Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of access and equity in higher education. In the academic and policy arenas, access has come to be understood as enrolling larger percentages of the population who desire higher education; equity requires that these opportunities are equally available to all citizens.

Most nations have succeeded in enrolling larger percentages of the traditional age cohort, but it has become increasingly apparent that expansion does not necessarily include all segments of the population. In others words, equity does not result naturally from greater access; new kinds of interventions are required to address the underlying factors that determine who enrolls and who persists to graduation. Governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) are beginning to address the challenges that result from recruiting, selecting and supporting students across a broader spectrum of the age cohort, paying particular attention to students from under-represented groups. This growing diversity obliges universities to confront face new challenges to insure that most (if not all) of these new students persist to complete their program of study. The public concern with equity reflects the growing expectation that universities must assume a larger role in civil society that reaches beyond the institution itself.

Nearly every society confronts inequities but the inequalities that play out in education are based on different historical, social and economic factors, for example
in Botswana and Switzerland, the United States and India, Malaysia and Australia. To appreciate the constraints and opportunities for widening access and securing equity in each environment one has to understand the culture and demography of (both) the society and the education system. There are no universal solutions here.

The issue of equity raises larger questions about the interface of the institution with the society around it. What is a university’s responsibility for solving complex issues that are embedded in conditions that often have deep roots in history and culture? To what extent should university communities reflect the make-up of the society that hosts them? How does an institution balance social obligations against other commitments? Who defines the university’s obligations and when these obligations have been met?

However, difficult choices are not only the burden of individual institutions but of all stakeholders—students, parents, sponsors, and policy-makers. Consensus about the problem or its solutions is not easily reached. Furthermore, every choice has consequences and often requires that in order to extend benefits in new directions, someone may lose them.

Greater and more inclusive participation in higher education goes beyond far the issue of social justice. In a globalized world where economic success depends on the ability to manage vast amounts of knowledge and technology, the development of human capital is key. The economic prosperity of most countries depends on an increasingly well-educated workforce, and thus access to higher education must be a national priority.
Non-financial benefits to education also need to be taken into account. The Wider Benefits of Learning Group at the Institute of Education in the United Kingdom has demonstrated (for cohorts born in 1958, 1970 and now 2000) that participants in HE in the UK are likely to be happier, healthier and more democratically tolerant (Schuller et al. 2004).

A recent report published by the state of Washington in the US show the same. Compared to families with parents who hold a first university degree, families where parents have only a high school diploma are three times more likely to live below the poverty line and require publically-subsidized services. Not only does more education promote financial independence and (consequently) less dependence on tax-supported programs, but higher levels of education correlate directly with individuals reporting excellent health, less likelihood of criminal activity, higher levels of participation in elections and a greater inclination to do volunteer work (HECB, 2009-2010).

Data from many other countries support these findings. No society can benefit in the long run from overlooking the education of the population as a whole that includes all subsectors. Higher education has an important role to play here and, as a result, is getting greater attention from policy makers and international donors.

The Scope of the Problem

*Access does not insure equity*
Participation in higher education has most certainly expanded in recent decades. Most countries have experienced success in enrolling larger percentages of their population in primary and secondary schools. The urgency of raising the median level of education even higher has contributed to the momentum of the “massification” of higher education. UNESCO data confirms the progress that has been made in encouraging secondary school leavers to pursue additional study. Worldwide, the gross enrollment ratio has increased from 19% to 26% (2000 to 2007 respectively). In high-income countries, participation during this period has increased from 57% of the age cohort to 67%. In several countries the enrollment growth has been particularly impressive. Brazil has increased enrollment from 16 to 30%; China from 8-23%, the Czech Republic from 29 to 55% (UIS data in Altbach et al. 2009). But gross enrollment ratios reflect national averages and do not convey critical data about the domestic profile of enrollment.

