

Editorial

Social Justice and Higher Education: Targeted Responses to a Complex Present?

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In the call for papers on the theme of social justice in higher education, co-authored by George Stamelos (University of Patras, Greece) and Sylvie Didou (Cinvestav – UNESCO Chair in Globalisation and Education, Mexico), which asked our colleagues to describe, based on their personal experiences and previous academic collaborations, the progress and limitations of policies aimed at improving social justice within their institutions, the coordinators of this special issue of the journal *Acadèmia* proposed several sub-themes. The response to these within peer communities has been mixed. The coordinators had in fact identified the following as their main areas of interest: public policies aimed at the diversification (or segmentation) of higher education systems and at increasing enrolment rates, primarily through the establishment of institutions specifically designed to cater for students from vulnerable groups; initial and continuing professional development programmes for teachers facing massification and the growing heterogeneity of their student bodies; the overhaul of knowledge-transfer mechanisms during and after the pandemic, and the resources mobilised by institutions to adapt to a changing context and its risks. Some of these themes were addressed by several authors using distinct approaches (overviews of the situation in Greece or Chile) or public policy studies in Mexico.

Nevertheless, the topic that attracted the most attention was that of the integration of new students into the university student body, which is now far from constituting a cohesive community based on shared characteristics and aspirations linked to the occupation of privileged social positions. Not all students are ‘heirs’ to higher education anymore – far from it. The influx of a growing number of ‘pioneers’ – with no family tradition of attending higher education – driven by policies aimed at democratising opportunities, has accentuated a heterogeneity in student intake that mirrors that of societies undergoing transformation, driven by social demands for access to higher education and the intensification of migratory movements.

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In response to the implementation of policies promoting equity—but also to their ghettoisation effects—numerous contributions, some of which are still in the process of being drafted, have been submitted to the editorial board. These have addressed themes as diverse as student wellbeing (or ill-being) in public learning spaces, which are often in a state of disrepair, their repercussions on the knowledge and skills acquired, as well as the disruptions to socialisation caused by a sense of otherness—which is often insufficiently taken into account, despite the strong convictions and commitments of institutions and their staff in favour of the most disadvantaged, whose profiles and resources remain far removed from those embodied by the academic ethos.

From an organisational sociology perspective, our authors have thus identified the obstacles to inclusion policies which, beyond a general increase in enrolment rates, tend to benefit the most advantaged students rather than the most disadvantaged, despite the stated and intended objectives. They have thus highlighted the limitations of institutional measures that still struggle to place at their centre individuals whose diversity is as undeniable as it is inconvenient. The denial of otherness, in turn, points to undeniable difficulties in reconciling quality and diversity, when the equation is thrown out of balance by a situation of deprivation and deficiency, and not merely of difference. Deprivation and shortcomings, however, cannot always be reduced to socio-economic vulnerability. They occasionally relate to specific, temporary cultural situations such as migration – whether chosen or imposed – amongst both pupils and teachers, the long-term repercussions of which are mitigated by a process of gradual adaptation. Hence the value of analysing the situations of interculturality faced by students in mobility situations—whether incoming or outgoing—as well as by ‘class defectors’, to use the expression in vogue at the end of the last century. Hence, too, the urgent need to ensure that the increasingly rich rhetoric on teachers’ capabilities does not remain a purely narrative statement. The hardships of standardisation and the wonder inspired by knowledge are therefore two dimensions that require further exploration.

Several colleagues have, moreover, carried out remarkable work reviewing texts on student diversity published in recent years, whether in Argentina, Chile, Brazil or France. They demonstrate, if proof were needed, that inclusion and equity are topical issues in very different countries, bringing together researchers, experts, civil servants and decision-makers alike. These issues have been the subject of diverse historical practices and experiences. Nevertheless, they have not always triggered sufficient or sustained financial commitments amongst decision-makers at various levels, who are thrown off balance by the multiple demands put forward by disruptive figures, and where such demands are often difficult to articulate, both organisationally and politically. The highly visible gaps in implementation are an issue that warrants further consideration, as is that of internal communication within academic bodies.

