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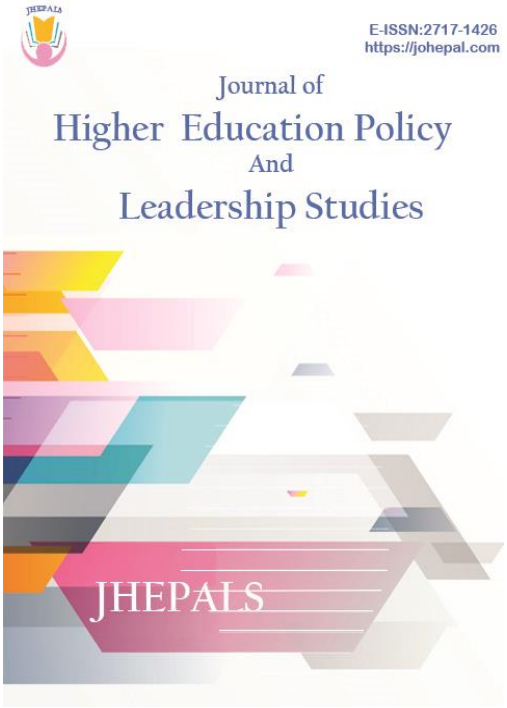

Book Review: Equity Policies in Global Higher Education: Reducing Inequality and Increasing Participation and Attainment

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Equity Policies in Global Higher Education: Reducing Inequality and Increasing Participation and Attainment

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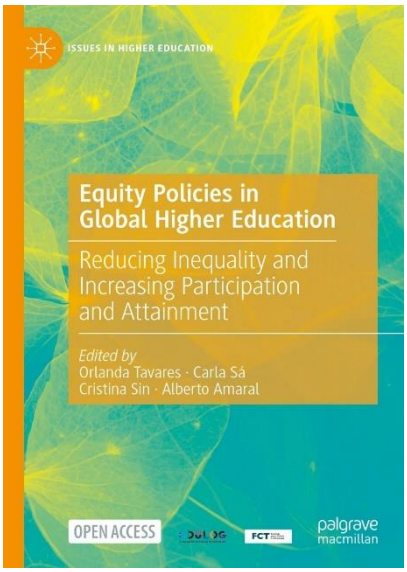

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The book discusses the issue of equity in higher education (HE), specifically focusing on reducing inequality and increasing participation and attainment. It is the outcome of an international conference on 'Equity in higher education: evidence, policy and practice' that took place in Porto in December 2019. The conference was organized by CIPES and A3ES and funded by EDULOG (Amaral, 2022, p. 1). The main theme of the conference was social inequalities in participation in HE, particularly in terms of access and success. In the

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knowledge society, where people need theoretical knowledge to carry out their jobs, the book emphasizes the need of higher education. It says that in post-industrial societies, having a worker with a good education has become quite valuable. To ensure that the population has rising levels of education, nations have enlarged our HE institutions. However, concerns about access equity have been raised as significant portions of the population have not been able to reach the expected education levels. The COVID-19 epidemic, which has raised issues about equity beyond access to school and brought to light the unjust living conditions of certain demographic segments, is also discussed in the book. Given the strong ties between socioeconomic background and racial and ethnic identity, it highlights the importance of addressing the socioeconomic aspect of equity. The idea that education is a positional good—that is, that it gives students a competitive edge in terms of employment, social standing, and status—is covered in the book. However, social groupings from privileged origins typically monopolize positional goods, which adds to the continuation of injustices in HE. The book refers to two hypotheses, Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) and Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI), which describe inequality patterns but do not explain them. Rational-choice theories are mentioned as possible explanations for these patterns. The book presents several national cases, including the United States, Brazil, England, the Nordic countries, and Portugal.

