

3 Educational Qualifications and Productivity*

The idea that Education is 'a Good Thing' and that, more than any other single factor, it explains why the developed countries have a so much higher standard of living than the developing countries is part of our psychological make-up in the developed countries. We are therefore likely to treat with instant disbelief the conclusion of the IDS research project that 'no correlations between educational qualifications and job performance could be discerned in either country (ie Mexico and Sri Lanka)' [Deraniyagala et al 1978: 94].

Can it really be true that there is **no** correlation between level of education and work performance? Are we therefore all victims of some strange delusion?

So we began to probe into the research more carefully, and we found that it does not set out to compare education and job performance in general, but rather education and job performance **within any specific category of job**. 'The relationship between education and job performance was examined within single job categories only, since it is impossible in practice, though perhaps not in principle, to compare real productivity across job categories, ie it would be impossible to compare the productivity of a manager with that of a shop-floor worker' [Deraniyagala et al 1978: 65].

So where does this leave us? Surely employers mostly use educational qualifications to recruit to specific jobs, and once a person has been recruited his further career development will depend mainly on how he performs his job, ie on such qualities as initiative, reliability, leadership and so on, rather than on his educational level? Thus all the elaborate research conducted by IDS can apparently tell us very little about whether educational achievement is a useful selection criteria **as between jobs at different levels**. We can therefore breathe a sigh of relief—we have not all been deluded after all. There is wisdom still in the conventional wisdom.

But is this the end of it? Have not the IDS researchers a point, or rather several points, when they argue that educational qualifications have hitherto been given altogether too great a weight by employers (and therefore by educators and job

applicants): as a basis of selection for jobs; as a screening device; as a means of reducing large numbers of applicants to manageable shortlists for interviewing ('acceptance of the education-job link . . . provides a very good reason why, in their search for a cut-off factor for reasons of logistic convenience, employers use educational records rather than say height or weight'); or simply as a less offensive way of weeding out the unacceptable applicants than other possible ways?

Our experience as advisers in the ODA forces us to agree that the IDS research is probably correct. All too often we have come across cases of countries which have adopted unthinkingly, and without regard to the real manpower needs of their economies, the educational qualifications for jobs that have become established in the developed countries. For example, we in the UK managed for years with non-graduate librarians, but now a degree is a basic requirement. Is it sensible for the developing countries to adopt such a standard of entry? Or take the case of doctors. Cannot barefoot doctors do an excellent job in the developing countries? Why should everyone have to receive a full seven-year training? We have come across universities in Africa where every member of the teaching staff is expected to have a PhD, whereas still in all UK universities there are many excellent and senior members of the teaching staff who do not have PhDs. We all know poor, agriculturally-oriented, developing countries where all the agricultural extension workers have to have a healthy set of 'O' levels, which automatically rules out most applicants from the rural areas, and ensures that those who are successful are mostly urban people who have their eyes fixed on good office jobs. Provided the applicants have the basic ability, would it not be better for them to be chosen on grounds of their rural background and knowledge of agriculture, and then for them to be given the necessary in-house training? Rather than the developing countries adopting the high standards now used in the developed countries, surely the boot should be on the other foot and the poorer countries should be willing to accept lower standards of entry, at least for the time being?

In principle, then, we accept the basic thesis of this research project. The next question is, what can be done about it? Do we introduce various kinds of aptitude tests or trial periods on the job? Any such dilution of the present system based on educational qualifications could itself lead to different kinds of problems. It would probably mean, for instance, that more training would

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have to be given on the job, which would lead to a cadre of more narrowly trained people and fewer generalists capable of switching from job to job. For example, the extension officers might well be much closer to the farmers they were advising, and better at their job for that reason. But they could not be expected to transfer readily to other jobs in the agricultural service or in the civil service, nor might some of them be capable of advancing much in their profession unless they were capable of receiving more advanced training. Thus an element of flexibility would have been lost. Governments frequently need to shift officers around as the needs of the public service change, and this would be difficult if too many of the staff were capable only of doing one narrowly defined job. The same would probably be true at the middle and upper levels of parastatal and private sector jobs. Gearing qualifications to the needs of a specific job has a price in terms of loss of flexibility . . . but it is still worth a try.

With the intense public pressure for ever more education in the developing countries, it will be difficult for the governments of those countries to put into practice the conclusions of this research, even if they are persuaded of the logic of it. It is therefore rather strange that the authors did not emphasise that the adoption of high educational job entry qualifications has a high social cost in terms of provision of secondary and tertiary education. Perhaps they felt this had been well done in other IDS publications, as indeed it has, but a chapter spelling out the social costs and benefits of the present system compared with some of the possible alternatives might well have given more teeth to the research. As it is, the authors come out with a rather strange suggestion for a new type of manpower agency: ADAPT (Agency for the Development and Allocation of the People's Talents). The word 'allocation' conveys unfortunate overtones of labour direction which the authors probably did not really envisage as a solution. Perhaps 'estimation' would have been more ADEPT?

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