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EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES AND ITS LONG-TERM IMPACT ON INCOME INEQUALITY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract:

The idea that higher education can and should be extended to low-income communities to foster socioeconomic mobility is well-touted, but the potential for higher education to lower long-term income inequality is complicated and conditional. This narrative review aims to analyze the literature from the international peer-reviewed scientific publications indexed in Scopus (2000–2026), to assess not only the expansion of higher education but also when and how it affects the reduction of long-term income inequality. The synthesis using a structured search strategy (n = 21 final retained studies) suggests that, although expansion in postsecondary education brings significant private earnings premiums, macro-level income compression does not necessarily or universally occur. This review's key takeaway is that an increase in access does not equal an increase in equality. General expansion on the supply side can lead to 'opportunity hoarding' by better-off socioeconomic groups via prestige hierarchy, selective institutions, and access to more high-reward academic programs. The Maximum Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis is used in the review to explain this phenomenon, in which the socioeconomically

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privileged classes fill the higher echelons of the education system before upward mobility is passed on to the disadvantaged. Finally, this review provides an explicit conceptual framework that follows the entire sequential chain from the expansion of higher education to the socioeconomic benefits of higher education in the long run, through high institutional quality, strong retention support and structural labour-market absorption. Based on the evidence reviewed, expansion alone does not necessarily lead to a decrease in inequality when access is accompanied by high institutional quality, holistic retention mechanisms, equitable participation, and effective labor-market integration.

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Keywords:

Higher Education Access, Income Inequality, Socioeconomic Mobility, Low-Income Communities, Educational Equity, Maximum Maintained Inequality, Narrative Review



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Introduction

Education, particularly at the higher level, is well known to be a major contributor to human capital development, social-economic mobility, and inclusive economic growth. Higher education provides people with greater knowledge, higher technical skills, and transferable skills, which improve employment prospects, boost lifetime earnings, and improve the productivity of the country. Therefore, increasing access to higher education has been a key goal of governments and international bodies in combating entrenched social and economic inequalities. This goal is especially pertinent in low-income areas where financial barriers, geographical disadvantage, lack of educational facilities, and inequities in access to higher education still limit access to higher education (Reinders et al., 2021). While expansion of higher education has been rapid across the world, access and education levels are still inequitable, and it is questionable whether higher education participation alone can help to lower the income inequality in the longer term.

Income inequality is still a significant socioeconomic problem in developed and developing countries. Many studies have indicated that a higher education level leads to a better life through higher income and employment, which in turn will lead to the reduction of income disparities in the long term (Tasseva, 2021). Empirical evidence also suggests that boosting higher education institutions can drive up disadvantaged groups' enrollment and enhance education levels in under-resourced areas (Katzkowicz et al., 2026). However, these benefits are far from universal and automatic. Educational expansion can also exacerbate inequalities, as higher Socioeconomic Status (SES) people who have more financial, cultural, and social capital may be more likely to benefit from expansion than others (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018;

Ding, 2007). The results of this study are contrasted with other studies and indicate that the link between higher education access and income inequality is very context-specific and is determined by wider institutional and policy contexts.

Although there has been increasing academic interest, there is still a lack of policy, knowledge, and practice. The current evidence is found in a variety of fields, including education, economics, sociology, and public policy, and there is little conceptual integration and a lack of understanding of the long-term impact of increased access to higher education on income inequality. Moreover, the evidence in sectors is not consistent, and many studies focus on a particular country or type of intervention, without taking a wider view of the trends across various socioeconomic situations. There is also a wide variety of terminology, and terms like educational access, widening participation, educational equity, and inclusive higher education are often used interchangeably, but have different theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, the models for implementation, such as financial assistance, institutional growth, affirmative admissions, community engagement, and student support programs, vary significantly from country to country and make it difficult to make comparisons between studies and to make coherent policy recommendations (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Óhidy, 2018; Madar & Danoch, 2024).

It is timely and needed to have a narrative review in view of these conceptual and empirical inconsistencies. This review does not focus on the evaluation of tertiary education expansion per se, but on the question of when and how the expansion of tertiary education can help to lower long-term income inequality. This paper reviews the evidence from multiple disciplines and helps to clarify the conditional mechanisms by which expanded access can impact socioeconomic mobility, as well as some of the necessary institutional and policy contexts to promote more equitable long-term socioeconomic outcomes. This synthesis is especially useful for policymakers, education leaders, and researchers who want to be guided in evidence-based practices for equitable access and sustainable decreases in income inequality.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, the review presents the methodology used for the narrative review, reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between higher education access and income inequality, summarizes key policy and implementation strategies, summarizes main findings and implications for policy and practice, identifies gaps in existing research, and concludes with recommendations for future research and policy development.

