

Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

Inequalities today are persistent and rising, with income and wealth inequalities intersecting with differences across race, gender, ethnicity and geography. Overcoming such multidimensional inequalities requires that we reinvent, reimagine and strengthen a wide range of policies and institutions. Education is seen as a key pathway out of poverty, and crucial for economic growth, empowerment, democratic citizenship and sustainable development. In recent decades participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. So is higher education a key to social mobility in countries of the global South today? What challenges are universities in the global South facing? And what policies show the greatest transformative promise when it comes to higher education as a pathway to more equal societies?

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

RESEARCH AND POLICY BRIEF

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The Issue

While higher education (HE) has historically been a privilege of elites, it is now recognized as a key to social mobility and greater equality across gender and race, empowering disadvantaged groups and increasing their labour market opportunities. It is a driver of economic growth, raising labour productivity through skills acquisition (or human capital) and innovation. Education also impacts society as a whole, through the creation of an educated, informed and empowered citizenry. It can have a strong positive impact for social cohesion and peace; for post-independence, postconflict nation-building processes in the global South (McCowan and Bertolin); and for addressing the environmental crisis. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims (inter alia) "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", including equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education (SDG 4, target 4.3). In addition, target 8.6 aims to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2020.

In the past several decades, efforts to expand higher education have swept the world and globally, more than one third of secondary school leavers are now absorbed into some form of HE, up from one fifth in 2000 (McCowan and Bertolin). But these increases are not evenly distributed across countries. The average gross enrolment ratio is just 9% in low-income countries (see Figure 1); and many global South countries lack not only financial

The Project

Part of the broader UNRISD research inquiry, <u>Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured</u> <u>World: Between Elite Power and Social</u> <u>Mobilization, the project Universities and</u> <u>Social Inequalities in the Global South aims</u> to improve understanding of the role of universities in reducing social inequalities, and to make evidence-based recommendations for the innovative design and implementation of tertiary education policies that lead to transformative institutions and outcomes, contributing to sustainable development and to the implementation of SDG 4.

The papers summarized in this brief were submitted in response to an open call. They examine different approaches to improving access to university education in sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal) and in Latin America (Brazil, Chile and Peru). The studies analyse these countries' reform outcomes in terms of access to and performance within tertiary education as well as labour market entry, in particular with regard to disadvantaged groups such as women, rural populations and ethnic/racial minorities.

UNRISD collaborated with Professor Ananya Mukherjee-Reed on this project, which received seed funding from York University and the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Canada. Full papers at • www.unrisd.org/Unis-Inequalities-South







resources to improve this figure but also qualified staff, with many of their best academics leaving for institutions in the global North (McCowan and Bertolin).

In addition to these disparities between countries, inequalities abound within countries as well, even where enrolment has risen markedly. In many cases, expansion in systems of higher education not only reinforces old inequalities, but also creates new ones. The increased participation in tertiary education has not necessarily been accompanied by sufficient formal employment opportunities for new labour market entrants, a situation that has worsened during the current Covid-19 pandemic (Marginson 2016; ILO 2021). In fact, the demand for tertiary education seems to be rising simultaneously with jobless growth and tectonic shifts in the world of work (World Bank 2018; ILO 2019). Further, the demand for HE in many places in the global South has exceeded the capacity of public educational institutions, which experienced budget cuts during structural adjustment and subsequent fiscal crises. Growing demand has largely been satisfied by private providers, with impacts for affordability and accessibility (UNESCO 2017). Indeed, data indicate a sharp divide in the developing world in terms of access, with rich students overwhelmingly outnumbering poor students in terms of attendance rates, and those students from disadvantaged social groups much more likely to attend non-selective universities (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2016). Recent research finds that the intergenerational transmission of privilege is particularly strong in the least developed countries, while the mobility gap between poor and rich countries has increased over time (Leone 2019). While student movements are emerging in different regions of the world, from Chile to South Africa, claiming their rights for free education and participation in the governance of educational institutions (Grugel and Nem Singh 2015), fiscal austerity continues to take a toll on public educational institutions. This is a situation that could further deteriorate due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has overburdened fiscal capacities in low- and middle-income countries and raised concerns about a looming fiscal and debt crisis.

Higher Education and Inequality– Making Sense of Recent Trends

To meet the growing demand for higher education in their societies, the seven countries analysed in this project have taken different approaches: some have expanded the public system, often relaxing accreditation requirements; in others, private, often for-profit, institutions are filling in the gaps of underfunded state systems. To address resource shortages in public institutions, some have introduced or increased tuition fees or charges for room and board, often through dual-track systems—in which lower-performing self-financed students study alongside higher-performing subsidized students—while others have invested in lower-cost, higher-capacity options such as distance education.

