

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.4: Access and Inequality in Higher Education

Guest: Jamil Salmi

Alex Usher (AU): *Jamil, good morning. Welcome to the show.*

Jamil Salmi (JS): Morning, Alex. Thanks for having me.

AU: *I want to start by talking about your most recent work for the UNESCO Higher Education Conference in Barcelona last year. It examined inequality and access to higher education across a wide number of low- and middle-income countries. It struck me as I was reading it that 15 years ago your name was synonymous with world class universities and research intensity, which was THE global issue in higher education at the time. Now you're working on accessibility. Is that an indication that the emphasis of the global debate around higher education is shifting and if so, how's that shift going to play out over the next few years do you think?*

JS: I don't know if it's the shift in the global high educational thinking or if it's my own evolution. We started with the global rankings becoming hot in the early 2000s where countries and institutions were getting excited. I'm not the one who coined this term of "world class university" but increasingly countries sought to understand that. I was involved in some work in Malaysia, for example, to try to find and determine the characteristics of what would be called world-class universities and understanding the path to become a world-class university. But over the years, I think many people have started to realize that a narrow focus on rankings was very dangerous because the universities would have their positions in the ranking as their main goal instead of focusing on their mission. So more recently, I've been working at what is called the Beyond Thinking about Beyond Academic Excellence and this is linked to the world we live in today: the world of fake news and conspiracy theories and realizing that the original mission of universities was to look at the truth as scientific evidence. The critical thinking was very important. Another dimension that we shouldn't forget is ethics. With all crises, graduates from prestigious institutions becoming political corrupt politicians, et cetera. So, the ethics we have to remind ourselves that this is a fundamental mission. And then when we think about all the threats our planet is under: hunger, poverty, inequality, and of course climate change. So reminding ourselves of the social commitment mission. Then of course, last but not least, equity and inclusion. You know, there is this bias assumption that a world class university has to be an elite institution, but that's not necessary. Perhaps, I'll have time to come back to this issue later on.

AU: *Great. Well, your report is about inclusion and inequality. But inequality is a very big multi-dimensional concept. I was surprised by the number of dimensions for which you managed to get some data. But can you tell us a little bit about the different dimensions of inequality that you were trying to investigate? And also, how easy was it to measure these different dimensions in across national context given the wide variety of different national measuring sticks for these concepts?*

JS: Thanks for this question that I wish I had more time to respond because it's very complex but I'll try to summarize. I think first is to understand the determinants - and it's a time sequence because what we see when we get to higher education is just the end of a long journey. Bruce Chapman, whom we both know as the father of the income contingent loan system in Australia used to say half-jokingly, but half seriously "if you want to position yourself well for your future you have to choose your parents carefully" and that's where it starts. You have wealthy families where you have lot of cultural capital,

and that will determine already how well you are able to learn when you get to primary and secondary. So, what happens in primary and secondary education or what doesn't happen for some people, will determine the pipeline of incoming students reaching higher education. Then when we look at the barriers, there are fundamentally two types of barriers. First, Financial. Too often we focus on that. You have to pay fee, so people who from low income groups are disadvantaged and then you have opportunity costs, et cetera. You have written a lot about these issues, Alex. Then you have what I call the non-monetary dimensions. I've already mentioned cultural capital, but academic preparation, motivation, information, these are elements that also determine the probability of entry into education. Then you have the dimension of access, but the dimension of success. Many students enter, and then especially in the open access systems, like in Argentina or in France, half of them will never graduate. A new dimension I've been looking at is what happens when you graduate? So you could have people with the same degree, but because of their individual characteristics, being white or black, being a man or woman, their labor market outcomes will be different. Then to answer your question about measurement, that's a big challenge because it's very unequal. Even in terms of a availability of data, a growing number of countries have household surveys which you can look at enrollment rates by income groups. That's interesting sometimes by gender or by urban/rural divide. But one of the big challenges is that in some countries, for philosophical reasons, or because the constitution said that you cannot discriminate, you are prohibited from asking questions about some dimensions. You know, in the US, you tick your ethnicity, et cetera. But in France or in Germany, it's not done. And then there is this assumption that because we are universal democracy, there are no dimensions of discrimination, but we know that they exist and they are very acute. So the data is really a challenge in when you work on inequality.