Review Approach

This study employed a narrative review methodology to integrate diverse theoretical views, policy, and empirical studies. To achieve methodological transparency and reproducibility, a structured search strategy was used, with only peer-reviewed journal articles from the last 25 years (2000-2026) retrieved from the Scopus database.

A structured keyword search was performed using the following Boolean string across titles, abstracts, and keywords:

("higher education" OR "postsecondary" OR "tertiary education" OR "college") AND ("access" OR "opportunity" OR "inclusion" OR "participation") AND ("low-income" OR "disadvantaged" OR "underprivileged" OR "economically challenged") AND ("income

inequality” OR “economic disparity” OR “wealth gap” OR “socioeconomic inequality”) AND (“impact” OR “effect” OR “influence” OR “consequence”)

The records retrieved after the initial search were then screened based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The screening process was done by taking a look at the title of the article, the abstract, and, if needed, the full text to check if the article was relevant to the objectives of the review. **Inclusion Criteria:** (1) Peer-reviewed journal articles written in English from 2000 to 2026; (2) The focus of the study is on higher education access for low-income or disadvantaged individuals; (3) The study has an empirical or conceptual focus on income inequality, socioeconomic mobility, or labor-market outcomes.

Exclusion Criteria: Studies focusing exclusively on primary/secondary education; non-English publications; non-peer-reviewed literature (editorials, book reviews, conference abstracts, dissertations); and articles lacking explicit theoretical or empirical focus on postsecondary expansion and income inequality.

Study Selection & Number of Studies: The first query of the database produced 142 records. After discarding duplicate articles, 48 full-text articles were evaluated based on the eligibility criteria after title/abstract screening. Finally, 21 important peer-reviewed studies that met all of the inclusion criteria were kept for qualitative thematic synthesis.

In the final selection, rather than aggregating statistics, attention was paid to conceptual relevance, methodological diversity, and contribution to understanding the link between higher education access and long-term income inequality. In keeping with the nature of narrative reviews, the literature selected was synthesized thematically to look for common ideas, conflicting results, policy options, implementation models, and gaps in the literature (Baethge et al., 2019; Green et al., 2006). The search strategy was a custom mix of Boolean operators and keyword clusters to elicit literature that focused on the synergy between income inequality and education methodologies, and this is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Search Strategy and Selection Parameters

Component	Description
Database	Scopus
Timeframe	2000–2026
Initial Search Yield	142 records retrieved
Studies Included	21 peer-reviewed journal articles were synthesized
Search string	("higher education" OR "postsecondary" OR "tertiary education" OR "college") AND ("access" OR "opportunity" OR "inclusion" OR "participation") AND ("low-income" OR "disadvantaged" OR "underprivileged" OR "economically challenged") AND ("income inequality" OR "economic disparity" OR "wealth gap" OR "socioeconomic inequality") AND ("impact" OR "effect" OR "influence" OR "consequence")

Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed articles; English language; Scopus-indexed (2000–2026); focus on low-income higher education access and long-term income inequality/mobility outcomes.
Exclusion criteria	Primary/secondary education studies; non-English papers; editorials, dissertations, and conference proceedings; studies without clear linkage between postsecondary expansion and inequality metrics.

Source: Developed by the Current Research Study

Conceptual Background

Definitions

Expanding access to higher education refers to policies, institutional practices, and systemic interventions designed to increase participation in postsecondary education among populations that have historically experienced educational disadvantage. These interventions include widening participation through financial assistance, institutional expansion, affirmative admission policies, community outreach, academic support, and flexible learning opportunities to reduce barriers associated with SES, geographic location, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of disadvantage (Óhidy, 2018; Reinders et al., 2021). For the purpose of this review, higher education is defined as universities, colleges, and other higher education institutions offering higher academic and professional qualifications.

Low-income communities are communities with lower incomes and fewer opportunities in the areas of education, social, and economic. The participation and completion rates of people from these communities are often low, as they often face multiple barriers to higher education, such as lack of pre-university preparation, financial hardship, lack of social capital, lack of information, and geographical disadvantages (Ilie et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2022). Therefore, to improve educational access, expanding access to enrollment and tackling structural inequities that affect student persistence, student success, and student outcomes are necessary (Swenson, 2023).

