Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions: International Evidence and (Some) Pathways for Policy Action

Policy conference

From data to direction: How can EHESO support the monitoring of the Union of Skills?

12 November 2025

Dr. Katarina Weßling
ROA, Maastricht University & BIBB, Bonn

Maastricht University
Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market / ROA

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Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions

- Does a degree level the playing field? Or do **parental income or education** still shape **labour market success even after graduation** from higher education?

- Why do we need **internationally comparative survey data** to analyse this?

- Why should **policymakers** care about this data?

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Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions

- Does a degree level the playing field? Or do **parental income or education** still shape **labour market success even after graduation** from higher education?

→ *Social background still matters, but **how** and **why**?*

- Why do we need **internationally comparative survey data** to analyse this?

→ *Because it can **inform** us about the **how** and **why?***

- Why should **policymakers** care about this data?

→ *Because **sound data knowledge** equips to design **fair higher education** and **employment policies** that open doors*

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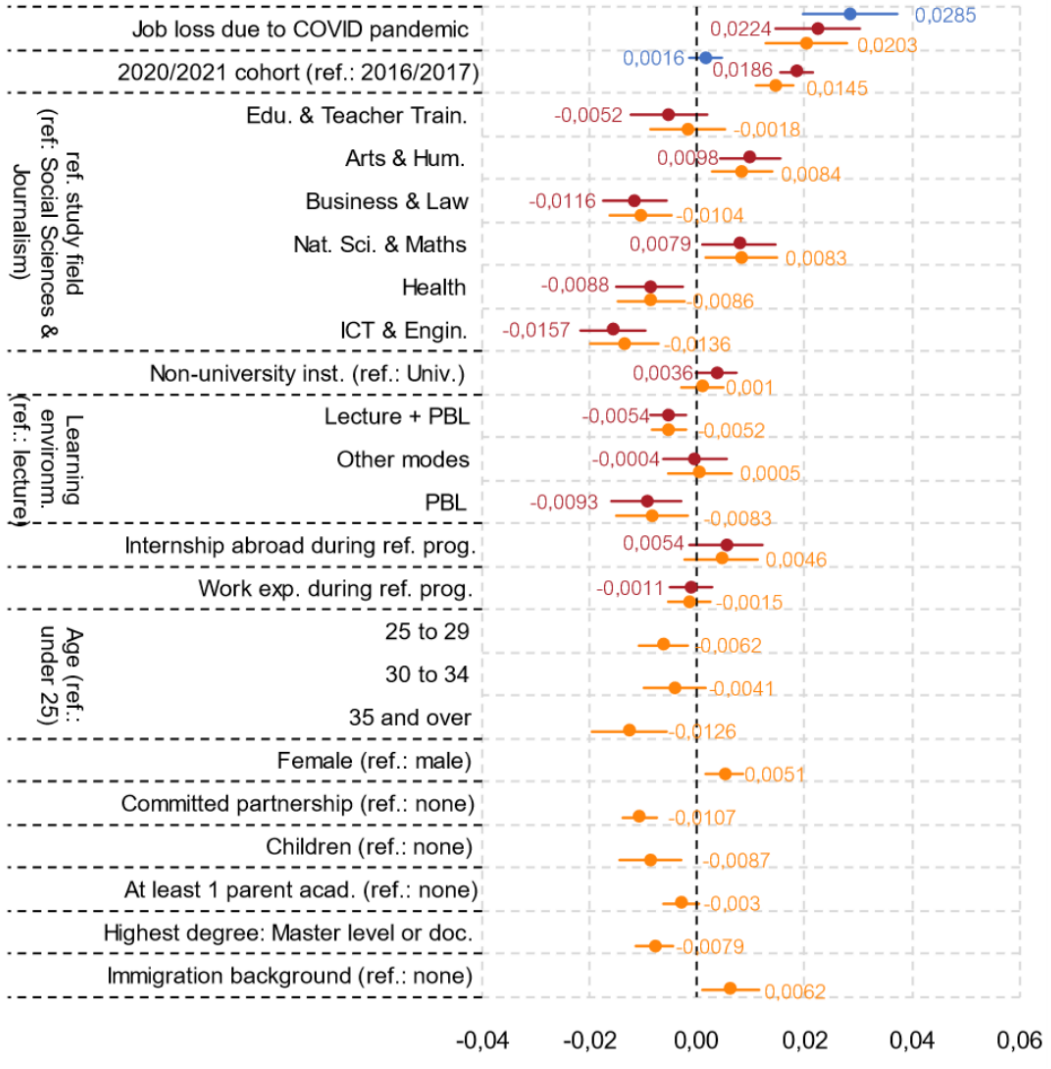
Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions:

Unemployment

Figure 4.5.1: Explanatory factors for being unemployed (average marginal effects)

Definition: Unemployment (a3.7.4, b1.0) and no other occupation (a3.7.3, a3.7.5, a3.7.6, a3.7.7, a3.7.9) was reported.

Graduates who are part of the labour force and currently not enrolled



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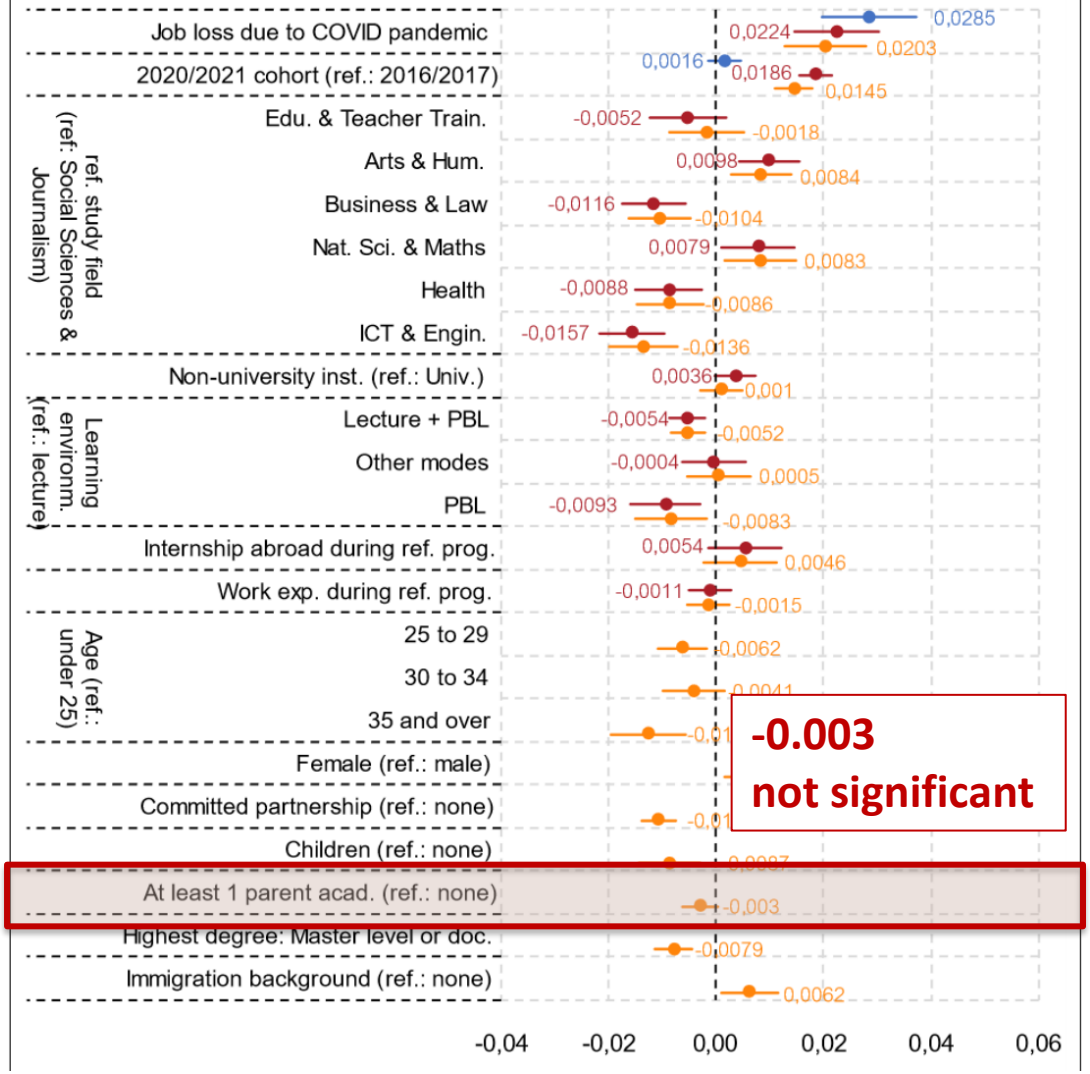

