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Contextualizing student affairs and services in global higher education

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Abstract

This article outlines major developments in higher education policies in terms of massification, diversification and stratification, marketization, and globalization. Although these developments are global, their local instantiations create a diverse backdrop for student affairs and services. By giving examples from different contexts, we illustrate the various effects that the enlargement of higher education systems, their diversification, pressures to marketize, and increased global mobility have on the provision of student services and access to them. Through these windows, we demonstrate how student services have developed in different contexts and what implications this has on student access to those services. We conclude the article by presenting future topics for student services research and policy.

INTRODUCTION

The various global contexts of higher education have a significant influence on the form and function of student services, covering a range from a comprehensive offering to their almost complete absence. While these contexts vary by country, we can still identify some global trends in higher education. In this article, we discuss student services and the higher education context in terms of massification, diversification and stratification, marketization, and globalization—phenomena that inevitably overlap. We first argue that higher education systems are diverse, and we, therefore, need to observe tensions between global and local dynamics. We then illustrate the main developments in the role of students in higher education by giving examples, particularly from the European, South American, and African continents as they reflect both local and global developments. We conclude by presenting pressing topics for student services research and policy in the future.

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Massification, diversification and stratification, marketization, and globalization of higher education

The challenge of summarizing complex higher education systems and developments in a few pages has compelled us to center on four main trends that are viewed both as points of convergence and divergence: massification, diversification and stratification, marketization, and globalization. These trends dialogue with the very experience of the student throughout higher education and the way higher education institutions (HEI) deliver education, services, and support to their students. Within these trends, we also draw attention to various inequalities in student services.

Massification

The global student enrollment in tertiary education has increased significantly since the Second World War. This development has often been theorized in terms of Martin Trow's (1974) classic, although arbitrary, characterization of higher education systems as elite (less than 15% of the age cohort entering higher education), mass (15%–50%) and universal (over 50%).

Teichler (1998) indicated already in the late 1990s that the growth of student participation impacts several dimensions of higher education, such as the labor market, governmental policies, staff development, and the internal dynamics of the main academic functions such as teaching, research, and service. The trend toward mass higher education systems has also generated discussions about equity, the quality of provision, student employability, and the perception and experience of new strata of students participating in higher education (Tight et al., 2019).

In 1990, tertiary enrollment worldwide was about 13.6%; in the 2000s, about 19%; in 2010, 29.4%; and in 2020, about 40%. This global growth can, however, hide differences and disparities between and within regions. To illustrate in Figure 1, we present data on enrollment according to global regions (World Bank, 2022).

Enrollment rates in tertiary education have grown across all regions, although at different speeds. Europe and Central Asia, the European Union, and North America have shown higher enrollment rates, while Middle East & North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa have lower rates. Latin America and the Caribbean are found in the middle ground.

Such data are obviously limited and several demographics (for instance, gender, race, income, age) remain invisible. In post-World War II Europe, higher education systems were expanded to accommodate a larger share of eligible students; in one example, Finland, this was achieved by establishing new education institutions regionally (Välilmaa et al., 2019). In many African countries, more students are attending institutions that were originally built for far fewer students. An institution with resources for 30,000 students enrolling 60,000 students from a more varied background than before will create pressures on available facilities and workforce, and eventually also student services (Darvas et al., 2017).

Massification creates new challenges on how to design student services that meet the diverse demographics, as similar staff diversity overseeing the services would be required. In an elite system of higher education, a personal tutor (with a similar background as the student) was often deemed sufficient and academic staff have usually been willing to accept the relatively narrow range of responsibilities implied in this role (Stephen et al., 2008; Yale et al., 2019). A larger and more diverse population, however, has presented HEIs with a more diverse set of needs. How do student affairs professionals and structures