Income inequality is the unequal distribution of income among individuals or households in a society and is usually measured by indicators like the Gini coefficient, income shares, or earnings distributions. Income inequality is a closely related concept to socioeconomic mobility in the context of higher education, as a higher education level impacts employability, occupational status, and lifetime income. While there is evidence that greater educational attainment is generally associated with better living standards (in the form of higher wages and better employment prospects), whether greater access to higher-quality higher education opportunities can reduce long-term income inequality depends on whether disadvantaged populations can access, complete, and benefit from higher-quality educational opportunities (Duryea et al., 2023; Tasseva, 2021). For this review, the link between access to higher education and income inequality is therefore viewed as a multi-faceted phenomenon that is shaped by educational opportunity, institutional quality, policy support, and underlying socioeconomic conditions.

The Conceptual Framework: Linkage Pathway

The main conditional argument of this review is tackled by modelling the relationship between expansion and inequality reduction as an explicit sequential pathway as follows:

Higher Education Expansion → Institutional Quality → Retention Support → Labor-Market Absorption → Equitable Socioeconomic Outcomes

Higher Education Expansion: Enabling supply-side regional campus establishment and financial support expands the base for low-income groups. **Institutional Quality:** Expansion should include equitable distribution of academic resources, high-quality faculty, and accredited programs to ensure that low-income students are not steered into unproductive, low-value, underfunded credential tracks.

Retention Support: Active mentoring and holistic persistence structures help to overcome non-financial barriers (academic underpreparation, institutional alienation, lack of social capital) and ensure that enrollment and persistence result in degree completion.

Labor-Market Absorption: Degree holders are seamlessly embedded in the regional and national labor market, where there is a match between industry skill demand, fair wage structure, and minimal opportunities are hoarded by the elites.

More Equitable Socioeconomic Outcomes: The structural mix of completion, institutional quality, and effective market placement leads to a narrowing of long-term earnings gaps and to upward mobility.

Key Theories or Frameworks

The link between access to higher education and long-term income inequality is mostly interpreted in the framework of the **Human Capital Theory** that views education as an investment that increases the knowledge, skills, and productivity of individuals to improve their labor market outcomes and increase their lifetime earnings (Becker, 1964, 1975). From this standpoint, higher education expansion can help people in low-income groups build up valuable human capital, which can drive up socioeconomic mobility and help to reduce income inequality. This proposition is backed up by empirical evidence, which shows that increased education levels lead to better incomes and living standards, especially when equitable access and successful completion are realized, especially among disadvantaged groups (Duryea et al., 2023; Tasseva, 2021; Katzkowicz et al., 2026). Human Capital Theory also implies that the returns to education investments may be unequal if access, institutional quality and/or labor market participation are not the same for all socioeconomic groups.

Human Capital Theory accounts for the economic benefits of education, and **Bourdieu's Theory of Capital** accounts for the lack of equal outcomes from the expansion of education from a sociological point of view. Bourdieu (1986) believed that, in addition to economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and the ability to deal with institutions are important factors in educational success. The higher SES students are more likely to have access to these types of capital, and thus reap the benefits of increased education opportunities. Therefore, even with higher participation, inequalities can still exist as disadvantaged students will still face structural barriers that impact access to admissions, persistence, completion, and graduate employment (Ilie et al., 2021; Reinders et al., 2021; Swenson, 2023). This view can be useful in understanding how increased access alone is not enough in order to achieve a decrease in the income inequality in the long term if it is not accompanied by other measures that focus on social and institutional disadvantages.

Another conceptual lens is the **Maximum Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis**, which suggests that expansion of higher education first benefits the socially privileged who are able to take up high-return opportunities until the demand for these opportunities is fully met. It is only after privileged classes reach full capacity that there is proportional growth for socioeconomically disadvantaged classes. MMI sheds light on the connection between the expansion of higher education and social inequality by showing how class privilege adjusts to mass higher education: while access to basic higher education becomes universal, the privileged classes are able to maintain their relative advantage by hoarding opportunities in academic programs that pay off, in prestigious institutions, and in metropolitan areas, while low-income students are directed to underfunded regional and vocational programs. This framework can help to explain why higher education participation does not necessarily lead to a decline in socioeconomic inequalities: privileged groups can continue to enjoy their relative advantage by accessing more prestigious institutions, being better prepared for higher education, and graduating at higher rates (Marginson, 2016). The history of China, Israel, and other higher education systems also indicates that while educational expansion can lead to differential outcomes, the policy needs to be targeted to disadvantaged groups in order to achieve this (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Ding, 2007). In total, these theories suggest that in order to decrease income inequality in the long run, access to education must be accompanied by equitable participation, persistence, education quality, and successful transition into the labor market. Hence, they are used to give the conceptual underpinning to the empirical evidence synthesized throughout this narrative review.

