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Reducing Inequality of Opportunity in Higher Education: Policy on Equity in Colombia

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This chapter analyzes a group of Colombian policy initiatives. These initiatives constitute an effort to increase equity in higher education. This research presents findings on policy goals, efforts, impacts, and outcomes regarding equity within the last 12 years, and comprises two different presidential administrations.

The concept of equity used here is tightly linked to the concept of access policy, and implies a role of equalizing opportunity developed by social and political institutions. As understood and worked for this research, access opportunity goes beyond the entry stage and embraces conditions prior to and after the beginning of higher education.

This analysis combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, and uses a framework of equity policy categories and indicators, which has been conceived and implemented by the author in previous works (Uribe Correa 2012; 2013). It seeks to identify equity policy efforts by the Colombian government, and subsequent impacts; secondly, this paper seeks to determine whether changes in the higher education landscape show reduced social inequalities in participation, specifically regarding income groups.

The findings reinforce previous research results in that Colombian policy efforts in equity have been diverse and focused on low-income population. Results in equity are

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mixed: while some indicators show improvements, others highlight non-resolved problems that pose a challenge for future policies.

Conceptual Approach

Higher education has increasingly become an aspiration of people, as more skills and knowledge are required to succeed in the labour market and the society. However, not all of those with aspirations may access higher education institutions because of multiple reasons related to lack of academic preparation or affordability, or other factors prior to the beginning of college education. Limited admittance is worsened by unequal access by social groups, for example in regard to income or race.

We distinguished, one from another, the concepts of equity and equality. The latter is considered a social value in societies which implies individuals having equal opportunity (Uribe Correa 2012). Equality may be branded as a right of an individual before the law, ergo as a human right.

Equity, in turn, involves the concept of fairness and a sense of social justice. In consequence, equity in academics may imply fairness in access, and treatment (such as quality of education). Equity and equality may overlap from a sociological viewpoint in a way that they could mean equality of opportunity (Benadusi 2001). However, whereas equality is inherent to individuals or groups as subjects of parity, equity is the search of equality which implies an intervention, plausibly a policy initiative developed by institutions (from public policy, or social, communitarian, educational venues). In education, equity would refer to pursuits of equality of opportunities regarding inputs, processes, and outputs.

Within the egalitarian theory, we argue that the Colombian policy has emphasized on the liberal approach, different from the basic and radical slants identified by John Baker (Lynch 2006). This means that the liberal dimension of equality embraces the tenet that society holds unequal distribution of goods, but social institutions, such as schools are in place in an attempt to equalize opportunities (Rawls 1999). Amartya Sen (1999) states that those goods are mostly “capabilities”; consequently, the concept is tightly linked to education as an important generator of equality.

By using his approach to the theory of justice, John Rawls (1999) argued that it is necessary to identify disadvantages among individuals which allow to better distribute goods by taking account of dissimilar capabilities. Such a concept of unequal treatment for unequal groups, according to their disparate capacity, is referred to by Berne and Stiefel as “vertical equity” (1984). Studies in equity and equity policy in higher education from such a liberal point of view would take into account not only unlike capabilities but also those factors that generate such a phenomenon. Several of those troublesome features that place constraints on equity (in access and academic performance) have been objects of research, as well as a policy to face them.

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