INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: DEFINITIONS, MEASUREMENTS, INFERENCES

The Serbian Case

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The data presented here show evidence of under-representation of several groups in society with respect to higher education, both in terms of external and internal under-representation. Furthermore, the data suggest that there is accumulation of disadvantage during higher education, i.e. that those who are with lower elements of socio-economic background are more likely to repeat or dropout entirely. However, given the discussion on definitions and measurement of inequality, what is it that can be inferred from data on inequality, and what kind of data is necessary for what kind of inference?

In this respect it is of significant importance to ensure reliability and comparability of data for each of the education transitions or to conduct longitudinal studies, following a cohort throughout the education system. The latter would also provide data for analysing the destinations of those who have left the education system at one of the transitions and also would allow focus on the socioeconomic characteristics of students at “destination”, i.e. after completion of certain years of schooling. Ideally, the data should be collected for the entire system, allowing for assessment of differences between higher education institutions and different fields of study. This is of relevance in order to distinguish between system-level effects (e.g. enrolment rules) and the institutional level or field effects (e.g. entrance exam for a particular institution in the particular field). Unfortunately, neither is the case in Serbia, which means that the fuller assessment of the nature and scope of reproduction of inequality in the (higher) education system is not possible at this stage.

On this point, it should also be stressed that such longitudinal studies should include a fine measurement of various elements of SEB, reflecting the ethnic, linguistic, educational, cultural and economic diversity found within Serbia. This could provide sufficient data for identification and analysis of causes and effects of under-representation of specific groups, which could also be used to inform future policy decisions, at both the system and institutional level.

Finally, in order to distinguish between effects of elements of SEB and personal characteristics such as motivations, expectations, perceptions and attitudes towards (higher) education, a more qualitative approach (surveys, interviews, focus groups) would be necessary. This would also enable analysis of possible clashes between the individual and the institutional habitus. However, it should also be borne in mind that variance in such personal characteristics may also be related to specific elements of SEB, and that therefore it would be necessary to control for such effects.

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