

Quality and Equitable Access: Insights from Indonesia

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From the perspective of higher education (HE) systems experiencing massification, protecting teaching quality is no easy task. The obvious reason is historical underfunding. Most of the middle-income, emerging country contexts in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa—where massification is occurring at rapid rates—must deal with the postcolonial legacy of underfunding and within-country inequality. Typically, a small number of elite state institutions have absorbed the bulk of resources available (such as the highest-educated staff, material resources, and donor aid). This means that quality has not been distributed evenly from the outset of higher education development. Secondly, there is the challenge of creating system-wide impact across a diverse sector. Massification in emerging economies has tended to rely on a large private sector to absorb demand. The quality of the private sector varies significantly, with some institutions exceeding the quality of state institutions, and others falling far short.

EQUITABLE ACCESS—THE MISSING LINK

For HE systems undergoing massification, a key challenge is also how to expand in a way that does not undermine fair or equitable access for students. The access consideration is also linked to the issue of quality. After all, what is the point of expanding access to HE for all groups in society, if they are not accessing an education that is of equal or meaningful quality? Until recently, however, quality and equitable access have often been discussed separately. This policy “blind spot” has fortunately been addressed in recent UN policy-making, most notably in the Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4.3 now calls for “equal access ... to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education,” to be achieved by 2030. Put simply, governments must hold institutions to account over both their teaching quality and their support for equitable access. The big question now is how to achieve that in practice, especially in the emerging economy/massification context described above.

THE CASE OF INDONESIA

The case of Indonesia provides valuable insight here, as

its current HE policy framework addresses both teaching quality and equitable access. The key is an inclusive policy approach that involves both state and private higher education institutions (HEIs). This makes sense, considering that over 90 percent of HEIs in Indonesia are run as privately owned foundations, absorbing some two-thirds of enrollments.

Teaching quality is regulated at state and private HEIs in multiple ways. Minimum qualification requirements for teaching staff are set in law. HEIs are required by law to undergo accreditation every five years—at both institutional and degree program levels—at which point the results are ranked from A to C. A high accreditation ranking has tangible labor market value. Employers often require a qualification obtained from a B- or A-ranked institution in their selection criteria. Since 2012, accreditation rubrics have been made more rigorous by harmonizing them with the National Higher Education Standards. This is a form of curricular standardization, outlining common principles for teaching, research, and community service provision. Furthermore, up to 60 percent of curricular content is standardized in subject benchmarks of learning outcomes, devised with input from professional associations. Of course, low-quality or even outright fraudulent providers always

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remain a threat. The current accountability framework empowers the authorities to clamp down on this issue. To date, the ministry of research, technology, and higher education (MRTHE) has closed down tens of private providers and “frozen” operations at 243 institutions, blocking them from admitting new students before improvements are made. Authorities have even fired civil servants found guilty of using “pay-for-your degree” certificates. Meanwhile, a degree of flexibility is retained by granting institutions some autonomy over their curricula, enabling them to innovate and customize their teaching according to their academic/market niches, their institutional mission, and the needs and characteristics of their student intake.

Accountability also extends to equitable access. Higher Education Law 12/2012 Article 74 stipulates that HEIs must allocate 20 percent of their annual student intake to

students from disadvantaged backgrounds, to be distributed across the full range of study programs. This latter stipulation ensures that students from low-income backgrounds are not limited to low-cost or low-prestige degree programs. The law defines disadvantage on two grounds: low-income status and/or coming from one of the country's most isolated and deprived districts. To address the first criterion, the state now imposes means-tested tuition fees at all state HEIs. In other words, about a third of students in the HE system only pay what their families can afford. To address the second criterion, the state has introduced an affirmative action scholarship scheme targeting students from Papua and Aceh in particular (ADik Papua/3T).

To further boost participation for low-income students, the government introduced the merit-based and means-tested Bidikmisi scholarship in 2010. The MRTHE dispenses a set tuition fee contribution directly to the host institution, and a living stipend directly to the student. Accredited private HEIs are also eligible to participate in this scheme, as long as they demonstrate a minimum B-ranking at institutional and degree program level. Including trusted private HEIs in the scheme widens student access to high-quality and niche programs unavailable elsewhere. Some private providers have proven success in teaching hard-to-reach groups of students, which further aids equitable access. Of course, the scheme cannot be compared to a blanket study grant along the lines of financial aid packages offered in some European countries. In 2017, the *Bidikmisi* cohort reached 80,000 students, equating to roughly 15 percent of the state sector intake for the year, or 5 percent of the combined state and private sector intake overall. The number of applicants outstrips the quotas allocated each year. Clearly, there is still an unmet need for financial aid, but the scheme is at least a valuable start.

CONCLUSION

Of course, accountability of the HE sector cannot be resolved overnight, but Indonesia has at least made an impressive start. Whether this model can be replicated elsewhere is by no means clear. Arriving at the current policy framework in Indonesia was certainly a long and contested process. A policy U-turn in favor of protecting teaching quality and fair access across the whole system only came about after civil society protests, a protracted legal battle, the revoking of an earlier marketization law by the constitutional court, and disagreement between competing factions within government. Ultimately, though, Indonesia has defied the frequently espoused policy rhetoric about quality and equity being an "either-or" choice. Pursuit of one does not have to come at the expense of the other. The case of

Indonesia certainly offers a tempting proposition for other massifying, emerging economy contexts—might it be possible to have your cake and eat it too? ■

Post-18 Education and Funding in England

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During the 2017 general election in the United Kingdom, the opposition—the Labour Party—proposed that higher education tuition fees should be abolished. Labour were rewarded with a better than expected election performance, especially from younger voters. The Conservative Party narrowly won the election. In a knee-jerk reaction, Prime Minister Theresa May in February 2018 commissioned Philip Augar, a banker and historian, to head up a review of post-18 education and funding. Its terms of reference, confined to England, were to “look at how we can ensure that the education system for those aged 18 years and over is accessible to all, is supported by a funding system that provides value for money and works for students and taxpayers, incentivizes choice and competition across the sector, and encourages the development of the skills that we need as a country.” The Augar Review’s report, *Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* was finally published in May 2019.

The Augar Report’s core message is the need to confront the disparity between the 50 percent of young people who participate in higher education and the other 50 percent who do not. Tackling this divide “is a matter of fairness and equity and is likely to bring considerable social and economic benefits to individuals and the country.” Does the report succeed?

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING

Starting with the 50 percent in higher education (HE)—the “cared for.” The review represents the first official ex-