
NEWSLETTER

An “Assurance of Security” or “Agent of Tracking”? An Empirical Study of the Impact of Vocational Education on Social Mobility

By Wang, Y. J. & Hu, H. Q.

Correspondence to: Yijun Wang, Institute of Vocational Education, Tongji University, China. E-mail: wjxgh@tongji.edu.cn

PUBLISHED in the *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, this study drew on data from the China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) by the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University as the research sample to examine the impact of education on social mobility as well as the influences of the registered residence, administrative region and other factors on social mobility of populations with different educational levels. The descriptive analysis and linear regression methods were adopted in the research. The results of the study are as follows:

- A longitudinal comparison of the social status between populations of various educational backgrounds revealed that generally, those that have received higher education had higher socio-economic status; compared with the junior secondary education group, the vocational education cohort enjoyed higher incomes and social status. To be more specific, people with vocational education background usually have relatively more stable incomes and could avoid the risk of falling into the bottom end of the labor market, which is a security particularly to socio-economically disadvantaged individuals. With the increase of age, their income levels tend to improve, further promoting the advancement of their social status. Therefore, vocational education can provide an “assurance of security for individuals involved and their families.
- According to the descriptive analysis of the intergenerational social mobility of the vocational education group, children’s the education levels exceeded those of parents to a large extent, vocational education can enable children to obtain more incomes than their parents, giving families (especially rural families) strong economic support, and there are more possibilities of occupational advancement among the younger generation. However, the social status of the younger generation tends to fluctuate around the

level of that of their parents, and the upward margin of social mobility is constrained.

- The regression analysis results indicated that vocational education could more significantly promote social mobility for rural families and families in relatively backward western regions than for urban families and those in developed eastern regions.

It can be concluded from research findings that it is difficult for vocational education group to obtain a substantial raise in social status due to their limited family economic, social, and cultural capital, the “utilitarian” nature of vocational education itself, and the labor market structure, yet they can still achieve a socio-economic status above the social average, which has the tendency to improve over time. However, from an individual or family perspective, vocational education can provide an “assurance of security” and to a certain extent promote positive social mobility. In general, the security function of vocational education is more significant, though its function of tracking is still strong, and the gap in socio-economic status between the vocational education and higher education cohorts will gradually expand over time.

In light of that, the study suggests that vocational education should strive to offer students high-quality educational resources, increase employment opportunities, and improve social mobility, thus enhancing its function of assuring security. Especially, the government should increase subsidies for vocational education in the western region and guide rural families to take on vocational education through corresponding support policies. At the same time, we should encourage junior secondary graduates to receive vocational education and give full play to the positive role of vocational education in the context of industrial transformation and upgrading.

Source: Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences), 2022; 2022(07): 69-84.