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# Comments on the Education Project from Outside IDS

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## 1 Qualifications and Selection at IDS

In the last five years or so I have been exposed to a set of signals coming from IDS. These signals tell me there might be something seriously wrong with schools, examinations and diplomas, especially in developing countries. The way I was exposed to these signals is twofold: first, by means of two publications [Dore 1976, 1976a], and second, by a set of unpublished documents stemming from this project. Hence, I must consider myself more informed than others who had no access to the unpublished material.

The thesis of the Sussex group sounds as plausible and persuasive as the statement that it is the sun that turns around the earth and not the other way round. The common preface to many of the unpublished reports by John Oxenham (the project coordinator) is at the same time intriguing, intuitively appealing, alarming and difficult to contest. Every single word makes sense:

- those who control the desirable jobs demand certain certified educational attainments;
- students devote themselves disproportionately to learning what employers want, neglecting other forms of learning;
- this tendency is stronger in societies with large income and lifestyle inequalities;
- school learning does not necessarily enhance a person's capabilities at the workplace;
- schools might simply identify pre-existing abilities;
- the more schooling was available, the more employers would demand qualifications in order to sieve candidates.

This is an admirable starting point and one is certainly eager to discover how the empirical evidence generated by the project supports or fails to support the hypotheses listed above.

The central issue raised in this project is the **social productivity of education**. No matter how employers use educated manpower or certificates, if an extra qualification adds to the employee's social product (in relation to the cost of acquiring it) then there is nothing wrong with the provision of schooling. Actually, society should encourage the acquisition of such qualifications

as long as the returns exceed the costs. How does the Sussex group test this central issue? Not very well, in my opinion. It is regrettable that the evidence put forward in support of their case is of the anecdotal, interview-in-depth type. The statistical material presented in the reports is certainly 'interesting'. However, it cannot make a case either for or against educational certificates. Let me explain.

The main weakness of the adopted methodology is that it is heavily based on **opinions** rather than objective **facts**. What 53 employers **think** about the productivity of their employees might be very different from what this productivity **actually is** when the objective performance of the country's labour force is taken into account. Another weakness of the methodology adopted is that no macro check is provided on the alleged socially unproductive certification. The reports are certainly rich in sociological flavour. But they grossly lack economic and statistical rigorouslyness. Hence, although they make fascinating reading and will convince most casual readers, I predict they will fail to persuade the more exacting academic community (for the same reasons as in the case of Berg).

But perhaps it is never too late. After all, the starting point is excellent and the formulation of hypotheses makes a lot of sense. Hence I dare to make the following set of recommendations to the qualifications-allergic Sussex group:

—first, hire two persons with the following certificates: a PhD in economics and a PhD in statistics from an Anglo-Saxon university. (I say this because some of the narrative in the reports sounds continental and boring). Sorry, I cannot recommend Masters in lieu of PhDs because I happen to believe the PhD will do a better job, even if the job description specifies the same salary for an MA;

—second, draw up in Sussex a more careful research design, and revisit some of the countries already investigated, in order to conduct proper tests on the social value of certificates (the two new additions to the staff will tell you how);

—third, write up the results of the new tests in, perhaps, a 10 page paper and submit it for refereeing to an acknowledged (non-partisan) international journal.

It is only then that the world community will take a more serious look at this project; and, hopefully, a policy maker may follow course A instead of course B in drawing up his country's educational plan. In the meantime, I will keep in front of me the interesting list of questions this project raised, in order to show them to new research students looking for a topic.

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### References

Dore, R. P., 1976, *The Diploma Disease*, Allen & Unwin, London  
—1976a, 'Human capital theory, the diversity of societies and the problems of quality in education', *Higher Education*, no 1

### Brief Response

George Psacharopoulos has responded pithily to our invitation to comment. We will emulate his discipline in replying briefly.

The central issue is **not** the social productivity of schooling. Rather, it is the social injustice which gives a few people more schooling than they need, in the hope of more eligibility for 'good jobs', and which simultaneously deprives the many of two human rights. The first is the minimum decent schooling universally agreed to be their entitlement. The second is the training and assistance which might enable them to better their lot wisely, well and fast.

An equally important issue is the social stupidity of using the school in a way that destroys education.

Observations of how employers actually use qualifications, of how supervisors actually rate subordinates, and of how education is actually carried on in schools, are not opinions: they are facts. And, if people act on their opinions, the opinion is as important as the fact of behaviour.

Micro-inspection was used precisely because of our dissatisfaction with the superficiality of macro-myths. The macro-correlation between education and earnings rests on the micro-belief that the more schooled are better at better-paid jobs, but does not validate the belief. Micro-demonstration that the opinion may indeed be ill-founded, suggests that 'schooling enhances productivity' may be quite as topsy turvy a perception as 'the sun goes round the earth'.

*J.O.*