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"A Public and a Private University in One"

Equity in University Attendance in Kenya since the Liberalization Reforms of the 1990s

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Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

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Introduction to Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

This paper is part of a project which explores what role universities play in overcoming persistent and rising inequalities. 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. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. The project asks: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

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Acronyms

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPUMS	Integrated Public Use Microdata Series
KCPE	Kenya Certificate of Primary Education
KCSE	Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education
KES	Kenyan shilling
KUCCPS	Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
PSC	Public Service Commission
SES	Socio-Economic Status

Abstract

Until the 1990s Kenya had a selective state-financed university system where students bore few educational costs. This limited the number of university students that the government could afford to educate and created fierce competition for university places. In the late 1990s the Kenyan government responded to this crisis in supply by liberalizing the tertiary sector. Barriers to accreditation of private universities were loosened and public universities began to establish parallel, fee-paying programmes, which only required applicants to meet minimum entry requirements, alongside the state-sponsored, selective programmes. By the late 2000s self-financed students accounted for roughly half of university admissions. Consequently, undergraduate enrolment rose sharply, from 33,000 in 1999, to close to 500,000 by 2017. The number of universities increased from a single public university in Nairobi in 1970, to over 50 tertiary institutions nationwide by 2014.

Critics have worried that these privately funded university tracks have undermined equity in access to university education. Many have argued that these reforms enabled lower-performing students from richer families, who could pay full fees, to enter Kenya's most competitive public universities. This may have increased the elite bias in student composition and heightened Kenya's already considerable regional and ethnic skews in university access. Others have posited the opposite, that restrictive, even if ostensibly free, higher education is more easily captured by children of the existing elite. Therefore, an expansion in opportunities to pursue university education, even if self-financed, would enable a more diverse group of students to study at universities.

This paper brings new empirical evidence to these debates by analysing inequalities in university access in Kenya since the 1990s, drawing on two main sources. First, we use census data to examine trends in equity in the 1990s and early 2000s. Second, we use a new dataset of all University of Nairobi students to study educational equity at Kenya's most prestigious university.

We find that horizontal inequalities in university access - between ethnic and religious groups and the sexes—have declined, while vertical, "class", inequality is likely increasing. Using a subsample of University of Nairobi graduates, we argue that parallel degree programmes absorbed a higher share of women and ethnic minorities than through the regular competitive admission stream, but that these students were on average from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In this sense, the programmes are regressive. However, this should not overshadow the fact that students entering through the regular,

meritocratic track are on average from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds too. We also show that intergenerational persistence in university access in Kenya is considerable, and its high level predates the reforms of the 1990s.

Keywords

Higher education; universities; inequality; Kenya

Bios

Rebecca Simson is the David Richard Junior Research Fellow in Economic History at Wadham College, University of Oxford. Her research explores social and economic processes of change in postcolonial Africa, with a focus on education, intergenerational mobility, social stratification and elite formation since independence.

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It is very painful that universities are open to you if you can pay. […] There is buying of education as a commodity; education has become a commodity, and you just have to be rich to have a good education. […] You start buying it from the primary school. You buy the most expensive if you have money; you buy it in secondary school and then in university, now you do not need the best grades to do medicine or architecture. You just need to have money. […] That is a serious problem because you block those who could have had the education as the way out of poverty, and as something to create social mobility; also universities have a challenge. […] the amount that the Government is providing to universities is not enough to educate as many students as we would like. Parallel or Module II courses are an income generation project for universities, as they are faced with a situation where the Government cannot put in all the money; universities have to find a way of being innovative and raise extra income to be able to support their own lecturers and students.

It is as we have two systems in our universities. We have a private and a public university in one.

—Dr. Mwiria, Assistant Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology, responding to a parliamentary motion for the admission of 75 per cent of qualified students to public universities (Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard) 2012:36-38)

Introduction

In 1999, student protests at the University of Nairobi led to the temporary closure of the university and banning of the student union. In the past, Kenya's university students had clashed with the university leadership and government on many occasions, and students played an outsized role in Kenya's pro-democracy movements (Amutabi 2002). The trigger for the 1999 protests, however, was not national political grievances but university-level policy reform. Students opposed the introduction of what was termed parallel degree programmes: routes for self-financed students meeting only the minimum university entry requirements to enter degree programmes outside the central, competitive admissions system. The student union deemed this scheme exploitative and prone to corruption (SONU 2019). Many feared that it would devalue all University of Nairobi degrees, undermine the merit-based education system and increase inequality in access (Munene and Otieno 2008). Yet despite this vocal opposition, within less than a decade, parallel degree entrants came to form half of the university's annual intake.[1]

Parallel degree programmes were the creation of the University of Nairobi's Vice Chancellor, F. J. Gichaga, who had, in the early 1990s, begun to search for means by which the cash-strapped university could raise funds independently to complement their rapidly declining funding from