

The wellbeing effect of education

Education has become one of the clearest indicators of life outcomes such as employment, income and social status, and is a strong predictor of attitudes and wellbeing.

Education is often used by people to shape their 'social identity', framing their understanding of themselves and their relationships with other people. A positive, affirming social identity is associated with a range of positive outcomes in life, such as increased wellbeing, health, social trust and political engagement.

However, the emphasis on education in today's society makes it much harder for people with low levels of education to develop a positive social identity. This can negatively affect self-esteem and wellbeing.

The research project *Identity, Socioeconomic Status and Wellbeing*, which is funded by the ESRC's Secondary Data Analysis Initiative, has investigated the psychological effect of differences in education. This study is the first to compare the strength and stability of the 'education effect' on a wide range of outcomes over time.

The researchers analysed data from the British Social Attitudes Survey, the British Household Panel Survey and the International Social Survey Programme. Findings indicated a clear association between education and wellbeing.

The results suggest that higher education levels are associated with higher levels of political interest, social trust, health and wellbeing, and lower levels of political cynicism and hostile attitudes towards immigrants. These effects were found to be relatively

stable over time. Most of the positive effects of education are linked to the benefits associated with achieving a university education.

Key findings

- Higher levels of education are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes - including better health and wellbeing, higher social trust, greater political interest, lower political cynicism, and less hostile attitudes towards immigrants.
- Level of education is the strongest predictor of outcomes (compared to age, gender, income, employment status, and marital status) in all models, except for the outcomes of wellbeing and health.
- This 'education effect' is both robust and relatively stable over time, with little variation in the surveyed population across a range of 25 years. The effect is particularly marked for the outcome of social trust, becoming stronger within the same people as they age.
- Across all education levels - low or high - people who report that they are satisfied with their education level and have incorporated education as part of their identity are benefitting psychologically.

Higher levels of education are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes.

Policy relevance and implications

- Policies aimed at encouraging higher education should not only target the young, but also increase the uptake and positive valuation of education across the lifespan.
- Awareness campaigns promoting the benefits of education, and portraying practical and vocational skills as valuable in their own right, would affirm the inherent value of education at all levels.
- The negative impact of rising tuition fees on higher education applications should be addressed and counteracted, at the least by capping the fee at the current level. Alternative models of funding higher education should also be considered.
- More funding should be made available in the early career stage to encourage educational progression. Serious consideration should be given to reintroducing an education maintenance allowance across the UK.
- Policies should aim to remove the stigma attached to lower levels of education. For instance, media guidelines could seek to limit stereotypical, negative portrayals of the lower educated.

Level of education is the strongest predictor of life outcomes, compared to age, gender, income, employment status and marital status.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The findings are based on the research project *Identity, socioeconomic status, and wellbeing*, which is funded under the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI). This study drew on three datasets available from the UK Data Service: the British Social Attitudes Survey, 1986-2011; the British Household Panel Survey, 1991-2008; and the International Social Survey Programme, 1991-2011.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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The Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI) aims to deliver high-quality research through the deeper exploitation of existing data resources created by the ESRC and other agencies.

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.
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