



ISSN: 0975-833X

REVIEW ARTICLE

EQUITY, ACCESS AND SOCIAL CLASS BIAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN KENYA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 28th December, 2011
Received in revised form
26th January, 2011
Accepted 25th February, 2011
Published online 31st March, 2012

Key words:

Equity,
Access,
Social class bias.

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions in the world over play a fundamental role in the social and economic life of a country. This is reflected in respective government policy documents and in the level of budgetary allocation these institutions receive (GOK, 1976; 1981; Ziderman And Albrecht, 1995). Higher education promotes National growth and development, defines the quality of the society we live in, the ability of the society to react to change and equips man for adaptation to various environments. The concern for equity (or equality of opportunity) access and social class bias has been and continues to be a strong motivating factor underlying governments' intervention in the education sector. The Government has demonstrated its commitment to addressing these issues through various policy documents. The principal objective of these government policy documents has been to provide an effective and efficient education system that serves well the wider interests of society. That is, an education system that aims at removing social injustices and disparities between regions, sexes, social and economic groups and that equalizes economic opportunities among all the citizens. Equity issues and equality of educational access and participation considerations have also been the over-riding objectives of Kenya's educational reforms since it attained its political independence from Britain forty-three years ago. Despite these efforts higher education is still characterized by disparities arising out of inequality of opportunity, access and social class bias. This paper therefore examines the distributive impact of higher education in particular issues relating to access, equity and social class bias, and recommends policy options to address these challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

At independence in 1963, the Kenya government inherited a School structure, which was totally inadequate for its needs. The education system contained gross inequalities based on racial, social and religious grounds (Boit, 1998). According to Sessional Paper No., 1 of 2005 on Policy Framework for Education, Training and Research, some of the challenges facing development of education in Kenya relate to access, equity, relevance gender and regional disparities, among others. These concerns and issues are decades old. Equity, access, and social class disparities are issues that have continued to plague our education system and government efforts to address them can be traced to the commission appointed in 1963 to inquiry into education in Kenya headed by Professor S.H. Ominde. The final report of this Commission, hereafter referred to as the Ominde Report, endorsed the call to expand secondary and post-secondary education consistent with the Government policy on education as contained in the Sessional Paper on African Socialism and its application in Kenya in 1965. The Ominde Report urged the Government to provide equal educational opportunities to all children with the ultimate aim of achieving universal free primary education. Similarly, the National Committees on Educational Objections and Policies, (NCEOP) of 1976 which was hailed as the most important turning point since the

Ominde Report in the development of education in Kenya and the 1982 Report of the Presidential Working Party on the Second University in Kenya recommended radical restructuring of the education system as away of addressing equity, access and equality of opportunity concerns. The more recent Commission of Inquiry into the Education system of Kenya, The Koech's Report on Totally Integrated Quality Education and Training (TIQET) in 1999 recommended education for all with emphasis on eradication of the existing disparities. In particular it urged the Government to increase support in provision of education by creating and strengthening new partners to enhance equity, access and reduce social inequalities in higher education. Other landmark documents that continue to shape the present and future trends on socially just policies in education include; The 1963 Kenya African National Union (KANU) manifesto, Kenya Development Plans, Sessional Paper No. 1 of 1986 on Economic Management for Renewed Growth and the Sessional Paper No. 6 of 1988 on Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond amongst others. The Government recognizes that education plays a significant role in reducing intergenerational equity in order to ensure that inequalities are not transferred from one generation to the next in perpetuity. Consequently the Government has, according to the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 committed itself to addressing the challenges related to equity, access and equality

of opportunity amongst other issues to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

THE DISTRIBUTIONAL IMPACT OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ISSUES AND FACTS

The challenges of equity, access and social class bias are nowhere as marked as in universities. The causes of these disparities include amongst others; rigid admission criteria, gender, course of study regional disparities, special needs, socio-economic and cultural factors, and rigid progression structure in the universities.

Rigid Admission Criteria

University admissions mainly rely on performance of the national competitive examinations. The body responsible for university admissions commonly called the Joint Admissions Board (JAB) uses cut-off point system to limit entry into the university. The system leaves many qualified secondary school leavers missing places at the university. The rigid admission criterion has been the main cause of low transition into the university. Quite a number of K.C.S.E. candidates meet the minimum university admission requirement of c+ but only about 10,000 are admitted into public universities (CHE 2003, GOK 2005). This is socially unacceptable (Table 1). According to (JAB) Document 3 – Review of Cluster Subjects 2006). The committee realized that the current clusters were too rigid to only allow a few students to qualify for degrees programmes of their choice. This rigidity has resulted in wastage of physical and human resources due to unfilled capacities in specific degree programmes in public universities.

