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Editorial

Access to higher education in Southern Europe

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According to the data that have been published in Eurydice, between the years 2000 and 2009, in an average of 27 European countries, the student population in higher education increased by about 22% (annual rate of increase, 2.7%), reaching 19.5 million in 2009. The increase differs significantly from one country to another: on the one hand, there was no increase in Spain, France and Portugal, and on the other in Cyprus and Turkey the number of students doubled, while in Romania it tripled. This differentiation can be explained by the existence of a greater dynamic in these countries, without forgetting the level of access to higher education, in the sense that they had a less developed higher education system.

So, access to higher education continues to constitute an important issue and mobilizes many factors in society (the government, the families and the young people). Indeed, for public authority, higher education represents the last stage of the education system which is designed to shape the national elite, the senior officials and graduates in the public sector services. Vasilopoulos (Greek text) seems to be right when he reminds us of the important role played by the state in the development and direction of higher education, placing emphasis, in the case of his own country, on the fact that access "was no more than a procedure regulated by the state". Indeed, the state exerts an influence, either directly or indirectly, not only on the structure and development of higher education but also on whatever has to do with the terms of access.

On the other hand, for the families, access to higher education is either a mechanism for the protection and reproduction of their social position, or an opportunity and a road which leads to upward social and economic mobility. For families that hadn't previously experienced higher education, this access also has an important symbolic dimension. So, the family strategies which develop for the children's education bear witness to the significance of access to higher education as though it were a vital step towards the realization of their professional plans and/or their social ambitions.

Finally, for the individuals themselves (pupils, future students), higher education, having become a generational model, may constitute a space of personal emancipation and/or an irreversible principal route, which allows them to realize their professional and/or social plans.

We should also not neglect the fact that the university is still the meeting place for the future social and scientific elites of the various countries. Historically, the university

was always an institution open to the world. Hence, for some decades now, internationalization has become an important dimension of higher education around the world.

Despite its proven significance, the question of access doesn't always seem to be given priority in current discussions on higher education. There appear to be multiple reasons for this. For a start, the appearance of a supranational (European) policy transforms, more and more decisively, higher education into a multidimensional issue where the various political levels become entangled and come into conflict (supranational, national, regional and local). Consequently, it is not by chance the fact that the five texts, in one way or another make reference to the existence and influence of European policies on national higher education systems. However we should point out a difference in extent, which can be attributed to the approach chosen by the writers from each country. With reference to the four texts which come from countries which are members of the EU (France, Italy, Spain and Greece), we detect the existence of an influence on the national systems despite the different shades which are observed from country to country. For Fave-Bonnet who presents the French context, it is more about a European dimension, while as far as the texts, which examine Greece, Italy and Spain are concerned, the writers note the existence of a more significant and decisive European influence. On the contrary, in the text from Kosovo, it is more a road map designed to improve its system of higher education.

Along general lines and independent of the particular case each time, we note that the state is no longer the sole factor in this situation. In fact, everything depends on the historical course of higher education in each system and on the role played by the

government or the regional and local authorities in its political and administrative management and funding. In the Spanish text, this development is directly linked to changes, which occurred in the governing and funding of the university institutions.

Another point worth noting is the radical transformation of the system of higher education to such an extent that for us to talk of access (in the singular) runs the risk of being interpreted as a simplistic form of the current situation. Indeed, Fornasari's text (Italy) highlights the fact that the university has already lost its monopoly on admission to higher education. Similarly, adults who return to education comprise a more and more significant element of the student population. Vasilopoulos (Greece) also reminds us that access could not only be differentiated but, by extending its content, be relevant to scientific research too. The development of postgraduate studies has indeed become a specialized new step between research and professional integration. From their point of view, Arraiz, Sabilon, Solar (Spain) present to us, in a clear and detailed way, the different types of access to a wide range of educations, which are offered by the university as an institution of lifelong learning.