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Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions:

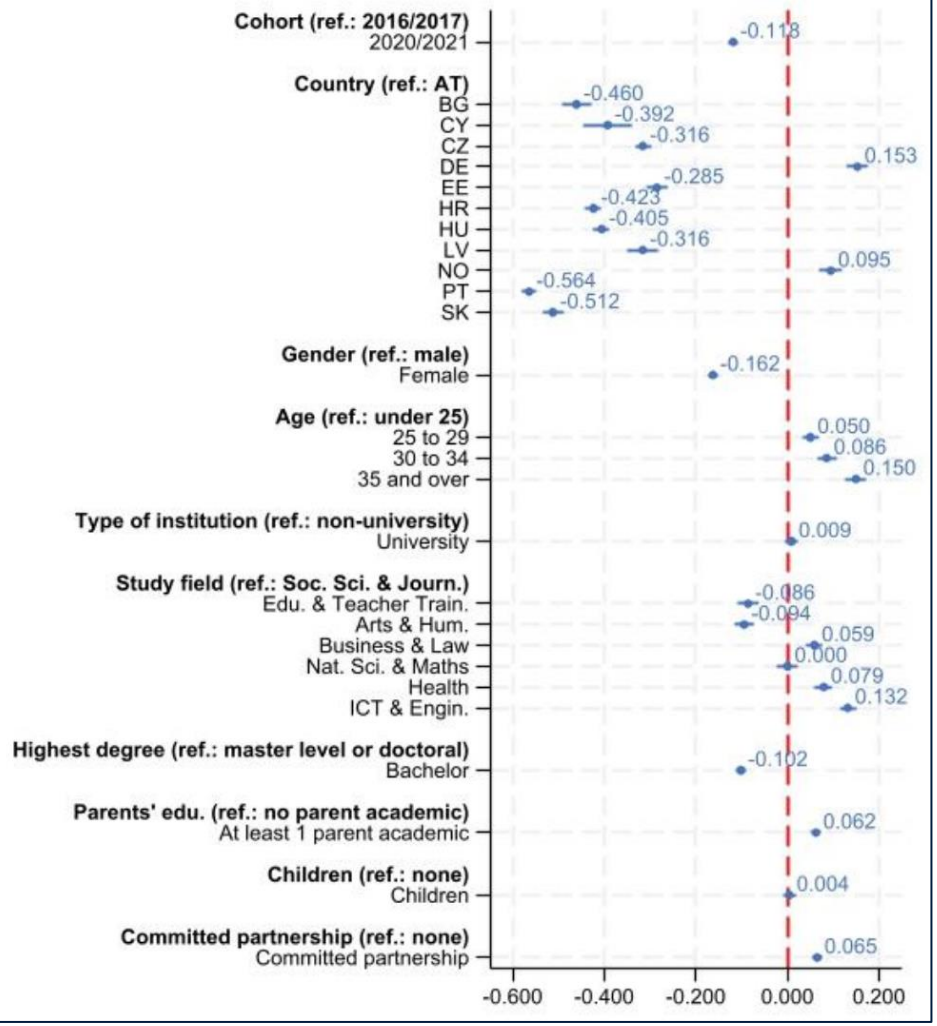
Income

Figure 5.5.6: Explanatory factors for income differences

Definition: Logarithmic transformation of gross hourly income based on gross monthly income in € adjusted with purchasing power parities (PPP) divided by actual weekly hours of work (b2.9a, b2.9b, b5b, b5c, b5d).

Graduates currently not enrolled by:

Variables (X-axis), regression coefficients (Y-axis)



