

## **PROPOSAL FOR SRHE CONFERENCE 10-12 DECEMBER 2014**

### **The social implications of high participation higher education systems**

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Over the last century, the expansion of the reach of higher education has been a crucial social and economic tendency across the world, affecting all dimensions of higher education and society. Though enrollment rates vary, in many nations more than 60 per cent of the school leaver age cohort now participates in higher education, the majority of these at degree level. Martin Trow tagged 50 per cent participation as 'universal' in his seminal 1973 essay on the transition from elite to mass to universal higher education. High participation countries have varying political, economic and educational configurations. The group includes advanced market oriented systems such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan and Korea; socially inclusive and egalitarian countries in Nordic Europe; and transitional Post-Socialist nations in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, where there has been major recent expansion of participation.

Trow's essay suggested that that the shift from elite to mass to universal participation reflected not only quantitative shifts in the share of the age cohort in higher education, but also qualitative changes in the nature and role of higher education. Higher education has moved from simply reproducing part of the social elite, to training a broad range of professionals, to adaptation of the wider population to rapid social and technological change. However, this transition does not eliminate the previous roles of institutions. Expansion is associated with the emergence of HEIs with diverse roles and missions, and institutional differentiation. Trow saw universal access as an expansion of social mobility, as populations long under-represented obtained 'alternative opportunities' to access higher education. Other scholars point to the continuing dominance of elite institutions and scarcity of valuable positional goods, to maintained inequalities, to the long historical role of institutional hierarchies in some countries, and to the effects of growing stratification in systems organized on the basis of market competition.

The experience of high participation varies by system. While the Nordic systems are comparatively egalitarian, with lesser differences between institutions in positional value, opportunities are more stratified in the US, UK, Japan and Russia. In all systems the social question is not only 'access?', it is 'access to what?' The mechanisms of expansion also vary from country to country. The social drivers of participation—particularly the desire of middle class families for opportunities for their children—seem more consistent and coherent than economic drivers such increased need for high-skill graduates. Government is a central player but does it drive expansion or facilitate it? In some cases public funding is key (e.g. Canada), in other cases universalization is encouraged by student tuition (Russia) or largely carried by private HEIs (Korea, Japan).

While these trends and developments play out differently by country it is likely that there are also common dynamics. There is much to be gained by comparative and shared study, in which scholars from different systems meld experiences of the dynamics of high participation higher education, and identify

the general tendencies and lessons. The overarching question is: 'What are the implications of a society with universal participation in higher education?' Amongst the specific questions are:

- ◆ What are the social, economic and political drivers of universal systems?
- ◆ What are the observable implications of high participation systems of higher education for the economy and the labour markets (augmented human capital? 'over-education'? both?) For society? For individuals? For educational institutions, organizations, practices, and cultures?
- ◆ What happens to value and value creation in universal higher education systems—value as in labour market returns to degrees, and value as in social status and opportunity (positional value)? How is value measured, and does the production of value in higher education change in the process of massification and the creation of universal systems?
- ◆ Do the political and social compacts entailed in higher education change as high participation systems become established? Does the role of government increase or diminish? How are the interests of 'society' expressed? Do other actors become more significant?
- ◆ What are the implications of high participation systems for the full-time and part-time student mix? For age participation, gender balance, and for inclusion of lower socio-economic status (SES) groups?
- ◆ Has universal higher education led to enhanced social mobility? What are the barriers to equalization of opportunity? Does institutional stratification increase in universal systems? Is stratification inevitable?
- ◆ What happens to the leading institutions as systems approach universal participation? Is it inevitable that academically elite institutions like top research universities will be dominated by social elites? Can elite universities flourish alongside democratized social mobility?
- ◆ Does online learning change the economic, social and individual meanings of participation?
- ◆ What to the universal participation countries have in common, and what factors govern the differences between them?

In September 2013 a group of leading scholars of higher education from nine different countries (Russia, Poland, Norway, Finland, Ireland, Japan, Canada, USA, UK) met at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, to establish an combined inquiry into these questions, to be pursued on the basis of scholarship and discussion rather than new empirical research. It was decided to prepare papers on relevant themes—rather than country studies—to be written in groups. These are being prepared during 2014. There is no specific project funding and participants are working with their own resources. There has been close discussion between project members. The themes of the papers are:

1. What is high participation, for societies, systems, students?
2. Comparative data on high participation
3. Forms of institutional and system diversity and differing models and shapes of high participation system
4. High participation systems and social equity
5. Vertical stratification, segmentation and competition
6. Policy, governance, consumers, stakeholders, institutions

7. Drivers of participation, including demographic, social, political and economic aspects

Preliminary drafts will be discussed at a meeting in Rome in September 2014. By December first papers from the project will be available. The paper at SRHE will report on the outcomes of the project.