

## Education Matters, but Who Can Attain It? Attitudes towards Education and Educational Attainment in Estonia

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### Abstract

Education is one of the most important determinants of socio-economic success in modern societies, but educational inequality remains an important societal problem. The aim of this study was to look at public attitudes towards the value of education and views on the opportunities to access education in Estonia. Using data from the Estonian Social Equality and Inequality Study (2010), the findings of the current study suggested that education is highly valued in Estonia, but the public also tends to think that access to education is not equally available to everybody. Furthermore, we found that there is a social-status-based structure in the views of the value of education and access to education. Lower social status groups tend to value education as less important for success in life, and these lower social status groups are also more likely to think that chances to access higher education are not equal for everybody, but that wealth, gender, ethnicity and social status matter. Similarly, inequality of opportunity is also felt more strongly within the ethnic minority group, the non-Estonians, than it is amongst Estonians.

**Keywords:** educational inequality, value of education, access to education, social status, Estonia.

### Introduction

Education is considered to be one of the most important predictors of socio-economic success in modern societies (Becker, 2006), and the provision of equal access to education is one of the core goals of most Western societies. Despite efforts to guarantee equality of opportunity, the conclusion so far is that class differentials in educational attainment have persisted over time (Goldthorpe, 2000). People from more advantaged class backgrounds tend to have more successful educational careers compared to people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Explanations of continuing inequality in education can be broadly divided into two streams (McCay, Byrne, O'Connell, Kelly & Doherty, 2010). Culture-based approaches (Bernstein, 1961; Bourdieu, 1973; Lareau, 2000) emphasise the role of culture in the continuation of educational inequality: the norms, values and beliefs that shape preferences, expectations and decisions that affect educational choices. In this stream, an important role is attributed to the dominant social class that imposes its values and norms on a society. The rational choice approach (Boudon, 1974; Goldthorpe, 2000; Keller & Zavalloni, 1964) places more emphasis on the role of resources and resource constraints on continuing educational inequality. From this perspective, less ambitious education careers are an outcome of the rational choices of individuals. In both approaches, the presence of educational inequality can be related to social status – on the one hand, in the differences in the attitudes towards education that are 'cultivated' across various social classes and, on the other hand, by the impact that the dominant attitudes and understandings have on the further educational choices of the various social classes.

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This study had two aims; first, to describe attitudes towards education and educational inequality, and, second, to see the extent to which these attitudes and perceptions relate to social status. The country studied was Estonia, and much has changed in Estonia and in the Estonian education system over the last two decades. Since the 1990s, the Estonian education sector has expanded and, thus, educational opportunities have increased. However, this has not led to a decreasing association between class origin and educational achievement, which suggests that inequalities in educational opportunities are continually present (Saar, 2010). At the same time, education, especially higher education (HE), has become a very strong predictor of socio-economic success in Estonia – having an HE qualification means a faster transition from school to work, better mobility opportunities and a more stable employment career (Täht, Saar, & Unt, 2008). Thus, on the one hand, securing an HE qualification has become increasingly important in Estonia, while, on the other hand, gaining place at a HE institution and securing qualification has become more strongly related to social status. In this study, we were interested in exploring the possible manifestations of social-status-related educational values in Estonia. For this, we first studied public opinion to see how important education is considered to be as a success factor in life in Estonia, and to gather views on inequalities in accessing HE. Second, we were interested in seeing the extent to which these attitudes differed across social groups. In summary, we wanted to find out whether everybody thinks that education is important or whether only some social status groups do. We also wanted to find out whether social status makes a difference in how strongly educational inequality is perceived.

As stated earlier, making a distinction between social status groups and their attitudes towards education has important theoretical implications. It is argued that attitudes influence educational outcomes, and that the persistence of educational inequality is partly reinforced because attitudes about education differ among social groups. Put simply, it has been suggested that lower social classes have less impressive educational outcomes because their attitudes towards education are different – they might see education as less valuable, or they might feel that accessing education is not a possibility, and this could work as a discouraging factor and result in poorer educational outcomes (Gilles, 2006; Lareau, 2006; Reay, 2005). Considering the importance of attitudes for making educational choices, we are in this study particularly interested in whether these attitudes are associated with socio-economic backgrounds in Estonia. The main research questions were the following: How much is education valued in the public opinion in Estonia? How strongly are educational inequalities perceived? Do the values and/or perceived inequalities in education differ across social groups? To answer these questions, we analysed data from the Estonian Social Equality and Inequality study (2010).

## **The value of education – importance and boundaries**

In a schooled society, education is central in connecting to major activities such as the labour market. There is a strong normative assumption that an individual's education should be chartered through the attainment of formal academic degrees, which are becoming increasingly synonymous with human capacity in the occupational structure (Baker, 2011). This leads to a process by which power in a society is distributed through education credentials (Collins, 1979). Educational credentialing has become prominent not only for an individual's status, but it also anchors the societal status system. In school, young people are socialised to the ideologies of the upper class, where education is understood to be a mechanism for maintaining the status quo through educational credentials that are necessary for acquiring meaningful employment (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

Explaining the differences in educational outcomes has been an important goal in sociological research, particularly in the field of social inequality and mobility (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Hout & DiPrete, 2006). One of the central findings of this line of research is that educational outcomes are

closely linked to *social background*, more precisely social class and social standing (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). In the studies that explore and explain the impact of social background on educational outcomes, the focus is mostly on the so-called objective primary effects (Boudon, 1974) such as cognitive abilities, skills, talents and available economic resources. By objective conditions we can also think of the institutional context that determines the education system (public vs. private education, cost, standardisation, stratification) (Fuchs & Wösserman, 2007). For instance, it is easy to imagine that the cost of education has a direct influence on which socio-economic groups have better access to it. Overall, one can say that these objective conditions tend to determine to a great extent *what is possible* when it comes to taking part in education. However, even when objective factors, such as ability level, are held constant, people from more advantaged social classes still have more successful educational careers (Goldthorpe, 2000). As a partial explanation for this, it has been suggested that, next to objective determinants, educational choices are also influenced by subjective factors – attitudes towards education and perceptions about educational inequalities, for instance.