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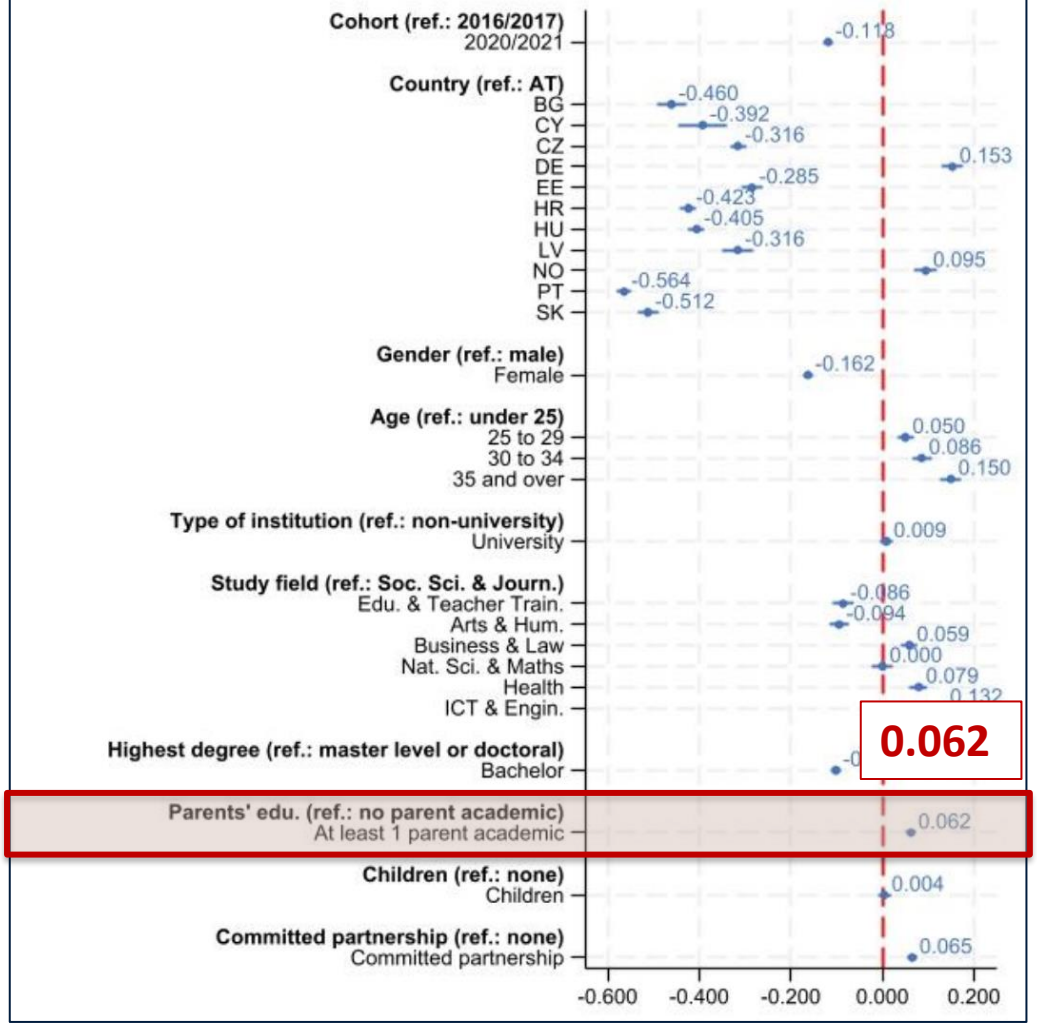

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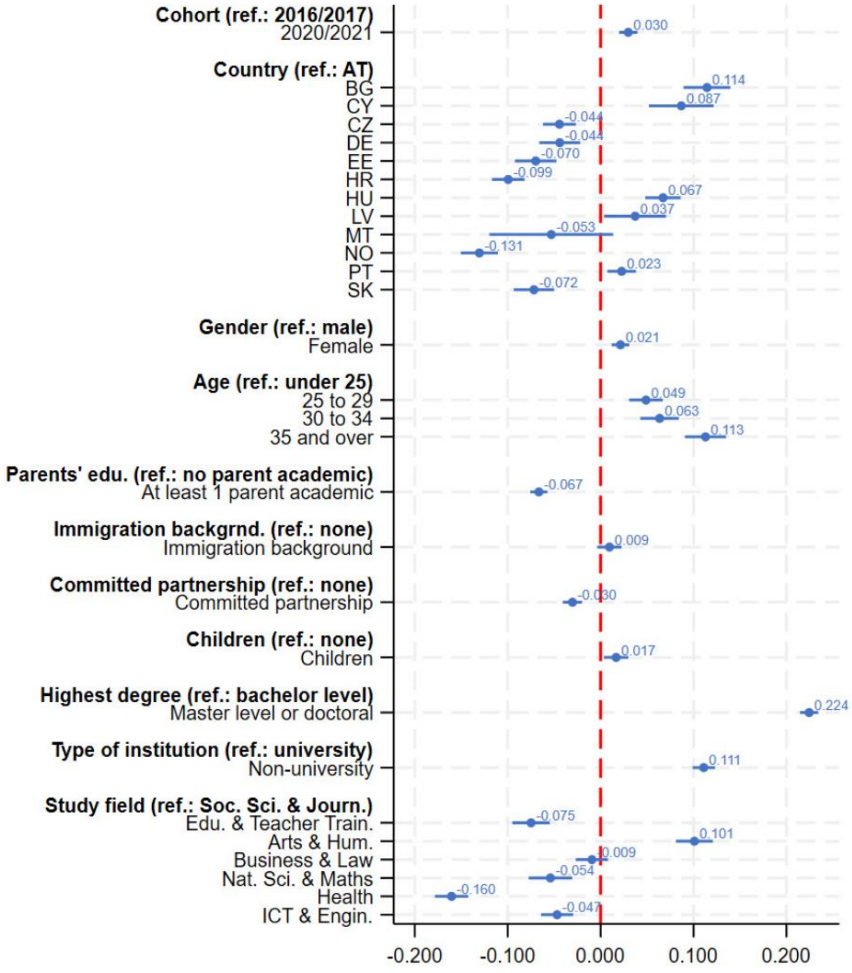
Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions:

Overeducation

Figure 5.4.1: Explaining the risk for overeducation: differences by countries, social groups & HE characteristics

Definition: Average marginal effects (AME) for risk of being overeducated (current job usually requires a lower degree vs. current job usually requires same level or higher-level degree as respondent holds) (a1.1a3, a3.3.2a2, a3.5.2a2, b3.1)

Graduates currently not enrolled



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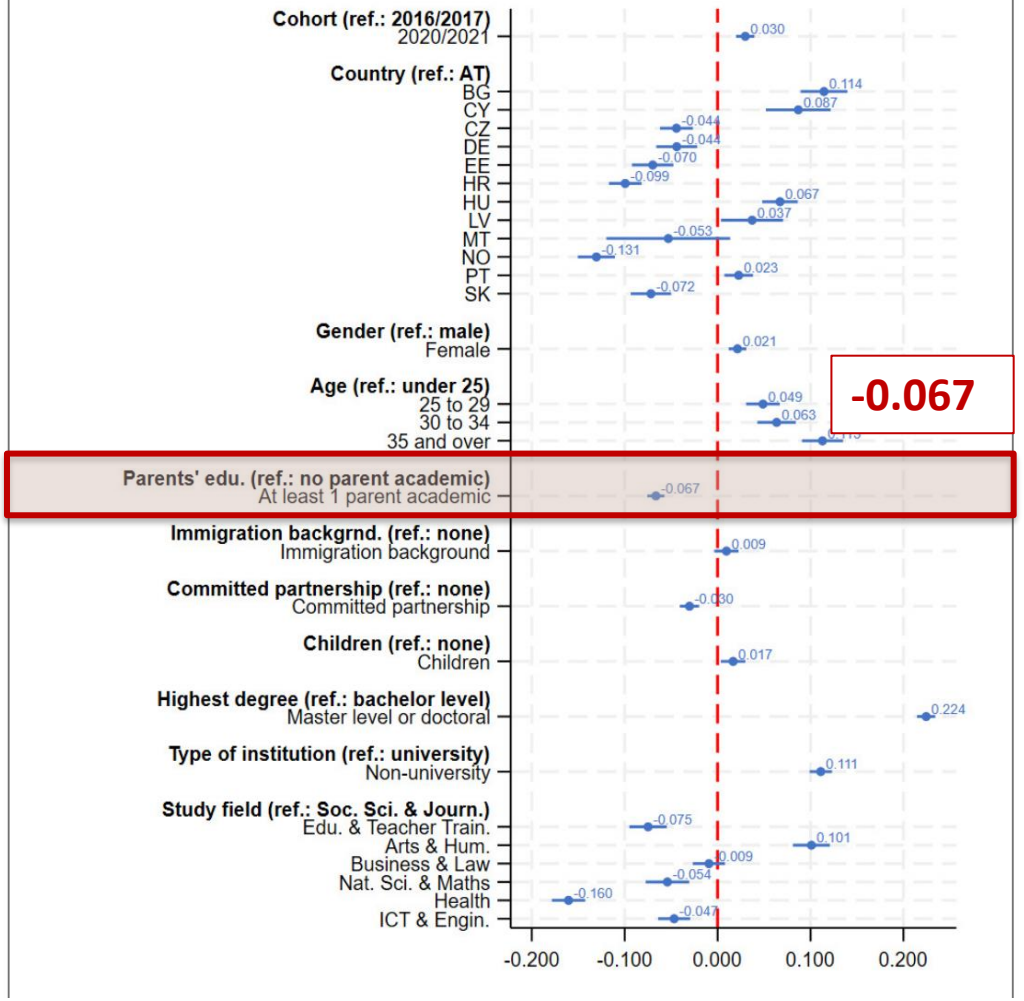

