8 United States of America (U.S.)

8.1 Facts and Figures

The United States of America look back on 200 years of democracy and a high growth rate next to a low inflation. Compared to other countries the higher education system in the U.S. is not centrally steered (Altbach 1998b, p.61) and is mainly privately organised, especially the old and high quality universities. McConnell (1957, p.315) formulates the crucial point:

There is no ‘system’ of American higher education. It is safe to say there never will be. Diversity of support, control, organization, aims, programs, and students will continue to be the most evident characteristics of post high-school education in this country.

All higher education institutions are organised on a local level which means that they are under the responsibility of the respective state but with different regulations for public and private institutions. The role of the federal government on primarily confined to student aid and research funding (Eckel 2001, p.106). Significant for the U.S. are high tuition fees compared to Europe and a competition of universities for the best professors, the most intelligent students and, of course, the most generous donors. Thus, there is a cluster of so-called elite-universities with an internationally excellent reputation. This reputation is often claimed for the whole American higher education sector although lots of higher education institutions do not provide high quality education. Furthermore, the U.S. apply accreditation procedures through certain bodies or regional organs of the academic self-administration instead of a nationally organised approval procedure for higher education institutions.

The higher education system is highly diversified and decentralised organised with more than 4,300 degree-granting higher education institutions and about 2,200 non-degree-granting institutions in 2006, which differ in size, complexity, mission and types of academic programmes, funding and steering. Whereas the majority of students at degree-granting institutions (in total about 17,700,000) are enrolled in public higher education providers, students at non-degree-granting institutions (in total about 450,000) are attending private for-
profit providers (according the numbers of the National Center for Education Statistics per July 2010). The focus of higher education is on degree-granting institutions organised both at a public and private basis (for-profit or not-for-profit). Figure 13 shows the distribution of students in these institutions within the last two decades. It is clearly visible that the majority of students are registered in public higher education institutions. Regarding the private higher education institutions especially the for-profit sector is highly increasing since the 1990s (Snyder et al. 2009).

Figure 13: U.S. Degree-granting Higher Education Institutions and Student Numbers 1990 – 2006

![Graph showing student numbers and number of higher education institutions from 1990 to 2006.]


The post-secondary education in the U.S. is divided into two main sectors: the undergraduate studies (2-year and 4-year colleges) and the graduate studies (university as graduate or professional schools). Nearly two thirds of all students are enrolled in 4-year colleges (more than 11 million students) (Snyder et al. 2009, p.276). The following categories can be distinguished: Vocational Technical Institutions and Junior/Community Colleges, Undergraduate Programs (Bachelor’s Degree), Master’s Degree Study, Doctor’s Degree Study (Ph.D.); and Professional Schools (Medicine, Theology, Law, etc.) and Postdoctoral Study and Research (USDOE 2003, p.12). Community colleges are the main initiators to open up the higher education sector to an increased student population because more than one third of the whole student population is enrolled in these colleges (Altbach 1998b, p.61). The majority of students graduate from a college and solely about 17 % of the age-cohort starts further studies at a graduate or professional school (USDOE 2003, p.12).