

# PATHFINDER



The Pathways to Adulthood Newsletter



## Welcome

Capacity building and advancing the understanding of productive youth development in an international context are the objectives of the PATHWAYS Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme funded by the Jacobs Foundation. In our biannual issue of PATHFINDER, we report on research conducted by the PATHWAYS fellows. The fourth issue focuses on young people's expectations regarding their future.

John Jerrim, a PATHWAYS associate Fellow based at the Institute of Education, University of London examined the wage expectations of higher education students, using evidence from the UK Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES). His findings suggest that higher education students do not know what they will earn in their first job after graduation. On average, students expect that they would earn more than they actually do in the end. There are variations in the accuracy of the predictions of the first wage. While social science students tend to overestimate their starting salary, those studying medicine underestimate their first wage. Women expect to earn less than men. Furthermore, part-time students tend to have higher wage expectations than those studying full-time, yet they also made better predictions of their starting salary. John concludes that prospective university students have a poor understanding of the graduate labour market, and that young adults need to be better informed about the costs and benefits of higher education and the economic value of different degrees.

Lara Perez-Felkner, a PATHWAYS associate Fellow based at Florida State University, reports on her findings regarding social inequalities in career aspirations, in particular on variations in education aspirations by ethnicity and gender. Based on data collected for the US Education Longitudinal Study she shows that during twelfth grade, the final year of secondary school (mostly age 18), there is near parity in African American and white students regarding their educational aspirations. Women have generally higher education expectations than men, and are more certain about how far they expect to go in the education system. Asian females have the highest aspirations of all ethnic groups and are the least uncertain regarding their educational plans. Latinos, in particular Latino men, express the lowest aspirations and the highest uncertainty. Lara argues that for a better understanding of the factors influencing career expectations of young people one has to take into account their experiences of the socio-cultural context they grow up in.

PATHWAYS programme activities during 2011/2 included two international workshops held at the University of Michigan and the University of Jena. We also organised a number of PATHWAYS symposia at international conferences, including the EARA biannual meeting in Spetses and the ISSBD conference in Edmonton, Canada. Two international seminars on 'Happy Schools' were held at the University of Helsinki (focusing on the role of peer influences) and one at the Finnish Institute in London.

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### In Brief

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# The wage expectations of higher education students

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## Why are the wage expectations of young people important?

Understanding why some suitably qualified young adults enter higher education and others do not has been the subject of extensive research by a number of social scientists from a range of disciplines. Economists suggest that young adults' willingness to invest in a tertiary qualification depends upon what they believe the costs and benefits of this investment will be. On the other hand, social theories stress that an early expectation of completing university is a key driver of tertiary participation (Morgan 2005; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969). Children's subjective beliefs of the future (their "expectations") are a consistent theme within these distinctively different approaches. Researchers across disciplines might argue that children's low or uninformed expectations (of future income, financial returns, or their ability to complete university) might lead them into making inappropriate educational choices (Eccles, 2009; Morgan 1998, Manski 2004; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). For instance, young adults who do not have a proper understanding of the graduate labour market may mistakenly invest (or not invest) in tertiary education. Alternatively some academically talented children may not enter university if they do not see it as realistic possibility, or that it is 'not for the likes of them'. Below is a summary of a study examining whether British higher education students' are "realistic" about the wages they are likely to receive in their first job upon graduation (Jerrim, 2011).

## The sample and measures used in the analysis

Wage expectation data were drawn from the 2004–05 UK Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES), a large cross-sectional study that was designed to be broadly representative of the UK higher education population. As part of the SIES survey, around 3,000 students (from over 70 universities) were asked how much they expected to earn in their first job after graduation.

Information on students' expected wages (taken from the SIES) were compared to information on actual graduate wages drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) Destination of Leavers Survey (DLHE). This was an attempted census of all British

