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## Access and Equity in Polish Higher Education

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This article examines influence of private higher education in Poland on access and accessibility of higher education. The first section focuses on theory on distributional effects of government interventions in the higher education system, in particular in terms of equity and access. We also examine the existing studies on distributional effects of traditional funding models. The second part looks closer at the impact of private higher education providers on enrolment rates in different socio-economic students groups in Poland.

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### State Funding Models of Higher Education

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There is a problem of equity in public higher education that calls for government intervention. If students paid all costs of higher education, the financial burden would prevent poor but otherwise qualified students from going to university. In order to redress this market failure, government intervenes and provides subsidies to lower the financial threshold. It offers free public education, in addition to various student support schemes. However, according to many data, governments fail to contribute to a situation where the composition of the student body reflects that of the population; the middle and higher socio-economic strata are often over-represented in the publicly supported higher education institutions. Moreover, in some cases government intervention intended to remedy the distributional inequities, itself produces distributional inequities.

While at first glance free education might seem to contribute to the principle of equal access, empirical evidence does not support this view. Across the world, free higher education does not seem to go hand in hand with a balanced social representation of students in higher education. Higher education researchers argue that a system of free tuition is inefficient and inequitable (Hansen and Weisbrod 1969; Hoenack 1971; Windham 1976; Jackson 1982; Jongbloed 2004). A higher education system with zero or low tuition fees reflects the general belief that the returns to society from a highly educated citizenry justify significant public expenditure on education (Hearn and Longanecker 1985). However, a more targeted approach of subsidizing higher education is based on the belief that higher education brings benefits first and foremost to the individual, so public expenditures for higher education should maximize the public returns from education while keeping the public costs to a minimum.

Given the debate on free versus subsidized higher education and the effects either has on efficiency and equity in the system, we discuss the outcomes of two different ways of providing subsidies to higher education. First of all, the effects of a system of direct payments to institutions are investigated. Second, a student-based funding mechanism is discussed.

Traditionally, public financial support for higher education is provided in the form of direct subsidies to selected higher education institutions, which in most countries are only public. Only this selected group of higher education providers receives subsidies to supply degree programs for zero tuition. In the case of zero tuition fees, the governments in question cannot provide sufficient financial support for the providers to create enrolment space for all candidates. Nearly all public higher education institutions have limited places that are offered for free to the students. Such mechanisms are developed mainly to protect the quality of education, but they are also created because of fiscal constraints. However, sometimes rigorous admission and selection systems have important implications for the opportunity of students from the lower socio-economic strata in society to access higher education. In particular, students from low-income families and other disadvantaged groups in society are often less well-educated than their peers from the middle and upper classes. Students from privileged backgrounds have often attended better quality secondary (and primary) schools, making them better prepared to take the university's entrance exams. Students from privileged backgrounds are raised in an environment where the idea of going to college is less 'foreign' than it is for students from lower socio-economic groups; they have higher aspiration levels and they see the value of a university degree.

Even if we assume that aspiration levels are similar in different socio-economic groups, there is a problem of so-called debt-aversion. Many students from lower-income families are debt-averse, meaning that they do not consider taking up a loan to pay for their costs while studying (Vossensteyn 2005).

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the large urban areas and academic centres. We might expect that their student body composition would be more balanced, with a higher share of students from lower socio-economic classes.

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## Summary

In times of state financial stringency and increasing demand for higher education, private institutions provided greater access to higher education for low-income students. Moreover, increased competition from private providers has also forced public institutions to expand their study offer, increase the available study places, improve their management and keep the tuition levels on low or medium levels. Without private higher education, Poland would not have experienced the five-fold increase in student enrolment, the increasing participation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from rural area, neither the diversification of study offer in whole higher education sector. Without private sector, public institutions would have continued to operate in a collusive monopoly, remaining elitist institutions and enrolling only the best candidates.

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