Gender

Research findings show that education empowers women to participate in all dimensions of development be it social, political and economic lives of their community and country at large. Under- representation of women in higher education institutions is therefore an issue of concern. For decades, female enrolment has been lagging behind that of male counterparts though at entry point of the education system (primary) the number of male and female enrolled is almost the same but as they progress to higher level of education, the number of females continues to declines and the situation is even worse at the post graduate level. What this means is that the distribution of education is unequal because of regressive transfers as shown in table 2 and 3 below). What this figures portray is that women have therefore not significantly benefited from the dramatic expansion of higher education in this country. It is estimated that the proportion of women is as low as 33% in several public universities (CHE 2005). This low percentage of women's participation is an implication that the country is underutilizing more than 50% of its available human talent. As evidenced from table 1 above, only private universities have attained gender parity. Females represented stood at 54% in accredited universities and 53% in unaccredited universities. Imbalance Between the Number of Students Studying Science and Art Based Courses.

Gender disparities in student enrolment exist at all levels of education. It is more pronounced at higher degrees levels and more so in science, mathematics and technology oriented

subjects (KESSP 2005-2010). Although female students are normally accorded special consideration by lowering cut off points by one, their academics are still concentrated in lower ranks of the hierarchy. This is, as a result of too rigid weighted degree clusters that allow a few students into subjects of their choice while others are forced into other programmes just to fill up the declared space. Despite gender parity in private universities, gender subject streaming is also still an issue. Women are better represented in humanities and social sciences, the so called the caring subjects, as it is the case with public universities (Table 4).

Regional Disparities

Regional disparities are a reflection of uneven socio-economic development among regions. According to JAB - Review of Admission Criteria (ASAL) 2005, the cut off points will be lowered until students from ASAL areas encompass 10% of the total number of students admitted to public universities. Similarly cluster points will be lowered between 1-3points in particular programmes to ensure their representation. Low female representation of students from ASAL areas is as a result of factors among them, shortage of primary and secondary school places and curricula that match the needs of pastoralists' lifestyles and livelihoods.

Special Needs

According to the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 the challenges of equity and access in the provision of education and training to children with special needs include lack of clear guidelines and support for the implementation of an inclusive education policy, inadequate facilities and lack of equipments, and capacity among teachers to handle children with special needs among other factors. Finances are the greatest challenge facing students with disabilities in higher education. It renders many who qualify for university admission economically incapable of sponsoring themselves for alternative degree programmes offered at the universities. In Kenyatta University where the policy had been established, admission of students with disabilities constitutes 0.3% of the total student population (JAB 2005). This indicates a high level of inequality.

Socio-economic factors

According to unpublished report of the Public Universities Inspection Board, 2006, higher education is considered to be elitist a preserve for the rich, privileged and powerful. Student enrolment reflects regional, ethnic and social class disparities. For instance, admission through what is commonly called mature entry at Moi university and parallel programmes. Low-income families often cannot afford to educate their children beyond secondary school, and in some instants primary level. They cannot afford user charges in universities. The greater the level of poverty the more limited this educational opportunity becomes and this serves to perpetuate disparities in higher education. Regional inequalities affect the socio-economic status of student and hence their access to higher education.

Cultural factors

Disparity in gender participation and access to higher education is a serious problem among most Kenyan communities. Cultural traditions and practices prevent girls from pursuing their education and inhibit them from

performing as well as boys. Some of the cultural barriers that have been identified include: early marriage practices, gender stereotyping in economic roles, and patriarchal social organisation (GOK, 1988; Brock and Cammish, 1991; GOK, 1994). At home, for example, girls are not given equal opportunities as boys to do homework or study. They spend most of their time helping their mothers with domestic chores such as fetching water, gathering firewood, cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes, hawking, shopping or doing other routine jobs around the house. In this respect, girl-child becomes more disadvantaged than boy-child. Girl-child is always the first child to drop out of school when poor families are in financial difficulties and are unable to raise the school fees. Brock and Cammish (1991) have called this phenomenon the "opportunity cost of schooling girls". This phenomenon seems to decline in well-to-do families, which are no longer strongly bound by socio-cultural and traditional practices that discriminate against female children.

Rigid progression structure in Universities

The universities progression structure has been rigid reducing completion rates and access to university education. The rigidity is accentuated through the curriculum that does not allow a flexible modular system, where a student can defer and join the system at his/her convenient time without any restriction and also through rigid admission criteria that makes it impossible for post-graduates from other tertiary secondary school to enroll.

SOCIAL SELECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Some Evidence

International and national dimensional of distributional effects of higher education cannot be overemphasized. Studies in this area (Williamson, 1981 and Burgess, 1981, Boit 1998), for example, consider higher education to be biased for and against certain groups of people in society. Problem of equity and access appear to pervade the lower levels of the education system and is reinforced particularly at the point of entry into the University particularly in developing countries. The question that needs to be asked is- who gains access to higher education? Who is likely to enroll in higher education?