Thematic Review of Literature

This section does not summarize the existing literature, study by study, but rather presents a thematic synthesis of the empirical and theoretical literature to provide a comprehensive and conceptually integrated synthesis of the impacts of increased postsecondary access in low-income communities on long-term income inequality. The topical organization of the literature allows for a critical review of the common empirical trends, policy practices, and theoretical debates in different institutional and country contexts. In particular, the review is structured around four interrelated themes: (1) Geographic and Supply-Side Infrastructure Expansion, which considers how spatial dimensions of education and physical campus decentralization and regional institutional supply affect spatial access to education; (2) Financial Aid, Target Policies, and Labor Market Returns, which examines the effectiveness of targeted financial support and public education expenditure on education wage premiums and economic mobility; (3) Social Stratification and the MMI Hypothesis, which considers how class-based advantages, institutional prestige hierarchies, and opportunity hoarding limit the equalizing potential of education growth; and (4) Non-Financial Barriers, Student Support, and Retention Systems, which explores how a holistic approach to institutional interventions, social capital development, and persistence mechanisms can translate initial entry into educational institutions into degree completion and long-term economic security.

Theme 1: Geographic and Supply-Side Infrastructure Expansion

The growth of higher education infrastructure on the supply side is a key enabler to expand access and to promote human capital accumulation in geographically and economically disadvantaged areas. Being physically and institutionally closer to a postsecondary campus reduces the direct tuition costs and indirect transportation/relocation expenses, directly increasing enrollment among historically underserved populations (Katzkowicz et al., 2026).

Decentralization of tertiary systems or the creation of new regional campuses leads to a significant increase in the number of low-income students enrolled, resulting in a greater acquisition of skills and strengthening of the workforce in the region (Katzkiewicz et al., 2026; Reinders et al., 2021). Thus, regional institutional growth can be seen as a key policy instrument in the process of regionalizing educational opportunities and helping to create regional economic development.

Although the expansion of the supply always leads to an increase in absolute participation rates, comparative empirical evidence shows that there are great differences in terms of the proportionate increase in participation rates for the most economically disadvantaged. On the other hand, in the developing world, there is evidence suggesting that providing local campuses can have significant welfare impacts, with lower-income groups seeing a greater increase in both the number of degrees earned and their post-graduation earnings after local campuses were built (Katzkiewicz et al., 2026; Sawadogo et al., 2026). Conversely, in national contexts like Israel and China, national institutional expansion is more likely to happen in the periphery, which does not necessarily lead to a rupture of pre-existing social hierarchies (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Ding, 2007). In such contexts, growth in the periphery largely meets demand on the middle tier, and the top tier of resources is disproportionately filled with affluent urban students, thus strengthening spatial and socioeconomic stratification (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018).

This literature shows that long-term income distribution changes cannot be achieved unless the physical campus is created, but that the physical campus is not sufficient. One of the main problems with the existing research on the supply side is that it treats "institutional expansion" as a monolithic intervention, without considering the quality of institutions, funding per pupil, and specialized labor market alignment between regions. While decentralization can improve geographic access, decentralized institutions, in the absence of investments in academic infrastructure and regional industry linkages, can create low-tier credentialing tracks, with lower wage returns (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Katzkiewicz et al., 2026). The ability of labor markets to absorb workers is a key missing element in the assessment of supply-side policies as a means to alleviate income inequality in a longer-term perspective.

Theme 2: Financial Aid, Target Policies, and Labor Market Returns

Postsecondary access must be translated into tangible gains in the labor market for disadvantaged groups, and targeted financial mechanisms like tuition-free policies, need-based grant programs, and public education allocations are key to achieving this goal. Public funding for higher education lowers the cost of attending, making it easier for low-income students to enroll in elite universities and to attain significant economic mobility (Duryea et al., 2023; Sawadogo et al., 2026). Low-income candidates who are admitted to a university with high-quality education and zero tuition have long-term upward shifts in their wage trajectories, compared with their non-admitted counterparts (Duryea et al., 2023). The results confirm that targeted financial policy measures can have high private returns to education, and that this can be done directly by increasing the lifetime earnings of socioeconomically disadvantaged graduates.

However, there are significant variations in the findings of the aggregate impact of education expansion on overall income inequality measures found across studies at the cross-national level. In more broadly based tertiary economies, like Great Britain, the expansion of education

raises the average incomes and living standards of all people, although the absolute income gains are often most pronounced in the middle and upper-middle range of the income distribution (Tasseva, 2021). Moreover, macro-level econometric studies reveal that public investments in tertiary education in low-income countries have a non-linear and highly conditional impact on national Gini coefficients (Sawadogo et al., 2026). Broad public subsidies, without explicit targeting to lower income deciles, may be providing support to higher SES families with a base level of academic preparation to meet competitive entrance requirements (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Duryea et al., 2023).

