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Ethnicity on top of social class? Inclusion and diversity in access to higher education degrees in Europe (1950–2010)

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Abstract

The massification of higher education has been an important development across education systems in Europe over the second half of the 20th century. Nurtured by political, economic and social goals, including the improvement of social justice in education and beyond, massification has been associated with inclusion as a goal of higher education systems. Generally, it has been construed as the realisation of a democratic project. This article reports on a study that examined the extent to which higher education systems effectively have moved towards a better inclusion of the various social groups composing national populations. Based on a quantitative analysis using data from the European Social Survey, this article presents an assessment of the level of inequalities in access to higher education degrees by employing indicators that are traditionally used by countries participating in the survey (gender, socio-economic background) and indicators that are not as widely shared (ethnic belonging, religion) in order to offer an original and comprehensive analysis of the extent to which national social diversities are represented in higher education. A comparison of three generations (born 1930–1949, 1950–1964 and 1965–1979) shows a development of decreasing inequality between the first two generations, but a slowing or interruption of this development in the 1980s. Also, the

effect of social belongings on educational trajectories became more complex. The importance of ethnic belonging increased, underscoring the importance to consider ethnicity in addition to socio-economic dimensions in sociological research. The study outcomes highlight differences in individual country trajectories in relation to the geopolitical reconfiguration of political territories.

KEYWORDS

Europe, ethnicity, higher education, inclusion, inequality, social belongings

1 | INTRODUCTION

While elitists until the Second World War, higher education systems in Europe subsequently underwent a development of massification. Achievement of general access to primary and secondary education supported this development. To this contributed also post-war reconstruction needs and the Cold War which increased competition in education between countries—access and graduation rates became indicators of national power (Cerych, 1978). As a result, the likelihood to pursue higher education increased, affecting the role played by higher education for individual trajectories and social mobility. While the student body was not very diverse, the issue of social justice in access became a political and economic goal for "*mobilising the productive power of nations and realising a more acceptable social equity in the distribution of opportunity*" (Halsey, 1993, p. 129).

This article analyses the extent to which this goal has been reached over the second half of the 20th century, i.e., the extent to which higher education graduates represent the social diversity of their societies. To estimate the extent to which European societies have fostered inclusive higher education systems, this article develops a comprehensive analysis of inequalities in access to higher education by employing a large set of indicators, independently of their political legitimacy in the various national contexts under scrutiny. European surveys developed over the last two decades to sustain European integration provide information for assessing the weight of several social belongings (this concept is preferred to that of social characteristics as it allows to comprehend the categories used to describe individuals as plural, selective and reversible as well as intertwined; Messu, 2011). This is the case of the European Social Survey (ESS). Established in 2001, it is funded by national agencies, the European Commission and the European Science Foundation. The aim of the survey is to identify "*changes in Europe's social, political and cultural fabric* [and to] *improve methods of quantitative social measurement in Europe and beyond, providing a means by which societies may judge themselves* […] *according to how citizens feel about and fare in the world they inhabit*" (ESS, 2011, p. 0).

Because it is not specifically devoted to the question of education, which remains a largely national prerogative, the ESS survey is very malleable for the problematisation of inequalities in access to higher education degrees. It makes it possible to compare the characteristics of graduates with those of the national populations of some thirty European countries in terms of gender, socioeconomic origin (highest parental level of education and profession) and ethnic origin (home language, feeling of belonging to an ethnic minority or a discriminated minority, international migration, religion). Most countries participating in the ESS survey belong to the European Union (24) or have an ongoing application (Turkey). A handful are politically outside the EU (Switzerland, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Norway, Israel). The population analysed comprises individuals born between 1930 and 1979, who graduated between 1950 and 2009. To assess changes in inequalities, three generations (born in 1930–1949, 1950–1964, 1965–1979, thus potentially graduating between 1950 and 1979, 1970 and 1994, 1985 and 2009) are compared by using odds ratio.

2 | VARIABLES CONSIDERED AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The results are based on the aggregated data from the first eight waves (2002–2016) of the survey. The resulting unweighted database of respondents born between 1930 and 1979 comprises 268,902 individuals and covers 30 countries. The database used is double weighted, following the ESS recommendations: *post-stratification weight including design weight* and *population size weight* are used. The first weighting allows adjustment for sampling error, non-response and variability in selection probabilities, ensuring better comparability of social structures. The second weight is required to compare country group averages. The variable we are trying to explain is the fact of having a higher education degree. The category of higher education graduates was constructed in correspondence with categories developed by UNESCO (UIS, 2012), which group the degrees offered by higher education institutions, excluding vocational post-secondary. The comparison of three generations allows us to understand the evolution of the weight of the different variables over time.

A first step of the statistical analysis consisted in characterising social diversity for each country. Second, odds ratios were compared to analyse the effect of socio-economic characteristics on access to higher education; third, a logistic regression was carried out.

