

Ostonaqulov Dilshod Ismatilla o'g'li

Teacher of Tashkent state university of economy

E-mail: dilshodostonakulov0@gmail.com

EDUCATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Annotation: This article explores the integral relationship between education and the quality of life. It starts by defining education as both a formal process and a broad concept encompassing various experiences and actions that shape individuals. The article underscores the pivotal role of education in economic development, technological advancement, and individual well-being.

Key points include:

- **Economic and Social Impact:** Education contributes significantly to economic growth by improving productivity and fostering technological innovation. It also affects individuals' economic opportunities and social inclusion, with those lacking education often facing higher risks of poverty and unemployment.
- **Measurement Challenges:** The article highlights difficulties in evaluating educational outcomes, particularly soft skills and informal learning. It advocates for a comprehensive assessment that includes both formal and non-formal education indicators, such as lifelong learning and training.
- **Educational Attainment Disparities:** It discusses differences in educational attainment within and between EU-28 countries. Higher education levels generally correlate with better job prospects and income, reducing unemployment rates.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Lifelong learning is emphasized as crucial for maintaining employability in a rapidly changing job market. The article reports varying participation rates in lifelong learning across EU countries and stresses the importance of including both formal and informal learning activities.
- **Digital Literacy and Language Skills:** The article addresses the digital divide and variations in computer literacy and foreign language proficiency across Europe. It notes significant disparities, with Northern Europe generally outperforming Southern and Eastern Europe.
- **Gender and Age Trends:** The article points out trends such as the increasing proportion of women with tertiary education compared to men and the higher education levels of younger generations compared to older ones.

The article concludes that while educational attainment has improved over time, challenges remain, particularly regarding early school leaving, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates, and lifelong learning participation. It calls for ongoing efforts to address educational inequalities and enhance the quality of education across all demographics.

Keywords: Education, quality of life, economic development, educational attainment, lifelong learning, digital literacy, language proficiency, EU educational disparities, unemployment rates, social inclusion, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), formal education, informal learning, educational measurement, gender disparities in education

Introduction

Understanding education in the quality of life context

Education, in its broadest sense, includes any experience or action that shapes an individual's mind, character, or physical abilities. When considered formally, education is the structured process through which society, via institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities, consciously passes on its cultural legacy and accumulated knowledge, values, and skills to future generations. In today's knowledge-driven economies, education is crucial for economic development, as it fuels technological advancements and boosts productivity. Additionally, as the mechanism for transmitting knowledge across generations, education serves as the foundation of human civilization. Beyond its societal advantages, education is a fundamental factor in determining an individual's quality of life. Those lacking skills and competencies are often excluded from well-paying jobs and face limited economic opportunities. Research shows that individuals who leave school early are at a higher risk of social exclusion and poverty and are less likely to engage in civic life or participate in political activities. This is partly because education enhances people's understanding of their environment and their perception of their ability to influence it. However, education is a complex field, which poses challenges for measurement. One difficulty in statistically evaluating educational outcomes is assessing "soft" skills gained through social interactions and knowledge acquired outside the formal educational system, such as through leisure reading or cultural activities. Furthermore, the quality of formal qualifications, such as university degrees, varies within a country over time and between different countries. Consequently, it's essential to use complementary indicators of educational attainment, including those related to self-reported and assessed skills, as well as participation in lifelong learning and training. In essence, to gauge the overall educational level, data on formal education and training should be supplemented with information on non-formal educational activities, such as adult education and lifelong learning. This aspect is increasingly significant in the educational process. The assessment considers the proportion of the population engaged in further education and training after obtaining a degree through formal education, such as high schools or universities. It is important to note that lifelong learning statistics include knowledge gained through educational institutions and other structured training but do not account for incidental learning activities like visits to libraries, museums, or personal reading. These statistics may be complemented by data on assessed skills, such as those provided by PIACC, and self-reported skills, including foreign language proficiency and computer usage.