Increased enrollment has not included all sectors of the population equally. As a result, many countries have introduced programs to encourage under-represented groups to enroll, sometimes giving these students priority through affirmative action programs, reservation or quota programs, and special financing programs. But the problem is not easily solved, drawing policy makers and scholars to look more deeply at the factors that influence participation. More thorough examination has brought to light the complexity of the equity issue. The underlying factors are as diverse as they are pernicious and involve circumstances that universities on their own are not in a position to resolve such as poor quality
preparation in primary and secondary school, family income or parental levels of education. Many of the challenges are addressed in this essay.

As mentioned above, global progress in increasing the gross enrollment ratio tells only part of the story. Higher education systems have been expanding and diversifying in response to the growing demand for wider access. It is important to examine where the enrollment expansion is taking place. A university degree benefits all graduates but alumni of elite institutions enjoy additional benefits and advantages that enhance the value of their degree. While elite institutions have done much to diversify their enrollment, most of the expansion has taken place at less prestigious universities, polytechnic and vocationally-oriented institutions, new private universities, community colleges, and online providers.

Arum, Gamoran, and Shavit (2007) highlight the debate over the social significance of persons from the disadvantaged strata enrolling at “second-tier” and less selective institutions and question whether this pattern continues to privilege select sectors of the population.

Some scholars suggest that higher education expansion, especially when it occurs through hierarchical differentiation, is a process of diversion, whereby members of the working class are diverted from elite opportunities and are channeled to positions of lower status (Brint and Karabel 1989). Others have noted, however, that even lower-tier postsecondary schooling represents enhanced opportunity, so that the important effect of expansion may be one of inclusion (Dougherty 1994) (p. 2).
Focused investment in key institutions has contributed to China’s increasingly stratified higher education system and demonstrates the way differentiation can influence future opportunities and channel privilege. Students, parents, and employers have taken careful note of the emerging hierarchy. National research revealed that more than 67% of employing units surveyed indicated that they gave great or fairly great importance to the prestige of the degree when considering who to hire. Fewer than 5% of the respondents indicated that they were not influenced by the institution where a job applicant had studied. Chinese elite institutions generally remain beyond the reach of the rural poor. (Hong 2004).

The dispute over whether the growing diversity of students and institutions opens opportunity or protects privilege pervades the literature (Morley et al. 2009; David 2007). What is undisputed is that there is limited space at elite research universities and a need for high quality alternatives for those individuals who do not qualify for top tier institutions. The extent to which the differentiation of institutions leads to differentiation of subsequent opportunities over the life course merits more research.

*What does equity mean?*

Inequality tends to sustain itself unless there is intervention of some kind. Golden (2006) reminds us that more perverse forms of affirmative action have been practiced at elite colleges for a long time such as priority given to the children of alumni and children of wealthy potential donors. That said, many societies now use affirmative
action, quotas, or reservation programs to remedy the inequitable distribution of opportunities in the past.

Recent studies have called attention to the limited attainment of the beneficiaries of expanded access and targeted admissions programs (Bowen et al 2009, Rose 2005). This underscores that equity means more than opening the door wider.

The definition of equity is broad and emphasizes both equity in opportunities and equity in educational outcome. Equity in education is thus not only a question of opportunities provided in the educational system, but it is also concerning the actual results of the various educational choices and performances of different groups of pupils and students through the educational system. (OECD, 2007).

One of the many problems is that unequal opportunity often begins long before tertiary education. Students who are disadvantaged for any number of reasons (economic background, racial prejudice, geographic location, physical disability) are often inadequately prepared for postsecondary study. The preparation gap is exacerbated by the fact that students from middle and upper middle class backgrounds often have the advantage not only of better schools but of additional tutoring and preparation before beginning tertiary study. Subsequently, institutions face the challenge of not only widening access but also addressing deficiencies and disadvantages that have accumulated over years of schooling if these targeted populations are to be integrated successfully at the university level.
In sum, true equity means making access available with the resources and support necessary for individuals to succeed and benefit from new opportunities. New services are needed to provide academic monitoring, support and tutoring, counselling to assist with social and academic culture at the university level, financial support to ameliorate economic hardship. Students from disadvantaged groups are less likely to have the benefit of university-educated parents who contribute support that is influential in insuring persistence and success. Universities must fill in many gaps of progress is to be made.

