

Inequalities in Access and Success: Higher Education's Biggest Problem?

Graeme Atherton

This paper examines the data on who participates and succeeds in higher education across the world by gender and socioeconomic background. It argues that these data reveal pervasive inequalities in access and participation. Such inequalities have implications for the higher education sector's ability to garner support for the challenges it faces, making equity central to the future of higher education across the world.

Many drivers of what has been recently described as an “existential” crisis facing higher education come from outside the sector, implying that higher education is simply a pawn in the game of bigger geopolitical forces. However, some of the fundamental characteristics of higher education across the world both make the sector more vulnerable to these forces and suggest that it needs to do more to take responsibility for its own predicament. One such characteristic is the extent of inequality in [who participates and succeeds in higher education across the world](#). Understanding the nature of this inequality and its potential impact on higher education is crucial if any route out of this crisis is to be found.

The Data on Access and Success

Building an understanding of these inequalities requires the gathering of data from different sources, as no single agency collects data on inequalities in higher education participation and success on a global scale. It also calls for appreciating that there are limitations to what we know—partly because inequality in any society has a range of dimensions whose importance varies. For example, rurality, ethnic background, and religion interact with gender and socioeconomic background to play differing roles in shaping life chances across nations.

What Differences by Gender Look Like

Two areas in which there is more commonality across contexts - and where the most data is collected - are gender and proxy measures of socio-economic background. In terms of gender and higher education, UNESCO collects data on gender parity for most countries in the world (over 90 percent). These data show that less than 20 percent of countries have what could be described as gender parity in participation or attainment. In most countries, more female than male students take part in higher education. Broadly speaking, as countries grow richer, the gap between female and male participation in higher education widens. However, this relationship is more complex than it appears. In Caribbean countries, for instance, where GDP per capita is relatively low, female participation in higher

education exceeds that of males with some of the largest gaps in the world. Yet any global gap between males and females narrows substantially when it comes to success or completion of higher education. In other words, a considerable number of female students across the world are starting higher education but not finishing.

Socioeconomic Background and Pervasive Inequality

While measures of gender are fairly uniform, socioeconomic background is more complicated. Comparing countries here is challenging. Multiple agencies measure higher education participation and attainment by taking socioeconomic background as a proxy. These agencies include the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; the World Bank; UNESCO; and, in Europe, the European Commission and the EUROSTUDENT project. They all do this differently, however: some agencies gather data on income or household wealth, whereas others capture parental education. In addition to these agencies, a growing number of countries collect their own data via administrative systems related to higher education application and completion. These data are not always readily available though.

While gaps in data do exist, when the data from these varied sources are considered together, the message is clear: there are no countries in the world where participation or attainment in higher education for those from lower socioeconomic groups surpasses that from higher groups. Inequality is pervasive, touching richer and poorer countries as well as older and newer higher education systems. It is at its most extreme in Africa; other regions in the world demonstrate little difference in relative inequality aside from North America, which performs a little better on this metric. The extent of this inequality is stark. In the majority of countries, individuals from higher socioeconomic groups have more than twice the chance of progressing to higher education or of obtaining a degree than their less-wealthy counterparts. But there is some evidence of progress. In Chile, it was previously the case that for every one student from a low socioeconomic background who earned a

higher education qualification, roughly four students from high socioeconomic backgrounds did so. This disparity has now lessened to about three high-income students for every one low-income student. However, many countries have seen little change over time, and some are even going backward.

Why Inequalities Matter to Higher Education

The weight of evidence here is too important to ignore—for societies and for universities. Who participates and succeeds in higher education (or, more precisely, who does not) plays a major role in higher education's present existential crisis. There are whole swaths of society across the world who simply do not see higher education as relevant to them. Such groups include not only people from less wealthy backgrounds but also, depending on the country concerned, the majority of men or women. It is thus not surprising that mass protests are rare when governments introduce, or threaten to introduce, policies that erode academic freedom. The matters concerning universities the most are not those that concern most people, in particular the many who have never entered a university or encountered one firsthand.

It shouldn't be a surprise that higher education participation and success are unequal. Higher education is designed to be selective, and its inequalities reflect wider inequities within the societies in which it sits. At the same time, countries from the same region can have quite different results where participation and inequality are concerned. In Europe, for instance, France

appears to have gone backward in recent years while Germany has made some progress. There are also a growing number of examples of universities who have managed to admit far more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than is the norm.

Putting Equity at the Heart of Higher Education

We need to know much more about how and why these universities and countries have been able to extend access and success. Policies and practice do not always travel well across borders, but efforts need to be made to spread what is working. Improving the quality and accessibility of data is also vital. Much of the information available from the agencies listed above is dated or drawn only from surveys. Countries themselves may have a more accurate picture. This may show more progress than initially assumed (and from which we can learn) or may equally identify an even bigger problem to address. Most importantly, organizations working internationally (across various countries, themes, and institutional types or missions in higher education) have to recognize that this pervasive inequality is at the root of the malaise they are facing. They need to start putting equity at the center of what they do, which calls for a step change in how most of these organizations prioritize issues. A different kind of crisis requires a different kind of response from higher education. Equity is not an add-on that is good to have when it can be afforded but sacrificed when budgets become more constrained. It is the solution.

Graeme Atherton is vice-principal of Ruskin College Oxford, University of West London, UK, and director of the World Access to Higher Education Network. Email: Graeme.atherton@uwl.ac.uk.