

Free Higher Education: Mistaking Equality and Equity

Ariane de Gayardon

Ariane de Gayardon was awarded her PhD from Boston College in 2017, where she served as a doctoral research assistant at the Center for International Higher Education. She is now a researcher at the Institute of Education Centre for Global Higher Education, University College London, UK. E-mail: a.gayardon@ucl.ac.uk.

Abstract

Free higher education is seeing a revival of popularity globally, at a time when students and their families are asked to contribute ever more toward the cost of going to college. However, contrary to popular belief, free-tuition higher education is not necessarily associated with better access to, or equity within, tertiary education. This article takes a closer look at the realities behind “free” higher education, more specifically in its relationship with access.

Keywords: tuition fees; free tuition; Argentina; Brazil; Chile; equity; access.

The free-tuition movement has been spreading around the world: from the Chilean student movement of 2013, to the South African #FeesMustFall movement of 2016, and the 2017 decision to abolish tuition fees in the Philippines. The general population, particularly demonstrating students and their families, seems to believe that eliminating tuition fees would improve access to higher education, including (and more

specifically) for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there is no evidence that free-tuition higher education leads to improved access and success for students, or to better equity.

Unequal Free-Tuition Systems

Close to 40 percent of higher education systems in the world today consider themselves “free.” However, the realities hidden behind the label “free higher education” are very diverse, and few countries provide a degree that is free of charge to all who enter. Indeed, even countries that are considered fully “free” restrict subsidized education to the public sector. In these countries, any student graduating from high school is guaranteed a place in the free public higher education sector. Such countries include Argentina, Cuba, Finland, and Norway. Others, namely Denmark and Sweden, added a restriction by recently introducing tuition fees for international students.

Other countries have increased nominal fees, which are supposed to cover administrative costs, while keeping tuition fees at zero. This is the case in Ireland, where current nominal fees are higher than the tuition fees that were abolished nearly ten years ago.

However, the most common way, globally, to reduce the public economic burden while keeping higher education free has been to limit the number of places subsidized by the government. These measures are particularly important, because they go against the very reasoning behind the call for free higher education: they restrict access, often penalizing the most disadvantaged groups. Some countries, like Brazil and Ecuador, have established standardized entrance exams for access to public institutions. Others,

mostly ex-Soviet countries and nations in East Africa, implement dual-track systems, where the government only finances a certain number of places in the public sector, while other places can be accessed by paying tuition fees. Effectively, these two systems, where individuals accessing the free places are chosen on merit, create the same kind of inequity, by favoring students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Overall, the concept of free-tuition higher education is a complex one that includes many realities. How free a country's higher education system really is depends on many factors but rarely guarantees universal access.

Access and Success: A Latin American Case Study

To illustrate the link between access and tuition fee policies, particularly free-tuition policies, this article looks at a specific set of countries in Latin America. Argentina and Brazil both have free public higher education, although the Argentinean public system is open to all, while the Brazilian one is restricted in size through a standardized entry exam. Before 2016, Chile had expensive tuition fees in the public and private sectors, making it one of the world's most expensive systems when adjusted for GDP per capita. Comparing these three countries is an edifying exercise, as their approach to financing higher education is radically different despite shared historical, geographical, and cultural circumstances.

In 2013, the gross enrollment ratios (GER) for these countries were 84 percent in Chile, 80 percent in Argentina, and 46 percent in Brazil. Chile had the highest GER and outperformed Brazil by nearly 40 percentage points. Thus, tuition fee policies in

themselves do not necessarily deter participation, and close to universal access can be achieved in systems that have tuition fees.

But enrollment is not a good enough measure for higher education access. Success has recently become an integral part of the research on access in higher education, and a system's access performance has to include graduation rates. In 2015, graduation rates were estimated at 60 percent for Chile, 31 percent for Argentina, and 51 percent for Brazil. On this measure also, Chile ranked first among the three countries, with a graduation rate twice as high as Argentina's. Like access, success in higher education does not seem to be defined by tuition fee policies, and countries with free tuition can do very poorly.

What these examples show is that higher education access and success are not defined by tuition fee policies, and that countries sustaining free-tuition systems could be struggling in these areas, while countries with high fees shine. Additionally, an analysis of these three countries' socioeconomic surveys shows that access to, and success in, higher education are independent of an individual's economic background in Chile and Argentina, while access is highly dependent on this variable in Brazil. All countries, however, suffer from pronounced inequity based on individuals' cultural capital. This suggests that cost is not the only or even the main barrier to access and that implementing free higher education will not necessarily lead to improved access, thus defeating the main argument of its advocates.

Implementing Free Tuition

Beyond impact, the realities behind the implementation of free tuition are essential to look at when considering such a policy move. Countries that recently decided to implement free tuition are facing critical issues. In Chile, the government is struggling to find the funds to implement its policy of free higher education for all in the public and private sectors. As a result, restrictions placed on who could get free tuition led to less than 18 percent of the student body getting free-tuition higher education in 2016. At the same time, the free-tuition law recently passed in the Philippines is already under criticism by the very same individuals who advocated for free tuition, as they argue that it will, in its current format, deepen inequity. Similarly, the government of Ecuador introduced an entrance exam when it abolished tuition and is now blamed for preventing the democratization of higher education. However, eliminating the entrance exam could create quality issues for a system that is not ready to absorb additional demand.

Implementing free-tuition policies is far from easy and these recent examples show that the limitations observed in Brazil and Argentina, two countries that have been sustaining free public higher education for decades, can become realities soon after the change is implemented. Beyond mere implementation, these policies need to be considered in the long-term since they are extremely hard to turn around, as embodied by Germany, which scrapped tuition fees in 2014, after introducing them only in 2005, because of popular pressure.

The situation in countries that recently introduced tuition free policies should therefore be monitored to see how it evolves and if free-tuition approaches are successful. As of now, indicators seem to show otherwise.

Conclusion

Free-tuition higher education is a complex reality. To policy makers, it may seem like an easy move, since it is, after all, simply a budget decision, and definitely a strong political act. However, implementing free-tuition higher education is not only expensive and convoluted, but also does not guarantee improving access or success. This is mostly because free higher education is not a targeted policy; it impacts all individuals independently of whether they need it or not. While this policy is egalitarian, it can, and often does, create inequity.

Examples of free systems with equity issues abound globally, but politicians continue to push for free tuition as a miracle social policy. However, what are the chances that a policy will work in one system if it does not elsewhere? Should we not spend more energy setting up equitable ways to help students pay for higher education, rather than negate its cost?