Who is under-represented?

The issue of equity moves the discussion of access beyond numbers and percentages. Equity implies fair access to all but patterns of under-representation appear in nearly all countries. Who qualifies as a member of a disadvantaged group is defined by a broad range of characteristics as alluded to above.

Inequalities in higher education participation are evident throughout the life course and include differences in terms of time (and age), place, gender, ethnicity, first language, parental (and sibling) social class, parental education, type of school attended, housing tenure, health/disability, criminal activity, learning difficulties, family structure and religious background. Multiple social disadvantages can result in initial education and, subsequently, participation in other forms of learning. Parental income and education are particularly influential. Occupational status and family size are also relevant . . . . Quality of life factors (such as infant health) are important
for understanding disengagement from education rather than participation within it. . . . The question is raised as to whether policymakers should seek to reduce inequality in education directly, or seek to reduce the wider inequalities that are reflected in education. (Gorard et al., 2006).

The underlying causes that favor some groups and discriminate against others vary widely, sometimes a reflection of policy, sometimes of circumstance. Parental education and family wealth seem to be particularly influential.

Some individuals confront multiple obstacles that disadvantage them from an early age. An example in the UK is the group now called “cared-for” children, children born without the prospect of a healthy or stable family and for whom the state has taken responsibility. These children tend to grow up in either foster or residential homes and reflect a “perfect storm” in the sense that they have limited support for academic development, an unpredictable home environment, limited financial means and other conditions that place them at the margin of society. Although they may not belong to a targeted sub-sector they are regularly at the bottom of almost every test of educational progression and subsequently disadvantaged at the point of entry into higher education (Jackson et al. 2005).

Around the world, different factors create unequal opportunities and produce unequal outcomes. The Chinese minority in Malaysia have been denied access to higher education in the past by the preferential and legal entitlement of the Malayan majority—even though their education and income levels are high; Arab-Israelis have been prejudiced by entrance tests; aspirant ethnic communities in East and Central Europe have suffered from policies in support of ethnic cleansing; non-
Afrikaans speakers in South Africa have been excluded perpetuating patterns of participation based on race (Watson, 2005). The United States has, likewise, overtly or indirectly limited access to different minority groups at different points in history. Despite intervention on behalf of minorities by the courts, black and Hispanic enrollment still represents a small percentage of the enrollment at US degree-granting institutions as well as taking much longer to complete their degree than their white counterparts (Bowen et al. 2009).

The social dynamic can be fluid; who is disadvantaged in a society can change over time. Women were once barely present in higher education. Today, women outnumber men in many countries. A special focus issue of University World News (25 October 2009) noted that with the exception of a few fields (engineering, science, and information technology) women outnumber men in Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean with the Arab states not far behind. Within the OECD reference group at present only a few countries still have a male majority of enrollments—Japan, Turkey, and Korea. Sweden actually had affirmative action for men to boost their enrollment numbers at university until challenged recently by a group of women in the courts. Women represent 60% of university enrollment in Sweden (The Chronicle of Higher Education 13 January 2010). Worldwide women are more likely than men to complete their studies based on data collected from OECD countries, an interesting departure from the past (OECD 2009).

Here again the quantitative data need further examination. Although gender parity of students enrolled in higher education might seem to be within sight in most countries, inequities persist. Globally women are concentrated in disciplinary areas
associated with lower wages post-graduation such as education, welfare and health giving rise to questions about factors that influence the selection of course of study (Morely et al. 2009).

Ironically, in the past quotas have been used to exclude as well as to include. In the US, the enrollment of Jews was once limited by quotas, particularly at elite institutions, to avoid representation disproportionate to their presence in the larger society (Golden 2006). Today, without quotas, Jews represent 25% of Harvard’s undergraduate enrollment (Harvard Hillel, 2010) although they account for less than 2% of the US population. There is a similar issue with Asian-American students who represent upwards of 40% of the undergraduates at the Universities of California at Los Angeles, Berkeley, San Diego, and Irvine while they represent 12% of California’s population (Chea 2009). Here again, the issue is more complicated than it may initially appear as neither Jewish-Americans or Asian-Americans is a homogenous group. Still high enrollment from these two groups raises another issue—whether the objective of equity policies is to have enrollment reflect the percentage of a minority group in the larger population and whether universities should hold to those percentages and limit the participation of some minority groups accordingly.

