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Socio-Economic Planning Sciences 36 (2002) 291–307

SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
PLANNING SCIENCES

www.elsevier.com/locate/dsw

# The importance of geographical attributes in the decision to attend college<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Studies of educational achievement have focused primarily on individual, family, and school-level influences. Yet, economic theory suggests that the expected economic returns to obtaining an education are also important. Two key determinants of these returns, the costs of obtaining an education and the employment opportunities available after receiving education, are often shaped at the local and regional levels. This paper examines the socio-economic correlates with the decision to attend college in Sweden in 1995. Data obtained from a unique geographically descriptive micro-database called *TOTAL Population of SWeden, INDividual and Geographical database* (TOPSWING) make it possible to conduct analyses of the decision to attend college using numerous individual, family, neighborhood, and labor market region variables. This paper shows that few geographical variables are associated with college attendance. However, the proportion of college educated residents at both the neighborhood and labor market levels, as well as proximity to a college, increase the likelihood of attending college.

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*Keywords:* Human capital; Microdata; Local labor market

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## 1. Introduction

Human capital is recognized as an important input in modern economic growth and development [1–3]. The social sciences have thus devoted increasing attention to the question of what affects human capital investment decisions. Ranking high among the variables thought to be important in these decisions are various individual, family, and school-level characteristics. Geographical attributes such as distance, neighborhood qualities, and characteristics of regional labor markets have received much less attention.

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<sup>☆</sup>This research was conducted at the Spatial Modelling Centre in Kiruna, Sweden, and was supported by funding from the European Community, European Regional Development Fund. The Editor-in-Chief and two anonymous referees provided very helpful comments. The views expressed in the article are those of the author alone.

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The question of the role of geographical attributes in educational decisions is an important one. Much of the current education policy debate centers on the amount of financial aid received by school districts, the level of school quality, class size and school administrative practices. Yet, geographical variables may also be important. These variables may be ones that planners can affect (e.g., distance to educational institutions), or they may reflect deeper differences of economic structure (e.g., percentage of employment in agricultural or mining activities) that are difficult to change. If the latter is true, it is important to acknowledge same in order not to create unrealistic benchmarks and expectations for areas that, at first glance, appear to suffer from human capital deficits.

This paper focuses on the effect of geographical attributes within a standard human capital investment model. Rather than attempt the formidable task of examining every educational decision in every country, this paper focuses on one aspect of education, entry to college, for one particular place, Sweden. Using data from a unique geographically descriptive micro-database called *TOTAL Population of SWeden, INDividual and Geographical database (TOPSWING)* [4], the paper examines the decision to attend college using numerous individual, family, neighborhood, and labor market region variables.

It must be recognized that the Swedish experience is much different from that of the US. Social and economic differences are relatively small in comparison, and public funding for education and related social services is relatively generous. On the other hand, the post-secondary educational services sector is smaller, with a much smaller percentage of the population receiving a post-secondary education. The differences may thus seem muted. However, if it can be demonstrated that individual, family, local, and regional attributes matter in Sweden, it may be reasonable to infer that the same holds elsewhere.

This paper is divided into several sections. The first briefly reviews the literature concerning educational achievement, with special emphasis on understanding geographical determinants of educational entry. The second section discusses the micro-database that was used for estimation purposes. The third section introduces a model of educational entry and presents the variables used in the analysis. The fourth section discusses the results of the empirical analysis. The paper finishes with a summary and conclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

Educational achievement can be influenced by individual traits and the characteristics of the various social groups into which an individual is embedded during a life cycle, including childhood household, adult household, schools, neighborhood, and region. Among these categories, however, household and individual influences have received the most attention. It is the purpose of this section to describe these influences and review selected studies that gauge their effect. With this background, one can better understand the relative importance of geographical attributes for educational decisions and outcomes. Moreover, the influences identified here (see Table 1 for a summary) will provide the basis for subsequent original empirical work presented in later sections.

### *2.1. Household attributes*

Family attributes during childhood are thought to play a dominant role in forming educational decisions and outcomes. Recent research in economics suggests that intergenerational

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