Voigt (2007) suggests that educational choices are not only dependent on what options are actually available, but also on what people think is available for them. Thus, different beliefs and ideological boundaries tend to shape *what people think is possible* when it comes to attaining education, including both the aspects related to the value of education and people's assessment of what level of education it is feasible for them to access. Thus, the literature implies that, just like objective factors, attitudes towards education can also differ among social status groups. For instance, it has been argued that due to differences in socialisation patterns and cultural capital the values, norms and attitudes with respect to education vary between social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Lareau, 1997). As summarised by Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe and Yaish (2007), when studying the persistence of educational inequalities, it is not sufficient to concentrate entirely on objective factors, such as class differences in academic performance, whether these are seen as being primarily genetic or socio-cultural in origin, because class differences also occur in the choices that are made by the students and their parents regarding their educational careers. In turn, these choices are closely related to attitudes towards education. Therefore, in addition to the differences in abilities and resources between the social classes, we should also study the way in which education is valued and educational opportunities perceived. These attitudes and perceptions could have further impact on the educational choices of the individuals, and they might influence the choices of their children.

First, it is important to consider whether people think that education is important and why. For instance, people can value education based on a rational calculation – thus, educational choices could depend on people's beliefs about how education will increase their utility (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Jonsson, 2005). The perceived importance of education is not necessarily universal, but is likely to differ between individuals as well as between social groups according to what they want or what they perceive as feasible (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Manski, 1993). For example, not necessarily everyone believes that HE will result in higher incomes or other forms of utility; consequently, it would be less valuable and less desirable for these groups. Furthermore, instead of or next to education, people might see a variety of other ways to successfully achieve their goals in life, such as luck or personal connections. Goldthorpe (2000) claims that educational decision-making remains conditioned by class position, and class leads to different evaluations of the benefits and costs of education. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) refer to 'relative risk aversion' as an explanation of class based differences in educational attainment. The major educational goal among young people (and their families) is the acquisition of a level of education that will allow them to attain a class position at least as good as that of their family of origin. This means that people from different class origins have different threshold levels of education that they seek to reach as a minimum.

Education may also have an intrinsic value; for example, people may see education as a way to individual development and enlightenment. Such attitudes towards education can depend on social status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997/1990; Lareau, 1997). Well-educated parents may see education as

important for success but also as a way to achieve individual development. They are likely to transfer these values and ideas to their children, which in turn creates high educational ambitions amongst their children. In the same way, other parents might consider education as less important in achieving personal goals and, thus, transfer these beliefs to their children.

Attitudes towards education can also include perceptions about equality of opportunity to access education, and this might influence the perceived chances of accessing HE. From the risk aversion perspective (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), negative perceptions about the chances of accessing education would increase the perceived risk of taking up education (time and possible resources spent on applying to an university, for instance), which in turn would lower the chances of striving for a place in an HE institution.

The value of education and perceptions about the ability to access it could also be influenced by more practical considerations, such as knowledge, understanding and beliefs about how the education system works (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997/1990). For instance, if the worse-off social groups believe that the education system is unfair or meant only for the wealthy, they might be more reluctant towards the idea of pursuing (or letting their children pursue) more education. Or just the opposite: in the context where equal access to education is very much promoted and encouraged, people may believe that regardless of their social background they can access and undertake the education that they want. Furthermore, people from the lower social classes may also be less knowledgeable about the role of education in the labour market, which could make them less likely to believe that education is an important success factor in life.

Boudon (1974) considers that differences in educational choices and outcomes are determined by different opportunities and constraints, and that one has to evaluate sets of costs and benefits before making decisions. The function of education is to a large extent determined and shaped by the context to which a person is exposed. These can be societal perceptions of the value and function of education in general, or the way education is perceived by the immediate community. Therefore, values about education do not develop in isolation but are influenced by the values that are widespread in a society or in someone's immediate community. This suggests that the study of attitudes towards education in a society and among particular socio-economic groups would be useful.

To summarise, an important role in educational inequality is played by the general and/or personal value given to education, which in turn is often social-status-structured. Most of the theoretical approaches assume that the values attached to education shape the outcomes, both in terms how much education is valued as well as how much education is attained. Although this is a common argument in the literature, it is reasonable to assume that when asking people about their educational values, what they express is a post-hoc rationalisation of their own educational experience. In one way or the other, a relationship between educational values and social status is to be expected, and testing for the presence of this relationship was the main aim of this study. Due to the cross-sectional character of the data, we did not test whether these attitudes develop as a result of rational choice, intrinsic values or institutional influences. We were aiming to explore the relationship between values and perceived restrictions and their relation to social status.

