Non-Market Outcomes of Education
The long-term impact of education on individuals’ social participation and health in Sweden

Annica Brännlund

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal 1031, Norra beteendevetarhuset, fredagen den 30 maj, kl. 13:15. Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på engelska.

Abstract

In research, it is typical to analyse and discuss the utility of education in economic terms—specifically the market value of a particular degree or the financial returns associated with additional years in higher education. However, education may also generate outcomes that belong to the non-market sphere, such as open-mindedness, societal cohesion, community involvement, and gender equality; yet these outcomes have received little scholarly attention. The main objective of this thesis, therefore, is to investigate the relationship between education and four non-market outcomes: agency, voice, health behaviour and psychological distress. By utilizing two longitudinal data sets, the Swedish Survey of Living Conditions and the Northern Swedish Cohort, it is possible to assess the long-term effects of education on each of these four non-market outcomes.

Results clearly demonstrate that education has a critical impact on each of the outcomes of interest. Having a higher education—and in particular a university degree—enhances individuals’ agency and voice, reduces psychological distress, and improves individuals’ health behaviour. Further, results show that different academic subjects generate field-specific resources. In contrast to a market perspective, where the value of the specific field of study is assessed only in economic terms, results indicate that fields that are commonly viewed as having low market value may actually yield non-economic rewards that benefit individuals in critically important ways.

Analyses also show that individual and social factors shape the extent to which education leads to positive outcomes. In terms of agency and voice, results indicate that education can compensate for social differences. Among those with a working class background, earning a university degree contributes to increasing levels of agency and voice, while no significant effects of education exist for those with a white-collar background. Results also demonstrate that the impact of education on psychological well-being differs for men and women. For men, labour market resources (i.e., being employed) was important for reducing psychological distress, while for women social resources (i.e., having a partner) was more important.

Due to its use of high quality, longitudinal data, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature and to what we know about the impact of education attainment. A limitation of cross-sectional analyses is that it is difficult to separate causal effects from selection effects. By adopting a longitudinal approach, it is possible to control for earlier (baseline) circumstances and therefore assess the causal impact of education on individual outcomes. This strategy yields robust results that make clear the long-term effects of educational attainment on individuals.