

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Sept. 18

The World Gets a Little Flatter

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is releasing an annual report today that — in presenting the broadest and most up-to-date array of data about global education — reinforces the sense that American higher education is in a competitive downward spiral.

“Education at a Glance 2007,” which will be available this morning on [the organization’s Web site](#), in general finds a worldwide higher education network that is expanding, educating ever-more students and improving their economic standing. The report provides a set of findings on the [overall situation in the 30 OECD countries](#) — which include much of Europe, the United States, Canada and Mexico, plus Australia, Japan, Korea and New Zealand — and a look at the United States’ status in that larger picture.

Internationally, the report finds that:

- Enrollments are rising generally, though growth has been strongest — more than doubling — in countries such as Korea, Ireland and Spain that have purposefully driven that growth through changes in policy.
- Graduation rates vary widely, with Austria, Germany and Turkey hovering around 20 percent and countries such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Poland at over 40 percent.
- Even as enrollments have expanded, there has been no significant change in the generally high pay or the generally low unemployment rates that the college educated enjoy compared to other groups, indicating that “the benefits of higher education have not deteriorated as higher education as expanded.”
- In countries where higher education has expanded the most, employment prospects for less-educated citizens had deteriorated, despite predictions to the contrary.
- In most countries, the number of science graduates is growing faster than the overall number of graduates.

- Between 1995 and 2004, growth in spending on education fell behind growth in national income.

Although there were numerous ways in which American higher education continued to lead the world, the report cites several statistics that are likely to prove worrying to policy makers in the United States:

- The higher education entry rate — an estimate of the probability that a young person will enter higher education at some point in his or her life, based on patterns of first entry into college — rose to 64 percent in 2005, up from 57 percent in 2000. But only 54 percent of entrants to higher education in the United States obtain a degree, giving the U.S. (and New Zealand) the “lowest survival rate” among the OECD countries, which average 71 percent.
- Not only are younger Americans going to college at significantly lower rates than older Americans did — figures that have been well-reported — but the proportions of employed 25 to 34-year-olds in the United States who have a science degree significantly lag the OECD averages.
- While the United States remains by far the most popular destination for foreign study, the country is losing its market share of international students.

“The latest OECD published data shows a continued trend of stagnation in higher education access and graduation rates in the U.S. among younger students, and a relatively decline in our standing when compared to other developed economies,” said John Douglass, senior research fellow in public policy and higher education at the University of California at Berkeley’s Center for Studies in Higher Education. “It’s a trajectory that could prove a real drag on the nation’s long-term economic competitiveness.”

“Among younger students, the U.S. is now a little bit better than mediocre in getting students into colleges and universities, and pretty lousy at getting those who enroll to actually get a degree.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)

Comments

“Not only are younger Americans going to college at significantly lower rates than older Americans did — figures that have been well-reported”

Perhaps this is true but it masks a deeper problem; women are going at a high rate but this has been more than offset by the declining proportion of male students in higher education. The war against men in higher education has been won; now we have to deal with the fallout.

Pyrrhus, at 9:40 am EDT on September 18, 2007

There are several issues that are cause the apparent fall in US higher education

1. American students do not graduate in the sciences because most have not attained the necessary math skills to enter the sciences.
2. Those that do have math skills major in Finance because the pay is higher.
3. Graduation rates are lower in the USA because we believe in the concept of the “Late Bloomer” and admit students who would not be admitted in other countries.
4. Application rates may be down in the USA because financial aid has not kept pace with the rise in tuition rates. In much of the world Higher Education is a public good with either very low or zero tuition charges.

econmavin, at 10:25 am EDT on September 18, 2007

Strengths and weaknesses of international comparisons

This article and the OECD report on which it is based demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of international comparisons. A strength is the enhanced ability to understand the differences in how countries organize and finance their tertiary education systems and how those characteristics might affect their results. The US lag behind many other OECD countries in the proportion of adults who have attained a sub-BA degree is a good example of the benefits of international comparisons in identifying problems that need to be addressed. The low proportion of U.S. students enrolled in scientific fields of study is another example of a helpful comparison with policy consequences.

A weakness of these comparisons is jumping to conclusions based on faulty data. Case in point: the entry and survival rates cited in the report and article are ‘proxy’ measures that OECD has developed because comparable data doesn’t exist among OECD countries. The entry rate compares the number of students enrolled against the traditional college age population and thus includes older and international students in the numerator and not in the denominator. The survival rate is equally flawed. Based on other data sources, there is much reason to believe that the U.S. continues to have one of the highest participation rates in the world and average-to-below-average degree completion rates — the % of students who enroll that complete a degree — particularly in community colleges. The trick is to dig deep enough with the comparisons until we identify real problems that then stimulate thoughtful discussions about how we might proceed to address them.

Art Hauptman, public policy consultant, at 10:35 am EDT on September 18, 2007

There points of the report are well-taken. However, I taught outside the USA for over 14 years and can attest that the political pressure in some countries to expand access to higher education is enormous, as is the pressure to graduate students. In some countries, new graduates have great difficulty finding jobs with employers decrying graduate’s lack

of knowledge and abilities. I haven't read the report, and maybe these issues are addressed, but if not, it's a glaring omission. The question: What is the quality of the graduates?

Mark, at 11:05 am EDT on September 18, 2007

Understanding the data

One problem with the OECD report is the issue of “apples to oranges” comparisons between educational systems and nations.

Among OECD countries one issue (which I think has been previously profiled on this site) is whether a three-year degree (a norm in several OECD countries) is equivalent to a four-year degree (the American norm). When the time-to-completion bar is raised 33%, you're going to have some additional attrition! When costs of attendance are considerable and increasing, as they are in the US, and largely financed by the attendee (as again, college education is in the US — there is a startling dearth of merit-based reward and even retention in higher education in America), there will be even more attrition.

There is little consideration of the notion that the US is a “mature” market, with existing high levels of participation, in relation to at least some of the other markets considered. When institutions have high attendance levels, individual treatment and retention are likely to suffer.

In addition, substantial national minority higher education participation is not characteristic of all OECD countries (e.g. Korea, Japan). Also, substantial international student participation is not characteristic of all OECD countries and often has some impacts on domestic student participation — not the least of which include increased costs and “clustering” in certain departments — sometimes to their detriment.

Finally there is little consideration of external structures including industrial policy, labor and immigration policy. The US in relation to many of these nations has a wide-open immigration policy. This has had a profound effect on American public institutions as they struggle to cope with an influx of around 20 million illegal immigrants (a level unmatched by that of any of the other countries in the OECD). In such an environment basic educational goals such as literacy and survival language skills trump the teaching of other subjects. Also the US has a labor policy and an industrial practices climate that favors the exportation of jobs and industries across many different categories. This HAS had a chilling effect on Americans' desire to pursue sciences- and engineering-related education, and is expanding to other sectors. It's even had an impact on the faculties that teach these subjects, and I would be remiss not to point out that some very disturbing race-related prejudices are emerging because of it.

Scrawed, at 7:15 pm EDT on September 20, 2007

