

EDUCATION AND YOUTH SOCIAL MOBILITY: EVIDENCE FROM AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between education and youth social mobility based on empirical evidence. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with 21 participants and a survey of 385 respondents. The empirical findings were used to analyze the role of education in shaping social status, expanding employment opportunities, and promoting upward social mobility among young people in Uzbekistan.

The results indicate that education is widely perceived as a key factor for improving social status and enhancing employment prospects. However, the findings also reveal persistent challenges, including the mismatch between educational outcomes and labor market demands, limited employment opportunities in graduates' fields of study, and unequal access to social mobility. The study further demonstrates that practical skills, digital competencies, participation in international educational programs, and institutional support significantly strengthen young people's opportunities for social advancement. Overall, the findings highlight that education remains a crucial, but not sufficient, condition for youth social mobility, emphasizing the need to strengthen the connection between education and the labor market.

Keywords

Education; youth social mobility; higher education; empirical research; labor market; employability; social capital; human capital; social status; educational policy; international mobility; Uzbekistan.

Introduction. In the 20th century, the relationship between education and social mobility was widely studied in the social sciences. In particular, P. Sorokin, in his work *"Social Mobility,"* emphasized that the movement between different social strata is one of the key indicators of societal development[1]. European scholar T. Parsons interpreted education as an institution that ensures integration and stability within the social system[2]. R. Merton, in turn, focused on the selective

function of education, describing it as an important mechanism that determines social stratification and the distribution of opportunities[3].

At the international level, various approaches and programs are being implemented to expand opportunities for mobility through education. For example, in the African continent, the “Gold Model” approach aims to ensure sustainable social mobility of young people by integrating education, healthcare, and the labor market[4]. In Europe, the EURODESK program encourages youth participation in international exchanges, training, and volunteer activities, thereby increasing their social engagement[5]. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasize education as a key driver of sustainable development, with particular attention to expanding opportunities for young people[6].

Literature Review. Social mobility based on education has attracted the attention of many researchers since the 20th century. Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, in his work *“Social Mobility,”* described mobility between social strata as an important indicator of societal development[7]. American sociologist Talcott Parsons interpreted education as an institution that integrates society[8], while another American scholar, Robert K. Merton, viewed it as an important mechanism regulating selection and stratification processes[9]. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, through the concept of cultural capital, demonstrated the direct role of education in strengthening an individual’s social status[10]. British sociologists have also interpreted this process in different ways: for example, Anthony Giddens analyzed education as a reproducing element of social systems[11], while John Goldthorpe empirically studied social stratification and occupational mobility based on statistical data[12].

Research Methodology. The conducted study was aimed at empirically examining the impact of higher education diplomas on the social mobility of young people. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (survey) methods.

Results and Analysis. Age is one of the key factors determining social mobility, as the value of a diploma is most strongly perceived during the initial entry into the labor market. In response to the question “What is your age?”, the largest group of respondents was aged 24 and above (67.1%). The next largest group consisted of those aged 22-23 (28.2%). In addition, participants aged 20-21 also took part (7.1%), while respondents aged 18-19 were not observed. These results indicate that the study mainly covered older students and graduates.

Age distribution of respondents. In addition to age structure, gender distribution is also noteworthy. According to the survey results, the majority of respondents were female – 175 individuals (46%) – while male respondents

accounted for 210 individuals (54%). The study showed a slight predominance of male respondents. Such characteristics of age and gender composition were taken into account when analyzing the impact of higher education diplomas on social mobility.

Parental education level is one of the key factors determining the social starting position of individuals. In social mobility theories, particularly in the works of P. Sorokin and P. Bourdieu, it is emphasized that parents' educational capital has a direct influence on the future opportunities of their children. In response to the question "What is your parents' level of education?", the survey results showed that 41.2% of parents had secondary specialized education, 29.4% had higher education, and 28.2% had secondary education. These results indicate that a significant proportion of respondents have achieved a higher level of education than their parents. In social sciences, this phenomenon is referred to as "vertical social mobility," meaning the upward movement of an individual's social status compared to that of their parents[13]. For example, if parents have only secondary education, their child may obtain higher education and move into a higher professional position. The results of the study demonstrate precisely such an upward mobility trend.

The type of educational institution is one of the key factors determining the value of a diploma and young people's opportunities in the labor market. In the next part of our survey, the difference between public and private higher education institutions was considered not only in terms of curricula but also in terms of employers' perceptions. In particular, the overwhelming majority of respondents (92.0%) reported studying in private higher education institutions, while only (8.0%) studied in public universities. The survey results indicate that private higher education institutions have a wide coverage in Uzbekistan. As Bourdieu notes, the type of educational institution contributes to the formation of an individual's "cultural capital," which in turn affects how they are evaluated in the labor market[14]. Therefore, the extent to which diplomas from private universities are valued in the labor market requires further in-depth study.

In this regard, international experience is also noteworthy. For example, in countries such as South Korea and Türkiye, although the number of private universities exceeds that of public ones, they are perceived differently in the labor market. This indicates the need for a deeper examination of evaluation criteria between public and private diplomas in Uzbekistan as well.

This process is also significant from legal and social perspectives. A. Saidov emphasizes the role of higher education diplomas in strengthening an individual's legal status, stating that "education shapes not only professional but also legal-

cultural subjectivity of a person"[15]. This approach demonstrates the interconnection between pedagogical and economic dimensions with social protection and legal opportunities in society. Likewise, T. Norboeva considers higher education as a key "social elevator" for women, noting that "women's access to professional activity through higher education strengthens gender equality and reduces social inequality"[16]. This is particularly relevant given the high proportion of female respondents in our study (83.5%).

Thus, the chosen field of study can be interpreted not only as a determinant of professional opportunities but also as a factor shaping legal status, gender equality, and social balance.