## **The Estonian country context**

The role of education in predicting socio-economic success in Estonia has increased over recent decades (Jõgi, Jääger, Leppänen, & Rinne, 2008) and is now one of the most important predictors of socio-economic position in Estonian society (Helemäe, Saar, & Vöörmann, 2000; Saar, 2011; Titma & Kõiv, 2002). For example, having an HE qualification dramatically increases one's labour market opportunities – graduates of HE enter the labour market faster than people with lower levels of education, they occupy higher positions, their upward occupational mobility chances are better, and

they are more protected against the risk of unemployment (Helemäe et al., 2000; Täht et al., 2008; Titma & Kõiv, 2002). At the same time, the Estonian HE sector in particular has expanded considerably – both the number of (private) institutions offering HE (Saar, 2010) and the number of students in tertiary education have increased dramatically. The number of students in HE has almost tripled, increasing from about 25,000 in 1993/94 to about 70,000 in 2010/11 (Tõnisson, 2011). The expansion of the sector, on the one hand, and the better labour market opportunities for those who have undertaken HE, on the other, leads us to expect that our findings will show that *education is generally highly valued in Estonian society*. Although we expect education to be generally highly valued, based on previous research findings (as discussed above), it is plausible to also argue in the case of Estonia that there are social class/status differences in the way education is valued. Thus, we expect to find that *lower social status groups value education somewhat less than the higher social status groups*.

Despite the expansion of the HE sector, recent studies show that participation in HE in Estonia is not equally available to everybody (Mägi, Lill, Kirss, Beerkens, & Orr, 2010). The primary beneficiaries of the increased opportunities were not children from less advantaged class backgrounds (Saar, 2010), participation in HE was strongly related to socio-economic status and background. One of the reasons for this is the cost of attending an HE institution. Following the private institutions, an increasing number of state universities have introduced tuition fees. The proportion of students paying tuition fees increased from 7 per cent in 1993 to 54 per cent in 2005 (Saar & Lindemann, 2008). At the same time, Estonia has experienced a vast increase in social inequality, as the so-called winners and losers emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union (Saar, 2011). The Gini coefficient, which indicates the level of income inequalities in society, increased from 27.7 in 1989 to 39.6 in 1995 (Cornia, Addison, & Kiiski, 2003), and has stabilised at 31.4, which is above the EU average (Eurostat, 2011). There is also empirical evidence that the Estonian population is dissatisfied with issues concerning social justice and equal opportunities in Estonia (Lauristin, 2003; Paškov, 2011). Based on these considerations, we expect that *access to education is not seen as equal in Estonia; people from the lower social status groups in particular are expected to perceive restrictions in accessing education*.

During the last decades, there has also been another important development in the field of education that may be reflected in people's perceptions. During the Soviet period, both secondary and HE in Estonia could be undertaken in Estonian or Russian. During the 1990s, Russian as a language of study was almost abolished from state universities. This has created many challenges for non-Estonians entering state universities compared to Estonians, due to their lower levels of Estonian language proficiency. Thus, *the non-Estonians are expected to perceive educational inequality in terms of access to HE more strongly than Estonians*.

## Data and methods

The data used came from the Estonian Social Equality and Inequality study [ESEI], and this data was collected in 2010 from a random probability sample of individuals aged 18 and over, within private households in Estonia. During the survey, 1,005 individuals were interviewed face-to-face. In the study, amongst other things, individuals were asked about their opinions about education and educational opportunities in Estonia.

In order to measure how education is valued, the following survey question was used: To get ahead in life, how important is it to have a good education? It is important to note that this survey item was part of a set of questions where respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of various factors in getting ahead in life, including factors such as hard work, ambition, knowing the right people, etc. Although the question primarily emphasises the instrumental value of education in Estonia (education as a success factor), we expected that it would also measure the general value of education in Estonian society compared to other possible factors.

For the perceived access opportunities to education, respondents were asked to evaluate the following statements on a 5-point scale (from 'absolutely agree' to 'absolutely disagree'):

- *In Estonia, only the rich can afford the costs of attending university;*
- *In Estonia, people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background.*

The first question was intended to capture the perceptions of educational inequality based on money – suggesting that only people who have enough resources could afford HE. It has been suggested that increasing income differentials are one of the main reasons for increasing educational inequality despite the vast expansion of the education sector in Estonia in the 1990s (Saar, 2010). The second question should capture broader types of educational inequality due to disadvantages related to one's gender, ethnicity or social background. These are all individual characteristics and (dis)advantages related to any of these aspects can be considered as educational inequality. From this question, we aimed to find out whether people believe that there are other factors, outside material standing, that influence access to HE in Estonia. It has to be kept in mind that this is a three-pronged question, and it is not possible to tell to which of the categories respondents refer. It is also important to note that the question on accessibility refers to HE only, whereas the value of education refers to education in general. Given that both the differences in labour market success as well as accessibility to education appeared mostly between HE and the other educational groups, the focus of this part of the analysis is on HE. In other words, we expect these questions to capture attitudes about equality of opportunity in accessing HE in Estonia.

To get representations of social status, we used different measures. As 'objective' measures we included the following characteristics:

- **Social class:** For social class, we used a modification of the commonly used Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero (EGP) class scheme (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). For the purpose of our analysis, the original 11-category scheme was collapsed to four classes: (1) Service class (EGP classes I and II); (2) Lower white-collar (EGP classes III); (3) Working class (EGP classes VI and VII); and 4) Self-employed and employers (EGP class IV). Class V (Supervisors of manual workers/technicians) was excluded from the analysis due to the very low number of cases in this class category, which may partly be a result of poor coding in the original data. The self-employed class was also rather small (about 4 per cent of cases), but it was included in the analysis as a separate category due to its distinctive behaviour compared to other categories. The scheme to collapse other class categories used the findings from previous post-socialist case studies (Saar, 2010; Toomse, 2003), and the absence of differences in the opinions presented by the representatives of these classes was also taken into account. Ganzeboom and Treiman's (1996) methodology was used to create the EGP class scheme variable.
- **Household income:** Household income is a natural logarithm of the household income in Estonian kroons (EEK, the Estonian currency at the time of the survey), adjusted for household size using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-modified equivalence scale of 0.5 for every additional adult and 0.3 for every child in the household (Hagenaars, de Vos, & Zaidi, 1994).
- **Attained level of education of the respondent:** The highest educational level attained variable was coded as follows: Elementary level education, Vocational training, General secondary education, Secondary education with vocational training, University degree. Our sample also included people who were currently in education, and these people made up 9 per cent of the whole sample. The impact of student status on the values regarding education was controlled for in the original models, but turned out not to be significant or to have any impact on the rest of the findings.

