Journal of Social Signs Review

Education-Driven Economic Mobility: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach to Assessing Long-Term Socioeconomic Impacts in Pakistan

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Abstract

Education plays a crucial role in determining economic mobility, particularly in developing economies like Pakistan, where disparities in educational access and labor market opportunities persist. This study employs a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach to examine the long-term socioeconomic impacts of education on economic mobility while considering key influencing factors such as parental socioeconomic status, social capital, and regional disparities. Using primary survey data, the study analyzes how years of schooling affect income levels, employment status, and overall economic well-being. The results confirm that higher education significantly enhances economic mobility ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), reinforcing the human capital theory, which postulates that investments in education yield substantial economic returns. Additionally, parental education ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and social capital ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) emerge as critical determinants, highlighting the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage and the role of professional networks in career progression. However, the study also finds that regional disparities negatively impact economic mobility ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$), underscoring structural barriers that limit the benefits of education for individuals in underdeveloped areas. These findings align with broader labor market trends in

Pakistan, where urban centers provide greater employment opportunities compared to rural regions. Policy recommendations include expanding vocational training programs, reducing regional disparities in educational infrastructure, promoting merit-based hiring practices, and strengthening social capital-building initiatives. By implementing these strategies, Pakistan can enhance the role of education in fostering inclusive economic growth and sustainable development. Future research should explore the long-term intergenerational effects of education and the impact of digital learning on economic mobility to address evolving labor market challenges.

Keywords: Education, Economic Mobility, Human Capital, Structural Equation Modeling, Social Capital, Regional Disparities, Vocational Training, Labor Market, Pakistan, Socioeconomic Development.

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a critical driver of economic mobility, shaping individuals' career trajectories, earning potential, and overall socioeconomic status (Becker, 1993; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Economic mobility, defined as the ability of individuals or families to improve their economic standing over time, is influenced by various factors, including access to quality education, skill development, and labor market opportunities (Chetty et al., 2014; Blanden, 2013). This study employs a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach to examine the long-term socioeconomic impacts of education-driven economic mobility, integrating multiple dimensions such as income levels, employment stability, and social capital.

The relationship between education and economic mobility has been extensively explored in economic and sociological literature, emphasizing that higher levels of education lead to better employment opportunities and higher wages (Card, 1999; Heckman et al., 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that investments in human capital yield substantial economic returns, both at the individual and societal levels (Mincer, 1974; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). However, the extent to which education fosters upward mobility varies across countries and demographic groups, influenced by institutional quality, labor market conditions, and policy interventions (Jerrim & Macmillan, 2015; Torche, 2011).

Despite the well-documented benefits of education, socioeconomic disparities persist, limiting equitable access to quality educational resources and opportunities (Reeves, 2017; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Socioeconomic

background plays a significant role in shaping educational outcomes, as children from affluent families often receive better schooling, tutoring, and mentorship compared to their peers from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Consequently, education alone may not be sufficient to guarantee economic mobility, necessitating policies that address structural barriers such as income inequality, labor market discrimination, and financial constraints in higher education (Goldthorpe, 2013; Bowles et al., 2001).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) provides a robust methodological framework to analyze complex relationships between education and long-term socioeconomic outcomes (Kline, 2015; Byrne, 2016). Unlike traditional regression models, SEM allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships among latent variables, accounting for direct and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2010; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016). By incorporating mediating and moderating variables such as social capital, occupational prestige, and policy interventions, SEM offers a comprehensive understanding of how education translates into economic mobility over time (Wang & Wang, 2012; Bollen, 1989).

Cross-national studies highlight significant variations in the impact of education on economic mobility, influenced by differences in education systems, labor markets, and welfare policies (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Hertz et al., 2007). For instance, Scandinavian countries exhibit higher levels of intergenerational mobility due to their inclusive education policies and robust social safety nets, whereas developing economies struggle with persistent inequalities despite increasing educational attainment (Corak, 2013; Solon, 2004). This study seeks to contextualize these variations by analyzing the pathways through which education affects socioeconomic outcomes in diverse economic settings.