In many countries, the factors that determine who has access to higher education and who will be successful have changed. Today it is as likely to be economic status as race, gender or ethnicity that determines who has access to the best opportunities for postsecondary education and who is most likely to complete a degree. In fact students are often disadvantaged by “multiple markers of identity”
Distributing equitable opportunity, determining if a particular group should get special consideration in admission, whether the participation of another group should be constrained, all contribute to the dilemmas of social responsibility that higher education is begin asked to address. While the goal of greater equality is generally shared, determining who and how is less easily resolved and different countries have pursued different strategies in the pursuit of a more equal society.

A Comparative Look at Challenges and Solutions

Affirmative action in the form of quota and reservation programs is being used in many countries to address the unequal participation of minority or disadvantaged groups within each society. On the surface, these programs may appear to make space to allow under-represented groups to “catch up” but they are usually controversial and research as to their impact is limited.

In Brazil, there are four times more white citizens with 15 years of education or more than black citizens or citizens of mixed race (Schwartzman 2006). Interestingly, much progress has been made in improving access to secondary school where the differences in participation by race are less significant. Progress at the tertiary level has continued to be skewed towards white students. Competitive entrance examinations to the more prestigious public universities have given advantage to a predominantly white population with the resources to attend better secondary schools.
There are sufficient university seats to accommodate all secondary school graduates but low-income and racial minorities (when they do enroll) are not well distributed throughout the higher education system (Schwartzman 2006). The irony of lower-income families finding greater access in tuition-driven institutions while wealthier students enroll in free public universities has not been lost on policymakers. In response the government has introduced quotas to reserve space in the public sector for more non-white students. Several public universities now add points to the admissions exam score of students from public secondary schools that enroll students from disadvantaged groups, on the surface a mechanism for “leveling the playing field” but Schwartzman points out that this disadvantages students from low-income families who have been able to enroll in private schools. He also notes that students given the benefit of additional points enter at an academic disadvantage that will increase the likelihood that they will drop out or (at the least) remain isolated in remedial courses.

In Brazil, as elsewhere, inequities are easier to identify than to resolve. The quota system has stirred considerable controversy. One notable response was more than 300 lawsuits filed against the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro by applicants who felt they were harmed by the quota system. There are concerns about whether the quota system will actually aggravate racial tension in Brazil and it remains difficult to determine how (in a largely mixed-race society), race will be defined (Tavolaro 2008).

Access to higher education in India has expanded rapidly with the inauguration of many new public and private institutions. Still, not only is the
overall gross enrollment relatively low at less than 15% but participation rates dip below 6% in the most rural states where access to higher education institutions is scarce (Jayaram 2008, Altbach et al 2009).

India is home to an extremely diverse population where a rigid hierarchy has governed the allocation of educational and economic opportunities in the past. The government of India, like Brazil, introduced affirmative action in the form of quotas or reservations with the objective of distributing social benefits more equally to “backwards classes and scheduled tribes.” Since 1961, the constitution has mandated that 22.5% of the space in higher education be reserved for scheduled classes and tribes. In some states 50% of the space is reserved. The program has resulted in much more diversity in higher education but like Brazil, India has had some difficulty defining clearly exactly who belongs to the targeted groups. As a result one somewhat perverse affect of the program was that while the classification might seem degrading many people claimed these identities in order to take advantage of the places in the civil service and universities reserved for members of these groups. (de Zwart 2000).