It is also regrettable that the authors have avoided certain sensitive topics, for example, the reconfiguration of the academic profession, faced with the challenges of interculturalism and the emergence of ‘new students’ as well as new institutional figures – a term referring to the influx into the higher education system of young adults, workers returning to university due to unemployment, teenagers experiencing an identity crisis, or new decision-makers. As a general rule, the educational and social capital of students—and even of their newly recruited lecturers—differs from the knowledge acquired by their fellow students and older colleagues, particularly those from more privileged backgrounds or who have traditionally been more closely connected to intellectual circles. In general terms, and surprisingly, however, neither the

political implications nor the contribution of ICT and artificial intelligence to these transformations have been explored in any significant way, whilst other causal factors (the Covid-19 pandemic, for example) have been, if not studied in detail, at least mentioned by almost all authors.

Among the contributions offering the most food for thought on the future of universities, one stands out, closely linked to the currently much-discussed topic of the future of higher education. It concerns the way in which inclusion measures not only lead to a renewal of the traditional elites but also intensify or erode levels of commitment to the educational programmes promoted by institutions and shape their prestige. Others focus on students' experiences and on how policies recognising 'individuals' and stakeholders act as catalysts for institutional transformation, granting certain groups the status of agents of change rather than passive and grateful beneficiaries. The functioning and power of student associations representing vulnerable groups to make their voices heard and demand that the standards concerning them be applied will therefore need to be documented.

Other, more conventional questions have been raised by the contributors to this issue, such as that concerning the identity of the primary beneficiaries of measures recognising difference, whether ethnic, geographical, social or demographic. In many countries, the groups most frequently targeted by inclusion policies are indigenous peoples, women and people with disabilities. New groups have recently been added to this list, in particular students older than the average age (25), transgender students and those who are displaced, whether forcibly or voluntarily, though not all of these groups enjoy the same level of visibility. Within the framework of universities that are open to all forms of knowledge and all sections of the population, these new groups are now seeking knowledge, skills and benefits within higher education institutions, and are establishing new, enriching interactions with administrators, fellow students and lecturers – interactions which are, at times, strained by a desire for recognition of who they are.

Consequently, the pursuit of social justice in higher education is not limited to its—admittedly significant—contributions to social cohesion in societies that are troubled and uncertain about their future. It also involves the reshaping of a key institution and the relationships between its members. Despite its shortcomings and limitations, and despite the attacks to which it is subjected, the university, in the broadest sense, nevertheless continues to embody individual hopes and aspirations for stability within societies that are increasingly tempted by isolationism and plagued by anxieties of all kinds. The issue of democratising opportunities, with a view to greater social justice, cannot therefore be addressed solely through the lens of its beneficiaries and its operators/promoters. It must also be examined through the prism of the established mechanisms designed to control the risks and dangers of social or institutional destabilisation. Finally, it must be analysed through an examination of curricular reforms and the transformation of the ways in which knowledge is transmitted.

Reflecting on social justice therefore involves identifying and studying specific mechanisms, as well as the actors—whether traditional or emerging—engaged in the dynamics of systemic reconfiguration of the higher education system and the institutions. Although their nature differs, the countries featured in this issue face similar challenges in terms of teacher training, interculturalism and the choice of learning materials, tailored to the profiles and skills of new students and new lecturers. Social justice is a complex topic, and in this issue of *Academia* we offer only an initial exploration of it. We hope that further, more focused studies will follow, and that we

will have the opportunity to revisit key points which have barely been touched upon so far but which are fundamental to understanding the dynamics of social justice policy in education – such as the resentment aroused by the sometimes hostile reception given to equity measures, or the erosion of this concept, despite its having been a powerful mobilising force during the first quarter of the 21st century.

This issue comprises seven articles on six countries in Europe and Latin America.

Véronique Attias-Delattre and Yves Lichtenberger wrote the article *“The student at the heart of open-ended projects: formalising the transformative processes of institutional and pedagogical frameworks”*. The expansion of higher education in France has led to a rise in student numbers and a greater diversity of student profiles. This diversity makes it more challenging to develop coherent study pathways, meaning that fostering student autonomy is an important goal. The authors proposed two alternative approaches which open up new possibilities, provided that institutional and organisational reforms accompany their implementation and benefit all stakeholders.