The current developments, as far as the access of the various student populations is concerned, reveal a progressive and radical transformation of higher education. Indeed, for around 50 years now, higher education has experienced two transformative demographic developments. On the one hand, we note an important increase in demand from young people who complete secondary education. On the other hand, the demand for higher education has widened and includes group of adults who are returning and discovering higher education within the framework of lifelong learning. Consequently, access is no longer directed solely at pupils with the best performances, from a specific

age group, but concerns more and more groups of adults and populations which are becoming all the more heterogeneous based on age, professional experience and school background. The main aim of the introduction of VAE (recognition of experiential learning) is to open higher education up to adults who come from the professional world. The presence of these adults can be attributed to different motives: the acquisition of a higher degree, the development of new skills, feelings of unfulfilment from previous bad formal learning experiences, a professional break, social justice for those who learnt a lot in life and outside of the university. This important transformation is depicted well in Fave-Bonnet's (France) text. This text describes the phenomenon of access, which is becoming all the more varied, really complex, for those who knew nothing about higher education previously. Between the public and the private sectors, between selective and non-selective institutions, the interested parties (the young people, and the adults returning to education), seem to be confronted with multiple issues related to studies at a higher level, which are not always easy to comprehend and deal with. In addition, the student, regardless of his pathway, should also examine the cost of the studies and the likely opportunities after studies. All these factors are not always compatible. The student may well be faced with various dilemmas: how should he reconcile theoretical interest with professional aspects? Consequently the choice of studies is transformed into a complex issue which is hard for young people and their families to understand when they are not suitably informed or are "non specialists". Hence then the need for an orientation service for help, support and the reduction of inappropriate choices before arrival in higher education.

The French text warns us of a trend which is worthy of our attention. In fact, under the current system of national education (for example in France) the level bac[1]-3 (second cycle of secondary education) and bac+3 (first cycle of higher education) is heading towards a limited autonomy. This development places the three traditional levels of the formal education system (primary, secondary and tertiary education) under new review. In reality, by considering this period of education as unified (bac-3 and bac+3), an attempt is made to reduce the shock of the transition from secondary to tertiary education. This shock produces a significant failure rate at first-degree level in tertiary education. If we add to that the tendency to shape a post-doctoral level of education, we are pushed to ask ourselves whether we are now faced with the process of the redesigning of the structure of higher education. This development is not restricted only to a simple extension of the duration of higher education. In fact, bac+3 instruction (first university cycle) runs the risk of being considered preparation for "real" university studies which will be re-shaped around three levels (Master, Doctorate, Post-Doctorate).

The texts are also interested in the social dimension of the orientation of young people after secondary education. A first critical observation emphasizes the fact that despite the opening of the system of higher education and the significant differentiation of its population, social inequality continues to exist. Hence, social origin is still a decisive factor for access and for the choice of different pathways in higher education, as is revealed in the statistical data related to the influence of the social and educational condition of the parents, as they are published in the OCDE. In reality, access or the

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[1] The baccalauréat, known in France colloquially as le bac, is an academic qualification which French students take at the end of the lycée (High School) (secondary education).

choice of one or another direction of studies is not a decision taken a few months before the end of secondary education. It is an objective prepared for years earlier: choice of school and of school subjects, choices, school progress, pathways chosen during studies in secondary education, and so on. It is then no more than the culmination of a strategy developed over a period of many years by the family and the interested youngster. Fave-Bonnet (France) offers us a detailed analysis of this social dimension in France. The author agrees with Fornasari (Italy) to highlight the gendered dimension of the choices made by the young people and their families during their passage into higher education. Indeed, despite the progress that has been noted, we observe the existence of widely female-dominated choices while in other choices the boys dominate. This phenomenon reflects the power of stereotypes and gender practices, which determine boys' and girls' differentiated choices when it comes to school and university studies.

The inequalities related to access to higher education constitute a critical issue for certain governments. What is referred to as "positive discrimination" includes social or school measures which aim at the reduction of the social chasm as far as access to higher education is concerned. Fave-Bonnet notes, for example, the existence of a policy of state scholarships as a means of limiting the factor "social inequalities" at the level of higher education.

On the other hand, Rexhaj and Pupovci (Kosovo) stress the massification of higher education in their country which is a recent phenomenon and concerns a social context characterized by a high rate of unemployment.

If we were to keep one key word from the five texts it would be "massification" as an experienced or in-progress situation in higher education. Massification doesn't have

only an exclusively quantitative or statistical dimension, but includes the sociological upheaval in the student environment, its relationship to studies and to knowledge. Massification has undoubtedly democratized higher education, replacing the dilemma "access-non access" with the question "which access"?

Naturally, "access" is part of an educational continuum which includes a "before", which concerns the school (secondary) progress, and an "after" which includes the experience and time spent in the folds of higher education.

