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**Introduction: Student Progress toward Graduation:
An International Topic of Concern**

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INTRODUCTION: STUDENT PROGRESS TOWARD GRADUATION: AN INTERNATIONAL TOPIC OF CONCERN

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Aggregate levels of higher education access are no longer the major concern in the industrial democracies. Of the age relevant population (age 18-24) in the United States, 35% are now enrolled as undergraduates. In Sweden the figure is 24%; in Korea it is 48% (*Measuring Up: National Report Card on Higher Education*, 2012). The major concern today is the quality of what is learned once entry has been obtained, and the degree to which, once entered, a student progresses efficiently to graduation. This special issue concerns the latter. Graduation rates differ dramatically from one country to another. Turkey and Slovenia report graduation rates of 20%; Australia is not much better at 25%; but New Zealand reports a rate of 48% and Finland a rate of 63% (Heuser, Drake, & Owens, Table 3 in this volume). What is clear is that a very high percentage of those who enroll in higher education programs do not continue to completion. Many would interpret this as inefficiency. From a human capital perspective, it is possible to suggest that the returns on the public investment in higher education should be reduced by as much as 50%. But would this be a fair assumption?

There are three reasons why the assumption would be precipitous. Structures of higher education differ. In Italy and the Czech Republic, higher education is unitary; all institutions are expected to serve the same purpose. In France, Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands, higher education is binary. Some institutions serve academic purposes, others technical purposes. In Korea, Taiwan, Sweden, the United States, Japan, and Israel, higher education is diversified. Institutional missions differ substantially. Different categories of higher education structures elicit different higher education results. In general, the countries with diversified systems have greater participation of low income students and greater equity. In addition, the systems characterized by a diversity of income sources have a higher level of equity

and a higher level of participation of low income students in spite of the fact that diversity of income implies higher tuition (Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007).

Some institutional missions, such as community colleges, operate in order to increase access to learning without necessarily expecting a degree. Some categories of institutions serve the interests of adult students returning from the workforce in mid-careers. Some serve as residential colleges; others as commuter colleges. With such different missions and purposes, it is difficult to compare levels of efficiency from one to the other.

Secondly, countries differ in the degree to which the higher education structures allow flexibility in specialization and changes in specialization. The range is quite broad. In Italy a student who passes the entrance examination may register in any campus and in any field. In France the fields are preselected according to the type of entrance examination taken. In Germany, Turkey, and Jordan (see articles by Allaf and Aypay, Çekiç, and Boyacı in this issue), students are not only preselected according to field, but also according to institution. The entrance examination pre-decides their specialization and their campus. This can have deleterious effects on student commitment. Contrast this with the freedom of movement experienced in the United States and Canada where students may shift majors and institutions depending on the development of their interests as they mature and assessment of their labor market potential. The result in these countries is that there is a significant amount of “churning,” the frequency by which students transfer from one institution to another. Many may graduate but not at the institution where they commenced their courses of study. This presents considerable problems when comparing graduation rates across countries with widely divergent student regulatory environments. Because these transfers are currently not captured by the graduation statistics, rates may differ not according to graduation rates, but according to the flexibility of program transfer.

The Committee on Measures of Student Success of the U.S. Congress has issued its final report. The report recommends that the National Center for Education Statistics of U.S. Department of Education create a new indicator, a combined graduation and transfer rate. This would include students from community colleges who transfer to a 4-year college. If created, it would alter the graduation rate in the United States from about 22% to about 40% (Nelson, 2011).

Lastly, in terms of why it would be precipitous to declare non-graduation as equivalent to inefficiency is the question of culture. Students do not attend higher education for the same reasons. Some wish to learn the nature of knowledge; others have ambitions for success in the labor market. Some may hope to meet their future spouse. Some may attend for reasons of family or ethnic tradition. Costs differ as well. To the student in Egypt or Italy, where tuitions are low or non-existent, their only expense is the opportunity cost of not working full time. In their case, the public taxpayer shoulders the full cost burden.