Pamela Gómez-López and Mery Hamui-Sutton present an article entitled *“Academic mobility and intercultural competencies in the post-COVID era: a perspective from postgraduate studies”*. This article addresses the central question of how postgraduate students acquire and strengthen their intercultural competencies through research placements abroad. It examines the changes they experienced in their social practices whilst immersed in a different cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using semi-structured interviews, the article adopts a qualitative approach to explore the educational, social and cultural contexts that shape these competencies. The research, conducted in three stages, examined the development of intercultural competencies, observed their application in unfamiliar contexts, and assessed their effectiveness in fostering a profound understanding of different cultural perspectives.

Andriana Ioannidi has written the text *“Diverse Student Populations in Universities: A Scoping Review of Challenges, Skills and Institutional Support”*. She argues that universities enrol students from a variety of ethnic, social and educational backgrounds, with different needs and expectations. Non-traditional students often face significant challenges. The paper examines these challenges, their academic preparedness, and the institutional support available to promote their success and inclusion. A scoping review was carried out using Scopus, ERIC and DOAJ, with supplementary searches conducted via Google Scholar. The results revealed that non-traditional students encounter unique difficulties influenced by their individual backgrounds. These academic struggles are often rooted in unfamiliarity with academic norms rather than a lack of ability amongst non-traditional students.

Consuelo Manosalba and María José Manosalba are the authors of the text *“Educating without exclusion: Advances and challenges in inclusion and equity in Chile’s higher education system”*. They argue that multiple regulatory reforms aimed at improving equity and inclusion in Chile’s higher education system have yielded mixed results to date. This study critically examined the coherence, scope and underlying tensions within public policies, laws and institutional programmes that promote inclusion in higher education, focusing particularly on how these initiatives are coordinated across multiple levels. A qualitative study based on documentary analysis was carried out. The effectiveness of inclusive policies depends heavily on institutional capacity, and differences in institutional capacity create disparities amongst students based on socio-economic background, ethnicity and disability status. In short, the

authors conclude that inclusion in Chilean higher education is more rhetorical than substantive.

François-Donatien Siry presents the paper *“Inclusive universities and the expansion of student numbers: challenges, specific features and constraints of the Mexican strategy”*. This article analyses Mexico’s strategy of establishing new, inclusive universities in response to the expansion of higher education. Using a methodology that combines interviews and quantitative analysis conducted between 2022 and 2025, the study draws on research that explores the diversity of the Mexican university landscape. The results demonstrate that Mexico has developed a segmented educational architecture characterised by heterogeneous and compensatory subsystems. This targeted diversification represents an innovative way of addressing the challenges of massification, offering institutional models adapted to different populations and territories. However, for this ambitious public policy to be effective, it must resolve the dilemma between its unprecedented quantitative objectives and the inherent requirements of the university sector, which is selective by nature.

Luciana Venâncio, Luiz Sanches Neto and Paulo Tiago Oliveira Alves present the article *“Social justice and education for ethnic-racial relations (ERER): Relationships to knowledge in higher education in the State of Ceará — Brazil”*. The authors begin by noting that, over the last two decades, the proportion of the Brazilian population in higher education has tripled. The country’s top-ranked universities are public and free, and campuses have been geographically decentralised across the country. This article aims to explore the concept of ‘relationships to knowledge’, as defined by Bernard Charlot, as experienced by three Black lecturers teaching at two universities in the state of Ceará in the north-east of the country. This self-study research is based on a theoretical-methodological approach involving thematic analysis of autobiographical narratives. The findings highlight four key areas: students’ engagement in intersubjective modes of learning about education on racial and ethnic relations (ERER); collaborative educational processes between professors when addressing social injustices; intergenerational aspects of relationships with knowledge concerning ERER; and the reconfiguration of knowledge about social justice based on shared experiences.

The text *“Critical analysis of the policies that shape the beginnings of university studies in Argentina”* is presented by Soledad Vercellino. She argues that higher education (HE) coverage in Argentina is amongst the highest in Latin America and is at the stage of universalisation. In this article, the author identifies a series of policies that shape the transition into university studies through a documentary analysis of research carried out in Argentina and the systematisation of the regulations of some Argentine universities. These policies have been organised as follows: first, the author describes those focused on the first year, which seek to address indicators of discontinuity in the initial stages of university studies. Then, she concentrates on the comprehensive, third-generation policies that organise the entire educational experience during the first year of university studies and beyond, thereby shaping the university system.

Enjoy!