

Expanding higher education systems in low- and middle-income countries: the challenges of equity and quality

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Published online: 18 August 2016
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Higher education systems worldwide are faced with an intractable tension between the demands of quality, equity and funding (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010). On the one hand, there are strong pressures for equitable expansion of enrolments, driven by both supply-side factors—principally the perceived importance of higher education for the knowledge economy—and demand-side factors, namely the increasing number of secondary leavers seeing university degrees as the primary means of economic betterment and social mobility. On the other hand, universities are grappling with the challenges of maintaining quality in the face of rapid expansion, particularly as massification implies both a rise in sheer numbers of students and an increasing diversity of incoming students, including in terms of academic preparation for university. The conundrum is further deepened by constraints on public funding and the uncertainties associated with alternative private sources.

While all countries struggle to reconcile the competing demands of budgetary constraints and high levels of university participation, the issues faced in low- and middle-income countries (LIMCs) are distinctive for a number of reasons. First, resource constraints (particularly in low-income countries) present severe limitations, both in terms of available public funding for the higher education system and with regard to the possibilities of cost-sharing with students and their families. Second, as a result of public resource constraints, higher education systems in lower-income contexts have traditionally been restricted to a small elite population and, as a result, rapid expansion represents a significant and destabilising shock. Third, even when funding is in place, such systems have limited capacity to expand, due to the insufficient number of qualified academic faculty able to staff institutions. Fourth, quality challenges at the primary and secondary levels in such contexts tend to lead to a high proportion of under-prepared students entering

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university. Finally, less-resourced contexts are often restricted in their national autonomy, due to the influence of supranational organisations and external donors on policy agendas.

Although these constraints present formidable obstacles, there is no question that higher education systems in lower-income contexts must expand—and must do so equitably, without endangering quality. After decades of scepticism surrounding the need for low-income countries to invest in higher education, largely due to the regressive nature of publicly funded elite systems, there is now widespread acceptance of the relationship between higher education and development (McCowan and Schendel 2016). The benefits to individuals enrolled in higher education have long been accepted, but it is now broadly acknowledged that higher education also contributes to development at the macro-level, by helping to fuel economic growth and strengthen crucial public services. Crucially, there is a parallel recognition that such macro-level benefits are more likely to materialise in higher participation systems (Tilak 2010). As such, governments around the world, including those in lower-income contexts, are incentivised to expand access to higher education. Development-related rationales for expansion are also bolstered by increasing demand for higher education, fuelled by the twin pressures of a burgeoning youth population and an improvement in secondary school completion rates in many countries—along with the continuing faith in university degrees as a primary mechanism for social mobility (Marginson, this issue).

Although it is a positive development to see renewed interest in higher education from both national governments and international agencies, it is a highly problematic assumption that simply doing *more* higher education will necessarily bring benefits to society. The fundamental error of attending to expansion without paying sufficient attention to quality was already made at the primary level in the early stages of the Education for All initiative, leading to overcrowded classrooms, strains on school and local government infrastructure and poor learning outcomes in a number of contexts. Attention to quality of higher education is, therefore, essential in ensuring that access is meaningful for students and that institutions can make a positive contribution to society beyond the issuing of diplomas (Schendel 2015; Schendel and McCowan 2015).

Similarly, as it is clear that the *inequitable* expansion of higher education provision tends to lead to negative social outcomes, namely increased socio-economic inequality (McMahon 2009), it is crucial that attention also be paid to equity of access, both in absolute terms and with regard to stratification of higher education systems. However, in most contexts, equity has not been realised in either respect. Gender, race/ethnicity and economic background all act as general barriers to access in many lower-income countries around the world (see, for example, Sifuna 2006, in reference to Kenya). At the same time, there is clear evidence of inequitable access to more prestigious institutions (e.g. Buckner 2013), a trend which appears to be increasing, rather than decreasing, in many countries.

In an attempt to address one or more of these challenges, policy makers have often inadvertently exacerbated another. One popular strategy for ensuring quality in the face of funding constraints, for instance, is the concentration of funds in a few flagship institutions. This trend has been actively supported by a number of international foundations and agencies (e.g. the World Bank, with its Centers of Academic Excellence Program, and the now defunct Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, supported by all of the major American philanthropic foundations) and fuelled by the global fever for creating ‘world-class universities’ (Altbach and Balán 2007). However, this strategy tends to funnel public funding away from regional universities, which are likely to cater to a more diverse population of students, thereby negatively affecting both the quality of more peripheral institutions and equity across the system. Similarly, many countries have embraced the

private sector as a solution to the challenge of expansion. However, numerous studies have demonstrated how private university expansion can result in inequalities of access, experiences and outcomes for students (e.g. McCowan 2004; Morley and Lugg 2009). Hybrid forms of privatisation, such as that seen in the ‘parallel streams’ in East Africa, meanwhile, ease pressure on government funding but at the expense of teaching and learning quality (Wangenge-Ouma 2007). In a similar vein, distance education and e-learning, which are often put forward as a low-cost solution to the problem of access, also raise substantial quality concerns, given the significant challenges related to connectivity and learner autonomy.

