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# An equity perspective on access to, enrolment in and finance of tertiary education

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## Abstract

Failure to achieve equitable access to university studies has contributed to turning the focus to the funding of higher education systems. This paper aims to review critically the literature assessing the effectiveness of existing financing schemes and changes in them as a means for reducing the prevalent under-representation of students from a socially disadvantaged background. While the theoretical literature fails to be consensual with respect to the equity effects of student funding schemes, empirical studies remain scarce and inconclusive due to the lack of harmonized data that comprehensively describe the social make-up of higher education attendees. For reasons of space, references are kept at a minimum but can be found elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords:

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## Notes

1. See Asplund, Ben Adbelkarim, and Skalli ([2007](#)).
2. This is, for instance, recognized in the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council held in March 2000 ([http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/key/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/key/index_en.htm)) as well as in the European work programme ‘Education and Training 2010’ ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et\\_2010\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html)).
3. Although ‘equity’ is still frequently used as a synonym for ‘equality’, the former seems to have gained the position of the preferred term. Istance ([1997](#)), for example, argues that ‘equity’ can be viewed as a more open and neutral term – cf. also EGREES ([2005](#)) and SEC(2006)1096 ([2006](#)) and the literature referred to therein.
4. Blossfeld and Shavit ([1993](#)) concluded that only in Sweden and the Netherlands had the expansion resulted in significantly reduced social class inequalities in access to higher education. Similar findings were reported by Halsey ([1993](#)). For an overview of selected country-specific evidence, see OECD ([2001b](#)), Biffle and Isaac ([2002](#)), Blöndal, Field, and Girouard ([2002](#), Table 6) and Clancy and Goastellec ([2007](#)). Moreover, Clancy and Goastellec ([2007](#)) criticize existing studies for being historical by relying on cohort data and, hence, for having little policy relevance. Arum, Gamoran, and Shavit ([2007](#)), in turn, claim that previous work has mistakenly interpreted rising enrolment in

combination with stable odds for intergenerational educational mobility as evidence for ‘persisting inequality’, when instead this situation should be expected to induce increasing inclusiveness as larger proportions of all social strata attend tertiary education.

- 5. See the discussion and references in Le and Miller ([2005](#)).
- 6. A selection of more recent references is Barr ([1991](#), 1993, 2001, 2005), Chapman ([1997](#), 2006), Oosterbeek ([1998](#)), Jacobs ([2002](#)), Dur, Teulings, and van Rens ([2004](#)), Greenaway and Haynes ([2004](#)), Johnstone ([2004](#)), Palacio Lleras ([2004](#)), Shireman ([2004](#)), Jacobs and van der Ploeg ([2006](#)), Migali ([2006](#)) and Teixeira, Johnstone, Rosa and Vossensteyn (2006).
- 7. See Debande ([2003](#)), Maguin ([2004](#)) and Asplund, Ben Adbelkarim, and Skalli ([2007](#), Table 3 and Appendix Table A1).
- 8. See Finnish Ministry of Education ([2006](#)) for Finland, and see Vossensteyn (2005) for the Netherlands.
- 9. See, for example, Corak, Lipps, and Zhao ([2003](#)) and Usher ([2006](#)) for Canada, and see Chapman ([1997](#), 2001), Chapman and Ryan ([2002](#)) as well as the review in Debande ([2003](#)) for Australia.
- 10. An important dimension in this context is the effect of tertiary education financing systems on lifetime incomes. In analysing the effect of the UK reform, Dearden, Fitzsimons, Goodman and Kaplan ([2008](#)) point to significant differences in the financing policy effects.

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