AU: *Yeah. Let's delve into the dimension that I think most people think of when they think of inequality and access, and that's inequality by income or family income or wealth. I wasn't particularly shocked when I saw the overall participation gaps by income in your study, but I was kind of surprised by the differences between countries. Some countries have quite small gaps and others very large ones. So, could you tell us a little bit about your overall findings here?*

JS: Access in higher education by income very often reflects inequality of income within society. So overall, I think it's a fair generalization to say that Latin America is terrible. Africa also, and then countries like the US or even the UK are also in very bad shape. Countries that are doing better would be the Nordic countries or some Asian countries like South Korea. If you take the Nordic countries, these are very egalitarian countries, the tax system is also very progressive, so they tend to do much better than other parts of the world.

AU: *I want to read you something that you wrote in the report. "It's noteworthy to observe that Brazil, which offers free higher education in its public universities, is much more unequal than Chile, where until a few years ago, students paid high tuition fees. In the former case, public universities enroll a high proportion of students from rich families who have studied in private high schools and are better prepared to take the competitive standardized entrance examination. In Chile, a comprehensive student aid system helped partially overcome the financial barriers based by academically qualified low-income students". This point that with respect to financial accessibility: it's the financial aid that matters and not the tuition fees. It seems obvious to me, and yet it never seems to be the politically popular choice, even in Chile, as we found out about a decade ago. Why is that, do you think? Why don't governments accept that logic?*

JS: Yeah, it's ironic and sometimes sad that governments would not be analytical and think about these things. You, Alex, have always made this point, which I think very important, that what matters is the net cost to students, not the sticker cost. Yet, that's not what's happening. And as you were remarking when we think about Brazil, but many other countries, we see the poor subsidizing the rich. If you think about Australia, which is hailed as one of the system with the best funding approach with their income contingent loan, which is quite good in terms of equity and efficiency. But, if we look at the big picture, we realize that international students who pay much higher fees are subsidizing the domestic students. So it's this kind of analysis people are not doing, or if they are available, people don't think about it. We see about changes in countries like Chile or in South Africa, these were driven by student protests. For students, free higher education is an easy slogan and it's very difficult for governments to go against this trend. I remember, some work I think that you did, Alex, in western Europe looking at a few countries that have had introduced student fees like some German states and had to go back to. It was not popular, even though it made sense. But, when you talk to many university presidents in these countries, which have free or very low tuition fees individually, they will tell you that yes, they need to have some degree of cost recovery as we see in the Netherlands, or even in in Switzerland. But the same university presidents will never go out in public and say that there should be some degree of cost sharing for students from the richer families, because it's really totally politically unacceptable.

AU: Jamil, I want to move away from incoming inequality for a second because you also measured differences with respect to sex, ethnicity, and indigeneity. I thought it was interesting some of the statistics you had there. Again, you've got a variety of outcomes here across nations. some look really interesting. Chile again, I thought was the numbers are very positive on, on indigenous participation. While in other countries you have very substantial gaps. What's the pattern here?

JS: I think it's linked to national policies about the past and recognizing the past. New Zealand I would say is the world leader and recognizing that the Māori population has been treated very poorly and are trying to make amends for that and build that into their higher education policy. Australia too to larger extent. I think I mean, you know, Canada much better than me, but it seems to me that it's becoming a part of the national debate. Whereas south of the border, the US, there is a total rejection. In fact we are going backward, trying to erase any, or prohibit any, discussions of this dimension. So, if a country is aware, then they start investigating, they have data, and they put in place policies to counter and improve the situation. But I think I'm much more optimistic in terms of gender, at least for enrollment, because with the exception of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa in fact, we have now majority of girls in most high education system. Where we still have problems is the enrollment in STEM programs, and proportion of senior academics and university leaders. You have the entire system in in Romania or in South Latin American countries where you would not have one single female university president. So, it's a question of alignment between national policies and resources put in place. Austria, for example, has a dimension of gender bias in favor of girls in their funding formula. Australia has grants to support Indigenous students so that universities are really enticed to do something around that. I would contrast that with India that has very good mandatory policies to promote gender equality, to promote access for Indigenous students, but there is no funding. So it's very difficult for institutions to make progress with a lack of resources.

