

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE FIRST TIME

Higher education has undergone important changes in the last decades. The massification and universalization of access to higher education are part of a phenomenon that affects developed and emerging countries, where the access to higher education becomes a substantial component of society. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) it is estimated that ~66% of the young adult population will register for the first time in their lives in higher education, a percentage that becomes more remarkable when considering the high tendencies of first time registration to higher education in New Zealand, with the highest rate (91%), followed by Chile (89%) and Denmark (86%)

The increase of registration into higher education is not a novelty in the national contexts of Latin America and the rest of the world; it is the result of a tendency that in large numbers can be deemed a positive fact for the development of the countries. However, such massive incorporation into higher education tends to turn invisible the situations of disadvantage suffered by numerous youths, product of their socio-demographic and economic backgrounds when they access this educational level. This situation is even more evident when it pertains to persons that are part of the first generation of their families to reach access to the university.

The disadvantage experienced by the youth coming from the less favored sectors of society, and that are the first in their families to access higher education, are obvious, since from the moment they decide to access this formative stage, they bring with them not only the academic deficiencies that they could have but, also, they do not have the necessary knowledge of the practices and the implications of being university students. The gaps in the access to this type of knowledge are in turn affected by the networks where these youth interact, which go beyond the family networks and include the networks from the secondary education establishments they come from, both being limited in the realm of higher education.

Therefore, it becomes necessary that universities, through their role as human capital trainers, articulate their activities

with the secondary education system so as to provide at an early time the links that transfer to future students the knowledge of what it means to be in the university, and the abilities required.

To know in time the institutional habitus of universities facilitates the insertion of the students in the university life and allows them to face the challenges of the academic demands with ease, being able to perform as “a fish in water” in the university.

Access to higher education brings along numerous challenges for students, which go beyond academic requirements and the effort needed to succeed in the training process, since it implies in some cases the separation from past culture and identity in order to adapt to the demands of university life. This situation of ambivalence experienced by students requires that higher education institutions recognize those characteristics of origin of the students and incorporate them to the learning experiences. It is important, furthermore, to transmit the institutional knowledge about what it is to be a member of the university community, together with the implications and demands of academic training, in an anticipatory fashion and, in a bi-directional articulation between the universities and the secondary education establishments of the area. Thus, higher education institutions should generate synergies and collaboration in search of a successful insertion into the university and the ensuing academic achievement of the students.

To know how the university operates is fundamental for the achievement of academic success, which is not trivial, since if the access to higher education is not accompanied by the academic success of the students, particularly of those coming from disadvantaged socio-economic sectors of society, and which are part of the first generation that reaches higher education, the sense of social justice attached to the amplified participation is lost.

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