
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inequalities in Agency and Empowerment in Moroccan Public Universities

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| ABSTRACT

Inequality in higher education in Morocco is a rising concern for policy circles as the distribution of opportunities and benefits is unequally distributed across lines of socio-economic stratification. This study explores the dynamics of access and participation in Moroccan higher education to scrutinize how the current configuration of the system generates unequal conditions. The study is particularly concerned with the exploration of how state-funded higher education in Morocco provides conditions for structural fairness and equality of opportunity; how the choices of higher education students in free-access and limited-access institutions integrate with their personal agency, aspirations and life plans, and finally the exploration of the reciprocal interrelationships between access and participation in higher education and capability deprivation. To achieve these objectives, a sample of (n= 262) higher education students from free-access (n=164) and regulated-access institutions (n=98) have been surveyed using a Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) questionnaire to measure their agency and empowerment levels in the enation of choices about higher education access and participation. The RAI developed by Deci and Ryan and refined in the context of human development and wellbeing by Alkire and Chirkov (2007) has been used to measure agency, autonomy and empowerment in higher education. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been used to analyze group differences to scrutinize inequalities in conditions and outcomes in Moroccan public higher education institutions. The results of this study indicate clearly that students in limited access institutions enjoyed significantly higher levels of freedom and opportunity to enact meaningful choices in their higher education pathways. In other words, they have higher levels of personal agency as a result of their expanded opportunity sets.

| KEYWORDS

Agency, Autonomy, Empowerment, Capability, Functioning, Freedom of choice, wellbeing, Inequality, Higher education.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The higher education landscape in Morocco features four major types of higher education provision: a) public university education, b) higher education Institutes for training engineers and executives “la formation des cadres”, c) vocational higher education institutes “formation professionnelle et technique” and, d) private higher education institutions. Public universities receive the biggest share of admitted students. In fact, despite the efforts deployed by the state through recent reforms to encourage the private provision of higher education and to expand the offer of vocational and professional higher education institutions, the public university still remains the primary recipient of entering cohorts. Furthermore, public higher institutions fall within one of two broad categories i.e.: free-access institutions that require only a high school diploma for access and participation and regulated-access institutions which require students to go through a more rigorous and competitive selection and recruitment process.

The present study puts forward a number of questions about the extent to which the Moroccan state-funded education system provides genuine equal opportunities for access and participation in higher education. The present paper, therefore, is more particularly concerned with the exploration of: 1) how state-funded higher education in Morocco provides conditions for

structural fairness and equality of opportunity; 2) how the choices of higher education students in free-access and limited-access institutions integrate with their personal agency, aspirations and life plans, 3) the exploration of the reciprocal interrelationships between access and participation in higher education and capability deprivation. In this analytical exercise, the scrutiny of fairness of participation is briefly and minimally expanded to the analysis of the economic benefits of higher education.

In general, research on educational equality has focused on the equalization of prospects of access to and participation within different levels of formal education for different social groups (Lynch, 2000;2001). No matter what conception is endorsed, the ideal of equality has serious normative implications for “two interconnected levels in education: the theoretical level, concerned with values and aims, and the level of provision, relating to the enactment of these ideals into policy and practice” (Terzi, 2008:1). Nevertheless, in addition to the difficulties inherent in settling disputes about what conceptions and metrics of equality is morally justifiable, exploring education equality from the prism of distributive justice is made additionally strenuous because of the nature of education itself as “a good”. Educational equality cannot be robustly measured and conceptualized without an adequate account of the instrumental and intrinsic functions it plays in the lives of individuals (Brighouse, 2000). Indeed, the intrinsic and instrumental roles of education in the wider social, cultural, economic and political context have an important bearing on what ought to be distributed. Education makes individuals competitive in economies that confer burdens and benefits unequally. Receiving an education is essential in expanding the chances and opportunities of individuals to have better life conditions and to enjoy the intrinsically fulfilling experiences made possible through education (Brighouse, 2000).

2. Literature review

For Lynch and Baker (2005), a robust conception of educational equality should be framed in terms of equality of condition in “what might be called people’s ‘real options’, which involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals” (Lynch and Baker,2005:132). This conception broadens the understanding of the ideal of equality in a remarkable way by acknowledging the multidimensionality of what makes the “good life” possible in and through education.