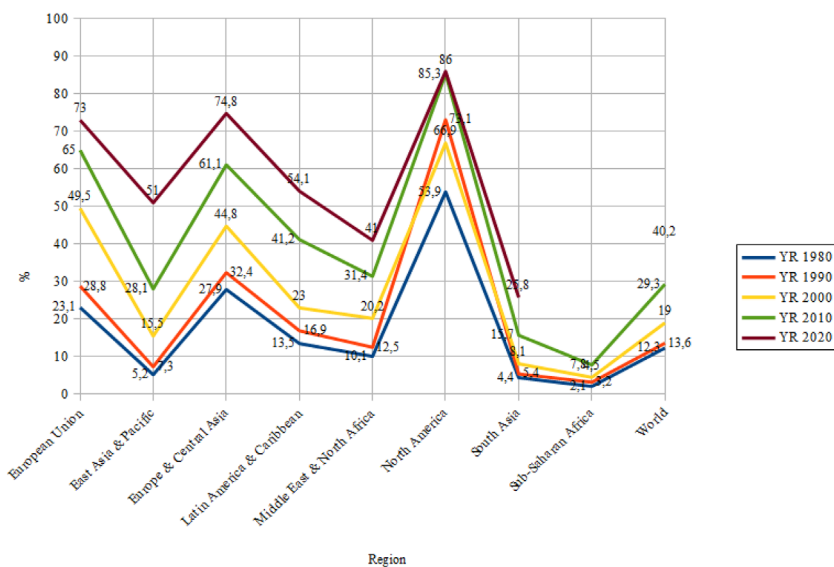


FIGURE 1 Enrollment on tertiary education (% gross) by region. *Source:* World Bank et al., 2022. Gross enrollment ratio is the ratio of total enrollment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown.

within the institutions work to engage these diverse student needs, make institutional environments more accommodating to student needs as a basis for quality learning, and prepare students adequately for the world outside the institutions?

Diversification and stratification

The complexity of massification is accentuated by other trends. Cantwell and Marginson (2018) drew attention to the phenomenon of horizontal and vertical stratification. Horizontal stratification relates to the growth of multi-discipline and multi-function research universities (Antonowicz et al., 2018), including factors such as disciplinary diversification, the size of universities, administrative and organizational complexification, and the expansion of the range of interactions between university and society (Frank & Meyer, 2007; Krücken et al., 2020). Vertical stratification, on the other hand, is related to the establishment of vertical differentiation among HEIs and the development of hierarchies in higher education.

Cantwell and Marginson (2018) speak of differentiation between elite institutions and mass institutions (as absorbing mass demand), leading to intensifying competition and interconnected hierarchies. Following Smith and Grodsky (2020), stratification is related to the “hierarchy of higher education experiences,” which is connected to stratification of groups based on socioeconomic, class, race, and gender factors, among others. In other words, vertical stratification can be linked to inequality of access in higher education.

In short, institutional differentiation of higher education systems creates hierarchies of value and different forms of competition that also affect students. This is linked to issues of higher education funding, including debates about tuition fees that have emerged in times of neoliberal austerity and the marketization of higher education (Sanchez-Serra & Marconi, 2018).

“One of the biggest challenges currently on the Latin American landscape is to promote the inclusion of students” from historically excluded groups, such as disadvantaged socioeconomic sectors, “Afrodescendants, and indigenous people” (Knobel et al., 2015, p. 9). Affirmative action policies stand out, also challenging student retention since many of these students depend on financial support and housing. In an African example, the introduction of fee-paying streams in public universities has introduced new forms of stratification among students (Lebeau & Oanda, 2020). This has undermined solidarity among students and their capacity to negotiate for better services. To conclude, the challenge of student services within diversifying higher education systems is to promote equality and inclusion while maintaining or improving quality.

Globalization and global mobility

Diversification of higher education is also partly a result of globalization. Internationalization has often, quite idealistically, been portrayed as cooperation among countries and is largely operationalized as mobility. However, mobility is becoming more diverse and fluid (Robertson et al., 2019), and focusing on intentional student mobility ignores the effects of forced migration and other kinds of mobility that are not primarily fueled by study (Robertson et al., 2019; Waters & Brooks, 2021). Very rarely are all mobile students equal in these developments, as student flows are diverse geographically, socio-economically, racially, ethnically, and linguistically (Waters & Brooks, 2021). Internationalization has never been an equal and geopolitically innocent activity (Gürüz et al., 2011).

The recent global developments, such as protectionist migration politics, changes in migration flows due to climate change and military conflicts, and the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions (Brøgger et al., 2021; Rhoades et al., 2017) have influenced internationalization. From the perspective of student affairs, the diversification of mobile students and their needs provides a challenge. Again, regional differences apply. An emerging trend in several African institutions implies that institutions and programs that attract a few international students are better resourced; additionally, the quality of student services for international students is often better compared to local students.

Marketization

We conclude this section by discussing the links between marketization and student affairs. Demands for a de-bureaucratization of universities emerged in Western contexts in the late 1970s, linked with an increasing intervention of market ideologies in universities. Since then, an entrepreneurial (Montesinos et al., 2008) ethos started to be naturalized in higher education, leading to a goal of commodification of higher education. This development has coincided with the introduction of New Public Management practices that have called for deregulation of decision-making. At the same time, however, the governmental grip on public services, based on self-governing rather than bureaucratic regulation, has tightened (Broucker & De Wit, 2015).

