

DO ASPIRATIONS DURING UPPER SCHOOL INFLUENCE UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT OF IMMIGRANTS' CHILDREN?¹

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Abstract. Educational aspirations play a central role in determining students' possible educational trajectories. A few scholarly researches have explored the comparison between aspirations and achievements due to the longitudinal nature of the information required. This contribution aims to fill this gap by using record linkage techniques and proposes to measure the role of students' educational aspirations during their upper school attendance in achieving their (subsequent) actual university attendance in Italy. First, the information from the 2015 ISTAT survey on "Integration of Second Generations (ISG)" were used to describe upper school students' educational aspirations by citizenship. Second, the record linkage of ISG dataset with the administrative data on university students, from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR), makes possible to analyse the role of individual aspirations on actual achievement in terms of university attendance. Results showed that the aspiration to pursue tertiary education positively impact on the final decision to attend tertiary education. However, the percentage of foreign students, who have post-upper school aspiration toward tertiary education and subsequently actually university attendance, is significantly lower than the same percentage for Italians. The results associated to the age at arrival do not indicate a definite trend when considering the aspiration to go to university. Conversely, when considering the likelihood of students' university attendance, the older the student is on arrival, the lower the probability of enrolling in university.

1. Introduction

Children of immigrants represent an increasingly important component of the Italian student population. Non-Italian citizens were 0.2% of students at the beginning of the 90s, around 8% in the 2010-11 school year and they are more than 10% according to the most recent data (MIUR, various years). The increase of this percentage was accompanied by an increase (absolute and percentage) of foreign students born in Italy (the second generation), which assume scholastic outcomes more similar to natives in respect to foreign-born students (Strozza, 2015; Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022). A further effect of the growth of the second generation is

¹ This article is the result of a common reflection of the authors, whose names are placed in alphabetical order.

the increase over time of foreign students with tertiary education. In the first half of the 2000s, foreigners enrolled at university were around 2.0%, while they exceed 5.0% according to the most recent data. With the stabilization of migrants in Italy and with the achievement of integration paths, it is therefore becoming increasingly important to monitor the transitions to tertiary education or to employment of children of immigrants (Conti et al., 2013; Strozza et al., 2018).

Educational aspirations play a central role in determining students' possible educational trajectories (Miyamoto et al., 2018; Buonomo et al., 2024). In addition, the comparison between aspiration and achievement makes it possible to highlight possible weaknesses in the school system and in inclusion pathways. This topic is receiving increasing attention in international scholarly research, although much still remains to be explored (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002). Few scholarly researches have explored the comparison between aspirations and achievements due to the longitudinal nature of the information required. This contribution aims to deepen the first descriptive results obtained in Italy on this topic (Buonomo et al., 2023) by measuring the role of students' educational aspirations during upper secondary school in achieving their actual university attendance. We use, for the first time in Italy, a multivariate approach to edge against confounding factors and look at the different magnitude of the main determinants associated to both educational aspirations and achieved results.

The record linkage of two different sources allowed us of having a longitudinal approach and analyzing the effect of individual aspirations on actual achievement in terms of university attendance as well as considered selected aspects associated to respectively aspiration and achievement. For this purpose, the information from the 2015 ISTAT survey on "Integration of Second Generation (ISG)" were linked with the administrative data on university enrolled students, from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR).

After reviewing in section 2 the exiting literature on the topic and describing in section 3 the used data and methods, the results of logistic regressions are carried out in section 4 to evaluate some aspects associated to respectively educational aspirations and actual university achievement and to analyze the match between these two issues, controlling for a number of confounding factors. The multivariate analyses are devoted to look at the impact of students' socio-demographic characteristics on dependent variables. In section 5, we will discuss the main findings and provide some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical background

