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Meritocracy and education policy for a sustainable development: Is access to tertiary education fair in Latin America?

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Socioeconomic inequality in Latin America region should be addressed by multiple policies, focused on different stages in the life course of citizenship, in social and economic areas. Although policy interventions in higher education to strength the vocational sector could be valuable to level inequalities in labour markets. However, the interventions would be oriented to address inequalities both before and after secondary education completion. The increasingly diversification of educational systems in Latin America, led by privatisation, has expanded educational opportunities but has increased inequalities as well. In this respect, expanding educational opportunities without the design of policy interventions to tackle inequalities at lower levels, could not ameliorate inequalities fostered by higher education institutions.

It is well-known that Latin American societies are structurally characterised by a high socioeconomic inequality. A recent [report](#) from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) states, social inequalities are the main obstacle to achieve a sustainable development. It shows how the distribution of personal income has improved in the first half of the past ten years, driven by policies oriented to the formalization of employment, increases in minimum wage and monetary transfers to lower socioeconomic groups. However, these efforts did not improve in the last years (2012 – 2015), where the pace [slowed](#). These inequalities reflect the uneven distribution of wealth and asymmetries in the capacity of appropriate resources and political and economic participation. The multidimensional nature of social inequalities –the influence of social origin on social outcomes- challenges the instruments and methodologies of the current and future research agenda in the region. As the report rightly acknowledges, a life-course perspective may allow us to understand social processes that generate inequalities in the interplay between individuals and institutions.

One important avenue through which social inequalities are reproduced is the characteristics of educational institutions. The long-lasting tradition of education policies and reforms have attempted to weaken the influence social origin under a meritocratic principle as basis of organization. As Michael Young first proposed sixty years ago, in a rather satirical way, this principle states the legitimation of social and educational inequalities should only be the outcome of ability and effort and skills, rather than adscriptive characteristics, like social class. Educational

qualifications (i.e. *credentialism*) then serve as signals to allocate individuals within the distribution of status and income. (Goldthorpe 2003; Hadjar & Becker 2016). Hence, educational inequalities mirror inequalities during the life course, particularly in the case of tertiary education, which yields substantial economic returns.

How can we design social policies to enhance human capital to generate private and social returns? The answer is not straightforward without understanding to what extent educational institutions conform to the context in which individual decisions are shaped. The educational system should work as an important mechanism to reduce social inequalities, in line with the structural reforms that [ECLAC recommend](#), in special the strengthen of the vocational sector to reach a sustainable development. Although the region has increased its rates of completion of compulsory education, as more disadvantaged students enrolled in public school, within a favourable macroeconomic context compared to the previous cycle, during the 80s. However, the strengthen of social background effects has increased in case of private schools, particularly in Brazil and Chile (Torche 2010; Marteleto, Gelbert, Huber & Salinas 2012). This is an important trend due the potential expansion of implicit institutional inequality, driven by market-based policies and privatization, alongside the increase in educational opportunities in the last decades. In this respect, the likelihood of transit to higher education will differ greatly for students that attended different types of schools.

Education has the double role of transmission of advantage through the socioeconomic reproduction and via social mobility (Torche 2010). Education-based meritocracy theory, as it was developed by Daniel Bell, would require that the expansion of education would weaken the association between social origin and educational attainment. Furthermore, the association between educational attainment and social destination strengthens as much as the direct influence of social origin on destination fades away. It would reconcile social efficiency with social justice, boosting social mobility (Goldthorpe 2003). Nevertheless, empirical evidence mostly in developed world, suggest that in general, the decrease in social inequalities in earlier educational transitions (e.g. compulsory education) are associated to an increase in inequalities in access to tertiary education (Shavit, Arum & Gamoran 2007; Hadjar & Becker 2016). Three phenomena seem to prevent against a meritocratic-based education: first, disadvantaged children do not translate demonstrated academic ability into progress to higher level qualifications; second, there may be non-meritocratic characteristics derived from socialization that could have productive value for potential employers for over formal qualifications; and third, the case of advantaged students which

does not meet academic requirements whose families can mobilise other resources to avoid downward social mobility (Goldthorpe 2003).

Therefore, how institutional characteristics of educational systems shape these social inequalities in Latin America? Although there is a notorious shortage of research about the driving social mechanisms that explain inequalities in the transition to tertiary education, there are important trends to be noted, to attempt an answer. The expansion of higher education implied that although it doubled the gross enrolment ratio during the first decade of the century, with enrolment rates higher than the OECD average in Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina and Chile. However, the expansion did not translate into more opportunities for disadvantaged students. In fact, the enrolment growth increased faster among [advantaged students](#). This expansion was driven by a significant increase in private supply of higher education ranging from more than half of enrolment in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador and Peru, until less than a fifth or no presence in Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba. This process of commercialisation of higher education in the region has led to an increasing institutional diversification in terms of programme quality, ownership, mission, selectivity and social composition, among others (OECD 2015).

Differentiated higher education systems that rely on private provision that depend on enrolments for revenue are client-seekers. Hence, they stimulate and generate demand for service through the use of promotional and marketing strategies focused on well-defined groups of potential students. These institutions are also status-seekers. In other words, they engage in activities to attract quality faculty and students, as part of these strategies. The competition for students, therefore, may lower admission thresholds (Shavit et al 2007). Wherever these forms of differentiation strengthen, non-meritocratic requirements for access to higher education may play a role in enrolments, which could maintain or increase social inequalities. Empirical evidence in a number of countries shows that the qualitative dimension of stratification –the type of institution attained at a particular level– may have increased its relative importance in channel and foster socioeconomic inequalities.

In this respect, horizontal stratification within higher education in Latin America may have intensified as more students gain access, in which well-off parents could have mobilised resources (social networks, economical) to secure qualitatively superior educational credentials for their children, to foster their labour market prospects (Shavit et al 2007; Torche 2011). Nevertheless, performance inequalities would have played an important role, due to the potential increasing competition in selective university slots. From a policy point of view, stratification research in higher education points out the distinction of these two types of inequalities. Performance inequalities as

main drivers of educational inequality would imply the design of policy interventions focused on early stages of schooling career, to enhance skills and learnings required to enter to higher education. Social differences in choices, particularly at the point of educational transitions, in students with similar performance levels, would require policies to change constraints and incentives (Jackson 2013).

In this regard, different scenarios could occur. The expansion of tertiary vocational education would bring opportunities for more disadvantaged students as they may be more confident and feel prepared enough to obtain a work-oriented degree. However, it would not equalize opportunities if the non-meritocratic channels in private institutions, for instance open admissions and high tuition fees, are not modified. Furthermore, it would still trigger *diversion* processes –the channelling of disadvantaged students to lower status post-secondary pathways– even if first-tier institutions are entirely meritocratic, as advantaged students have performed better during compulsory school, and therefore have better chances to gain access to these institutions (Shavit et al 2007). Finally, the potential counterbalancing trends combined, that is, the expansion of opportunities through privatization, and the social inequalities that they generate due the stratification of educational opportunities, would not cancel out each other. Social inequalities would persist, no matter the development of a strong vocational sector in higher education. The test of these policies on higher education systems in the region would seem to be a promising and critical area of research, alongside the necessity of raise quality data for that matter.

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