Given the evolution of the respective weight of the father's and mother's education in the different societies studied, the *parents' education* variable was constructed from the education variables of both parents. The highest level of education between the mother and the father was chosen. The variables detailing the occupation of the father and mother when the respondent was fourteen years old were grouped into five categories, and, as with education, the highest category between father and mother was chosen.

The ESS documents ethnicity by a plural approach, by capturing both the home language (whether home language is the—or one of the—officially recognised *national* language/s); the feeling of belonging to an ethnic minority or to a discriminated minority, and international migration. Depending on the country, the probability of speaking a language that is not nationally recognised varies from 0.1% to 45.9%; the feeling of belonging to an ethnic minority from 2.1% to 22.2%; on average, an increase between generations is observed (4.7% for the oldest generation, 8.6% for the youngest). The same is observed for the feeling of belonging to a discriminated minority; this was reported by 5% of the respondents of the oldest generation, and 8% of the youngest, with inter-country variations (2.9% to 16.4%). Last, international migration is assessed by distinguishing between the respondents who have at least one mobility criteria of three: (1) born abroad, (2) having a parent who was born abroad, (3) not a citizen of the country of residence. This applies to a range of 1.9% to 77.8% of national populations. For each of these indicators, the analysis was limited to the countries and generations for which more than ten respondents indicated belonging to the least represented group. Based on these indicators and for the purpose of the logistic regression, the ethnic variable has been built through a principal component analysis.

The religious variable was determined by whether respondents considered themselves as belonging to any particular religion or denomination, as well as a specific religion. Again, the share of respondents declaring a religion varied markedly between countries (from 24.5% to 98.4%) and decreases over time. In fifteen countries, Catholic respondents were the most numerous, while in some countries the majority of respondents were Protestant (6) Orthodox Christian (7), Muslim (1) or Jewish (1).

The article is structured as follows. First, changes in socio-economic inequalities observed in previous research are outlined. Second, changes in the effect of ethnic belonging on access to higher education are identified. The analysis underscores the multidimensionality of inequalities and advocates for analysing ethnicity on top of social class.

3 | LIMITED DECLINE IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

Research analysing the evolution of inequalities in access to education and qualifications, mainly measured by socio-economic origin (Goastellec, 2011), has led to contrasting conclusions. The results vary according to the

statistical tools used, the countries and the periods analysed. Shavit et al. (2007) show for example by comparing fifteen countries that higher education has become more inclusive since the Second World War, enabling a greater number of individuals to gain access to higher education degrees. But the effect of social origin on the probability to access higher education remains the same, and varies by sector, institution and programme. We therefore observe a triple process of inclusion, maintenance of inequalities and diversion between social groups, with inequalities being recomposed within higher education. The work of Koucký et al. (2017) contributes to an overview of the situation in Europe by capturing the temporal dynamics: a decrease in inequalities during the period 1950–1970 with comparable trends across countries in terms of inequality levels, then a new increase from the 1990s onwards, and a trend towards an increase in differences between countries in the 2000s. Our results corroborate these trends by exploring the same survey with a different statistical methodology.

3.1 | The effect of the parents' profession has declined and then stagnated

The profession exercised by parents (or in older surveys fathers) has historically played an important role in access to education. This relationship is reflected in a statistical constant: whatever the country and generation considered, the probability of having a tertiary qualification increases with the parents' professional level. Moreover, this link appears to be very strong: for all countries and generations, in comparison with the children of blue-collar workers, the children of parents in the liberal professions, intellectuals and scientists are on average ten times more likely to have a tertiary qualification, those of directors and senior managers nine times more likely and those of employees three times more likely (Table 1).

However, the evolution of inequalities between generations reveals a significant drop: the average level of inequality is falling and a majority of countries show a reduction in inequalities (Table 1). This is strong in a third of the countries (inequalities divided by 1.2 to 2.7, depending on the Socio-Professional Categories), and limited in a quarter (divided by 1.2 to 1.6). A small number of countries (five) stand out for an increase in inequalities concerning most occupational groups compared to workers, either moderately (Israel, Switzerland) or strongly (Croatia, Estonia, Czech Republic). In the latter three countries, the increase in inequality results from a change in political regime (the abandonment of socialism that accompanied the process of independence at the turn of the 1990s) and the liberalisation of higher education and the economy. These transformations have a different impact on the levels of inequality depending on whether higher education is massified (Estonia) or remains very elitist (the Czech Republic and Croatia).

Another strong trend is that this decrease takes place mainly between the first and second generations (see averages in Table 1), with a convergence of inequality levels between the different countries (see medians in Table 1), which continues with their slowing down or stagnation (except for directors and senior managers, for whom the decrease takes place between the second and third generations). With this exception, in proportion, the decline in inequality is relatively similar for the different occupational categories (divided by about 1.2). In most countries, the generation born during the period of economic growth (between 1950 and 1964) thus experienced overall less inequality in access to tertiary education compared to the generation born during the previous period (1930–1949). In turn, the following generation (1965–1979) did not experience any improvement but, in some countries, a further increase in inequality in a general context of lower prosperity as well as marked income and capital inequalities (Piketty, 2013). Variations in social inequalities in obtaining higher education qualifications can thus be analysed in part as a consequence of economic conditions influencing the terms of school competition and hence the strategies and choices of families, and not only by social reproduction or cultural transmission processes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). In periods of labour market uncertainty, access to qualifications becomes more socially competitive.

