

## **Inequalities in Higher Education and Research**

**2<sup>nd</sup> International RESUP Conference**

**Lausanne, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2009**

**Conference organised by the Study Network on Higher Education (RESUP) in partnership  
with the Observatory for Science, Policy and Society (OSPS)**

**Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (SSP)**

**University of Lausanne (UNIL)**

### **Presentation of the conference**

Inequalities in higher education and research constitute a key issue in the analysis of higher education systems and institutions. Over the last years, research problems have been renewed and diversified in a threefold context: the higher education systems' expansion, differentiation and internationalisation. From inequalities of access to inequalities of success and integration of graduates in the marketplace, from individual to collective inequalities, from inter-individual inequalities to inter-institutional inequalities in the amount of available resources... the reading of inequalities have been largely complexified.

Inequalities in higher education were ignored for a long time, then began to draw some attention. Criteria for access were later made public, followed by attempts to construct instruments that aim at measuring, correcting and controlling inequalities. From fatality to action, inequalities represent one of the dominating research problems in higher education studies.

Three dimensions characterise the increased scholarly attention accorded to the problem of inequality:

- First, the measure of inequalities as (a) methodological and (b) political problems.

(a) Methodological problems are due to the differences existing between higher education and research systems. Whatever the issue – for instance the definition of the components of higher education and scientific production, the system's structure (binary, diversified) or academic careers – the organisation of higher education and research systems is always the heritage of a national history. Hence, from a methodological point of view, assessing inequalities presupposes not only a preliminary contextualisation of the higher education and research systems and the role of their institutional components but also the subsequent elaboration of a system to monitor inequalities. In spite of these difficulties, comparative data are increasingly looked for and elaborated to deal with the participation in higher education and research or the institutions' position within the international market, as represented for instance by the growing number of rankings. The quality of research and of the individuals' education also determines competition within "knowledge societies". As a consequence, assessing the quality of the

education systems and of the academic institutions becomes increasingly important as shown, for example, by the concerted efforts of OECD and UNESCO to establish a system measuring inequalities in students' access to higher education (Clancy, 2007). In the field of economics as well as in social sciences, we also observe more numerous debates and polemics about the instruments measuring inequalities (Vinod & al., 2000, Breen, & al., 2005, Shavit et Blossfeld, 1993, etc.), as most of the statistical models used fuel controversies.

(b) Political problems are amplified by the competition between institutions and systems because it makes state and social policies more visible on the competitive international scene. Between the international pressure aiming at normalising the measure of some inequalities (access, equity, gender, institutional results...) and the social pressure for recognition or, conversely, for the dismissal of others inequalities (ethno-racial, social, geographic origin), the issue is eminently political. Measuring inequalities implies acknowledging them in the first place. Such acknowledgment proceeds from societal negotiations of criteria whose legitimacy varies according to national histories.

- Second, *the criteria's societal definition* of how to read inequalities: ethno-racial belonging, gender, geographic and social origin, etc. represent many possible categories for the reading of inequalities. Historically, each nation-state has developed a dominating and legitimated category; others like gender have progressively compelled recognition as a universal norm. This societal definition of criteria simultaneously characterises the inequalities between individuals and between higher education institutions. For two decades, the circulation of ideas as well as the necessity to refine the reading of these inequalities has led to the diversification of the criteria taken into account.

At the institutional and system levels, the reading of inequalities results from a national doctrine and from the recognition of the institutions' differentiation. Thus, for a long time, France claimed to provide for the equality of universities and awarded diplomas, thereby excluding any analysis of inequalities between universities (the only one acknowledged being the gap separating universities from *Grandes écoles*). In contrast, the American system is built on the principle of institutional differentiation, which precociously normalises the measure of inequalities between institutions.

These historically inherited differences lead to new forms of interplay among actors when it comes to the definition of these criteria: public authorities, institutions and societies meet in diverse configurations to define legitimate criteria for measuring inequalities. For instance, in the United States of America, the policies of *affirmative action* (hence, the criterion of ethno-racial inequality) were first the object of institutional policies before society dealt with them through referenda, leading public authorities to ban them. These actors' configurations condition the declared or, conversely, discrete implementation of policies based on criteria that are not legitimated nation-wide. How inequalities are dealt with depends on the type of national consensus related to the categories used to read inequalities.

- *The treatment of inequalities* represents the third central dimension of the inequality problem. Is it the product of a universal principle or of positive discrimination? Initiated by J.B. Conant and the development of the *Scholastic Assessment Test* (SAT) as a tool to measure the "pure" academic value of individuals, which is supposed to be independent from culture, the treatment of inequalities appeared in the United States of America in the 1940's. Although the use of the SAT did not produce the expected effects, it represents one of the first tool to deal with inequalities. Other types of institutions were then added to such tools: from administrative to political and university services, under the incentive of public authorities or institutions, the number and types of institutions dedicated to the correction of inequalities has exploded during

the last two decades. Concerning student access, the selection criteria as well as the play of grants have become more complex and the problem of access to diplomas has led to the implementation of support courses (in South Africa, the United States of America). These courses are organised at the disciplinary, faculty, institutional or public authority levels, according to the culture of the institution. They can be motivated through financial incentives (South Africa), public funding being indexed on the access and graduation rate of students belonging to disadvantaged minorities.

