Democratization of Access to and Success in Higher Education:
A reflection on the realities of Portugal and Brazil

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Abstract

In accepting massification of higher education as an inescapable reality, to what extent does massification really correspond to effective democratization of both access and success. Through a brief analysis of the expansion of higher education in Portugal and Brazil, this paper focuses on how the political system and higher education institutions (HEIs) responded to the need for a better educated population and increased demand for tertiary education. The analysis of access equity in both countries can be made through the ratio of candidates from different socio-economic backgrounds to vacancies, which reveals that the supposed access democratization is compromised. Data shows that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are not only proportionally fewer in number, they also tend to enrol in less socially prestigious institutions and study programmes. If the democratization of access is questionable, then we can anticipate more doubts about the democratization of academic success. Several studies indicate that higher rates of academic failure and drop out are also associated with the student’s disadvantaged social background.

In this paper, the analysis of democratization as a phenomenon associated with the expansion of higher education in Portugal and Brazil is based on a broader range of variables that better describe the complexity of the problem. Thus, in addition to individual variables characterising the student, it integrates variables more directly related to the HEIs that are assumed to be co-responsible for social democratization achieved in terms of access and success.

Key words: Higher Education, Expansion, Massification, Democratization, Portugal and Brazil.