Next to 'objective' measures, social status can also be measured via a subjective measure. While objective measures of social position indicate the visible characteristics, the subjective position reflects people's personal opinions about their position in a social hierarchy, and shows how people perceive their position in relation to others in the society. This is particularly important and explains why the subjective measure might sometimes better capture someone's position in a social hierarchy. This measure might be particularly suitable in the case of Estonia, where social classes have not yet clearly developed and, thus, it could be the perceived relative position that matters. In a previous study carried out by Lindemann (2011), the subjective social position was associated with 'objective' characteristics, such as income and education, and served as an indicator of social status in Estonia. The 'subjective social status' measure used in the current analysis was a 3-category measure derived from the question where the respondents were asked to locate themselves in a social status scale with a minimum of 1 (low social status) and a maximum of 10 (high social status). The new measure has three categories: low, medium and high social status. In the data used in this study, subjective social position has a moderate but significant positive correlation with the respondents' education ( $r=.34$ ) and household income ( $r=.26$ ), indicating a relationship with 'objective' status characteristics, but still including an individual component of a social status measure. The association with education and household income is, in this case, also slightly stronger with the subjective social status measure than with the 'objective' social class measure. The association between the objective and subjective social class measures is presented in Appendix 1 and indicates that people from the service class tend to perceive themselves predominantly as having medium or high social status, while representatives of the working class see themselves mainly in lower social status level. Overall, we believe that subjective social status might capture nuances of someone's relative position that are not included in the social class measure. However, we have to consider that subjective social position does not only reflect a person's relative position in a society, but it also reflects an attitude towards life. For instance, high perceived social position might be seen as a reflection of optimism. We will come back to this when interpreting the findings.

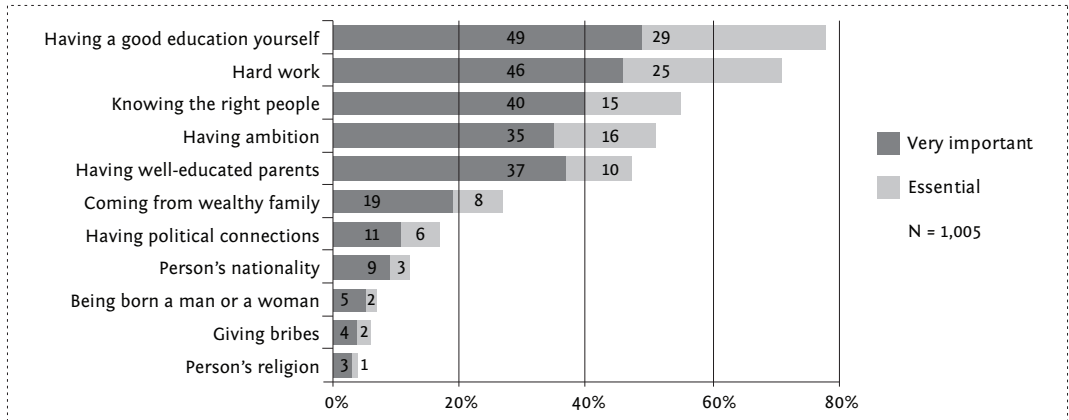
As indicated above, nationality may be an important indicator in the context of Estonia, when it comes to perceived access to education, especially in terms of HE. So we also included the ethnicity of the respondents in the analysis, which was stated as follows: Estonians and non-Estonians. Non-Estonians are mainly either Russian or Russian-speaking, or both. All models also controlled for the gender and age of the respondents.

For the analysis of the perceptions about the value and accessibility of HE, an ordered logit regression model was used to avoid losing information that would occur from collapsing or dichotomising scales. These models are not sensitive to the distribution of the variables in the way that OLS regression models are and enabled us to analyse variables with skewed distributions (Long, 1997; Winship & Mare, 1984).

## Results

### The value of education

As predicted, education appears to be highly valued in Estonia. When asking respondents to assess the importance of different factors in getting ahead in life, 'having a good education' was ranked the highest of all the proposed factors (Figure 1). It was seen as 'essential' by 29% of the respondents and as 'very important' by 49% of respondents. Therefore, a large proportion of the population agreed that education was either essential or very important for success in life. Although having a good education may mainly refer to the instrumental value of education, it shows in general that education



**Figure 1:** The importance of various factors for getting ahead in life, %.

Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

is considered to be the most important factor in getting ahead in life in Estonia. It was ranked as the most important among a whole list of other factors, including 'hard work', 'knowing the right people', 'having well-educated parents' and 'having ambition'.