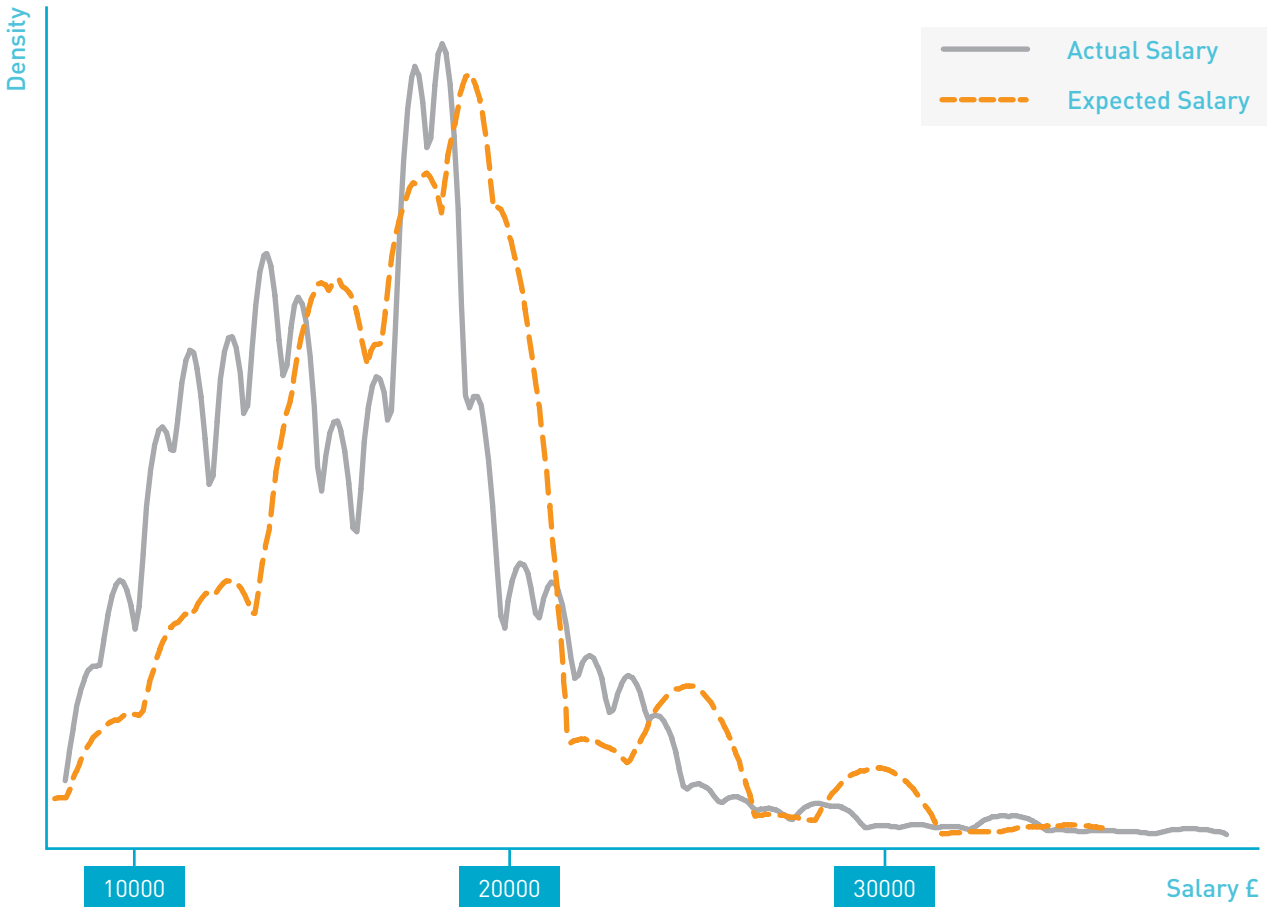
university graduates conducted six months after they had finished university. Details were collected on employment, occupational status and the salary they currently receive. The analysis thus draws upon information on the wages of over 44,000 graduates for whom wage information was available (Jerrim, 2011)

## Young people do not know what they will later earn

The distribution of full-time students' expected and actual wages can be found in Figure 1. The solid line represents the distribution of graduates' starting salaries, while the broken line refers to their expectations. The two distributions clearly differ, with expected wages tending to be to the right of (i.e. higher than) actual wages. In fact, students expected to earn, on average, a starting salary of £18,300 (\$29,000) while average actual graduate wages stood at just £15,900 (\$25,000). This difference of £2,400 (\$4,000) is both sizeable and significantly different from zero at the five percent level. Consequently, one can clearly reject the null hypothesis that full-time higher education students can (on average) accurately predict their starting salary.

The study also suggests that certain groups of students make more accurate predictions of their first wage than others. Both men and women overestimate their first wage by roughly 15%. However, women expect to earn less than men, a fact that (unfortunately) is also born out by actual experiences in the labour market (Olsen and Walby 2004). Social science students at "modern" higher education institutions overestimate their starting salary by (on average) £3,000 (\$5,000), while those studying medicine underestimate their first wage by almost the same amount. Jerrim (2011) furthermore finds evidence that young people lower their wage expectations as they approach entry to the labour market, and also become more realistic about the pay they will obtain. Part-time students tended to have higher wage expectation than those that were studying full time, yet also made better predictions of their starting salary.