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Social Inequality in Study-to-Work Transitions: Occupational position (ISEI)

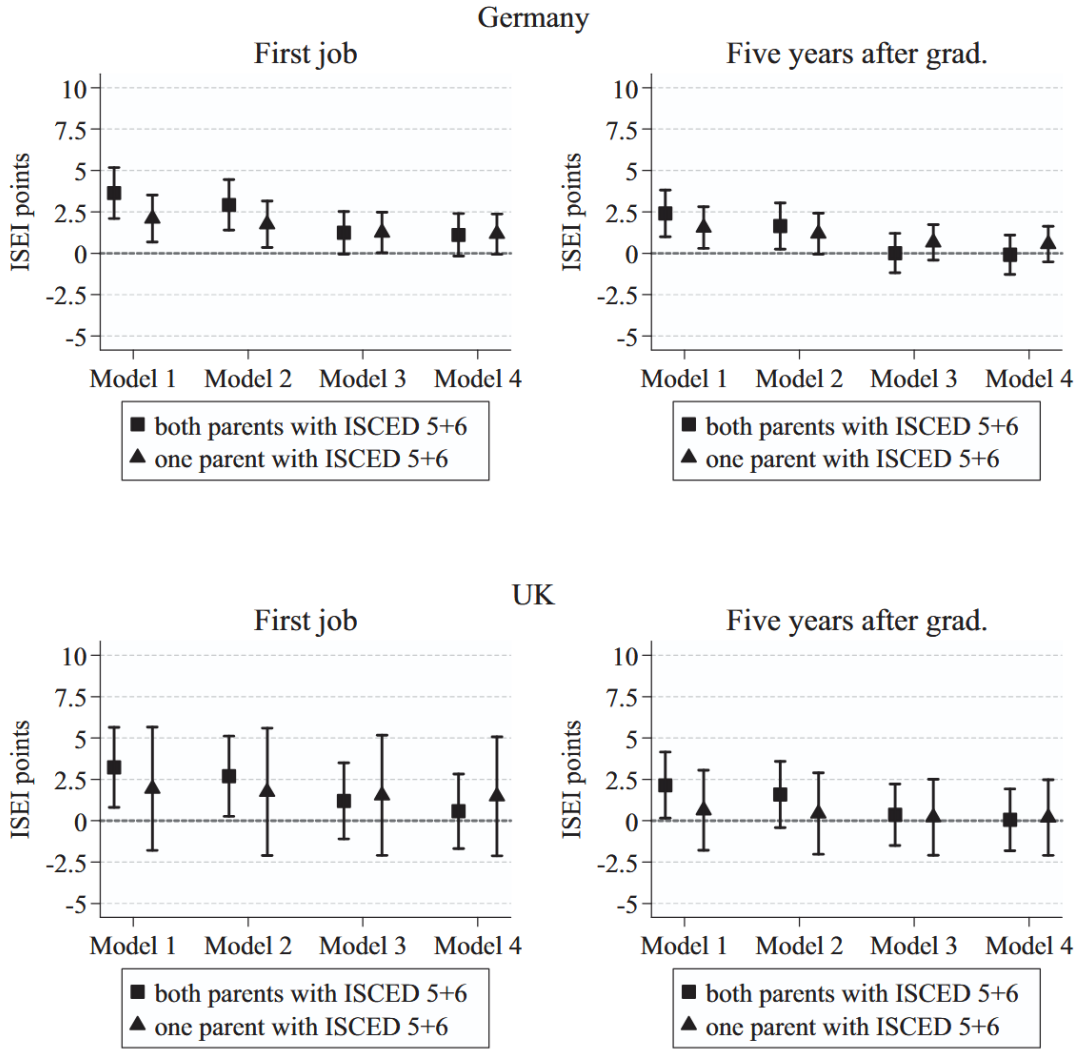

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Figure 1. Parental education effects on occupational destinations measured by ISEI in Germany and the United Kingdom (OLS regressions)

