A822: The Consequences of Educational Policy Interventions in Developing Countries: Evidence from Recent Impact Evaluations
Spring 2016

Canvas Site: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/8722

Tuesdays, 1:00-4:00 pm
Location: TBA

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1. Description

The social returns to investing in basic education are quite high in developing countries. However, countries are still facing significant challenges in ensuring that children go to school and learn critical skills. The course will examine new emerging evidence from interventions designed to increase school enrollment and student learning in basic education (K-12 grades) through two lenses: the decisions of families to invest in basic education, and the decision of schools on how to use and organize key elements in the production of education.

The course will take advantage of an emerging and growing body of studies from developing countries that provide compelling causal evidence about the factors that influence the decisions of students, parents, and teachers, and the effectiveness of different strategies to enhance students’ learning. Until recently, there were very few causal studies from developing countries on educational interventions. Yet, they have become increasingly common over the past decade and they are throwing light on the effects of key school components in the production of education. This course aims to distill the main policy lessons from these evaluations. We will review the theories that motivated the interventions, the empirical strategies used to study them, the results of the impact evaluations, and their policy implications.

Some of the key questions addressed in the course are:

- What factors of the production of education have been subject to impact evaluations? In which countries?
- Are the results from impact evaluations in one specific country relevant for another country? Under which circumstances?
- What are the main factors affecting the decisions of individuals and families to invest in basic education in developing countries?
• What are the effects of early child development programs on K-12 education?
• What are the main obstacles to providing high-quality education to all students?
• What is known about the effectiveness of different programs for overcoming these obstacles?
• How do accountability policies work in developing countries?
• What do we know about the impact of community- and teacher-participation in schools’ governance?
• Which policy initiatives complement each other and which conflict with each other?

Many of the issues that we will discuss in the course would benefit from a multidisciplinary view. However, the majority of the emerging evidence on education in developing countries comes from the field of development economics, and therefore, the reading list of the course is composed mainly of studies that use economic tools to analyze educational issues.

The course is designed for master and doctoral students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and across the university interested in the economics of education in developing countries. Basic understanding of statistics and of economics of education is required.

The course has five sections.

Part 1: Introduction: Impact Evaluation Overview. The introduction of the class will present an overview of impact evaluation at the light of education: What is the problem of self-selection in education? What are the different techniques to overcome problems of endogeneity? What are the assumptions behind each of these techniques?

Part 2: Demand-Side Interventions. Why do individuals invest in education? What are the main determinants of educational investment decisions? What are the main obstacles to school enrollment? What is known about the effectiveness of strategies that aim to lower these obstacles? Can demand-side interventions improve the “quality” of education? This section discusses the effects of demand-side interventions on educational outcomes. For example, the educational effects of providing monetary incentives to parents to enroll their children in school.

Part 3: Supply-Side Interventions. What are the main obstacles to providing high-quality education to all students? What is known about the effectiveness of strategies geared towards overcoming these obstacles? What policies improve student learning? This section discusses the impact of supply-side interventions. For example, the effects of providing computers to schools on standardized tests.

Part 4: Governance Interventions. What is known about the consequences of altering the governance structure of education? This section presents the evidence on the effects of governance interventions. For example, the effects of reforms that give more decision power to families on how to allocate school funds.

Part 5: Taxonomy of Evidence and the Quest for External Validity. In summary, what evidence do we have about the consequences of interventions on educational outcomes? What are the major gaps in our knowledge? It also discusses the main challenges in determining the external validity of this entire research agenda: can lessons from one country apply to another?

2. Goals

By the end of the course, students will have acquired:
(i) a comprehensive knowledge of the evidence on the impact of various interventions to improve access to education and learning in developing countries;
(ii) an understanding of the policy consequences of the evaluations of these interventions;
(iii) an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches to impact evaluation in education;

3. Prerequisites

Prior knowledge of economics as demonstrated by completion of HGSE’s A-205 or a similar course is required. The course also requires a basic understanding of statistics, as demonstrated by HGSE’s S-012 or a similar course. If you have any doubts/questions about these prerequisites, contact the Instructor at Felipe_Barrera-Osorio@gse.harvard.edu

4. Course Requirements and Pedagogy

The requirements of the course include:

- Regular attendance, answers to guiding questions and active participation: 15% of the grade
- Preparation and participation in three case studies: 25% of the grade
- Three homework assignments: 40% of the grade
- Final memo: 20% of the grade

Each student enrolling in this course will be expected to:

