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Setting the Scene

Equity in Higher Education: evidences, policies and practices

Setting the Scene

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Higher education is associated with higher living standards. In the knowledge society higher education is a key factor of economic growth of societies.

Equity of access to higher education has become an increasingly prominent concern of governmental policies.

Several international organisations have issued declarations on access equity:

- § 26 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- 1998 UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education
- European Commission (2006): Putting knowledge into practice
- International Association of Universities (2008)
- OECD (2008): Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society

Equitable tertiary education systems are those that ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study effort. They ensure that the achievement of educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including of factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age or disability. (OECD 2008)

Components of equity

Fairness – personal and social circumstances do not hinder achieving educational potential.

Inclusion – all people are able to attain a basic standard of education.

The socioeconomic background of parents has been considered one of the strongest predictors of students' academic achievement and attainment (Reardon 2011).

Relative and absolute changes in participation

Absolute changes point to the improvement of the participation of any particular group irrespective of what happened to other groups (fairness).

Relative changes point to the improvement of the participation of one group relative to other (inclusion).

Expansion of systems has increased participation in absolute terms. In Europe overall participation increased from 12% in the 1959s to 42% in 2009 (60 years). However, we will see that relative change is more difficult.

Massification and diversification of the systems

Massification was accompanied by a diversification of the systems, to answer to the increasingly varied aspirations.

Diversification is fundamental to create opportunities accessible for all and answering to a multitude of diverse interests and aspirations, otherwise many will be left out of higher education (Brennan and Naidoo 2007).

Disadvantaged students may gain access to lower-status HEIs and/or programmes or they may represent a disproportionate percentage of those paying tuition fees (OECD 2008). Shavit *et al.* (2007) argue that massification tends to create new opportunities but mainly of lower value.

Positional goods

Positional goods or status goods are goods or services, which are demanded and bought because their possession or consumption confers social or other status to those acquiring them.

Education is a positional good in the sense that it provides students with a competitive advantage when looking for employment, social standing and status (Marginson, 1998).

The value of positional goods depends strongly on position in relation to others. Positional goods have a hierarchy of value, some being more valuable than others.

Positional goods

Places in highly reputed elite institutions such as Harvard or Cambridge or in study programmes such as Medicine are the most desired form of positional good as they offer a high probability of a successful career.

Positional goods are not only a scarce good they are also a scarce good in absolute sense.

A spectator in a stadium may improve his view by standing on tiptoe. However if everyone else does the same thing then everyone is worse off (Hirsch, 1976: 6) and the advantage of that spectator disappears.

Therefore, 'positional goods' produced in higher education must be scarce.

Positional goods

This explains why one of the main characteristics of American elite universities is their highly selective admissions system and their prestige in research (Dill and Soo, 2004) or the very high positional value of study programmes such as medicine that are frequently protected by imposing quotas (*numerus clausus)*.

Marginson (2004) argues that scarcity by increasing competition for the best institutions and study programmes is a sign of prestige: "the mechanisms of competition for prestige reproduce prestige itself and sustain the relative standing of institutions that produce it".

Positional goods

Elite institutions do not expand production to meet the full demand, like capitalist businesses.

Elite institutions do not need to advertise their programmes or services, which is not the case of low and middle-level institutions.

Positional goods

Social groups from deprived backgrounds are not in a good position to compete for positional goods, which have a tendency to be monopolised by social groups from privileged backgrounds. A consequence of this competition is the persistent inequality at the level of higher education.

Wealth follows prestige: wealthy families invest in high value positions in education so as to maintain their positions of social leadership, positions which provide necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for reproducing incomes and wealth in the next generation. The hierarchy of students/families is synchronised with the hierarchy of universities, and individual market choices are determined by status goals (Marginson, 2004)

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

As higher education systems expanded from elite to mass systems it was expected that inequalities in educational participation and attainment would decline (Parsons 1970; Treiman 1970; Bell 1973).

However empirical evidence showed that educational inequalities were surprisingly persistent despite expansion of the systems.

In UK the percentage of students on free school meals (a proxy for low socio-economic level) increased from 13% to 18% (from 2005 to 2013) while the rate for the other students has increased from 33% to 38% thus maintaining an almost constant gap (BIS 2013).

Defining 4 status groups of equal size for European countries, Koucký et al. (2010) show that, after a period of sixty years, children from families in the higher quarter have 3.7 higher chances than those of families in the lower quarter.

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

The problem is that students whose parents belong to well-educated and affluent backgrounds have an advantage over the other students: they can afford to pay for better schools, to have better professors, to pay for extra educational support, etc.

