



## HAS THE EXPANSION OF PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION LED TO A DECREASE IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES WITHIN IT? THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

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### **Abstract:**

In recent decades, the move from an elite to a mass higher education system in many countries and the resulting expansion of the higher education sector has not brought about a significant decrease in social inequalities. An important factor that has contributed to the persistence of social inequalities is attributed to the fact that increased access has been accompanied by a differentiated and stratified higher education sector. In this framework, researchers from many countries argue that students from upper and middle class backgrounds, with higher levels of cultural and social capital, are much more likely to attend high status higher education institutions and departments. By contrast, working class students usually choose to attend institutions and departments with a lower status. Class differentials in relation study completion and retention rates also exist, since working class students have lower retention rates than students from upper and middle class backgrounds. Bearing the above issues into consideration, in this paper, we conduct a short bibliographical review of studies examining the reasons for the persisting social inequalities in higher education and the relationship between social class and allocation in the different departments in higher education. We also present critically the most influential explanatory frameworks employed in the analysis and interpretation of the issue. Research findings provide strong evidence social class, and the students' cultural and social capital play a major role in the persistence of social inequalities. Implications for policy makers are clear. On the basis of the above, we argue that socio-economic inequalities within higher education cannot be dealt with unless we tackle the issue of differentiated allocation in the different higher education departments.

**Keywords:** higher education, social inequalities, widening of participation

## Introduction

The higher education landscape is undergoing significant change in recent decades due to a number of developments (Reay et al, 2005; Reimer and Jacob, 2011). The most important of these is related to policies aiming at the expansion of the higher education sector. In the last decades educational policies in many countries aim at increasing the number of young people who study in higher education. At the same time, widening participation initiatives for groups of people who were underrepresented or excluded from higher education (such as working class, ethnic minority or mature students) have been introduced. For instance, in the context of European Union higher education policies, *“the European Union (EU) has as its stated ambition the goal of 40% of all young people having graduated from higher education by 2020”* (European Commission, 2013:12).

As a result, the higher education sector has witnessed a significant expansion in many countries, moving from an elite higher education sector to mass participation (Reay et al, 2005; OECD, 2014). More people than ever before enroll in higher education programmes of study (Walker and Zhu, 2008; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2009). The target is that 40% of people aged 30-34 should have a higher education or equivalent qualification by 2020 (Crozier et al, 2014). According to official data, by 2000, the number of higher education has grown to such an extent that it amounts to approximately 20 percent of the cohort worldwide, even if national variations exist (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). More recent official data show that 57% of young adults in OECD countries will participate in higher education over their lifetime, while 22% are will enroll in a master’s degree programme over their lifetime (OECD, 2015).

According to the official rhetoric that accompanies these policies, the expansion of participation in higher education has beneficial outcomes at individual and national level. First, it improves the life chances of young people equipping them with skills that are needed in the market, increases inclusiveness, brings about equality of educational opportunity and boosts upward social mobility. Second, it is beneficial to countries as well, since it produces a highly skilled workforce necessary in modern knowledge and information societies (European Commission, 2011).

Apart from the above considerations, policies for the expansion of higher education have been framed in terms of social justice. This is due to the association between participation and success in higher education and social justice. As Engberg (2012:575) argues *“educational access, particularly as it relates to postsecondary education, remains a critical social justice concern of the twenty-first century”*. It constitutes, in other

words, an issue which is at the epicenter of the public, political and scholarly debate, because it is acknowledged that inequalities in higher education entail wider societal inequalities.

Governments adopt a “human capital” approach, so they invest heavily in higher education, believing there are positive associations between higher education, transition to the labour market and economic growth (Shavit et al., 2007; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011; Quinn, 2013). It is a serious concern, since, according to the official rhetoric, a university degree increases the chances of finding a job and the prospects of upward social mobility (Kyrides, 1997; Green and Vryonides, 2005; Thanos, 2007, 2009). In general throughout the modern world it is assumed that there is a positive association between education and individual, economic, political and cultural development (Chabbott and Ramirez, 2000; Asimaki et al, 2001).

However, these optimistic expectations concerning the beneficial outcomes of an expanded higher education sector have not been achieved. Empirical studies suggest that there are “*increasing advantages for children growing up in high-income families*” (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011:1). Research findings also indicate that inequalities persist and take other forms (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2009). The reasons for the persisting inequalities in higher education, despite the fact that more young people than ever before participate in it, are described and analysed in the following part.

### **Persisting inequalities in higher education**

Significant developments in the higher education sector, following the expansion of participation in it, have contributed to the persistence of socio-economic inequalities in higher education. These developments are related to the issues of: (a) distribution and stratification within higher education, (b) success within it and student retention (Reay et al, 2005; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011; Sianou-Kyrgiou, Tzafea and Tsiplakides, 2013). In the next part, we examine each of these developments separately in some detail.