TABLE 1 Average relative effect of parental occupation on the odds of graduating by respondent generation (average of national odds ratios) and changes between 1st and 3rd generation

	1930–1949	1950–1964	1965–1979	Total	Decrease	Increase	Stable	Number of countries
Clerical/sales and service workers	3.7[a]	3.3	3.2	3.4	17	8	5	30
Median	3.4	3	3.1	3.2				
Professional, intellectual and scientific occupations	11.6	10	9.8	10.3	16	8	4	28
Median	9.1	9.2	9.6	8.9				
Directors and senior managers	9.6	9.8	8	9	17	8	3	28
Median	8.1	7.4	7.8	7.6				
Unskilled or semi-skilled workers	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	

Source: Author.

[a]Example of reading: on average, respondents born between 1930 and 1949 and whose parents are employees are 3.7 times more likely to have a tertiary degree than those whose parents are manual workers.

3.2 | Significant inequalities remain in the effect of parental education

Even more systematically than for parental occupation, the chances of obtaining a tertiary qualification increase with the parents' level of education. This link appears to be very strong: for all countries and generations, children of tertiary graduates are on average respectively 26 times, ten times and four times more likely to be tertiary graduates than children of parents with lower levels of education (Table 2). Here again, the comparison of generations captures a general trend towards decreasing inequality but, as with the effect of parents' occupation, this is especially true between the first and second generations.

Still, while the effect of the parents' occupation decreases in a relatively homogeneous way for the different professional categories, it essentially concentrates on one level of education: the children of parents with no more than lower secondary education compared with the children of parents with higher education. In the first generation, the latter are 33 times more likely to hold a tertiary qualification, compared with 21 times in the second and 20 times in the third. The decrease in inequality appears much more moderate when children of parents with lower secondary and tertiary education are compared, or between children of upper secondary and tertiary graduates (Table 2).

In summary, the influence of socio-economic background has decreased (Table 2). But this decrease is limited in time (until the 1980s)—after which inequalities stabilise or, in some countries, increase again, sometimes as the result of the liberalisation of higher education and the economy (especially in former USSR countries). More generally, increasing economic inequality reinforces the role of higher education degrees and the social competition they are subjected to.

Another change is that parental levels of education now appear a stronger determinant of educational trajectory than parental occupation, which aligns with the concept of social reproduction. The influence of socio-economic origin is therefore also undergoing more qualitative changes. These results corroborate the trends highlighted by other research (see e.g., Baker, 2014; Ballarino & Schadee, 2011).

> […] over the past 50 years, the impact of the socioeconomic status of the family of origin has precipitously dropped in its direct influence on the adult child's status, while the direct influence of educational attainment has increased. Consequently, over just several generations in advanced schooled societies, formal education has thoroughly saturated intergenerational mobility. (Baker, 2014, p. 9)

TABLE 2 Average relative effect of parental education on the chances of graduating by generation of respondents (odds ratio) and changes between 1st and 3rd generation

	1930–1949	1950–1964	1965–1979	Total	Decrease	Increase	Stable	Nunber of countries
Less than lower secondary	33[a]	20.9	20.4	26.5	22	5	0	27
Median	22.3	13.4	14.6	18.3				
Lower secondary completed	12.5	11	11	10.3	16	10	3	29
Median	9.5	6.5	7.2	7				
Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary not completed	5.8	4.8	4.4	4.5	15	10	4	29
Median	4.7	4.2	4.1	4.2				
Tertiary completed	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	

Source: Author.

[a]Reading example: on average across countries, respondents born between 1930 and 1949 whose parents have less than lower secondary education are 33 times less likely to be tertiary graduates than those whose parents hold tertiary degrees.

At the very general level of higher education attainment, our results thus suggest that the influence of cultural capital outweighs that of economic capital, but that economic contexts matter in terms of education strategies chosen by families.

4 | EFFECT REVERSAL OF ETHNICITY

The focus on socio-economic characteristics in European sociological research—as well as a lack of political agreement on ethnic issues across European societies—has led to marginalisation of research on ethnic belongings. Indeed, compared to socio-economic background, ethnicity superficially appears—at first sight—to have a limited effect, with odds ratios most often between 1 and 2 when the relative probability of ethnic minorities versus majorities gaining access to diplomas is assessed. Nevertheless, ethnic belongings have a significant impact on the educational pathway of individuals, since an odds ratio of 1.5 means that the relative chance of obtaining a higher education degree is half as high for some of the groups compared. This effect is therefore anything but residual. Unlike socioeconomic origin, the direction of the effects of ethnic categories vary over time: the broad categories of belonging which, in the 1950s, improved the probability of accessing higher education degrees tend to deteriorate since the 2000s, thus demonstrating a restructuring of inequalities and the importance of researching this issue to provide a comprehensive understanding of inequalities.

