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Educational aspirations and inequality in an expanding higher education system: evidence from South Korea

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Abstract
Educational aspirations are recognised as crucial mediators between social origins and educational attainment, yet their role may have evolved as higher education systems expand and become internally stratified. This study examines how educational aspirations mediate socioeconomic inequality in higher education participation during a period of massive expansion in South Korea, analysing three birth cohorts (born between 1956 and 1986) who encountered varying educational opportunities. The analysis extends the Wisconsin model of status attainment by incorporating insights from maximally maintained inequality and effectively maintained inequality theories, examining both vertical differentiation in degree levels and horizontal differentiation in institutional types in the mediation process. Using data from the Korean Education and Social Mobility Survey (KEDI-ESM), we employ multinomial logit models and decomposition analysis to reveal three key findings. First, parental education has become more strongly associated with aspirations for prestigious higher education pathways among recent cohorts. Second, the influence of these educational aspirations on access to selective universities remains largely unchanged. Third, while educational aspirations mediate a growing proportion of overall inequality in higher education participation, this mediation varies substantially across institutional types. The results highlight how, in South Korea, educational inequality persists through vertically and horizontally differentiated aspirations in expanded higher education systems.

Keywords Educational aspirations · Higher education expansion · Educational inequality · Status attainment · South Korea

Introduction

Educational aspirations are a key mediator linking parents' socioeconomic status (SES) to children's educational attainment (Sewell et al., 1969, 1970). Research shows that parental SES strongly influences young people's educational aspirations (Lekfuangfu & Odermatt,

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2022; Marjoribanks, 2005; Zimmermann, 2020), and these aspirations predict academic attainment even when accounting for social backgrounds and prior academic performance (Descary et al., 2023; Khattab, 2015; Wu & Bai, 2015). This understanding has driven policy initiatives aimed at raising aspirations among disadvantaged students to address educational disparities.

However, as higher education expands, the significance of aspirations in addressing inequalities has been questioned (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2011). Despite more disadvantaged students aspiring to higher education, their aspirations often exceed realistic chances of achievement (Baker et al., 2014), potentially weakening the aspiration-attainment link (Reynolds et al., 2006). Furthermore, as higher education systems become internally stratified, inequality shifts from 'whether' to attend to 'where' to attend (Lucas, 2001; Raftery & Hout, 1993). Yet, little research has examined how educational expansion affects both the formation of differentiated aspirations regarding institutional selectivity and degree level and their role in mediating socioeconomic inequalities in higher education participation.

This study addresses this research gap by examining how educational aspirations mediate the relationship between parental SES and higher education participation during South Korea's rapid and large-scale expansion period. We focus on cross-cohort changes, investigating (a) whether and how socioeconomic inequality in aspirations has evolved across cohorts when considering different types of higher education institutions and postgraduate studies, and (b) how the mediating role of these differentiated aspirations in reproducing socioeconomic inequality has changed across different types of higher education participation. We focus here on educational 'aspirations', defined as the level of education individuals hope to achieve, which is not necessarily based on a realistic assessment of potential barriers to achievement.[1]

South Korea (henceforth Korea) provides an ideal case for examining these questions, having achieved the world's highest higher education participation rate while maintaining socioeconomic inequality based on a rigid institutional hierarchy (KEDI, 2022). For the empirical analysis, we draw upon the KEDI Education and Social Mobility Survey, a series of repeated cross-sectional surveys covering three cohorts of Koreans who were born between 1956 and 1986 and thus encountered varying opportunities for higher education (KEDI, 2012a). While primarily based on retrospective data, this survey provides valuable insights into South Korea's rapid higher education expansion and the evolving educational aspirations of Koreans over three decades.

This study makes three key contributions to existing literature. First, we advance theoretical understanding of educational inequality by integrating the Wisconsin model (Sewell et al., 1969, 1970) with maximally maintained inequality and effectively maintained inequality perspectives (Lucas, 2001; Raftery & Hout, 1993). This integration provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how aspirations operate in stratified education systems. Second, by employing detailed measurements that distinguish between aspirations for different types of higher education institutions and advanced degrees, we reveal how socioeconomic inequality in aspirations has changed over time. Third, we extend cross-cohort aspirations research beyond Western contexts, offering insights into

[1] While 'aspirations' reflect hopes and wishes, 'expectations' represent more realistic assessments incorporating potential barriers and individual capabilities (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). We focus on aspirations as they have been described as 'anticipatory decisions' that motivate self-regulative effort and investment (Jackson, 2013).

how rapid educational expansion affects the relationship between social background, aspirations, and educational attainment in different societal contexts.

Theoretical background

Context: higher education expansion in Korea

Korea's higher education system has undergone remarkable expansion over the last decades. Between 1950 and 2010, student enrolment in higher education institutions increased 300-fold, with particularly accelerated growth following the government's relaxation of admission quota controls in the early 1980 s (Ha, 1993; KEDI, 2022). This expansion created a stark intergenerational gap in tertiary education attainment between young and older generations, the largest among OECD countries (OECD, 2021). The country now maintains the world's highest higher education participation rate at 70% (KEDI, 2022).

The Korean higher education system consists of 4-year universities and 2-year junior colleges, with distinct missions but clear status differences. While universities aim to cultivate knowledge and advance academic theories that contribute to national and human development, junior colleges focus on training skilled professionals for societal needs. Contrary to junior colleges in the USA which often serve as a stepping stone for transferring to universities, Korean junior colleges represent a distinct terminal pathway, with only approximately 3% of graduates transferring to universities between 2006 and 2011 (Choi, 2016). However, junior colleges are often viewed as a second-tier option, struggling to gain social recognition and establish clear professional pathways for their graduates (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2019).