Educational Attainment Levels

Data on educational attainment reveal significant differences between EU-28 countries (such as between Scandinavia and the Balkan Peninsula) and within individual countries (for instance, Spain, where a large portion of the population holds tertiary education degrees while another sizable group are early school leavers). These disparities increase the risk of growing inequalities within the EU-28 and social stratification within Member States. Generally, higher levels of educational attainment are associated with better job prospects and higher income, positively influencing an individual's quality of life. Completing tertiary education increases the likelihood of securing a job, as unemployment rates decrease with higher educational levels. In Europe in 2011, people with lower education were three times more likely to be unemployed than those with higher education. In Slovakia, Lithuania, and Latvia, the unemployment rate gap between individuals with low levels of education and those with a tertiary degree exceeds 20 percentage points. Tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-6) represents the highest educational level attainable, offered by universities or other higher education institutions. This level includes both academic and occupational programs, which can lead to advanced research qualifications like a Ph.D. or doctorate. As of 2011 in the EU-27, slightly over

one-fifth (23.7%) of the population aged 15 to 64 had obtained a tertiary education degree, with rates varying from 33.7% in Cyprus to 13.0% in Romania. Ireland and the UK also reported high percentages of working-age individuals with the highest educational qualifications (33.3% each). In five EU countries, a significant portion of the working-age population (over one-third) has completed at most lower secondary education (ISCED level 2). These education levels are typically part of compulsory schooling in most countries. In Portugal, over 60% of the working-age population has only completed compulsory education or less, with Malta also showing 57.2% of its working-age population having only completed junior high school. Spain presents a unique situation, where 47.2% of its working-age population has completed only lower secondary education, yet 29.0% of Spaniards aged 15-64 have completed tertiary or postgraduate studies, surpassing the EU-28 average. However, when considering average education levels for such broad age groups, it's essential to account for older generations who may have experienced different education systems (e.g., shorter compulsory education periods) and the potential impact of large-scale immigration. Overall, in the EU-27, nearly half of the working-age population (46.6%) has completed at most upper secondary education. The EU countries with the highest percentages of university graduates are Cyprus, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Finland, where about one-third of the population has completed tertiary or postgraduate studies. Conversely, the lowest rates of university graduates are found in Romania (13.0%), Italy (13.1%), and Malta (14.3%). However, even in countries with lower overall numbers of university graduates, younger generations are more likely to have completed tertiary education. The most significant differences in tertiary educational attainment between the 25-34 and 45-54 age groups are observed in Italy, Latvia, Cyprus, Romania, Portugal, Malta, Croatia, Ireland, and Poland. In contrast, in countries like Estonia, Germany, and Finland, the improvement has been less pronounced. Notably, Finnish and German males aged 45-54 in 2011 were more likely to have completed tertiary education than their 25-34-year-old counterparts. Despite these exceptions, the general trend across the EU shows that younger Europeans are more educated than older age groups. In the EU-28, more than one in five men (22.5%) and nearly one in four women (24.9%) aged 15-64 had graduated from tertiary education by the end of 2011. Women with tertiary education are more prevalent than men in almost all surveyed countries, with exceptions in Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Malta, and Turkey, where men were more likely to have completed ISCED levels 5-6. It is noteworthy that women's dominance in tertiary education is a relatively recent development. For instance, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, the proportion of university graduates among men and women aged 45 to 54 in the EU is nearly equal. However, the situation changes significantly in the 25-34 age group, where women noticeably surpass men in university graduation rates. In countries like Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia, and Sweden, over half of women in this age group have completed tertiary or postgraduate education. Meanwhile, EU Member States have pledged to reduce school drop-out rates to below 10% by 2020. The term "early school leaver" typically describes an individual aged 18 to 24 who has completed no more than lower secondary education and is not engaged in further education or training; this statistic is often expressed as a percentage of the total 18-24-year-old population. In establishing the 2020 target, the EU recognized early school leaving (ESL) as a barrier to economic growth and employment, as it reduces productivity and competitiveness and exacerbates poverty and social exclusion. The challenge of reducing ESL is particularly acute in Spain, where 26.5% of 18-24-year-olds were early leavers in 2011 (see Figure 3). Similarly, in 2011, 23.2% of young people in Portugal in this age group were early leavers. In contrast, countries like Croatia, Slovakia, Sweden, Poland, and Luxembourg are on track to meet their national goals for reducing ESL and have already surpassed the EU's overall target. One of the most concerning trends for young Europeans aged 18-24 is the number who are neither employed nor engaged in education or training. Extended periods away from

the labor market and a lack of skills and knowledge acquisition can severely impact their future prospects. The "NEET" indicator measures the percentage of young individuals in this age group who are neither working nor involved in further education or training. In 2011, 16.7% of Europeans aged 18 to 24 fell into this category. The issue is particularly pronounced in Bulgaria (26.3%), Italy (25.2%), Greece (24.4%), Ireland (24.0%), and Spain (23.1%), where roughly one in five to one in four young adults were NEET in 2011. Conversely, Nordic countries, along with Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Germany, Malta, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, have successfully mitigated this issue, keeping most of their young population either employed or engaged in educational or training programs. Most of these countries, excluding Finland and Sweden, also report the lowest youth unemployment rates.