So, the findings show that education is generally highly valued in Estonia. However, despite being highly valued in general, the question remains as to whether the value of education is perceived similarly across different social status groups. When first looking at the class differences in the perceived importance of education (Table 1), it stands out most clearly that the self-employed and employers find education less important for getting ahead in life compared to people from the service class. This is in line with previous findings by Saar & Unt (2008), who showed that in the relationship between entrepreneurship and education, self-employed entrepreneurs are more likely to be at the extreme ends of the education spectrum – either with very little education or highly educated. There is also some indication that those belonging to the working class, compared to the higher (service) class, find it less important to have a good education to get ahead in life. However, this relationship is explained by the level of education that the respondent has achieved – once controlling for education, working class does not differ from the service class (see Model 2 in Table 1). Attained level of education is strongly associated with attitudes towards education – compared to university graduates, people with lower education are less likely to believe that education is important for getting ahead in life. The association with the level of education achieved could reflect the rational choice argument – people who value education less highly also choose to undertake less education. On the other hand, it could be seen as a post-hoc rationalisation of choices made in the past. For instance, a person who did not manage to achieve a high level of education might avoid cognitive dissonance by thinking that education is not that important for getting ahead in life. The third 'objective' social status characteristic, household income, shows no significant association with the perceived value of education.

Adding subjective social status to our analysis (Model 3) slightly improved the predictive power of the model. The association is in line with the pattern already described – comparing people who think they hold a 'low' position in social hierarchy to the ones who think they hold a 'high' position, we can see that the former group is significantly less likely to value education. Interestingly, the difference between people with 'medium' and 'high' social status is not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the fact that we find a large gap between people with subjectively 'high' and 'low' positions indicates that perceived social position captures something different or something additional compared to the objective measures of status. It could be that a subjective social position works better in capturing



**Table 1:** The impact of social class and status factors in predicting the importance of having a good education for getting ahead in life.<sup>1</sup> Ordered logit regression coefficients.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Female (Ref=Male)</i>	.12	.10	.12	.11
<i>Age</i>	.01**	.01**	.01**	.01**
<i>Social class/EGP (Ref=Service I+II)</i>				
Working class (VI+VII)	-.48***	-.09	.02	.04
Self-employed and employers (IV)	-.86**	-.86**	-.83**	-.82**
Lower white-collar (III)	-.28	-.01	.05	.06
<i>Household income<sup>2</sup></i>				
		.14	.11	.11
<i>Education (Ref=University)</i>				
Elementary		-.60**	-.55**	-.58**
Vocational		-.93***	-.93***	-.94***
General secondary		-.72***	-.68***	-.70***
Secondary vocational		-.69***	-.70***	-.72***
<i>Subjective social status (Ref=High)</i>				
Low			-.45**	-.42**
Medium			-.17	-.16
<i>Non-Estonian (Ref=Estonian)</i>				
				-.19
R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	.03	.06	.07	.07
N = 799				

Significance: \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .10$ .

Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

the relative socio-economic position of people in Estonian society. However, it could also be that a subjective position indicates whether a person has a positive or a negative outlook on life. An optimistic outlook about one's social position could also mean that the person is more enthusiastic about education and believes that education can work as a success factor in life. People who perceive their social position as low may also be more critical about the society that they live in and, therefore, express a cynical view of the importance of education in getting ahead in life. This is potentially problematic, as it appears that people with a low social position would not think that a better education could improve their status in a society, and this could mean that they would be less eager to obtain additional education to improve their position.

Finally, nationality seems to play no significant role in the variability of the perceptions regarding the value of education for success in life. Estonians and non-Estonians seem to have similar opinions about the role of education in getting ahead in Estonian society.

Given the way the original question was asked, these findings could be interpreted as how much education is valued *per se*, meaning how important people think education is – the intrinsic value of education. Or it could be understood as a question of how useful having a good education is seen to be in Estonia – the instrumental value of education in achieving socio-economic success. Either way, the findings do show that social status-related differences exist in the perceptions on the value and importance of education in Estonia. Unfortunately, the current data does not allow exploring the impact of the value of education on actual educational intentions or outcomes or the meaning and role attributed to 'having a good education' in the process of life success. The data does suggest that the vast majority of Estonian people see education as an important factor and/or

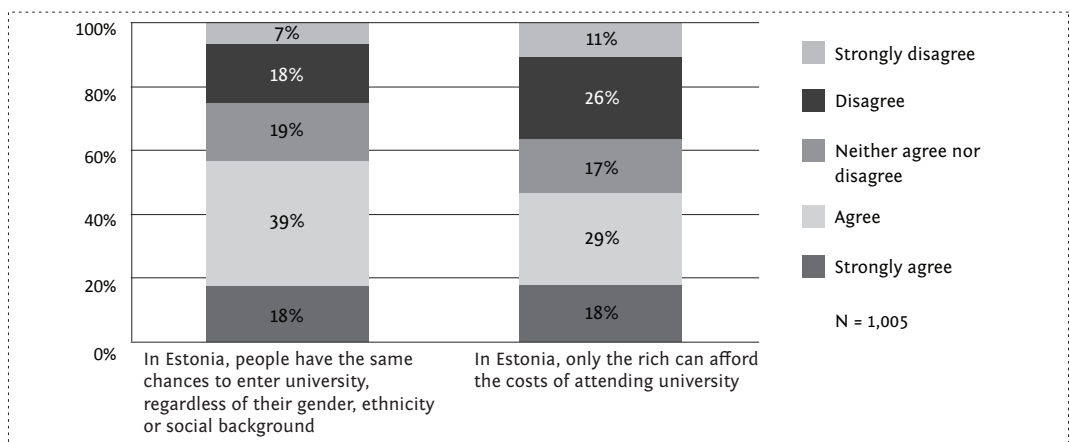
1 Original statement *How important you think it is for getting ahead in life: Having a good education yourself?* Scale: 1 – not important at all; 5 – essential. 2 Natural logarithm of household income/number of household members in equivalence scale: additional adult 0.5; child 0.3.

instrument, especially in comparison to other potential factors. This shows that people's attitudes are in accordance with societal trends – as was mentioned earlier, education has indeed become an important predictor of socio-economic success in Estonian society. However, although education is generally highly valued, we found some evidence that people with lower education and a perceived low position value education somewhat less highly than the higher social status groups. However, we also found that some particular groups in a society, like the self-employed and employers, seem to be less convinced in the importance of education for attaining success. Finally, it is worthwhile noting that there is not very much variability in how much education is valued in Estonia, and social class/status explains just a very minor part of it.