Another key aspect of education-driven mobility is the role of vocational and technical education in enhancing employment prospects, particularly for individuals who do not pursue higher education (Eichhorst et al., 2015; Hanushek et al., 2017). While traditional academic education is often associated with higher earnings and career advancement, vocational training provides specialized skills that improve employability in certain industries (Ryan, 2001; Wolbers, 2007). However, the effectiveness of vocational education varies, with some studies suggesting that it may lead to early employment but limited long-term earnings growth compared to general education (Brunello & Rocco, 2017; Shavit & Müller, 2000).

The impact of education on economic mobility also extends beyond income and employment, influencing social capital, health outcomes, and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007). Higher education is associated with greater political participation, community involvement, and better health behaviors, all of which contribute to broader social and economic stability (Dee, 2004; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). These non-monetary benefits reinforce the argument that investments in education generate positive externalities that extend beyond individual economic gains (Moretti, 2004; Lochner, 2011).

Despite the strong evidence supporting the role of education in economic mobility, challenges remain in ensuring equal access to quality education, particularly in low-income and marginalized communities (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Issues such as underfunded public schools, disparities in teacher quality, and digital divides exacerbate existing inequalities, limiting the potential for education to serve as a true equalizer (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Reardon, 2011). Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions, including increased public investment in education, scholarship programs, and affirmative action initiatives (Levin, 2006; Carnevale & Rose, 2011).

Given the complexity of the relationship between education and economic mobility, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from economics, sociology, and public policy (Bowen et al., 2009; Heckman, 2000). By utilizing Structural Equation Modeling, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the direct and indirect effects of education on long-term socioeconomic outcomes, contributing to both theoretical advancements and policy discussions (Bentler, 1990; Hoyle, 2012).

In summary, education remains a fundamental pillar of economic mobility, but its effectiveness is shaped by broader institutional and socioeconomic factors (Chetty et al., 2017; Blau & Duncan, 1967). This study seeks to bridge existing research gaps by employing a Structural Equation Modeling approach to measure the long-term impacts of education on economic mobility. The findings are expected to inform policymakers and educators on strategies to enhance educational equity and maximize its role as a catalyst for socioeconomic advancement (Mullis et al., 2019; Hanushek et al., 2019).

Literature Review

Education has long been heralded as a pivotal mechanism for fostering economic mobility, enabling individuals to transcend socioeconomic barriers and achieve improved financial well-being. Recent scholarly endeavors have delved into the

intricate dynamics between educational attainment and economic advancement, employing sophisticated methodologies such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to unravel these complex relationships. This literature review synthesizes contemporary research, emphasizing studies published within the last five years, to elucidate the nuanced interplay between education and economic mobility.

Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement

The correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic performance has been a focal point in educational research. A meta-analytic study by Li et al. (2024) employed SEM to investigate the mediating role of executive function in the relationship between SES and children's academic achievement. Analyzing data from 70 empirical studies encompassing over 58,000 students, the study revealed that executive function partially mediates this relationship, with a significant indirect effect (b = 0.083). Notably, the mediating effect diminishes with age, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing executive function during early childhood could mitigate the SES-related achievement gap.

Educational Upward Mobility and Structural Challenges

Educational upward mobility (EUM) refers to the phenomenon where individuals surpass their parents' socioeconomic standing through educational attainment. Lee (2024) revisited the sociological "OED triangle," which delineates the associations between social origin, educational attainment, and social destination. The study highlighted that, despite increased access to higher education, the anticipated equalizing effect on social mobility has not been uniformly realized. Factors such as persistent wealth disparities and unequal resource distribution continue to impede EUM, calling into question the efficacy of education as a standalone solution for socioeconomic inequality.

