

Fulbright New Century Scholars Symposium on Higher Education

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Statements and Recommendations

Working Group Two: Access and Equity

The massive expansion of higher education across all continents has been one of the defining features of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In looking at access we have analysed the differential levels of quantitative expansion in enrolments. Our analysis focused mainly on eight countries: Ethiopia, France, Ireland, Israel, South Africa, United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam. In considering equity we have sought to examine the extent to which this expansion has led to a widening of opportunity to under-represented groups. Expansion in enrolments has been driven largely by economic priorities, while ideals of social justice and democratisation have influenced the concern with the equity dimension.

Key findings

To achieve an understanding of access and equity in a comparative context we identified the following topics as central: an analysis of government policies; the impact of globalisation forces on national policies; an identification of historical and cultural contexts; the structures of higher education systems and of secondary education; an identification of student support mechanisms; and a comparative analysis of intervention strategies. The analytic approach adopted was to move from an analysis of national specificities towards an identification of comparative trends.

A general trend governing access to higher education is movement from a dominant meritocratic norm to a complex mix of merit and equality. This shift is accompanied by some convergence in the definitions of social diversity, a more complex understanding of identities and an increase in the number of relevant categories requiring affirmative action. These identities include gender, social class, geography, ethnicity, disability and linguistic variations. There is a serious gap in current indicators in respect of comparative measures of participation, retention and equity. We have developed an index of participation in higher education and proposed a methodology for the collection of data on equity based on current enrolments. An equal concern for levels of retention and graduation which vary significantly by student background must complement a focus on equity and access. While there is no one optimum structure for higher education systems, massification and diversification will not achieve optimum results unless they are accompanied by the development of flexibility within systems to enable students to progress between different levels and sectors. Policy intervention has to take account of the need for initiatives at other levels of education and critical cross-sectoral boundaries. For many countries the current imperative is to maximize the pool of those qualified to enter higher education. In reviewing intervention strategies a variety of promising initiatives have been identified. These range from financial supports through structural changes in the education system to programs seeking to raise student aspirations. While there is much scope for policy borrowing, interventions need to take account of national cultures, diversity of higher education systems and institutional structures.

Recommendations

- National governments should develop a clear specification of what equity groups are to become the target of public policy. Appropriate implementation strategies need to be developed.
- International agencies involved with national governments in collecting comparative data need to agree appropriate measures of access, equity and retention.
- National governments should seek to maximise flexibility within HE systems to facilitate student mobility between levels, institutions, sectors and countries.

- Higher education policy cannot be viewed separately from the problems of primary and secondary education
- Development partners must commit themselves to extensive and on-going consultation, at the start and particularly at the end of any programme of higher education.
- All policy initiatives and interventions should be accompanied by systematic data gathering and monitored for their effectiveness.