Comparing parental occupation and education is not without methodological issues but it is facilitated by three factors: the existence of a long tradition of comparative research; national categories that are sufficiently close to each other to be grouped together at a still relatively detailed level; and results that are always in the same direction. The higher the parental occupation and education, the higher the probability of holding a degree.

This is not the case when it comes to comparing the effect of ethnicity on access to educational qualifications. National statistical categories are varied or missing and categorisations differ; research on the issue is rare; and the effects are variable. "*International comparison of ethnic minorities is problematic because each country has its own collection methods which are linked to the interpretation of the legal framework surrounding data protection*" (Simon, 2007). Generally, the variability of statistical categories available at the national level is the consequence of two dynamics: (1) the ethnic structure of a society, and (2) its administrative recognition translated into statistics, which depends on and reflects a temporary and renegotiable definition of the imagined national community. "*Some Member States are indeed reluctant to develop disaggregated quantitative data on racial or ethnic origin for cultural reasons* [...]" (Glaude, 2007, p. 5). Because of this twofold difference of national ethnic contexts, the criteria of ethnicity are multiple, ranging from different descriptors of migration and home language, to belonging to a minority ethnic group or religion. This heterogeneity of available data explains in part why the effect of ethnicity on access to higher education has been little analysed in broad European comparisons.

In the European Union, the number of individuals who can be categorised as belonging to an ethnic minority is estimated at several tens of millions (European Student Union, 2016). They comprise citizens who represent ethnic minorities and individuals of foreign origin—either born abroad or having one or both parents born abroad. The wide range of possible characteristics forces a high degree of generality to construct ethnic categories that are comparable internationally and across generations. For example, it is not the language spoken that is captured but whether it is part of the national languages. Such a choice entails consequences. On the one hand, it means that when multilingualism is nationally recognised, social relations between groups of different languages are neutralised by the indicator used. On the other hand, depending on the context, speaking a non-national language in the private sphere may be the prerogative of a former socially dominant minority or, conversely, of low-skilled first-time migrants. The level of reading that allows a double comparison, international and intergenerational, thus appears disconnected from the national social and political realities that more precise categorisations (comparing, for example, the access of Roma to the rest of the national populations) reveal. It does, however, allow for an understanding of the broad trends in Europe in terms of access for ethnic minorities.

This limitation is also compensated for by the joint use of four ethnicity indicators: (1) home language (a nationally recognised language or not), (2) migration (first or second generation, citizenship status), (3) feeling of belonging to an ethnic minority and/or a discriminated minority, and (4) religion. The number of countries where these indicators are applicable, i.e., help to describe actual social diversity, is increasing over the generations, underlining a process of ethnic diversification and an expanded role of ethnicity in Europe.

4.1 | Opposite effects of home language across countries, converging across generations

For all ESS respondents, in 28 countries, the linguistic heterogeneity of the population makes the home language a possible marker of educational inequality. In most countries (26/28), it impacts the relative chances of graduating (in France and the Netherlands, no effect is observed). But the direction of the effect varies: all generations combined, in fourteen countries (in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and Ukraine), individuals who do not speak a national language in the private sphere are more likely to be tertiary graduates. In twelve countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey) the opposite is true (Table 3).

Comparison of three generations in this study reveals that the proportion of individuals reporting speaking a non-national language in the private sphere has increased over time and, with it, the number of countries where the home language influences the chances of graduation: from sixteen countries in the first generation to 22 in the third (Table 3). At the same time, the positive effect of speaking a nationally recognised language extends to a greater number of countries over the generations (respectively in eight, fourteen and twelve countries compared to the number of countries where the opposite is true, which have increased from eight and nine to ten). This dynamic is coupled with a tendency for the positive effect of speaking a national language to increase, whereas in countries where speaking a language that is not officially recognised has a positive effect, it tends to decrease. Between the first and third generation, the initial advantage of those who speak a language that is not officially recognised decreased in six countries and increased in three. At the same time, those who speak a nationally

TABLE 3 Effect of home language on the chances of graduation for the whole cohort and by generation

