

EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF KNOWLEDGE: HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT OR TRAINING OF PEOPLE?

The era of knowledge advances in a steadfast manner, promising levels of progress that will change radically the life expectancy and above all, life quality over the next decades. Technological convergence foretells the cure for multiple diseases and a permanent monitoring of vital aspects of human beings, in the perspective of expanding their potential in all spheres, strengthening its abilities at the same time that life is prolonged and improving health over all the life cycle. This knowledge society is characterized because the main source of the competitive advantage of nations, organizations and people resides, precisely and as foreseen, in knowledge.

Information is available and at the reach of all in an ever more massive way, through media such as the World Wide Web, that facilitate the distribution of documents as hypertext or interconnected and easily reached hypermedia. However, information is not knowledge, as the latter necessarily needs the acquisition of intellectual content. The appropriation of facts or information by a person or team, and that cognitive responses are given to certain questions, are necessary.

Under this perspective, it becomes natural to emphasize the importance of human capital training as a nuclear element of development for the nations, as has been shown by Robert Barro. The investment in human capital is relevant for the people, who can improve their productivity individually and, thus, their income; but, additionally, such investment is important for the country, which improves its long-term growth potential. The development of human capital is a structural determinant of the wealth of nations in the knowledge society. Probably, this is one of the causes why there has been the tendency to a massive growth of higher education in order to achieve ever higher levels of human capital.

Two decades ago, Peter Drucker predicted that in this society higher education would be equivalent to high school and that the doctor's degree would be like the old professional degree. Therefore, it is not surprising that less advanced countries evolve towards higher coverage levels of its higher education. Nonetheless, such higher coverage should go hand in hand with the fulfillment of satisfactory quality standards.

The role of educational institutions consists in contributing to the development of nations through the training of human capital, of persons with knowledge, skills and abilities to perform efficiently and effectively in the labor market. Thus, for a better training of the people, better will be their productivity and better their remuneration; in turn, greater will be the rhythm of growth of the country. However, such vision can be deemed reductionist and economically oriented, as education cares, from the beginning, about the formation of persons. The knowledge, skills and abilities, without a solid background in values, reduce the potential of people to simple factors or production means, or elements of a process of economic wealth creation.

In fact, education is fundamental for the fulfillment of the principles that govern a society. In it are sustained both tradition and progress, as its impact does not only reach the economic sphere. Education is the essential source of social innovation and human development. To think about the future of humanity and to delineate it, instead of waiting for the random result of multiple actions, effects and impacts, constitute an essential task in a society that, as never before, counts with a stock and a flow of information that allow taking every time better decisions.

It is appropriate to understand the economic dimension of the effects of education, but without hence renouncing to an integrative view, without losing sight that training persons has complexities that cannot be standardized nor are susceptible to be reduced to concepts such as productivity or marginal yield. The principles, the values, the capacity to dream and to reflect –with passion– about the past, present and future constitute elements that are indissolubly bound to education.

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