AU: Okay. So, one thing that nagged at me as I was reading your work was how seriously very poor developing countries should take the issue of inequality. It seems to me that it's much harder to get both the financial and academic barriers under control in poor countries. Yet these countries need educated people to make that jump in development. How would you talk to someone in Tanzania or Mozambique

about this trade off? If they just say, "look, we just want as many students as we can get because the country needs them. We shouldn't mess around. We shouldn't worry too much or worry about spending too much money on inequality stuff." How would you talk to them about that trade off?

JS: Well, you know, the first trade off you were talking about is resources. Yes, these countries are poor, yet many of them are buying tanks, and fighter jets, and spending so much money on their military and much less on education. Universal education at the basic level is so important from the social justice point of view. You cannot talk about democracy without that. And also to avoid waste of talent. When you have so many young people who do not finish primary school or high school or could not access higher education, how many talented people with high potential are being left behind? As you rightly said, increasingly we talk about knowledge economy, but we know that in our technology driven growth, it's all about the brains and minds. When you look at South Korea, for example, that was a part of their successes. They invested in basic education, then they grew secondary education, charging fees for rich students. Look what where they are today.

AU: You also include some thoughts in your report about how covid has affected higher education. I've been here in Canada, those effects were mostly deleterious, although I think particularly students with disabilities might argue that covid education was better for them than it was for some other people. Access was a little bit easier. What are your findings there? Is the covid phenomena a long-term issue for higher education, are we going to be dealing with the effects for a long time? Or are we seeing recovery and it'll be done as an issue in a year or two?

JS: Well certainly what we've experienced between the three years of Covid so far, is that it has revealed the depth and impact of disparities in higher education and amplified them in a way across countries, within countries, across high education institutions, within single countries amongst students. As a result, we've seen learning loss and we see this serious issue of mental health. Institutions are now realizing that the wellbeing of their student and sometime even academics and administrators needs to have much more priority. I know many people want to say "okay, let's forget. it's finished. It's over. Let's go back to our old ways and the old normal." But I don't think the old normal exists anymore. And I think that's on the positive side. You were mentioning students with disability and I believe that. There have been some very interesting experiences and innovations about delivery of teaching and modality of learning. I think this is an opportunity for many institutions to rethink and their education model and their business model. We've seen the weakness and the fragility of many systems and many institutions. Also to think in terms of long-term resilience. How many institutions were ready for this huge, rapid, and big shift from on-campus teaching to online learning? I know very few institutions, whether in rich countries or in the developing world, where this kind of "what if" mindset was there. But when you think about it, many countries and many institutions operate in complex systems. We have climate catastrophes, we have war, we have civil unrest, we have economic crisis. There was not this kind of thinking about the impact of these crisis. It was not part of the strategic planning process or having business continuity plans. There is a lot to rethink as a result of the pandemic as the universities move forward.

AU: Interesting. A final question: when you were working on research excellence schemes 10-12 years ago, I remember you telling me that one of the underappreciated effects of these research-based rankings was to spur an enormous amount of spending by governments who were suddenly conscious of their relative rating in research. I guess my question is, is there any way that a data-driven effort, not necessarily rankings, but a data-driven effort could ever could ever shame China, or the European Union,

or the United States in the spending lots of money to improve their standings on equity or inequality? I'm thinking now because I know the C H E is trying to put social inclusion indicators in the U multi-rankings. Is there any way we could use data to spur competition on that level?

JS: Whether we can use data, I do believe yes, it would be very useful. In fact, there is now a ranking on economic mobility in the US, and you mentioned new multi ranks efforts. But my question is, is there an appetite? Are institutions or countries interested in being shamed or interested in putting that high on the agenda? And I'm not too optimistic. And in fact, after yesterday's announcement in Florida that equity and inclusion, we're now seen as no-no's knows, or as bad things; and when you think about the fact that affirmative action might be totally erased from the political map in the US whenever the Supreme Court makes a decision. I see countries going backward. I think it should be in the national agenda, but having the data is not enough. We need pressure groups to shame institutions. There are examples, if you compare Berkeley and Harvard in the US and look at the proportion of Pell grant recipients, people who get federal scholarships because they come from low-income families, Berkeley has demonstrated clearly that you can be an elite university and a much more inclusive university than most Ivy League institutions.

AU: Jamil, it's been a pleasure having you with us today. Thank you very much.

JS: My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

AU: It remains for me to thank the show's excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you, the listener for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@higheredstrategy.com