

347 Peeling the Multiple Layers of Inequalities in Higher Education: The Case of Syria

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

It has long been debated as to whether HE is a site of social mobility that promotes meritocracy or social reproduction that creates and exacerbates inequalities in societies. In this paper, I argued that HE, even when democratised and provided free to everyone, reproduces inequalities unless coupled with an inclusive sectoral design, an expansion of funding, and a wider strategy to reduce socio-economic inequalities. To do so, I studied the case of Syria, which has always claimed to have a meritocratic HE system that is designed to achieve equality in society by providing free HE. I analysed the database of the Ministry of Higher Education for 15 academic years (2001-2015). I unpacked four types of inequalities, namely HE provision mode-based inequalities, specialisation-based inequalities, city-based inequality, and gender-based inequalities. Finally, I show how gender dynamics and roles are changing in the HE sector as a result of the Syrian conflict.

Full paper

The debate around the role of education in society is a very old one amongst sociologists. In Western sociology, this debate around the role of education in society has been addressed by the work of functionalist sociologists such as Émile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1956, 1997, 2002). In Sociology, the concept of social stratification and its relationship with the social order is of fundamental importance (and debate). Functionalist thinkers perceive that societies embody both competitive elements and social solidarity features. They tried to answer a fundamental question about how society can design an efficient and fair system of stratification that balances the competitive elements within it while at the same time maintaining social stability/coherence. Education was perceived to play this role (and others) by functioning as a meritocratic and achievement-based stratification system that selects and allocates people to roles in society based on their merit only. In this way, people will be fairly sorted and progress (achieve social mobility) into social positions based on their capacity. However, structuralist sociologists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1998), perceive education as a tool which reproduces social stratification and the cultural hegemony of the elite. Accessing and finishing education could be dependent on the “forms of capital”. Also, the “field” of education is designed to fit the middle-class “habitus” (tastes and attributes) which limits working-class individuals’ ability to enter the field and makes them feel out of place in HE, and as a result, struggle/drop out of education (Lee & Kramer, 2013; Reay et al., 2010). In particular, Bourdieu conceptualised HE as a “sorting machine that selects students according to an implicit social classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit academic classification” (Naidoo, 2004, p. 459).

The latter argument that students’ socio-economic background has a lot of influence on HE access, decision, and attainment is quite documented by recent empirical research (Ball et al., 2002; Bukodi et al., 2021; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Crawford & Greaves, 2015; Reay et al., 2010). To disconnect the influence of socioeconomic background on people’s chances in education, there is a line of research and activism that extends from South America to Africa to the Far East demanding that HE should be free (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013; Cini, 2019; Samuels, 2013). While it could be an important first step, free HE is not a magic wand that solves the inequality of access or the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds on education attainments. In this paper, I argue that free HE, if it is not coupled with an inclusive sectoral design, an expansion of funding, and a wider strategy to reduce socioeconomic inequalities, will continue to exacerbate inequalities. I argue this by analysing the case of Syria which, for over fifty years, has followed a socialist model of HE that is free to everyone.

Following Jones & Goldring (2022) and Williams et al. (2021) archival analysis strategy (data exploration, migration and merging, organisation and cleaning, checking, analysis and visualisation), I analyse the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) archive. This database covers the years from 2001 to 2015 and includes data for the students’

access and graduation divided by the type of education (public, private, higher institutes, and technical institutes), level of education (undergraduate and postgraduate), gender (male and female), faculty, specialisations, city. There is also data for the number of academics in each university and faculty divided by gender.

The data analysis unpacked four types of inequalities, namely HE provision mode-based inequalities (private/public universities, higher institutes, virtual learning, etc), specialisation-based inequalities, city-based inequality, and gender-based inequalities. The inequalities manifested themselves in the rate of access to the sector and academic specialisations, graduation rates, and student-teacher ratios. Using academic literature, grey reports and students' testimonies, I then interpret the data and show that these inequalities were the results of inefficient sectoral design. In particular, the Syrian admission system created a hierarchy of specialisations that has been reflected in society and created a hierarchy of prestige for disciplines and careers. The distribution of universities across cities disadvantaged, in particular, rural areas and female students. The unequal development of academics and staff led to huge discrepancies in the quality of courses, which was reflected in huge discrepancies in the graduation rates. Finally, findings show how gender dynamics and roles are changing noticeably in the HE sector as a result of the Syrian conflict, which is quite common for women to become the breadwinners in conflict and post-conflict contexts in the absence, death, or migration of males (Petesch, 2017).

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