2.1 Freedom “to be” and “achieve” versus agency “to be” and “achieve”

One key distinction that pervades the work of Amartya Sen on human development and well-being is the foregrounding of the cross-cutting distinctions between agency and well-being on the one hand and actual achievement versus freedom to achieve, on the other (See for instance Sen, 1985 and 1992). Despite being interrelated and intertwined agency and well-being involve distinguishable levels of analysis with each having merits in evaluations and accounts of development. In fact, Sen argues that both “the agency aspect” and “the well-being aspect” of the individual are distinguishable but interdependent and crucial dimensions or aspects of human life that should be captured in capability approach analyses (Sen, 1985: 169–221; 1992: 39–42, 56–72; 1999: 189–91). Well-being and agency are central notions in the capability approach because they allow us to evaluate both what a person has actually managed to achieve in terms of well-being and the freedom to achieve or the opportunity structure indicative of the agency enjoyed by the person. As Sen explicates: a “person’s position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives, viz. (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve. Achievement is concerned with what we manage to accomplish, and freedom with the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value. The two need not be congruent” (Sen 1992: 31).

Sen conceives of both agency and well-being to have two levels each, namely, the actual achievements in the physical world and the freedom or opportunity structure to choose those achievements. This entails that the evaluation of the human development of any particular individual should attend to the following four dimensions: agency achievement, and well-being achievements (which are functionings) and agency freedom and well-being freedoms (capabilities). In what follows, a brief definition of agency and well-being and their corresponding levels is provided.

Simply put, agency is defined as “person’s ability to pursue and realize goals she values and has reason to value.” (Deneulin and Shahani, 2009:22). Agency achievement as defined by Sen refers to “the realization of goals and values she has reasons to pursue, whether or not they are connected with her own well-being” (1992: 56; see also 1985b: 203–4, 207; 1999: 19). Whereas, agency freedom is “one’s freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce” (Sen, 1992: 57). In the capability approach plural characterization of the person, agentic behavior whether altruistic or not is taken to be constitutive of human nature. Nonetheless, the approach recognizes the constraints on individuals’ agency exercised by the social, political and economic opportunities available to us (Sen, 1999). This dimension is essential for human development since enabling individuals to become agents in their own lives and their environments is crucial for both individual and social development. It has both a foundational and constitutive role as well as an instrumental one in the development process.

As it were, the conceptual articulation of agency is crucial for the analysis of concerns of autonomy, empowerment, self-direction and self-determination in varied settings and situations. The capability approach in both its evaluative and prospective applications is concerned with the measurement and the promotion of empowerment. The latter is a complex concept where the

notions of agency and freedom play central roles. In this vein, Alsop and Henshon (2005) and Narayan et al. (2004), argue that empowerment subsumes two sub-components i.e. opportunities which represent information on possibilities open to a person or a community and second agency “what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good” (Sen, 1985:206), namely, opportunities that represent institutional possibilities available to a person or a community and second: agency.

According to Sen (1985:206) an assessment of agency requires the scrutiny of “what a person can do in line with his own conception of the good”. Alsop and Heinsohn (2005:2) concur that agency is primarily the ability of an actor to make meaningful choices, which implies that the agent is able to envisage and decide on options. The operationalization adopted here is consistent with the two dimensions just presented.

2.2 Measurements of Autonomy and Agency:

Indeed, Self Determination Theory (SDT), where the tool of relative autonomy index has been developed, has predictive and explanatory power regarding both agency as well as the external opportunities available to the individual. According to SDT, “a person is autonomous when his or her behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and when he or she fully endorses the actions in which he or she is engaged and/or the values expressed by them” (Alkire and Chirkov, 2007:105). SDT diametrically distinguishes between autonomy and its antithetical counterpart heteronomy. The latter depicts situations “in which one’s actions are experienced as controlled by forces that are phenomenally alien to the self, or that compels one to behave in specific ways regardless of one’s values or interests” (Chirkov, Ryan et al., 2003:98). This view of SDT is consistent with the capability approach view of the agent as “someone who acts and brings about change” (Sen, 1999:19) in contrast with an individual who is coerced, oppressed or passive and therefore deprived of agency. Hence, individuals are most autonomous when they act consistently with their authentic interests or integrated values and desires (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000; Ryan 1995).

