

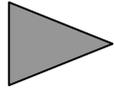
INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS OF EDUCATION, TRAINING
AND SKILLS

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Abstract

This article aims to present an overview of the benefits of education, training and skills and their consequences on individual development. Education and training can take quite different forms as regards their type, content, degree of formality and resources invested. As concepts of education, as well as training and skills, differ strongly not only among European countries but also because of different schools of tradition, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of education and training.

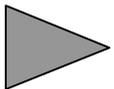
Keywords: education, training, skills, benefits, research, effects



Preliminary considerations

The emphasis of the present article is placed on the current perceptions of the benefits of education and training and their consequences for empirical investigation.

The simple assumption that education and training have short-term and long-term effects on life-course patterns, at least on the individual's career and wages, is generally accepted and its correctness seems to be fairly obvious. "But when it comes to actual education and training benefits, some questions arise: what do we understand by the term 'benefits' and how can these be measured?"(Tomlinson, 1999: 77). Furthermore, education and training can take quite different forms as regards their type, content, degree of formality and resources invested. As concepts of education, as well as training and skills differ strongly not only among European countries but also because of different schools of tradition, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of education and training.



Education, training and skills

A research review of empirical work needs, as an introduction, a relatively simple technical understanding of its central terms (education, training and skills), in order to clarify the various definitions of education, training and skills/qualifications in existing empirical surveys:

a) education:

"The term education is used to mean programmes of learning with general objectives relating to the personal development of the learner and his/her acquisition of knowledge" (Beck, 1994: 52). Formal education takes place in a structured and taught manner normally in schools or other educational institutions. Education is also a property that a person possesses after going through this process, usually confirmed by a formal and generally accepted qualification. Therefore, education as a concept is tangible and is – in comparison to intangible terms like learning – relatively easy to measure.

b) training:

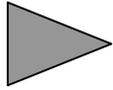
In comparison to education, training is more directly related to the preparation of individuals for employment in current or emerging occupations. "Training can take place on-the-job as well as off-the-job, the latter usually being organised as programmes offering a sequence of courses" (Coles, 2002: 56). Training can include applied learning, problem-solving skills, work attitudes, general employability skills, and the occupational –specific skills necessary for economic independence as a productive and contributing member of society. The training a person has obtained is usually measured in quantitative terms (duration, frequency) discriminating between types (initial, continuing), degrees of formality and place.

c) skills:

The term skills is defined as the relevant knowledge and experience needed to perform a specific task or job. Skills also constitute the product of education, training and job experience together with relevant technical know-how. Specific skills can only be measured through elaborate testing procedures which are normally too costly to perform. As an alternative to the lack of objective measurements, surveys rely on subjective statements from respondents regarding the skills they believe they possess. This is unlikely to be reliable, because the subjective perception of skills can differ strongly between individuals.

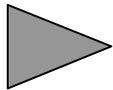
Most empirical studies seem to be based on rather implicit definitions of education and training and reveal a somewhat unstructured picture. As there are many different notions of complex concepts like education, training or skills, there are also many different perceptions of the benefits of education and training. Individual benefits are often reduced to educational returns in terms of income or wage development, avoidance costs and other measurable economic benefits.

In contrast, psychological and educational research concentrates on non-monetary or wider benefits like health, reduction of criminal behavior or social exclusion, usually without providing any corporate concept of the benefits of education and training. Theoretical educational discussion does not really contribute any greater quality. Lacking more or less any descriptive concept, most of this research dissipates into some kind of philosophical discourse about the meaning and importance of educational benefits.



Material benefits

From a sociological perspective, benefits are perceived as bringing all manner of advantages – material or non-material – concerning the individual's place within society. Social institutions (e.g. the educational system, the labour market) and individual behavior (e.g. educational decisions) determine the chances and risks of attaining or not attaining, the social position to which an individual aspires. Such a definition allows at least for the integration of economic and non-economic benefits (e.g. power, prestige, satisfaction) and – as sociological research shows – points to their strong interrelationship. The all-embracing sociological concept is social status, i.e. the position of a person in the social structure of a certain group or society. “Status can be assigned (e.g. through nationality, age) but also attained actively through individual performance” (*Global Trends 2015, 2000*: 15). It is assumed that education and training play a major role in status attainment. Within this concept hard education and training outcomes, that might be termed material benefits (employment, occupational position) are more or less directly linked to monetary aspects while other soft or non-material outcomes are rather indirectly influenced by education and training and often conveyed through these material benefits. For example, health or participation in social and cultural life are at least, in part, influenced by individual earnings or the economic status of a person.