Two hypothesis were formulated that aim at re-theorizing the relationship between expansion and inequality, the Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) – Rafferty and Hout 1993, and the Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) – Lucas 2001, 2009.

It is argued that expansion is unlikely to reduce inequalities simply because those students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are better placed than others to take advantage of the new educational opportunities offered by expansion (MMI) and to secure for themselves a qualitatively better kind of education at any given level (EMI).

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

MMI posits that only if the demand for a given level of education approaches 100% (saturation) then the association between social origin and education is weakened.

To summarise rather crudely: the lower classes only can take advantage of opportunities offered by expansion when the needs of the upper classes are fully satisfied.

The existence of alternative routes (lower value) can also play a role, which will probably increase the odds of accessing higher education of students from lower backgrounds.

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

When saturation occurs the nature of inequalities changes. EMI posits that "socioeconomically advantaged actors secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible. On the one hand, if quantitative differences are common, the socioeconomically advantaged will obtain quantitative advantage; on the other hand, if qualitative differences are common the socioeconomically advantaged will obtain qualitative advantage".

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

As long as a particular level of schooling is not universal, the socioeconomically advantaged use their advantages to secure that level of schooling. Once that level of schooling becomes nearly universal, however, the socioeconomically advantaged seek out whatever qualitative differences there are at that level and use their advantages to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education.

In short, "the socioeconomically advantaged will use their socioeconomic advantages to secure both quantitatively and qualitatively better outcomes".

Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality (MMI/EMI)

In the Portuguese higher education system the overall number of new places is higher than the number of candidates. However, in highly prestigious programmes such as Medicine, the percentage of enrolled students coming from advantaged backgrounds is about 75% against 25% from disadvantaged backgrounds, while the percentage of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolled in programmes such as Nursing is about 75% against 25% of students coming from advantaged backgrounds (Tavares et al. 2008).

Conclusions

The OECD refers two components of equity, fairness and inclusion. To promote fairness governments should design policies aiming at convergence to a situation where the percentage of participation of students from different family backgrounds would match the social composition of society.

To promote inclusion governments should design policies aiming at increasing the absolute number of students from deprived backgrounds entering higher education and graduating successfully.

Therefore there are two ways of measuring progress in equity: relative changes of participation (equity/fairness) or absolute changes (inclusion) (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007).

Conclusions

The positional character of higher education makes the objective of fairness extremely difficult to attain. Koucký *et al.* (2010 analysed change in Europe over a period of 60 years to conclude: It is not possible to postulate that quantitative expansion by itself decreases the differences in the attainment of tertiary education by children of various social strata ad groups and thus also the Inequality Index, though it contributes to this effect; although opportunities for all groups have been increasing, mutual relationship of their levels has not changed too much (Koucký *et al.*, 2010)

Conclusions

Marginson (2011) argues that it is more achievable and more fruitful to implement policies aimed at inclusion rather than to increase fairness.

These policies will be effective from the point of view of inclusion and may eventually, although slowly, contribute to increased fairness.

As Marginson recognises, “social inequalities in education are organic to social relations and sustained from outside as well as inside regulated systems, in the reproduction of families, classes, professions, wealth and political power”.

Conclusions

There are also some measures, which could contribute to increase equity. One of those measures consists in avoiding early tracking systems. There is tracking when students are grouped into distinct classes by academic ability, either in different schools or in different classes of the same school.

- There is evidence that tracked systems of secondary education contribute to widening inequalities in access to higher education (OECD 2008).
- Early tracking seems to reduce significantly inter-generational mobility (Sursock and Smidt 2010)
- Students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds are statistically more likely to 'opt for' (or to have no option but) a vocational training route, from where it is more difficult to continue to higher education" (Eurydice 2010).

Conclusions

The admission system to higher education can also create problems: … a number of young people are excluded from tertiary education because they do not meet the necessary qualifications. These include early school-leavers and students who complete given tracks of secondary education, which do not give direct access to tertiary education (OECD 2008).

Therefore to increase equity it is necessary to create alternative ways of acquiring eligibility for tertiary education (OECD 2008), which go beyond the traditional competition based on academic performance.

Students from deprived backgrounds tend to enrol in higher proportion in vocational tracks of upper secondary education, which do not facilitate access to the best universities and programmes.

Conclusions

The OECD (2008) refers that "inequalities in the access to tertiary education are also influenced by differences in the quality of schooling or the distribution of schooling resources (2008: 38). Therefore it is necessary to implement policies aiming at improving the quality of schooling and facilitating the articulation between secondary and tertiary education.

However, some countries have tried to address the element of fairness by implementing affirmative action policies. Examples can be found in the USA, Brazil, Sweden, India or Sri Lanka. In the conference we will address some examples.