3. Methodology

3.1 The sample

The final sample in this study is of (N=262) respondents for the survey. The respondents were selected from free-access and limited-access higher education institutions operating in Rabat. The distribution of the survey respondents, to a large extent, approximated the recent configuration of the higher education population in Morocco. Table (1) below summarizes the most important elements capturing the characteristics of the sample in terms of educational history and background.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample by educational background
Type of higher education institution

(Valid N=262, Missing=0)		FLSH	FS	FSEJ
Free Access	(N=164) 62.6%	(N=120) 45.8%	(N=1) 0.4%	(N=43) 16.4%
		EMI	ENSIA	ENSIA
Limited-access	(N=98) 37.4%	(N=23) 8.8%	(N=9) 3.4%	(N=10) 3.8%
		ESI	FST	ENA
		(N=10) 3.8%	(N=1) 0.4%	(N=2) 0.8%
		EST	ENSET	INPT
		(N=1) 0.4%	(N=1) 0.4%	(N=41) 15.6%

Table (2) below provides a summary of the biographical information about the sample used. It reports the distribution of the sample in terms of gender, age groups, marital status, residence area and socio-economic status (SES).

Table 2: Biographic information

Gender

Male	Female	18 or Less
121	150	4
42.7%	57.3%	1.5%

Marital Status

Unmarried	Married	Urban
242	19	222
92.4%	7.3%	84.7%

Socio-Economic Status SES*

Low	Mid	High
71	116	31
32.6%	53.2%	14.2%

Age groups

18-23	24-29	29+
212	35	8
80.9%	13.4%	3.1%

Residence Area

Semi-Urba	Semi-Rural	Rural
18	3	13
6.9%	1.1%	5%

3.2 The Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) as a measure of agency and empowerment

In order to measure the empowerment level of respondents regarding the five following domains: 1) choice of higher education institution, 2) class attendance and engagement with education received, 3) participation in class and group work, 4) choice of specialty and field of study and 5) ability to secure desired job opportunities after graduation, another operationalization has been used in the present research. The Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) developed by Deci and Ryan and refined in the context of human development and wellbeing by Alkire and Chirkov (2007) has been adopted to directly measure agency, empowerment and autonomy in the aforementioned domains related to educational equality and human development in higher education.

The formula for the aggregation and weighting of RAI is the following:

$$2 * \text{Integrated} + \text{Identified} - \text{Introjected} - 2 * \text{External} = \text{Relative Autonomy Index (RAI)}$$

3.3 Results

3.3.1 The interaction between agency and institutional opportunities on access and participation in higher education

It has already been established that empowerment is the result of the interaction between the opportunities that represent the institutional possibilities available for individuals with their agency. In the analysis of the fairness of the Moroccan higher education system in terms of access and participation, we are interested in determining the extent to which the choices of students in free-access and limited-access institutions tend towards highly agentic choices where "behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and when [the individual] fully endorses the actions in which he or she is engaged and/or the values expressed by them" (Alkire and Chirkov, 2007:105) or towards the opposite direction where the choices of the individual are the result of external regulation. In this vein, the results of the relative autonomy index (RAI) are used to compare the level of autonomous agency in the context of access and participation in higher education for students in limited-access and free-access institutions.

3.3.2 The choice of higher education institution

Answering the question: to what extent students in free-access and limited access institutions willingly and fully endorse the choice of the higher education institution they currently attend is extremely helpful in putting into adequate perspective other findings about the fairness of access and participation in higher education. In fact, it is a step further towards uncovering the patterns of advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, Table 3 below presents the mean scores obtained by students in free-access and limited-access institutions with respect to the relative autonomy index (RAI). The mean scores of students in limited-access institutions ($M=3.65$) are higher than those of their counterparts in free-access institutions ($M= 2.03$).

Table 3. Relative Autonomy Index descriptives for choice of institution by students from free-access and limited access higher education institutions

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
free access	155	2.03	4.507	.362
regulated access	97	3.65	3.811	.387
Total	252	2.65	4.318	.272

The analysis of variance through the ANOVA test has shown that the difference expressed by the mean scores is statistically significant with $F(1,250) = 8.625$ at $P < .004$. This result strongly suggests that students in limited-access institutions have higher levels of agency and more institutional possibilities at their disposal to choose their respective higher education programs.