On the other hand, for students in private institutions or in countries where the private cost is high, the individual bears the major part of the cost and, therefore,

the choices of what to study and how long to take for one's study is heavily colored by the burden presented by the different choices. Because costs differ, the ramifications of non-graduation differ. Generally where the public bears the larger share of the cost, the ramifications of non-graduation rates are more dire.

Culture includes issues of gender. Do graduation rates vary by gender? Are women in Jordan, for instance, more likely to not finish their higher education programs? The evidence is mixed. What is known is that the higher education experience is particularly taxing on Jordanian women, and Allaf, in the article *Women's Perspectives on Retention in Higher Education in Jordan: Commute and Choice*, explains why. She gave 28 Jordanian women an opportunity to explain their higher education experiences. They ranged in age, incoming academic ability, and social status. Half did not finish their degree programs. She concludes that there are three reasons for not finishing their programs: (i) the commute, (ii) the academic environment, and (iii) the social atmosphere of their family culture. Universities in Jordan, as in much of the world, are not residential; they are what Americans know as "commuter colleges." This implies two things. It implies that the entire student body experiences long, expensive, and often frustrating travel times to get to class. It also implies an absence of student services and on-campus activities which would typify an institution where students lived on campus. Jordanian women often had to sequence their commute so they could be accompanied by male family members and be home before dark. One is quoted as saying: "There is no outside of the house. You are either at your parent's house or at your husband's house." This suggests that the commute was disproportionately difficult for them as opposed to their male counterparts.

Second in importance according to Allaf is the low quality of the academic experience. This has two causes. The first has to do with the *tawjkihi* (college admission) exam which is used not only to sort out those who would be admitted, but also to track them into specific institutions and specializations. Instead of allowing a student to choose a specialization during their undergraduate experience, the exam is used to place students regardless of whether they are interested in what they are ordered to study. This policy, common to Germany, Austria, and Turkey, often implies that unless a student is very fortunate, they will end up in a program in which they have only modest interest. For this reason, none of the 28 women interviewed by Allaf expressed any interest whatsoever in their academic work. There was no excitement, no love of learning. Additionally, however, is the quality of instruction and facilities which they experienced. Lectures were ritualistic, examinations were rigid, reading materials were stultifying.

Lastly was social pressure. Female students worked in the home. Unlike male counter-parts, home and family obligations for women constituted the equivalent of a full time job. Females were socialized to be interdependent as opposed to independent. Freedom of movement was often distrusted; women students were expected to be home at all times when they were not in class. The only place they could relax was in the ladies toilet, which served as an informal social

club. There they could smoke and talk with colleagues. There was considerable pressure to marry and begin families of their own. The low priority of professional ambitions further handicapped their ability to finish their academic programs.

The placement test in Jordan is hardly an isolated source of the problem of higher education retention as explained by Ahmet Aypay, Osman Çekiç, and Adnan Boyaci, in their article *Student Retention in Higher Education in Turkey: A Qualitative Study*. The authors review the history of higher education retention literature and then apply it to Turkey. Their first conclusion is that the Undergraduate Placement Exam (LYS), which allocates students to 4-year colleges, vocational colleges, and the Open University, is a principal cause of the lack of student integration within the higher education system. The allocation depends on the quota of the program (established not by the university but by central authorities), the score rank of candidates wishing to enter the same program, the candidate's rank, and any program special requirements (female only, foreign language, etc.). The placement exam is so distorting to the system that 10% of the 4-year colleges and 25% of the 2-year colleges were left without any students. One hundred thousand students will wait for a year to try to take the test again in order to achieve a more satisfactory placement. Of all the LYS test takers in 2009, only 42% were recent graduates of secondary school. In the interviews conducted for their article, two-thirds of the respondents declared that they were unwillingly enrolled in their current programs. More than half said that they enrolled in their universities and in their majors by accident. This absence of personal integration constitutes a major source of student dissatisfaction. One respondent, now enrolled in a teacher education program, complained that her courses in chemistry were "very abstract and meaningless . . . (when) I like being and working with people." Another who left their first program declares that she is "now happy, taking pleasure from her courses and studying not just to get good grades but to learn to improve myself."

