

**Measures to combat educational disadvantage:  
A European consultation symposium December 2011**

Rapporteur Report

**WORKSHOP 2: HIDDEN BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Introduction**

The topic of inequalities in higher education raises issues which are specific to the HE sector. First, the HE system is characterised and underpinned by a contradiction. On the one hand HE reasserts elitism and social divisions, on the other, it aims to be transformative in terms of widening participation and social mobility. Thus HE raises a potential conflict between the pursuit of excellence, including selectivity, and the desire for greater equality of opportunity and outcome. Within HE efficiency and equity may be contradictory rather than complementary.

It is also recognised that a key factor influencing unequal opportunities in access to HE lies outside the HE sector, and can largely be explained for differences in school/academic attainment which in turn are related to prospective students' socio-economic background.

**Key Barriers to HE participation**

The key barriers to HE are associated with different stages in the lifecycle of a prospective student, from initial entry to HE to graduation. The key stages are identified below. However, an overarching theme covering all stages is the issue of affordability.

1. Affordability
2. Participation in HE for whom?
  - a. Access – entry to HE
3. Participation in what?/ Experience of HE participation
  - a. What HE door enter - Type of institution
  - b. The offer – type of provision
  - c. Student experience while at university
  - d. Retention
4. Participation for what?
  - o Outcomes in terms of labour market experiences on graduation
  - o Access to postgraduate study

## 1. AFFORDABILITY

- Fees or no fees?

There is mixed evidence on the extent to which fees inhibit equal access to HE. EU Countries which do not charge fees have unequal initial access to HE (e.g. Sweden) as do countries charging fees (e.g. England). Some believe that the absence of fees is regressive because it is primarily middle class families and students who benefit from free HE.

- Government funded support – deal with liquidity constraints

There was complete consensus that government funding is required to provide financial support for students and private sector provision would lead to market failure. Without it government funding, liquidity constraints would mean falls in participation and unequal HE access.

### Favoured types of financial support

- Means-tested grants – particularly important to aid initial access to HE for low income students and to encourage persistence and completion
- Loans – need to be income-contingent underwritten by the state guaranteed – but recognised that there must be a good/reliable tax system for the collection of loan repayments. Student loans are available in a variety of countries but there is little evidence to suggest that one scheme is better than another – and there is a question about better for whom – the student or the government funding the loans (i.e. the public expenditure costs of loans systems vary considerably). Concerns about loans focused on the issue of debt aversion - low-income students are more likely than their wealthier peers to be debt averse and may not take loans out which may deter them from entering HE. Hence the need for grants in addition to loans, especially for low-income students. While ‘debt aversion’ may be deemed to be as an economically irrational response to income contingent loans, the reality of debt aversion, especially among low income students cannot be dismissed.

### Unfavoured types of financial support

- Bursaries funded by HEIs as these tend to be discretionary rather than an entitlement and eligibility criteria vary from one HEI to another adding to the complexity of student support. Moreover, research suggests their effectiveness is questionable.
- Employers – tend to be very selective in terms of who they fund and favour those most likely to succeed – full-time employees with experience of HE fund students who have

## 2. PARTICIPATION IN HE FOR WHOM?

### General issues

- The sort of groups disadvantaged in access to HE will vary from one country to another but likely to be commonalities in terms of their socio-economic characteristics especially in relation to social class and household income.

- How many people should enter HE – anyone who wants to go, or should numbers of entrants be restricted, and if so how restrict numbers in an equitable manner?
- Should the number of places the state is prepared to pay for be limited, if so how restrict numbers in an equitable manner?
- Is Higher education a compulsion? There is a danger that someone who is deemed appropriate for HE but elects not to go to HE is deemed somehow to be making a mistake, and must be re-motivated or re-engineered by society.
- Should we make people change their rationality and aspirations, so that they enter HE?
- If motivation to enter HE is stratified by the socio-economic characteristics of potential students – how do we deal with this?
- If HE entry qualifications are stratified by the socio-economic characteristics of potential students – how deal with that? Recognised that patterns of access affected by the qualifications of HE entrants

### **Measures to increase initial participation for under-represented groups**

Little research that clearly established the causal link between and intervention and its impact on initial participation

#### **Favoured measures**

- Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

Some countries use APL and other do not. Suggest that it is used more widely and best practice is exchanged.