International Dimension

A study on the social economic distribution of students at the national autonomous university of Honduras showed that despite the government's efforts to increase participation of students from low income groups through its open access policy and payment of token, 66% of the students came from families that had higher annual income US\$ 2500 and 6% of the students were from families with income below US\$1130 (Ziderman and Albrecht 1995). The reasons policy (open access) did not have the desired effects according to Ziderman and Albrecht; this was briefly due to the selective nature of the education system that ensures that the children (from wealthy families) will have access to quality basic education survive through secondary education. This appears to be the most occurrences in most developing countries. The influence of special economic background on the rate of university participation of the various social economic group is also demonstrated by the study carried out in 1990 the university of Philippines 77% of the student came from families that owned cars and 77% of students had fathers who were

professionals. Similar studies in Sweden, Germany and UK have not found any significant increase in the participation rate from working class children (Burgess, 1981; Richardson, 1981; Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995). Studies to demonstrate class-bias and the extent to which higher education is preponderantly middle/ upper class is provided by data connected in OECD countries. This data shows that between 1967-1977 the number of home entrance university student increased to 9.3% from 7.3%. This percentage increase varied widely between classes, however. Research conducted by Halsey et al (1980) shows that those who are already privileged tend to benefit more than those who are not from provision of higher education. Although this research report is dated, there are many significant elements, which are still considered to be relevant to contemporary development in Kenyans. This is also true of research reports by Wastergaard and Little (1967; 1977) and the OECD (1970). The university of Oxford Social Mobility study on data of family and educational biographies collected from a sample of 10,000 men living in England and Wales in 1972 showed that whereas opportunities for higher education for people with a working class – back ground had grown at a faster rate, their relative opportunities had remained remarkably stable since the period of the first world war. The beneficiaries were the middle/ upper class the already privileged. Similar trends were also observed in European countries, in particular (Williamson 1981). In comparing social class in the British education system in the 1950s with the Pre-war years, Wastergaard and Little (1977) Showed evidence of screening that took place at different stages of the dictation system in England and Wales. Using information from selective second of education and universities the demonstrative higher rate of elimination and low rate of survival children at each successive stage. And that survival between children of different social- backgrounds was less equal. With regard to disparity between sexes, particularly at the stage of university entrance, Wastregard and Little (1967) noted that it widened as one went down the social scale ladder. Comparing the chances of girls from the two extreme ends of the social scale, the pointed out that the daughter of the unskilled manual worker was hundred times lower than if she had been born into a professional family.

National Dimension

A study Maundu (1986) examined students' achievement in science and mathematics in secondary school. Parental occupation status and the level of formal education attained constituted a measure of social, economic status. According to the study, parental level of education was found to be significantly different for students attending National, Provincial and district secondary schools. More than half (57%) of students in National schools came from family back ground where the father had at least form four standard education in comparison to 37% in provincial and 23% in district schools. A similar trend for mothers' level of education was correspondingly observed across the three types of schools. In terms of parental occupation status about 50% of fathers of students attending National schools were either in managerial and professional positions, or were employed in skilled occupations. This percentage was, however, correspondingly lower for fathers of students with similar occupations but with children attending *provincial* (33 per cent) and *district* (28 per cent). Students in either *provincial* or *district* schools had a higher proportion of fathers in unskilled

occupations (60 per cent) than those attending national (40 per cent). Although mothers of students across the three types of secondary schools were in unskilled occupations the proportion of mothers in unskilled occupations in the extra-provincial school was the lowest. The findings indicate the extent of social selection and social class bias in Kenya's education system, which begins early in the primary schools cycle. In another study titled "Education Productivity and Inequality" involving Kenya, and Tanzania, Knight and Sabot (1990) found that in Kenya 36% of employees whose fathers had no formal education had secondary or higher education compared to 66% of those whose fathers had primary education and 84% for those whose fathers had secondary or higher education. According to Knight and Sabot, this is an indication that children from well-educated family backgrounds tend to have a higher probability of getting secondary education and progressing to universities than those who are not. The study by Boit (1998) investigating on who gains access to higher education in Kenya using three institutions of higher learning namely a public university, a private university and tertiary institution found the following:

- Students from all socio-economic backgrounds are enrolled in higher education
- There are more students from lower status households in public universities than they are in polytechnic or private universities.
- Students in private universities are preponderantly of middle/upper socio-economic backgrounds.
- Significantly few students from lower socio-economic stratum also study in private universities.
- Students from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds, that is, children of "professionals" are more likely to have attended the top rated secondary schools in the country; *national* and *provincial* schools.
- Students from low status households are more likely to have attended *district* and other type secondary schools and less likely to have attended the two top schools; *provincial* and *national* secondary schools.
- Students from the middle and upper end of the socio-economic scale are disproportionately represented in higher education and more likely to be enrolled in high prestige courses.
- Students from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to benefit most from public subsidies.
- Female students are under-represented in public universities and polytechnics.
- Female students are more likely to enrol in arts related courses; the so-called "caring profession" courses.
- That government measures (both policy and legal) to widen access and equality of opportunity do not so far appear to have been very successful in helping to neutralise the effects of social status and income on participation in higher education and in particular fields of study.