		Positive effect of speaking a national language	Positive effect of speaking another language	No effect	Total countries
All generations	Number of countries concerned	12	14	2	28
	Strong Odds Ratio	10 countries: 1.5–3.7 (+Bulgaria 18)	7 countries: 1.5–3.1		
	Low to moderate Odds Ratio	2 countries: 1.1–1.3	7 countries: 1.2–1.4		
1930–1949	Number of countries concerned	8	8	2	18
	Strong Odds Ratio	5 countries: 1.6–10.9	5 countries: 1.5–5		
	Low to moderate Odds Ratio	3 countries: 1.1–1.2	3 countries: 1.2–1.3		
1950–1964	Number of countries concerned	14	9	1	24
	Strong Odds Ratio	9 countries: 1.5–20.5	4 countries: 1.5–3.5		
	Low to moderate Odds Ratio	5 countries: 1.2–1.4	5 countries: 1.1–1.4		
1965–1979	Number of countries concerned	12	10	3	25
	Strong Odds Ratio	8 countries: 1.5–25.1	3 countries: 1.5–2.3		
	Low to moderate Odds Ratio	4 countries: 1.1–1.4	7 countries: 1.1–1.4		

Source: Author.

recognised language in the private sphere see their premium in access to tertiary qualifications decrease in two countries and increase in six countries (Table 4). Thus, the effect of the language spoken is reduced overall, and gradually converges towards a situation that favours those who master the national languages. This shared trend relates both to the increase in migratory flows, but also to the eminently political dimension of the language issue within nation-states, which is re-problematised according to geopolitical restructuring. The national recognition of a language is the product of lobbying that reflects and supports the capacity of a part of the population to access and act on the organisation of social institutions.

The declaration of home language by the respondents thus reflects at least two dimensions: (1) a political dimension of ethnic belonging and, (2) the power relations that structure social organisation. The latter are transformed by historical events, the reconfigurations of power between different recognised social groups, and how this translates into the organisation and use of school systems. As Françoise Lorcerie (2004, p. 3) recalls, "*Ethnicity is as much if not more, according to Weber*, [the] *characteristic of groups with a political organisation, than a trait of minority groups*". On the other hand, a different home language also sometimes appears to be the result of recent immigration of populations holding different levels of education from their countries of origin. Examining migration thus also makes it possible to understand other processes that support or limit access to higher education degrees.

4.2 | Reversal in the effect of migration

The proportion of persons originating from other countries varies very strongly across countries (approximately ten percent in Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus, Spain and Austria; less than one percent in Poland, Romania or Bulgaria; European Student Union, 2016). For all ESS respondents, migration was associated with a negative effect on the relative probability of graduating in seventeen countries, positive in four countries and no effect in nine countries. But here again the comparison of generations captures a transformation of the effect (Table 5).

For the 1st generation, an advantage can be observed for students with a migratory background in twenty-four countries. They have a higher chance of obtaining a tertiary degree than those who do not have a mobility attribute. These chances are high in sixteen countries (from 1.5 to 6.2), in particular Portugal (6.2), Israel (3.8) and Spain (3.3), and low to moderate in eight countries (from 1.2 to 1.4). No effect was observed in four countries (Germany, Estonia, France, Poland), and only the Czech Republic (with 1.4) showed the opposite trend.

In the second generation, the mobility advantage still prevails in sixteen of the twenty-eight countries. In five countries no effect is discernible. In seven countries the trend reversed, in that the chances of graduating were higher for non-mobile individuals. Finally, in the third generation, students with migratory backgrounds retained an advantage in only ten countries. The advantage of the mobile over the non-mobile therefore tends to diminish (Table 6).

TABLE 4 Changes in the effect of home language between the 1st and 3rd generations

	Number and countries concerned
Decrease of the initial advantage of speaking a national language	2 (Denmark, Russia)
Increase in initial advantage of speaking a national language	6 (Germany, Bulgaria, Estonia, Romania, United Kingdom, Slovakia)
Reduction/loss of initial advantage of speaking a non-national language	6 (Belgium, Hungary, Israel, Netherlands, Latvia, Ukraine)
Increase in initial advantage of speaking a non-national language	3 (Germany, Spain, Czech Republic)
Number of countries	16

Source: Author.

TABLE 5 Effect of migration background on higher education graduation rates for the whole cohort and by generation

		Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect
All generations	Number of countries involved	4	17	9
	Strong odds ratio		8 countries: 1.5–3.3	
	Low to moderate odds ratio	1.2–1.4	9 countries: 1.2–1.4	
1st generation	Number of countries involved	24	1 country (Czech Republic)	4
	Strong odds ratio	16 countries: 1.5–6.2	1.4	
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	8 countries: 1.2–1.4		
2nd generation	Number of countries involved	16	8	5
	Strong odds ratio	9 countries: 1.5–2.5	5 countries: 1.2–1.4	
	Weak to moderate odds rati	7 countries: 1.2–1.4	3 countries: 1.5–2.6	
3rd generation	Number of countries involved	10	10	9
	Strong odds ratio	7 countries: 1.5–2.2	5 countries: 1.2–1.4	
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	4 countries: 1.2–1.4	5 countries: 1.5–1.9	

Source: Author.

Depending on the country, the characteristics of immigrants vary greatly, as a result of policies more or less supporting highly skilled migration. In the United Kingdom, for example, migration policies primarily facilitate the immigration of skilled labour, while the opposite is true for Belgium, Spain and Germany. These policies are changing; countries such as Denmark, Germany and Sweden have comparatively recently developed policies aimed at skilled immigration (Eurostat, 2011).

