

International Strategies for Increasing Attainment

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In the past decade, increasing attainment rates—the percentage of adult workers holding a degree beyond the secondary level—have replaced participation rates as a primary goal of higher education policy in many countries. Positively, this shift in focus means that policies in these countries are being designed to improve both access and success of students rather than emphasizing just more access as measured by traditional participation-rate measures.

In the United States these policy changes have resulted, first, in a debate over why a number of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries are catching up or surpassing overall US attainment rates, especially for younger workers, while the United States spends more and commits more of its gross domestic product on higher education than any other OECD country. Second, these patterns raise questions about how other countries improve their attainment rates without increasing their costs per student and financial commitment.

DIFFERENTIATION OF MEASURES

To address these two queries, Jobs for the Future as part of its Making Opportunity Affordable project recently published a report we cowrote entitled “Cost, Commitment, and Attainment: An International Comparison.” The report elaborates the importance to differentiate among key subcomponents when discussing three measures of tertiary education activity. Costs per student, for example, should be examined separately for education and research (although measuring research effort as OECD does on a per student basis makes little sense).

Public and private levels of commitment should be examined separately as well because countries that devote a lot of public resources to higher education rarely rely on private resources as well. The opposite also applies: countries that rely more on private resources to fund higher education typically do not invest as much in public resources. Canada is the principal exception to this rule.

For attainment, the report states the relevance of differentiating between bachelor's and sub-bachelor's (e.g., associate) degrees. Countries that rank highest on bachelor's-degree attainment such as Norway and the United States tend to have

low or mediocre sub-bachelor attainment rates. Countries such as Canada and Japan that have the highest sub-bachelor's rates of attainment do not represent countries with the highest rates of bachelor's-degree attainment. Definitely, the growing number of reports that cite the rankings on overall attainment rates should clarify this distinction.

INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES

Another key lesson to be learned includes the most beneficial aspects of moving international comparisons beyond statistical rankings to examining the strategies that countries use in achieving high rates of attainment. To that end, our review of OECD-reported statistics examines why attainment rates may have grown more rapidly in some countries than others. The report suggests that the following eight strategies may have helped various countries achieve increases in attainment in sustainable ways.

Public and private levels of commitment should be examined separately as well because countries that devote a lot of public resources to higher education rarely rely on private resources as well.

Increasing degree-completion rates. One obvious way to raise attainment rates is to introduce regulations or provide incentives to institutions or students that lead to higher degree-completion rates. A number of countries have made strides in this regard. For example, Denmark now uses graduation measures in its funding formulas. At least a handful of OECD countries have increased the number of graduates relative to population—including Australia, Iceland, and Italy. Increasing degree-completion rates would seem to be a more sustainable way to improve attainment than encouraging large increases in enrollments, which could strain system capacities.

Reducing time-to-degree. Through the Bologna process, European countries are seeking to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their higher education systems in a number of ways. One key focus involves reducing the normal time-to-degree for bachelor's degree programs, to three or four years from what has been five or more years in many European countries. A number of European and non-European countries have taken this approach, including Australia, Czech Republic, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The Bologna process also has stimulated some countries to institute reforms that help to lessen the average time-to-degree.

Expanding sub-bachelor's programs. A principal way for countries to stimulate growth in attainment at relatively modest levels of cost and commitment is to invest more heavily in their sub-bachelor's-degree programs, which tend to cost less per student than most bachelor's-degree programs. Canada and Japan

have both used this strategy to achieve very high levels of overall degree attainment.

Making a high level of public commitment. The investment of more resources in higher education often leads to higher levels of participation, which then may translate into higher rates of attainment. A number of countries, especially from Nordic regions, have made a significant public commitment to expanding their higher education systems and raising attainment rates. Ireland, too, has significantly increased its investment of public resources in higher education, but this increase came more from rapid national economic growth than from a high level of public commitment.

Relying on the private sector to foster growth. South Korea and Japan are the prime examples of industrialized countries that have relied on private-sector institutions to fuel growth in participation and attainment. Both have become worldwide leaders in attainment without a high cost per student or high level of public commitment. Some developing countries have pursued this strategy for increasing the size of their higher education systems with reasonable success.

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Enrolling more students in universities. Several Scandinavian countries now have bachelor's-degree attainment rates similar to or exceeding those in the United States, at least for their youngest workers. Norway, with the highest rate of bachelor's-degree attainment, has focused on bachelor's-degree programs, with a very small sector of sub-bachelor's programs. As a result, these countries tend to have relatively high levels of both education cost per student and public commitment. They also tend to spend more on research per student than do countries with smaller university sectors.

Increasing tuition fees in the public sector. Some OECD countries have raised their participation and thus their attainment rates by relying more on the fees paid by students attending public-sector institutions. Canada has followed this strategy, and it now has the highest overall attainment rate among OECD countries, although much of this growth has been in sub-bachelor's degrees. In the United States and New Zealand, higher public fees also have expanded resources, which in turn allow for higher enrollments. Australia is the prime example, through its Higher Education Contribution Scheme, of a country that now publicly funds higher fees initially, with students repaying these fees based on their income once they graduate. England and Thailand recently have adopted similar approaches.

Recruiting abroad. Another means for countries to increase resources and enrollments is to recruit more students from

other countries. The fees these students pay, which often approach market rates, can generate significant resources for a higher education system. Australia and New Zealand are particularly aggressive in this regard: overseas students represent one-fifth or more of total higher education enrollments. In Austria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, overseas students represent at least one-tenth of enrollments. But to the extent that these students do not become citizens of the countries in which they study, large influxes of international students may not affect attainment rates significantly.

CONCLUSION

Each of these eight strategies are worth considering as countries around the world deal with economies in deep recession. Since the recovery from these hard times may be longer than normal, it is even more critical for political and education leaders to focus on higher education strategies that will lead to more degree attainment achieved in financially sustainable ways. ■

The Unintended Effects of the Bologna Reforms

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When the Bologna Declaration was signed 10 years ago, the 29 ministers' commitment to concerted national reforms of their higher education systems and to the creation of common and readable degree structures was not taken seriously at first. Many stakeholders saw these goals as the inflated rhetoric that had become typical of European ministerial meetings. Now, however, close to the self-set deadline of 2010, after a process of unprecedented ministerial peer pressure, most of the reform objectives appear implemented, albeit in most countries in a merely formal and superficial manner.

The ideal of the Bologna reforms to improve the quality and international attractiveness of European higher education remains a vision, for it would have needed substantial investments, which few countries were ready to carry out. The prospect involved multiple policies: student-centered teaching, flexible curricula and learning paths, transparent descriptions of learning outcomes to facilitate student mobility and inter-institutional recognition of [program] study periods and higher education's adaptation to more diverse student qualifications and labor-market needs. However, such trends would have required better student-staff ratios and staff development than most countries were ready to provide.