

Beyond access: What has Ghana's education expansion delivered?

New evidence on opportunity, work, gender and wellbeing

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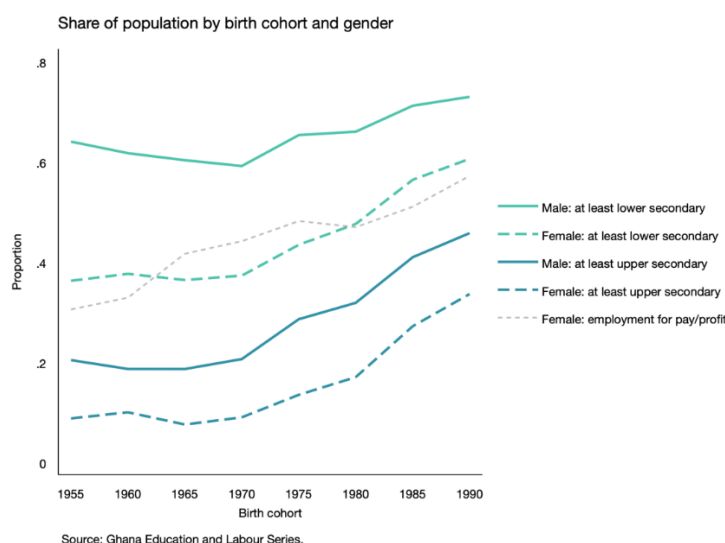


Ghana expanded schooling rapidly. The challenge now is turning access into opportunity.

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Topic at a Glance

At the same time as Africa's youth population is growing, governments across the continent are increasingly shifting policy focus to participation in secondary education to meet SDG 4. Ghana has already dramatically expanded access to secondary education, first through free, compulsory lower junior high in 1996 and, since 2017, free senior high school. This project asks what that expansion has meant beyond getting more young people into school. Understanding whether increased access translates into more equal opportunities, better work and wider benefits is important for assessing what education expansion ultimately delivers. Drawing on three decades of national surveys and data that followed the same people over four rounds we examine who progressed, whether educational opportunity became more equal, how work changed for women and men, and whether education is linked to wider benefits such as mental wellbeing. The results show substantial gains in schooling, but a more uneven translation into opportunity and work. They also show why it is still too early to judge the full effects of Free SHS: many of the first exposed cohorts are only now reaching the stages when longer-run education and labour-market outcomes can be observed.



Schooling rose across birth cohorts and gender gaps narrowed, while women's market work also grew. The wider evidence shows why attainment and the type of work must be assessed together.

New Insights

1. More schooling did not automatically equalise educational opportunity. Free junior high school (JHS) substantially increased attainment: moving from low to high district exposure raised average schooling by about 0.25 years and JHS completion by 2.8 percentage points. Yet children's relative position remained strongly linked to parents' education, and mobility changed only modestly. Expansion therefore raised the overall level of schooling more clearly than it levelled educational opportunity for children from different families and regions.
2. Education expansion changed the kind of work people did, not simply whether they worked. Among men, work for pay or profit rose by 3.5 percentage points as own-use production

declined. Women also moved away from producing mainly for household use, but their market-work gains were concentrated in informal and vulnerable jobs, and some moved into care and family responsibilities. A single measure of whether someone is simply 'working' can therefore mask a shift from household production into the market, as well as important differences in job quality and constraints facing women.

3. Free SHS evidence is promising but still early. Among young people who were initially enrolled below SHS, fully exposed cohorts were 15 percentage points more likely to have moved into SHS 4-5 years later and 10.6 points less likely to remain below SHS. Together, these patterns suggest faster progression through the education system and greater movement into SHS, rather than an earlier transition out of education and into paid work. Paid-work differences were close to zero. These adjusted comparisons show changes in where young people were observed within the education system; they do not establish a causal effect or yet reveal completion, later study or sustained labour-market outcomes.
4. Girls' secondary education may have returns beyond the labour market. Women with an upper-secondary (SHS) credential show a 7.8-percentage-point lower probability of psychological distress, after accounting for years of schooling and other observed differences. The data also lets us follow the same women over time: those with a secondary credential who were doing well at one interview were less likely to have fallen into distress by the next. These associations do not show that the credential caused better mental health, but identify women's wellbeing as an important potential return for future evaluations to examine.

Policy Recommendations

1. Measure changes in the kind and quality of work. Report work for pay or profit separately from production for household use, inactivity and care. Otherwise, education expansion may appear to have little effect even when it changes how people participate in the economy.
2. Connect access to economic opportunity and care support. Removing fees can raise schooling, but it cannot by itself create suitable jobs or remove the care constraints that shape women's choices. Employment policy, local labour demand and practical care support should complement education access.
3. Evaluate Free SHS not only on expanded access but whether enrolment leads to successful completion, progression into post-secondary education or training, and productive,

sustained labour-market transitions. Education and labour market policy should track the pathways young people take, not only the outcomes they end up with. Two countries can have similar completion rates but very different pathways through school and into work. Understanding the pathways provides information on where to intervene. Continued longitudinal tracking will be needed to assess outcomes as the first Free SHS cohorts move further into adulthood.

4. Look beyond attainment, employment and earnings when assessing the returns to girls' secondary education. Women with secondary credentials have substantially lower psychological distress, but project data and findings cannot identify the mental-health consequences of a particular expansion or free education policy. Future evaluations should include wellbeing alongside education and labour-market outcomes.

Limitations

Free SHS is still a relatively recent reform. Introduced in 2017, it has not yet been in place long enough for many exposed cohorts to reach the stages at which SHS completion, post-secondary progression, sustained labour-market entry, job quality, earnings, family outcomes and longer-run wellbeing can be fully assessed. The project therefore provides early evidence, not a final assessment of Free SHS. As the first cohorts move further into adulthood, continuing research can extend the evidence on progression and labour-market outcomes. Not every relationship identified by the project can be attributed directly to policy. In particular, the mental-health findings are associations rather than proof that education caused better mental health. Finally, surveys conducted at widely separated dates show where people are observed at those dates, but cannot reveal every transition between them.

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