The reservation program has also provoked protests from students and professionals who warned that this strategy would only serve to replace qualified candidates with unqualified and unprepared individuals (Neelakantan 2006). But the question is how and whether inequities would be addressed without some type of forced intervention leading one observer to observe, “Reservations are needed because of the innate inability of Indian society to be just and fair by itself to all its constituents” (Punwani in Gupta 2006, p. 2).
Despite their complications quota systems continue to have great appeal internationally where large inequities exist and no better alternative is apparent. A lecturer at the University of Malawi observed:

. . . I was part of the team that administered Unima entrance exams in Mzuzu.

If you had the spirit of the living God in you, you could not control a tear of sympathy from your eyes when you saw the gulf between candidates from rich versus poor families, rural versus urban areas and private versus public schools. These and other concerns about the poor in rural areas are the reason why we need a quota system as an equalization policy that benefits the rural poor and not a region or tribe (University World News, 13 December 2009).

Throughout Africa, participation in higher education remains low for all population groups. Progress towards improved gross enrollment ratios continues but in this region, women are not keeping pace with men. In Tanzania and Ghana, for example, despite affirmative action and quota programs the social group most likely to enroll in higher education is men from the top socio-economic groups. In Ghana where women are making slow progress, women are also most likely to be from the wealthier class (Morley et al. 2009). Morley et al remind us that gender has cultural associations that quotas will not dissipate, that women in many African societies are expected to conform to traditional female roles not compatible with higher levels of education. “Parental message systems” (p. 61) more than affirmative action seem to help women break through the constraints of traditional culture; encouragement from fathers is particularly influential.
Quota programs, reservation programs and affirmative action programs have undoubtedly opened doors wider but are limited in the social conditions they can change. They also tend to base eligibility on a single characteristic that is not always easy to assign and where individuals in the target groups are generally disadvantaged by multiple factors. Without understanding and attention to these deeper challenges initiatives that simply attempt to extend admissions opportunity on the basis of a single characteristic, a strategy that will most likely have limited impact.

Towards the Fair Distribution of Opportunity

The unfair distribution of wealth and poverty and the subsequent circumstances that can be ascribed to each is a problem across the globe. Most individuals are born to advantages or disadvantages due to no act or choice of their own. The challenge is finding a solution that apportions social benefits where they have been scarce without depriving those who are poised to enjoy them.

Addressing past deficits

One of the dilemmas of programs to improve equitable access to the full spectrum of higher education institutions is bridging the gaps in preparation. The problem of raising aspirations of fair access to prestigious institutions on the part of well-qualified non-standard students is hindered by the challenge of getting more prepared students to matriculation. In March 2008 during a public debate over the achievement gap in the UK it was disclosed that:
Only 176, or just over half a percent, of the nearly 30,000 pupils who got three A’s at A-level last year were eligible for free meals, according to figures which show that household income is the biggest single predictor of a child’s academic success.

They [new statistics] were released by ministers in response to questions from the shadow children’s secretary, Michael Gove, who said they illustrated the struggle top universities face in trying to recruit top candidates from the poorest backgrounds (Curtis, 2008).

It is important not to underestimate the effect of decisions made by and for students during primary and secondary education that derail their preparation for higher education. The gap widens as students from wealthier families are more likely to supplement their required classroom attendance with tutoring to improve their performance on universities entrance examinations, a practice evident in countries from Brazil to Japan.

When elite universities pursue diversity in their student body the results reveal a perplexing pattern of advantage and disadvantage. In their study of admission to elite US colleges, Espenshade, Radford and Chung (2009) found that whites received more offers than students of Asian heritage; Hispanics received offers disproportionately to whites; African Americans were at least five times as likely to be accepted as whites; athletes were twice as likely to be admitted as non-athletes; students from private schools were twice as likely to be admitted as students from public high schools; and on and on (Clark 2009). In other words, in the pursuit of diversity elite schools are giving preferences based on a dizzying number
of variables. Although minority students tend to be more successful at more-selective than less-selective institutions, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) warn that selecting students who are under-prepared for the academic expectations of elite institutions (“over matched”) put these students at higher risk of not completing their degree than their more privileged peers.

