

## The Link between Socio-Economic Background, Field of Studies, and Employability of Ethnic Roma Students in Europe (0043)

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Higher education used to be accessible mainly for the socio-economically privileged. However, in the 1960s higher education started to expand, with gross enrolment ratios in Europe attaining 26% in 1970, 35% in 1990 and over 60% by 2009 (Altbag et.al. 2009). As a result, higher education became more and more accessible to socio-economically disadvantaged people, and other previously marginalised groups. Referring to the increasing ratios of female and minority students in higher education, as well as of students with working-class background, the academic literature often use the terms “massification” and “de-elitisation” (Guri-Rosenblita et.al. 2007). But has higher education given up its elitist elements? This study seeks to bring evidence in support for the argument that despite the increasing improvements in the access to higher education for unprivileged groups, the elitist opportunities in tertiary education have been preserved in other ways, one of these ways being the access to specific fields of studies. Since some fields have better employment prospects than others, the more “marketable” fields are more competitive at enrolment and therefore less accessible for the socially disadvantaged groups (Robst, 2007, Ortiz & Kucel, 2008; Reimer et al. 2008; Reimer & Steinmetz, 2009).

Various research on disadvantaged communities’ access to higher education around the world confirms this tendency. A study on African-Americans in the United States, for instance, revealed that in the 1980s African-Americans were more likely to major in education, humanities, or social sciences, “fields associated with lower

incomes for college graduates” than the natural and technical sciences (Thomas, 1985). A more recent study revealed that university students in natural sciences, including the biological/ agricultural sciences and physical sciences come from wealthier families with higher level of parental education, compared to students in other fields (Chen & Weko, 2009).

In relation to this argument, this study focuses on the analysis of the socio-economic background and academic profile of ethnic Roma students in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). A glimpse at the available data suggests that Roma students enroll more frequently in humanities and social sciences courses, compared to the mainstream students; there is also empirical evidence suggesting that Roma students in CEE generally come from less privileged socio-economic background than mainstream students (Garaz, 2014, Greenberg, 2010). Consequently, the study explores whether Roma students in CEE enroll in academic specialisations providing less secure employment prospects, as well as the degree to which this choice is linked to their socio-economic status.

The methodology of the study is based on statistical analysis, using data from EUROSTAT (2013) on the employability prospects of various academic specialisations in each analysed country; from EUROSTUDENT (2011) on mainstream students’ academic profile and socio-economic background, and from the Roma Education Fund (REF) on Roma students’ academic profile and socio-economic background. REF collected such data on Roma students from 16 countries of CEE for the last 4 academic years, an overall sample of about 3000 Roma students from the region. This data collection is conducted every year as part of REF’s scholarship program and at the moment constitutes the most comprehensive data collection on tertiary-level Roma students in Europe. This study, however, is focused

on four countries – Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and Turkey – that are among the countries where REF implements its scholarships schemes and at the same time, are countries included in the EUROSTUDENT 2011 database.

The analysis of the available data in the four countries reveals that the socio-economic background is indeed one of the factors influencing students' choice of fields of studies in higher education. Students from relatively disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds tend to choose specialisations that also happen to be less demanded on the job markets of their respective countries. This tendency has been observed in all four countries while comparing the choice of specialisation of the group of students coming from families with a low education background with the group of students coming from families with a high education background, both within the group of mainstream students and within the group of Roma students. This has been also observed while making similar comparison between the mainstream students and the Roma students: keeping in mind the findings of previous research that revealed that Roma students generally have lower socio-economic backgrounds than mainstream students (Garaz, 2014), one can also observe that Roma students tend to choose more frequently specialisations that are less demanded on the graduate job market.

The specialisations in which socio-economically disadvantaged students (both Roma and non-Roma) are most under-represented are health and welfare, as well as science, engineering, manufacturing and constructions, while those in which they are most overrepresented are humanities and arts. At the same time, the relative ratios of employment and of full-time (vs. part time) employment in humanities and arts are smaller than the same ratios in health and welfare, science, engineering, manufacturing and construction.

The relevance of this study for the policy field is related to the debates about the best ways to improve the access to tertiary education for underprivileged groups, specifically for Roma. Until now there have been several attempts to implement programs based on affirmative action principles in various Central, Eastern and South Eastern European countries aimed at facilitating the access to tertiary education for Roma, but with very few efforts to adjust these policies in a way to avoid the overrepresentation of Roma in specific fields (Bojinca et al, 2009; Arnold et al, 2011; Velkovski, 2011). The evidence that this overrepresentation is associated with Roma's underprivileged socio-economic status on the one hand, and with relatively less prospects for decent employment upon graduation associated with the fields in which they are overrepresented on the other hand, may be used for further policy adjustments aiming at creating a more diversified palette of occupations among Roma graduates.

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