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Student enrolment in Malaysian higher education: is there gender disparity and what can we learn from the disparity?

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ABSTRACT

Access into higher education has traditionally been dominated by males. However, the current situation in Malaysia as well as in many developed and developing nations is that females have outnumbered males in higher education. By comparing gender enrolment, this paper illustrates the extent of gender disparity in Malaysian higher education across different higher education institutions, levels of study and fields of study. The disparity across the three dimensions can be summarised as a trend in which there is over-representation of females in public universities, in all disciplines except engineering, manufacturing and construction, and at all levels except the doctorate. Importantly, although set in Malaysia, this paper has wider implications where the trend of gender disparity underlined two areas of concern, namely an overly emphasised academic admission for transition from schools into higher education and the differentiated willingness of households to spend on higher education for their sons and daughters.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; Malaysia; gender; transitions; equal opportunities

Introduction

The third of the eight Millennium Development Goals is to promote gender equality and empower women. This goal is translated into the target of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005, and in all levels of education before 2015. Moving forward, in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, quality education is outlined as the fourth of seventeen goals. The goal of quality education comprises 10 targets, one of which is to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university, by 2030. However, across these two sets of global aspirations, there has been a subtle but significant change in focus in relation to higher education and gender.

Traditionally higher education has been dominated by males, and females have been significantly under-represented. The oldest university in the English-speaking world, Oxford University, for more than 800 years only admitted male students, and it was only in 1920 that female students were enrolled as full members of the university. Similarly, females were excluded by statute from colleges and universities in the USA until the 1850s when