Table 4. One Way ANOVA results for Relative Autonomy Index for choice of institution by students from free-access and limited access higher education institutions

	Sum Squares	of Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	156.043	1	156.043	8.625	.004*
Within Groups	4522.921	250	8.625		
Total	4678.964	251			

* $P < .05$ ** $P < .001$

The calculation of omega squared indicates that $w^2 = .03$ accounts for 3% of the statistically significant variance between limited-access and free-access institutions. Following Cohen's (1988) conventions for ranking size effects calculated by omega squared, the .03 size effect is between small and medium. Nevertheless, this statistical result remains important as it tells us that in the case of 3% of the higher education population in Morocco, highly statistically significant disparities in agency levels and institutional opportunities are experienced by students with students in limited-access institutions being more favored by the distribution scheme of the social arrangement as shown by the higher mean of RAI ($M=3.65$). Using the more recent and, by the same token, more positive statistics about enrollment in higher education with 26% of the cohort being in limited-access institutions in 2009 as opposed to 2% in 2000, the 3% affected by capability deprivations in empowerment, agency levels and institutional opportunities would be an average of 10000 students for the 2008, 2009 and 2010 cohorts.

3.3.3 The choice of major

If in the case of the choice of the higher education institution to attend, the students in limited access institutions were found to be more favored by the distribution scheme as they enjoyed higher levels of agency and empowerment which are all organically connected to social arrangements. In fact, in many respects, they are the results of social arrangements. Then what is the case for the choice of majors? This dimension is supposed to be even more nuanced as students might choose the majors that integrate widely with their wider interests and aspirations, even when those are offered in a free-access institution.

Table 5 below shows that the students in limited-access institutions obtained higher RAI means with (M= 5.38) while their counterparts in free-access institutions obtained lower RAI means (M=1.89).

Table 5. for Relative Autonomy Index descriptives for choice of major by students from free-access and limited access higher education institutions

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
free access	150	1.89	5.292	.432
regulated access	92	5.38	3.797	.396
Total	242	3.21	5.064	.326

The analysis of variance conducted through ANOVA to investigate the statistical significance of the mean differences between groups with regard to the choice of major RAI results indicated that the difference was highly statistically significant with $F(1,240) = 30.458$ at $P < .000$. This result suggests that the difference between students in limited-access and free-access students in the levels of agency, empowerment and institutional possibilities and opportunities is highly statistically significant.

Table 6. One Way ANOVA results for Relative Autonomy Index for choice of major by students from free-access and limited access higher education institutions

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	696.068	1	696.068	30.458	.000**
Within Groups	5484.758	240	22.853		
Total	6180.826	241			

* $P < .05$ ** $P < .001$

The omega squared statistic for the choice of major RAI with a value of $\omega^2 = .10$ indicates that as much as 10% of the sample is affected by this variance. To generalize this effect size on the whole higher education student population suggests that an average of 33000 students in the 2008, 2009, 2010 cohorts is affected by deprivation in capability with regard to this dimension.

3.3.4 The level of integration of attendance within the agent's wider objectives

Attendance has been found to correlate highly with motivation as well as academic achievement. Investigating the extent to which students choose to attend regularly as a result of integrated rather than external regulation is yet another indicator of how the choices of students of higher institutions and programs integrate with their wider views and aspirations, thus indicating strong agentic behavior. Table 35 below shows that the RAI mean scores obtained by free-access institutions were higher with (M=4.32) while the mean score for limited-access institutions was (M=3.39).

Table 7. for Relative Autonomy Index descriptives for attendance of HE classes by students from free-access and limited access higher education institutions

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
free access	152	4.32	3.686	.299
regulated access	95	3.39	3.526	.362
Total	247	3.96	3.646	.232

The ANOVA test shows that this mean difference was found significant with $F(1,245) = 3.871$ at $P < .05$. This result denotes higher levels of agency in terms of attendance among students in free-access institutions.

Table 8. One Way ANOVA results for attendance Relative Autonomy Index

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	50.879	1	50.879	3.871	.05*
Within Groups	3219.793	245	13.142		
Total	3270.672	246			

* $P < .05$ ** $P < .001$

3.3.5 The RAI index for participation in class discussions and group work and in higher education

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the means scores for the relative autonomy index (RAI) measuring participation in class discussions and group work was statistically non-significant. No significant effects of group membership were detected. This suggests that this dimension is not affected.

3.3.6 The effects of socio-economic status on access to higher education

A truly meritocratic educational system is one in which individuals' prospects of educational achievement are the function of talent and effort rather than the effects of social class. In evaluating social justice as a dimension and a result of higher education, it is important to test the residual effects of social class on educational achievement. In this case, emphasis is put on the role played by the socio-economic status of students and their families in determining the routes of differential access to higher education in Morocco. Furthermore, to investigate the effect of socio-economic status on access to higher education, an independent samples one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to investigate whether the group differences were statistically significant. Establishing that there is a statistically significant difference between groups will reject the ANOVA null hypothesis. Furthermore, analyzing the significance of the difference between students attending free-access and limited access institutions in terms of socio-economic status will help determine the extent to which this variable explains the differential routes of access to higher education available for different strata in Morocco.