Even within universities, a further prestige hierarchy exists. Research capacity serves as a primary determinant, with institutions' academic output and funding significantly influencing their status (Shin, 2009). Historical legacy—particularly colonial-era establishment—and location also play crucial roles, with Seoul-based universities maintaining higher rankings and better employment outcomes due to their proximity to major corporations (Ha, 1993; Park, 2015). This informal hierarchy gained quasi-official recognition when the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Developement (MOE) developed a four-tier classification system categorising institutions as research universities I, research universities II, research-teaching universities, and teaching universities (MOE, 2005). Although temporary, this classification reflected and reinforced existing status distinctions. The significance of hierarchy is evident in graduate outcomes, with graduates from selective universities earning 23% more than junior college graduates and 14% more than those from non-selective universities (Park & Kim, 2011).

The hierarchical education system has contributed to the persistence of educational inequalities in Korea despite the massive scale of expansion. The persistence of educational inequalities is often understood through two mechanisms: maximally maintained inequality (MMI) and effectively maintained inequality (EMI). The MMI hypothesis suggests that privileged groups are better positioned to capitalise on educational expansion until their participation reaches saturation, after which inequality shifts to the next higher level (Raftery & Hout, 1993). Complementarily, the EMI hypothesis focuses on qualitative inequality within educational levels based on track or institutional prestige (Lucas, 2001). As overall access increases, socioeconomic advantages in higher education participation manifest in attendance at more prestigious institutions. The Korean case provides evidence supporting

both perspectives. Consistent with MMI, the relationship between family background and higher education participation was found to be stable during earlier phases of expansion (Park, 2007; Park et al., 2011) with inequality becoming evident at the postgraduate level in recent years (Kim, 2022). Supporting EMI, institutional selectivity has emerged as a new dimension of educational inequality, with clear socioeconomic differences in access to (elite) universities compared to junior colleges (Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Choi, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2024). Thus, while Korea has achieved remarkable higher education enrolment rates overall, its system is still marked by socioeconomic differentials in both participation itself and institutional quality.

The role of educational aspirations in educational inequality

The Wisconsin model of status attainment highlights educational aspirations as a key mediator between socioeconomic backgrounds and educational outcomes (Sewell et al., 1969, 1970). The model proposes that young people's socioeconomic backgrounds and academic abilities shape both their school performance and the encouragement they receive, which in turn influence their educational aspirations and ultimate attainment. This socialisation process operates through multiple channels, including parents' direct communication of educational expectations, the presence of educational and financial resources in the home, and the broader social network of similarly advantaged families and friends who reinforce these educational values (Porter, 1974). Moreover, higher-SES parents often serve as educational role models themselves, demonstrating the value and attainability of higher education through their own experiences (Haller, 1982). Within this framework, socioeconomic inequality in educational attainment occurs through two pathways, as illustrated in Fig. 1—the indirect effect of SES mediated by educational aspirations ($a \times b$) and the direct effect of SES (c), with most effect claimed to be through aspirations. Particularly, the recognition of positive effect of aspirations on attainment (b) highlights its conceptualisation of young people as active, future-oriented agents and frames aspirations as 'motors to behaviour' that drive them towards desired outcomes (Haller, 1982; Woelfel & Haller, 1971).

Extensive empirical research supports the Wisconsin model's propositions. Studies consistently demonstrate that high-SES students develop higher educational aspirations (Lekfuangfu & Odermatt, 2022; Marjoribanks, 2005; Zimmermann, 2020), which significantly influence educational outcomes including academic effort, performance, and attainment (Descary et al., 2023; Domina et al., 2011; Khattab, 2015; Lekfuangfu & Odermatt, 2022). While acknowledging the role of socioeconomic background in shaping aspirations, research confirms that aspirations exert independent effects on educational outcomes beyond both SES and prior academic performance, lending strong support to their motivational power (Schoon & Cook, 2021; Wu & Bai, 2015).

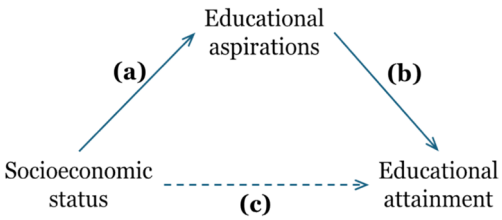

Fig. 1 The Wisconsin model of educational attainment (a simplified version)

However, aspiration development must be understood within its sociohistorical context because 'differences in birth year expose individuals to different historical worlds with their constraints and options' (Elder, 1994). In this regard, the expansion of higher education represents a crucial factor that may alter the pathways proposed in the Wisconsin model. First, expansion may alter the relationship between socioeconomic background and educational aspirations (pathway *a* in Fig. 1). Higher education expansion has coincided with rising educational aspirations across all social groups, driven by increased access, growing labour market demands for skilled workers, and a larger proportion of college-educated individuals in the population (Goyette, 2008). As a result, higher education has become a new social norm, promoting the idea of 'college for all' regardless of socioeconomic background or academic aptitude (Rosenbaum, 2011). In line with this trend, several Western studies show a weakening association between SES and educational aspirations over time (Goyette, 2008; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Schoon, 2010), which may reduce the indirect effect of SES via educational aspirations.

Second, higher education expansion shifts the relationship between educational aspirations and participation in higher education (pathway *b*). Research examining these changes is limited and presents mixed findings. Reynolds et al. (2006) and Burger and Mortimer (2021), who explored the US context, reported a decreased association between educational aspirations and attainment among more recent cohorts compared to earlier generations. The authors suggest that unrealistically inflated aspirations among younger cohorts have undermined the beneficial effect of aspirations in educational achievement. On the contrary, Reynolds and Johnson (2011), focusing specifically on bachelor's degree expectations and attainment, found increasing odds of US high school seniors realising their educational aspirations across 15 cohorts, challenging the narrative of unrealistic aspirations among younger generations.