The studies explore these various approaches, consider their political economy contexts, and evaluate their outcomes. In the face of expanded opportunities (**availability**), who can access these opportunities and at what cost, financial or otherwise (**accessibility**)? (How do various factors—such as income, family education levels, gender, race/ethnicity and geographical location—affect access to quality education?) And for those who are able to secure a place, what **vertical** stratification emerges in terms of quality of education and outcomes (this as opposed to **horizontal** stratification, based on orientation, focal area or mission) (McCowan and Bertolin)?

1970

	North America	47.37%
	Europe and Central Asia	33.27%
	Latin America and Caribbean	5.96%
	Middle East and North Africa	5.65%
•	South Asia	4.28%
•	East Asia and Pacific	1.43%
•	Sub-Saharan Africa	1.40%
	1990	

	North America	12.61%
	Europe and Central Asia	35.07%
	Latin America and Caribbean	16.20%
•	Middle East and North Africa	12.71%
•	South Asia	5.42%
•	East Asia and Pacific	5.21%
•	Sub-Saharan Africa	3.20%
	2014	
	North America	84.03%
	Europe and Central Asia	62.07%
•	Europe and Central Asia Latin America and Caribbean	62.07% 43.30%
•	Europe and Central Asia Latin America and Caribbean East Asia and Pacific	62.07% 43.30% 36.47%

Source: Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics database. Lebeau and Oanda 2020.

20.84%

8.59%

South Asia

Sub-Saharan Africa

A second conceptual lens cutting across the studies is the potential of higher education to reduce inequality by engendering social mobility, understood as the movement through a system of social hierarchy and stratification. The relationship between HE and social mobility is not direct; it depends on the rate of return on investment in HE for different social groups, which tends to be lower for low-income students and disadvantaged groups (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). Graduates from groups with disadvantages in terms of location, gender, ethnicity or class tend to have less success in the labour market due to a number of factors, including the reputation of the university attended and degree programme completed: disadvantaged groups are underrepresented in degree courses of professions that earn high incomes. These factors, combined with inequalities in access to social capital including family networks, correlate strongly with parental education and socio-economic status, limiting possibilities for social mobility and undermining the transformative potential of higher education.

The Findings

Availability: Strategies of HE expansion

In much of the global South up until the 1980s and 1990s, HE was not widely available. Many countries had only a handful of highly selective, largely government-funded universities, available mainly to students from privileged backgrounds who had been able to afford high-quality, often private, primary and secondary schooling. As secondary school attainment rates and demand for tertiary education started increasing in the 1970s, many governments responded by liberalizing HE. A range of different approaches were used.

In Chile, Peru and Brazil, the expansion of HE has largely taken place in the private sector. In Chile, in 1981, the military government began a major education reform process, expanding from eight "traditional universities", which were a mix of federally funded public and private institutions, to 40 new private universities and 80 professional institutions by the end of the military dictatorship in 1990 (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). Starting in the 1990s, Peru legalized private investment in education and incentivized its expansion through tax benefits. In both Chile and Peru, the major wave of expansion occurred after 2004, and has resulted in a shift from majority public enrolment to majority private, with private enrolment outpacing public by a factor of 1.12 in Chile and 1.8 in Peru (where private enrolment totaled over 1 million in 2016) (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). In Brazil, the expansion similarly came with liberalization beginning in the late 1990s. Since then, enrolment has increased from 1.5 million to 8 million, with the private sector constituting three quarters of total enrolments (McCowan and Bertolin). In all three Latin American cases, efforts to expand the availability of higher education have led to marked increases in enrolment.

Gross enrolment rates have grown in Africa as well, although the expansion has not been on par with that of Latin America and other parts of the global South (Lebeau and Oanda; Figure 1). The legalization of private higher education has been an important feature of reform in many countries, but the lion's share of increased enrolment is found in expanded state offerings, whether through the increase in places at existing universities, the establishment of new universities, or the upgrading of lower-level institutions to university status (Simson and Harris). In a context of marketoriented reforms in social sectors, and in order to make up for declining state revenues as a result of the debt and austerity crisis of the 1980s, costsharing measures were introduced widely. In the case of Kenya, this took the form of a dual-track system allowing the admission of self-financed, lower-performing students into competitive public universities alongside students admitted into subsidized programmes on the basis of academic performance. Combined with the advent of private HE and reform of the student loan system, this resulted in enrolment increasing from 33,000 in 1999 to 500,000 in 2017, with 85% of enrolment in the public sector (Simson and Harris). A similar package of reforms was implemented in Ghana in 2010, with enrolment increasing from just over 100,000 in 2008 to nearly 350,000 in 2018 and public universities accounting for over 81% of enrolment (Ayelazuno and Aziabah). In addition to such reforms, Nigeria's expansion also featured an increase in state-level public universities offering fee-charging, part-time, sub-degree programmes along with their subsidized accredited programmes. However, enrolment levels in the country have not increased greatly. Public universities have the capacity to admit only 30% of qualified applicants, and private institutions account for 5.8% of enrolment (Lebeau and Oanda). Senegal faces a similar struggle to meet demand despite efforts to expand and diversify supply. Four new public universities have been established since the 1990s, but 80% of students in the public sector still attend one university, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD), which is operating at three times its capacity. The 75 private universities that have been accredited enroll no more than 200 students each (Lebeau and Oanda; Figure 2).



