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Yes, you can! The Influence of Relative Performance Feedback on Secondary School Track Choice—A Randomized Field Experiment

GNet Abstract

This paper reports the results of a cluster randomized information campaign, which motivated pupils to choose the collage-bound secondary track in relatively deprived areas of Hungary. In many countries, completing secondary education on the academically oriented track is a prerequisite for college enrollment. Not all qualified pupils, however, chose the academic track in high school. We conducted a randomized field experiment to test whether uncertainty about admissions requirements for the academic track discourages applications and reduces admissions to the academic secondary track. Our intervention targets a common feature of education systems worldwide, where admissions cutoffs are not *ex ante* known to applicants and vary across schools. The intervention informed primary school seniors, four months before the track choice about the past admission cutoffs for all academic-track secondary schools in their region. Since almost all pupils in our sample met the minimal requirements for at least one grammar school in their area, many pupils will newly learn about their ability to get into grammar school. Thus, the intervention aimed to reduce pupils' uncertainty about admissions standards. Using a pair-matched cluster randomized design involving 702 eight-grade pupils in 26 schools, we found that our intervention increases applications to the academic track among pupils who planned to apply for the academic track but believed their chances of admission to be low. In contrast to prior field experiments, which tried to motivate educational choice with information about the economic returns to education, our intervention is entirely non-economic, targeting uncertainty in the admission standards. Our results demonstrate that even among pupils already motivated to choose the academic secondary track, reducing uncertainty about admissions requirements empowers less confident pupils to opt for the academic track.