As far as distribution and stratification within higher education is concerned, studies have consistently shown that it is now a highly stratified sector (Gerald and Haycock, 2006; Karen, 2007; Hoxby and Avery, 2009). Higher education seems to be highly stratified in terms of selectivity, and returns to earned degrees, a phenomenon that is referred to as “*institutional stratification*” (Bastedo and Gumport, 2003; Posselt et al., 2012). The term is used to denote the fact that students from different socioeconomic background attend different higher education institutions and courses of study. For instance, students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend

high status university departments, since they believe that these courses of study can provide them with knowledge and competences necessary for success in high-skill occupations (Eurydice, 2014). By contrast, working class students usually study in university departments that lead to occupational trajectories with limited material and symbolic benefits. The term “institutional stratification” also refers to the fact that *“privileged students are diverted to lower tiers whereas elite institutions remain highly socially selective in favour of privileged social strata”* (Reimer and Jacob, 2011:224).

As regards success within higher education and student retention, a number of studies have shown that there are differentials in academic success and retention among students from different social classes (Stevens, 2007). Retention is defined as *“the extent to which students remain within a higher education institution and progress to complete their study programme within a given time frame”* (Crosier et al, 2014:13). In this framework, growing gaps in higher education completion rates have been found in a number of studies (Raftery and Hout, 1993; Jones, 2008). These studies provide strong evidence that students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to withdraw from their studies.

This means that, despite increased access, inequalities in higher education persist, mainly because inequalities are dependent on not only access, but also success within the higher education sector. In other words, students need not only enter higher education, but they also need to have high academic performance and retention rates. As Reay et al (2005:vii) put it *“concerns around growing inequalities in higher education”* have to do with *“who goes where and who does what in higher education”*.

In addition, the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by credential inflation, which increases the competition for credentials from elite higher education institutions and decreases the potential value of a university degree (Brown, 2003; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Wolf 2002). In the transition to the labour market, the students’ social capital, defined by Bourdieu as the *“aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”* (Bourdieu, 1986a:248) plays a vital role in the effort to find a job with high material and symbolic benefits.

To summarise the above observations, sociological research has consistently shown that the expansion of higher education has not been accompanied by a significant reduction in inequalities (Machin and Vignoles, 2004; Brooks, 2004). Research data reveal that the increase in participation in higher education has benefited mainly the middle classes (Metcalf 1997; Connor and Dewson, 2001; Pugsley, 2004; Iannelli 2007), which means that they can monopolise the most desired social positions (Panagiotopoulos, 2009).

In the next part we present the most prominent and influential theoretical frameworks that sociologists of education frequently use in an attempt to explain these persisting inequalities, paying special attention to Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

### **Explanatory frameworks**

Some studies have attempted to explain these differences in relation to familial social capital (Perna and Titus, 2005), considering it as a way to increase productivity (Coleman, 1988) and facilitate upward social mobility (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Research on inequalities in education associated with social class have also focused on the concept of reproduction (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and the fact that the educational system reproduces economic inequality (Bowles and Gintis, 2007), as well as on the issue of resistance (Giroux, 1983). Researchers have also focused on the school processes in reproducing social stratification at the macro level (Bernstein, 1990, 2007), on the relationship between curriculum and teaching and cultural, political and economic power (Apple, 2004), and on Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

In particular, Bourdieu's concept of social capital as a mechanism of the dominant classes with the aim of maintaining their dominant position has also been employed in the explanation of persisting inequalities in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986b). Bourdieu talks about the three variants of cultural capital, (a) the embodied state, incorporated in mind and body, (b) the institutionalized state in the form of educational qualifications, and (c) the objectified state in the form of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1977).

In addition, Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a set of internalized dispositions, preferences and "*lived experiences*" (Vryonides and Gouvias, 2012:320) determine an people's reasonable actions at a subconscious level provides an invaluable tool in the study and interpretation of persisting inequalities in higher education (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In this framework, the students' cultural, social and economic capital impact strongly on success in higher education, since there is a connection between the unequally distributed cultural capital among students from different social classes and educational achievement (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The students' habitus, "*a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which ... functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions', which is developed through experience, also affects the*

*students' experiences in higher education*" which is developed through experience, also affects the students' experiences in higher education (Bourdieu, 1977a:83).

## Discussion and conclusions

The above developments have highlighted more emphatically than ever before the need for change in higher education if it is to promote equality in society (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; Lynch, 2000) and to benefit students by providing them with the knowledge and skills in order to participate in the labour market and countries by helping them become more competitive. In this framework, a growing body of research focuses on two interrelated issues. The first is the issue of student success and graduation within higher education. It is now acknowledged that widened access to higher education does not necessarily entail a reduction in social inequalities, simply because more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds participate in it. Researchers have consistently shown that "*our societies have not yet succeeded in promoting equal access independent of social origin*" and that social inequalities in higher education exist (Weber, 1999:9). This means that, apart from widened access to higher education, students also need to be successful within it and be able to graduate. The second issue concerns ways to increase the quality of teaching in higher education and this issue is now at the epicenter of the relevant academic discussion and studies. It is also worth noting that, apart from the above factors, the focus on the quality of teaching provided by higher education institutions has been fuelled by concerns about increasing levels of student drop-out and by researchers and policy makers who consider education as a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy (Hénard, 2009).

To sum up, the present research study will provide policy makers with a body of information and data to draw on with regard to taking measures to promote widened, and not simply increased, access to higher education.

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