

COVID-19 and student success: A literature analysis of ‘stuckness’ and systemic inequalities in global north and south contexts.

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper draws on an international literature review undertaken in 2021-22. Our focus was on HE access and equity during COVID-19.

Much of the literature has focussed on the pivot to online learning, the experiences of students and some studies have focussed on the experience of faculty. The links between government policy and HEIs’ responses and the supports provided to students who were already disadvantaged are less prevalent in the literature. The pandemic has demonstrated how inequalities can be compounded at multiple levels (individuals, communities, countries). Reviewing research on equity and access from a global perspective has enabled us to identify how policies centred on student success require new thinking in the context of supports provided to diverse cohorts of students during the pandemic. With intentionality, HE might provide solutions to counteract amplified structural inequalities, rather than reinforce accumulated layers of disadvantage.

Full paper

There are approximately 200 million students enrolled in higher education (HE) around the world (Calderon, 2018); a growth fueled, in part, by increased emphasis on access to HE in national policy

agendas and international agencies (Glass & Szonyegi, 2020; Salmi, 2018). Yet while global discourse on equitable HE access and success has gained momentum, outcomes for diverse students have not kept pace. And although specific populations experiencing educational inequality are not uniform across all nations, universities around the world express needing to improve access, retention and/or graduation rates for minoritized and marginalized students (Altbach et al., 2009; Salmi, 2018, 2019).

Prior to COVID-19, a significant discourse had developed around student success in HE. Factors contributing to student success include an institutional commitment to student learning; management of student transitions; treating learning as both an academic and social construct and ensuring curricular structures are in place which support student success (Yorke and Longden, 2008).

Demands emerging from government interest and oversight, can influence interpretations of student success through the direction and scope of program design, skill sets found within programs and courses, and experiences mandated to students within the curriculum and the co-curriculum. Structural changes in HE (move to mass higher education, students as paying customers) have changed the conditions under which students experience HE in complex ways and in which both students and universities struggle to make sense of particular contexts (Clegg, 2017). Understanding the complex factors that shape student success are challenged and exacerbated by COVID-19. Around the world, minoritized students are navigating the inequitable impact of COVID-19 on their communities, alongside attempting to access and complete a college degree (Bassett, 2020).

This paper draws on an international literature review undertaken in 2021-22. Our focus was on HE access and equity during COVID-19.

The review examines journal articles and reports published in English from September 2021 to June 2022. Where reference was made to pre-existing social inequalities, structural barriers, socio-economic issues, the digital divide, or student difficulties in accessing technology these papers were included. Initially a search was conducted to identify publications from the following education databases: EBSCO; ERIC. ProQuest; One Search and Scopus. The initial search resulted in 170 papers placed in Endnote software

facilitating a review of the abstracts of which 41 were identified as relevant. Two further searches yielded 123 papers for review. Using OneSearch, a new search using the phrases higher education + covid-19 within education discipline was conducted. While 13,681 papers were reported, 500 were available for review and 116 were viewed as being of possible relevance to the literature analysis. This was further refined to 23 inclusive of special issue journals devoted to COVID-19. A further search was conducted in 2022 with a focus on students in HE with additional needs, yielding 10 relevant articles. After review, 94 papers were considered relevant with a geographical spread across North America, Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe.

Much of the literature has focussed on the pivot to online learning, the experiences of students and some studies have focussed on the experience of faculty. The links between government policy and HEIs' responses and the supports provided to students who were already disadvantaged are less prevalent in the literature but are crucial to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the system from a structural perspective and especially in relation to developing new understandings around student success and diversity. Students with diverse needs face intersecting challenges and COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing social and educational inequalities between students with and without additional needs. Those with additional needs experienced difficulties with accessible software and learning materials, acquiring appropriate accommodations, receiving therapies, and feeling supported in HE settings. Even as many factors converged to further hinder the academic progress of students with additional needs, there is a dearth of research about their experiences or their academic outcomes (Reyes & Meneses, 2021). This speaks to the ways in which the pandemic has shaped responses to student success reflecting a 'stuckness' (Jefferson et al., 2019) embedded in systemic inequalities via national educational and social systems in the global north and global south contexts.

Reviewing research on equity and access from a global perspective has enabled us to identify how policies centred on student success require new thinking in the context of supports provided to diverse cohorts of students during the pandemic. The pandemic has demonstrated how inequalities can be compounded at multiple

levels (individuals, communities, countries). With intentionality, HE might provide solutions to counteract amplified structural inequalities, rather than reinforce accumulated layers of disadvantage.

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