Also, people with characteristics of migratory populations may have belonged to a common political space at one time. For example, post-Soviet republics such as Estonia and Latvia retain social groups from Soviet era population transfers. In that respect, the effect of certain historical events can be observed in population structures. The end of the USSR led to the emigration of a large number of individuals, many holding advanced qualifications since the school system was developed there. This was the case in Germany, which received more than 62,000 immigrants in 1989–1990, mainly from East Germany; countries that have received notable immigration from Russia include Greece and Finland (Eurostat, 2011). Migration of very different origins, temporalities and characteristics thus coexist in the same country, explaining the variability of the geographic origin effect.

4.3 | Reversal in the trend of ethnic minority status and educational attainment

In twenty-one of the thirty countries studied, the number of individuals self-reporting as belonging to an ethnic minority, or a discriminated ethnic group, is sufficient for analysis. The first finding is that the number of countries concerned increased between the first and third generations, from twenty-one to twenty-six. This reflects both an objective increase in ethnic diversity linked to migration and the proliferation of a sense of belonging or the legitimacy of its expression, underlining the complexity of documenting and analysing the sense of belonging to an ethnic minority (see e.g., Meuleman & Billiet, 2007).

Second, the direction of the effect changes between generations. In the first generation, individuals who declared themselves belonging to an ethnic minority have a higher probability of obtaining a degree in a majority of countries (twelve, while the opposite is true in eight countries). In the second generation, the advantage of declaring ethnicity is evident in thirteen countries, but the reverse is true in eleven countries. Finally, in the third generation, the effect is reversed: the ethnicity premium remains in five countries (high in the United Kingdom, 1.8; and Ireland, 1.6; lower in Poland and Sweden, 1.3; low in Austria, 1.1). In nineteen countries it is now the declaration

TABLE 6 Average and median effect sizes by generation according to the direction of the relationship

	1930–1949		1950–1964		1965–1979		Combined	
	Effect + NotMobile	Effect + Mobile	Effect + NotMobile	Effect + Mobile	Effect + NotMobile	Effect + Mobile	Effect + NotMobile	Effect + Mobile
Country Average	1.9[a]	1	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.5	1.1
Median	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.4	1.1

Source: Author.

[a]For the generation born between 1930 and 1949 the average positive effect of not having a mobility attribute increases the relative chances of graduating by 1.9.

TABLE 7 Relative effect of declaring ethnic minority status on the chances of graduating

		Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect	Total
1st generation	Number of countries	12	8	2	21
	Strong odds ratio	8 countries: 1.5–3.4	5 countries: 1.9–9.9		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	4 countries: 1.1–1.4	3 countries: 1.2–1.4		
2nd generation	Number of countries	13	11	4	28
	Strong odds ratio	3 countries: 1.5–3.3	7 countries: 1.5–15.5		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	10 countries: 1.1–1.4	4 countries: 1.1–1.4		
3rd generation	Number of countries	5	19	2	26
	Strong odds	2 countries: 1.6–1.8	13 countries: 1.5–14		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	3 countries: 1.1–1.3	6 countries: 1.1–1.4		
Total	Number of countries	8	17	4	29
	Strong odds ratio	4 countries: 1.5–2.2	8 countries: 1.5–12.7		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	4 countries: 1.1–1.3	9 countries: 1.1–1.4		

Source: Author.

of non-ethnic minority belonging that increases the chances of graduating: in seven of them this means that the direction of the effect has changed, making ethnic minority status a disadvantage (in Switzerland, Estonia, Spain, France, Greece, Norway and Portugal), whereas the opposite trend is not observed.

Third, when individuals declaring ethnic minority belonging are disadvantaged in access to educational qualifications, they are on average at a much greater disadvantage than those who do not declare ethnic minority status. Finally, irrespective of the direction of the relationship, the strength of the effect also decreases, especially between the first and second generation, after which the trend is rather stable (Table 7).

The increased advantage of individuals with no migratory background in accessing higher education qualifications is the result of different processes in different countries. Nevertheless, it can be hypothesised that it is nurtured by a combination of major shared processes. Firstly, the ethnic diversification of national populations; a consequence of immigration (European countries foreign resident population tripled between the 1950s and the 1980s; Garson & Loizillon, 2003) and changes in migratory flows during the second half of the 20th century. The latter were initially typically individual and temporary but have become family-based and lasting. Second, the territorial fragmentations following the political reconfiguration, numerous in Europe during the second half of the 20th century. The new autonomy of certain post-Soviet states was accompanied by a re-problematisation ethnic questions. Finally, the increased importance of higher education degrees for the socio-economic status of individuals, particularly from the 1970s onwards, made access to education an important issue for different social groups. The increase in the advantage of non-migratory groups is constructed at the junction of these processes, as well as through the transformation of the characteristics of migrants.