It discusses the different policies implemented in these countries to increase fairness and reduce inequities in HE. The United States and Brazil have implemented affirmative action policies, but the role of the federal government in education differs between the two countries. England has aimed at improving social justice within a neoliberal context, while the Nordic countries have implemented redistribution policies and universalistic contribution mechanisms. Portugal completes the sample as a Southern European country. The book also mentions the introduction of cost-sharing policies in many countries, where students and their parents are required to bear part of the education costs. Loan systems have been created to make this change more tolerable, with mortgage-style loans and income-contingent loans being the two types mentioned. The book highlights the potential risks and inequalities associated with these loan systems. Access to HE is a topic of great importance and concern in many countries, including England and Portugal. In England, student funding policies have undergone significant changes since 1990, resulting in a funding system based on student loan debt. These reforms were intended to improve access to HE and promote the economic and social benefits associated with it. However, there are concerns that these policies may have had the opposite effect, particularly for disadvantaged students, perpetuating existing inequalities rather than ameliorating them. Similarly, in Portugal, access to HE is a complex issue that has been the subject of research and analysis. The chapters in both countries highlight the importance of financial support and student loans in facilitating access to HE.

They also discuss the role of student choice and decision-making, as well as the importance of guidance and support in helping students navigate the transition to HE. The chapters provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in promoting access to HE in England and Portugal, highlighting the complex interplay of factors, including financial support, student choice, and guidance, that shape students' access and transition to HE. These insights can inform policy and practice in both countries and contribute to

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ongoing efforts to promote equity and inclusivity in HE (Callender, 2022; Baptista et al., 2022; Tavares et al., 2022).

Analysis

The book titled "Equity Policies in Global Higher Education" highlights the importance of HE in the knowledge society, where individuals require theoretical knowledge to perform their work. Amaral discusses the concept of education as a positional good, which means that "it provides individuals with a competitive advantage in the job market and social standing" (Amaral, 2022b, p. 30). However, he points out that "positional goods tend to be monopolized by social groups from privileged backgrounds, leading to persistent inequities in HE" (Amaral, 2022a, p. 4). Dill's chapter provides a critical analysis of the U.S. case in terms of equity in HE. He highlights "the lack of regulation, information asymmetry, disparities in the recruitment process, and issues with financial aid as key factors contributing to inequities in access to, HE in the United States" (Amaral, 2022a, p. 5). Júlio Bertolin and Terri McCowan begin by highlighting that "Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in terms of income distribution and has one of the lowest percentages of graduates aged 25 to 34 among OECD countries". They explain that despite the impressive increase in HE enrollments over the past three decades, the participation of students from deprived backgrounds has remained low (p. 39). One of the key factors contributing to inequality in HE accesses in Brazil is the "low quality of public secondary schooling compared to private schooling" (Amaral, 2022a, p. 7). Students from deprived backgrounds often attend public secondary schools and face disadvantages when competing for places in public HE institutions, where tuition is free, as a result, they tend to enroll in lower-quality HE institutions that charge significant tuition fees. In Brazil, affirmative action policies such as The Quotas Law of 2012 were implemented to tackle inequalities. This law reserves 50% of seats for public school students, further subdivided into sub-quotas for low-income, black, mixed-race, and indigenous students. The authors note that "these measures have resulted in a higher enrollment of black and mixed-race students in HE" (Dill, 2022, p. 48).

However, the authors also note that the private sector has experienced significant growth in HE in Brazil, with "for-profit institutions accounting for a large share of enrollments" (Bertolin & McCowan, 2022, p. 80). This expansion has been driven by the introduction of financing programs such as the University for All (Prouni) and the Student Financing Fund (Fies), "which provide scholarships and loans for students to enroll in private colleges and universities" (Amaral, 2022a, p. 8). The authors point out that "this expansion has resulted in a concentration of students from deprived status in lower-quality study private institutions, exacerbating inequalities" (Amaral, 2022b, p. 32). Overall, the chapter four concludes that while there have been some improvements in access to, HE for students from deprived backgrounds in Brazil, "there are still significant inequalities that persist. The authors argue that there is a need for further policy interventions to address these inequalities and ensure equitable access and completion in HE" (Bertolin & McCowan, 2022, pp. 71-86). Chapter 5 discusses the topic of improving student retention and success in HE, with a focus on the national approaches taken in England. The chapter highlights the importance of addressing the goals of widening access and promoting social justice, as well as improving the productivity and competitiveness of the national economy. It discusses the Europe 2020 strategy, which sets targets for increasing the number of individuals