Lifelong learning

The notion that education ends with school or university is increasingly outdated. Employability is heavily reliant on the skills individuals acquire throughout their careers. In today's competitive European job market, lifelong learning is essential due to the constant evolution of company needs and technologies. "Lifelong learning" refers to all educational activities pursued for personal or professional reasons after formal schooling. Eurostat's statistics on lifelong learning focus on private household members aged 25 to 64 and measure the percentage who received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Data is sourced from the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS). Participation in such learning activities can enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies beneficial for one's career. Notably, lifelong learning statistics include formal and non-formal education and training but exclude self-directed learning activities. For instance, evening or language courses at institutions are counted, while personal reading or museum visits, although relevant to lifelong learning, are not included. Data from 2011 shows that Denmark, Sweden, and Finland lead in lifelong learning participation, with nearly one in three Danes and one in four Swedes and Finns involved in such programs. The EU average is considerably lower, with only 8.9% of individuals aged 25 to 64 participating in structured lifelong learning courses, a figure that falls short compared to countries outside the EU, such as Norway, Iceland, and Switzerland. It is evident that individuals in the EU with higher education degrees are more likely to engage in lifelong learning. In the EU-27, 16.0% of those aged 25 to 64 with tertiary degrees participate in lifelong learning, compared to 7.6% of secondary education graduates and 3.9% of those with only primary education. However, disparities exist between countries, with some, like Greece and Hungary, showing lower lifelong learning participation rates among highly educated individuals than countries like those in the Nordic region. Computer and language skills are crucial competencies for navigating the modern job market and accessing educational, informational, and cultural opportunities in our increasingly digital and globalized societies. Currently, about one-third of Europeans aged 25 to 54 demonstrate high computer literacy, which is assessed based on the ability to perform standard computer operations. However, there is a noticeable digital divide: roughly one in four Europeans struggles with even basic computer tasks. This issue is less pronounced in Nordic countries, where fewer than 10% lack basic skills, but it affects over 35% in countries like Italy, Lithuania, and Poland, and up to 49% in Bulgaria and 59% in Romania. Additionally, nearly half of Romania's population in this age group and about one-third of people in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Greece report never having used the internet. Conversely, internet usage is nearly universal in Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, highlighting a "digital divide" between Northern Europe and Southern and Eastern Europe. Variations in educational attainment, especially higher education levels, may contribute to this digital literacy gap, warranting further study. In the European Union, comprising 28 Member States with 24

languages, proficiency in foreign languages is increasingly essential for communication and mobility. Across most countries, more than half of the population reports a good or proficient level of their best-known foreign language (typically English, with some exceptions). Italy is an outlier, with only about a third of Italians reporting strong proficiency in English, and countries like Poland, France, Germany, and Romania also show lower rates. In general, younger Europeans exhibit significantly higher proficiency rates in foreign languages compared to older generations, reflecting a clear trend. This improvement is especially notable in countries where English is the dominant foreign language, although in the Baltic states, proficiency in Russian is declining among younger generations.

Conclusions

In 2011, over one-fifth (23.7%) of the working-age population in the EU-27 had obtained a tertiary education degree, while nearly half (46.6%) had completed at most upper secondary education. A clear trend is evident across the EU: younger Europeans are more educated than their older counterparts. The gender gap in higher education has not only diminished but reversed, with women holding tertiary degrees in higher proportions than men in nearly all countries. Although the percentage of university graduates is nearly equal among men and women aged 45 to 54, women significantly outnumber men in the 25-34 age group. Addressing school drop-out rates remains a persistent challenge for the EU, with some countries facing more difficulty than others. Concerns also exist regarding "NEET" individuals—those aged 18 to 24 who are neither employed nor engaged in further education or training. In 2011, 16.7% of young Europeans were classified as NEET. Participation in lifelong learning activities among adults in the EU-27 is relatively low, with only 8.9% of the population aged 25 to 64 involved in structured lifelong learning courses. Individuals with higher education degrees are more likely to engage in lifelong learning compared to those with lower educational attainment. Approximately one in three Europeans across most countries possesses a high level of basic computer skills. Generally, higher income earners and younger individuals are more adept at using computers. However, there is a "digital divide" in computer literacy between Northern Europe and Southern and Eastern Europe. Additionally, between one-third and over two-thirds of Europeans report having at least a good level of proficiency in their best-known foreign language.

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