It is worth noting that higher education expansion may also affect the direct effect of SES on attainment (pathway *c*). However, while there exists plentiful evidence that education expansion has been limited in addressing socioeconomic inequality in higher education in both Korea (Byun & Park, 2017; Park et al., 2011) and other contexts (Pensiero & Schoon, 2019; Shavit et al., 2007), there is little research which decomposes the direct effect of SES from the indirect effect mediated by aspirations. Understanding these distinct pathways would be beneficial as they may respond differently to educational expansion.

Differentiated aspirations in higher education expansion: towards an integrated Wisconsin model of maintained inequalities (WOMI)

The Wisconsin model conceptualises educational aspirations as a central mediating mechanism between socioeconomic background and educational attainment, highlighting the role of individual agency in shaping educational trajectories. However, in the context of expanded higher education systems, the relationship between aspirations, social background, and attainment has become more complex. We argue that integrating insights from MMI and EMI theories with the Wisconsin model can better explain how educational inequality persists in expanded systems through differentiated aspirations. This theoretical synthesis extends the Wisconsin model by retaining its emphasis on aspirations as a central motivational mediator, while incorporating the stratification mechanisms highlighted in MMI and EMI. Rather than conceptualising aspirations as binary (i.e. aspiring or not aspiring to higher education), we propose that they are differentiated along two dimensions. Vertical differentiation, aligned with MMI's focus on sequential inequality, manifests in

students' aspirations for different degree levels from first degrees to postgraduate studies. Horizontal differentiation, reflecting EMI's emphasis on qualitative distinctions within education levels, appears in students' choices between institutions of different types and prestige. This dual differentiation creates a complex landscape where socioeconomic background shapes not just whether students aspire to higher education, but which specific higher educational route they target.

Students from high socioeconomic backgrounds typically develop more strategically targeted educational goals, drawing on their parents' educational, cultural, and economic resources, including familiarity with higher education systems and professional networks (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013). Their better understanding of institutional hierarchies, admission requirements, and labour market returns enables deliberate planning for specific institutional tiers and advanced degrees, which translates into focused academic preparation, strategic resource allocation, and sustained effort towards these specific goals (Domina et al., 2011). By contrast, disadvantaged students, whose parents often lack higher education experience and associated knowledge, tend to develop less-informed aspirations that may not effectively guide strategic behaviours and resource investment.

Indeed, previous research has documented socioeconomic differences in aspirations for elite institutions (Jerrim et al., 2020) and postgraduate degrees (Ortiz-Gervasi, 2023), even when basic aspirations for higher education appear similar. In line with this, Jeon and Kim (2006) reported that parents' income level and investment in private tutoring are strongly associated with children's postgraduate-level aspiration formation in Korea. These horizontally and vertically differentiated aspirations are often masked in previous studies using binary measures. Yet they have distinct implications for higher education outcomes, given the motivational effect of aspirations (Haller, 1982; Woelfel & Haller, 1971). Furthermore, their impact could particularly be pronounced in access to prestigious institutions, where institutional hierarchies create additional barriers to entry.

Based on this theoretical synthesis of an *integrated Wisconsin model of maintained inequalities (WOMI)*, we formulate three hypotheses. The first hypothesis addresses how educational expansion affects the relationship between SES and aspirations. Although previous research suggests weakening SES effects on higher education aspirations during expansion (Goyette, 2008; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Schoon, 2010), socioeconomic inequality may manifest through stratified aspirations for higher education. Thus, we anticipate a strengthening association between SES and aspirations for universities and postgraduate studies compared to aspirations for junior colleges among younger generations (hypothesis 1: stratified aspirations).

The second hypothesis examines how educational expansion affects the link between aspirations and educational attainment. As both higher education aspirations and access become universal, we expect the aspiration-attainment relationship to become increasingly dependent on types of higher education institutions and degree levels. Specifically, we hypothesise that among younger cohorts, aspirations for universities and postgraduate degrees (as opposed to aspirations for junior colleges) are more strongly associated with attending selective higher education institutions (hypothesis 2: stratified outcomes).

Building on these two hypotheses, our third hypothesis addresses the overall mediating role of differentiated aspirations in reproducing inequality. We expect that the proportion of socioeconomic inequality mediated through stratified aspirations (pathways $a \times b$) will increase across cohorts, particularly for selective institutional attendance compared to basic higher education participation (hypothesis 3: differentiated mediation). This hypothesis captures how the reproduction of educational inequality increasingly operates through qualitative distinctions in both aspiration formation and realisation as basic access expands.

While we emphasise the mediating role of aspirations following the Wisconsin model, we also acknowledge that SES may shape attainment directly (pathway *c*). The MMI and EMI frameworks not only illustrate how aspirations are stratified in the context of higher education expansion, but also highlight the structural barriers such as institutional gatekeeping, unequal access to information, and resource disparities that may hinder the realisation of aspirations, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These barriers contribute to the persistence of educational inequality even when aspirations appear similar across social groups. Our framework, therefore, recognises both aspiration-mediated and unmediated pathways through which SES shapes educational outcomes. By examining these dual mechanisms, we are able to assess the extent to which stratified aspirations account for inequality, while also highlighting the enduring role of structural constraints that operate independently of aspiration formation.

Data and methods

Data

This study utilises three waves of the Korean Education and Social Mobility Survey (KEDI-ESM), a series of cross-sectional surveys conducted annually between 2009 and 2011 (KEDI, 2012a). The survey employed retrospective interviews to gather information about participants' socioeconomic backgrounds and educational trajectories, including educational aspirations at age 14, collected when they were aged 25 to 53. The KEDI-ESM's extensive temporal coverage offers a unique opportunity to examine long-term educational trends in Korea during a period of dramatic educational expansion.