So, social origin seems to have exercised, in advance, significant influence on the schooling of the students prior to their entrance into the university, through their secondary orientation. The previous pathways (the high school orientation for example), the visible and less visible boundaries of choice and orientation, seem to have exercised significant influence prior to university entrance (Kontogiannopoulou-Polydoridis 1999). The student who registers for a university pathway has previously completed his schooling and carries a cognitive load; he is a carrier of an educational culture and a future plan. In this way, then, social origin tends to lose its power as an "independent" variable, in the sense of its weakness to explain everything concerning the duration of the passage through higher education. It would be equally useful to note the importance of extracurricular preparation and its quality (individual preparation or in a group, etc), which, as in the Greek case, emphasizes the role of social origin no longer in terms of access as such but rather in terms of the chosen pathway (access to competitive programmes of study) (Sianou-Kyrgiou 2008).

To go into more depth, massification of the university makes us question the state of social inequalities in higher education. Quantitatively, the "statistical" data from the

1960s and 1970s seem to be relevant. Secondary and tertiary education have evolved to a great extent and amongst the pupils and students there are increasingly diversified groups who did not have access to this level of education before. This heterogeneity of the student population, as far as social stratification is concerned, reflects the "significant decline in inequality" (Langouet 1994:139).

Nevertheless, the notable social opening up of higher education doesn't function in the same way for all sectors of higher education and for all categories of students. The increasing differentiation of higher education has multiplied the means of access to orientations and degrees which do not offer the same kind of education and which do not have the same value in the job market. In total we can detect three levels of social inequalities in higher education.

The first level concerns access to higher education. All the statistical evidence, which has been published since 1970 point to increasing differentiation in the social origin of students. Despite the significant progress with reference to access to higher education for all social categories, the gap continues to be considerable between the children of "privileged families" and the "unprivileged families" (working class, popular classes).

The second level of social inequality concerns the distribution of students in the various sectors of higher education. The students don't choose the orientation of their studies in the same way. We notice certain inequalities, which reflect in much differentiated student behaviours according to the social surroundings (Sianou-Kyrgiou 2010). Indeed, sociological research clearly demonstrates that the choice of study orientation and future plans is closely linked to the social origin of the students (Paivandi 2010). The students from "privileged families" invest in orientations with greater "status" and the middle

and lower classes are to be found in other orientations. The data reveal the limitations of the democratization of higher education, which sometimes shows a real social segregation by sector, level and degree program. Indeed, it seems that there is a kind of "social homogeneity" inside certain academic fields to the extent that the inequalities comprise first and foremost a "disciplinary/scientific" fact. A child of working class origin finds more students with the same background as him on short professional training courses and the reverse is also true, in a medical school, a "privileged" child meets more often students with the same background: "intermarrying" persists (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakidis 2011).

Some students who come from the working classes often prefer to choose a university that corresponds to their social profile. They don't want to "mix" with children from "privileged families" who are really "hostile" in their eyes. In their social reconstructions, the atmosphere and the attitude of the professors in one or another institution correspond better to their social and cultural "reality". Face to face with this "defensive" attitude, some try to move away from their original environment to confirm a clearer social mobility and to try to avoid the label of being in "a less valued orientation» or in an "inferior" institution. The structure and organization of higher education contributes directly to the development of such a type of university division in Paris, for example. The choice of study programs which are marked by social origin seems to result from structures set up to guide students but are overemphasized by the behaviour of the students themselves.

A third level of social inequality exists within the folds of higher education. Indeed, access to higher education poses two important questions, among many others. Does

social origin continue to burden students' futures? Does familiarization with the educational system and the conditions of student life bear traces of the influence of the social environment? The statistical data as far as promotion in university professions is concerned show that students from privileged backgrounds advance more often to the second and third cycle.

The undoubted influence of social origin on access and post-secondary orientation should not be interpreted as a socio-educational fate. There is an unfortunate statistical reference for young people from non-privileged families. Nevertheless, some of these young people manage to overcome their educational prospects and to further continue their studies. In fact, social origin constitutes a significant factor in probabilistic and not deterministic order (Charlot, 1997). From the moment one arrives in higher education, the role of the individual and his mobilization become important factors. The university is a social space, which provides greater autonomy to social actors and the teaching mechanism isn't "deterministic in terms of its consequences" (Bernstein, 2007). One of the first pieces of research in the sociology of the student in the USA stresses the less "discriminatory" character of the university (in comparison with the school) when dealing with the students who come from different social classes (Becker et al 1977). Hence, we can't talk about the transfer of cultural capital and habitus as the sole factors in the production of educational behaviours and attitudes when considering learning processes as they had been depicted by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). In contrast, we adequately discern the influence of the context of the institution on the success of the students from non-privileged families. A suitable university framework, which is respected by the students, can be an important factor in the students' performance, and mainly the performance of those that come from disadvantaged groups. The autonomy

of the university and the promotion of local systems of higher education tend to create pedagogical realities and differentiated conditions of study for the students.