Aypay et al. also point out the absence of student dorms on campus, and what dorms were available were not under the control of the university but by a different ministry. The conclusion was that the housing needs of students were not at all integrated within the culture of the university. As one respondent said: "the campus dies when classes end." As in Turkey, family support or control plays an important part of the social integration of students. Students with more family support persist longer. On the other hand, families can direct students into courses of study of low interest and low commitment, adding to the dissatisfaction stimulated by the LYS and other institutional characteristics. Poor pedagogy, lack of a social integration, and choices of institution artificially forced by the placement exam are the main sources of problems. One dropout says: "I had great dreams when I learned I was going to college but . . . (Name of college) had become the place where those dreams had died."

The authors have six recommendations designed to improve the dropout problem in Turkey. They include:

- a revision in the process of college choice;
- a revision in the way university administrators and rectors are selected;
- a shift in pedagogy from recitation to active learning;
- the provision of orientation programs to provide students with more knowledge about the various opportunities within each institution;
- the provision of academic advising in secondary school; and
- the integration of campus housing within the life of the campus.

They conclude their article by referring to the need for competitiveness of Turkish higher education and the necessity for student integration to make that competitiveness feasible.

Universities in both Turkey and Jordan represent both public and private providers. The question arises as to whether the patterns of student dropout and repetition differ. Is it possible that students who make the decision to pay greater tuitions are more certain in their choices? Is it possible that tuitions actually generate greater system efficiency? This question is approached by Francis Atuahene in his article on *The Impact of "Tuition-paying" Policy on Retention and Graduation Rates at the University of Ghana*. Ghana is one of the many countries with a dual tuition policy. While higher education is publically provided and is largely free of private cost, state-provided scholarships are allocated to those with the highest scores on the university entrance examinations. Students with lower scores are charged tuition. Atuahene studies the differences in dropout and rates of repetition between the two categories of students within the same institution. The students attended the same classes, the same programs, and had similar living arrangements; the only difference was the terms of university costs.

Atuahene concludes that the institution of dual track tuitions has increased resources in higher education (today tuitions represent 28% of the university revenue) and expanded opportunity to attend higher education. However, fee-paying students have a higher propensity to drop out or repeat because of family poverty and the absence of financial support. But the lack of financial support is not the only problem identified. Other problems include the rigid mechanism of assigning students to particular programs. For example, medical school applicants who are not able to obtain a place in medical school are automatically assigned a major (usually Zoology) instead. In addition, fee paying students are allowed to choose whatever program they wish. This has the effect of allowing those with weaker academic preparation to choose the most selective programs. Atuahene concludes with a list of suggestions common as well to Jordan and Turkey: the initiation of advising programs; financial support for students from low-income families; relaxation of regulations restricting changing majors within institutions.

Is there a public policy which can ameliorate rates of non-completion? This is the question taken up by Bernard Longden in his article: *"Bearing Down" on Student Non-Completion: Implications and Consequences for English Higher Education*. After reviewing past watersheds in English higher education policy reform (the

Robbins and Dearing reports), the article describes a memorandum from the Minister of Education (Blunkett) in 2000 which called on the government to “bear down” on the rate of dropouts from university which are “linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited.”

This set into place a series of management reforms which included the annual publication of institutional efficiency, the initiation of a national survey of graduating students, and the placement of financial sanctions on institutions with high dropout rates. Consequently, the rate of non-completion dropped from 15.7% in 1996 to 11.9% in 2008; and the rate of failure to graduate dropped from 12.2% in 1965 to 5.3% in 2009. The question is what was done to affect these changes and what effect this has had on the system at large.