To capture these shifts, we analysed participants based on three birth cohorts as categorised by the data provider, which align with major phases of South Korea's educational development. Cohort 1 (born in 1956–1965) experienced the implementation of the middle and high school equalisation policies (1968 and 1974, respectively) which resulted in the initial higher education expansion. Cohort 2 (1966–1975) came of age as secondary education became near-universal and higher education emerged as the new arena of inequality. Cohort 3 (1976–1986) entered adulthood during the explosive expansion of higher education following the 1996–1997 liberalisation of university regulations and quotas, a period marked by soaring participation rates and increased institutional stratification (Park et al., 2011).

Using retrospective interviews requires reliance on long-term memory, which can introduce potential bias through both unintentional memory lapses and conscious reconstruction of past events (Manzoni et al., 2010). Although research indicates that fundamental sociodemographic information such as parental education and occupation typically maintains reasonable recall accuracy (Berney & Blane, 1997), the reliability of remembered aspirations requires particular scrutiny. Research by Ashby and Schoon (2012) offers encouraging evidence, demonstrating substantial concordance between adults' retrospective reports of teenage aspirations at age 50 and their contemporaneous accounts at age 16. To further address concerns over recall bias, we implemented two validation strategies. First, we benchmarked our retrospective data on educational aspirations and higher education participation against historical statistics, which reveals broad alignment in temporal patterns (see Sect. 1 in Appendix). Second, we conducted a sensitivity analysis, controlling for time elapsed since age 14 under an assumed linear memory decay (see Tables A6–A7

in Appendix). These measures confirm that the KEDI-ESM data capture meaningful cross-cohort variation in educational experiences and that our findings are robust to potential recall bias.

The KEDI-ESM employed a stratified sampling method to collect information from 6085 individuals born between 1956 and 1986 (KEDI, 2012b). To examine the influence of SES and aspirations on continuing to higher education given the completion of upper secondary education, we restricted the analytic sample to 5584 persons who completed upper secondary education. After excluding cases with missing data, the final analytic sample comprised 5069 participants (83.3% of the total; more details in Table A1 in Appendix). To minimise potential bias from listwise deletion, we applied inverse probability weights (Seaman & White, 2013). All analyses use survey weights multiplied by these inverse probability weights.

Measures

Higher education participation

Higher education participation is measured through two distinct variables. One captures basic enrolment status as a binary measure indicating whether an individual enrolled in higher education (HE) or not. The other provides a more detailed classification based on institutional type and prestige, differentiating between no higher education, junior college, teaching university, and research university. Using data on the institutions participants attended from the KEDI-ESM, we classify them based on the MOE's 2005 typology (MOE, 2005). In our analysis, we consolidate the original categories by grouping research universities I and II along with research-teaching universities under the broader 'research university' classification, while maintaining 'teaching universities' as a separate category.[2]

Educational aspirations

Participants responded to the question, 'what level of education did you aspire to achieve when you were 14 years old?' The responses are recoded into four categories, including no HE aspirations, aspirations for junior college, university, and postgraduate study. This measurement captures both horizontal differentiation (junior colleges versus universities) and vertical stratification (undergraduate versus advanced degrees). However, the data does not allow for distinguishing between aspirations for research universities and teaching universities.

Socioeconomic background

Recognising the multidimensional nature of SES and its cumulative effect on educational attainment (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013), we measure socioeconomic background with

[2] Since the typology is based on research capacity, which requires significant time to develop, we assume that the typology established in 2005 is applicable across all three cohorts. Supporting this assumption, 80% of the 40 top-ranked universities in 1967, as measured by average college entrance exam scores (The Weekly Joong-ang, 1976), fall within our 'research university' category.

two indicators, namely, the highest education level and occupational prestige between mother and father. Parental education is quantified in years of schooling, with the following conversions: primary school (6 years), middle school (9 years), high school (12 years), junior college (14 years), university (16 years), master's degree (18 years), and doctorate (22 years), with dropouts assigned median values between levels. Parental occupational prestige is based on the occupations held by the parents when the participants were 14 years old. These occupations are matched to the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) scores, which runs from 10 to 90 (Ganzeboom, 2010). To separate the effect of changes in the distribution of parental education and occupation across cohorts, the two variables are standardised within each cohort.

Controls

We include several important control variables in our analysis. First, academic ability, recognised as a significant factor in aspiration development according to the Wisconsin model, is approximated using self-reported primary school performance on a five-level scale. Gender is also controlled for, given its influence on educational aspirations and higher education participation (Schoon & Eccles, 2014). In line with literature highlighting regional and family composition effects on aspirations and outcomes (Kintrea et al., 2015; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001), we include region of residence at age 14 (metropolitan versus other regions), living with both biological parents at age 14, and being the first-born child. For the decomposition analysis, we also control for participants' age at the survey, accounting for the decade-wide span of each cohort.

Analytic strategies

Our analysis consists of three parts. We first focus on the association between SES and four categories of educational aspirations and whether this relationship has changed across the three cohorts. To do this, we use a multinomial logit model with interaction terms between SES indicators and cohort identifiers. Significant coefficients for these interaction terms would indicate that the association between SES and aspirations varies across cohorts.