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completing HE qualifications, and the role of national policy tools such as 'Access and Participation Plans' and Teaching Excellence and Outcomes Framework for student in addressing inequalities and promoting equity in HE. The chapter also explores the factors that contribute to student success in HE, including individual characteristics, institutional support, and "the role of the state" (Thomas, 2022, p. 90). It emphasizes the importance of student engagement, belonging, and academic integration, as well as "the need for institutions to create inclusiveness and culturally support the success of all students" (Thomas, 2022, p. 106). The role of the state is discussed in terms of "funding and financial support of HE, and the provision of information and support for students" (Thomas, 2022, p. 102). The chapter concludes by highlighting the strengths of the national approach to widening participation and improving student success in England, including "clear definitions of success, the use of metrics and benchmarks to measure performance, and the focus on institutional responsibility for student success" (Thomas, 2022, p. 109). It also acknowledges the challenges that remain, such as "increasing participation of students from non-traditional groups and reducing attainment gaps between different student populations" (Thomas, 2022, p. 106). The overall chapter provides an overview of the aspects of equity, including access, student performance, affirmative action policies, and efforts to promote social justice aimed at improving student retention and success in HE, with a "particular focus on the context of England" (Thomas, 2022, pp. 90-109). The chapter six begins by providing an overview of the ideas that "inform student funding policies globally, particularly the shift towards marketization of HE" (Callender, 2022, p. 118). It then focuses on "the changes in student funding in England since 2012, which have resulted funding system based on student loan structure" Callender, 2022, p. 117). The chapter highlights the "assumptions and predictions made by policymakers regarding the benefits of student loans and their impact on student behavior" (Callender, 2022, p. 118). It argues that these assumptions are often unsubstantiated and misplaced. A primary argument supporting student loans is that they "facilitate access to higher education and promote greater equality by preventing liquidity constraints from obstructing access" (Callender, 2022, p. 119). However, the chapter points out that "student loans can actually perpetuate existing inequalities, especially among disadvantaged groups" (Callender, 2022, p. 135). "Low-income prospective students are more risk-averse and concerned about building up student loan debt, which can deter them from pursuing HE" (Callender, 2022, p. 120). The chapter also discusses the preference for loans over grants from a government perspective. Loans are seen as cheaper and more politically and socially acceptable, as they can be repaid by graduates once they are in better-paid jobs. However, opponents of loans argue that they may have the opposite effect, "discouraging access to HE among low-income students and creating additional administrative and financial costs" (Callender, 2022, p. 119). The chapter then examines "the impact of student funding reforms in England since 2012" (Callender, 2022, p. 125). It highlights that "while HE participation rates have increased for young full-time undergraduates, there has been a decline in participation among older part-time students" (Callender, 2022, p. 136). This has resulted in a widening socioeconomic gap in access to HE. The chapter also notes that "the expansion of HE has not reduced class inequalities in access to elite universities" (Callender, 2022, p. 128). Furthermore, the chapter discusses the eligibility and take-up of student loans. It points out that "part-time

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students are less likely to be eligible for loans due to restrictive eligibility criteria" (Callender, 2022, p. 129). Even when eligible, many part-time students choose not to take out loans due to "the more onerous repayment terms and concerns about their ability to repay" (Callender, 2022, p. 130). This highlights the fact that "loans are not perceived as fair, affordable, or risk-free by all students" (Callender, 2022, p. 137). The authors conclude by Sargues that the current student funding system in England has not achieved its intended goals of widening participation and promoting social mobility. Instead, it has perpetuated existing inequalities and limited student choices. The chapter calls for a more comprehensive understanding of "the complex factors that shape student behavior and decision-making in relation to student loans" (Callender, 2022, p. 118). Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive analysis of "the access-transition process to HE in Portugal" (Baptista et al., 2022, p. 143). The chapters emphasize the need for "targeted interventions and policies to promote equal opportunities and improve access to HE for all students" (Baptista et al., 2022, p. 165). Chapter 8 authored by Carla Sá, Orlanda Tavares, and Cristina Sin highlights the importance of addressing inequalities in HE accesses, as HE is seen as a means to foster social justice and economic development. The authors contend that educational disparities manifest in students' paths prior to HE, and "the transition into HE mirrors these varied opportunities" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 172). They identify several factors that influence "the chances of secondary school graduates in Portugal to enter HE" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 182). These factors include "socioeconomic status, parents' education, academic achievement, previous schooling, type of secondary education attended, gender, regional differences, and selection and admission procedures" (Sá, et al., 2022, pp. 173-180). The authors discuss "how socioeconomic status is a significant determinant for the transition to HE" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 179).