Following the *expectancy-value theory of motivation* (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000), pro-school attitudes and behaviours add pivotal resources to enable

educational success and reduce existing barriers. Positive aspirations, psychological traits, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, as well as good intrinsic/extrinsic motivation in studying and perceived relevance of school success can favour long-standing educational achievements (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Considering the correspondence between post-upper school aspiration and achieved university attendance, generally speaking, scholars observed a positive relationship among them, as well as with better school performances and better employment positions (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002). However, according to the *aspiration-achievement paradox* (Hadjar and Scharf, 2019), on the one hand, immigrant students have on average worse educational achievements than native students (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022; Heath and Brinbaum, 2014), on the other hand they show high aspirations, sometimes even higher than native students (Kao and Tienda, 1998; Buonomo et al., 2024). The so-called *immigrant optimism* explains this outcome on educational aspiration as follows. First-generation migrants represent a positive selected group with regard to character traits (e.g., ambition, optimism, and motivation), aiming to overcome with migration the difficulties in their origin context, and pursue upward socio-economic mobility in the destination country (Heath and Brinbaum, 2014). According to *blocked opportunities theory*, migrant students, well knowing their penalized future position in job placement, over-invest in education and have higher educational aspirations compared to non-migrants (Kao and Tienda, 1998).

By contrast, children of immigrants suffer a number of negative outcomes at school with respect to their autochthonous counterparts: more school dropouts, lower academic performances and higher concentrations in vocational secondary schools (Alba et al., 2011). Previous empirical studies showed that different factors matter in explaining the heterogeneity in terms of aspirations and achievements among children of immigrants. Among the others, this may be due to the level of integration (for example naturalization), the individual characteristics (for example gender, place of residence), the school outcomes (for example school performances, school type), the migratory characteristics (for example age at arrival, country of origin), the characteristics of the family of origin (for example parents' educational level, occupational or socio-economic status), and the interpersonal relationships (for example with peers, with teachers, within the origin family).

Country of origin, that proxy the different students' sociocultural heritage of migrants, may show mixed findings in terms of educational aspirations and of educational outcomes (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011).

Ethnic gap reduces with the acculturation process of migrants, proxied by the age at arrival (Salikutluk, 2016). Students who arrived during late childhood or adolescence were exposed to the social and cultural background of the origin country (Rumbaut, 2004). These students are more vulnerable in terms of their likelihood of experiencing alienation after migration. Furthermore, their "*information bias*"

sharpen their educational aspirations more than the second generation or students arriving at younger ages (Berry, 2005).

In the study of educational aspirations and achievements, other factors play a pivotal importance. *Composition effect* is based on the assumption that families in upper socio-economic classes can support their descendants in achieving better academic performance, whereas investments in education tend to be lower among families with poor socio-economic resources (Heath and Brinbaum, 2014). *Achievement motivation theory* exerted the fact that the interpersonal relationships are crucial in determining educational aspirations and outcomes (Martin et al., 2007).

We formulate our research hypotheses bearing in mind the theoretical background presented above, as well as the information available from the data.

H1. Structural variables play a crucial role and are significantly associated to both achievement and aspiration controlling by several other independent variables.

H2. Post-upper school aspiration toward tertiary education has a positive effect in achieving actual university attendance.

3. Data and methods

The analyses are based on data from the ISG survey conducted by the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) during the 2014/15 school year, representative of all major ethnic groups of foreign students (Conti and Prati, 2020). The municipalities involved in the survey were over 800, in which over 1,400 schools participated to the survey (approximately 15% of the universe identified). The initial sample included around 70,000 unweighted cases, of which 52% were attending upper secondary school. The 34.5% of them were enrolled in lyceum (unreleased ISTAT analyses).

The observed final sample consists of 6,918 foreign students enrolled in grades 11–13 of upper secondary school (especially in the 16-18 age group), excluding the citizens of More Developed Countries².

Our ISG sample was linked, using the individual unique and anonymized code and the deterministic record linkage³ techniques, to MIUR's data on students attending university in the period 2015-2020. This merge between the two datasets allowed us to associate students' educational aspirations during upper secondary

² A separate analysis of the immigrant component from more developed countries was not feasible due to the limited sample size. Immigrants from more developed countries often have socio-economic characteristics and levels of cultural capital closer to those of native Italian students, making their experiences in the educational system less comparable to those of students from less developed regions (Strozza et al. 2018). Excluding these students allows for a clearer analysis of the challenges faced by immigrant students who are more likely to experience educational inequities, language barriers, and limited economic resources.