Next, we examine the relationship between educational aspirations and higher education participation and its change across cohorts. As higher education participation is operationalised by two measures, we use both binary and multinomial logit models. The binary logit model estimates whether participants continued to higher education after graduating high school, while the multinomial logit model compares the probability of leaving school after graduation to the probability of attending three different types of higher education. In both models, we include aspiration-cohort interactions to test potential cross-cohort changes in the association.[3]

The final part of our study examines the extent to which the association between SES and higher education outcomes is mediated by educational aspirations. In the context of non-linear regression models, decomposing the total effect of a variable into its direct and indirect effects via a mediator is challenging due to rescaling issues, which

[3] While we rely primarily on interaction terms to assess cohort differences in the first two parts of the analysis, we also conduct cohort-specific analyses, allowing all variables to vary across cohorts, to provide a more comprehensive view of cohort-based changes. The result is reported in Tables A3–A5 in Appendix.

complicate cross-model comparisons (Karlson & Holm, 2011). To address this, we employ the Karlson–Holm–Breen (KHB) decomposition method, which compares the reduced model (without mediators) and the full model (with mediators) by replacing the mediator with residuals unpredicted by the independent variable (Karlson & Holm, 2011; Kohler et al., 2011). While the decomposition analysis follows the model specification of the earlier binary and multinomial logit analyses, we run the estimates separately by cohort, without interaction terms. For better interpretability, we report the results as average marginal effects.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample. It reveals a dramatic expansion in higher education participation among upper secondary graduates. Whereas only 41% of individuals in cohort 1 attended higher education in any form, this figure rose to 70% in cohort 3. This increase was observed across all three types of higher education institutions. This expansion was accompanied by shifting patterns in educational aspirations. University aspirations increased markedly, rising from 64% in cohort 1 to 72% in cohort 3. In contrast, aspirations for postgraduate education exhibited only a marginal increase, from 5 to 6%. Interestingly, despite higher rates of junior college attendance among the youngest cohort, aspirations for junior college education remained relatively stable between cohorts 2 and 3, suggesting a decline in its perceived desirability as a higher education pathway. These changes in educational aspirations paralleled significant improvements in parental socioeconomic status. Mean parental education increased by approximately four years across cohorts. Similarly, average parental occupational prestige increased by nearly six points on the ISEI scale.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Cohort 1 (1956–1965)	Cohort 2 (1966–1975)	Cohort 3 (1967–1986)
HE participation			
No HE	59.27%	52.69%	30.36%
Junior college	12.26%	14.85%	20.14%
Teaching university	10.94%	12.53%	16.66%
Research university	17.53%	19.94%	32.84%
Educational aspiration			
No HE	23.02%	21.31%	11.12%
Junior college	8.51%	12.59%	11.25%
University	63.50%	60.93%	71.62%
Postgraduate	4.96%	5.16%	6.01%
Parental education	7.27 (4.50)	9.06 (3.69)	11.35 (3.07)
Parental occupation	29.65 (15.52)	30.08 (14.10)	35.31 (13.65)
N	1475	1779	1815

Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Parental education and occupation are reported in original scales before standardisation for descriptive purposes. See Table A2 in Appendix for all variables

Changes in the association between SES and educational aspirations

Table 2 reports the results of the multinomial logit model analysing aspirations for junior colleges, universities, and postgraduate studies, relative to having no HE aspirations. Parental education shows a significant positive association with aspirations for both university and postgraduate, while its relationship with junior college aspirations remains insignificant. The interaction terms with cohort indicate that parental education's association with university and postgraduate aspirations is significantly strengthened for the youngest cohort. Figure A3 in the Appendix illustrates this pattern using predicted probabilities to facilitate real-world interpretation; these results are consistent with the main findings. Parental occupation exhibits a contrasting pattern, with its main coefficient being insignificant across all aspirations. Although there is a positive interaction with cohort 2 for junior college aspirations, it does not persist in cohort 3. Regarding cohort main effects, cohort 3 has a significant positive effect for all types of aspirations, indicating younger people's higher baseline aspirations than previous generations. Overall, these findings largely support hypothesis 1, as they demonstrate an intensifying relationship between socioeconomic status—particularly parental education—and aspirations for university and postgraduate education in the youngest cohort, which is not observed for junior college aspirations.

Table 2 Multinomial logit model of educational aspiration

	Aspiration for junior college	Aspiration for university	Aspiration for postgraduate
Parents' education (PEDU)	0.181 (0.158)	0.272^{***} (0.070)	0.542^{***} (0.141)
Parents' occupation (POCC)	−0.183 (0.150)	0.124 (0.084)	0.220 (0.169)
Cohort (ref: Cohort1)			
Cohort2	0.507^{*} (0.213)	0.104 (0.110)	0.228 (0.214)
Cohort3	1.053^{***} (0.235)	1.019^{***} (0.116)	1.139^{***} (0.222)
PEDU × Cohort2	−0.194 (0.208)	−0.001 (0.123)	0.058 (0.219)
PEDU × Cohort3	0.061 (0.158)	0.302^{***} (0.091)	0.562^{*} (0.276)
POCC × Cohort2	0.327^{**} (0.126)	0.225 (0.127)	0.197 (0.198)
POCC × Cohort3	−0.063 (0.262)	−0.054 (0.168)	−0.202 (0.312)
Male	−0.010 (0.089)	0.432^{***} (0.074)	0.626^{***} (0.122)
Academic ability	0.088 (0.056)	0.558^{***} (0.052)	1.208^{***} (0.110)
Metropolitan area	−0.144 (0.124)	0.047 (0.079)	−0.051 (0.203)
Two-parent family	−0.044 (0.204)	0.267 (0.184)	−0.080 (0.323)
First-born child	0.037 (0.120)	0.042 (0.106)	−0.088 (0.159)
Constant	-1.225^{***} (0.317)	-1.495^{***} (0.263)	-6.549^{***} (0.646)
Pseudo R^2	0.080		
N	5069		

The outcome of 'No HE aspiration' is the reference. Robust clustered standard errors are in parentheses. PEDU and POCC are standardised within cohorts

$^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

Changes in the association between educational aspirations and higher education participation

Column (A) in Table 3 presents the parameter estimates of the binary logit model, which compares the likelihood of enrolling in any type of higher education to leaving school without further education. All levels of educational aspirations show strong positive associations with overall higher education participation, with postgraduate aspirations showing the strongest relationship, followed by university and then junior college aspirations.