In Latin America, marketization is connected to policies (enhanced by multilateral organizations, notably the World Bank) reducing public investment in higher education, de-bureaucratization, and privatization of the sector (Brunner & Labraña, 2020; Serafim et al., 2011). Public universities have been pressured to incorporate private management

mechanisms, considered to be more efficient and justified with a need to catch up with the developed countries in the competitive “knowledge economy.”

Across Africa, in turn, marketization trends have doubled student enrollments to spaces that were meant for fewer students, reduced funding to student services, and led university administrators to engage student leadership as a strategy to contain students’ open expression of dissatisfaction with deteriorating welfare conditions (Deutschmann et al., 2022; Murage et al., 2019).

The ethos of commercialization is also connected to the social, political, cultural, and economic value of higher education, seen either as a public good or a commodity (Gupta et al., 2018). Students are understood as consumers, both in fee-charging and non-fee-charging systems (Tomlinson et al., 2016). The consumer metaphor has implications also for the organization of student services.

Students and the higher education context

We move next to discussing the relationship between students, universities, and the state.

Role of the state

The role of the state in the governance and control of HEIs, and consequently of students, varies enormously from country to country. In the liberal democracies of Western Europe and the United States (US), a tradition of autonomy is often enshrined in statutes and gives HEIs significant freedoms. This model extends to countries that are also part of that tradition because they were colonies or were at some period of their history under the hegemonic influence of one of the liberal democracies. In these jurisdictions, the HEI is the prime actor when it comes to matters of student services, although the policies can be influenced by the state.

In liberal democracies, the government has two major levers of influence which are connected. The first of these is direct: the provision of finance to the universities. By funding some activities and not others, the government can exert strong pressure on the direction of the institutions. The more indirect influence takes place through the nature and extent of the financial support, in particular the extent to which the model includes tuition fees.

In the African continent, the post-1990 period witnessed a decreased role of the state in governance, including student governance and welfare. Student accommodation and health services were privatized in some countries as institutions delinked accommodation and health from tuition. This privatization often divided students based on their socio-economic background. Health services have also been delinked from the institutions and given to private insurance, making it difficult for students who struggle with tuition fees and living expenses to cater for their health needs.

In Latin America, in turn, the governance of higher education varies between countries, although all share a history under colonial rule and, more recently, have undergone market-oriented reforms since the 1980s (Jordaña et al., 2021). In general, systems have been marked by growth of for-profit HEIs and pressures for the reduction of public funding, requiring states to reform or create instruments for the evaluation, regulation, and quality assurance of the sector. At the same time, public universities tend to observe high autonomy from the government (Bernasconi & Celis, 2017).

State-student relationship and student fees

The charging of fees is one example of a state-university-student relationship that has a significant effect on the provision of student services, shifting the student–university relationship into a consumer relationship (see above) from an earlier community membership ideal. For instance, in England, universities can set their own fees up to a maximum set by the government, setting up a restricted market. This is complemented by government institutions collecting annual student satisfaction and engagement data. A national Quality Assurance system makes public judgments about the academic quality of each institution. All these efforts are driven by the desire to create an informed student consumer. The link to student services in this model is easy to see. There is an emphasis on educational and personal-social support to prevent student dropout and services which provide support for students in key areas like academic development, personal counseling, or support for students with specific learning difficulties.

In a Latin American example, Brazil has a large higher education system with a wide variety of private institutions (70% of the enrollments, most of them for-profit), whereas the public sector is made up of universities (high degree of autonomy) and HEIs that conduct most of the research. There has been an ongoing public discussion since the 1990s neoliberal turn in Brazil about whether public HEIs should charge tuition fees. The academic community and pro-public education movements have resisted pressures to implement fees, arguing that charging tuition fees is a gateway to privatization and a way of establishing public higher education as a product and not a right.

Over the last 15 years, HEIs in Brazil have been implementing strong social inclusion policies, for example, affirmative actions for low-income students, people of African descent, or indigenous people. In this sense, the debate on student services is strongly linked to offering conditions for students to complete the degree and make the most of their experiences at university. In the different Chilean context, where neoliberal tendencies have been strong since the Pinochet dictatorship, the student protests since 2011 have sought to change the market logic, including charging tuition fees in public HEIs.

Tuition and other fees (supplies, transport, room, and board, among others) have also been argued as having an empowering effect on students, who can legitimately act as consumers purchasing a service, complain about the quality of the service, and demand value for money. In most liberal democracies, students have organized as student unions, recognized by the HEIs, and working on behalf of student interests. The character and organization of these bodies vary widely. In England, all students are automatically enrolled in the student union, although they can opt-out (few use this option). The individual unions are democratic bodies whose officers are elected annually by the student body, and who employ professional staff to run the union and its services. The unions have specified roles that shadow key university services like welfare, recreation (including sport), and teaching, and they have voting representation on the major bodies which govern the HEI.