As a result, these different evolutions in the measure, the societal definition and the treatment of inequalities justify our wish to scrutinise “the inequalities in higher education and research”. This topic will constitute the central topic of the international conference organised by RESUP at the University of Lausanne, on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2009.

In this context, acknowledged or current transformations of inequalities, their measure, their mode of production as well as analyses of their effective consequences shall be presented. As a result, papers that compare these dynamics in an international perspective, as well as those presenting national and institutional case studies, will be particularly welcomed. Paper proposals have to be empirically based and must fit with one of the hereunder mentioned thematic sessions.

### **Session 1: Inequalities of access and success**

Between 1970 and 2000, the global access to higher education quadrupled (Gradstein & Nikitin, 2004) and reached 100 million students. This increase is not simply the result of a demographic dynamic but represents also the impact of social and economic policies implemented by governments. The expansion of access to higher education is a product of the economic priorities related to technological change, globalisation and an increased international competition. It leads to a progressive reduction of inequalities of access to higher education systems characterised by a global although differentiated rise in access rates. However, if the question of expansion in higher education remains a current concern – be it within the systems which stagnate (since the middle of the 90s in some European systems) or in developing systems (like South Africa, Indonesia, Mexico...) – the question of widening access to higher education for underrepresented groups becomes paramount. How are access and equity defined and measured at the institutional, national and global levels?

This session calls for close scrutiny of the inequalities in students’ access and success in higher education from the perspective of the definition process of inequalities and the construction of inequality measures, but also of national and institutional compensation policies aimed at these inequalities (assessment of academic criteria, tuition fees, grants, loans, support courses, tutorials...). How are the problems defined, by whom, what type of policy do they lead to, why and with what results?

### **Session 2: Inequalities in academic careers**

Inequalities in academic careers can be dealt with from two perspectives:

- What first comes to mind are the individuals and their differentiated access to the different kinds of academic positions (from graduate student to professor), the recruitment games and their effects, the degree of employment stability (permanent full-time position versus precarious part-time position), the salary scale (varying according to institutions and systems), the work

conditions (teaching load, research infrastructure). Depending on the higher education systems and institutions, what are the main career inequalities and what individuals do they concern? Is it possible to identify inequality patterns in careers at the disciplinary, national and international levels?

- Second, these inequalities in individual careers result from institutional inequalities in terms of resources (human, financial, infrastructure, prestige, etc.). Faced with a increasing number of students and according to the resources they have at their disposal, the universities have to manage the necessary increase of the teaching staff, for instance by ensuring women's representation, which constitutes a public demand everywhere. Their degree of prestige on the higher education market as well as their flexibility in salary negotiation limits the extent of potential recruitments. The tradition of national and international mobility for teacher-researchers and, more largely, the employment situation of the academic staff also make the opportunities for an academic career vary, depending on the institutions. How do the institutions – which play an increasingly important role in the management of problems traditionally handled by disciplines (Musselin 2005) and particularly the management of academic staffs (Enders 1999) – deal with this problem of resource inequalities in the management of academic careers?

### **Session 3: Gender inequalities**

Gender inequalities are multi-dimensional. To varying and evolving extents they reproduce inequalities inherited from a specific social organisation characterised by male domination. For a long time inequalities between men and women in higher education were studied from the perspective of access: to the higher education system, scientific disciplines, elitist education, etc. Today, the situation at the level of higher education systems is progressively shifting: in an increasing number of societies, female students are more numerous than their male counterparts. Policies aiming at the latter's access begin to appear. However, depending on the institutions and disciplines, gendered differences in the chosen study path persist, also in the access to graduates studies, doctorates as well as to academic professions. Some policies aim at solving this problem: communication campaigns designed to convince women to enrol in scientific degrees, commissions for equality of opportunity in university management, mentoring, hiring policies at favouring women, etc. Whether it is at the European, national or local levels, instruments are implemented in order to balance gendered inequalities. To what extent do these adopted policies and measures allow for the decrease of this type of inequality? Conversely, does the reproduction of gendered inequalities paradoxically occur due to these so-called equality policies? Which are the perverse effects of equality policies on the encouragement of women in education systems and academic careers?

Finally, beyond the inequality of access to the different education levels, gendered inequalities are also criticised from the perspective of legitimated knowledge, considered as emblematic of a cultural domination constructed by men. The diversification of curricula and the development of gender studies represent an attempt to remedy this domination.