Table 3 Binary and multinomial logit models of HE participation and types

	(A)	(B)		
	Enrolled in HE	Junior college	Teaching uni.	Research uni.
Parents' education (PEDU)	0.376*** (0.080)	0.266** (0.091)	0.393*** (0.114)	0.470*** (0.123)
Parents' occupation (POCC)	0.334*** (0.066)	0.311*** (0.086)	0.225** (0.087)	0.429*** (0.109)
Aspirations (ref: No HE)				
Junior college	2.024*** (0.379)	3.557*** (0.561)	− 1.051 (0.831)	− 13.708*** (0.557)
University	2.318*** (0.371)	2.730*** (0.570)	1.837*** (0.351)	2.556*** (0.532)
Postgraduate	4.385*** (0.478)	4.308*** (0.670)	3.833*** (0.411)	4.892*** (0.613)
Cohort (ref: Cohort1)				
Cohort2	0.115 (0.485)	1.189 (0.639)	− 0.310 (0.633)	− 1.098 (0.711)
Cohort3	1.268*** (0.367)	2.100*** (0.588)	0.654 (0.422)	0.956 (0.512)
PEDU × Cohort2	0.014 (0.142)	− 0.091 (0.134)	0.110 (0.183)	0.128 (0.190)
PEDU × Cohort3	− 0.050 (0.114)	− 0.234 (0.134)	0.092 (0.139)	0.151 (0.171)
POCC × Cohort2	− 0.053 (0.117)	0.001 (0.131)	− 0.043 (0.141)	− 0.129 (0.139)
POCC × Cohort3	− 0.061 (0.088)	− 0.083 (0.106)	0.032 (0.156)	− 0.151 (0.123)
Aspiration × Cohort				
Junior college × Cohort2	− 0.186 (0.583)	− 1.409 (0.725)	1.896 (0.996)	14.213*** (0.906)
Junior college × Cohort3	0.080 (0.320)	− 1.039 (0.590)	1.949* (0.935)	13.951*** (0.714)
University × Cohort2	0.402 (0.501)	− 0.696 (0.674)	0.777 (0.652)	1.671* (0.703)
University × Cohort3	0.179 (0.400)	− 0.838 (0.621)	0.690 (0.387)	0.698 (0.581)
Postgraduate × Cohort2	0.619 (0.696)	− 0.242 (0.965)	1.126 (0.804)	1.737* (0.792)
Postgraduate × Cohort3	0.534 (1.037)	− 0.429 (1.257)	0.972 (0.999)	1.011 (1.017)
Male	0.978*** (0.077)	0.797*** (0.116)	0.884*** (0.144)	1.283*** (0.076)
Academic ability	0.465*** (0.064)	0.303*** (0.067)	0.438*** (0.082)	0.682*** (0.062)
Metropolitan area	0.046 (0.097)	− 0.094 (0.101)	− 0.106 (0.082)	0.322 (0.179)
Two-parent family	0.789*** (0.107)	0.802*** (0.118)	0.720*** (0.218)	0.843*** (0.143)
First-born child	0.052 (0.062)	− 0.024 (0.081)	0.096 (0.068)	0.109 (0.085)
Constant	− 5.473*** (0.550)	− 6.321*** (0.715)	− 5.929*** (0.505)	− 7.863*** (0.745)
Pseudo R^2	0.299	0.218		
N	5069	5069		

The outcome of 'No HE' is the reference. Robust clustered standard errors are in parentheses. PEDU and POCC are standardised within cohorts

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

However, the coefficients of parental education and occupation also remain significant and positive. It means that their relationship with higher education participation is not entirely mediated by aspirations. It is notable that parental occupation has a significant association with higher education participation, whereas its association with educational aspirations is insignificant (Table 2). None of the interaction terms with the cohort identifiers reaches statistical significance, suggesting that both the relationship between SES and higher education participation, and between educational aspirations and higher education participation, remained relatively stable across cohorts.

The multinomial logit results (column B) show more detailed outcomes across different types of higher education (column B). Both parental education and occupation show significant positive associations with attendance across all institution types, with the strongest relationships observed for research universities. Looking at aspirations, all levels of aspirations show positive associations with junior college attendance, while only university and postgraduate aspirations positively predict teaching university attendance. For a research university, having junior college aspirations shows a strong negative association, while both university and postgraduate aspirations show positive associations. The interaction terms between cohort and socioeconomic status are insignificant. On the other hand, the interaction terms between aspirations and cohort reveal interesting patterns for research universities. University and postgraduate aspirations have a positive interaction with cohort 2, though this effect does not extend to cohort 3. Junior college aspirations show significant positive interactions with both cohorts 2 and 3. However, given the large negative baseline coefficient for junior college aspirations, these interactions suggest that such aspirations have become less disadvantageous in more recent cohorts, rather than indicating an increase in their importance. This interpretation is supported by the predicted probability plot in Figure A4 in Appendix, which shows that these interactions have minimal impact on the likelihood of attending a research university once all main effects, interactions, and baseline comparisons are accounted for. Overall, the findings do not support hypothesis 2, indicating a relatively fluctuating association between high aspirations and research university attendance.

Decomposition analysis

Our KHB decomposition analysis focused on parental education's relationship with higher education participation, as parental occupation showed a largely insignificant association with educational aspirations when controlling for parental education (Table 2). As shown in Fig. 2, the average marginal effect of parental education on higher education participation declined from cohort 1 to cohort 3. In cohort 1, the association was predominantly direct (75%), with 25% attributed to an indirect pathway via educational aspirations. In cohort 2, the proportion of the indirect component increased to 33%, while the direct component declined to 67%. This trend continues in cohort 3, where 43% of the total association operates through educational aspirations, and the direct component falls to 57%. These results suggest that, over time, educational aspirations have become a more prominent channel through which parental education is linked to higher education participation over time, even as the overall association has weakened. Given the strengthened relationship between parental education and educational aspirations (Table 2) and the stable association between aspirations and higher education participation (column A in Table 3), the increasing indirect component appears to be primarily driven by the former.