Non material benefits

Nevertheless, this applied perspective also brings with it some difficulties. Although it seems to be common sense that material benefits are mainly represented by patterns of employment, income and career prospects, concepts of non-material benefits are controversial. Moreover, non-material benefits are not primarily objective constructs but are merely the result of subjective judgments or cultural dispositions. Marriage, for example, has largely been seen as a social benefit and higher education has increased the likelihood of marriage. Today – as a result of individualisation – marriage is losing its attractiveness, especially for those with experience of higher education. Nevertheless, some non-material beneficial aspects can be considered substantially agreed upon, such as health and social participation, even if the perception of their benefits remains again rather subjective. For analytical correctness we recommend three additional dimensions

of education and training benefits: individually perceived benefits; culture dependent benefits; and culture independent benefits.

Most empirical research into the benefits of education and training claims to apply an objective perspective as a benchmark for beneficial outcomes. But this objectivity is rather questionable even with regard to material benefits, because every benefit remains subjective at a micro level. Whatever is labeled a benefit from a mass perspective is also a benefit from the individual perspective and vice versa. Understanding individual benefits is therefore largely congruent with social benefits. There is also a tendency to stress the intended outcomes of education and training rather than the unintentional benefits.

Research from a life-course perspective tends to concentrate on those education and training benefits which have a longer-term relevance in an individual's development and which undergo a form of accumulation over the life course. Among possible material benefits are primarily income, employment opportunities, career prospects and the avoidance of unemployment. Non-material outcomes of education and training in which life-course research has an interest relate mainly to health, marriage and family formation as well as social participation and status attainment. Furthermore, the inequalities, or neutrally expressed differences in accessing education and training and the benefits of education and training between social groups, are of special interest in life-course research. The individual life course can be observed from very different viewpoints. For the purpose of this research, the following short definitions of life-course and biography should be used:

a) "life-course is defined as – and mostly determined by – a series of individual decisions between institutionally offered alternatives which an individual is forced to make at several specific points in history"(Heise, Wolfgang, 2004: 328). Each decision influences the path through the institution and the future decision situation. The opportunities presented by social institutions open different pathways of one individual's life through society and its social structure.

b) "Biography is the subjective interpretation and digestion of all life events, from which decisions during the life course are only one part. Moreover, biography is the self perception of one's life history and is recognized by the individual as a single entity" (Heise, Wolfgang, 2004: 328).

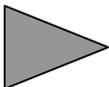
By using this differentiation, life-course research concentrates on the decision situation offered by institutions and its well-defined alternatives, while biography focuses on the individual psychological process of perceiving, assimilating, understanding and reconstructing reality.

While work is one of the central themes in sociology and economics, the benefits of education and training for the occupational life-course are more or less marginal topics inside this field. Therefore, three specific topics should be highlighted here:

a) entrance to the labour market. The increasing extent of youth unemployment has focused attention on the circumstances under which the transition from the educational to the employment system happens.

b) unemployment and the chances of re-entering the labour market. The increasing number of unemployed people in Europe also led to the question of how to get them into work again. To avoid long-term unemployment with its socio-psychological consequences this topic became an important political issue.

c) career mobility and life-long learning. One of the most important resources for the economy in developed countries is the skill level of the employed. "Due to increasing worldwide competition, the pressure to increase individual competencies and to adapt them to an accelerating innovation cycle is growing both for individuals and companies" (Unwin, Wellington, 2001: 66). From an individual perspective, life-long learning is increasingly becoming a premise for job security. However, the flexibility needed to acquire new skills also requires the individual to change jobs more often than before and to accept periodic phases of unemployment.



Conclusion

Life-course and biographical research assumes time outside the employment system not only dependent on specific historical situations (e.g. labour market imbalances due to business cycles) but also on individual experiences and skills assembled through the life course.

In conclusion, both educational and labour market research was productively influenced by the life-course and biographical perspective and its techniques of analysis. However, life-course and biographical research never became the leading force within this research field. Additionally, the mainstream of life course and biographical research followed broader research interests other than the benefits of vocational education and training for work life.

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