### **Session 4: Inter-institutional inequalities**

If inequalities were first analysed from the perspective of individuals and the groups they belong to, the measure of inequalities between institutions was strongly developed while the

postulate of equality between universities prevailing in some systems (e.g. in France) was questioned. Inequalities of financial resources (public funding vs. private funding, the indexation of funding on results, differentiated funding according to sector, etc.), inequalities in the position occupied by the institutions on the local, national and international higher education market (whom do we attract? students, foreign university partners, local partners? in what context and with what results?), territorial inequalities, inequalities in action and autonomy capacities *vis-à-vis* public authorities, represent many ways to interpret inequalities.

Given the numerous assessments of resource and result inequalities, do higher education and research institutions become accountable for their activity and efficiency? For instance, in the 80's, the state of Florida renamed and redefined its performance indicators in collaboration with the campus leaders, resulting in the six “*accountability measures*” (St John & et al. 2001). According to the chosen criteria, this efficiency measure can simultaneously increase resource inequalities between institutions – for instance if funding is exclusively indexed on the number of Nobel prizes, the publications *per capita*, the academic prestige of teachers and enrolled student, etc. – but it can also increase inequalities – for instance when the social mobility of the students promoted by the institution is measured, the services for the community, etc. We can clearly see that the consequences of the measure of inter-institutional inequalities largely depend on the values and orientations it incorporates.

The diffusion of rankings and measures participates in this phenomenon. Of course, the Shanghai ranking and its effects come to mind, for example on the grouping of French universities in order to achieve a greater visibility. However, other national and international rankings exist which incorporate original measure criteria and start from different conceptions of the role played by higher education. For instance, the ranking of American universities carried out by the *Washington Monthly* (2005) uses as an indicator the institution's capacity to produce social mobility.

Nowadays, what are the criteria to measure inter-institutional inequalities depending on the systems? Can we assess the effects of these measure diffusion of the academic institutions and systems?

### **Session 5: Inequalities and knowledge production**

Like higher education, the social space of research is also characterised by an unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources between researchers and research institutes. This inequality is partly due to the specificity of the social organisation prevalent in scientific work and to the ways resources are granted, which is organised by the academics themselves (peer-review) and is in part based on the researchers' social and scientific reputation (Whitley 2000; Latour 1979). Defined as a differentiated access to various resources (material and symbolic), indexed on a given researcher social position in a specific disciplinary field, inequality is perceived as fair or at least acceptable if the organization of scientific work and its modes of evaluation favour good research. These processes have been largely documented and shed light on the mechanisms of social reproduction in the scientific elites and the effects of “scientific conservatism” both in content as well as in methods (cf. the theory of cumulative advantages, Cole, Cole, 1973). From then on, social inequalities in the scientific field represent both a knowledge and a power issue (and are hence challenged). The diversification of funding modes for research and the transformation of the universities' internal organisation taking place within national research systems and academic institutions (Lepori 2008; De Boer et al 2007) will not

remain without effect on the redistribution of resources and the power relationships within the scientific field (Whitley 2004). To what extent do these new research funding mechanisms modify inequalities in the access to material and symbolic resources and to power relationships within and between disciplines? To what extent and in what ways do these recent transformations intervene not only on the structuring of the scientific field (in particular on the distribution of resources) but also on the research practices, especially from the perspective of the emergence of new research domains? What are the new individual and collective strategies deployed by researchers in order to take into consideration these new institutional “constraints” in the framework of their research activities and in order to go beyond the existing inequalities? To what extent do these transformations intervene in the hierarchy of disciplines within a given national space? Are social mechanisms leading to social inequalities in different fields reproducible at the regional and national levels? Does that differentiated access to resources between researchers, institutions, regions and nations, echo the North-South divide? To this extend, what role do new information and communication technologies play?

### **Practical modalities**

Abstracts are expected by **December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008**. They must include the author’s name, his or her institutional affiliation, and a summary of 500 words at most, presenting the research problem, methodology and expected results. The authors of accepted abstracts will be informed by the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2009 and the final paper (max. 45,000 characters) has to be sent by the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2009 at the latest as a Word document or PDF file. Abstracts and final papers can be written **in French or English** (the two conference languages). Accommodation and meals for respondents will be paid for by the organisers. In the case of papers having several authors, expenses will be paid for one speaker only.

These documents must be addressed to: [Annick.Despont@unil.ch](mailto:Annick.Despont@unil.ch)

### **Organising committee for the conference:**

Martin Benninghoff, Gaële Goastellec, Michel Grossetti, Jean-Philippe Leresche et Christine Musselin.

Other information (proceedings, directory of researchers, current issues, etc.) is available on the RESUP webpage: <http://www.u-bordeaux2.fr/resup/> or on the webpage of the Observatory for Science, Policy and Society: <http://www.unil.ch/osps>