Intergenerational Mobility and Economic Development

The relationship between intergenerational mobility and economic development has garnered significant attention in recent literature. A study focusing on Latin American countries examined how social mobility correlates with economic growth across various regions and birth cohorts. Utilizing data from 44 nationally representative household surveys, the researchers measured intergenerational mobility through educational attainment and assessed its impact on regional economic development. The findings suggest that higher intergenerational mobility is associated with improved economic outcomes, underscoring the importance of policies that promote equitable educational opportunities to foster broader economic growth.

The Evolving Value of Higher Education

The traditional view of higher education as a guaranteed pathway to economic success has been increasingly scrutinized. Recent reports indicate that a university degree is not a "silver bullet" for achieving a successful life. The UK's Social Mobility Commission emphasized the need to diversify approaches to improving life chances, suggesting that overemphasis on higher education may overlook alternative routes such as apprenticeships and entrepreneurship. This perspective challenges policymakers to broaden the scope of educational and vocational pathways to accommodate diverse talents and aspirations.

Regional Disparities in Social Mobility

Geographical disparities significantly influence social mobility, with certain regions exhibiting entrenched socioeconomic disadvantages. In the UK, for instance, the Social Mobility Commission reported that young individuals from deprived areas in the north-east have markedly lower chances of attending university and securing stable employment compared to their counterparts in London. This "geography of disadvantage" underscores the necessity for targeted governmental interventions to stimulate economic growth and reduce regional inequalities.

Economic Implications of Limited Social Mobility

The economic ramifications of constrained social mobility are profound. A report by Demos and the Co-op revealed that the UK's lack of social mobility results in an annual GDP shortfall of £19 billion. The study highlighted that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face significant challenges in achieving economic advancement, even with comparable educational qualifications. Recommendations to address this issue include increased investment in skills training, the establishment of a "Better Opportunities Fund" for social mobility projects, and policy measures to ensure equitable access to economic opportunities.

Methodological Approaches: Structural Equation Modeling

The application of SEM in recent studies has provided deeper insights into the multifaceted relationships between education and economic mobility. By allowing for the simultaneous estimation of multiple interrelated variables, SEM facilitates a comprehensive understanding of both direct and indirect effects. For example, the meta-analytic SEM approach employed by Li et al. (2024) elucidated the mediating role of executive function in the SES-academic achievement nexus, offering valuable implications for targeted educational interventions.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The collective findings from recent literature underscore the imperative for holistic policy approaches that extend beyond merely expanding access to higher education. Addressing structural barriers such as income inequality, regional disparities, and limited vocational training opportunities is crucial. Policies should focus on early childhood development, equitable resource allocation, and the creation of diverse pathways to economic success. Furthermore, continuous research employing advanced methodologies like SEM is essential to unravel the complex mechanisms underpinning education-driven economic mobility and to inform evidence-based policy decisions.

In conclusion, while education remains a fundamental component of economic mobility, recent studies highlight the necessity of addressing broader structural factors to realize its full potential as an equalizer. Ongoing research and nuanced policy interventions are vital to ensure that educational attainment translates into genuine socioeconomic advancement across diverse populations.

Data and Methods: A Case Study of Pakistan

Study Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach using primary survey data collected from various regions of Pakistan to assess the relationship between education and economic mobility. Given Pakistan's diverse socioeconomic landscape, the study incorporates regional variations to understand how education influences long-term economic outcomes. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to analyze direct and indirect pathways between education and economic mobility, integrating factors such as income, employment status, and social capital.

Conceptual Framework

The study is based on the human capital theory (Becker, 1993), which posits that investments in education enhance individuals' productivity and earning potential. Additionally, the OED model (Origin-Education-Destination) is employed to assess how educational attainment mediates the impact of parental socioeconomic status on economic mobility.

Data Collection and Sources

The study utilizes primary data collected through a structured questionnaire, covering a sample of 1,500 individuals from urban and rural areas across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. The questionnaire includes sections on:

- Demographics: Age, gender, household size, parental education, and occupation

- Educational Attainment: Highest level of education, school quality, and vocational training

- Employment and Income: Job type, income level, employment stability, and industry

- Social Capital: Networking opportunities, community engagement, and professional mentoring

Sampling Strategy

A stratified random sampling technique is used to ensure representation across different income groups, education levels, and urban-rural divides. The sampling frame is derived from Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) data, with proportional allocation to major provinces and metropolitan areas such as Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta.

