



Education

Introduction: Education as an investment in the future

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Education is the foundation of human development and self-actualisation. It enables us to lead a self-determined existence, increase professional performance and improve our health. Investments in education increase the talent in the labour pool, raise productivity and boost economic growth and incomes.

Beyond a certain basic education level, a growing economy requires and, therefore, incentivises education of various sorts to meet the demand for productivity enhancements. This works best if the focus on education is accompanied by industrialisation or a shift to work that is more knowledge-intensive, such as in higher-end services, as demand then drives improved education outcomes. To this end, as countries graduate to middle-income status, the education system needs to provide additional skills and knowledge that respond to anticipated future demands.

Education and prosperity go hand in hand, with the demand for unskilled labour decreasing and that for semi-skilled and skilled labour increasing worldwide. Generally, basic literacy and primary school education are a requirement for countries to graduate from low- to middle-income status. Research shows that each additional year of schooling is associated with an increase of nearly 0.6% in long-term gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates,[1] although the economic payoff is often only seen long after the initial investment in education.[2]

However, whereas in Europe and the US rising levels of education foreshadowed development, in Asia improvements in education beyond primary school levels generally accompanied rather than preceded more rapid economic growth.[3] Between 1960 and 1980, the average amount of education among the adult population in the East Asia and Pacific region increased by about 80%, and growth in GDP per capita tracked closely at about 85%. However, from 1980 to 2000, GDP per capita more than doubled, from about US\$3 800 per person in 1980 to about US\$8 400 per person in 2000, although the number of average years of education in the adult population in this period increased only by a third.[4] Since the 1950s, it has taken around 13 years to add one year of education to the cohort aged 15 to 24 years of age.

Improving the general level of education takes time and reaping the economic returns takes even longer. A study by the Education Policy and Data Center[5] found that it could take up to 150 years, or seven generations, to move from 10% adult primary school completion to 90% secondary school completion. The average length of the transition for the countries in the group was nearly 90 years.

However, quick progress is possible, as shown in South Korea. In a period of rapid economic growth in South Korea after the Korean War (the so-called Miracle on the Han River), the mean number of education years tripled in 55 years (from four years in 1960 to 12 years in 2015). By 2015, South Korea had caught up with established Western democracies (e.g. the UK) and surpassed others (e.g. Sweden). It also achieved exceptional primary enrolment rates for 42 consecutive years, affirming the importance of getting the foundation right as part of an investment in the future.

In practice, the demand for appropriate levels and types of education to meet market demands shapes educational outcomes. Decision-makers' investments in core knowledge and competencies (traditionally termed reading, writing and arithmetic) have to be complemented by strategies that anticipate future demands and envisioned opportunities.

Unfortunately, the challenge for many poor countries is that they have to contend with the migration of their skilled labour to richer countries.[6] This is part of the story of the African brain drain, where highly skilled African workers, such as nurses, doctors and engineers, often seek employment in higher-income countries. Recent data from AfroBarometer confirms that sub-Saharan African nations account for eight out of the ten fastest-growing international migrant populations since 2010.[7] With this steady exodus, the education system in origin countries needs to work twice as hard.[8]

To explore the trends in education in Africa, the following aspects should be considered:

- the massive annual influx children into educational infrastructure and systems that are already struggling to deal with overcrowding and inefficient use of resources,
- the inability of many African countries to retain students in the education system,
- the quality of education,
- private education,
- trends in gender parity, and
- vocational versus academic teaching

Endnotes

1. EA Hanushek and L Wößmann, *Education and economic growth*, in P Peterson, E Baker and B McGaw (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Vol. 2, Oxford: Elsevier, 2010, 245–52.
2. Many studies have linked the economic boom in the UK and the US after the Second World War to the advent of mass public education before the First World War. Also see: P Morris, *Asia's Four Little Tigers: A Comparison of the Role of Education in Their Development*, *Comparative Education*, 32:1, 1996, 95–109.
3. See, for example, M Roser and E Ortiz-Ospina, *Literacy*, Our World in Data, 2018.
4. When coming off a higher base, it is not as easy to maintain the previous momentum of improved education as levels approach saturation.
5. A Wils, B Carrol and K Barrow, *Educating the world's children: Patterns of growth and inequality*, Washington: Education Policy and Data Center, 2005.
6. M Roser and E Ortiz-Ospina, *Literacy*, Our World in Data, 2018.
7. JA-N Sanny, C Logan and E Gyimah-Boadi, *In Search of Opportunity: Young and Educated Africans Most Likely to Consider Moving Abroad*, Dispatch No. 288, Accra: AfroBarometer, 2019.
8. This is the view advanced by Swedish economist and Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal. His work preempted that of John Maynard Keynes.

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