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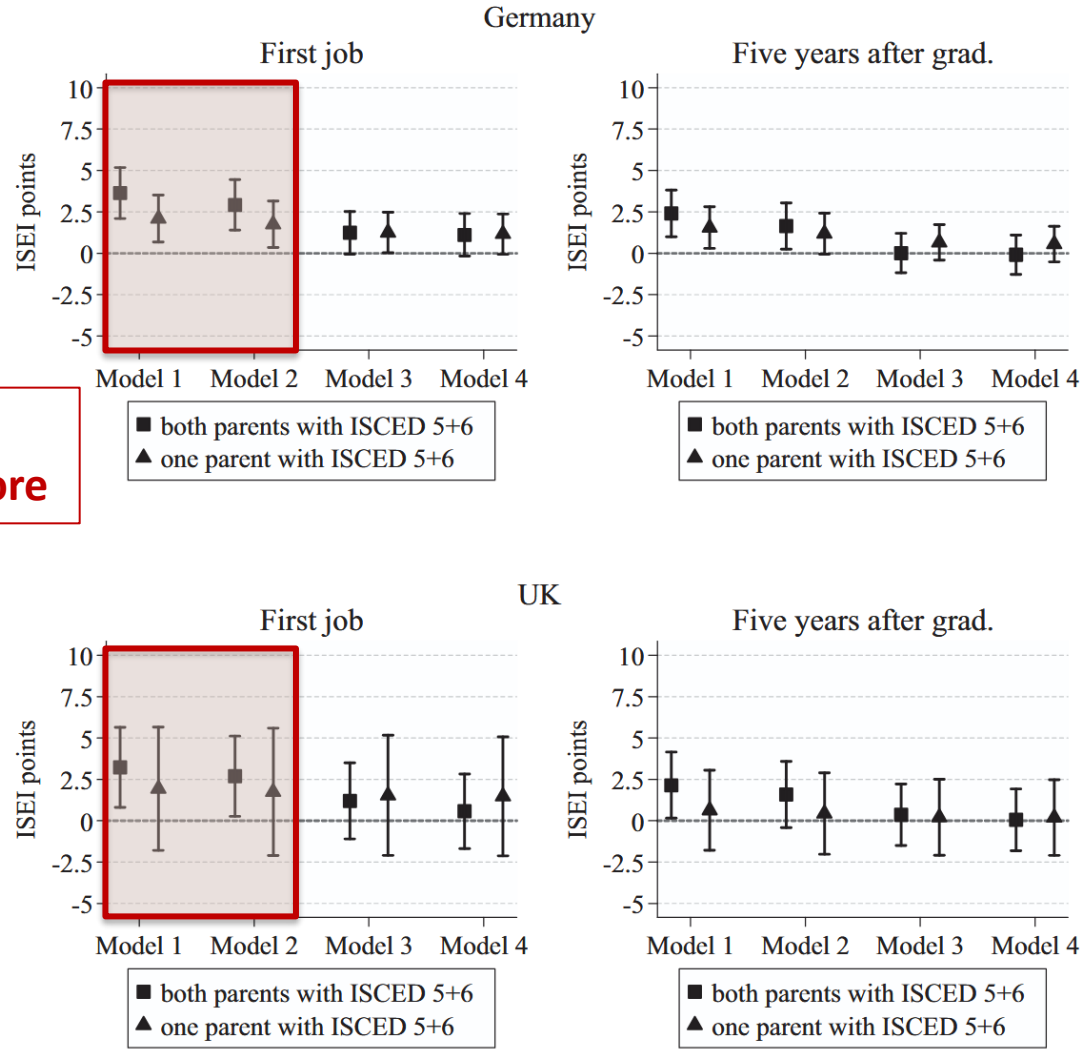

2 to 4 ISEI-points more

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What explains social inequalities in labour-market outcomes even after graduation? What are the mechanisms behind?

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Mechanisms

1. Educational Choices (Secondary Effects) → Differences in educational choices among equally capable students; lower-SES students choose shorter, less prestigious tracks (e.g. vocational vs. academic, lower-status fields (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997))

2. Social and Cultural Capital (Informal Resources) → High-SES students benefit from family and social networks that provide job information, internships, mentoring helping them enter higher-status jobs faster; low-SES graduates rely more on formal applications, with lower success rates (Granovetter, 1973; Jackson et al., 2005)

3. Institutional Prestige and Signalling → High-SES students are overrepresented in elite or highly selective universities; prestige operates as labour-market signal for employers, even net of competence (Triventi 2013; Rivera, 2011; Spence, 1973)

4. Discrimination and Bias → Employers interpret signals differently depending on class-coded cues (accents, hobbies, names); experimental studies show identical CVs yield fewer callbacks for working-class names (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Rivera, 2012)

5. Career Aspirations and Self-Efficacy → Class-based differences in self-confidence, perceived employability, persist after graduation; low-SES graduates apply for “safer” jobs, underestimate their market value (Bandura, 1997)

6. Geographical and Mobility Constraints → Low-SES graduates face stronger constraints in relocating for jobs, unpaid internships, participate in study abroad; they are more likely to be bound to their home regions and susceptible to local conditions (Green et al., 2019; Van Mol; 2021; Weßling & Meng, 2021; Hartung & Weßling, 2025)

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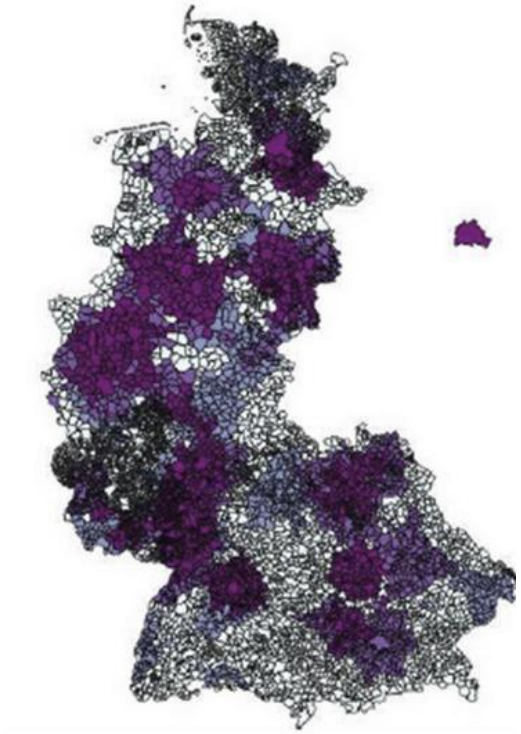
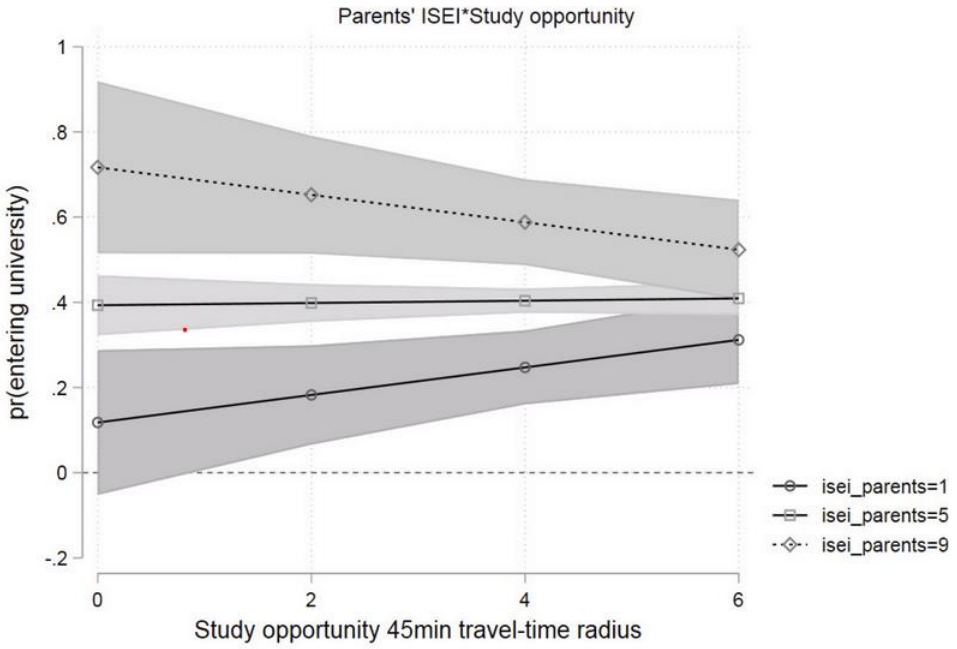