4.4 | Restructuration of religious belonging

Religion is little questioned when it comes to higher education, although it historically played a structuring role (Goastellec, 2020) and complements ethnic characterisations. Here it is analysed at two levels: by distinguishing members of the populations studied who declare a religious belonging from those who do not, and by comparing the effects of self-declared religious belonging.

The advantage of self-reporting a secular stance has decreased. In eighteen countries in the cohort, individuals who declared no religious belonging are more likely to be graduates than those who do declare one,

with a strong effect in thirteen of them (ranging from 1.5 to 6.5) and a weak to moderate effect in five (from 1.2 to 1.4). In two countries (Latvia, Sweden), those who declare a religious belonging have a slight advantage (1.2–1.3). Finally, in nine countries, no effect is observable (Odds at 1–1.1). But beyond this general picture, as for other ethnic characteristics, the effect changes between generations.For the first generation, in twenty-seven of the twenty-nine countries where the information is available, not declaring a religious belonging is positively related to access, strongly so in nineteen of them (1.5–10). In only one country (Sweden) the advantage increased for those who declared a religious belonging (1.4), and in another (Finland) there was no effect. For the second generation, the benefit of a secular stance was reduced in seventeen countries (ten with a strong effect, 1.5–4.4). In six countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Latvia, Sweden, United Kingdom) the effect is the opposite (but small to moderate, 1.2–1.4), and in six the effect is zero. Finally, for the third generation, a secular stance was an advantage only in twelve countries and strong in six (Croatia, Greece, Israel, Poland, Portugal, Turkey, 1.5–7), while religious affiliation increases the probability of access in ten countries. In seven countries, affiliation has no effect.

These results corroborate those obtained by the Pew Research Center (2016) through broad comparative research: the link between declaring a secular stance (no religion) and having a high level of education is not constant, and erodes in particular for younger generations. Other research, specific to the British context, comes to the same conclusion: for individuals born after 1955, those who declare themselves to have no religion have a lower average level of education (Voas & McAndrew, 2014). This change is contextualised by the Pew Research Center who identify an effect of the size of the population declaring a secular stance. In countries where these individuals represent 20% or more of the population, the effect is reduced or disappears. Voas and McAndrew (2014) extend the explanation by hypothesising a combined effect of the expansion of higher education and secularisation; when access to higher education is elitist, it is reserved for students with a high level of educational capital, whereas with massification, the student population more closely resembles the general population. Similarly, when almost the entire population declares a religious belonging, those who do not are mainly members of the intelligentsia. It is therefore the joint development of higher education and the secularisation of individuals which, by transforming the characteristics of these two populations, changes the meaning of the relationship.

Our results confirm these hypotheses. Sweden, which stands out by being the only country for which, from the first generation onwards, those declaring a secular stance have no educational advantage, is also the most secularised (with only 37% of respondents declaring a religious belonging) and is one of the countries with the most massified higher education. Conversely, the countries where those declaring a secular stance retain a significant advantage in access to higher education degrees for the third generation (Croatia, Greece, Israel, Poland, Portugal, Turkey) are distinguished by a high rate of self-reported religious affiliation in the overall population (between 80% and 95%) and a low rate of access to higher education degrees (10 to 25%; in Israel 32%).

The initial positive link between self-declared secular stances for accessing higher education degrees has a particular historical context. Atheism (an expression of non-belief) was at various times a stance common among intellectuals, with scientists playing an important role in its dissemination. In Europe, it was notably associated with the end of the Enlightenment period; and particularly with the work of existentialist philosophers during the second half of the 19th century. We can therefore hypothesise that an individual's social position and available resources influenced the possibility of adopting a secular stance in social organisations that required the adoption of a religious belonging, this same social position being favourable to the pursuit of studies. For the more contemporary period, this relates to the fact that individuals declaring no religious belonging are more likely to be of Protestant cultural origin, with Protestant countries being the first to experience secularisation, the timing of this process being an important variable in explaining variations between countries (Table 8).

Although religious belonging has gradually been abandoned as a discriminating criterion in admission procedures, it continues to influence the probability of accessing a higher education degree. For the first generation,

out of fifteen countries where Catholic and Protestant denominations coexist in varying proportions, Protestants held a greater or equal probability of graduating than Catholics in ten countries, with no effect in five countries. But the situation becomes more complex for the third generation: the advantage of Protestants remains in twelve out of twenty countries, with no observable difference in four countries; Catholic students hold an advantage in four countries. The third generation is characterised by a disadvantage for accessing higher education degrees for students with a self-declared Muslim affiliation (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Israel, the United Kingdom and Switzerland) compared to those who declare themselves to belong to the majority religion (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Jews). This is associated with the migratory flows of the second half of the 20th century, which corroborates trends observed for other indicators of ethnicity.