Figure 1.  
The distribution of actual and expected wages for full-time students



Source: Jerrim (2011)

### Conclusion

Whether to enter higher education is one of the most important decisions that young people make. Such an investment can offer substantial financial rewards; the UK government often cites work that suggests graduates earn, on average, £100,000 more over their lifetime than if they entered the labour force upon finishing their A-Levels. Yet completing higher education is also becoming more expensive. At the time of writing, the cap on tuition fees had been lifted to a maximum of £9,000 per annum. Hence educational decisions made at age 18 are having ever greater financial ramifications, with increasing responsibility being placed onto relatively inexperienced shoulders. It is therefore vital that, in making such important decisions, young adults are well informed about the costs and benefits of higher education and the economic value of different degrees. But are young adults capable of making such rational assessments of the future, and do they hold enough information to make financially complex decisions? This research has shown that young people's decisions regarding higher education may be based upon too optimistic assumptions about the future, which may lead to mistaken choices and disappointment in later life. Of course, it is still possible for university to be a good investment, even under such conditions, although the possibility of high returns for education might change in the future, especially in the light of the current global economic depression and high youth unemployment rates, even among graduates (ONS, 2011). Many will still find university both a financially and culturally profitable experience, even if perhaps not to the level they once expected.

Nevertheless, it is equally plausible that by overestimating future wages, some students may choose to go to university, and then not receive the benefit they expected on enrolment. Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton (2005 page 194) illustrate such feelings based on findings in their qualitative research on the labour market experience of recent graduates:

'I would have still ended up in the position I'm in now if I would have carried on working full-time.....I applied for over two hundred jobs, I felt this degree was a total waste of time; I was a self-funding student, which was a waste of money. Im still paying for it now. Im a single parent and to be honest it was the biggest waste of time and money that I've ever spent..... Everyone tells you if you do a degree the world will be your oyster, you'll earn loads of money.'

### Impact of the research

Results from this study have received significant attention from academics, policymakers and the British media. The central message that prospective university students have a poor understanding of the graduate labour market has reached a number of stakeholders through the press (The Times and Daily Telegraph), internet (BBC News) and specialist publications (Financial Times, Times Higher Educational Supplement). Interested parties have subsequently commented on the findings through similar mediums. For instance, the then Minister for Higher Education (Rt Hon Bill Rammell) acknowledged Jerrim's research in a letter to The Times newspaper. A number of prospective students (and their parents) have also put forward their views on the results, either online or through the press (e.g. The Times letters page 23rd July 2009). In December 2011 the results were published in *Fiscal Studies*, an academic journal specialising in public policy debate.

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# Educational Aspirations: Understanding Social Inequality in Higher Education and Careers

Educational aspirations have been rising in the U.S. over recent years, however it appears that race-ethnicity and gender continue to distinguish students' expectations of realizing these aspirations. Decades of research shows that aspirations are related to later educational and career attainment (e.g., Schoon & Polek, 2011). It has been thought that socioeconomic disadvantage may constrain occupational aspirations, expectations, and attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Willis, 1977). However, aspirations to higher education and professional careers have generally been rising in many industrialized nations, even among relative disadvantaged young people. This democratization of big dreams seems to promote school engagement among U.S. secondary school students, in their effort to realize these aspirations (Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011). Research suggests that individuals' experiences in their sociocultural contexts may shape racial-ethnic and gender underrepresentation in postsecondary sectors and fields, as adolescents develop socialized expectations about traditional and seemingly more 'realistic' pathways (Correll, 2001; Eccles, 1994; Hanson, 1994; O'Connor, 1999). This article investigates to what extent U.S. adolescents' educational aspirations vary by race-ethnicity and gender among the most recent nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents, and how these aspirations change over the course of upper secondary school.