Students hailing from families with a higher socioeconomic status tend to enroll in higher education more frequently, often weighing the costs and benefits against their family's income. Additionally, "the educational level of parents, reflecting socioeconomic status, impacts their children's likelihood of participating in higher education. Those with parents who have attained higher education degrees are more inclined to pursue university qualifications themselves" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 176). The chapter also highlights the impact of previous schooling on the transition to HE. The type of secondary education attended, such as scientific-humanistic or vocational programs, significantly affects the likelihood of enrolling in HE. Gender is another factor that influences participation in HE. "Women generally have higher participation rates in HE, and this can be attributed to their higher attainment in previous levels of education. The availability of HE institutions and the proximity of HE to students' homes influences enrollment rates" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 174). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may face obstacles in accessing HE due to "limited educational opportunities in their regions or the costs associated with migration" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 178). In conclusion, Chapter 8 provides a comprehensive analysis of "the inequalities in HE admissions and placements in Portugal" (Sá, et al., 2022, p. 170). The authors highlight the importance of addressing socioeconomic status, previous schooling, gender, regional differences, and selection and admission procedures to ensure equitable access to HE. The chapter provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to inequalities in HE and offers recommendations for policy interventions. Chapter 9 of the

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document discusses the topic of "inequality in access to HE in the Nordic countries" (Aamodt, 2022, p. 195). The chapter begins by highlighting the high levels of equality and access to education in the Nordic countries, thanks to their welfare state policies and emphasis on education for all. However, it also acknowledges that "despite these efforts, there is still a considerable degree of inequality in access to HE" (Aamodt, 2022, p. 196). The chapter presents a "review of international research on educational inequality, comparing the Nordic countries to other countries around the world" (Aamodt, 2022, p. 208). One of the key findings is that "while the Nordic countries have made progress in reducing inequality, there are still significant differences between the countries and room for improvement" (Aamodt, 2022, p. 214). The chapter also explores the theories of maximally maintained inequality (MMI) and effectively maintained inequality (EMI), which suggest that "even in systems with high levels of equality, privileged groups will still have advantages in accessing prestigious institutions and study programs" (Aamodt, 2022, p. 203). It suggests measures such as widening the recruitment base of HE institutions, diversifying admission routes, and providing tailored support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also highlights the importance of considering the impact of policies on access inequalities, particularly in regions with high demand for HE places.

Thematic Insights on Equity and Policy Implications in Higher Education

Theme 1: Impact of Student Funding Policies

Reforms in England and Portugal have led to a funding system based on student loan debt, which has had mixed effects on access to HE. Concerns persist regarding the potential deterrent effect of loans on participation, especially among low-income students. In Portugal, the introduction of student loans has raised concerns about access to HE, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.

Theme 2: Inequalities in Access and Participation

Significant socioeconomic disparities exist in HE participation rates in England and Portugal, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds being less likely to enter HE. Gender also plays a role in participation, with women generally having higher rates compared to men. In the Nordic countries, despite HE expansion, inequalities in access persist, with students from higher social classes being more strongly represented (Aamodt, 2022).

Theme 3: Student Loan Debt and its Consequences

The increase in tuition fees in England and Portugal has resulted in higher levels of student loan debt upon graduation. In Portugal, this debt has implications for housing tenure, with loan recipients being less likely to own their own homes (Baptista et al., 2022; Tavares et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Policies to Promote Equity and Reduce Inequalities

Various policies have been implemented across different national contexts to tackle inequality in HE enrollment and attainment (Amaral, 2022; Callender, 2022; Baptista et al., 2022; Tavares et al., 2022). These include addressing achievement in previous education

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levels, expanding HE systems, providing student support such as grants and loans, and improving information provision.

