

2

Access vs Admission

The Open and Free-For-All Public Universities in Argentina and its Consequences in Terms of Equity

Marcelo Rabossi

Introduction

A principal distinction must be made between access and admission if the goal is to give vulnerable students the right not only to go to university but also to get a degree. While admission refers to the mechanism where students are selected through different processes, access is a much broader concept. As such, it does not exclude two paramount issues: retention and graduation. Both are generally ignored when admission policies are discussed. Therefore, it seems clear, as Stewart (1991) states, “the major problem that a university faces in its admission process is not recruitment (or admission) but retention, a main issue for students with no “university-life background”. Then, the “first step in increasing the efficiency with which higher education provides career preparation to students from socio-economic groups that do not traditionally go to college is to recapture . . . [those] students who do not get their degree” (1991, p. 204). Thus, no institution can claim to be both efficient and equitable if is unable to graduate students who belonged to the lower socio-economic layers of society.

Using statistics from the Secretariat for University Policies (SPU), entity in charge of setting the rules that coordinate the whole university system, the objective of this

18 | Equity in Higher Education: Argentina

chapter is to analyze the current admission, retention and graduation policies in public universities in Argentina. When these three processes are analyzed as a unit, we get into the notion of access. In this case, access to higher education. Since 1983, Argentina implemented an open admission, free-for-all system of higher education that has ended up benefiting the most favoured members of society (Corbacho 1999; Rabossi 2013). Alerted by these unwanted consequences, policymakers have put into practice remedial mechanisms to increase the rate of participation and retention of vulnerable students. For example, the number of scholarships programs has grown during the last years. Also, with the intention of increasing the number of students coming from the lowest socio-economic groups, the national state began the opening of new public universities in neighbours where the average household income is well below the mean. Both measures will be described in great detail.

Reflections about Equity and Educational Opportunities

An egalitarian system is based on the egalitarian philosophy that affirms that similar cases should be accorded similar treatment. “A society in which every member holds an equal quantity of property needs no justification; only a society in which property is unequal needs it” (Berlin 1978:82). Equality “requires equal life prospects in all sectors of society for those similarly endowed and motivated” (Rawls 1971:301). Thus, if relevant socio-economic differences are observed among freshmen, each group of students coming from different socio-economic backgrounds required unequal treatment. It is clear that fair opportunities require greater compensation for the less privileged. Rawls, in this case, assumes that the society as a whole will benefit from a system that cares for the specific needs of the unprivileged. Consequently, an unequal distribution of educational resources must be the dominant criteria from which we must start looking.

When the selection of students are only based through the lens of admission, and fundamentally when it is sustained through an open mechanisms, where the secondary diploma is the only prerequisite to secure a place in the university, and tuition is totally free, equality of educational opportunities reins over education equity. Equality means the same rights for all, whether the individual belongs to a higher or lower socio-economic layer. On the contrary, equity implies granting a greater aid to those who need more. Rawls argues that in a fair society certain principles must govern the actions of the individuals. In Rawls’ (1971) essay, a *Theory of Justice*, he suggests the following two principles:

- **First Principle** Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
- **Second Principle** Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

Few Pages are not available

32 | Equity in Higher Education: Argentina

admission but graduation. While the admission refers to the mechanism through which students are recruited and selected, the access takes into account the socio-economic condition of enrollees, cognitive aspects of students, the process of adaptation to the new academic life, and also students' performance with the final objective of getting a university degree. Also, student departures must be analyzed through an interactional perspective. According to Tinto (1988), student attrition reflects both individual and organizational behaviours. Personal interaction among students and faculty members may affect the decision of staying or living. In this dynamic, retention is a direct consequence of how the student adapts to a new culture and organizational climate. Thus, if Argentina wants to truly achieve its theoretical ambition of a post-secondary system that is both socially just and equitably accessible, higher education policy must be redefined taking into account the needs of a student body that in many cases is still ill-prepared and is more heterogenic than it used to be when the university was just a place for training the elite of society. In the end, the idea is to achieve greater equity of educational opportunity, not only in terms of admission but also graduation.

Endnotes

¹ Only a handful of national universities began to charge a kind of symbolic tuition. However, many of them discontinued this practice.

² Rooted in historical reasons, Argentina perceives private universities as inferior alternatives to their public counterparts, this although the quality of some public university can be questioned.

³ With alternative approaches and in different moments of time, Brazil, Chile and Colombia are good examples where the private sector was used to decompress the increasing demand for university education.

⁴ GER is the percentage of university population regardless of age in relation to the whole country population between 20 and 24 years old.

⁵ Currently, non-university institutions enroll 30 per cent of all post-secondary students but graduate the same number as its university counterparts (Rabossi 2013).

References

Altbach, Philip. 1999. "Survival of the fittest: The University of Buenos Aires, a model for the future?" *Change*, 31(3): 46-48.