Longden’s answer includes the possibility that curriculum was made more simple; that universities had become more careful in selection; that the portfolio of subjects was altered to match expectations with experiences. In spite of the decline in dropouts, however, a range remains. Newer universities, older students and low income neighborhoods tend to have higher rates. In fact, Longden sees a future in which the system will again be divided into binary parts, one part consisting of older, established universities with high income well prepared students, another part consisting of newer universities with low income students from low income neighborhoods. The first subsector will be regularly rewarded for achieving low dropout rates; the latter subsector will be regularly sanctioned for having high dropout rates.

With so many problems accounting for dropout and repetition rates, how can one country’s performance be compared with others? This is the issue discussed in the article by Brian L. Heuser, Timothy A. Drake, and Taya L. Owens titled *Evaluating Cross-National Metrics of Tertiary Graduation Rates for OECD Countries: A Case for Increasing Methodological Congruence and Data Comparability*. Each OECD country calculates a completion rate in higher education, defined as the percentage of students who enroll and complete their program in higher education. But this may be based on a true cohort completion rate or a cross-section completion rate. The two are quite different, yet only 23 out of 36 countries provide data for both types of figures. Graduation rates range from as low as 20% (Slovenia) to 63% (Finland). In addition to the differences across countries there are substantial differences within countries. Females generally have higher graduation rates than males: in Japan they have a 15% higher graduation rate; in Iceland it is 41%; in Slovak Republic it is 39%; and in Finland it is 34%.

The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIE) has a difficult task of calculating comparable rates of higher education completion across countries because of missing data and the logistical complexities of insuring comparability. Further problems of comparability are encountered with different national policies toward exclusion. In some countries, only full-time students are counted. In some countries, transfer students are not counted. In the United States, about 32% of higher education students have transferred during their higher education experience. This may range from 25%

in universities to 42% in community colleges. According to one report, 63% of those who transferred eventually completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years. Accurately evaluating the dropout phenomena has become so complicated that Heuser et al. point to the requirements of Title I of the Higher Education Act, which calls for institutions to report three different figures: (i) the normal time of completion; (ii) completion at 150% of the normal time; and (iii) completion at 200% of the normal time. They also call for the United States to change the mechanisms for calculating figures on dropouts by incorporating transfer students into institutional rates of graduation and for the UIE to "devise new metrics" for graduation rates by reporting on students who transfer out and graduate as a cohort.

SUMMARY

This special issue may constitute an important step toward figuring out the nature of the "dropout problem" in higher education. That there is a problem is not in dispute. The question is whether the problem in one country is more serious than in other countries. Since statistical protocols and agreements differ, the question is how one might compare rates of non-completion across countries. In spite of the complexity of the statistical issues raised by Heuser, Drake, and Owens, from the articles on Turkey, Ghana, and Jordan certain conclusions seem clear. Examinations which place students into institutions and programs should be eliminated. Universities should have the right to autonomously select the students they want based on their own assessment of their interests and abilities. The article on England suggests that the higher education sector may soon experience differences in institutional mission as pertains in the United States, with lower end community and some 4-year teaching colleges emphasizing access over student process as their principal goal. Since missions differ, these institutions might be held accountable to different standards of excellence.

As to what can be done about student integration, state universities might adopt some characteristics from for-profit institutions. These might include:

- campuses close to public transportation and to low income neighborhoods where demand is high (Oseguera & Malagon, 2011);
- flexible and accelerated degree completion options, as well as classes on weekends and on-line (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001);
- support learners with extra academic assistance (Gonzalez, 2009; Smith, 2010);
- integrate admissions, financial assistance, and career advising (Bailey et al., 2001); and
- provide a welcome to non-traditional students—those who are older, working part or full time, commuters, and those from families with first-time enrollment (Bailey et al., 2001).

The conclusion from each of these articles and the recommendations is that student dropout and repetition rates, their causes, and methods of amelioration will be an important focus of policy for the foreseeable future.

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