- Reconfigure what is meant by drop out and non-completion

Definition in some countries is very narrow

- Information, advice and guidance – minimum standards – all routes into HE  
Need to establish some minimum standards for IAG which does not favour a particular route into HE for particular student groups but provides comprehensive unbiased IAG, including information on student financial support, on all potential routes for all potential students. Currently IAG tends to promote vocational routes into HE for lower income groups as against academic routes. This is important for equity but not major causal agent for HE entry. Helping students make the 'right' choices but recognise that choices may be constrained.
- Standardisation of EU data about disadvantage for all HE applicants

The absence of comparable data makes it difficult to understand inequalities of access and to examine the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at combating inequalities in HE access. Key variables include:

- Outcome of application
- Highest parental education
- Highest parental occupation
- Country of birth
- Country of residence

- Age
- Gender
- Disability

#### **Unfavoured measures**

- Quotas will give rise to legal challenges. Not clear who to exclude if fixed number of places and a lack of data on which to make decision about quotas.
- Dual track education system – key determinant of whether go to HE – don't track early on into vocational and academic – generic education system

### **3. PARTICIPATION IN WHAT? THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF HE**

#### **General issues**

- Expect increasing differentiation between students and that the student body will become more heterogeneous
- Expect more flexible HE provision
- The increasing diversity of the sector will mean increasing HE segmentation and polarisation with elite HEIs focusing increasingly on research
- Dysfunctional reward and incentive structures– with academic reputation becoming increasingly important – which will have access to the most prestigious universities?
- How should the state allocate public funding?
- Excellence v inclusion
- Time to graduation
- Support for students with disabilities
- Additional academic language support for those who are not studying in their first language

#### **Favoured measures**

- EU level – can help in agenda setting and by setting up legislative frameworks e.g. European qualification framework and quality
- Incentivise the recruitment and retention of non-traditional students in the allocation of public funds to HEI – e.g. premium/additional funding for HEIs recruiting and retain such students
- Teaching needs a higher focus to help improve teaching quality and to counter the ranking of universities in league tables which favours research as against the quality of teaching and learning (HELO project trying to capture this). So suggest that the EU support new programmes for HE teachers – extra funds for teaching programmes for HE teachers, programmes which are equality checked. Also the awarding of Teaching prizes –for best teachers.
- National targets for social mobility to help set the agenda and to galvanise action but recognise that such targets can have a perverse impact if gamed.
- Mainstreaming of equity indicators
- More data required on students – gaps mostly between students

- There is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of policies. More information is needed on what policies work and promote a good 'student experience' e.g. in relation to student drop-out and how to track students overtime – not enough information

#### **4. PARTICIPATION FOR WHAT?**

##### **General issues**

- Need to improve employer's inclusive policies but not clear what works and how this can be done
- High levels of HE access and graduation levels for women – but gender inequalities in labour market
- More information needed about graduates and 'valuable citizens'. HEIs need to track their alumni to find out what happens to them on graduation and on those students who become valuable citizens

##### **Favoured measures**

- Employer gender equality plans
- Internships for labour market entrants– especially for disadvantaged students to give them work experience that employers value and access to networks. These should be designed and controlled by HEIs and incorporated into courses. The internships need to be paid and co-funded by the corporate sector and the public sector. Use tax incentives to incentive companies to take interns and sponsor internships. Legislation would be required to safeguard against exploitation and to ensure that interns do not become 'cheap' labour as they have done in Spain.

## HOW DOES THE CRISIS AFFECT STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION?

Not all countries had seen cuts in HE public expenditure

- Aspects of the 'crisis' – what do we mean by the crisis?
  - Funding cuts/Lack of funding for secondary education – may lead to lowering of standards in poorer schools
  - Increases in levels of poverty and inequality – lead to poorer attainment levels in secondary schools
  - Funding/cuts in public expenditure in tertiary sectors
  - Rising unemployment – cause problems for graduates but may lead to increase in demand for HE to 'shelter' from the economic crisis
- Funding/cuts in public expenditure in tertiary sectors
  - Withdraw of funding from courses that help entry in HE for adults e.g. in England
  - Increasing costs of HE for individual students/families
    - less generous student financial support
    - deter entry
    - influence where and what to study – living at home
    - lead to more student employment while studying which can have negative impact on attainment
  - Reduced spending per student in tertiary institutions
    - Reductions in quality
    - Reductions in pastoral support for students
    - Limited options for students – closure of uneconomic courses (however defined)
- Increase in demand for HE – because of high levels of youth unemployment
  - More competition for places because of increase demand and cuts in number of places
- Financial returns to HE decline
- Rising graduate unemployment
- Increase in credentialism? Graduates displace those only with secondary education qualifications