### Perceived opportunities to undertake higher education

While little variation could be found in the perceived value of education for getting ahead in Estonia, more variation can be seen in the way the chances to access HE are perceived. As shown in the Figure 2, almost half of the Estonian population (47% of respondents) agrees or strongly agrees with the statement that 'In Estonia, only the rich can afford the costs of attending university', whereas 36% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. The feeling that access to HE is restricted by gender, ethnicity or social status is somewhat less widespread. As seen in the same graph, 57% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that 'In Estonia, people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background', suggesting that over half of the population believes that these factors do not play a role in accessing HE. However, a quarter of the population (25%) does feel that access to HE is restricted due to gender, ethnicity or social background. Note that due to the nature of the question, we cannot distinguish which characteristic people are specifically referring to. For instance, it may be that people believe that access is determined by ethnicity and not at all by gender, or vice versa. This simply suggests that next to material conditions, people are somewhat less likely to believe that ascribed characteristics determine the ease of access to university studies.

The variability in both statements can be partly explained by the social status of the respondent. We looked first at the impact of social class on the probability of agreeing with the statement 'In Estonia only rich can afford the costs of attending university' (see Table 2.1.). As can be seen in Model 1, there



**Figure 2:** Opinions about the chances to enter a university in Estonia, %.  
Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

**Table 2.1:** The impact of social class and social status on the perceptions about entry chances to university due to the family's financial situation in Estonia.<sup>2</sup> Ordered logit regression coefficients.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Female (Ref=Male)</i>	-.11	-.19	-.19	-.18	-.19	-.20
<i>Age</i>	.03***	.02***	.02***	.02***	.02***	.02***
<i>Social class/EGP (Ref=Service I+II)</i>						
Working class (VI+VII)	.44***	.11	.01	-.03	-.06	-.03
Self-employed and employers (IV)	.31	.19	.17	.17	.02	-.23
Lower white-collar (III)	.39**	.11	-.01	-.02	-.01	-.02
<i>Household income<sup>2</sup></i>		-.19**	-.09	-.09	-.07	-.08
<i>Education (Ref=University)</i>						
Elementary		.87***	.72***	.76***	.69***	.53**
Vocational		.42*	.28	.30	.26	.12
General secondary		.44*	.32	.35	.32	.18
Secondary vocational		.58***	.43**	.45**	.42*	.29
<i>Subjective social status (Ref=High)</i>						
Low			.83***	.77***	.79***	.82***
Medium			.48**	.46**	.49**	.51***
<i>Non-Estonian (Ref = Estonian)</i>				.26*	.22	.24
<i>Success in life: good education</i>					-.11	2.13
<i>Interactions with 'Success in life: good education'</i>						
<i>Social class/EGP (Ref=Service I+II)</i>						
*Working class (VI+VII)						.63**
*Self-employed and employers (IV)						-.19
*Lower white-collar (III)						.22
*Household income <sup>2</sup>						-.25*
<i>Education (Ref=University)</i>						
*Elementary						-.23
*Vocational						-.55
*General secondary						.01
*Secondary vocational						.02
<i>Subjective social status (Ref=High)</i>						
*Low						-.18
*Medium						-.15
*Non-Estonian (Ref=Estonian)						.14
R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	.08	.10	.12	.13	.13	.14
N=787						

Significance: \*\*\*p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \*p < .10.

Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

appear to be class differences when it comes to the attitudes towards the importance of money in accessing HE. However, when including attained education in the analysis (Model 2 in Table 2.1.) the impact of social class disappears. When it comes to education, only those with the lowest educational level or with secondary vocational training, compared to people with higher education, feel that

2 Original statement *In Estonia, only the rich can afford the costs of attending university*. Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree; 5 – Strongly agree. 2 Natural logarithm of household income/number of household members in equivalence scale: additional adult 0.5; child 0.3.

access to HE is easier for wealthier families. Furthermore, the perception of accessibility to HE is also related to the household financial situation – the higher the household income, the less likely is the agreement that access to university studies is restricted to richer families only. People with lower levels of income are more likely to claim that university is only for the rich.

The findings regarding the impact of subjective social status on perceived access to HE (Model 3) are in line with expectations – respondents who see themselves in a lower or medium social class, as compared to those that think they hold a high position, are more inclined to think that rich families are in a more favourable position for entering a university. Again, it could be that the subjective status captures aspects that are left out by looking only at the objective measures of status. At the same time, it could also be that people who are disappointed with their social position are also critical of the society, which makes them more eager to point out educational inequalities. It could also be that the subjective social position captures people's levels of insecurity. If people are insecure about their social position, they may also feel insecure about the idea that everybody has an equal chance to go to a university. On the other hand, when people feel confident about their social position, they may also feel more confident that everybody who wants to go to a university could do so.

In Model 4, ethnicity is included in the analysis, and the findings show that even after controlling for the main socio-economic characteristics, non-Estonians are more likely to agree that HE is more accessible for richer families (Model 4 in Table 2.1). One of the explanations for this could be that non-Estonians are more likely to have to attend private universities, which offer the option to study in their native language – Russian, but private universities are more costly. Therefore, for non-Estonians resources are a more important factor in determining access to universities.