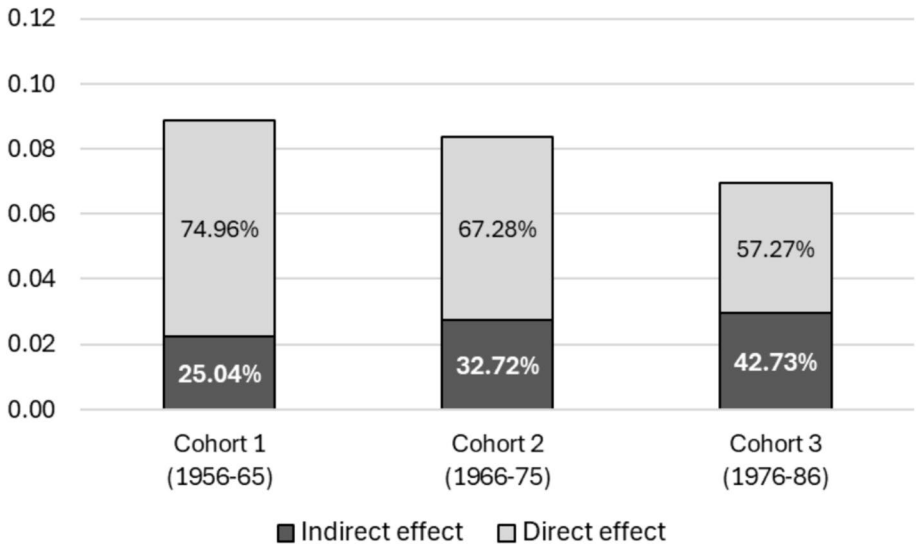

Fig. 2 Decomposition analysis of parental education and HE participation by cohort. Note: Average marginal effects are reported ($N = 5069$). The darker portion represents the indirect pathway via aspirations

Figure 3 illustrates the decomposition of the relationship between parental education and attendance at different types of higher education institutions across cohorts. While the average marginal effect of parental education on attendance at teaching universities

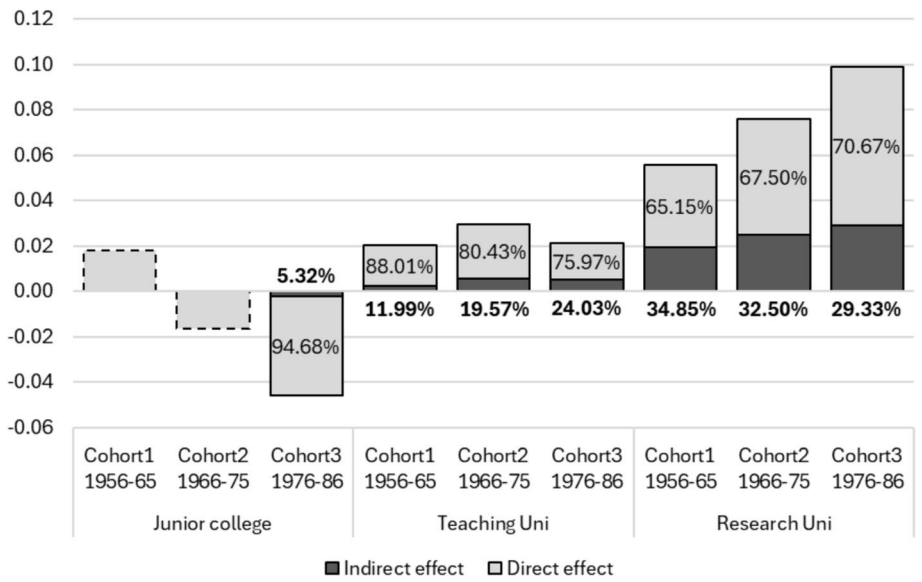

Fig. 3 Decomposition analysis of parental education and HE types by cohort. Note: Average marginal effects are reported ($N = 5069$). The darker portion represents the indirect pathway via aspirations. Bars with dashed borders indicate non-significant associations at $p < 0.05$

fluctuated moderately, it turned negative for junior colleges and strengthened for research universities, highlighting growing inequality by institutional type and prestige among younger cohorts. Moreover, examining the mediating role of educational aspirations reveals distinct patterns across institution types. For teaching universities, the proportion of the indirect pathway through aspirations has doubled from 12 to 24%, despite small changes in the total average marginal effect. For research universities, although the indirect share declined from 35 to 29%, the overall rise in inequality led to a larger absolute magnitude of aspiration-mediated inequality. These trends appear to be primarily driven by the strengthened association between parental education and educational aspirations, as is the case with the binary model (Table 2). In the cases of junior colleges and research universities, the increasing alignment between educational aspirations and these specific types of higher education may have also played a contributory role (Figure A4 in Appendix). The findings only partially support hypothesis 3, as aspiration-mediated inequality increased generally, but more for overall higher education participation than for research university attendance.

Discussion

By analysing three cohorts of Koreans with detailed measures of both aspirations and higher education outcomes, our study reveals how the role of educational aspirations in mediating socioeconomic advantage has transformed across generations during a period of substantial education expansion. Three key findings emerge that enhance our understanding of educational inequality in contemporary society.

First, parental education has become more strongly associated with differentiated higher education aspirations among recent cohorts. This intensification is most pronounced for aspirations targeting more prestigious educational pathways, such as university education and postgraduate studies. This pattern contrasts with findings from Western contexts where studies suggest that higher education expansion narrows socioeconomic gaps in aspirations (Goyette, 2008; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Schoon, 2010). Our more detailed measurement approach reveals that socioeconomic gaps have shifted towards different types of institutions and postgraduate levels, lending support to the propositions of both MMI and EMI theories in their application to educational aspiration development (Lucas, 2001; Raftery & Hout, 1993).

