

Research Insight

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Different Pathways, Different Outcomes?

Associations Between Educational Tracking, School Prestige, and Academic Achievement: Insights from Romania

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Central finding: The educational pathways students enter at the start of upper secondary education are associated with their academic development and later examination outcomes.

Many European education systems guide students into different educational tracks during adolescence. While these pathways are intended to match students' interests and abilities, they may also be associated with differences in educational outcomes over time. Our study of Romanian students found that those enrolled in vocational and work-oriented tracks, as well as those attending less prestigious schools, were more likely to follow lower achievement pathways throughout upper secondary education. These were, in turn, associated with lower performance on the national Baccalaureate examination, a key gateway to higher education.

The findings suggest that educational tracking and school context are linked to differences in students' achievement pathways and access to future educational opportunities.

Many European education systems direct students into different educational pathways during adolescence, often based on prior academic performance. These pathways are intended to support students' interests and future aspirations. However, there is ongoing debate about whether early tracking may also contribute to differences in educational outcomes over time.

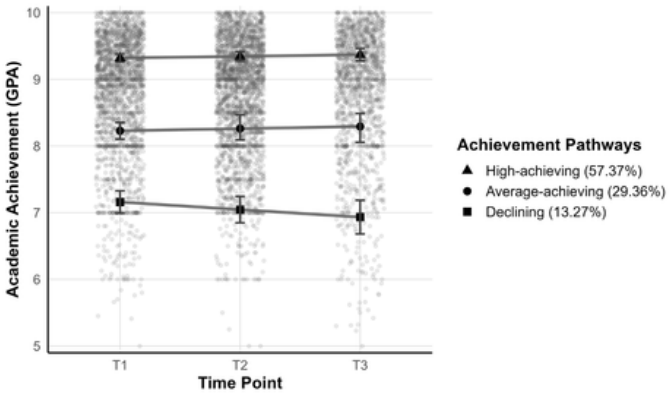
This question is particularly relevant in countries where students are allocated to different tracks at the transition to upper secondary education and where access to higher education depends on performance in high-stakes examinations (Terrin & Triventi, 2022; Triventi et al., 2020). In such contexts, the educational pathway a student enters may be associated with experiences and opportunities that extend beyond the immediate school experience.

To explore these issues, Dodan, Negru-Subtririca, and Szekely-Copîndean (2026) combined data from three longitudinal research projects and followed more than 3,200 Romanian students across three measurement points during upper secondary education. The study examined how students' academic performance evolved over time, whether they attended university-oriented or vocational/work-oriented tracks, the prestige of the school they attended, and their subsequent results on the national Baccalaureate examination.

The analysis revealed that students followed different academic pathways during upper secondary education. While most maintained consistently high levels of achievement (57%), a substantial proportion showed more moderate (29%) or declining (13%) academic performance over time (See Figure 1). These findings suggest that students' educational trajectories are not uniform and that different patterns of achievement during upper secondary education are associated with different educational outcomes later on.

For policymakers, this highlights the importance of looking beyond single examination results or one-time measures of achievement. Understanding how students' achievement develops throughout upper secondary education can provide a more complete picture of who is thriving, who may be falling behind, and where additional support may be needed.

Figure 1. Academic Achievement Pathways During Upper Secondary Education



Source: Dodan, D., Negru-Subtirica, O., & Szekely-Copîndean, R. D. (2026). The role of educational tracking and school prestige in shaping adolescents' achievement trajectories and results at high-stakes national exams. Studies in Educational Evaluation, 89, 101617. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2026.101617

Our findings suggest that the educational pathway students enter and the school they attend are closely associated with how their academic achievement develops throughout upper secondary education. Students enrolled in vocational and work-oriented tracks were more likely to experience less favourable achievement trajectories than their peers in university-oriented tracks. These results are consistent with previous research showing that students in different educational tracks and school contexts often experience different patterns of academic development over time (Dockx et al., 2019; Traini et al., 2021).

These differences also mattered for later educational outcomes. Students who maintained stronger academic performance throughout upper secondary education achieved better results on Romania's national Baccalaureate examination, a key gateway to higher education. The findings therefore suggest that disparities in examination outcomes are linked not only to students' performance at a single point in time, but also to the educational pathways and achievement patterns they experience during upper secondary education.

The results are particularly relevant for countries where educational tracking is combined with high-stakes examinations. While Romania is one example, similar structures exist across several European countries, including Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Serbia, and Austria. In these systems, students' future opportunities may differ depending on the educational pathways and school environments they experience. Our findings are consistent with previous evidence showing that access to more prestigious schools is associated with stronger educational outcomes and greater opportunities to progress to higher education (Pop-Eleches & Urquiola, 2013; Triventi et al., 2020).

Several implications emerge for policy and practice. First, the transition into upper secondary education represents a critical period during which students may benefit from additional academic and motivational support. Early interventions that strengthen engagement, learning strategies, and growth mindsets may help students remain on positive achievement pathways throughout secondary education (Yeager et al., 2019).

Second, education systems may benefit from maintaining flexible pathways that allow students to move between tracks or combine vocational and academic learning opportunities. Greater flexibility can help ensure that early educational decisions do not unnecessarily limit future options and that students continue to have options as their interests, aspirations, and performance develop over time.

Finally, schools and education systems should monitor students' academic progress throughout secondary education, rather than relying solely on examination results at the end of schooling. Early identification of declining achievement may create opportunities for timely support through tutoring, mentoring, counselling, or other targeted interventions.

For policymakers, the key message is that educational pathways matter. Examining how achievement develops over time provides a broader understanding of educational success than looking at examination results alone and can help identify where support is needed to promote equity, educational attainment, and access to further learning opportunities.

NOTE

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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