Most importantly, the financial aid literature was synthesized, and a gap between short-term access measures and long-term earnings equalization was identified. Although tuition waivers and public spending help to ease the immediate liquidity pressures, they are not necessarily a solution to the problem of labor market discrimination, wage compression, or credential inflation (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Tasseva, 2021). A major analytical challenge in policy research is the lack of analysis of the effects of longer-term (multi-decadal) changes in the supply of graduates on the skill premium. Financial aid policies alone can push the point of economic exclusion from university entry to after graduation employment unless there are structural changes in the labor market and equitable wage structures for entry-level professionals.

Theme 3: Social Stratification and the Maximum Maintained Inequality Hypothesis

Theories from sociology, especially MMI and Bourdieu's capital theory, help to account for the often-observed lack of an overall decrease in socioeconomic inequality in the wake of systemic expansion in higher education. These frameworks suggest privileged social classes constantly use their economic, cultural, and social capital to gain relative advantages in the growth of the education system (Marginson, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2022). With basic tertiary education now universal or widely available, wealthier families keep opportunities for themselves at more prestigious, elite tertiary institutions or seek tertiary postgraduate qualifications (Ding, 2007; Marginson, 2016). Thus, expansion can affect the absolute position of education in society without impacting the relative position of individuals in society or narrowing income inequalities in the long run.

Empirical research in a variety of geographical contexts shows that structural stratification remains in spite of policies that aim to increase access. Rapid expansion in enrollments in developing and transitioning education systems often goes hand in hand with qualitative differentiation, with lower-income students being overrepresented in lower-tier, under-resourced regional colleges, and higher-income students being overrepresented in the elite colleges (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Ding, 2007). In contrast, life-course research in rich economies shows that the impact of early childhood educational opportunities and family SES accumulates over time and has long-lasting effects on postsecondary pathways before students are even of university age (Ilie et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2022). The debate among scholars is, therefore, whether equity programs are failing due to poor design in higher education policies or are unavoidably compensatory due to pre-tertiary systemic inequities.

An analysis of the social stratification literature highlights that gross enrollment ratios for higher education only reveal the extent of higher education expansion and not the extent of the qualitative inequality. Despite the fact that more people are getting credentials, low-income students continue to be concentrated in less-prestigious tracks, and this hinders their access to

higher-paying sectors of the labor market (Marginson, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2022). One key area of need is a lack of connection between early child care learning equity data and tracking of postsecondary career outcomes (Ilie et al., 2021). Literature on MMI is largely descriptive and fails to provide parameters for structural policy intervention without the use of longitudinal frameworks which link pre-tertiary preparation, institutional hierarchy and long-term earnings.

Theme 4: Non-Financial Barriers, Student Support, and Retention Systems

Even if access to college is increased, if low-income students face significant non-financial obstacles to their college enrollment, that does not mean they will complete college or achieve economic mobility. Economically disadvantaged students are facing systemic issues that affect them across the board, such as low social capital, lack of familiarity with institutional norms and expectations, low academic preparation, and a sense of social exclusion (Contreras et al., 2025; Swenson, 2023). These obstacles help drive higher dropout rates and lower achievement among low-income students, and hinder their ability to reap economic benefits from attending school. Thus, it is crucial to ensure that targeted institutional interventions are in place to help students who initially access the program to successfully complete their degrees (Hersch et al., 2026; Renbarger & Long, 2019).

Comparative studies show that there are some apparent tensions in the design, scalability, and implementation of retention and support programs in the postsecondary systems. Complete systematic reviews show that comprehensive, holistic interventions that integrate academic tutoring, social mentoring, and customized financial supports are effective in achieving high retention and completion gains for high-potential, low-income undergraduate students (Renbarger & Long, 2019). But, localized program evaluations indicate that participatory or remedial support schemes can actually worsen the marginalization or have limited longer-term impacts if they are stigmatizing for those who take part and/or are not integrated into mainstream institutional structures (Madar & Danoch, 2024). In addition, peer and faculty networks are important to building institutional social capital, which can significantly improve retention (Contreras et al., 2025; Hersch et al., 2026). However, these high-touch approaches are often not available in low-resource campuses due to funding limitations.

A critical review of this literature reveals that policy debates often focus on a single stage of the life course (enrollment) and do not consider the multiple stages involved in accessing postsecondary education. An emphasis on first-time entry ignores the fact that many low-income students who do not complete their education are left with debt and lost opportunity costs, but not the wage benefits of college completion (Swenson, 2023). One key area where there is limited research is the rigor and long-term follow-up of the impact of non-financial support programs on post-graduation career placement and earnings trajectories (Hersch et al., 2026; Renbarger & Long, 2019). Future research will need to explore how institutional retention structures work alongside external labor market processes to ensure that supported students are economically secure in the long term in order to further the primary focus of this review.