4.5 | How ethnicity has compounded inequalities of class

Logistic regressions were carried out to examine how different markers of social belonging interact to produce a greater or lesser probability of graduating. For the three generations taken together, all other things being equal, the extent to which self-reported social belongings (language minority, migrant, religious) have a notable influence on access to higher education degrees is significant, although it varies from one society to another. This means that after controlling for parental education and occupation, gender and age of respondents, the observed ethnic markers have an additional effect on the probability of graduating in one third of the countries. A slightly greater additional effect is observed for self-reported Muslims, in thirteen countries (Tables 9 and 10).

TABLE 8 Relative effect of not declaring a religious belonging on the chances of graduating

		Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect	Total
1st generation	Number of countries	27	1 (Sweden)	1 (Finland)	29
	Strong odds ratio	19 countries: 1.5–10	1.4		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	8 countries: 1.2–1.4			
2nd generation	Number of countries	17	6	6	29
	Strong odds ratio	10 countries: 1.5–4.4	1.2–1.4		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	7 countries: 1.2–1.5			
3rd generation	Number of countries	12	10	7	29
	Strong odds ratio	6 countries: 1.5–7	4 countries: 1.5–1.7		
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	6 countries: 1.2–1.4	6 countries: 1.2–1.4		
Total	Number of countries	18	2	9	29
	Strong odds ratio	13 countries: 1.5–6.5			
	Weak to moderate odds ratio	5 countries: 1.2–1.4	2 countries: 1.2–1.3		

Source: Author.

TABLE 9 Effect of religious belonging on the chances of graduating

		1st generation	2nd generation	3rd generation	Overall
Protestant/Catholic advantage	Number of countries	10 of 15 5 no effect	9 of 19 5 no effect	12 of 20 4 no effect	9 of 20 4 no effect
Muslim/other religion disadvantage	Number of countries	4 of 8	12 of 14	13 of 15	14 of16

Source: Author.

TABLE 10 Changes in the number of countries where ethnic variables have an impact, other things being equal, on the chances of obtaining a tertiary degree and countries with significant ethnic variables in the overall regression

	Year of birth of respondents			
	1930–1949	1950–1964	1965–1979	Combined 1930–1979
Language spoken	3	5	4	5
Geographical trajectory	4	3	6	8
Sense of belonging to a minority	5	4	5	7
Total number of countries where the ethnic dimension influences, other things being equal, the chances of obtaining a degree	8	9	10	11
National language spoken at home +	Effect +: Germany, Spain, Israel Effect −: Russia, United Kingdom			
Geographical trajectory	Effect +: Austria, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine Effect −: Spain, Greece, Russia			
Sense of belonging to a minority	Effect +: Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Effect -: Romania			
Religion: Muslim/ other religion	Effect −: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, France			

Source: Author.

Finally, the intergenerational comparison reveals a trend towards an increase in the number of social attributes that influence educational outcomes. In almost half of the countries (thirteen), the number of significant variables increased between the first and third generations. It was stable in nine countries and decreased in eight. This shows a trend towards the diversification of societies on the one hand, and the increasing complexity of social determinisms on the other.

5 | CONCLUSION

During the second half of the 20th century, differences in access to educational qualifications decreased overall, both regarding the effect of social belonging between individuals in the same society and between societies. However, the social attributes that have structured access to higher education and qualifications over the centuries continue to have a strong influence. European societies therefore remain far from the norm of inclusion associated with the democratic project.

Furthermore, the process of reducing inequalities within societies that prevailed until the 1980s, supported by the massification of higher education, appears to have stalled. This development is accompanied by a qualitative restructuring of inequalities. Educational achievement strongly reproduces the social positions of families, and not only in socio-economic terms. Multiple markers of social belonging that position the individual in the social space are interwoven to influence his or her educational future.

The broad-ranging comparative analysis presented in this article sought to identify "*common properties among all instances of a phenomenon*" (Tilly, 1984, p. 81). As a result, it documents statistical causality links between socio-demographic characteristics and access to higher education. By doing so, the relations observed are not inferred to be unilateral; policy matters, and a variety of processes can impinge on apparently similar statistical trends, which may manifest a variety of different underlying correlations. Still, the results show that the dynamics of inequality vary by time-periods considered, but also that there are shared trends in Europe,

stemming in part from distinct processes. These trends underscore the importance of analysing ethnicity for better understanding the social dynamics of access to higher education degrees. Also, that it is important to go beyond the characterisation of national identities to qualify diversity, and to not limit analysis to socio-economic dimensions of educational trajectories, to better comprehend the relationship between education and society.

The reduction of inequalities can never be taken for granted. The sources of inequalities in access to higher education are being restructured. For these reasons, an analysis of inequalities in educational achievement requires a consideration of the effect of social belongings—such as religious affiliation, home language and migration, independently of their legitimacy in the various national settings. A heuristic and comprehensive scientific analysis thus necessarily addresses, on top of social-class, dimensions which, like ethnicity, may be seen as politically and socially sensitive.

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A detailed presentation of the data used in this article can be found in the methodological annexes of my habilitation thesis (Goastellec, 2020).

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