Continuing Studies. Compulsory and Upper Secondary Students' Perceptions of Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper presents preliminary findings from *Continuing Studies: Students' Perceptions of Higher Education*, a collaborative project involving the Federation of Upper Secondary Schools in Jämtland, the Municipality of Östersund and Mid Sweden University. The county of Jämtland faces demographic decline, youth unemployment, low educational attainment and limited progression to higher education. The study therefore examines compulsory and upper-secondary students' perceptions of higher education and the opportunities and challenges they identify. Data from qualitative focus group interviews will be analysed using six-step thematic analysis. The findings aim to inform practical support for students' transition to higher education.

Keywords: Compulsory School Students, Educational Transitions, Higher Education, Upper-Secondary Students, Regional Educational Inequality

1. Introduction and Background

Sweden faces demographic decline and an ageing population, challenges that are particularly pronounced in the Mid Sweden region. Retaining residents and increasing participation in further education are therefore important for regional development (Guarderes et al, 2022). Educational inequality remains a concern in Sweden (OECD, 2016, 2023; Pareliussen et al, 2019). In the county of Jämtland, 16.8% of students leave compulsory education without passing grades, compared with 15.8% nationally (Status Sweden, 2026; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2026). Progression to higher education is also low: 6% continue by age 19 and 33% by age 24, compared with national figures of 14% and 45%, respectively (UKÄ, 2025). The area also has a comparatively low general level of education and limited access to attractive post-secondary environments (Region Västernorrland and Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020).

Youth unemployment has not declined in the region (Holmgren, Forsberg and Persson, 2022). Across Sweden, 8.0% of young people aged 16–24 were neither in employment nor education, while the corresponding proportion among 20–25-year-olds in Jämtland is 29%. Young men are slightly more likely than young women to be in this situation, and the proportion is considerably higher among foreign-born young people than among those born in Sweden (Persson och Lindestig, 2026). These patterns underline the importance of education as a pathway to employment or higher education.

Research describes the transition from compulsory schooling to higher education and employment as an increasingly complex and non-linear process shaped by individual agency, institutional structures, and socioeconomic inequalities (Kyndt et al, 2017; Sugimura et al, 2023). Prolonged education and labour-market uncertainty have contributed to more fluid transition pathways (Blokker et al, 2023; Dougherty, 2022; Fu, 2023), with potential consequences for young people's health and well-being (Reuter et al, 2022).

Swedish policy has addressed young people who are neither in employment nor education through national inquiries, agency reports and cross-sectoral initiatives rather than a single legislative framework (Jonsson et al, 2022). Policy analyses identify gaps in knowledge, coordination and welfare support, particularly for certain subgroups, and emphasise cooperation across central, regional and municipal levels (Swedish Government Official Report, 2018:11; Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2021; Minas, 2025). Local implementation is strongest when municipalities establish shared problem definitions and inter-organisational coordination agreements (Minas et al, 2025; Mellberg et al, 2022). However, less attention has been given to students' own perceptions of continuing to higher education. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate how Year 9 and upper-secondary students perceive higher education. It asks how students view continuing to higher education and what challenges and opportunities they associate with this transition.

2. Method

A qualitative research design was selected to capture the nuanced perspectives of students. Focus group interview were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they facilitate dynamic discussions and allow respondents to reflect on shared challenges and potential solutions (Krueger and Casey, 2014). The study is

based on focus group interviews with upper secondary and compulsory school students' perceptions of pursuing higher education. The study focuses on upper secondary students enrolled in the university-preparatory Social Science Programme and on Year 9 compulsory school students. The students have been contacted by teachers in the schools and interviewed in small groups. This paper reports on the initial focus group interview with three upper secondary students enrolled in the university-preparatory Social Science Programme. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2121) framework. In this study, the applicable research ethics requirements were followed (Swedish Research Council, 2017). The study will be conducted with compulsory and upper secondary school students within the areas served by the Federation of Upper Secondary Schools in Jämtland and the municipality of Östersund.

3. Preliminary Findings

Students' aspirations and views of success shaped their educational choices. They associated a desirable future with high income, meaningful work, fame, and living abroad, viewing higher education mainly as a route to secure, well-paid employment rather than as an interest-driven goal.

Students were uncertain about what to study and which careers to pursue. Their programme choices were often pragmatic, shaped by eligibility, admission requirements, expected earnings, and perceived difficulty. They viewed the transition to higher education as both exciting and uncertain because it involved new study formats, environments, classmates, and living arrangements.

Higher education was associated with adulthood, freedom, responsibility, and autonomy, but also with less support. Students expected greater academic demands and identified failure to gain admission to their preferred programme as a key challenge.

Family members influenced students as role models, conveying expectations about education, employment, and financially advantageous pathways. Higher education was partly seen as the default because finding work appeared difficult.

Overall, students balanced high aspirations with uncertainty about how to achieve them. Challenges included unclear choices, admission and academic demands, reduced support, and limited employment, while higher education offered meaningful work, financial security, independence, personal development, and broader opportunities.

4. Points of Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate and analyse upper secondary and compulsory school students' perceptions of higher education. How do upper secondary students enrolled in the university-preparatory Social Science Programme view higher education? What challenges and opportunities emerge in students' perception of continuing to higher education?

In this study, the students expressed high aspirations, but uncertain pathways (Blokker et al, 2023; Dougherty, 2022; Fu, 2023). They express ambitious goals but often appear to lack clear knowledge about how to achieve them. Their view of higher education represents an instrumental view of higher education. Higher education is mainly valued as a route to employment and financial security rather than personal or intellectual development. For the students in this this study, family expectations, local labour-market conditions and regional inequalities shape students' choices. In the transition from upper secondary school to higher education, the students in this study identify transition challenges (Kyndt et al, 2017; Sugimura et al, 2023). They appear to find the independence which higher education provides as attractive, but students are concerned about admission, academic demands, relocation and reduced support. There is a need for guidance, to support students and in turn the possible need to support student health (Reuter, 2022). More guidance which takes place early is adapted to individuals may support student choice, connecting connect students' interests and aspirations with realistic educational pathways. The students in this study also express the notion of higher education as a default option. Some students may choose further study because employment alternatives appear limited rather than because the higher education programme they choose is a good personal fit.

Key challenges include uncertainty about educational and career choices, admission requirements, academic demands, reduced support, and limited employment opportunities. At the same time, higher education offers opportunities for meaningful work, financial security, independence, personal development, and broader future

possibilities. In summary, the students express high aspirations, but uncertain pathways. They express ambitious goals but often appear to lack clear knowledge about how to achieve them.

5. Practical Implications and Limitations

Schools and higher education institutions could collaborate on earlier guidance, clearer information, university visits and mentoring. Support should address practical concerns, and families may be included because they influence students' decisions. As a small qualitative study of selected groups in one geographic area in Sweden, the findings are context-dependent and not transferable to all students. Focus group responses may also be influenced by group dynamics, social desirability and unequal participation.

6. Future Work and Research Contribution

Future work will include further focus group interviews and a larger project application to deepen knowledge of students' perceptions of higher education. The study contributes insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding educational transitions and may inform support for students, educators, school leaders and public-sector stakeholders in similar regional contexts.

Ethics Declaration

This study has been conducted in line with the applicable ethical recommendations.

AI Declaration

Generative AI tools were used to support language editing.

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