

Arguments, Actors and Policies in Postsecondary Educational Equity: A Comparative Case Study

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Our collaborative project compared and contrasted the political contexts where postsecondary education has been used to promote equity in opportunities among marginalized or under-represented populations. We sought to illuminate the arguments used by interest groups in formulating the policies that regulate social mobility and attainment by groups which have been excluded in past years. We focused on the postsecondary systems of: Mexico, France, Romania, Brazil, Spain, Zanzibar, and Hong Kong. We identified the different populations in each context that are described by different actors as “disadvantaged” in access or success in postsecondary education. These different populations are not always formally organized or even identifiable as social groups in every context.

David Post identified the major arguments and actors shaping decisions over access to Hong Kong’s expanding and diversifying system of higher education. Prior to his becoming a New Century Scholar, David Post had predicted that considerations of equity and equal opportunity would become prominent in debate over the ownership and control of higher education. Until 2002 virtually all postsecondary opportunities were through Hong Kong’s government-owned and operated programs. After 2002, a patchwork of Associate Degree programs were encouraged by Hong Kong, financed mainly through user fees (although students could obtain need-based grants and loans). Post anticipated that the inequity of this bifurcated system would energize opposition groups and shift the terms of debate from a human resource to a human rights framework. Post particularly focused on the evolution of opportunities for marginalized populations of working-class and immigrant children. He analyzed the changing determinants of access to the associate and bachelor degree programs in Hong Kong, as well as to degree study outside of Hong Kong, based on household records from the newly-released 2006 Census and comparing determinants in that year with earlier Census years. Post found continuing effects of parental income over time, and increasing disadvantages for young people born in the Chinese Mainland (as compared with those born in Hong Kong). Based on interviews with education officials and political leaders from all the emergent parties in Hong Kong, Post was surprised that human resource concerns still dominated the discussion of public support to higher education. Pressure groups from the associate degree sector, based at City University, as well as the Hong Kong Student Federation, acknowledged other reasons for mass higher education than the economic growth concerns articulated by Hong Kong’s Chief Executive and Secretary of Education. However, Post’s informants generally conceded that arguments based on civic responsibility and humanistic development would not convince many in Hong Kong. Therefore, they opted to discuss expanded access with less reference to equity than is

typically the case in pluralistic polities. One explanation offered by Post's informants was that the decision over universal suffrage would ultimately be made by leaders in the Chinese Communist Party. This "China Factor" (as it is frequently termed) discouraged the mobilization around arguments that might under other circumstances have energized opposition groups. Ironically, those who were most excluded from participation were children born in the Mainland, who came to Hong Kong without language skills in Cantonese or with knowledge only of the Mainland's simplified Chinese character writing system (Hong Kong, like Taiwan, continues to teach and use the more complex traditional character system). Post concludes that absence of equity arguments is in itself revealing of Hong Kong's constricted political culture and policy formulation.

Consuela Lewis conducted interviews in Pemba, Zanzibar, with groups of women who were under-represented in the educational pipeline. In addition, Lewis examined information from archive to collect data on policies and as well Zanzibar's demography and workforce. She collected information from the Minister of Education and Vocational Training. During two visits to Zanzibar, Lewis gathered information pertaining to the under-representation of marginal groups in general and more specifically women in higher education. Lewis found that one part of the problem was Zanzibar's shift from agriculture to tourism. The shift has led to a demand for a better-educated citizenry. A key question that is at nexus of this transition: What type of education does Zanzibar need and how much? In accordance with the Dakar Agreement, Zanzibar adopted policies in 2006 which have yet to be implemented to increase the number of years individuals will participate in high school. While this change will increase the number of students eligible for college admission, it does not guaranteed participation in college. Financing college is a difficult barrier for many students to overcome. Historically, free higher education was promoted by the Nyerere administration. However that program became too costly to sustain, and so an interest free loan program was developed. Several arguments are now being made to increase participation in higher education. The principal actors making these arguments were the MOVET, the legislature, the Ministers of Health, Finance and Tourism and the Principal Secretary to Minister of Education. Other actors include the faculty and staff of the State University Zanzibar, World Bank, the Scandinavian Group from the University of Oslo, USAID, and the Aga Khan Foundation. Policies aimed at increasing participation will need to be closely tied to cost and funding for students. Several critical academic training institutes are housed under the auspices of the Ministers of Health, Finance and Tourism, and these were established by policy acts. In order to consolidate those programs within the State University of Zanzibar, these policy acts will need to be repealed. One arguments that are not being made is whether a four year degree is necessary to meet the workforce demands in some fields. This argument surfaces through the resistance of faculty and staff in the aforementioned institutes to integration within the State University.