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## Social Stratification in Educational and Career Aspirations

Adolescents' aspirations are important indicators of their later educational and career attainment, but social norms in their family, community, and school contexts may diminish both their expectations of being able to realize these aspirations and their actual attainment (e.g., Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). It seems crucial that youth align their aspirations to behaviors and resources instrumental to helping them realize these ambitions (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). For example, research using the British Cohort Study finds that youth who hold either misaligned or uncertain ambitions during adolescence encounter problems in the transition to adulthood, in particular regarding educational and career outcomes by age 34 (Sabates, Harris, & Staff, 2011). Social and structural resources in students' school, family, and neighborhood contexts also seem to help youth achieve their ambitions, for example teachers can encourage persistence in the advanced mathematics course sequences that position students (socioeconomically disadvantaged students in particular) for successful transitions to postsecondary education [see Crosnoe & Schneider, 2010]. Notably, the chances of realizing one's educational expectations

appears to remain lower for those from racial-ethnic minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged families, even as – in general – gendered constraints on expectations are abating (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007).

## The Role of Gender

Although gender is a critical factor in the development of young people's educational and occupational aspirations, much of the foundational research has focused on males (e.g., Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Overall, females surpass males in educational achievement, including academic performance in secondary school and postsecondary educational attainment, yet remain concentrated in specific occupational domains (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). They also tend to have higher career ambitions than males (Schoon & Polek, 2011). Interestingly, a recent study of the 1970 British Cohort finds that the most ambitious and motivated adolescent females were also those who were least likely to have a child before the age of 29, suggesting that women continue to perceive that it is necessary to delay the start of a family in order to participate in certain career fields that are associated with high occupational status (Schoon, et al., 2007).

Sex segregation continues in many fields, notably including the sciences (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010). Female adolescents tend to have less positive orientations towards mathematics and mathematics-related tasks (see Eccles, 1987). This applies even to those who complete advanced mathematics course sequences in secondary school, which, in turn, may result in their selection of postsecondary specializations in biological, health, and social and behavioral sciences rather than the physical sciences, engineering, mathematics, and computer sciences (PEMC) (Perez-Felkner, McDonald, Schneider, & Grogan, 2012).

#### Data source

How do educational aspirations vary by race-ethnicity and gender?

Findings reported here are based on data collected for the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS: 2002), a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents ( $n=14,410$ ) most of whom were born in 1986 and were in 10th grade and around age 16 in the spring of 2002.

Table 1 reports on differences in educational aspirations during tenth grade (mostly age 16) and the final year of secondary school, i.e. twelfth grade (mostly age 18), with a focus on differences across racial-ethnic groups and by gender both across and within groups. In tenth grade, African American and Latino adolescents have lower aspirations than their white and Asian peers. During twelfth grade however there is near parity in African American and white students' aspirations toward college for both male and female students, although female white and African American students have notably higher aspirations than their male counterparts. In tenth grade, 10% more white and African American males expect less than a bachelor's degree as compared to their female peers. Regarding aspirations for a bachelor degree, African American males have higher aspirations at the end of high school than they did two years prior; however, they also have the highest rates of uncertainty about how far in

the education system they will go. African American females report the lowest levels of uncertainty of any of the groups, including Asians who have the highest aspirations overall. Asian females appear the least uncertain and hold the highest aspirations. Lowest aspirations are observed for male Latinos and male African Americans, followed by white males. Latinos have the most uncertain aspirations of all of the groups studied, with 16% of Latino males and 13% of Latina females stating in 12th grade that they "don't know" how far they think they will get in school.

#### What we have learned: Current and Future Research Directions

While more students aspire to and enroll in postsecondary school than before, including those from minority backgrounds, African American and Latino youth, in particular males, remain underrepresented among bachelor's degree holders (National Science Foundation, 2010). Furthermore, gender stratification within racial-ethnic groups persists, even in the scientific fields in which African American youth are overall more likely to enroll, controlling for other factors (Perez-Felkner, et al., 2012; Riegle-Crumb & King, 2010). Even during periods of economic growth and stability, the aspirations of underrepresented minority youth may be challenged by financial, familial, and normative constraints undermining their ability to pursue four-year colleges (see Perez-Felkner, 2013). Latino and other minority youth who attend college preparatory schools may be reluctant to attend college far from home because of concerns about the potential strains on their families, who might have already made sacrifices to support their education (Perez-Felkner, 2009).