Availability of fields of study



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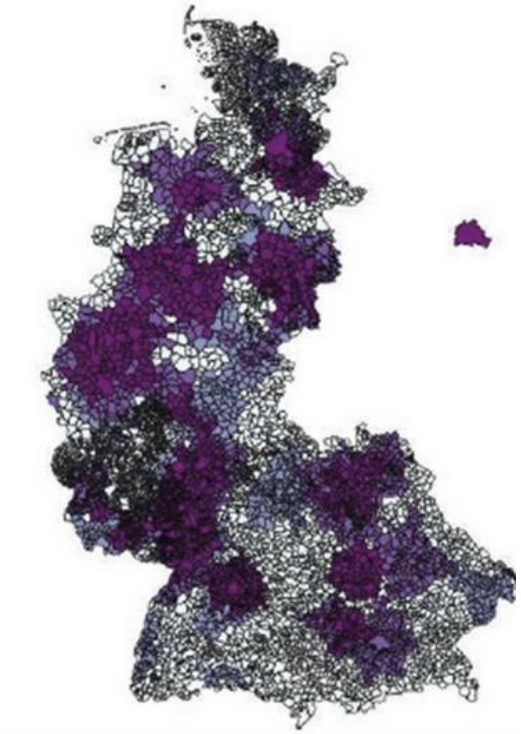

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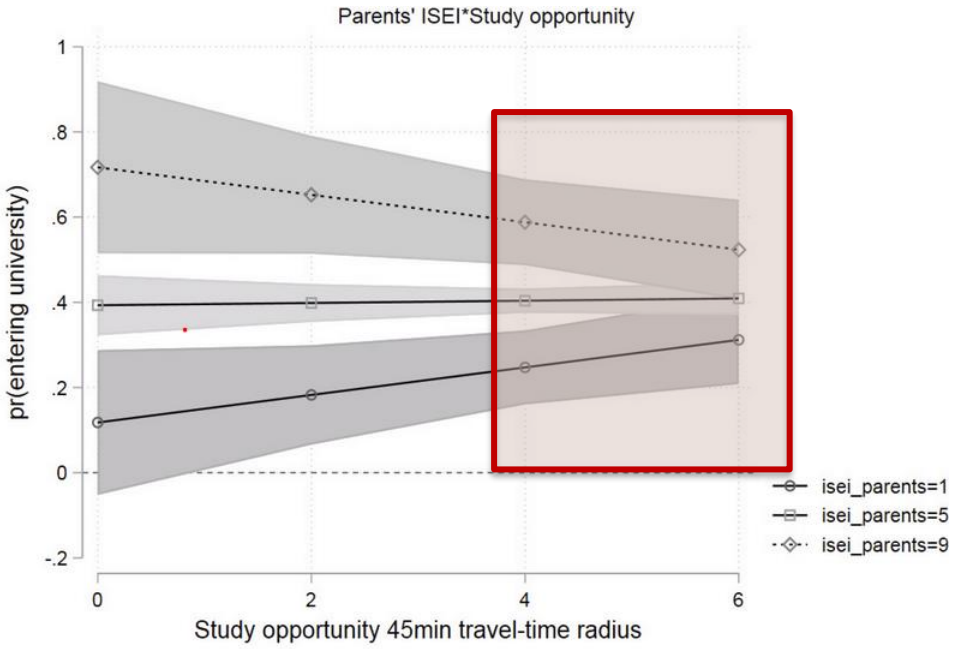

→ The **local availability of study opportunities** mitigates social inequalites

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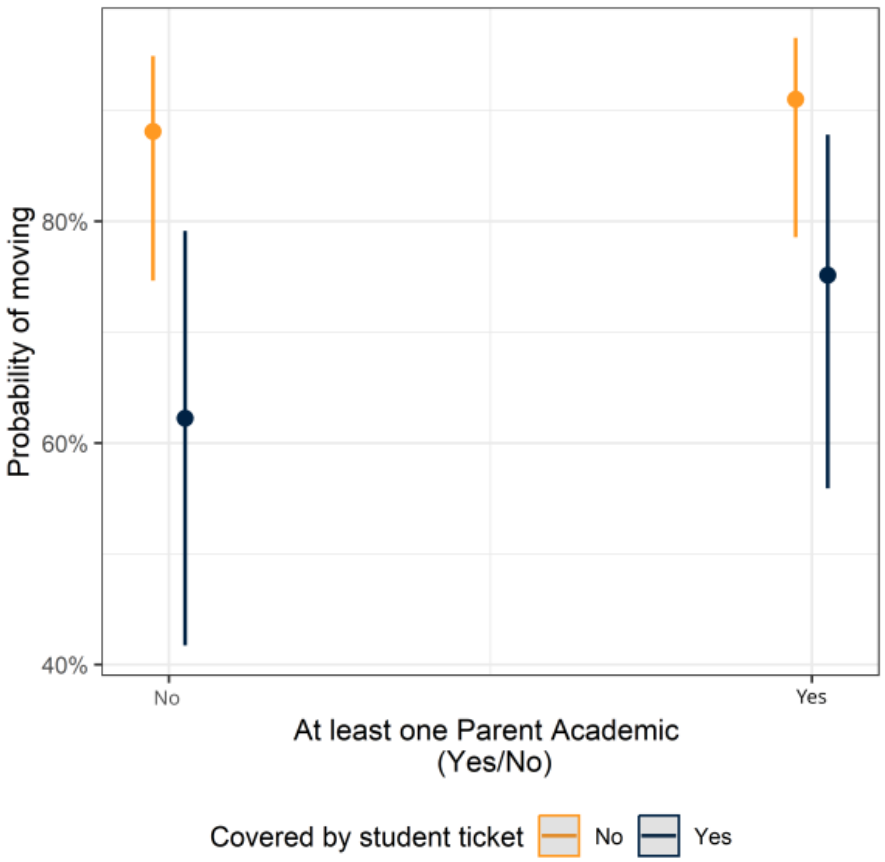