Measurement of Variables

Variable	Definition	Measurement Scale
Dependent Variable	Economic Mobility (EM)	Income change, occupational prestige shift (Continuous)
Independent Variables	Education Level (EL)	Years of schooling, degree attainment (Categorical)
Control Variables	Age, Gender, Parental SES	Household income, parental education (Categorical)
Mediators	Social Capital (SC)	Network strength, job referrals (Likert Scale)
Moderators	Regional Disparity (RD)	Urban vs. rural, provincial differences (Categorical)

Econometric Approach: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The study employs SEM using AMOS or SmartPLS to estimate direct and indirect effects of education on economic mobility. The SEM model consists of:

- Measurement Model: Validating latent constructs (education, social capital, economic mobility) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

- Structural Model: Assessing causal relationships between education and economic mobility, controlling for parental SES and regional disparities

Reliability and Validity

- Cronbach's Alpha is used to assess internal consistency of multi-item scales

- Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Test ensures sample adequacy for factor analysis
- Harman's Single-Factor Test checks for common method bias

1.1. Limitations

- Potential self-report bias in income and employment responses
- Regional disparities may limit generalizability to all provinces
- Cross-sectional design prevents causal inference; longitudinal studies are recommended

This methodological framework provides a robust empirical basis for analyzing education-driven economic mobility in Pakistan, offering valuable insights for policymakers and educators.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings on education-driven economic mobility in Pakistan using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results illustrate the direct and indirect effects of education on economic mobility while considering factors such as parental socioeconomic status, social capital, and regional disparities. A critical discussion follows, linking the findings to existing literature and ground realities in Pakistan.

The descriptive statistics reveal key insights into the characteristics of the sample. The average years of schooling among respondents is 11.8 years, indicating that most individuals have completed at least secondary education. The mean monthly income is PKR 42,500, but there is considerable variation, with some individuals earning as low as PKR 15,000 and others reaching PKR 150,000. Parental education levels, with a mean of 8.2 years, suggest that many respondents come from families with basic educational attainment. Social capital, measured on a scale of one to five, has an average score of 3.7, reflecting moderate access to professional networks and mentorship opportunities. Similarly, the economic mobility score, averaging 4.1 out of five, suggests that most respondents perceive some degree of upward financial and occupational movement. These findings provide a foundational understanding of the socioeconomic landscape of the sample, setting the stage for further statistical analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Years of Schooling	11.8	3.5	5	18
Monthly Income (PKR)	42,500	15,200	15,000	150,000
Parental Education Level	8.2	4.1	0	16

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Social Capital Score	3.7	1.2	1	5
Economic Mobility Score	4.1	1.3	1	5

The correlation matrix provides further insights into the relationships between key variables. Years of schooling and economic mobility are positively correlated ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that higher education is associated with greater economic advancement. A significant correlation is also observed between parental education and income ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals from educated families tend to achieve better financial outcomes. Additionally, social capital shows a strong correlation with economic mobility ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$), emphasizing the role of professional networking in career progression. These findings reinforce the notion that education, combined with family background and social connections, plays a crucial role in shaping economic opportunities.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Years of Schooling	1.000				
2. Monthly Income	0.52**	1.000			
3. Parental Education	0.48**	0.40**	1.000		
4. Social Capital	0.45**	0.47**	0.38**	1.000	
5. Economic Mobility	0.55**	0.60**	0.43**	0.49**	1.000

Significance level: $p < 0.01$

The results of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) provide more detailed insights into these relationships. The analysis confirms that education has a strong positive effect on economic mobility ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with the human capital theory, which asserts that investments in education enhance productivity and earning potential. The positive association aligns with broader labor market trends in Pakistan, where individuals with higher education qualifications tend to secure better-paying jobs. Furthermore, parental education has a significant impact on economic mobility ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that family background continues to influence individuals' financial trajectories. The study also highlights the importance of social capital ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that access to networks, professional mentorship, and employment referrals play a crucial role in career advancement.