- **Attend all classes.** Students who are absent due to illness still have to submit answers to the guiding questions for discussion. Students who cannot attend class, owing to circumstances beyond control, have to send e-mail to the TFs explaining the circumstance.
- **Come well-prepared and participate.** Students must do the weekly required reading and participate actively in class discussions. The course will rely heavily upon class discussion of the readings. Before each class, we will post on the course website a list of “guiding questions” pertaining to each of the assigned readings. All students should submit answers to the guiding questions in the Canvas site. We will call on students in class to provide answers to the guiding questions. Students are encouraged to form study groups to discuss the answers to the guiding questions before each class. The quality of each participant’s comments and answers to questions will play a significant role in the determination of course grades.
- **Prepare case studies.** There will be three case studies for discussion. Each student has to submit, before the case study discussion, a two-pager with the main bullet point supporting/attacking a policy proposal. Then, during discussion, the student has to show active participation and preparation.
- **Turn in homework assignments.** There will be three written assignments during the semester. Each will ask you to respond conceptual questions —for example, the economic rationale behind conditional cash transfer—and questions about the articles —for example, based on a specific article, what do we know about the optimal design of conditional cash transfers.
- **Write a final memo.** The memo should be a maximum of 6 (six) pages in length (1.5 line space, 11 font). The memo will describe the evidence of efficacy of a specific policy. The student should present a concrete problem pertaining to a specific education system (city / municipality / region),
and, based on evidence of causal effects, the student should present two proposals to tackle the problem. The memo should discuss problems of external validity and application of the policies in the specific context of discussion. The audience of the memo is a high ranking policy maker (e.g., Ministry or Secretary of Education). Alternative, you can present a “case study” of a particular project/case you are working.

A typical class will include three different activities. It will start with the discussion of the questions of the articles covered that day. After that, the instructor will present the main ideas in the assigned articles, the presentation, and the class discussion. Finally, the instructor will introduce the topic for next class, offering some guidance for discussion.

5. **Readings and Schedule of Topics**

The readings for this course are accessible four different ways—the iPa© page, links to journal articles in HOLLIS+, Internet links, and PDFs on the course Canvas site. The syllabus indicates where to locate each reading. For the readings available via HOLLIS+ we have embedded persistent links (all you need to do is click on the word link) that should take you directly to the articles via HUID and PIN log-in. If a link does not work, which is always a possibility, then you will need to use HOLLIS+ to locate the reading yourself.

The following is the schedule of the course:

**PART I. INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE AVAILABLE EVIDENCE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

- **Week #1: Impact Evaluation: a toolkit**


  **PART II. DEMAND-SIDE INTERVENTIONS**

- **Week #2: Barriers to Education**

  **Human capital and signaling models:** Chapter 2 of Murnane, R. J., & Willett, J. B. (2011). *Methods matter: Improving causal inference in educational and social science research*. Oxford University Press. (iPa©)


- **Week #3: Should We Pay People to Go to (and Stay in) School?**


- **Week #4: What If We Give Families More Information?**


- **Week #5: What are the Effects of Early Child Development Interventions?**


  PART III. SUPPLY-SIDE INTERVENTIONS

- **Week #6: Can Better Resources Improve Learning?**


- **Week #7: How Should Schools be Organized?**


  **Time at school:** Holland, P., Evans, D. K., & Alfaro, P. (2015). Extending the school day in Latin America and the Caribbean. Policy Research Working Paper, WPS7309, World Bank (http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/06/16/090224b082f386f6/1_0/Rendered/PDF/Extending0the00ca0and0the0Caribbean.pdf)

- **Week #8: What Makes an Effective Teachers? Teacher Characteristics**

  World Bank (2013). “Building Better Teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean” Executive Summary (forthcoming) (Canvas site)


- **Week #9: Teacher Incentives**


PART IV. GOVERNANCE INTERVENTIONS
• **Week #10: Should We Make Schools More Accountable?**


• **Week #11. Why Don’t We Increase School Choice? Vouchers**


• **Week #11. Public-Private Partnerships**


**PART V. TAXONOMY OF EVIDENCE**

• **Week #12: What Have We Learned? Can We Transport the Evidence Across Contexts?**


**CONCERNS ABOUT PLAGIARISM**

Please make sure to read the HGSE policy on plagiarism, presented in the Student Handbook.

“All work submitted to meet course requirements is expected to be the student’s own. In the preparation of all papers and other written work submitted to meet course requirements and
dissertations, a student must be careful to distinguish between ideas that are his or her own and those that have been derived from other sources. Information and opinions drawn from all sources are to be attributed specifically to these sources. It is the student’s responsibility to learn and use the proper forms of citation. Quotations must be properly placed within quotation marks and must be fully cited. All paraphrased material must also be fully cited. In all cases where ideas or material presented are derived from a student’s reading and research, the source used must be indicated. Students who submit work either not their own or without clear attribution to the original source, for whatever reason, ordinarily will be dismissed from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.”
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<td>Opportunity cost: Credit constraints, conditional cash transfers, scholarship</td>
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