³ The key variable used for record linkage is available for 98% of the cases (interviewed students)

school and their actual achievement in terms of university attendance. By merging two datasets, we are able to observe whether high school students subsequently enrolled in university, thereby focusing our analysis on non-international university students. While this group represents an important part of the student population with distinct characteristics (Casacchia et al. 2016), their specific attributes cannot be analyzed in our current study and are outside the scope of this paper.

To operationalize our hypotheses, we provide the weighted⁴ percentage of students enrolled in 2015 upper secondary school (grades 11-13) who actually attended university for at least one academic year in the period 2015-2020 distinguished by post-upper school aspiration, citizenship/place of birth. We focus the attention on the following question: *When you finish upper secondary school, what do you plan to do?* The possible answers were: work; take a vocational training course; pursue studies at university; stay at home; have no idea; other.

Second, we perform two distinct logistic regression models, respectively for post-upper school aspiration toward tertiary education (yes/no) and for the achieved university attendance (yes/no) and analyze the association of selected students' socio-demographic characteristics (H1).

A further logistic regression analysis let us to estimate the effect of post-upper school aspirations on students' actual university attendance controlling for a number of confounding factors (H2). The information on post-upper school aspirations is operationalized as follows: work; pursue studies at university; other (ref.: reference category which includes take a vocational training course, stay at home, have no idea, and other).

Gender was considered in the conventional way, discriminating boy (0) and girl (1) students. The macro-area of residence is considered as follows: north-east; north-west; centre (ref.); south. We look at the upper secondary school track attended by: technical institute (ref.); professional institute; lyceum.

We consider the students' age at arrival to proxy Rumbaut's (2004) classification: born in Italy (ref.); arrived in Italy before 6 years of age; arrived in the 6-12 age group; arrived in Italy after 12 years of age.

Ethnic origin is defined by considering foreign students' citizenship. We selected the six most numerous ethnic origins in Italy according to ISG survey: Romania (ref.), Albania, Ukraine, Moldova, China, and Morocco. The other migrant foreign students were grouped into one single category: other countries.

A number of other aspects have an important role in shaping educational aspirations and achievements. They are included in our analyses as control variables

⁴ The results consider standard weights for descriptive analysis and normalized weights for logistic regression models.

and are not showed and discussed in this occasion for space constraints (but they are available on request).

We included in the models four measures of school performances: number of failures, students' most recent marks in Italian and in mathematics, self-perceived school performance.

Five variables are included in the analyses to control for family characteristics: parents' educational level and employment status, self-perceived wealth of the family, number of assets owned by the family, number of co-resident siblings

We included one dichotomous variable on the "Student's family believes that study is very important to find a good job". Three further dichotomous variables on relationships with relatives, classmates, and teachers are considered through the following opinions: "In my family, we help each other", "I have a good relationship with my classmates", and "I trust my teachers".

4. Results

Before conducting logistic regression analysis, it is important to consider the percentage of students who actually attended university for at least one academic year in the period 2015-2020 distinguished by post-upper school aspiration, citizenship or place of birth (Table 1). As expected, Italians with high educational aspirations (tertiary education) are the students with the highest percentages of university attendance (79.5%), followed by foreigners born in Italy (68.8%), and foreign-born students (66.2%) with high educational aspirations. Conversely, the lowest percentages are those who aspire to go to work in all subgroups considered.

Table 1 – *Percentage of students enrolled in 2015 upper secondary school (grades 11-13) who actually attended university for at least one academic year in the period 2015-2020 distinguished by post-upper school aspiration, citizenship/place of birth.*

Post-upper school aspiration	Italians	Foreigners born in Italy	Foreigners born abroad	Italians	Foreigners born in Italy	Foreigners born abroad
	%			% students attending university		
Tertiary education	47.8	50.4	42.0	79.5	68.8	66.2
Work	31.8	25.9	39.2	14.5	11.7	11.8
Training	5.5	7.3	7.1	26.7	41.3	22.6
I don't know	9.2	11.1	8.1	44.6	32.9	33.0
Other	5.8	5.3	3.6	40.0	40.1	30.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	50.5	46.4	37.8

Source: our elaborations on ISG data (2014/15) and MIUR data on university students in the period 2015-2020.

