

Drawing the Global Access Map: How access to higher education differs across the world (0056)

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This paper will draw upon a recent research project delivered from 2014-2016 examining the extent of data available across the world on participation in HE by social background supported by a research partnership between Pearson Plc, the University of Newcastle, Australia and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) The objectives of the project were to:

- collate existing information on who participates in HE by social background
- understand better how data is collected and how such collection could be improved
- explore the extent to which the progress of different countries on equity in HE participation can be compared through the development of a 'global equity index'
- bring the information that we have identified together to draw the 'global access map'

## **Background**

It is estimated that by 2030 there will be approaching half a billion higher education students across the world (Calderon, 2012). It is also predicted that this number will continue to rise over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This expansion is likely to be accompanied by marked change in what higher education (HE) looks like as funders and providers assess how best to respond to this growing demand within finite resources. However, understanding of who makes up the existing student body is only partial. If policymakers are to be encouraged and enabled to take action to address inequalities in HE participation they will need effective data. Existing work tends to focus on richer nations (OECD 2015), or gender/overall levels of participation (UNESCO 2012). There are also significant challenges in the collation of data in this area as inequality is context driven. Clancy & Goastellec (2007) describe each country as have legitimised categories i.e. particular groups for whom there is greater concern about their participation in HE. The nature of these groups is grounded in social and political histories of countries. Given the empirical and theoretical limitations outlined here though, it is important that we develop a more comprehensive understanding of the global state of play where data collection on HE participation by social background is concerned if we are to develop practice and policy to address inequalities in this area.

## **Methods**

The project comprised an examination of data on HE participation collected by cross-national agencies i.e. OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank, a survey of 50 countries from across the world, together with case studies of six contrasting countries: Australia, Colombia, India, South Africa, England and the United States of America

## **Results**

## **Inequality in access to higher education is common across the world**

The paper outlines an experimental 'Global Equity Index' involving over 70 countries. The index has a higher value in countries where HE participation overall is higher. There is less clear relationship between the index and the wealth of the country. While such a relationship exists in Latin America, this is less the case in Europe and amongst richer nations. It includes an global access map classifying every country in the world into one of 5 categories based on the availability of data on HE participation.

## **But major data gaps exist**

The extent to which we can document and explain the nature of inequalities in participation remains relatively limited. Gaps exist in a variety of forms including in the range of information individual countries collect, the lack of cross-national survey data outside richer countries and the European Union (in particular in Africa) and the lack of common approaches to the collection of data in multiple dimensions.

## **There is no one-size all approach to data collection**

There is no country that does not have challenges in how it collects information. It is not possible nor desirable to simply take a 'one size fits all' approach. In particular, we need to very wary of trying to impose on less developed countries models from economically rich countries

## **Access means more than participation**

This report has focused primarily on trying to map the availability of data with respect to participation at the point of entry to HE (horizontal inequalities). However, the case studies illustrated clearly that we need to consider inequalities in outcomes as students move up the system in terms of their academic progression and subsequent destinations (vertical inequalities).

## **Political will & wealth shape data collection**

It is the wealthier countries where more data is available on who participates in HE. However, the political will to collect information which is grounded in how important the issue is seen by policymakers and politicians also plays a major factor in shaping what data is collected and how it is used.

## **Conclusions**

This paper shows clearly that inequality in participation in HE is a truly global issue – but understood differently across the world. A collaborative approach is required if we are to improve the collection of data in the area of equity and access to HE. It is crucial we do this if we are to provide the evidence base to advocate for greater equity in access to HE. But how to engender this greater collaboration and data collection needs further analysis. This paper brings out clearly the political nature of widening access to HE and equity and the nature of this as one of the most acute areas of struggle in global HE. As a paper this relates well to the conference themes by highlighting a particular area of global contestation in higher education. Better data collection here will require concerted efforts from national governments, supra-national organisations in particular OECD/World

Bank/UNESCO and individual higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves. The paper will outline 10 recommendations to underpin this approach which form a 'Global Equity Charter'.

### **References**

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