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**Abstract**

International evidence shows that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend university. We examine the potential link between university aspiration and secondary schools' attainment grouping practices (tracking/setting). Modelling of longitudinal student questionnaires (N = 6680) completed in England suggests that there is a slight cumulative association between students' university aspirations and their set placement. Interestingly, we find that students' self-confidence predicts university aspirations over and above both prior aspirations and attainment. Our findings suggest that to improve our understanding of students' university aspirations it is crucial to take account of factors other than just prior attainment. The concept of capacity to aspire emphasises the multiplicity of factors involved in enabling or hindering aspirations for university, and their interaction over time. We argue that universities have an important role in realising more socially just patterns in higher education participation through outreach work that can enhance students' capacity to aspire to university. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)