Social origin as a factor in differentiation does not disappear completely from the university. From the beginning of their journey, students from a "privileged families" claim to experience fewer difficulties and tend to have greater confidence. The "vulnerable" students frequently need more time to get into the "university game" and to learn the "student's career". We can find the same observation in a number of recent researches, which demonstrate the impact of social class on students' futures (Paivandi 2011). Consequently, as the writer shows, faced with university difficulties, "vulnerable" students, who belong more often to popular class families, are far more exposed to the phenomenon of early dropout, or failure. The difficulties related to material conditions, lack of family support, and the inconsistency of their personal plans, all tend to destabilize these students.

In the university context, knowledge of the scientific language can, as in all forms of learning, be acquired and doesn't comprise an unsurmountable obstacle. It is possible, in the case of a young student, for him to gradually acquire and adopt the categorization mechanisms of the members of the university community (Coulon, 1997), mechanisms based on which he will be recognized by others, mainly by the professors but also by his fellow students, as an approved member of the group to which he claims to belong. In reality, we are dealing with scientific learning which is of the same nature as all learning and which demands the acquisition of appropriate categories of thought which would permit a description of the world,. For one to acquire, in a lasting way and then in an assimilated and incorporated way, these mechanisms of categorization is, for the

writer, a mark of the "student's career" (Coulon 1997). So, in contrast to Bourdieu, it is possible for us to comprehend how the incorporation of a new student, which is an active phenomenon of transformation and not simply a habitus, which is handed down passively once and for ever, takes place.

Sociological research with students in different countries shows that the transition from secondary education to higher education is a crucial and tense period. Entry into the university (or some other institution of higher education), as into any institution in social life, requires a mechanism for entry, the crossing of borders or the completion of an enculturing. Integration into a new social and educational environment always has the tendency to create questions or place in doubt participation in the pre-existing community. The new educational paradigm that the university proposes includes a period of instability. The "social" theoretical model of the student is clearly a model of the subject, which is integrated into a community, is recreated through interactions and partially creates the community into which he is integrated.

In the university tradition, the new students were always objects of concern, and social practices, which were sometimes traumatic (hazing, humiliation, activities involving harassment, abuse, socialization practices) on the part of the institution, or the "older members". Starting at the University of Bologna in the 12th century, new students have always been considered a separate category. The term freshmen, which were was used for new students, appeared in university language in England (mainly in Oxford and Cambridge) in the 1590s. The Americans then used it, during the 17th century, becoming an object of socialization pedagogy. The Tutoring is the keystone of the English system, the "Oxbridge" model. It is based on the informal, close relationships

between students and professors. These relationships were considered to be as important for the development of the young people as the courses and seminars. Within the context of this system the student was followed by a "teacher" who would propose a topic for him to work on each week, and who had discussions with him on a regular basis.

The American universities adopted the English tradition in the 17th century in order to improve the entry of young students into the university. In 1640, Harvard tried out "supervision" of the new students for the first time, on the initiative of its then new president, Henry Dunster, who was a graduate of Cambridge. This tradition was revived and enriched by other newly established universities during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Finally, we can mention a less visible source of inequalities, one that is difficult to evaluate, within higher education. It concerns the link between degrees acquired and cognitive, cultural or practical achievements, which in essence have been acquired through a programme of higher education. Statistical evidence can hide a "qualitative" dimension of the inequalities amongst those who finish their courses in higher education. The less mobilized students run the risk of validating their courses without mastering the skills targeted by the university as successful, which does not always mean quality learning. This mostly concerns the "vulnerable" students (prior school trajectory, uncertain orientation, lack of personal project). Some manage to overcome all these obstacles, mobilized and rewarded by a suitably adapted pedagogical environment. Their fate was not predetermined, but the road ahead is tougher compared to other students.

These findings provoke questions concerning the policies which aim at the widening of access to higher education and at the students' persistence in their field of study at a local, regional and national level. Access to higher education doesn't mean access to knowledge and success. Firstly we must consider the factors, which promote access and appropriate orientation. After enrolment at university, student socialization as a prerequisite for access to knowledge is linked more broadly to the social and pedagogical context, which should facilitate the integration of new members. Then, for the prevention of early dropout and for the integration and success of the students, the university needs to think about its teaching and social context and its terms of entrance. The students face the challenge of intellectual incorporation, in other words of assimilation into a science environment, into a community of knowledge, into a spiritual and educational kind of activity. The teaching system comes first in the need to help undergraduate students to enter university effectively, to remain there and be successful there.

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