For the past fifteen years, the development agenda has been driven by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which included no reference to higher education. However, the new Sustainable Development Goals, which replaced the MDGs at the end of 2015, imply a crucial cross-cutting role for higher education, while also including a specific goal aimed at ‘ensur[ing] equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university’ (United Nations 2015). Questions of how to better support the equitable expansion of high-quality higher education in lower-income contexts are, therefore, an issue of increased concern for international policy makers, as well as those responsible for higher education provision across the Global South. This special issue seeks to engage with this crucial and timely debate, by presenting a range of perspectives on how tensions between access, equity and quality manifest themselves within—and, crucially, might be addressed by—higher education systems in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The first four articles explore the core constructs of access, equity and quality which orient the special issue. The first contribution—by Simon Marginson—focuses on the global trend towards high participation systems of higher education. He argues that, more than the requirements of the economy or the active encouragement of states, it is family demand for social betterment that has driven the startling expansion across high-, middle- and low-income countries alike. While there are some universal gains, high participation systems have a tendency towards stratification, leading to intensification of socio-economic inequalities and restriction of high-value rewards to the privileged. While most of the evidence to date comes from Europe, North America and East Asia, the article ends by drawing out principles for ensuring an egalitarian expansion of relevance to low- and middle-income countries that are entering the phase of high participation systems.

Following this global overview, the contribution of Sonia Ilie and Pauline Rose emphasises the enormity of the access challenge in many low-income contexts, by looking across a broad sample of countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Through robust analysis of recent Demographic and Health Survey data from 35 LMICs, Ilie and Rose highlight current gaps in access to higher education, focusing particularly on the crucial inequalities related to poverty and gender which can be identified across the sample.

Castro, Yamada and Arias expand the notion of ‘equity’ in their article, by investigating a range of variables, beyond poverty, which restrict access to higher education in Peru. The authors start from the premise that cost cannot be the only barrier to access, given that a disproportionate number of university students in Peru come from wealthy backgrounds, despite the availability of free public education. Their subsequent analysis of a novel dataset, which includes measures of cognitive and socio-emotional skills, determines that cognitive skills, family background and educational background, is as important as family income in determining access to higher education in Peru.

Rebecca Schendel’s contribution focuses on the question of quality, by investigating an example of innovative pedagogical practice that was recently implemented at the Kigali

Institute of Science and Technology in Rwanda. Schendel's article explores the impact of the pedagogical approach on student learning outcomes and examines the mediating role of institutional culture in supporting excellence in pedagogy. While focusing primarily on the complexity of pedagogical reform, it also holds relevance for questions of access, highlighting the dangers of expanding enrolments without paying sufficient attention to student learning within universities.

The rest of the contributions engage with some of the potential policy responses to the challenge of equitable expansion of access to quality higher education. Tristan McCowan's article examines the commodification and unbundling of higher education, two recent trends which have been lauded by some governments and international agencies as innovative solutions to entrenched funding challenges within the sector. McCowan analyses how these trends could both help and hinder the contribution of higher education to development, by investigating the opportunities and threats in respect of the value, the function and the interaction of higher education in low-income contexts. In so doing, he both raises crucial concerns about the developmental potential of these models and provides a concise theoretical framework to guide analysis of other policy solutions in the sector.

Moses Oketch provides a reflection on funding schemes in sub-Saharan Africa in the context of rapid expansion of access. Considering a range of alternatives—i.e. free of charge provision, fees and loan schemes—he analyses their implications for efficiency and equity in a region that has experienced dramatic growth over the last 40 years, but still has the lowest enrolment ratio of any of the global regions. The dual track approach common in East Africa—combining government-sponsored places with privately funded places within the same institution—is seen to have been successful in generating much needed funding for public universities, but to have a potentially intolerable effect on quality if there is not regulation of enrolment numbers. The article argues that blanket solutions are undesirable, that attention must be paid to macroeconomic conditions of a given society, and that the 'threshold' for the introduction of cost-sharing policies is context-specific.

Faustina Msigwa looks more closely at one of the funding schemes discussed by Oketch—the provision of means-tested student loans—by investigating the effectiveness of Tanzania's university student loan programme. Msigwa concludes that despite the government's intentions to expand access to higher education for low-income students, imprecise wording of the loan policy and high levels of discretion given to the Higher Education Student Loans Board have restricted the impact of the initiative, by enabling wealthier students to access the available government funding.

Finally, Thomas Muhr's contribution looks beyond the nation state by exploring a regional approach to expanding equitable access to higher education. While expansion in most parts of the world has been carried through the private sector or marketised public sector, the neo-structuralist governments of Venezuela and Brazil have since 2003 developed new forms of regional cooperation, both through the Mercosur and the specific border region of Pacaraima/Santa Elena de Uairén. Through a multiscale analysis, Muhr shows the ways in which these initiatives have created a new logic of internationalisation and enhanced both the availability and accessibility of higher education in the region, albeit with little impact as of yet on 'horizontal' (McCowan 2016) within the sector.

Together, the contributions in this issue provide an important and timely contribution to the existing literature on expanding higher education systems, both by providing new theoretical insights into the connections between access, equity and quality in low-income contexts and by carefully examining some of the policy responses intended to address such concerns.

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