Asplund, Rita; Oussama Ben Abdelkarim and Ali Skalli. 2008. "An Equity Perspective on Access to, Enrolment in and Finance of Tertiary Education." *Education Economics*, 16(3): 261-274.

- Berlin, Isaiah. 1978. *Concepts and Categories*. New York: Viking Press.
- Bonasegna Kelly, Cristina. 2013. "Argentina at the Top — For Its Dropout Rate!" *The World View*. Accessed August 20, 2015. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/argentina-top-%E2%80%94-its-dropout-rate>
- Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo. 2007. *Educación Superior en Iberoamérica: Informe 2007*. CINDA, Santiago de Chile.
- Corbacho, Ana. 1999. *The Effects of Family Background in Schooling Enrolment and Attainment: The Case of Argentina in 1974-1997*. Buenos Aires: Instituto y Universidad Torcuato Di Tella.
- DINIECE (Dirección Nacional de Información y Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa). 2014. *Anuarios Estadísticos*. Accessed July 15, 2015. <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/diniece/2014/05/24/anuarios-estadisticos/>
- Ediger, Marlow. 2009. "Reading Comprehension in the Science Curriculum." *Reading Improvement*, 6(2): 78–80.
- Engstrom, Cathy and Vincent Tinto. 2008. "Access without Support is not Opportunity." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40(1): 46-50
- Foley, Kelly. 2012. "Can Neighbourhoods Change the Decisions of Youth on the Margins of University Participation?" *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 45: 167–188.
- Frank, David and Jay Gabler. 2006. *Reconstructing the University: Worldwide Shifts in Academia in the 20th Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- García de Fanelli, Ana and Cecilia Adrogué. 2015. "Abandono de los estudios universitarios: dimensión, factores asociados y desafíos para la política pública." *Revista Fuentes*: 85-106
- Grabe, William and Fredericka Stoller. 2002. *Teaching and Researching Reading*. London: Longman
- Horn, Laura. 1998. *Stopouts or Stayouts? Undergraduates Who Leave College in their First Year (NCES 1999-087)*. U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC.
- Kukathas, Chandran and Philip Pettit. 1990. *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Critics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Levy, Daniel. 1986. *Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Manski, Charles. 1989. "Schooling as experimentation: a reappraisal of the postsecondary dropout phenomenon." *Economics of Education Review*, 8(4): 305–312.
- de Moura Castro, Claudio, and Juan Carlos, Navarro. 1999. "Will the Invisible Hand fix Latin America Private Higher Education?", in Philip Altbach (ed.), *Private Prometheus: Private Higher Education and Development in the 21st Century*, pp. 51-72. Boston: Center for International Higher Education.
- Murdock, Tullisse. 1989. "Does Financial Aid Really Have An Effect On Student Retention?" *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 19(11): 4-16

34 | Equity in Higher Education: Argentina

- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. 2014. *Education at a glance: OECD Indicators*. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>
- Rabossi, Marcelo. 2011a. "Public Intervention in Argentina: The Homogenous Expansion of the Private University Market." *Comparative & International Higher Education*, 3(2): 39-45.
- — —. 2011b. "The Private Sector in Argentina: A Limited and Selective Expansion." *Excellence in Higher Education*, 2(1): 42-50.
- — —. 2013. "The Public University in Argentina: Both Inefficient and Ineffective?" *International Higher Education*, 71 (Spring): 23-24.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schwartzman, Simon. 1993. "Policies for Higher Education in Latin America: The Context." *Higher Education*, 25(1): 9-20.
- Secretariat for University Policies. 1999. *Anuario 1999 de Estadísticas Universitarias*. Buenos Aires: SPU. <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/investigacion-y-estadisticas/anuarios/>
- — —. 2008. *Anuario 2008 de Estadísticas Universitarias*. Buenos Aires: SPU. <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/investigacion-y-estadisticas/anuarios/>
- — —. 2012. *Anuario 2012 de Estadísticas Universitarias*. Buenos Aires: SPU. <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/investigacion-y-estadisticas/anuarios/>
- — —. 2015. *Becas Universitarias*. Buenos Aires: SPU. Accessed, August 8, 2015. <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/becas-universitarias/>
- Stewart, Donald. 1991. "Higher Education", in David Hornbeck and Lester Salamon (eds), *An Economic Strategy for the '90s: Human capital and America's future*, pp. 193-219. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stinebrickner, Todd and Ralph Stinebrickner. 2008. "The Effect of Credit Constraints on the College Drop-out Decision: A Direct Approach Using a New Panel Study." *The American Economic Review*, 98(5): 163-84.
- Tinto, Vincent. 1975. Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1): 89-125.
- — —. 1988. Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4): 439-455.
- — —. 1993. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. 2013. *Orígenes de la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*. Accessed, July 20, 2015. <http://www.unc.edu.ar/institucional/historia/origenes>