Theme 5: Persistent (Social) Inequalities

Despite policy efforts, equity issues remain a major challenge in HE systems worldwide (Amaral, 2022; Callender, 2022; Baptista et al., 2022; Tavares et al., 2022). Expansion of HE systems has not effectively diminished educational inequality or promoted social mobility.

Theme 6: Reforms

Improving equity in HE requires comprehensive reforms at all levels of administration and radical transformations of institutional environments, curriculum, and pedagogy. Challenges include widening participation, reinforcing accessibility, and involving multiple actors in promoting horizontality.

Strengths

1. The book content has several strengths, including providing a comprehensive overview of the topic, presenting evidence from different countries, discussing theoretical background and hypotheses, highlighting the role of policies and government interventions, and raising important questions and challenges.
2. The book provides a comprehensive analysis of in Portugal in the inequalities transition from secondary to HE. It covers various factors that influence this transition, such as socioeconomic status, previous schooling, gender, regional differences, and internal grades.
3. The book supports its arguments with empirical data from the General-Directorate of Education and Science Statistics (GDESS), which adds credibility to the analysis.
4. The book sheds light on the socioeconomic barriers within Portuguese education, illustrating the significant impact of socioeconomic status on students' academic advancement and decision-making.
5. The book identifies specific barriers and challenges faced by disadvantaged students, such as lower academic achievement, limited access to HE opportunities, and regional disparities.
6. The book identifies potential intervention areas to tackle these inequalities, including addressing socioeconomic biases in academic achievement, encouraging lifelong learning, enhancing the geographic distribution of public short-cycle tertiary education, and confronting grade inflation.

Weaknesses:

1. However, there are also weaknesses, such as the lack of specific examples and case studies, limited exploration of factors like race and gender, the absence of clear recommendations, and the need for a more critical analysis of limitations and biases. The overall coherence of the book is generally good, but it could benefit from stronger narrative threads, clearer connections between sections, and more explicit signposting and transitions.

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2. The book does not more balanced discussion on potential counterarguments or alternative perspectives on the issue of inequalities in HE admissions and placements in Portugal.
3. The book does not much explore the potential impact of other factors, such as cultural or racial disparities, on the inequalities in HE admissions and placements.
4. The book does not provide a detailed analysis of the policies and initiatives implemented by the Portuguese government to address these inequalities, or their effectiveness.

In terms of originality, relevance, and contribution to the field or genre, the book provides a valuable analysis of the inequalities in HE admissions and placements in Portugal. It adds to the existing literature on this topic by focusing specifically on the Portuguese context and providing empirical evidence to support its arguments. The book's findings and recommendations can contribute to the development of policies and initiatives aimed at reducing inequalities in HE accesses and promoting social equity. Overall, it is well-structured, coherent, and provides a comprehensive analysis of the topic. It effectively highlights the socioeconomic disparities and challenges faced by disadvantaged students in accessing HE in Portugal.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the book "Equity Policies in Global HE" offers a thorough analysis of the multifaceted issues surrounding equity in HE across various countries, as delineated throughout its chapters. From the inception of the conference in Porto, the discourse delves into the critical examination of access, success, and retention in HE systems worldwide. Chapters meticulously dissect the concept of education as a positional good, illustrating its monopolization by privileged social groups and the persistent inequalities it engenders, as evidenced by hypotheses such as Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) and Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI). By scrutinizing specific national cases, such as Brazil and the United States, the book elucidates the systemic barriers hindering equitable access, such as disparities in public and private schooling, the proliferation of for-profit institutions, and the inadequacies of student funding policies. Moreover, it underscores the importance of affirmative action measures, financial aid programs, and institutional support mechanisms in ameliorating these disparities. Across diverse contexts, including England, Portugal, and the Nordic countries, the chapters underscore the imperative of targeted interventions and policy reforms to address socioeconomic status, parental education, academic achievement, gender, regional disparities, and admission procedures. They advocate for strategies to widen recruitment bases, diversify admission routes, and provide tailored support to marginalized students. Overall, the book not only identifies the systemic inequities pervasive in HE but also offers actionable insights and policy recommendations to foster greater inclusivity and social justice within these systems (Tavares et al., 2022).

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Originality Note

The authors confirm this book review is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

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