Table 2 shows the two logistic regression models on the upper school aspiration toward tertiary education (model 1) and on the achieved university attendance (model 2.1) among non-Italian citizens. In line with Hypothesis 1, the results confirmed the importance of structural factors. Girls are more positively and significantly associated than boys with both having post-upper school aspiration towards tertiary education and attaining university.

The macro-area of residence plays also an important role in the two models. Residents in the North-West show a positive and significant association compared to residents in the centre in having post-upper school aspiration towards tertiary education and attaining university. In addition, both models indicate a statistically negative association with respect to students residing in southern Italian regions. Only the North-East category shows differences between the two dependent variables considered. The residents in the North-East have a negative and weakly significant association to university attendance. The odds ratio of this category is instead greater than one, but not significant, in the case of university aspiration. The school track variable reveals that the choice of type of upper secondary school in Italy is crucial with regard to both university aspirations and *de facto* university enrolment. Having technical institute as a reference category, the results indicate that being enrolled in lyceum significantly increases both the likelihood of aspiring and enrolling at University. The two considered odd-ratios are the highest ones in the models respectively. Similarly, the vocational institute school track has a negative and significant effect on both dependent variables. In light of these results, we can argue that a crucial choice about university (in terms of both aspiration and achievement) occurs around the age of 13 when the student in Italy has to choose which educational school track wants to pursue in upper secondary school (Buonomo et al., 2024).

Important differences emerge when considering the two models looking at the age on arrival. The results associated to the age at arrival are less clear-cut and do not indicate a definite trend when considering the aspiration to go to university (model 1). Compared to those born in Italy, the odds ratio is non-significant for students who arrived in Italy before the age of 6. It is significant and lower than one for those who arrived between 6 and 12 years of age. Conversely, the coefficient becomes positive for those who arrived after the age of 12.

When considering the likelihood of students' university attendance (model 2.1), the older the student is on arrival, the statistically lower the probability of enrolling in university. Although, those who were younger than 6 years of age on arrival were more likely to enrol in university than those born in Italy.

Compared with Romania (reference category), all countries of citizenship have odds ratios greater than 1 in both model 1 and 2.1. However, in the achieved university attendance model, the only significant category is Albania. In upper

school aspiration toward tertiary education model, in addition to Albania, the category “other countries” is also significant.

Table 2 – Determinants of the students’ upper school aspiration toward tertiary education (model 1) and of the achieved university attendance for at least one academic year in the period 2015-2020 (model 2.1). Odd-ratios and p-values of selected characteristics with adding control variables^(a). Logistic regression models. Students enrolled in 2015 upper secondary school (grades 11-13).

Variables	Model 1 upper school aspiration toward tertiary educ.		Model 2.1 Achieved university attendance	
	Odd-ratios	p-values	Odd-ratios	p-values
<i>Gender (ref. Boy)</i>				
Girl	1.820	***	1.384	***
<i>Macro area of residence (ref. Centre)</i>				
North-East	1.056		0.852	*
North-West	1.195	***	1.198	***
South	0.829	***	0.730	***
<i>School track (ref. Technical institute)</i>				
Professional institute	0.425	***	0.281	***
Lyceum	4.075	***	2.762	***
<i>Years of age at arrival (ref. Born in Italy)</i>				
0-5	1.083		1.109	***
6-12	0.813	***	0.940	
>13	1.135	**	0.789	***
<i>Country of citizenship (ref. Romania)</i>				
Albania	1.432	*	1.809	**
China	1.598		1.841	
Moldova	1.061		1.794	
Morocco	1.204		1.637	
Ukraine	1.169		1.522	
Other Country	1.434	**	1.474	
<i>Pseudo R²</i>	0.258		0.248	
<i>N</i>	6,918		6,918	

(a) Control variables: number of failures, students’ most recent marks in Italian and in mathematics, self-perceived school performance, parents’ educational level and employment status, self-perceived wealth of the family, number of assets owned by the family, number of co-resident siblings, family believes on the importance of the study, we help each other, good relationship with classmates, and the trust in the teachers.

Note: Statistical significance of the relationship is marked by * if $p < 0.1$, ** if $p < 0.05$, *** if $p < 0.01$.

Source: our elaborations on ISG data (2014/15) and MIUR data on university students in the period 2015-2020.

