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Should European universities be agents of social mobility?

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Abstract

Widening participation and the related issue of social mobility are re-emerging as crucial, complex and pressing priorities in terms of the governance and the social and economic effectiveness of higher education in the regions of Europe. Concern about barriers to entry to higher education has been debated across Europe since at least the 1960s, yet there is still disagreement about the extent to which universities should take responsibility for the social effects of access policies and provision. Despite the unifying effects of the Bologna Process, the meaning and status of widening participation action across Europe remain highly differentiated. Enhanced access in terms of numbers does not necessarily correlate with equality of opportunity and planned national responses to access concerns remain underdeveloped in many member states. This paper presents data from seven EU countries: Czech Republic, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and the UK collected as part of the IBAR (Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level) Project. IBAR is a three-year project funded by the EACEA and led by the Centre for Higher Education Studies in Prague and Durham University.