To explore the actors, arguments, events, and policies in Brazil, *Pat Somers* spent two months in Porto Alegre, talking with students and faculty members at several private and public universities. While in Brazil and in the U.S. she reviewed documents in Portuguese and English, including state and federal government documents, university policies, executive orders, speeches, blogs, media reports, and court documents. Pat

focused on the formation of “ação afirmativa.” After decades of maintaining a “myth of racial democracy,” Brazil began to develop these policies in the last decade. In 1995, President Cardoso admitted that racial discrimination against Afro Brazilians existed and called for a “Brazilian solution” to the problem. The development of specific policies on affirmative action in higher education was influenced by several events and actors. One key event was the Durban Conference on Racism (2001), which lent important moral and international political weight to affirmative action in Brazil. Following that conference, influenced by the Brazilian delegation, executive orders for affirmative action in public employment and higher education admissions were signed. The “EO”s specified a percentage of employment slots be held for Afro-Brazilians in the Federal government and in Federal and State Universities. The major actors in 2001 included President Cardoso, the MNU (Movimento Negro Unificado), several key federal deputies, and governors. Arguments included a appeal to basic justice, given that only 2 percent of tertiary students were identified by the government as being Black, and this population is thus vastly under-represented. Currently, affirmative action in higher education is being implemented at public and private universities throughout Brazil. However, the process is contested, with some activists pressing for additional programs and others challenging affirmative action in the courts. Pat concludes that existing policies are fragile, because they depend on executive orders as opposed to legislation. It is still unclear how widespread is the public support for these policies. It also not clear whether these policies will promote not mere access but success in tertiary education.

In the case of Romania, *Remus Pricopie* examined differences in public discourse regarding educational policies for Hungarian and Roma minorities, on one hand, and the rural population, on the other hand. He began with a presumption that the lack of public discourse regarding access and equity in higher education for children from rural areas was a key reason for the lack of policies to address access by rural students to higher education. In order to compare the educational policies promoted during the last 15-20 years for these three categories of Romanian population, Pricopie investigated several dimensions, including: the presence and the absence of different specific policies and the arguments related to these policies; the actors that have been involved in the policy process; the context (more exactly, the contextual elements that have encouraged or not a certain policy proposal). Pricopie found that, since 1989, the issue of education for different *minority populations* has been constantly in the public debate. The main drivers of these debates have been political parties, NGOs, international organizations (EU, OECD, Council of Europe, UN, NATO, etc.), public opinion leaders, and academics. By contrast, access and equity for people from rural area has been only occasionally mentioned since 1989. Romania’s mass media address quite often the issue of education for Hungarian and Roma population, but so rarely for students from rural areas. Therefore, the public awareness on access and equity on higher education is low. The actors promoting rural equity include only a few academics, the regional funds and structural funds of the European Union, some journalists, and a few politicians. Pricopie concluded that there were few actors with national visibility that support and promote constantly the interests of people living in rural area. Therefore, such issues are not on the public agenda. The state institutions in charge of education (Government, Parliament, other national bodies) have responded to the issues raised by the strong actors on

education (unions, political parties, international bodies etc.). But this has meant there were few policy initiatives on topics other than those raised by these national and international actors. The government in the past was more reactive (for example to Hungarian and labor groups) and proactive. Pricopie predicts that future governments will be more proactive in terms developing policies based on research and dialogue with other actors.

In the case of France, *Stephan Vincent-Lancrin* studied the emergence of affirmative action initiatives in French selective higher education institutions, notably the grandes écoles, and the context in which they appeared. Vincent-Lancrin reviewed and synthesized existing research on higher education equity and on social issues related to migration and urban areas. To identify France's actors and the arguments, Vincent-Lancrin used a variety of official government reports, public documents issued by the higher education institutions and their associations, as well as articles published in the national press. Vincent-Lancrin found that the rationales for initiating these "positive discrimination" experiments were based on the feel that the strong social inequity in accessing the grandes écoles had become a threat to social cohesion in France. Although some have argued that social inequity has increased in French higher education, this is not the case. What is true though is that the share of students from working class backgrounds has decreased in the grandes écoles enrollments, because of the change in the social structure of the population, so that the perception of increased inequity can be grounded. The main actors were a French elite higher education institution, Sciences Po, and some French grandes écoles, notably Essec (a business school) and Ensam (an engineering school). These institutions have experimented in ways to facilitate the admission of children from under-represented neighborhoods. The government (first left-wing, then right-wing) has supported the initiatives, as well as some leaders of the main political parties. Intellectuals and students have also contributed to the debate – with notably one right-wing student union bringing Sciences Po to court. Vincent-Lancrin showed that, as in the cases of primary and secondary education policies, post-secondary affirmative action policies are based on a territorial approach, building on the ZEPs (Zones d'Education Prioritaire) and other urban priority areas. He found that Sciences Po has created a new admission process for the brightest students of the ZEPs. Essec has put in place a mentoring and tutoring program for students studying in ZEPs during their high school years in order to help them to access a place in the classes préparatoires and have better chances to be admitted after the concours. Ensam has created a special classe préparatoire for students coming from the ZEPs. Both grandes écoles have not changed their admission process. The government recently announced that a share of the best students from all high schools would automatically be admitted in a classe préparatoire from next academic year, opening new avenues for those studying in ZEP high schools who had little chances to be selected. Vincent-Lancrin concluded that what is not discussed can be more important than what is explicitly discussed. In that particular area, being explicit or not about what one is doing is one of the critical policy decisions, which may explain some disagreements between the actors. This obviously challenges a framework where arguments would be taken very seriously while overlooking the actual measures encouraged. There is a strong resistance to embrace affirmative action using quotas in France. French institutions would deny their experiments can be depicted as

“affirmative action.” This explains why the ethnicity dimension is almost totally absent from the explicit debates, although there is a clear understanding among the population and the elites that this is the real stake. This is also why the strategies are harnessed on territories rather than individual characteristics. Vincent-Lancrin concluded that the inexplicitness of France might help it to avoid some of the drawbacks of an explicit affirmative action policy while nonetheless allowing greater access to visible minorities and, ultimately, to greater visibility. This could help change social stereotypes. This inexplicitness is seen by Vincent-Lancrin as akin to “squaring the circle.”