Better understanding of how sociocultural contexts might temper high aspirations among underrepresented youth can inform similar processes. Recent research has identified how geographical proximity to universities with particular attributes (e.g. high representation of minority students, four-year vs. two-year institutions), can shape racial-ethnic disparities in educational attainment in the U.S. (Butler, 2010; López Turley, 2009), with the potential for intriguing cross-national and comparative investigations. Additional comparative work might examine changes in educational aspirations among youth in nations experiencing particular hardships since the Great Recession (e.g., Greece, Spain). Social stratification may have increased in these nations as access to state-subsidized university education and professional careers has declined. Economic hardship notwithstanding, nations and their school structures vary in their ability to facilitate the realization of their students' high aspirations (Matějů, Smith, Soukup, & Basl, 2007). It is important to consider not only how social and structural conditions shape aspirations but also how youth develop their aspirations in response to or even in spite of their social contexts (Salmela-Aro & Schoon, 2009).

#### Conclusion

The educational aspirations of U.S. adolescents continue to vary by race-ethnicity through the final year of secondary school. Gender plays a role as well, as females are more ambitious than males overall and have both higher and more certain education aspirations than their male peers. Finally, uncertain aspirations are understood to have important consequences for later educational and career attainment, but empirical studies of nationally representative U.S. longitudinal data rarely examine the effect of being unsure about one's educational future. This paper finds that uncertainty of aspirations varies by race-ethnicity and gender, which merits deeper investigation.

Educational aspirations	White			Asian			African American			Latino		
	Male	Female	Dif	Male	Female	Dif	Male	Female	Dif	Male	Female	Dif
	N=4297	N=4385		N=4297	N=4385		N=4297	N=4385		N=4297	N=4385	
	%	%		%	%		%	%		%	%	
<b>All respondents</b>												
<b>Don't know</b>												
Tenth grade (~age 16)	9.8	8.2	*	10.8	9.9		9.1	8.1		12.6	12.7	
Twelfth grade (~age 18)	8.3	6.4	**	11.3	5.6	***	12.6	10.5		16.1	13.3	
<b>Specific Aspirations</b>												
Tenth grade (~age 16)	90.2	91.8	*	89.2	90.1		90.9	91.9		87.4	87.3	
Twelfth grade (~age 18)	91.7	93.6	**	88.7	94.4	***	87.4	89.5		83.9	86.7	
<b>Those that report specific aspirations</b>												
<b>Less than bachelors' degree</b>												
Tenth grade (~age 16)	23	13.2	***	19.9	12.2	***	28.3	18.2	***	33.7	21.2	***
Twelfth grade (~age 18)	23.9	16.8	***	17.4	9.3	***	24.0	17.9	**	34.3	24.7	***
<b>Bachelors'</b>												
Tenth grade (~age 16)	77.0	86.8	***	80.1	87.8	***	71.7	81.8	***	66.3	78.8	***
Twelfth grade (~age 18)	76.1	83.2	***	82.6	90.7	***	76.0	82.1	**	65.7	75.3	***

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002).

Note. Data are weighted to population means (n=14,410), using f2bywt. "Don't know" is a binary variable coded 1 (don't know) or 0 (specific expectations). Significant differences were calculated using bonferroni coefficients from two-way anovas. The number of cases reported is the unweighted total. \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.



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# Aspirations for the future in times of social change

There is ample evidence documenting the importance of teenage educational and career aspirations for later academic and career success (Clausen, 1991; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Mello, 2008). In the era of growing knowledge economies there has been an increasing demand for a highly skilled workforce, and more young people are participating in higher education, once the preserve of a relative privileged minority (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; ONS, 2011). These developments might have been incentives for young people to raise their expectations and change their perceptions regarding higher education (Goyette, 2008; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon, 2010). But does this apply to all young people – and what are the associated costs and benefits of extended education participation?

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## Wage returns

The trend towards rising number of entrants into higher education potentially increases the competition for graduate jobs, but also offers a significant 'role model' effect for successive cohorts (McVicar & Rice, 2001). Moreover, the relative wages of graduates have risen since the 1980s - very fast in the 1980s, and with no fall in the 1990s (Machin & McNelly, 2007). Examining changes in wage returns to tertiary education across different OECD countries (including the US and the UK) Machin and McNelly (2007) conclude that between the late 1990s and 2003, despite a rise in the relative supply of workers who have a degree, wage returns to a degree were rising as well, suggesting that relative demand rose faster than relative supply. However, young people today appear to have unrealistic expectations regarding their future wages (Jerrim, this issue). Furthermore, the extent to which young people in future cohorts will be able to realise their expectations remains to be seen. The evidence of high returns for education might change (Brown, 2008), especially given the current global economic depression and high youth unemployment rates, even among graduates (ONS, 2011).