Role of students in higher education

The history of universities tends to be told as a Western European one, starting with the founding of the universities of Bologna in 1088 and Paris in 1119. However, the establishment of universities goes back to the fifth-century establishment of the Buddhist center in India, the Moroccan University of Al Quaraouiyine in 859, and The Academy of Islam Al Azhar in Cairo in 970 (Gubara et al., 2014).

Of the oldest European universities, Bologna and Paris provide two rather different historical models from the point of view of the role of students. Bologna was run by and for the students who wished to enter the service of the state and hired tutors for that purpose. Paris, in contrast, developed a guild model of master and apprentice for its students, who were also interested in serving the state and church (Välilmaa et al., 2019).

In the present day, a teacher-dominated model, often marked by a didactic model of teaching, is also marked by a low emphasis on wider student services. France might be seen as an example of such a model, as are some Sub-Saharan countries where the teacher-dominated model has privileged the interests of the colonial order and remained ambivalent to the needs of students and their communities. Within East Africa, the need for student support services during the colonial period was articulated in terms of the white missionaries' reservations that African students lacked the moral resilience to successfully endure the greater freedom of a university, and the colonial administrators' intent on limiting student engagement in the emerging nationalist politics (Mills et al., 2006; Sicherman et al., 2005). The nature of student services that emerged in these conditions was framed to satisfy these concerns rather than advance the educational needs of students (Sicherman et al., 2005). This system has been maintained to date in several universities across the African continent, suppressing students' concerns on behalf of university administrators who view student passivity as the definition of a good student (Oanda et al., 2020).

Where the emphasis is more on empowering the students as co-partners in the university, the institutions are more likely to be marked by a social constructivist model of teaching and by examples of students and academic staff cooperating on curriculum design and delivery (Trowler et al., 2015).

Metropolitans and locals

Another factor influencing the provision of services is the extent to which individual students are either inclined to choose their local HEI or an HEI irrespective of location. If students stay in their locality, they are normally able to access their familiar social services, including recreational, medical, and welfare services. Consequently, there is less pressure on an HEI to provide these services themselves. By contrast, students choosing a university further away from home will be cut off from their municipal support services. Consequently, there will be more pressure on HEIs attracting many non-local students to provide such services. The need for services is accentuated with overseas students who need to cope with challenges extending the regular health and welfare services.

Full service and minimalist universities

We argued above that the massification of higher education has led to the expansion and development of student services within HEIs. However, many countries have been unable to afford the cost of this expansion, while finding the expansion itself beneficial. One solution chosen by some countries is to encourage the provision by private universities who often operate on a for profit basis. This model operates in much of Eastern Europe and South America, and it is also part of the higher education systems of the US and the United Kingdom (UK). Most offer a limited range of low-cost subjects like business, accountancy and law, and their focus is almost entirely on the teaching function of higher education. These minimalist HEIs provide very few student services other than those deemed strictly necessary to fulfill their license and accreditation conditions.

Within the African continent, recent privatizations of universities have deepened student exclusion in student services, and the desire to use student services as a means of controlling instead of developing students has become widespread (Munyae et al., 2017; Oanda et al., 2020). Even within South Africa, despite the developed nature of student services in the universities, recent studies argue that student affairs are wedged between students and management (Bawa et al., 2020).

The professionalization of student services

The marketization of higher education has also led to a significant increase in the ratio of professional support staff to students in many countries. In some contexts, it has influenced the operation of student unions, including changes in the relationships between the universities and student unions, leading also into professionalization of student union representatives and staff.

Looking at an African example, the status of student services in institutional administrative and academic structures varies widely. The degree of professionalization is generally low, services underfunded, and students' voices largely missing (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2012; Deutschmann et al., 2022). Other than in South Africa, student services in HEIs across the continent are under academics who serve as deans of students, with no academic or professional background in student affairs (Mwalutambi & Shen, 2021). Because student service departments are largely not professionalized, important data related to, for instance, the students' experiences or their adjustment to university life is rarely available. Research on student activism exists but as a distraction to orderly campus life, rather than as part of the student's academic progression. With the experience of COVID-19, higher education institutions may need to explore globally how digital transformations can scale up and enrich student services. The second consideration should be the professionalization of the use of technology to offer student services.