Students who are not sufficiently competitive to be attractive to elite schools—hard to reach groups—tend to remain concentrated in less demanding institutions (typically polytechnics, community colleges, large colleges under local authority). Additionally, these students tend to stay closer to home for economic, familial and cultural reasons. This is often especially true with children in indigenous communities that are often isolated. Subsequently, the quality of the education that students from under-represented groups may pursue may be linked to the geography (Gibbons & Vignoles 2009; Piquet 2006).

The Impact of Fees

The massification of higher education coupled with the growing tendency to count education as a “private good” have encouraged governments to more increasingly towards cost sharing and cost-recovery schemes for financing higher education.

Even before the trend to introduce fees, there was an inequitable cost burden to university attendance. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to struggle to fund living expenses and the ancillary costs of study (books, materials, etc) and less likely to be in a position to forgo immediate income than their middle and upper class peers who receive family support. Only a few countries
provide subsidies to adequately cover the full cost of tertiary study and in these states massification has put a strain on these subsidies.

In addition the imposition of student fees in jurisdictions where at least full-time initial higher education has been free in the past is a phenomenon that has been spreading across Europe and Australasia over the past decade. To insure that fees will not become a barricade to participation, complex arrangements for student support (financial aid, loans, subsidies) and postgraduate fee recovery through the tax system have been springing up, even in the most traditionally “statist” systems, such as Germany. For institutional leaders and policy makers, cost recovery schemes present a wicked dilemma. The commitment to free higher education (like access to national health services) has strong populist appeal, not least to students and their parents. Still, subsidies to higher education have not distributed benefits equally to all sectors of the population in the past. At the same time institutions need additional revenue in a context of declining public subsidy. The dilemma requires unattractive compromises that have unequal impact on different segments of the population.

Data measuring the impact of new cost-sharing schemes are still limited and confusing. In China for example, rapidly rising fees do not take into account the income disparities between urban and rural populations. Furthermore the most prestigious and best institutions tend to be concentrated in large urban areas placing attendance out of reach for rural students whose family income can afford neither fees nor the cost of living in China’s expensive cities (Hong, 2004).
Willingness to assume debt seems to vary by culture but in most cases, students from low-income families are more risk-averse and less likely to take advantage of low-interest study loans. Loans are often less available to lower-income students where they require co-signers or collateral. Making credit available to lower-income student has demonstrated positive effect on attendance (Johnstone & Marucci 2003; Canton and Blom 2004). Some countries reward merit with scholarship producing the perverse (but not surprising) effect of offering additional subsidies to wealthier students (Usher 2009). Bruce Johnstone’s chapter on “the funding of universities” in this book provides further analysis of these issues.

As always, there is the issue of whether policy accomplishes stated objectives or something else. In England in 2006 a system of intended variable fees to students was introduced with the provision that the government would cover the gap to institutions and recover them from the graduates later in life through the income tax system. Meanwhile, under the supervision of a newly-formed Office for Fair Access (OFFA) institutions are required to dedicate part of the income resulting from fees to student bursaries and related “out-reach” work. Claire Callender, reflects:

[R]ather than eliminate price as a factor in university choice, which was central both to the rationale underpinning the introduction of bursaries and to the political rhetoric surrounding their establishment, HEIs are turning net price to their advantage in the competitive struggle for students (Callender, forthcoming).

It is generally agreed that free tuition or even quite low cost higher education is not sustainable in the era of massification and the growing tendency to classify
higher education as a “private good.” The challenge now is to ensure that access and equity are protected in an increasingly difficult fiscal environment for higher education.

Retention and Persistence to Graduation

As the issue of access gets more attention from researchers and policymakers it becomes increasingly apparent that increased access has less social impact if study programs are not completed. The challenges of retaining students to graduation are many and even greater when a student is the first in his or her family to enroll in tertiary study, less prepared for his or her peers, or combating the disadvantages often associated with race, ethnicity or disability. Evidence indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out even if they are equally qualified when they enter higher education (Chowdry et al. 2008). Although there is evidence that each additional year of postsecondary study boosts income potential, a significantly larger wage premium is earned by individuals who complete their degree (Bowen et al. 2009).

