

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

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This collaboration between New Century Scholars will compare and contrast the political contexts under which eight systems of postsecondary education have promoted equity in opportunities for success in marginalized or under-represented populations. The ultimate goal of the project is to suggest an overarching heuristic, a framework that can be tested in additional cases. Our resulting framework will illuminate the interplay of argumentation, of actors and interest groups, and of the resulting policies regulating social mobility and attainment by groups which have been excluded in past years.

In this collaboration, we will focus on the eight postsecondary systems of Mexico, France, Romania, Brazil, United States, Spain, Zanzibar, and Hong Kong. We will first identify the different populations in each context that have been seen as disadvantaged in terms of access or success in postsecondary education. These different populations may or may not be formally organized or identifiable social groups. For example, these populations would include immigrants from N.Africa to Spain and from Mainland China to Hong Kong. They would include rural youth in Zanzibar and Brazil. Poor families in France and the United States would be considered, as well as identifiable ethnic groups such as the Roma and Hungarian peoples of Romania, and African-Americans or Afro-Brazilians, and the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Part of our research is to propose explanations for why certain excluded populations become seen as target groups for postsecondary policies promoting equity.

In each of the cases we study, we document that major arguments that have emerged in plans to promote greater equity. These arguments may be based on economic growth considerations, on civil rights, on social harmony, on rectification of past injustices, or on human rights. We consider the reasons for the emergence over time of arguments in each case, and we also try to suggest reasons why certain arguments have not emerged in particular contexts. The absence of an argument is in itself revealing of the context for policy formation.

We next describe the political actors and interest groups which have promoted each argument. These include both local and international agents. We consider the extent to which representatives of each argument come from the groups that are considered to be under-represented. The actors we consider include trade unions, political parties, civil rights organizations, bureaucrats, and patriotic associations. We will try to account for the absence of actors, as well as their presence, in the mobilization around postsecondary equity.

In each of the eight cases, we consider a wide range of policies that have been developed by political actors and using particular arguments. These policies can be broadly labeled as those which target particular groups and those which are more universal but which would be expected to increase opportunities for under-represented populations. To facilitate comparisons across our case studies, we will focus on two general responses to exclusion and for the promotion of postsecondary equity. One general response is to diversify the options for postsecondary education by creating a wide range of institutions that are tailored to the needs and capabilities of a large population. By expanding the types of postsecondary education that are available, some systems have succeeded in promoting access and success by previously under-represented groups. An example would be the Community College movement in the United States. Another general response we will document is the presence (and absence) of special mission universities that are specifically targeted for an excluded language or national group. An example would be the Hungarian University (?) in Romania.

After documenting the positions of actors and their arguments used to promote postsecondary diversification and special mission institutions, we will propose a general framework to account for the presence and absence of arguments and actors. Ultimately, our mission is to account for the saliency of arguments in particular cases, and to explain why “problems” of exclusion come to be seen as problematic by the public as a result of mobilization by interest groups.