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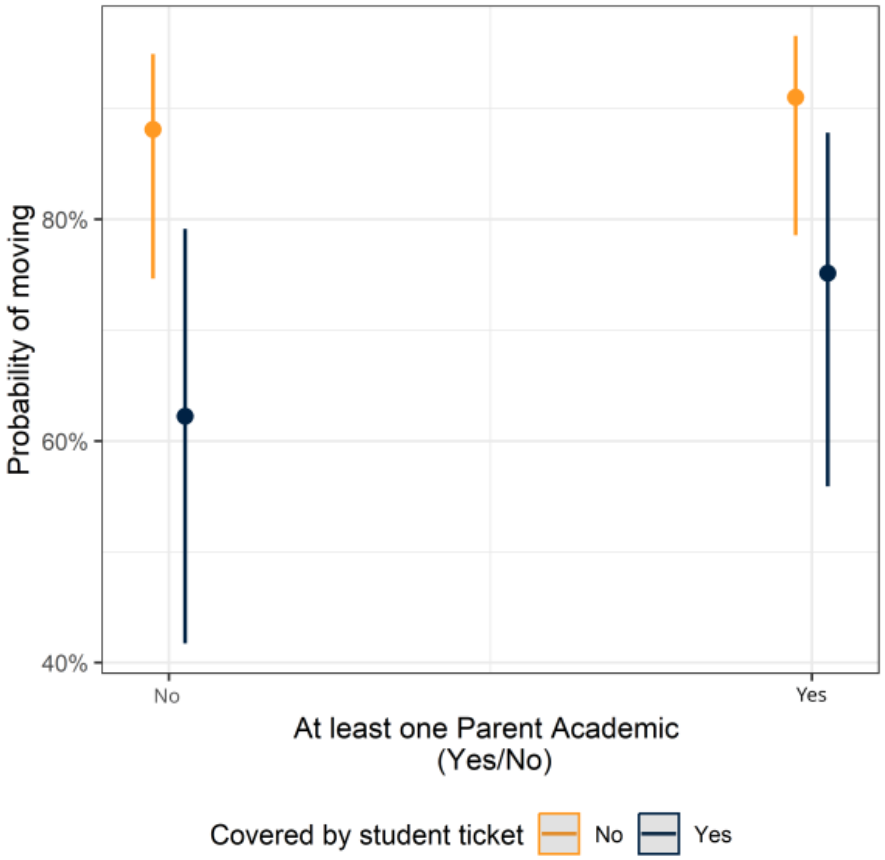

→ **Student tickets** are particularly relevant for students from lower social backgrounds

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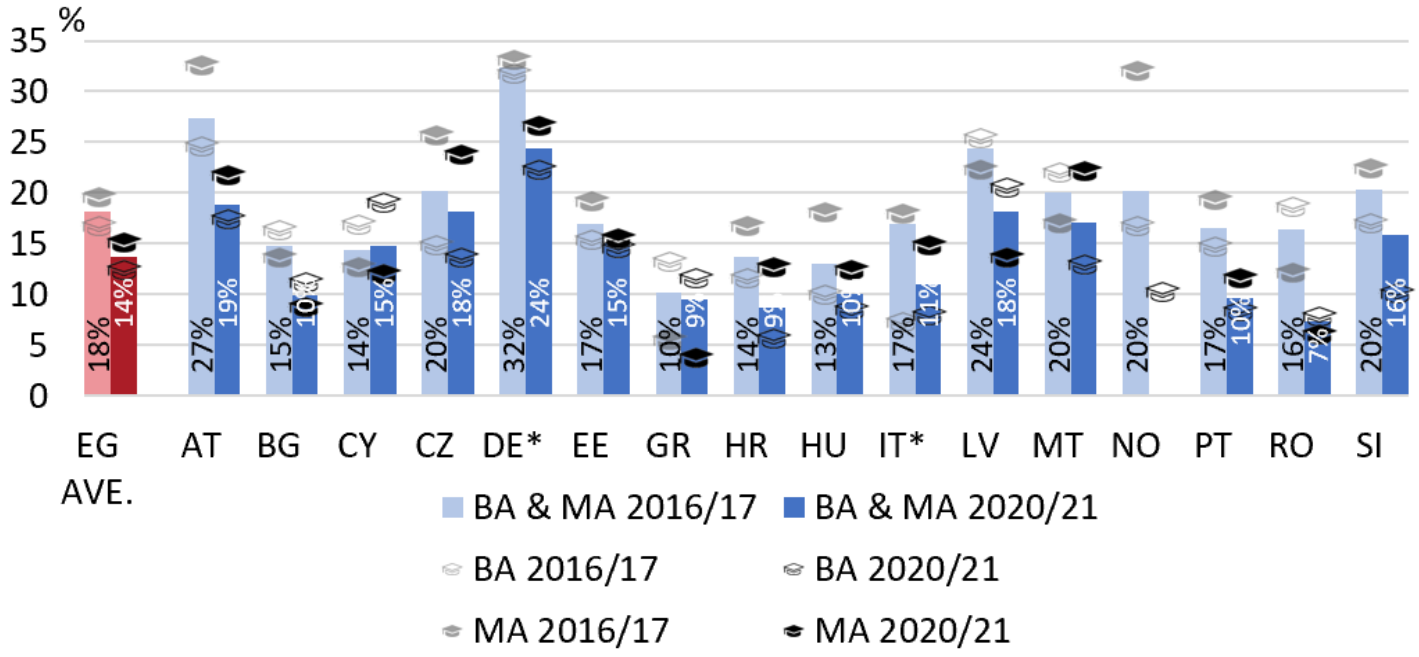
Mobility Constraints

Figure 3.6.1: Proportion of graduates with (any) experience abroad during reference programme.

Definition: Any experience abroad includes all stays in another country including study stay, work/internship abroad, language course abroad, summer school abroad

All graduates by:

Survey country (X-Axis), cohort (twin bars), degree level per cohort (grey/black, emptied/filled icons)



Data source: EUROGRADUATE 2022, data version 3.0.0.