This section is a summary of the existing literature in four key thematic areas: conceptual foundations, cross-industry applications, performance outcomes, and implementation challenges. The relationship between these themes is depicted in **Figure 1**.

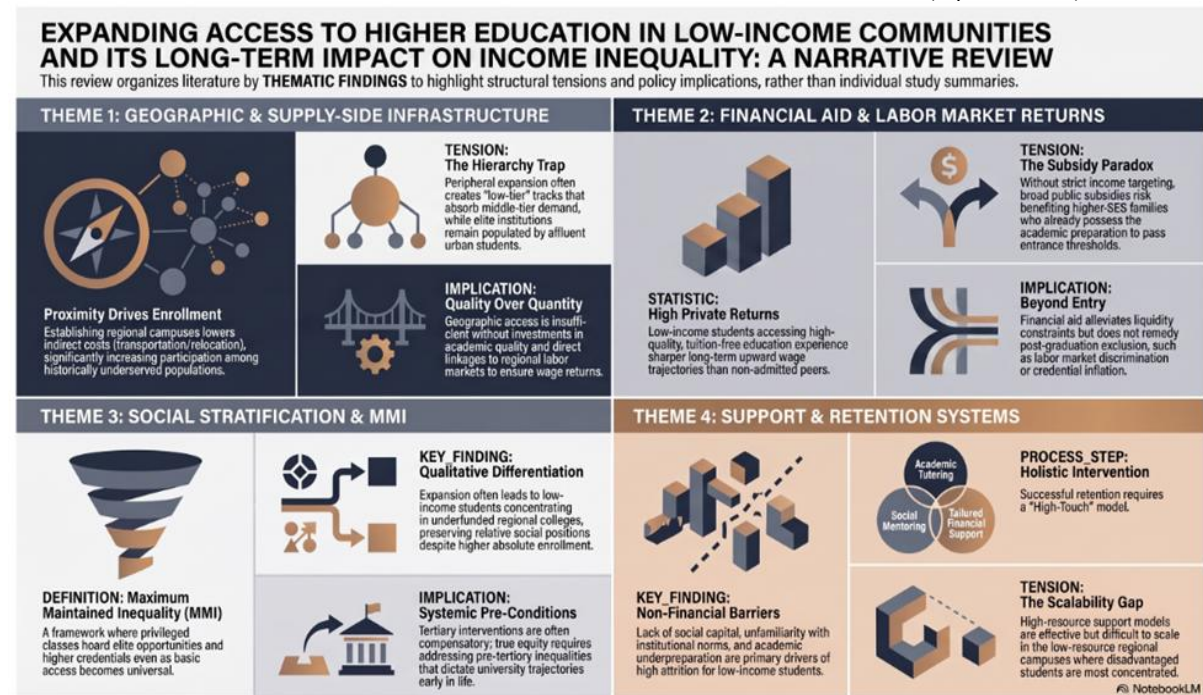


Figure 1: Thematic Review of Literature

Source: (Developed by the Current Research Study)

Critical Discussion

This section goes beyond a descriptive overview of the empirical and theoretical work that currently exists and offers an analytical critique of the intersection of the expansion of higher education access in low-income communities and long-term income inequality. The discussion unfolds along four interrelated analytical dimensions: (1) *agreements in the literature*, synthesizing the broad consensus of the literature in the fields of human capital formation and basic mobility; (2) *disagreements and theoretical friction*, highlighting the conflicting empirical findings in the literature on institutional quality, wage premiums, and opportunity hoarding; (3) *persistent literature gaps*, identifying conceptual and methodological blind spots in the literature, particularly in the areas of long-term labor market tracking and structural absorption; and (4) *actionable policy and research implications*, which translate these findings into evidence-based frameworks for educational leaders and policymakers aiming to implement systemic, inequality-reducing interventions.

Agreements in the Literature

Academics in the fields of economics, sociology, and public policy, in general, agree that increasing access to postsecondary education is a key pathway to individual human capital development and social and economic mobility. Evidence from empirical studies shows that higher education provides significant private wage returns, boosts lifetime earnings, and contributes to employment security, especially for those who come from disadvantaged and/or historically marginalized groups. In addition, there is a broad agreement that targeted structural interventions, including regional campuses to overcome geographical obstacles, models with tuition-free or need-based financial aid, and interventions with academic and social mentoring, are effective in increasing enrollment and degree completion rates of disadvantaged groups.

