

The functions of Education 2

Functionalism, education and the economy

Functionalists see education as functional because it teaches the **skills** required by a modern industrial society, produces **human capital** and allocates people to their most effective role within the economic system.

Skills provision

Functionalists argue that **an important function of education is to respond to the needs and demands of the economy and to produce a skilled workforce that can compete effectively with workers in other countries.** For example, as we have seen when examining educational policy,

- **mass education** was introduced in 1870 so that the UK economy could compete on equal terms with the economies of Germany and the USA.
- In the 1960s as the economy required more complex skills, **higher education** was expanded in the UK in order to educate UK workers in 'new' skills such as IT and computer programming.
- In the 1980s, **vocational education and training** was introduced to increase young people's skills levels because it was argued that the British economy was in decline because British workers lacked the appropriate skills and attitudes towards work.
- In the 1990s, New Labour expanded the **Apprenticeship** scheme and raised the school leaving age in an attempt to make Britain more competitive in the **global economy.**

Human capital theory

Human capital is the **stock of knowledge, skills, habits, values and creativity embodied in the ability to perform work that produces real economic value.**

Functionalists argue that economic investment in people via education is similar to investment in factories or technology in that it will **produce more effective workers and consequently profit and wealth.**

Role allocation

The functionalist thinkers, **Davis and Moore (1945)** believed that **education functions to sift and sort pupils and students via examinations and qualifications so that they can be allocated to a work role or job that best suits their abilities.**

Davis and Moore argue that **the most functionally important jobs in modern industrial economies need to be allocated to those who display the most ability, effort and flexibility.** Those with lower grades need to be allocated low-skilled jobs.

Davis and Moore conclude that **the educational function of role allocation ensures a more efficient economy.**

Evaluation of role allocation as a function of educational systems:

- (1) **New Right educationalists** (despite their functionalist sympathies) believe that **state schools do not produce the right sort of workers required for British businesses to successfully compete in the global marketplace or economy.**
- (2) **The best jobs may not necessarily go to those who are best qualified.** There is evidence that **merit may be a secondary factor in role allocation in comparison with factors such as being privately educated, being male or being white.** If role allocation is to work properly, it can only do so if societies are **meritocracies.** There is **little evidence that the UK qualifies as a meritocracy.**
- (3) The number of people going to university in the UK do not match the number of jobs available. **Evidence suggests that the educational system may be producing an over-qualified workforce.** Surveys suggest that over-qualified workers are potentially less efficient because they are easily bored or disaffected because the job they are doing is neither interesting nor challenging.
- (4) **Woolf (2002)** questions whether more government spending on education will automatically lead to human capital and economic growth. For example, **Switzerland** invests a relatively low amount of spending on education but generally experiences high economic growth.