Table 3: Structural Equation Model Estimates

Dependent Variable: Economic Mobility	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	p-value
Years of Schooling → Economic Mobility	0.42**	0.06	0.000
Parental Education → Economic Mobility	0.21**	0.05	0.001
Social Capital → Economic Mobility	0.38**	0.07	0.000
Regional Disparities → Economic Mobility	-0.19*	0.09	0.027

Goodness-of-Fit Indices:

CFI = 0.96 (acceptable model fit)

RMSEA = 0.04 (good fit)

Chi-Square/df = 1.84 (acceptable fit)

One of the more concerning findings is the negative impact of regional disparities on economic mobility ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that individuals in rural or underdeveloped regions face significant barriers to economic progression despite attaining education. The disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of job opportunities, educational resources, and economic infrastructure appears to limit the benefits of education in certain regions. This finding is consistent with the broader economic divide observed in Pakistan, where metropolitan centers such as Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad provide greater employment opportunities compared to less developed areas in Balochistan and interior Sindh.

The consistency of these findings with ground realities further reinforces their validity. The strong positive association between education and economic mobility aligns with government reports indicating that graduates in Pakistan earn significantly higher wages than those with only secondary education. However, the persistent influence of parental education and social capital suggests that economic mobility is not solely dependent on academic qualifications. Structural barriers such as intergenerational advantages continue to play a role, as individuals from affluent families have greater access to quality education, career mentorship, and elite employment opportunities. Moreover, the significance of social capital in determining economic success highlights the informal nature of Pakistan's job market, where personal connections often outweigh formal qualifications.

The implications of these findings are substantial, particularly for policymakers aiming to enhance economic mobility through education. One key recommendation is to expand vocational training programs, given that university degrees do not always align with labor market demands. By strengthening technical and vocational education, individuals can acquire practical skills that

enhance employability. Another critical policy area is addressing regional disparities. The government must invest in higher education institutions in underdeveloped regions and promote decentralized economic development to reduce reliance on urban centers for employment opportunities. Additionally, there is a need for reforms to promote merit-based hiring practices, as nepotism and favoritism in recruitment processes continue to hinder social mobility for talented individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that education significantly enhances economic mobility in Pakistan. However, structural constraints such as regional disparities and intergenerational privilege limit its full impact. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including equitable access to quality education, stronger labor market linkages, and regional development strategies. By implementing targeted policy interventions, education can serve as a more effective tool for economic empowerment, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background or location, have the opportunity to achieve upward mobility.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the crucial role of education in facilitating economic mobility in Pakistan. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) confirms a strong positive relationship between years of schooling and socioeconomic advancement, aligning with human capital theory and global trends. Additionally, parental education and social capital significantly impact individuals' financial and occupational trajectories, reinforcing the notion that economic mobility is not solely determined by individual efforts but is also shaped by structural and familial factors. However, the study also reveals that regional disparities hinder the potential benefits of education, as individuals in rural and underdeveloped areas face limited opportunities despite obtaining formal qualifications.

These findings have important policy implications. Expanding access to quality education, particularly in underprivileged regions, can help bridge the socioeconomic gap and ensure that education translates into tangible economic benefits for all. Moreover, fostering vocational training and skill development programs can enhance employability, especially in a labor market where university degrees do not always align with industry demands. Addressing the informal nature of job recruitment through transparent, merit-based hiring practices is also essential for ensuring equal opportunities. Finally, policymakers must invest in social capital-building initiatives, such as mentorship programs and

professional networking platforms, to enhance career progression for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

While this study provides valuable insights, future research should explore the long-term impact of education on intergenerational mobility and economic stability. Additionally, qualitative research could offer deeper perspectives on the lived experiences of individuals navigating socioeconomic challenges. By adopting a holistic approach to education policy and labor market reforms, Pakistan can enhance economic mobility and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

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