Equity of access to higher education

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The issue

Higher education has seen astounding growth across the world in recent decades, and about a third of the population globally now go on to some form of post-secondary study. Yet while there are increasing participation rates in all regions there remain significant disparities, with a gross enrolment ratio of 68% in Europe, 23% in Southern Asia and 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa (data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics). Furthermore, within specific countries there are marked inequalities of opportunity. Rates of access are significantly higher for more privileged social groups, and lower-income and other marginalised communities struggle for entry, particularly in the poorest countries.

In contrast to primary and secondary levels, it is generally accepted that higher education does not need to be compulsory and fully universalised. Given the limited number of places available in most contexts, the complex question arises then of who should go to university. Should it be the highest performing students, or those who are in greatest need, or perhaps those who will make the greatest contribution to society?

The concept of equity of access to higher education is far from straightforward. In particular, it places in tension ideas of procedural justice – for example, that those who score highest in entrance exams should have priority – with those of social justice, bringing into play historical and continuing discrimination against certain groups in society. A further challenge is presented by stratification of higher education systems, with marked differences of quality and prestige between different universities. Consequently, issues of equity relate not only to gaining access to the system, but also avoiding confining less advantaged students to lower quality institutions and courses.

Concerns about the specific groups underrepresented in higher education vary considerably from region to region. In some contexts, social class or family income is the primary barrier, while in others it may be region, rurality, religion or language group. In relation to gender, following significant increases in female enrolments in recent years, there are now more women than men in undergraduate courses globally.

About the author

Tristan McCowan is Reader in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education, London. His work focuses on the areas of access to higher education, alternative and innovative universities, citizenship education and human rights, and covers a broad range of contexts, particularly in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. He is currently leading multi-country research projects focusing on higher education pedagogy and graduate destinations. He is the author of Rethinking Citizenship Education (Continuum, 2009) and Education as a Human Right (Bloomsbury, 2013).

Nevertheless, there are many countries (particularly in Africa and Asia) in which women are underrepresented. Furthermore, as explored in the Morley and Lugg reading, there are a range of more hidden inequalities relating to discipline studied, experiences within the university and subsequent opportunities. Those with disabilities also struggle to gain access to higher education in most countries. As emphasised by Morley and Lugg, attention must also be paid to intersectionality, when these factors coincide and lead to even more pernicious forms of exclusion.

But what is preventing these groups from accessing higher education? The two primary barriers present in most higher education systems are tuition fees and entrance examinations. Fees are a primary characteristic of private universities, but increasing popularity of 'cost-sharing' policies has meant that public institutions are rarely free-of-charge, and there are a range of other direct and opportunity costs of full-time study. Entrance examinations appear a justifiable means of assessing whether students are equipped to engage in a particular course, yet in many cases act to privilege students from high quality schools and those who have been able to pay for preparatory courses. As explored in the readings below, the meritocratic principles of university admissions are hard to disentangle from unfair social advantage and disadvantage. Furthermore, there are other barriers to access present in some contexts such as low aspirations and geographical distance of institutions.

Countries have implemented a range of responses to these challenges. In order to offset the regressive impact of fees on access for low-income students, many countries have student loan schemes. However, as evidenced by the convulsions caused by the student protests in Chile in 2011, even universally available loans can fail to provide an adequate solution. Affirmative action policies are also common. These measures aim to provide preferential conditions for access for disadvantaged students – whether in the form of a quota, a bonus on entrance exam scores or a lower cut-off point. As discussed in the studies below of Bertrand et al. on India and Onsongo on East Africa, these schemes have been successful in allowing access to disadvantaged groups, although there is a concern that the places might be filled by the more privileged members of these groups. There are also measures in a number of countries to allow access for 'mature' students who may have been in employment for some time, to acknowledge other forms of experience in addition to entrance test scores, and to provide preparatory courses (as explored in the Downs reading).

Finally, it is important to retain a holistic vision of the entire education system. Justice in higher education admissions is closely intertwined with opportunities at primary and secondary levels. It is hard for university policies to compensate for the highly uneven playing field of the lower levels – and indeed, many young people in low-income countries do not even finish secondary school and allow themselves the chance of going to university. Nevertheless, this does not let higher education 'off the hook', with all the blame placed on deeper social and educational inequalities: there are still a range of effective measures that can be taken by universities, a number of which are outlined in the readings that follow.

Key readings

Meyer, H-D (2013) Reasoning about Fairness in Access to Higher Education: Common Sense, Normative, and Institutional Perspectives. In Meyer, H.-D., St. John, E.P., Chankseliani, M., and Uribe, L. (eds) Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice. Rotterdam: Sense.
http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/fairness-access-higher-education-global-perspective-reconciling-excellence-efficiency-justice/

Content - Overview of diverse conceptualisations of fair access to higher education, their grounding in political and moral philosophy, and their relation to current social and economic trends.

McCowan T (2007) Expansion without equity: an analysis of current policy on access to higher education in Brazil. Higher Education, 53(5): 579–598.
http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/expansion-without-equity-an-analysis-of-current-policy-on-access-to-higher-education-in-brazil/

Content - Assessment of policies for promoting equitable access in Brazil using the private sector (loans and tax breaks) and the public sector (quotas and changes in entrance examinations) in relation to two principles of equity.

Morley L, Lugg R (2009) Mapping meritocracy: intersecting gender, poverty and higher educational opportunity structures. Higher Education Policy 22(1): 37–60.
http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/mapping-meritocracy-intersecting-gender-poverty-and-higher-educational-opportunity-structures/

Content - Article analysing findings from an ESRC/DFID funded study on access to higher education in Tanzania and Ghana, focusing on hidden barriers to access, discrimination against and stereotyping of women within universities.

Onsongo J (2009) Affirmative action, gender equity and university admissions – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. London Review of Education 7(1): 71–81.
http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/affirmative-action-gender-equity-university-admissions-kenya-uganda-tanzania/

Content - Assessment of impact and limitations of affirmative action policies (in the form of entrance score bonuses) for women in the three countries, highlighting the need for a coordinated approach.

Bertrand M, Hanna R, Mullainathan S (2010) Affirmative action in education: evidence from engineering college admissions in India. Journal of Public Economics, 94(1–2): 16–29.
http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/affirmative-action-education-evidence-engineering-college-admissions-india/

Content - Statistical analysis of impact of policies facilitating access for students from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and 'other backward castes'. Contrary to popular belief, these policies have not only benefited more privileged students from the disadvantaged groups.

Downs C (2010) Increasing equity and compensating historically academically disadvantaged students at a tertiary level: benefits of a science foundation programme as a way of access. Teaching in Higher Education 15(1): 97–107.

Content - Case study of the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, showing the positive impact of a science faculty access course for black students with English as a second language.

Further Reading

Power L, Millington K, Bengtsson S (2015) Building Capacity in Higher Education Topic Guide. Health and Education Advice and Resource Team (HEART). http://www.heart-resources.org/topic/higher-education/

Questions to guide reading

1. In which different ways can fairness in admissions to higher education be conceptualised?
2. Which are the main barriers to access, and how are these changing in light of current global trends?
3. How does underrepresentation of social groups in higher education vary in relation to context?
4. How do different forms of disadvantage intersect to reinforce one another?
5. Which are the most promising interventions for enabling equitable access?
6. Which benefits and potential risks are presented by affirmative action policies?
7. How has privatisation impacted on equity of access, and how should states respond?