The findings on social class bias in higher education as discussed above indicate that children from more privileged backgrounds tend to remain one step ahead in educational attainment and that equalization of opportunities at the lower secondary level does not necessarily equalize opportunities at the next level. Proportionately fewer children from less

privileged backgrounds tend to get promoted into the tertiary or university education system. This has effect of increasing the inequality in the distribution of places at the tertiary or university level and disproportionately benefiting children from the more privileged background.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in this paper there are intolerable inequalities in access, inequalities of opportunity and social class bias in higher education due to disparities include amongst others; rigid admission criteria, gender, course of study regional disparities, special needs, socio-economic and cultural factors, and rigid progression structure in the universities amongst other factors. Indications are that 70 % of those who qualify annually with a mean grade of c+ in Kenya Certificate of secondary Education (KCSE) are unable to access university education and about 45% of students who complete primary school education are admitted to secondary schools. Therefore the aggregate distribution impact of the education transfers is regressive. This regressive transfer requires comprehensive policy intervention and policy solutions to ensure that provision of higher education is socially just. Below are some suggested policy intervention measures, which may implement singly or in a combination to address the pervasive issues of inequality, access and social class bias in higher education in Kenya.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

a) Embracing ICT in delivery of education

A continued reliance on quantitative expansion of conventional face-to-face residential universities to address issues of equity and access is a zero-sum game. Equity and access to higher education can never be achieved in the foreseeable future if necessity distance education strategies through use of contemporary technology communication are not adopted. Open and Distance learning offers the hope of making quality education available to all at low cost since they can be cost effective. The potential of this mode of delivering education has been emphasized in almost all Government Policy Reports and Plans beginning with the Ominde Report of 1964/65, The National Development Plans of 1966 and 1976; the Gachathi Report on Educational Objectives and Policies of 1976; The Mackay Report of 1981; The Kamunge Report of 1988, The master Plan on Education and Training 1998 to 2000 and the Davy Koech Report of 1999. Although Open learning and Distance Education initiatives have been introduced in some universities in Kenya they are however on a limited scale. There is need for the government to develop a comprehensive National policy on Open Learning and Distance Education that will give providers and stakeholders' direction and focus as well to facilitate coordination of effort. Open Learning and Distance Education is becoming an indispensable part of mainstream education in both developing and developed countries. It provides opportunity for developing countries like Kenya to achieve its educational goals.

b) Improving access to primary and secondary education

In order to achieve equity and enhance access to education, amongst all socio-economic groups, the government should seriously address disparities in school outcomes, both at primary school level and between the various secondary school types. This is absolutely necessary considering that

equality of educational participation in higher education is directly dependent upon equality of access at the lower levels of the education system. It is, therefore, recommended that:

- The government should continue with cost-saving, cost-shifting and quality enhancing reforms at both primary and secondary school levels in order to raise standards and enhance access as outlined in the National Development Plan 1997-2001. These reforms should be expected to re-orient government expenditure towards increasing learning resources, targeting bursaries to the poor and needy and increasing participation rate of girls.
- At secondary school level, provision of facilities such as science laboratories, workshops and well-equipped libraries to strengthen the teaching of science and technical subjects should be done in a gender sensitive manner. This will not only meet the objective of reducing skill shortage in the science and science related fields but will also help to increase the proportion of girls enrolled in science based courses, for example, engineering and medicine, with the effects being ultimately felt throughout the whole education system and in the world of work.
- Government should also continue to pursue, on a permanent basis, policies that will enhance resources going to schools in disadvantaged regions of the country particularly the arid and semi-arid areas. It should also vigorously pursue "affirmative action" programmes in admission policies, such as the application of gender and socio-economic criteria and the quota system in the selection of students to secondary schools and higher institutions. This is considered to be necessary since the constraint of access to higher education is due to selectivity with respect to progress through primary and into and through secondary schools. Alternative forms of financing higher education that do not take into account factors which largely appear to be outside the higher education domain, such as those discussed above, can expect to have very little effect on the current composition of socio-economic backgrounds of students enrolled in higher education.

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