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Quality, Equity and the Social Dimension: the shift from national to European level

Abstract

The paper reviews the current state of knowledge of higher education's contribution to social equity and the achievement of a just and fair society. It summarises different perspectives to be found in the academic literature on the balance between higher education's contribution to extending opportunities and enhancing mobility on the one hand and to protecting privilege and reproducing inequalities on the other. It goes on to review some policy assumptions prevalent in the European context before turning to an analysis of access and participation, including the wider benefits of higher education. With the expansion of higher education has also come increasing differentiation of higher education's institutional forms and the paper attempts to assess the extent to which differentiation and diversity of higher education may work to reinforce or limit wider social diversities. The paper concludes by turning to policy implications at the European level.

Higher education as a whole, as well as individual institutions and individual academics, may often be performing contradictory functions. For example, bolstering and reproducing privilege and inequality at the same time as they are creating new knowledge of benefit to all. In this context, some attention must be given to the increasing differentiation of higher education systems which may be an important way by which higher education can pull off the trick of simultaneously achieving both elite and mass functions.

At its simplest, the policy message is two-fold:

- Higher education is important to the development of successful economies (regional as well as national)
- Higher education is important in providing opportunities for all individuals in a society to participate in and benefit from a successful economy.

Quite often, the second social equity argument is subsidiary to the first and economic argument. Opportunities must exist for all in order to avoid a waste of talent to the detriment of the economy and the interests of all. Thus employability and widening participation become central and linked policy themes.

We might summarise the current European position on widening participation by saying that there is evidence that inequalities are reducing in some countries but that overall very large inequalities remain. Considering future developments of the European Higher Education Area, we can expect higher education to continue to expand but not that this expansion will of itself remove social inequalities in access.

Much is also claimed for the wider impacts of higher education but the evidence base with which to evaluate them is very limited. Thus, one of the objectives for policy makers will be to find better ways of monitoring the impact of expanded higher education systems.

The role of a European level of policy intervention in offering encouragement and support for the wider social benefits of higher education may be important, not least in maintaining a balance between the economic and social functions of higher education. However, national specificities still play a major role in mediating global and regional pressures and discourses and it is important to acknowledge a European higher education space as constituting various cultures and histories.