Next we will discuss some additional relationships that were not part of our hypotheses but may provide further insights to our findings. First, we are interested in seeing whether and how the value of education and perceived access chances are related to one another. When adding the mean perceived value of education to the model (Model 5), we see that there is no direct relationship between these two perceptions – the value of education is not related to how people estimate the opportunities to access education. Part of this could also be due to the fact that different social groups perceive the value of education differently and the association between value and perceived access is not universal. When looking at the interactions (Model 6), we see that the impact of the value of education on perceived access differs significantly for the working class – in their case, valuing education higher than average is more positively related with perceived access restrictions due to a family's wealth. Association patterns also differ among different household income levels – the higher the income, the smaller the positive association between the value of education and access restrictions.

Next, we analyse attitudes towards the statement that 'In Estonia, people have the same chances to enter a university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background.' At first sight, it appears that working class people, as well as the self-employed and employers, differ from the service class. Working class people and the self-employed are less likely to feel that access to HE is equally available for everybody. However, the impact of social class weakens when controlling for the level of education achieved by the respondent and disappears completely when we add subjective social status to the analysis. Interestingly, unlike in the previous analysis, here the level of education achieved does not have any significant association with perceived access restrictions and neither does household income. The explanation as to why education does not matter may be due to the fact that the predictive power of this model is in general very low. It captures some of the effect of the social class, but does not have much differentiating power. Therefore, it seems that attitudes do not differ very much when it comes to inequalities related to gender, ethnic or social status characteristics; instead, attitudes differ more when it comes to the role of money in determining access to HE. In other words, even if access restrictions are perceived by respondents with lower educational levels, they do not feel that these are related to gender, ethnicity or social status but more to one's financial situation.

**Table 2.2:** The impact of social position on the perceptions about entry chances to a university according to gender, ethnicity or social status in Estonia.<sup>3</sup> Ordered logit regression coefficients.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Female (Ref=Male)</i>	.15	.15	.13	.13	.15	.18
<i>Age</i>	.01**	.01**	.01***	.01***	.01***	.01***
<i>Social class/EGP (Ref=Service I+II)</i>						
Working class (VI+VII)	-.33**	-.34*	-.21	-.18	-.19	-.18
Self-employed and employers (IV)	-.68**	-.52	-.48	-.49	-.40	-.26
Lower white-collar (III)	-.09	-.15	-.00	-.00	-.06	-.04
<i>Household income<sup>2</sup></i>		-.05	-.13	-.13	-.11	-.11
<i>Education (Ref=University)</i>						
Elementary		-.26	-.12	-.14	-.03	.01
Vocational		.00	.12	.11	.18	.22
General secondary		-.14	-.04	-.07	.02	.06
Secondary vocational		-.08	.08	.06	.08	.17
<i>Subjective social status (Ref=High)</i>						
Low			-.80***	-.76***	-.73***	-.73**
Medium			-.57***	-.55***	-.53***	-.51**
<i>Non-Estonian (Ref = Estonian)</i>						
<i>Success in life: good education</i>				-.27*	-.24**	-.25**
<i>Interactions with 'Success in life: good education'</i>						
<i>Social class/EGP (Ref=Service I+II)</i>						
*Working class (VI+VII)						.26
*Self-employed and employers (IV)						.61
*Lower white-collar (III)						.33
*Household income <sup>2</sup>						.06
<i>Education (Ref=University)</i>						
*Elementary						-.25
*Vocational						-.21
*General secondary						-.14
*Secondary vocational						-.21
<i>Subjective social status (Ref=High)</i>						
*Low						-.50*
*Medium						-.19
*Non-Estonian (Ref = Estonian)						-.32*
R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	.02	.02	.04	.05	.06	.07
N=775						

Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

Again, a clearer social status impact can be observed when including the subjective social position in the analysis – compared to higher status groups, lower and medium level social status groups are less likely to feel that access to HE is equal despite gender, ethnicity or social status. Also non-Estonians (Model 4) are less likely to agree with the statement. The impact here may be partly due to the way the dependent variable is constructed – it consists of various categories, including ethnicity

3 Original statement *In Estonia, people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background*. Scale: 1– Strongly disagree; 5 – Strongly agree; The model controls for respondent's age and gender.

and social status, which the respondents from these 'categories' might recognise in themselves. In other words, the assessment may be influenced by the respondent's personal experience or perception regarding educational achievement.

Again, we discuss some additional relationships to gain further insight into the questions at hand. For instance, here we find that the perceived value of education has a significant association with perceived access opportunities (Model 5) – in general, the more important education is considered to be as a success factor, the less restrictive is the access to HE based on gender, ethnic or social status. In other words, for those who value education highly, access restrictions to HE are rarely related to ascribed characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or social status. Furthermore, we witness again that the associations are not universal among social groups. The value of education and perceived equality of opportunity are less positively related among those who see themselves to be of lower social status. It is also lower among the non-Estonians compared to Estonians. Therefore, people who think that their position is low, but also the non-Estonians, might perceive more restrictions when it comes to accessing higher education, even if they value education very highly.

## Discussion and conclusion

Against the backdrop of the major changes that have occurred in Estonian society and the education system, the aim of this research was to study public attitudes towards education and educational inequality in Estonia – how important education is considered to be for life success and how accessible HE is seen to be in Estonian society. We were particularly interested in how social status relates to the perceived educational value and evaluations of inequality of opportunity to access HE. Looking at differences between social groups leads to an interesting theoretical discussion, as it has been argued that educational choices and decisions do not only depend on skills and talents but also beliefs about the value of education and the perceived opportunities to access education. Although we did not test whether attitudes actually determine educational decisions, we observed that the attitudes and perceptions do differ across social status groups, often in the way that we would expect.

