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Lifelong learning, labor market returns and social inequalities in three European countries[1]

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Introduction

Lifelong learning has become an important issue for many Western societies. This can be seen to link back to processes of industrial and demographic change. On the one hand, knowledge-based economies require individuals to develop their skills over the entire life span. This need is intensified by the rapid change that takes place in a globalized world. On the other hand, demographic ageing and smaller cohorts entering the labor force increase the need for encouraging all potential workers to stay in employment. For older cohorts in particular, this may imply a need to acquire additional training.

In addition to an economic need for lifelong learning, there is also a social inequality aspect to the issue. Individuals' initial education influences their occupation, which, in turn, affects their learning opportunities at work and in the private sphere. Thus, while some individuals can maintain and develop what they have learned in traditional school contexts, others cannot. The so-called Matthew effect, whereby initial educational inequalities are magnified over the life span, has been identified with regards to on-the-job training. However, countries are likely to differ in the extent to which this happens. It is also possible that the social inequalities that prevail in non-formal education (such as on-the-job training) are less pronounced – or even reversed – in formal adult education. From a social inequality point of view the question of lifelong learning is of high interest: it is a way for individuals to 'correct' for former educational decisions or educational failure. Thus, if a country successfully adopts lifelong learning, this may serve to reduce social inequalities within the society. In contrast, if a country relies on a strongly youth-oriented system of offering education to individuals, social inequalities of educational systems are likely to be reproduced on the labor market as persons can only rely on their education received in youth and can hardly correct for earlier educational decisions.

[1] This paper presents some results of the first phase of the Edulife project (Education as a Lifelong Process – Comparing Educational Trajectories in Modern Societies), the P.I. of which is Dr. Hans-Peter Blossfeld. We acknowledge the collaboration and helpful comments of Anders Stenberg, Pau Miret Gamundi and Patricia O' Reilly.

Allmendinger and Hinz (1998) show that the national institutions of education and training correspond to characteristic patterns of work careers, with variable stability and different levels of social integration across the entire life course. The relative strength of market forces and welfare-state policies contributes to the individuals' options for training, employment, further education, and retirement age. For example, Nordic countries tend to actively engage in supporting the abilities of older employees. In these countries, the promotion of lifelong learning and further vocational qualification help to keep older workers employable so that their employment careers are more continuous and stable than in the liberal countries (e.g. US, UK) which are oriented toward labor market mobility. In Germany, due to a highly standardized education system that largely restricts vocational education and training to the early life course and offers few possibilities for further training, older employees often have major qualification disadvantages compared with their younger labor market competitors (Blossfeld et al. 2006). The same is true for the Southern European welfare states such as Spain and Italy, where workers are retired early instead of receiving opportunities for lifelong learning. Such country-specific differences not only shape the participation rate in adult education but also lead to different definitions of the role of education in individuals' adult lives.

Thus, cross-national comparisons of educational trajectories can greatly extend the scope of our knowledge of returns from adult education. Moreover, they are also likely to further deepen our understanding of cross-national differences when an explanation of the impact of institutional conditions on the educational careers and competence developments in various nations is given. In this sense, this paper aims to map lifelong learning in terms of its determinants and labor market returns and how these relate back to social inequalities from a comparative perspective. Specifically, we will study the impact of formal adult education on getting out of unemployment. This will be done by analyzing the United Kingdom, Spain, and Sweden. The three countries chosen for this comparison represent different constellations of national institutions that are likely to affect lifelong learning.

Objectives:

1) The main goal of this paper is to analyze the extent to which individuals can correct early stratification in formal education later in their job careers, paying particular attention to the effects of adult education and with a sociological life course perspective. Some key elements to be analyzed are included in the following research questions: What is the value of

adult education on the labor market in terms of employment chances? Is the value of education and training acquired later in life the same as the value of education acquired before entry into the labor market? Do some countries reproduce or even amplify social inequalities of their educational systems on the labor market?

2) This analysis will be done considering the different models of lifelong learning we have identified in the selected European countries. This differentiation has a key role in the analysis in order to explain the impact of institutional conditions on the educational and labor careers. Educational career lines often depend strongly on structural features of the educational system, and thus draw attention to the ways in which institutional arrangements in modern societies shape the educational careers of individuals.

3) Thirdly, and based on the results obtained for the first and second research question, we aim to identify patterns of social inequality that result from different models of lifelong learning.

Hypotheses:

Our comparative framework includes Sweden, the United Kingdom and Spain. Those four countries represent different models of how the state supports lifelong learning. For instance, in Sweden we have identified a state-supported model of lifelong learning, with recognized and established systems of continued education (both through active labor market policies and in educational institutions). It is usually connected with equalizing/redistributive welfare policies and a coordinated market economy. Consequently, there is a high possibility to correct earlier educational decisions (by acquiring training later in life) and to reduce earlier educational inequalities. In Spain, an occupation- and employer-related model of lifelong learning was identified. In this model there is a relatively high level of educational standardization and stratification and a very youth-oriented system of transmitting (recognized) occupational knowledge to the workforce. Moreover, lifelong learning is mainly related to occupation-specific work experience. In these systems, we expect that lifelong learning is not able to reduce social inequalities individuals experienced earlier in (educational) life. Finally, the United Kingdom represents an individualized model of lifelong learning typical of liberal countries. In the individualized model there are no clear signals of occupational skills, a low level of occupational segmentation and skills strongly bound to the workplace. However, at the same time, open occupational and market structures can be observed. In general, in liberal countries there is a high level of social inequality, but they are

more broadly distributed over the whole society. Thus, individual resources – rather than occupational experience – are of high importance. In these contexts, we expect less clear returns to education and, as a result, broad variance of returns both within and between different occupations. We also expect reasonable possibilities for corrections later in life, e.g. by occupational mobility, maybe even upward mobility through further education.

Data and method:

In order to analyse transitions to and from lifelong learning more fully, longitudinal data is used. For the UK, the data used is the British Household Panel Survey (now incorporated into Understanding Society); for Spain, the Catalonian Inequality Panel (*Panel de Desigualtats de Catalunya*); and for Sweden longitudinal register data.

At the individual level, dynamics related to work and educational careers as well as family events will be analyzed. We apply ramdom-intercept logistic regression analysis to answer our research questions. The life course perspective emphasizes that developmental consequences of life transitions vary according to their timing in a person's life. It recognises that the impact of life events is contingent on when exactly they occur in an individual's life. Thus, there is a need to detect single and multiple risks associated with these pathways.

References

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