

Access Means Inequality

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It seems a contradiction that access would bring inequality to higher education, but that trend is the usual case. Students, and institutions, while catering to mass access, provide vastly different quality, facilities, and focus than do elite institutions at the top, and this gulf has widened as access has expanded worldwide. Furthermore, mass higher education has, for a majority of students worldwide, lowered quality and increased dropout rates. All of these consequences have become inevitable and logical. These effects do not argue against access but rather call for a more realistic understanding of the implications of massification and the steps needed to ameliorate the problems created by dramatic increases in enrollments.

Mass higher education now forms a worldwide phenomenon. Enrollments constitute more than 150 million worldwide, having increased by 53 percent in just a decade. Twenty-six percent of the age group now participates in postsecondary education globally, up from 19 percent in 2000. In many of the rich countries, access is over half and in some over 80 percent, and in much of the developing world enrollments are dramatically increasing. This increase in access has been universally hailed—contributing to social mobility for individuals, the expansion of the knowledge economy of nations, and an increase in skill levels worldwide. In the first decade of the 21st century, quite likely more

students will study in academic institutions than in the previous 10 centuries combined.

Massification has moved largely from the developed countries, which have achieved high participation rates, to developing and some middle-income nations. In fact, the majority of enrollment growth in the coming several decades will take place in two countries—China and India. China enrolls about 23 percent and India around 12 percent of the age cohort. The region with the lowest enrollment rate, sub-Saharan Africa, which in 2007 was educating only 6 percent of the age group, is expanding access but has a long way to go.

The Consequences of Access

Access brings a series of inevitable changes to higher education systems. The specific impacts and conditions will vary by location, but all countries experience these factors to some extent. Countries that have more financial resources, a strong commitment to postsecondary education, and perhaps a slower growth curve may be less dramatically affected than others; but the impact is universal and of great relevance to policymakers and the higher education community.

Student populations not only expand but also become more diverse. Traditionally, universities educated only a small elite—often fewer than 5 percent of the age group. These students came from top-secondary schools and from well-educated and affluent families. Access opens higher education to young people from an array of social class and educational backgrounds, to students from rural backgrounds, and to students who are the first in their families to study at higher education institutions. One of the most dramatic implications of greater access constitutes the expansion of women's enrollments.

Women are now the majority of students in many countries. Serving students from diverse backgrounds and generally without a high-quality secondary education is a challenge. Serving these students is often more expensive than educating a small elite because tutoring, counseling, and other services are needed but are seldom available. At one time, universities assumed that almost all of the small student populations they were educating had obtained a high-quality secondary education and were prepared for academic study. Expanded access has delivered many students who have neither the academic background nor the ability that was once the norm.

Expanded access obviously requires more facilities. Existing universities and other postsecondary institutions have expanded, new institutions have been built, but supply can seldom keep up with demand. Deterioration in the conditions of study for students is common if not universal. Overcrowding, inadequate libraries and other study facilities, and the inability to provide students with the courses needed to graduate constitute familiar circumstances.

The academic profession has been stretched to the breaking point. Close to half of those teaching in postsecondary education worldwide possess only a bachelor's degree. Class sizes have increased, and students receive little personal attention from professors. Academic salaries have deteriorated, and many academics must hold more than one job to survive. It is likely that access has produced, on average, a poorer learning environment for students, in part because the academic profession has not grown fast enough to keep up with expansion.

Demand for access has contributed to the rise of private higher education in many countries. Governments have been unable to fund public-postsecondary

institutions to meet expanding enrollments, and the private sector has taken up the slack. In much of Latin America, where public universities dominated the sector two decades ago, private institutions now educate half or more of the students. Most of the new private institutions are “demand absorbing”—unselective and often poor-quality schools providing a degree and little else. Many are for-profit. First generation students may be forced to attend these new private schools, which often charge relatively high tuition, because they cannot gain access to the public sector.

Massification has created the demand for quality assurance and accreditation, but few countries have been able to set up and enforce effective regimes to ensure appropriate quality standards. This environment means that at least for the present there is little transparency or knowledge about the effectiveness of much of higher education provision, particularly at institutions that serve a mass clientele.

Access growth has meant a significant increase in noncompletion rates in higher education. Even in the United States, the country that developed the first mass higher education system and allocated significant resources to higher education, the proportion has increased significantly of students who take more than the standard four years to complete an undergraduate degree or who do not complete any degree. Many countries are unable to cope with increased demand and routinely “flunk out” a significant proportion of entering students.

Access has increased the cost of higher education—to society, individuals, and families. In much of the world, the increased cost has fallen on those who can least afford it—first-generation students and those from lower-income

families. Governments cannot afford to fund access and have increased the cost of study or turned over expansion to the private sector.

The Inevitability of Inequality

The reality of postsecondary education, in an era of access combined with fiscal constraint and ever-increasing costs, is that inequality within higher education systems is here to stay. Most countries have or are creating differentiated systems of higher education that will include different kinds of institutions serving specific needs. This process is inevitable and largely positive. However, the research universities at the top of any system tend to serve an elite clientele and have high status, while institutions lower in the hierarchy cater to students who cannot compete for the limited seats at the top. Major and growing differences exist in funding, quality, and facilities within systems. Given financial and staffing constraints, institutional inequalities will continue. Students will come from more diverse backgrounds and in many ways will be more difficult to serve effectively.

All of these issues constitute a deep contradiction for 21st-century higher education. As access expands, inequalities within the higher education system also grow. Conditions of study for many students deteriorate. More of them fail to obtain degrees. The economic benefits assumed to accrue to persons with a postsecondary qualification probably decline for many. Access remains an important goal—and an inevitable goal—of higher education everywhere, but it creates many challenges.