## Psycho-social costs

Not receiving the expected benefits, associated with increasing frustration and disenchantment with current social structures and opportunities, might lead to lack of planning for the future, increased anxieties, lower self esteem and depression (Suhrccke & Stuckler, 2012; see also Jerrim,



this issue). It can also lead to increased aggression (as seen in the UK riots during the summer 2011), as well as the political mobilization of young people, as for example during the Arab spring, the European marches against unemployment, or the recent occupy movement (Chabanet & Faniel, 2012).

## Implications for policy

To avoid incongruence between goals and actual experience in the transition to independent adulthood it is vital to provide adequate support structures. For example, it is important that parents and young people (especially those who will be the first generation to attend higher education) are provided with relevant information regarding changing education and employment opportunities and how to prepare for the transition from school to work. This might involve the creation of institutional bridges between schools, universities, and employers (which is especially important for disadvantaged youths who are more likely than their more privileged peers to use institutional contacts to find jobs), as well as the development of clear occupational career tracks. Another vital component is the creation of employment opportunities for young people, especially during a time of an economic downturn.

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# Report on Seminar Series: Happy School

A series of three Happy School seminars and one methodological workshop were organized by Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro, University of Helsinki. The Seminar Series was supported by the Jacobs Foundation, Academy of Finland and the Finnish National Graduate School of Psychology.

The first seminar focused on Peers and School, and took place in the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (10-11 October 2011). The seminar brought together prominent and established, as well as early career researchers to share new methodological ideas, innovative approaches and current advances in the study of peer relationships. The first day of the seminar focused on peer relations in context, including dyadic contexts, peer networks in the classroom and school contexts. The second day had a methodological focus, deepening the understanding of methodological issues concerning peer research, with emphases on dyads and social relations modeling, peer networks and classroom studies. Invited speakers included William Burk from Maastrich University, Jan Kornelis from Dijkstra University of Groningen, René Veenstra from the University of Groningen, Ernest Hodges from St. Johns University, Julie Hubbard from the University of Delaware, Brett Laursen from the Florida Atlantic University, and Christina Salmivalli from University of Turku. Several PATHWAYS fellows also joined the seminar.

The second seminar focused on the school context, and also took place in the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in the University of Helsinki (24 November 2011). Two outstanding keynotes were given by Professor Jürgen Baumert, from the MPI Berlin and Professor Ulrich Trautwein, University of Tübingen, Germany.

The third seminar examined 'Adolescence in the 21st century - Current debates in Finland and the UK'. It took place in The Finnish Institute in London (15 February 2012), and was organized together with the Academy of Finland. The aim of the seminar was to bring together researchers and policy makers from Finland and the UK, to exchange ideas and perspectives regarding the many challenges facing young people today, such as the current recession, unemployment, immigration, and issues related to school and further education. Professor Sir Michael Rutter, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, UK gave a keynote titled "Science & Policy: Myth and Substance". It was followed by two presentations reporting experiences of young people during the current economic crisis. Professor Marjo-Riitta Järvelin, Imperial College London, UK gave another keynote. The seminar concluded with a panel discussion chaired by Professor John Bynner, Institute of Education, University of London. Panel participants were Professor Ingrid Schoon, Institute of Education, University of London; Professor Jouni Välijärvi, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; and Professor Leon Feinstein, UK Treasury. Several PATHWAYS fellows were actively involved in the seminar.

Furthermore, a methodological seminar on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) delivered by Amiram Vinokur from the ISR, University of Michigan, was held in June 11-13, 2012 in the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. The workshop covered conceptual as well as practical issues involved in SEM.



- The major objective of the programme is to promote the next generation of researchers through funding, mentoring and collaboration
- The mission of this Collaborative Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme is to stimulate innovative, interdisciplinary, and comparative research of productive youth development.
- Our programme brings together experts from the UK, Germany, Finland, Sweden and the US.
- We engage with different stakeholders in how best to equip young people for mastering the challenges of growing up in a changing social context.

## Principal Investigators and participating institutions

- Lars Bergman – Stockholm University
- Jacquelynne S. Eccles – University of Michigan
- Katariina Salmela-Aro – University of Helsinki
- Barbara Schneider – Michigan State University
- Ingrid Schoon – Institute of Education, University of London
- Rainer K. Silbereisen – University of Jena
- Ulrich Trautwein -University of Tübingen

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