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Public-private dimensions and equitable access to quality higher education: perspectives from Brazil and England (0195)

Programme number: J2

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

This paper seeks to explore the public/private debates around the development of mass quality higher education system. These debates are more and more important as the consensus on the impact of higher education on socio-economic development increasingly contrasts with the controversies related to the appropriate public/private structure of funding and provision driving an efficient and equitable system of higher education.

Over the last few decades the increasing tensions between funding and expansion have been addressed differently in different countries. While it is difficult to map out the various strategies implemented, one key trend has been a worldwide acceleration of the contribution of private funding provision (Altbach, 1998; Levy, 2003). In countries such as the US or Korea, the expansion of higher education systems has been traditionally driven by both private funding and provision and continues to be so. Some countries with traditionally high levels of private provision, such as India, are slowly implementing cost sharing policies in the public sector (Carpentier et al, 2009). Other countries, such as England, which have already developed cost sharing policies, are increasingly opening space for domestic or international private providers (Carpentier, 2012). Some countries are still resisting these transformations and everywhere there are significant controversies on the implications of this for students, for institutions and their staff and to the whole HE system (Brown, 2010). It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which these tensions have led to redefinition of the funding regime and sometimes a redrawing of the social contract in higher education, with significant consequences.

This paper proposes to explore the cases of Brazil and England. We are conscious that these are extremely different contexts and do not seek develop a comparative study but rather a parallel study of their historical trajectories. Our main research question is the following:

How have the two countries used the public and private sectors in distinct ways to ensure equitable access to quality education, and with what impact?

There are significant differences between the two countries. The percentage of the 25-64 age group which had reached tertiary education is 39% (38 for men and 39 for women) in the UK and 12% (10 for men and 12 for women) in Brazil. (OECD, 2013, p. 275). The participation of Brazil at the moment is similar to what it was in the UK in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, while these two countries have very distinct trajectories, the experiences of each are illuminating for the other. In the public sector, the UK introduced fees in 1998 (followed by further increases in England which have been much debated), and thus has lessons for Brazil, in which the principle of free of charge provision is still strongly defended in the public sector (which is still holding out with free of charge provision). But England is only now allowing for-profit providers (BIS, 2011; King, 2009; Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011), while Brazil has a long experience of this, with some 40% of enrolment in for-profit institutions (McCowan, 2007). 85% of students are enrolled in private institutions in Brazil in 2011 (and 70% for type A programmes) (OECD, 2013, p. 275). The rapid expansion of the private sector has been fuelled by the *prouni* initiative, which has given tax breaks for private universities in exchange for their allocating free of charge places to lower-income students (McCowan, 2007). The initiative been very successful in quantitative terms, with over 1 million students having gone to university through the scheme but remains controversial in encouraging expansion of the private sector.

It is also clear that the stratification of both systems is deeply connected with the public/private structure. In Brazil, most traditional elite universities are in the public sector, with their highly competitive entrance exams, while the private sector absorbs the excess demand. Nevertheless, recent efforts to democratise access to the public universities is leading to a migration of elite groups to expensive private institutions. In England, the elitist and non elitist institutions will have different levels of exposition to the variation of the structure of public/private funding.

Using key historical statistics and policy documents, this paper proposes to examine the driving forces behind the different strategies for expanding access through public and private sectors in the two countries and the implications for the whole system, institutions, staff and students.

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