In our study, practical training is considered an integral part of the higher education process, determining the practical value of a diploma and forming skills required in the labor market. Therefore, respondents' internship experience was separately analyzed. In response to the question "How long did you complete your internship?", the results showed that 44.7% of respondents completed a two-month internship. 17.6% completed one month, 10.6% completed six months, while 22.4% reported having no internship experience at all. Thus, a significant proportion of students are limited to short-term internships, and some do not participate in internships at all.

In relation to internship duration, the respondents' graduation year was also analyzed in the next question, as the length of internship is often related to the stage of study completion. In response to the question "In which year did you graduate from higher education?", 98.7% reported graduating in 2025, while the remaining 2.3% completed their studies between 2022 and 2024. This indicates that the majority of respondents are recent graduates of the current academic year.

In connection with graduation, their academic performance was also examined, as diploma grades reflect not only academic achievement but also competitiveness in the labor market. In response to the question "What are your diploma grades?", 32.9% of respondents had grades below 71, 3.5% scored between 71-85, and 2.4% scored between 86-100.

Results and Analysis. The study involved a total of 385 survey respondents and 21 interview participants. The obtained results indicate that the impact of higher education diplomas on the social mobility of young people is complex and multidimensional.

In the context of the labor market, while a portion of respondents are fully employed, a significant number face difficulties in finding jobs corresponding to their field of study. Low wages, the necessity of obtaining employment through

personal connections, and a lack of practical skills indicate that education does not fully perform its role as a “social elevator.”

The level of financial support is also low, with nearly 90% of respondents reporting that they did not receive scholarships or any other financial assistance during their studies. This suggests that education is largely financed through personal resources.

In self-assessments, most respondents stated that higher education expanded their worldview and improved their social status. However, more than half of the respondents compared to their parents believed that their own social status was lower. This indicates that stable upward intergenerational vertical mobility is not consistently observed.

The interview results confirmed this finding, as some young people, although valuing education, emphasized that the impact of diplomas in the real labor market is limited. In addition, a significant proportion of respondents expressed a desire to work abroad or pursue further education. Interest in programs such as Erasmus+ and Youth Mobility exists, but such opportunities are not accessible to everyone. Nevertheless, the strong interest in further education demonstrates that education is perceived as a key social resource for young people.

Overall, the study shows that although higher education serves as an important factor of social mobility for young people, its effect is not stable or automatic. Practical training, financial support, structural problems in the labor market, and social inequalities limit its effectiveness. At the same time, interest in further education and international programs may represent an important opportunity for enhancing future social mobility.

Discussion. The findings of the study show that higher education has an impact on youth social mobility, but this effect is often not stable. This aligns with P. Sorokin’s theory of the “social elevator,” which suggests that education creates opportunities for upward mobility in society, but is not equally effective for all social groups.

In this regard, prominent scholars T. Parsons and R. Merton described education as an institution that performs both integration and selection functions within society. The results of our study also confirm this approach: while some respondents reported an improvement in their social status and recognition through education, a significant number are unable to benefit from these opportunities due to structural barriers in the labor market[17].

As P. Bourdieu noted, higher education is not merely a diploma but also a mechanism for forming cultural capital. Our findings support this idea: upward social mobility among young people is increasingly determined by additional

resources such as foreign language skills, practical experience, and participation in international programs. This is consistent with OECD studies, which also emphasize that a diploma alone is not sufficient, while additional skills play a decisive role in the labor market[18].

Local scholarly perspectives are also reflected in our findings. For example, A. Yunusov notes that although a higher education diploma is an important requirement for entering the labor market in Uzbekistan, it does not guarantee employment due to structural imbalances between demand and supply. T. Norboeva highlights that women's access to higher education strengthens gender equality and facilitates their entry into professional life. Our study also confirms these perspectives, as the majority of respondents were women who viewed higher education as a key resource for social advancement.

International experience further highlights these processes. For instance, the "Gold Model" in Africa focuses on integrating education, healthcare, and employment to ensure sustainable social mobility among youth. In Europe, the EURODESK program expands opportunities for youth participation in international exchange, volunteering, and training activities, thereby increasing their social engagement. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasize education as a key driver of sustainable development and youth empowerment.

Our findings indicate that in Uzbekistan, higher education diplomas function as an important social resource for young people. However, their effectiveness depends on various conditions. As national scholars (A. Yunusov, T. Norboeva) emphasize, structural imbalances and gender disparities slow down this process. Our results confirm that while young people value education, there are still barriers in the labor market. International experience suggests possible solutions, such as integrating education with health and employment systems and expanding international mobility programs.

Thus, the study confirms the complex relationship between education and social mobility at both national and global levels. In the context of Uzbekistan, improving this process requires strengthening practical training, expanding financial support, and increasing access to international programs. Only then can higher education become a strong and stable "social elevator" for youth mobility.

Conclusion. The results of the study show that higher education diplomas play an important role in improving the social status of young people in Uzbekistan. They are significant for entering the labor market, gaining social recognition, and personal development. However, this impact is not stable, as

limited practical training, insufficient financial support, and labor market constraints reduce its effectiveness.

Nevertheless, young people's strong interest in further education and participation in international programs indicates positive prospects for future social mobility. The study shows that although the role of higher education in young people's lives is significant, its impact is not equally strong for everyone.

Students view education as a means of improving social status, competing in the labor market, and building a stable future. However, theoretical dominance in education, insufficient practical training, persistence of informal employment practices, and perceived lower social status compared to parents limit its effectiveness in promoting social mobility.

Overall, the interview results complement the survey data, showing that young people have high expectations from education, but these expectations are not always fully realized. This highlights the need to better align education with the labor market, strengthen practical skills, and expand equal opportunities in Uzbekistan.

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