In line with our hypothesis, our first central finding was that, in general, education is considered to be very important in Estonia – most people agree that education is important for success in life. However, we also find that the perceived value of education differs along the lines of social status. Education is considered to be somewhat less 'valuable' among lower social status groups – less educated people and people with a lower subjective social status are somewhat less 'convinced' that education matters for getting ahead in life. Furthermore, we found that the self-employed and employers are less likely than the service class to believe that education is important for getting ahead. This finding is particular for Estonian society – previous research has shown that it is not uncommon in Estonia for self-employed entrepreneurs to have very little education (Saar & Unt, 2008). Therefore, the self-employed may rely on their own experience when claiming that education is not necessary to get ahead in life in Estonian society. Furthermore, the fact that we found some effect of social status is in line with most of the theoretical approaches, according to which in lower social statuses education is simply not seen as that important because the life goals of the people are different and do not necessarily include HE. For the educational outcomes, it would mean that lower social status groups participate in HE less because they have chosen to do so. However, as our data is cross-sectional, we cannot see whether people have made or will make educational choices based on these values. Instead, it could be that these values are a post-hoc justification of the achieved social position – in lower social status positions, obtaining HE is considered less feasible and, therefore, it is argued that it is not important. The current study did not study the causality between perceptions and outcomes (educational achievement, educational choices) and the real impact of these values.

For this, different type of data (longitudinal data) is needed and this would be a useful future research study. For now, we can only say that the lower social status groups are somewhat less likely to believe that education is important to get ahead in life.

The second main finding of the study was that, generally, people in Estonia tend to believe that the opportunities to access HE are unequal. People feel that access to university studies depends on the wealth of the family, while disadvantages stemming from social position (gender, ethnicity and/or social status) are felt somewhat less strongly. The wealth aspect may be more pronounced due to the general situation in HE in Estonia, where half of the students pay tuition fees (Tõnisson, 2011) – this figure is among the highest in Europe (Saar, Täht, Roosalu & Tamm, 2013). Furthermore, we also found that perceived access to HE is also dependent on the social status of the individual – people from lower social positions (lower education, lower subjective social status, and lower income) are more likely to perceive that access to HE in Estonia is unequal. Although with our data we could not test whether attitudes towards education are related to actual behaviour and educational achievement, based on previous studies it could be assumed that these perceived restrictions to accessing education may negatively affect actual educational achievement (of these individuals or their offspring), as for instance, the ‘relative risk aversion’ hypothesis suggests (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). The observed social status differences in perceptions correspond to the findings of previous studies that showed increasing educational inequality in Estonia due to social status (Mägi et al., 2010; Saar, 2010).

The third central finding of the study concerned the hypothesis that non-Estonians as the minority group in Estonia are more likely to perceive restrictions in the chance to access HE than Estonians. Our findings showed that non-Estonians are indeed more likely to perceive that access to HE is affordable only for richer families and that there are disadvantages when it comes to accessing to HE based on gender, ethnicity and/or social status. Considering the disadvantaged educational opportunities of the non-Estonians, there is a high risk that this group stays away from HE because they do not see that it is feasible to access it. So, the negative attitudes about educational opportunities could discourage non-Estonians to strive for HE, while the negative attitudes of non-Estonians could also be seen as strong criticism towards the existing educational opportunities in Estonia, and they might encourage them to speak out and take action against the unfairness. At the same time, no ethnic group differences could be observed in the value of education – non-Estonians find education as important for life success as Estonians. We think that it can be argued that in this group in particular there is a discrepancy between ‘what is wanted’ and ‘what is seen as feasible’. Non-Estonians value education as highly as the Estonians do, but they are much more critical about their chances to attend universities.

This leads us to the fourth main finding of the current research – the relationship between the perceived value of education and the perceived chances to access HE. In particular, we found some discrepancy in the values and perceived access chances. While in general a higher value of education was associated with less perceived inequality in access to education, among those with a low subjective social status and the non-Estonians the association was significantly less positive. In other words, even when education is generally valued highly in those groups, access is not perceived as equal. The findings indicated that although education is generally valued highly, the way it is associated with perceived access chances is not always universal.

To summarise, our results point to the potential risk that lower social status groups see themselves as ‘not eligible’ for HE in Estonia. Although it is important to keep in mind that the impact of the values on the actual educational achievement was not tested in the current research and so remains an assumption. However, the fact that the lower social classes, in particular, are likely to believe that education is not equally available might have implications for the educational choices that they make for themselves and for their children. Also, as the higher social classes are less likely to perceive inequality of opportunity, this suggests that they are less likely to acknowledge and be concerned about the existing level of educational inequality in Estonian society. This, in turn, might have implications for their preferences regarding educational policy.

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**Appendix 1:** Distribution of social class/EGP and subjective social status measure, %.

Social class/EGP	Subjective social status			Total row	Total social class/EGP
	Low	Medium	High		
Service class (I+II)	24.6	43.1	32.3	100.0	35.6
Lower white-collar (III)	37.5	48.0	14.5	100.0	16.6
Working class (VI+VII)	50.5	40.5	9.0	100.0	43.8
Self-employed and employers (IV)	25.0	52.8	22.2	100.0	3.9
Total subjective social status	38.1	43.2	18.7	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculations, ESEI 2010.

.0