Does students’ educational aspiration matter in determining their *de facto* university enrolment? Table 3 helps in answer to this question. Both in the case in which we do not add any other control variables (model 2.0) and in the case in which we consider all control variables (model 2.2, corresponding to model 2.1 plus

educational aspiration), the results indicate very high and strongly significant odds ratios in the case of those who aspire to go to university, while the opposite occurs for those who indicate that they aspire to go to work (also in this case the result is strongly significant). In other words, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed, based on the results summarized in the table, if we look at foreign students enrolled in the last three years of upper secondary school, educational aspirations play a crucial role in determining subsequent actual university enrolment. Students' university aspiration is strongly and significantly associated with the likelihood of enrolling in university.

Table 3 – *The role of students' upper school aspiration toward tertiary education in achieving their actual university attendance for at least one academic year in the period 2015-2020. Odd-ratios and p-values without and with control variables^(a). Logistic regression models. Students enrolled in 2015 upper secondary school (grades 11-13).*

Educational aspiration (ref. Other)	Model 2.0		Model 2.2	
	Without control variables		With control variables	
	Odd-ratios	p-values	Odd-ratios	p-values
University	3.982	***	2.910	***
Work	0.336	***	0.459	***
Pseudo R ²		0.237		0.322
N		6,918		6,918

(a) *Control variables: gender, macro-area of residence, upper secondary school, citizenship, age at arrival, number of failures, students' most recent marks in Italian and in mathematics, self-perceived school performance, parents' educational level and employment status, self-perceived wealth of the family, number of assets owned by the family, number of co-resident siblings, family believes on the importance of the study, we help each other, good relationship with classmates, and the trust in the teachers.*

Note: Statistical significance of the relationship is marked by * if $p < 0.1$, ** if $p < 0.05$, *** if $p < 0.01$.

Source: our elaborations on ISG data (2014/15) and MIUR data on university students in the period 2015-2020.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The analyses conducted confirm the complexity of becoming adults for young people with a migrant background. The transition to adult life also represents a phase of moving from aspirations to the realization of childhood dreams. While dreams come at no cost, realization is different, especially when it involves aspirations related to education. As demonstrated by the regression model, having high hopes also influences achievements. Therefore, it is certainly important to strengthen self-esteem and encourage young people to set significant goals. However, the analyses also clearly show that many aspirations remain unfulfilled or are scaled down over time.

The model highlights the connection between specific individual characteristics and aspects of the migration model with aspirations and actual university enrollment.

Not all factors have the same influence on both aspects. Age at arrival, for instance, has more impact on achievements than on aspirations. Overall, the analysis indicates that there are starting differences among young people with a migration background, thereby highlighting the existence of “super vulnerable” groups to which policies should pay particular attention. It should be noted, however, that in the case of university enrollment, girls, who are generally more vulnerable during the transition to adulthood, seem to be more protected than boys. The North-West is the area of the highest probability of aspiring and enrolling in University, against the South of the country where the probabilities are the lowest. Less clear-cut are the opportunities for young people living in the Northeast: the area where economic and employment integration is highest, but the probability of enrolling in university is lower than in the other central-northern areas. It is clear that the groups of interest for policies are different from those targeted by other policies, such as those aimed at inclusion in the labor market.

In this concluding section, we want to mention the variables included in the model but not commented on in the analysis, which will be the subject of future studies. The aspects concerning parents’ characteristics, family conditions, and the influence, whether conscious or not, of family opinions on young people's choices are treated in the analysis as control variables and are not discussed in this paper. Considering further steps, it is important to underline that these factors already appear interesting from this initial study and seem worthy of focused attention in future analyses.

Further studies should also consider that, in the years following the survey, certain characteristics, such as area of residence and citizenship status, may change, particularly during the transition to adulthood for young foreign individuals. (Strozza et al., 2021). For example, considering the latter characteristic, over 23% of the foreign young people interviewed in 2015 became Italian. The various changes can be interconnected and lead to different outcomes. From the perspective of policies and interventions, the new data provided by the survey confirm that efforts still need to be continued in order to “remove the economic and social obstacles that, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, hinder the full development of the human person” as stated in the Italian Constitution.

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