Second, educational aspirations maintain their crucial role in predicting whether individuals participate in higher education and what type of institution they end up in. Although university and postgraduate aspirations do not have stronger associations with research university attendance among the youngest cohorts, their significance persists. These findings also present an intriguing contrast to evidence from Western studies suggesting that expansion weakens the aspiration-participation link (Reynolds et al., 2006). While methodological differences in measuring aspirations and outcomes partially explain this divergence, Korea's unique context also offers plausible explanations. The unprecedented scale and pace of Korea's higher education expansion have created abundant opportunities for students to fulfil their academic goals, potentially preserving the predictive power of aspirations (Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Shanahan et al., 1997). Simultaneously, the emergence of a rigid institutional hierarchy may have supported the importance of specific educational goals in securing admission to prestigious institutions, while also implying a growing need for relevant information and guidance. The interplay between expanded

access and institutional stratification explains both the sustained influence of aspirations on both general higher education participation and selective institution attendance. These findings suggest that the role of educational aspirations is more context-dependent than previously theorised, particularly in rapidly expanding systems characterised by clear institutional hierarchies.

Third, the decomposition analysis reveals that the educational aspirations' mediating role has evolved in complex ways. Counter to our expectations, the proportion of inequality mediated by aspirations increased more substantially for overall higher education participation (from 25 to 43%) than for selective institutions (from 12 to 24% for teaching universities, from 35 to 29% for research universities). While this pattern may partially reflect limitations in the categorical measurement of aspirations, where indirect effects are calculated as summed products across aspiration categories, the findings carry broader implications. Despite the relative decline in the share of aspiration-mediated inequality for research university attendance, the strengthening association between parental education and research university enrolment has increased the absolute magnitude of aspiration-mediated inequality at these institutions. These results challenge the assumption that educational expansion diminishes the significance of aspirations (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2011). Instead, they suggest the need to reformulate the Wisconsin model for contemporary contexts. While aspirations remain crucial mediators of social background, their operation has become more complex, with socioeconomic advantages increasingly transmitted through differentiated aspirations for specific institutional types and degree levels. The integrated WOMI emphasises how aspiration-mediated pathways have become vertically and horizontally stratified within expanded higher education systems. At the same time, the substantial and growing share of direct effects of parental education on research university attendance unmediated by aspirations calls for attention to structural barriers that limit aspiration realisation. These may include unequal access to academic resources, financial constraints, and potentially discriminatory selection mechanisms, which operate independently of socioeconomic differences in aspiration formation.

Another noteworthy pattern emerging from our analysis is that educational aspirations primarily mediate the influence of parental education, but not parental occupation. It suggests that parental education, as an 'educational resource', enables parents to provide supportive learning environments and leverage their knowledge of the education system (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013). Highly educated parents are better positioned to provide guidance on educational choices, engage in school-related activities, and serve as role models—factors that shape their children's aspirations. Meanwhile, occupational status apparently influences higher education participation through different pathways, such as investment in private tutoring and direct financial support (Entrich, 2020; Flaster, 2018). This finding indicates that both educational and economic resources are crucial for accessing higher education, though they operate through different mechanisms.

Several limitations merit consideration when interpreting this study's findings. First, despite our sensitivity analysis controlling for time elapsed from age 14, recall bias remains a potential concern. Participants may have reconstructed their aspirations to align with achieved educational outcomes (Bell & Bell, 2018), and if this bias is stronger among older cohorts, it could artificially inflate their aspiration-outcome link. However, this would likely reinforce rather than undermine our conclusion, suggesting our estimate of rising aspiration-mediated inequality in younger cohorts is conservative. Second, our measurement approach only partially captures horizontal differentiation in aspirations by overlooking distinctions between universities of different prestige. This limitation is particularly significant given the increasing importance of institutional stratification in higher education systems. More detailed measures

would better illuminate how aspirations shape educational trajectories. Third, while we controlled for various factors, our study cannot establish causal relationships between aspirations and higher education participation due to potential unobserved confounders. Lastly, the generalisability of findings to other cultural and institutional contexts requires careful consideration. Nevertheless, our observations of persistent and emerging inequality during times of social change carry broader implications given the expansion of higher education commonly observed across the world.

Conclusion

Our findings have important implications for both research and policy. From a research perspective, they highlight the need to move beyond the binary conceptualisation of educational aspirations towards more detailed measures that capture both vertical and horizontal stratification in both aspirations and outcomes. While the WOMI offers a first step in this direction, future research should further explore how students' aspirations vary not only by degree level but also by institutional prestige and type, as these distinctions are consequential for educational outcomes. From a policy perspective, our findings call into question simplistic approaches to educational inequality that focus solely on promoting aspirations for higher education or expanding access. The strengthening relationship between socioeconomic background and differentiated aspirations suggests that interventions need to address not just whether students aspire to higher education, but what specific pathways they target. For instance, schools might consider providing more comprehensive information about different institutional pathways and their long-term implications, particularly to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have limited access to such information through family networks. However, such interventions should be viewed as complementary to, rather than replacements for, broader structural reforms addressing unequal access to prestigious higher education institutions.

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Author contribution Anna Yong: conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, validation, writing (original draft, review and editing), visualisation, project administration.
Ingrid Schoon: supervision; conceptualisation, writing (review and editing).
Nikki Shure: supervision; conceptualisation, writing (review and editing).

Data availability The Korean Education and Social Mobility Survey dataset is available from the Korea Educational Development Institute upon request and approval.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate The current project received approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education, University College London (Ref No. IOE/00065). The analysis was conducted using secondary data.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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