Student mental health services

One dramatic change for student services in many parts of the Global North is the rise in demand for mental health services. An English study reports a tenfold increase in student mental ill-health since 2010 (Hubble & Bolton, 2020). It is unlikely that there is a single cause for this increase. For many students, this is their first move out of their family home and away from their friends and familiar local environment. At university, they must adjust to a context and a way of living that challenges them in many ways, both socially and academically. Many are also faced with the prospect of having to combine part-time work with study to survive. These pressures can be exacerbated for international and non-traditional students, who may be confronted with different expectations and experiences.

A systematic review of studies across twelve Sub-Saharan African countries undertaken in the context of COVID-19 showed high rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students (Tiwa et al., 2021), with other studies suggesting widening socio-economic inequalities tending to exacerbate mental health issues, with little or no institutional support systems (Bantjes et al., 2020).

It is unlikely that the factors outlined above, even during a global pandemic or climate crisis, could alone account for the dramatic rise in students reported mental health problems. Some other societal changes may yield additional insights. The first

of these relates to the “relativist approach” (Collins et al., 1981, p. 3) that may provide explanations to world events and phenomena that are not always based on material but socially constructed arguments. This may have been linked to the dramatic rise of social media, which provide reinforcing echo chambers of group views of the world.

Meanwhile, the material world itself presents students with an uncertain future. The world of traditional careers is being replaced by a turbulent new world of precarious jobs. Debates about climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and government responses to them illustrate the dilemmas that research-based arguments face. Many universities find this a difficult territory, as their established role in the production of knowledge has been challenged.

Some universities have adopted student centered strategies that seem likely to ameliorate this gloomy picture: active and participatory pedagogies, ensuring students' contact with each other and learning in demographically diverse groups, and encouraging and valuing respectful debate are some strategies available. Diversity in extracurricular activities, in sports, and in arts can also be important in promoting student wellbeing. Nevertheless, the support which student services can offer to individuals with mental health issues remains crucial.

Marketization, digitalization, and the future of student services

Linked to the marketization trends discussed above, a privatized sector of digital services has emerged, including e-learning infrastructures and digital architectures to support recruitment, training, finance, and student systems. Major companies in this field typically rent rather than sell their services and software to HEIs. These developments, driven partly by the underfunding of higher education, are part of a wider trend for sub-contracting services to private providers. Until recently, this tendency has focused on functions like cleaning, catering, and security. However, sub-contracting has spread to the provision of accommodation and now to the very heart of the university itself: teaching and learning.

The question then is: what will be the fate of student services in marketized and digitized higher education? Many student services are currently delivered by professionals such as health workers, and depend on face-to-face interchanges, which could be thought difficult to digitize and thus potentially offer student services some protection. However, this does not seem to have protected the role of university teachers.

Although a move to mass systems of higher education saw more students benefiting from a transformative education, with a wide range of support available, the mass model is also expensive, and cheaper alternatives with less services available have emerged. Unless explicit equity action is taken, it is possible that the full-service university complete with face-to-face teaching and an array of student services will in practice be available only to an elite minority in most societies.

Research agenda

We have examined the main global trends in higher education from the perspective of the provision of student services in several regions of the world and attempted to show how different social, political, and economic forces have shaped these services. In this final section, we take a brief look at some future directions.

To pinpoint some gaps in the current research, we conducted a basic scientometric analysis, based on a Web of Science database search on “student services” and “higher

education” (March 3, 2022; first 400 papers by relevance). This type of analysis is very limited analytically but can be helpful in teasing out a broader picture of the research agenda currently dominating student services in higher education.

An author’s key-words analysis (counting keywords with two or more occurrences) shows that the current literature on student services is clustered around the discussion of “service satisfaction” and “service quality,” themes very much in line with individualization and customerization of student life as discussed above. However, a diverse range of other topics related to international students, student supports, and disability also appear. One of the smaller clusters looks at issues such as equity, mental health, engagement, and service learning. Most of the papers in the analysis came from the Anglophone and European worlds. China and South Korea dominate Asian research, and Brazil is the Latin American context. Africa is underrepresented and hardly appears in the data.

It seems that questions of inclusion and diversity in student affairs should be paid more attention to. How do we support research from understudied geographical contexts? How can the needs of diverse demographics of students, such as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, disabled students, or the LGBTI+ community be better served? How can we overcome barriers to internationalization, equality, and engagement in student services? The higher education trends of privatization and commercialization potentially widen inequalities and lead to the deterioration of student services in most institutions, while the broadest variety of services may be available only to an elite minority. This challenges the development of professionalization and equitable offer of student services globally, regionally, and nationally.

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