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**Abstract**

In this paper, we analyse social inequalities along the horizontal dimension of education in Italy. More precisely, we focus on the role of family background in completing specific fields of study at both secondary and tertiary levels of education. To mitigate the limitations of the traditional sequential model, we construct a typology of educational paths based on two axes: the prestige of one's choice of high school track (academic or vocational) and the labour market returns of the university field of study in terms of monthly net income (high or low). We identify four paths: academic-high, academic-low, vocational-high, and vocational-low. We investigate the influence of social inequalities on educational path using data from the Istat "Survey on the transition to work of University graduates" regarding cohorts of university graduates in 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2007. Results obtained from multinomial logistic regressions confirm predictions based on rational action theory. We find that family background, defined in terms of parental education, is positively and significantly associated with the completion of the most advantageous educational path. Moreover, we find that high-performing students from lower socio-economic backgrounds show a higher

**30.6.2024**

probability of completing the vocational-high path. This result suggests that a vocational upper secondary degree could be perceived as a sort of safety option for students from less wealthy families, which allows them to invest in the most lucrative and risky fields at university. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Vlach, Eleonora, E-Mail: [eleonora.vlach@gmail.com](mailto:eleonora.vlach@gmail.com)