* Source: Lebeau and Oanda 2020

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Accessibility: Who has access to what?

While availability has increased in all cases, the increased opportunities have not been accessible to all groups equally. The majority of the new places created by expansion, whether in public or private institutions, come with a cost element, and this has implications for access by socioeconomically disadvantaged students. In Senegal in 2016, less than 1% of students aged 25-29 from the poorest households had completed higher education, while 10% of wealthy students had. In Nigeria the gap was even larger at 1% and 19% (Lebeau and Oanda). Data from Brazil suggest similar disparities, although there have been some improvements, notably through the private system: 4% of students from the two lowest income guintiles were enrolled in private institutions in 2002, and by 2015 that had risen to 15% (McCowan and Bertolin). Some measures have been put in place to counter disparities due to socio-economic status, including scholarship programmes for lowincome students in Peru (through government grants to private universities) and student loans in Ghana (administered by the Student Loan Trust Fund); the extension of federal student loans to fund private university tuition costs in Chile; and tax credits for private institutions offering fully and partially funded positions to low-income students in Brazil (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román, Ayelazuno and Aziabah, McCowan and Bertolin).

Because the vast majority of subsidized university spots are reserved for the highest performing students, socio-economic status also affects access to HE in as far as it determines the quality of primary and secondary education one receives. In Brazil, for example, 88% of secondary schools in the country are state-run (the rest being private fee-charging schools accessible only to the well-off), but only 36% of students from state-run secondary schools go on to university (McCowan and Bertolin).

Racial and ethnic disparities are also present. In Brazil, while 52% of white students completing secondary school attend university, only 33% of black and mixed-race students do (McCowan and Bertolin), and net enrolment rates in HE of white students as a percentage of their population group are double the shares of black and mixedrace students (Table 1). Indigenous groups are underrepresented in HE in both Chile and Peru; in Chile this gap has decreased since the reforms were put in place, however in Peru the gap has grown, indicating that advances in HE have benefited non-indigenous groups at a faster rate than indigenous groups (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). On the other hand, Simson and Harris find that ethnic disparities in HE are declining in Kenya. Some measures are being taken to address inequalities based on race or ethnicity, for example quota systems in Brazil and Ghana, although their impacts have been limited (McCowan and Bertolin, Ayelazuno and Aziabah).

One of the greatest sources of inequality in access to education relates to geographical location. In Ghana, the vast majority of institutions are located in the southern region and in urban areas. Considering that just shy of 50% of Ghanaians live in rural areas, and without measures to ensure that students of rural origin have equitable access to those institutions, this geographical imbalance creates steep inequalities. The expansion in supply has done little to address this: the number of universities located in rural areas and in northern Ghana grew only slightly (Ayelazuno and Aziabah). Continued disparities in rural versus urban education in Chile and Peru point to insufficient secondary educational opportunities, specifically in rural and/or indigenous communities (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). In Kenya, disparities between Nairobi and the rest of the country are widening due to differences in income growth across the country, as well as geographic distribution of guality primary and secondary institutions (Simson and Harris). Geographic disparities also translate into socio-economic ones, as proximity to an institution reduces transportation and housing costs (Ayelazuno and Aziabah).

The findings from the various studies show that gender balance in HE is improving, with much of this due to increased participation of girls in primary and secondary education. Brazil, Peru and Chile have achieved near gender parity in their HE systems; however, in Peru fewer women enter the education system at all. In Ghana and in Kenya gender balance is improving (see Figure 3), although the increased participation of women is coming largely from wealthier socio-economic strata.

Horizontality: Quality disparities across institutions

Beyond the question of access, disparities between HE institutions in terms of resources, quality and prestige also reinforce and produce inequality. There are marked differences in quality within both public and private systems—although in many countries the public sector still offers the more prestigious institutions.