In the US data from the National Center for Educational Statistics show the six-year graduation rate for black students is less than 50%, 20 percentage points lower than black students (Carey 2008). Innovative programs demonstrate that despite pre-university academic deficits and social challenges, new participants to higher education can be successful with appropriate intervention. The Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) at Florida State University offers a broad, multi-faceted approach to enrolling and graduating “hard to reach” students.
CARE works with secondary schools to identify talented students as early as sixth grade and offers summer programs and after-school programs to encourage and guide them. A bridge program provides academic and social orientation during the summer between high school graduation and university matriculation. Ongoing tutoring and counselling is available after enrolling. The result has been that CARE students graduate at nearly the same rate as their non-CARE peers (Carey 2008).

There is cause to doubt the previous assumption that some higher education is better than none; persistence to graduation is becoming as important to future opportunities as access to university study. It appears that those who commence postsecondary study and drop out fall behind economically, comparable to their peers who never pursued tertiary study at all. As we expand access to higher education, retention and completion have become as important to success (measured as social and economic participation after graduation) as widening participation.

Ability to persist is very directly related to prior educational success, and represents another way in which institutions of higher education should have strong motivation to contribute to the improvement of the performance of primary and secondary education. They also have rather greater leverage (through research and their role in forming relevant professionals) than they often acknowledge. They also have the option of innovative partnerships with previous levels of education as demonstrated in the example of Florida State University.

Challenges for Leadership

*Does Greater Equity Compromise Quality?*
Whether or not widening participation can be achieved without compromising the quality of what is offered, is another dilemma. This certainly concerns politicians and policymakers. Here is one of the UK House of Commons Select Committees reflecting on access and equity:

Our values and democratic commitments press us to answer the old question ‘Can we be equal and excellent too?’ with a resounding ‘yes’.


Excellence is a word used often in political rhetoric but without much utility in practice. When higher percentages of the age cohort enroll, new and more practical definitions of excellence will be needed.

By definition, as one passes 50 percent, to continue to increase participation means to involve people who are below the median in terms of academic achievement and these people tend to come from society’s more disadvantaged groups who have always been less likely to attend post-secondary education (Usher 2009).

Elite institutions will be able to increase diversity with little effect; these institutions will always be in a position to select students with high potential for success and (often) provide the environment and services needed to sustain high completion rates. For other institutions, diversity will introduce students with broadly varied levels of pre-university preparation and talent and that will require more accommodation and flexibility in the classroom.
The report of the Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) suggests that higher education must “combine tolerance at points of entrance with rigor at the point of exit” (p. 41). The challenge will be to put this goal into practice given the realities of local circumstance and resources.

New pressures on higher education are likely to compete with continued progress towards greater equity. The definition of excellence has become tied to the notion “world-class”. In this context emphasis is placed on research productivity, media interest, graduate destinations, infrastructure, and international recruitment. These are unlikely characteristics of most “demand-absorbing” institutions. Many of the common-sense elements of performance – like teaching quality, widening participation and social mobility, services to business and the community, support of rural in addition to metropolitan communities, as well as contributions to other public services - are conspicuously absent from this new take on excellence (Watson, 2007: 34-46). World-classness and improved access and equity may sit together well in theory and rhetoric, but require different kinds of policy and support. As more governments become preoccupied with developing more “world class” universities it is possible that they endeavor could divert resources necessary to accommodate the participation of new populations in higher education. The following example from the UK underscores the disproportionate allocation of funding from the perspective of social justice. The Funding Council in England in 2004-05 reported expenditures as follows:

- £ 40m on access for full-time undergraduates (based on educational disadvantage in different census wards)
• £ 54m on access for part-time undergraduates
• £ 187m on retention of full-time undergraduates
• £ 56m on retention of part-time undergraduates
• £ 13m on support and facilities for disabled students

A total of £ 354m was spent to support broader access and retention. This is in contrast to the £ 1.4b to research funding. Investment in broader access represents about 2.5% of the research related funding (HEFCE 2007).

