



Education

Introduction: Education as an investment in the future

Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 06 June 2024 using IFs 7.84

Introduction: Education as an investment in the future

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](#), although the economic payoff is often only seen long after the initial investment in [education](#).

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](#). 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.^[1] 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](#) 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](#). 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. With this steady exodus, the education system in origin countries needs to work twice as hard.^[2]

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. When coming off a higher base, it is not as easy to maintain the previous momentum of improved education as levels approach saturation.
2. This is the view advanced by Swedish economist and Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal. His work preempted that of John Maynard Keynes.

Donors and sponsors



Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

Cite this research

Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers (2025) Education. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/06-education/> [Online Resource] Updated 06 June 2024.

About the authors

Mr Enoch Randy Aikins joined the AFI in May 2021 as a Researcher. Before that, Enoch was a research and programmes officer at the Institute for Democratic Governance in Accra in charge of local governance reforms, poverty and inequality and public sector reforms. He also worked as a research assistant (economic division) with the Institute for Statistical Social and Economic Research at the University of Ghana. Enoch's interests include African politics and governance, economic development, public sector reform, poverty and inequality. Enoch is a Young African Fellow at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute in Florence and has an MPhil in economics from the University of Ghana, Legon.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, [Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution](#) (March 2020), [The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities](#) (April 2021), and [Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity](#) (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.