Table 9 below shows that the means of subjects attending limited-access institutions in terms of socio-economic status were higher than their counterparts in free-access institutions.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics for socio-economic status distribution among students of free-access and limited-access higher education institutions

Socio-Economic Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
free access	136	43.06	10.574	.907
regulated access	82	52.17	12.479	1.378
Total	218	46.49	12.135	.822

Table 10 below reports the results of the independent samples One Way ANOVA about the effects of socio-economic status on access routes to either the free-access or limited –access institutions. As a matter of fact, the ANOVA results clearly indicate that the differences in socio-economic status levels are significant between students free-access and limited access institutions with $F(1,216) = 33.111$, $P < .000$. As the socio-economic status mean scores of the respondents attending free-access institutions were the lowest, this result suggests that access to limited-access institutions is more likely to take place in the case of students with higher socio-economic status.

Table 10. Independent Samples One Way ANOVA results for the effect of socio-economic status on access to free and limited access higher education institutions.

Socio-Economic Status	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4247.320	1	4247.320	33.111	.000**
Within Groups	27707.139	216	128.274		
Total	31954.459	217			

* P < .05 **P < .001

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the process of actualizing entitlements to access, the process of agentic choice in higher education as well as processes of participation. These results when assessed through the prism of a capability perspective to social justice and educational equality in higher education.

The higher education system in Morocco operates through two major types of institutions entails different experiences in terms of access and participation. Access to the first type is selective, elitist and highly regulated, while in the case of the second, it is not selective and to a greater extent, less elitist. In terms of equality of entitlements to higher education, the findings of this study indicate that larger sections of the population gaining access to public higher education find themselves in free-access institutions which seem to be less advantaged by the distribution scheme.

What is more, for a significant number of students in free-access higher education institutions, the enactment of choice of institutional affiliation and majors is the result of shrinking personal agency directly influenced by structural unfreedoms and injustices resulting from the inability of the system to neutralize the overreaching effects of social class that undercut progress and growth in the areas of study skills, academic achievement, linguistic proficiency and the mastery of science and technology subject matters.

The findings presented in this study also seem to indicate that the structural bias in the Moroccan higher education policy landscape is consistently in favor of graduates of limited-access institutions and holders of degrees in the fields of engineering, business, science and technology. The structural duality created by the differentiated levels of restrictiveness and selectivity of the free-access and limited-access modes of higher education provision results in a stark ambivalence in how the system deals with the claims of individuals to entitlement to access.

Despite the fact that the exclusiveness or selectiveness of limited-access institutions is marketed and adduced as a fairness-based meritocratic system put in place to ensure equality of access as well as quality of outcomes, the findings exposed in the present study have revealed some alarming and problematic instances of structural injustices that need to be redeemed by imminent policy reforms.

More alarming still is the fact that the findings of this study indicate clearly that access to limited-access institutions significantly correlates with higher levels of socio-economic status. This suggests that the exclusive and elitist institutions that are more privileged by the distributive scheme and confer more economic and non-economic benefits serve mainly individuals enjoying higher levels of socio-economic empowerment. While individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not completely denied access to higher education, they are in turn disadvantaged by the lack of structural mechanisms that help equalize their prospects for equal entitlement to access to those coveted limited-access tracks (science and technology) privileged by the distributive scheme and conferring more economic and non-economic benefits.

The findings exposed in the present study also suggest that failure in establishing entitlement to access to limited-access institutions on the grounds of poor overall academic achievement and poor levels in scientific and technological subject matters relates more to unfreedom created by structural factors than pure failure of personal agency. The study also appears to indicate that a large proportion of the community is denied the opportunity to acquire those coveted science and technology skills at a threshold high enough to guarantee participation in the competition for establishing entitlement to access. The enactment of agentic choice of higher education institutions and majors was found to be significantly the result of shrinking personal agency directly influenced by structural unfreedom and injustices in the case of students in free-access institutions.

Overall, the findings of discussed in this study indicated clearly that students in limited access institutions enjoyed significantly higher levels of freedom and opportunity to enact meaningful choices of higher education institutions and majors. In other words, they have higher levels of personal agency as a result of their expanded opportunity sets.

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