In the case of Mexico, the lower educational attainment and the poor quality of the education provided to individuals in indigenous communities is a well-recognized problem. The few college goers are usually ill-prepared and encountered several problems, which usually forced them to quit higher education. *Juan Carlos Silas* spent several months visiting Mexico’s new Intercultural Universities (IU), as well as analyzing documents and interviewing key personnel interviews. The IU were envisioned as early as 2001, using arguments for a need relation of existing “western” knowledge and the “original” knowledge. Silas obtained first-hand empirical data through his visits to the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education, and to three universities. These were, the “Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México,” “Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural,” and “Universidad Intercultural de Quintana Roo. In 2004, during the Vicente Fox administration, the Secretary of Public Education, Reyes Tamez, created the a coordinating body, within the SEP, to oversee the IU’s using Federal funds. The creation of intercultural universities led to construction of new spaces for the inclusion and participation of indigenous communities in the production of knowledge. Decision makers intentionally omitted the word “indígena” or indigenous because they wanted to avoid the connotation of segregation of ethnic groups from the rest of the country. Instead, they decided to highlight the intercultural identity of the institution. The main actor for the creation of the IU’s was the federal government which received several inputs from the civil society during the presidential campaign. The “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo” (PND) 2001-2006 included relevant ideas for improving the conditions of the neglected debate about indigenous communities. The PND problematized the idea of a homogeneous Mexican culture as inadequate, given Mexico’s indigenous populations. In addition, the PND recognized that the 1994 Zapatista movement brought the indigenous problem to national attention and forced the government, social organizations and general society to participate in a more active way in the solution of the historical neglecting of this sector of the population. The rhetoric surrounding the creation of the IUs that is used by its proponents leaves aside traditional governmental discourse about higher education as a means for promoting economic development through professionalization of the citizenry. It also leaves aside the widespread argument of compensating indigenous populations for years of marginalization. Instead, the rhetoric focuses on the need for the IU as a catalyst for indigenous communities, enabling them to give voice to community and indigenous knowledge as a compliment to the mainstream knowledge. Juan Carlos Silas concluded that, after four years in operation, and as a result of the experience of nine sites, intercultural universities show promise for enhancing the access opportunities to higher education for marginalized populations in Mexico. At the same time, they

highlight traditional knowledge and foster an informed academic dialogue about knowledge and the best way to address it.

In the case of Spain, *Michael Malahy Morris* has investigated the politics and policies regulating access to higher education in a context of recent immigration. From November 2007 until early March of 2008, Malahy Morris reviewed more than 100 articles, books and reports, he conducted site visits and he also attended several research conferences related to immigration. During his NCS visit to Granada, Michael interviewed twenty policy advocates, practitioners and scholars of immigration and education. Michael also participated in a visit led by US State Department to immigrant serving agencies, schools and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Cordoba. Concerns over immigration occur at a time when universities are pre-occupied with three others pressures. These include a shift in institutional funding, the Bologna Process for educational reform towards uniformity, and a falling demographic among the traditional college age attendance group (16-25). Universities are immersed with these pressures to the extent that the immigrant may represent a social concern but not an educational or university focus, beyond the normal teaching and research foci. Immigration has no hold on the imagination of academics other than as a field of study and research. Michael encountered several “surprises” as a result of his experience in Spain. He found that, in this process have been that immigration is not yet an area in which universities engage or to connect to their larger higher education policy concerns. Except at the senior levels of university administration or government policy-making, few realize that the downturn in the traditional age student population means universities will either have to cut budgets or find new groups to serve. Higher education actors have yet to articulate any political or academic argument to serve a more diverse group of students, or identified ways for non-traditional groups can be accommodated. Immigrants remain a particularly invisible and neglected group in this process, both in terms of rights or education for all. Moreover, there is no tradition of service or civic mission in Spanish higher education. University missions, rather, are focused on teaching and research, with the Third Mission being service largely to the corporate community as a source of revenue generation. Spain’s higher education system has not yet responded to immigration through changes in teacher preparation, curriculum development, or the social support for immigrant students and families. Thus, there is not yet in Spain an expanded mission for social inclusion, integration and or the preparation of new citizens. The educational institutions are distracted by other demands and priorities, even when they may be cognizant of the problems, and truly frozen in what the options may be. There is a tremendous need for policy analysts and advocates to map out clearer mandates and constructive educational policies to direct and fund more constructive activities in response to this ongoing shift in global migrants.