**Pedagogy and Student Engagement**

New entrants to higher education from historically under-represented groups will not only reflect diverse pre-university experience but are also likely to demonstrate different inclinations and needs. As already mentioned, there will be greater need for tutoring and other academic support as students from poor secondary schools are likely to be unprepared for the demands of university study. There is also likely to be a growing “disconnect” between traditional teaching and the culture and expectations of first-generation college students and other students from historically under-represented groups. This is most likely to be seen by faculty as a student problem rather than an incentive to develop new pedagogy (Gorard et al. 2006).

Going forward diversity will oblige institutions to rethink the way higher education is delivered.

As universalization progresses, most new students are simply less interested in the kind of education provided by existing higher education institutes or
are simply less academically gifted. In order to attract these students, new tactics need to be introduced. (Usher 2009, p.9)

There may be courses on offer which are perceived to be more attractive (especially those that relate to health, service and cultural professions) and the teaching styles may be felt to be more appropriate in the so-called “new” universities. The Higher Education Policy Institute has pointed to the greater frequency of contact with mainstream academic staff in these institutions (as opposed to research and teaching assistants), and there is some evidence of greater attention to pedagogical practice (Bekhradnia et al. 2007).

Some countries are experimenting with new approaches to pedagogy at institutions that serve indigenous populations. New Mexican “intercultural universities” are developing approaches to teaching and learning that are congruent with cultural values, language, and history (Brunner et al. 2006).

Pedagogy and the organization of degree programs will have to be reconsidered along with measures of performance and criteria for achievement and excellence as higher education becomes increasingly diverse.

Conclusion

It is generally agreed that there is a worldwide need for the reallocation of privilege. The concentration of social benefits to a small segment of society is no longer acceptable. To continue past patterns of inequality will stunt the expansion of economic prosperity and democracy. Access to higher education has become an important component of building stable and prosperous modern societies.
Access to postsecondary education was long the privilege of small segments of society until the last half of the 20th century. The massification of most higher education systems expanded opportunities worldwide but not equally to all sectors of society. Nations today are trying to address those inequities through a range of strategies.

Perfect solutions are not in evidence. Public resources are limited and needed to address a broad spectrum of social problems and all needs will not be met. Some individuals will likely lose opportunities even though they were not directly responsible for past patterns of discrimination. The sacrifices they may be required to make may contribute to further divisiveness as would continuing to exclude sectors of the population from access to opportunities. The situation cannot remain static and universities have an important role to play.

Despite a lot of rhetoric, from the evidence we know the following about widening participation—it is not about dependent solely on decisions by higher education admissions offices. If anything university admissions have improved rather than further undermined distributional fairness (Gorard et al. 2006).

Widening participation is about improving the quality of school-based experience for all students, but especially those from under-represented groups. Improving success in compulsory education is vital. The gap in higher education participation between richer and poorer students is largely explained by the weak academic achievement of disadvantaged children in secondary school (Chowdry et al. 2008). Ultimately eliminating obstacles to successful participation requires
intervention well before the point of entry into higher education and increasing the attainment of children from poorer backgrounds at earlier ages.

Inside the university there is an obligation to understand the current pattern of recruitment, orientation, and integration of diverse populations. New initiatives to insure retention (or persistence) and the eventual success of all groups (in employment as well as graduation) are needed. This involves sustaining a professional dialogue about a range of issues, including any cultural, curriculum or pedagogical adjustments that might be necessary within institutions as well as in the policy arena. Across the sector there is an obligation to collaborate and cooperate to improve progression. New and relevant research is badly needed.

At the level of public policy and debate, university leadership must work in partnership with schools at the compulsory phase of education, with other types of social institutions, and with public and private employers.

Above all universities should strive to get the balance right between self-reflection (via institutional research) and constructive criticism of the other social and political enterprises that figure into this equation. Positive engagement with access and equity represents a long haul; it is however immensely worthwhile in the light of the commitment of universities to social justice.
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