Theoretically, this agreement supports the Human Capital Theory and confirms that formal postsecondary training leads to improving the productivity and labor market value of individuals. Nevertheless, a more critical interpretation shows that there is a consensus in the literature on the *individual* benefits of education, but this consensus does not always capture the systemic reality. While it is clear that wider participation has clear micro-level positive effects for individual low-income graduates, there is no guarantee that this will lead to lower levels of income inequality at the national level. Existing studies often overstate the importance of individual mobility indicators and understate the role of systemic labor market restrictions, because of the general focus on mobility indicators.

Disagreements in the Literature

While some mobility improvements are agreed upon, there is considerable disagreement over whether such increases in access to higher education necessarily reduce overall income inequality. One literature states that widespread supply-side expansions and public spending directly lower national income inequality by democratizing skills and redistributing economic opportunities. On the other hand, another group of scholars argues that the expansion of education mostly helps the higher SES individuals who have the necessary financial, cultural, and social capital to gain access to the higher education institutions and professional opportunities. Empirical evidence from a variety of national contexts (e.g., Great Britain and China) shows that the effects of increasing tertiary seats can exacerbate or preserve relative earnings inequalities if the middle and higher income groups reap the greatest economic gains.

The empirical differences suggest that there is a theoretical conflict between the Human Capital Theory and sociological theories like MMI and Bourdieu's Theory of Capital. The fundamental disagreement is over the nature of higher education, as either a great leveler of economic opportunity or a sorting device that evolves to maintain class privilege. Research has shown that there are only limited effects on income inequality, which means that the equalizing power of mass tertiary education is undermined by the relative dominance of elite groups, who are credentialled through institutions, specialize in postgraduate education, and engage in social networks. The literature is thus split: expansion leads to redistributive outcomes in some institutional settings but to structural stratification in others.

Gaps in the Literature

A major gap in the existing literature is that the analysis is broken up into three parts: access to postsecondary education, quality of postsecondary institutions, and long-term outcomes in the labor market. A lot of the empirical work done to date is limited to short-term outcomes, like first-year college enrollment rates, financial aid distribution, or immediate degree completion rates, and fails to follow earnings over the long term, over decades. Moreover, the research on the relationship between pre-tertiary systemic inequalities, including those in early childhood learning and secondary school and post-graduation performance in the labor market in developing and low-income economies, is lacking in an integrative approach. Comparative studies frequently categorize higher education institutions as a single group and ignore the fact that their quality, faculty resources, and accreditation levels vary across regions, and that these factors influence the employment prospects of their graduates.

The lack of long-term labor market absorption dynamics is an important gap in the current educational policy research. However, with the absence of longitudinal data that follow low-income graduates into mid- and late-career, it is hard to determine if greater access will lead to lasting economic security or to a more rapid credential inflation and underemployment. Furthermore, not taking macro-economic considerations into account (such as local demand for labor, industrial structure, and regional wage compression) results in a theoretical mismatch between educational policy creation and macro-economic realities. The conceptual and empirical gaps must be filled to conclude whether or not educational growth is a real income equalizing force in the long term.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The synthesized evidence provides clear implications for educational leaders and educational policy makers who want to use higher education as a means of economic equalization. First, policy interventions need to go beyond mere enrollment goals and also include targeted financial support and comprehensive academic tutoring, social capital building, and institutional support systems. Second, governments need to ensure that institutional growth on the supply side is linked to the demand for labor in the region, to avoid giving low-income individuals low-value credentials that provide little economic benefit. Complementary economic policies, including wage regulation, equitable hiring practices, and public investment in regional job creation, are essential for skilled graduates from low-income groups to be well integrated into high-paying employment sectors.

In the future, researchers need to abandon the single-institution studies and use long-term and interdisciplinary evaluation methods. Longitudinal studies that follow low-income students from early childhood until they finish tertiary education and move on to the next phase of their careers are needed to separate the structural conditions that lead to a compression of income distributions for tertiary education. Moreover, comparative cross-national analyses based on quantile regression and mixed-methods designs will help to understand the interplay between certain policy configurations (affirmative admissions, building regional campuses, tuition-free policies) and local institutional and economic contexts. Further work in this research field will help to provide evidence to inform the design of HE systems that promote true, sustainable economic equity.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Recommendations for Practice

In order to achieve higher, long-term economic mobility for low-income students, higher education practitioners need to look at and implement holistic, high-touch approaches that go beyond the traditional academic delivery model. It is important for institutional leaders to develop comprehensive retention programs that combine financial aid counseling with social capital interventions, peer mentoring, and customized academic advising (Hersch et al., 2026; Renbarger & Long, 2019). Practitioners should be mindful that non-financial obstacles like institutional alienation, not knowing the rules of the academic game, and limited professional networks can greatly contribute to attrition among low-income populations and should be integrated into the day-to-day student programming (Swenson, 2023). Additionally, career services offices at postsecondary institutions should proactively build connections with industry, internship pipelines, and post-graduation placement programs that are specifically

geared toward first-generation and economically disadvantaged undergraduate students, where degree completion is more likely to lead to a good labor market outcome (Contreras et al., 2025; Duryea et al., 2023).

