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LETTER: An incomplete, misleading picture

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Friedman makes a mistake in lending credence to economist Ricardo Hausmann's hypothesis on 'education myth'

STEVEN Friedman is one of our country's best political analysts, but I believe he made a mistake in lending credence to economist Ricardo Hausmann's hypothesis that there is a worrying, even sinister, "education myth" in the economic growth discourse ([Education is not the cure-all it is made out to be](#), October 21).

Hausmann's unusual argument appears in an online opinion piece entitled, The education myth. He essentially claims that politicians have duped the public into believing educational improvement possesses growth-enhancing qualities that it, in fact, does not have.

The first problem with this argument, and a reason Hausmann has infuriated a few fellow economists, is that he provides — one assumes deliberately — an incomplete and misleading picture of the research over the past 20 or so years.

Yes, there was considerable disagreement around the education-growth link when we still relied on educational participation as an indicator of investment in education. But since about 2005, the use of educational-quality indicators, drawing from test data, have made the link clearer and far less disputable. In fact, over the longer term, education tends to emerge as the most powerful single factor promoting growth.

Second, Hausmann's notion of the policy maker, or economist, embracing education solutions to the exclusion of all else seems unreal. The only example cited is Tony Blair, but Blair's growth strategies, while prioritising education, were clearly about much more than that. If there is a warning worth making about education and growth, it is that the effects take time, for obvious reasons. If we want to boost growth in the next three years, education is not a major player, though certain changes to post-school training can achieve fairly rapid results. But these important time dimensions do not feature in Hausmann's article.

In a 2009 report for the South African government on recommended growth strategies, Hausmann came up with 21 short-to long-term interventions, many of them interesting, but curiously not one of them dealing with education and training.

Fortunately, the National Development Plan has given prominence to education, making high-quality basic education its first priority, while also prioritising several noneducation strategies.

The idea that there should be a worrying education myth within the growth discourse is itself a myth, it would seem, and is an unnecessary distraction.

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