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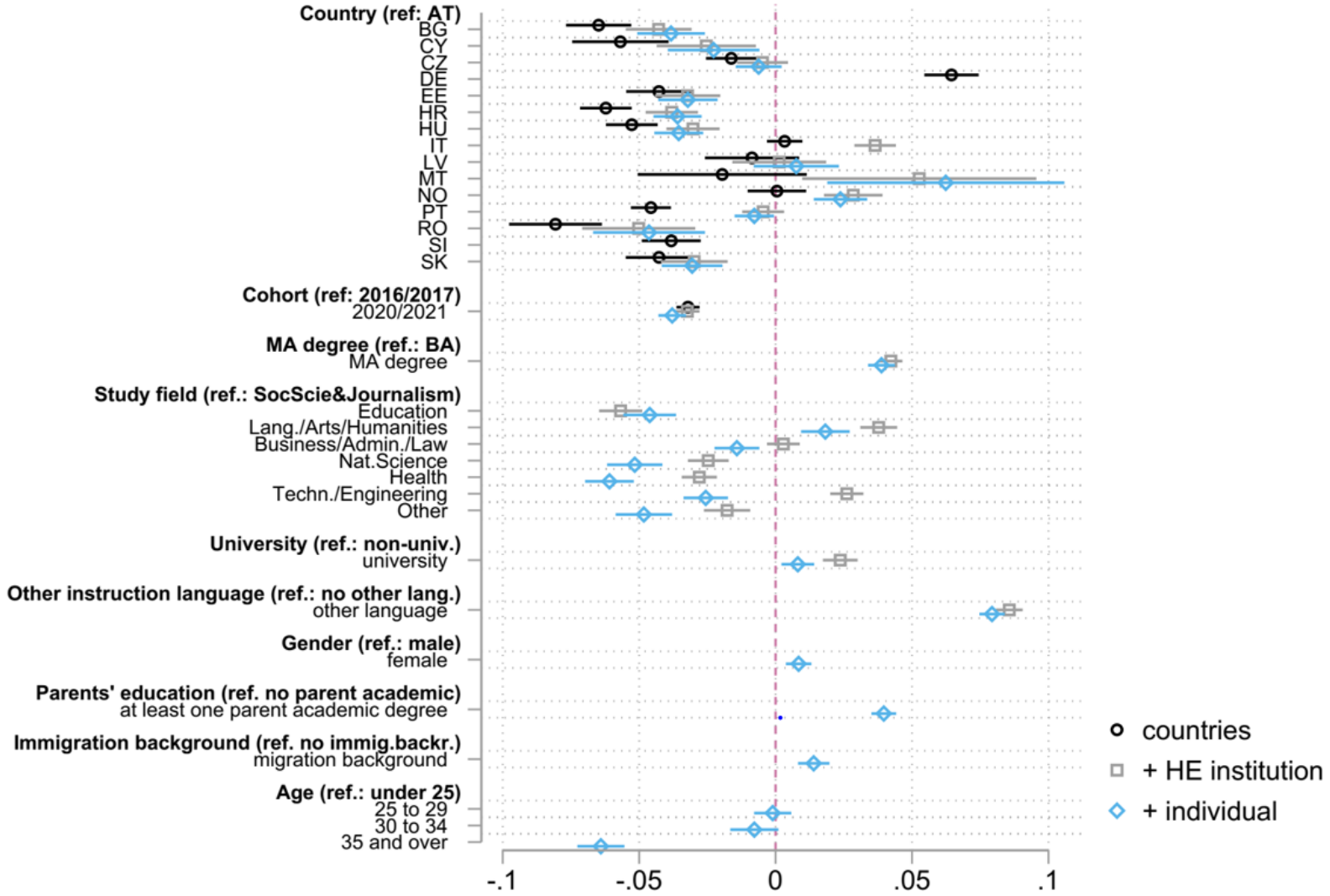
Figure 3.6.3: Explaining the chance to participate in any abroad mobility experiences.

Average marginal effects (AME) for chance of participating in any abroad experience as defined in Fig. 3.6.1 versus not participating in abroad experiences

All graduates



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Countries not covered: GR
Method: Logistic regression analyses; coefficients are average marginal effects (AME).

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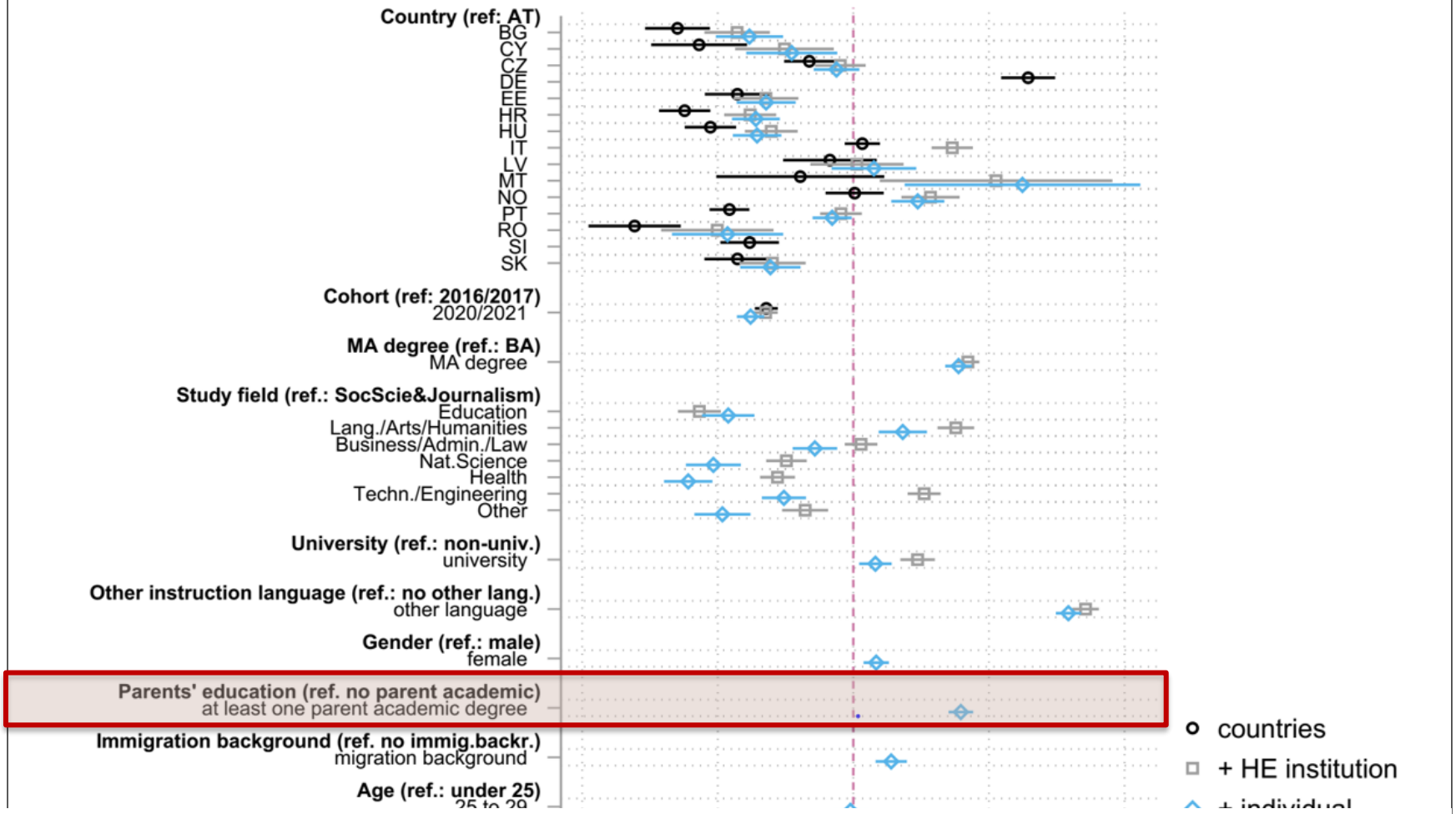

→ **Participation in study abroad activities** relates strongly to social background

Countries not covered: GR

Method: Logistic regression analyses; coefficients are average marginal effects (AME).

Measures to Support Mobility = Measures to Reduce Social Inequality

→ **Improving information** and **access to local study** options can enhance participation and reduce social inequalities

→ **Affordable student tickets** expand access to learning and mobility opportunities for low-SES students

→ **Fostering study abroad** through **targeted grants** and **tailored guidance**

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