Recommendations for Policy or Organizational Use

Policymakers and educational governance bodies need to move away from only having broad enrollment goals and work towards developing equity-focused and context-specific funding models. State and national governments should focus on targeted financial aid systems, for example, income-contingent grants, tuition-free programs at top public institutions, and financial aid for other living costs incurred by low-income families (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Duryea et al., 2023). Furthermore, the policy decisions of geographic expansion should be accompanied by proper institutional funding, recruitment of high-quality faculty, and a good match with the industrial labor needs in the region, to avoid creating low-tier credentialing tracks in peripheral regions (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Katzkowicz et al., 2026; Sawadogo et al., 2026). Government agencies also need to put in place inter-sectoral oversight mechanisms linking investments in early childhood and secondary education with admission policies for postsecondary education, thereby addressing systemic achievement gaps early on, before students reach the age of postsecondary education (Ilie et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2022).

Future Research Directions

Future research should seek to answer important methodological and conceptual questions to shed more light on how to link postsecondary access with long-term income equalization. Researchers should focus on multi-decade longitudinal study designs that follow low-income matriculants as they progress through early, mid, and late careers and determine whether expanding education results in lifetime earnings parity or just in a faster rate of credential inflation and occupational skill mismatch (Marginson, 2016; Tasseva, 2021). In terms of methodology, researchers should aim to use rigorous quantitative analysis (including quantile regression and quasi-experimental econometric models) and qualitative research to assess the interaction among institutional prestige, program design, and the local labor market context on the distribution of graduate earnings (Madar & Danoch, 2024; Sawadogo et al., 2026). Lastly, cross-national comparative studies of low, medium, and high-income economies are required to observe how the equalizing potential of higher education expansion is moderated by different welfare regimes, labor market regulations, and public expenditure allocations (Óhidy, 2018; Reinders et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Limitations

Conclusion

This narrative review aims to distill the multifaceted relationship between increased access to postsecondary education in low-income communities and the long-term effects of this on income inequality. The review examines empirical evidence and theoretical arguments from economics, sociology, and public policy and shows that while increased higher education can be a potent force for individual human capital accumulation and upward socioeconomic mobility (Duryea et al., 2023; Katzkowicz et al., 2026), its impact on narrowing macro-level income distributions is not automatic or universal. Instead, complementary structural factors

such as the regional distribution of the supply-side expansion, targeted financial aid, comprehensive support for students, and fair absorption of the workforce into the labor market are crucial in equalizing outcomes (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Hersch et al., 2026; Sawadogo et al., 2026). If not designed proactively and with an equity lens, broad participation can result in the risk of reinforcing existing class stratification as a result of institutional prestige hierarchies and opportunity hoarding (Davidovitch & Soen, 2018; Marginson, 2016). If not designed proactively and with an equity lens, broad participation can result in the risk of reinforcing existing class stratification as a result of institutional prestige hierarchies and opportunity hoarding (Ilie et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2022). Finally, the view of higher education as a tool for economic equalization must be extended beyond access to include the promise that expansion of higher education provides high-quality education, high rates of persistence, and real security for all graduates in the labor market.

Limitations

The limitations of the methodology and structure of the narrative review approach and the literature base must be recognized. First, the search strategy only included peer-reviewed journal articles from the Scopus database published between 2000 and 2026, which might have missed important findings from books, policy monographs, grey literature, and non-English language articles (Baethge et al., 2019; Green et al., 2006). Second, there is also a clear sectoral and geographical imbalance in the existing literature: empirical studies are largely conducted in a certain national context and/or in high-income economies, and the findings of these studies are not necessarily transferable to lower-income and/or transitioning educational systems (Reinders et al., 2021). Thirdly, the concepts and terminology used in different disciplines are often overlapping and used interchangeably. For example, the terms educational access, widening participation, and educational equity are used interchangeably (Óhidy, 2018). Lastly, literature selection and thematic synthesis, like a narrative review, do not involve statistical aggregation (e.g., meta-analysis) but rather qualitative synthesis. Hence, findings are not based on standardized effect-size estimation

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