Table 1. Net enrolment ratio in HE by race/colour in Brazil, 2012-2018 (as % of total population group by race)										
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018			
White	24.1	25	25.7	27.1	28.4	27.9	30.7			
Black	9.4	9.2	10.6	12.3	13.8	14.3	15.1			
Mixed-race	10.6	11.3	12.6	13.7	15.2	14.6	16.3			
Source: McCowan and Bertolin 2020										



In Africa, cost-cutting during the period of neoliberal adjustment and state retrenchment has had a profound impact on the quality of public institutions. From establishing insufficiently resourced universities to serve rural populations, to loosening accreditation requirements, to filling underfunded universities well-beyond capacity, public institutions regularly suffer from poor infrastructure, overcrowding and disrupted learning due to staff and student strikes (Ayelazuno and Aziabah, Lebeau and Oanda, Simson and Harris).

In the Latin American cases, where private institutions account for the vast majority of enrolment, disparities in quality between public and private institutions have stark consequences for inequality. In Brazil, for example, almost all of the country's scientific knowledge production takes place at public institutions, and graduates of public institutions perform notably better on the national university exit exam than their counterparts from private institutions (McCowan and Bertolin). These private institutions are largely profit oriented; in Peru and Brazil, HE institutions are legally permitted to turn a profit, and in Chile profits are often reaped through the creation of subsidiary companies (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román, McCowan and Bertolin). As private universities in Chile and Peru face little regulation, they lack incentives to meet quality standards and tend to be oriented towards maximal output at minimal costs, responding to market competition (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). With the only route to HE available to most students from lower-quality secondary schools being private institutions, this tends to perpetuate existing inequalities: in Brazil, only 20% of students enrolled in federal free-of-charge institutions come from the poorest two income quintiles, while 65% come from the upper two quintiles (McCowan and Bertolin). In Chile and Peru, women, indigenous and rural individuals are more likely to enter a vocational track than university. Indigenous and rural individuals are also more likely to attend private rather than public universities (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román).

While the private sector in Africa plays a smaller role overall, in some countries the private sector has stepped in where the public has failed, offering higher-quality services at a premium. These institutions mainly serve upper-middle class groups, offering courses that equip graduates for high-earning professions such as banking, finance and management, and providing in many cases better infrastructure, staff-to-student ratios, and career services. In this way the private sector does little to democratize access to HE and reduce inequalities (Lebeau and Oanda).

Finally, in many of these countries the expansion of distance education presents (in theory) a viable alternative for low-income and working students. In reality however, it is considered a "second-class option", seen as less valuable on the job market; further, distance students' test scores tend to be lower than those of face-to-face students, reflecting the low levels of investment by the state to improve the quality of these programmes (McCowan and Bertolin).

Social mobility: Variation in returns to higher education

Higher education is a key tool for social mobility, but systems in which access is skewed can perpetuate intergenerational inequalities, locking individuals into patterns of disadvantage. Parental education remains one of the strongest predictors of HE attainment in all the cases explored. For example, in Kenya, it is estimated that roughly half of respondents with university-educated fathers go on to attend university, compared to 1% of those with fathers holding less than a primary school degree (Simson and Harris).

Returns to HE for those who do attend are not equal across groups. In each of the cases explored, graduates from disadvantaged groups largely remain disadvantaged in the labour market as a result of various factors, including the reputation of the university attended and degree programme completed. Data from Peru show that earning trajectories of secondary school completers and vocational education and training graduates are nearly identical (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román).

Even in comparing students graduating from the same types of institution, disparities exist in earnings along lines of gender, ethnic background, parental education, and other factors. Comparative data on graduate earnings in Chile and Peru (Figure 4) are revealing. In both countries, graduates from disadvantaged groups earn less than their counterparts with the same degrees (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román). Beyond the case studies synthesized here, a South African study revealed that along with year of graduation, race and socioeconomic status were the strongest determinants of graduate unemployment (Lebeau and Oanda). This, combined with privileges and discriminations embedded within the labour market itself, which advantage certain groups over others, as well as unequal access to social capital, ultimately reduces the potential for social mobility.

Figure 4. Labour market returns to education by circumstances: Gender, ethnicity, parental education and type of higher education, Chile, Peru, 2017





Educational track

Note: The lines track mean earnings by age across different levels of educational achievement and for subgroups defined by gender, ethnic background, parental education and across educational tracks. In 2017, female labour market entrants at the age of 25-29 years earned an average earning of around 1,900 USD PPP with university education compared to around 2,200 USD PPP for male university graduates.









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