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Review Article

Affirmative Action in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize the existing literature on affirmative action in higher education. In the literature search, the researcher used different electronic databases. The databases used were ERIC, JSTOR, Willey, and Google Scholar. Search terms were formulated and applied to the online databases. A total of 80 study articles were identified, and 15 studies were included in the study after applying inclusion, exclusion, and quality assessment criteria. Research questions guided the review process. PICO was used to formulate the research questions. The paper was prepared using the planning, protocol, extraction, analysis, and reporting stages. This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria and used Zotero for reference management. The study revealed that affirmative action is provided to promote equity and access for minority and historically discriminated subgroups who wish to participate in higher education. Affirmative action is a controversial issue in higher education. Research on the effects of affirmative action in higher education has resulted in mixed outcomes. Researchers in the study of affirmative action in higher education used various research methods. The systematic literature review conducted also showed that there are still gaps in affirmative action research in higher education. To this effect, further study could be done in the future on the impact of affirmative action on students' performance and attainment, the impact of affirmative action on labor market outcomes and earnings, and graduate rates of beneficiaries. Finally, it is uncertain what the future holds for affirmative action.

Keywords

Access, Affirmative Action, Equity, Higher Education, PRISMA

1. Introduction

To promote equity and access, policies and programs that give historically marginalized groups—such as racial minorities—special consideration are referred to as affirmative action in higher education. These policies exist globally in various forms and aim to address demographic diversity and inequalities in education, employment, and public contracting participation and inclusion [20].

Baker, D. states that race-based affirmative action arose from the civil rights movement and a long history of racial discrimination [1]. In the United States, it was first mandated by the Kennedy administration in the 1960s and has since been widely implemented in procurement, education, and hiring. In line with this, [8] iterates that in the 1970s, three big changes occurred. First, additional categories came to be

covered in affirmative action, mainly Hispanic/Latino, Asians, and women; it became a policy for "women and minorities." Second, there was a move toward "hard" affirmative action with an emphasis on employees meeting numerical goals and quotas, targets, and timetables in the hiring and promotion of women and minorities. Third, it has become a controversial public policy. This change became institutionalized in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. In the second half of the 1990s, however, a number of court decisions, popular initiatives, and governmental agencies resulted in a national pullback from "hard" affirmative action. There was a shift from jobs to higher education occupying center stage.

According to [21] the goal of affirmative action is to address group based inequalities by focusing on marginalized populations, aiming to correct historical injustices, support equality, and mitigate social conflicts globally. But, it is also a controversial policy [12]. Affirmative action has been widely used to promote social inclusion and increase opportunities for minority groups in higher education [18].

Affirmative action has also been widely implemented outside the United States, from Canada to Malaysia to Northern Ireland, and in India, where reservation law, a set of caste-based quotas, is imposed by constitutional edict. Today, AA is a pervasive fixture of US college admissions, though it has been caste-based and generated much controversy [7]. However, the use of affirmative action in state universities and colleges is almost universally voluntary and has actually been banned in eight states.

When implemented, affirmative action in higher education has different forms. The most common way is the direct recruitment of minorities (e.g., recruiting at high schools), who might be overlooked in the admissions process. Recruitment can use tools such as scholarships to increase minority enrollment [5]. According to [25], affirmative action strategies range from outreach and recruitment to targeted training and investment to goals, timetables, and set-asides. Affirmative action strategies may be voluntary or compulsory, embedded in public policy and private practice.

Currently, affirmative action policies are under fire, and some have been retracted because of perceived partiality toward minorities and women [11]. Some people argue that although affirmative action was created to right historic wrongs, the policies are no longer necessary. They think that discrimination tends to be reversed by affirmative action. Affirmative action's detractors also contend that it violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbids discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or color. Affirmative action policies' detractors also claim that they result in lowered standards and possibly decreased student ambition. Affirmative action critics also think that it could strengthen stereotypes. People may look at achievements made by minorities and assume they got where they are because of affirmative action, not their achievement [17].

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a systematic literature review that aims to provide a comprehensive under-

standing of affirmative action in higher education. The study focuses on examining the motivations and implementation strategies of affirmative action, exploring the arguments both for and against it, analyzing the outcomes and impacts of affirmative action policies in higher education, and assessing the research methodologies utilized in this area of study.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Procedures

This systematic literature review was conducted on studies on affirmative action in higher education between November 21, 2023, and March 1, 2024. A systematic literature review is a review of the research literature using systematic and explicit accountable methods [13]. A more elaborated definition of systematic literature review is provided by [19] as follows: "Systematic reviews are literature reviews that adhere closely to a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant studies (of whatever design) in order to answer a particular question (or set of questions)."

The review process was guided by the following research questions:

1. Why and how is affirmative action practiced in higher education?
2. What are the arguments against affirmative action in higher education?
3. What are the effects of affirmative action in higher education?
4. What research methodologies are utilized in affirmative action literature?
5. What is the future of affirmative action research in higher education?

The review encompassed 15 papers that were gathered from different databases—ERIC, JSTOR, Willey, and Google Scholar. The author checked the Prospero database (http://www.library.ucsf.edu/) to determine if there are any published or ongoing projects related to the topic—affirmative action in higher education—in order to avoid any duplication. The finding showed that there are no ongoing or published articles in the area of this topic.

The paper was prepared in the following steps: planning, protocol, extraction, analysis, and reporting stages. This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria. The researcher used Zotero for reference management, and a check was made as to the correctness of the referencing by Zotero.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The paper focused on studies made on affirmative action in higher education and was published between 2019 and

2023. The paper is excluded if it is written in a language other than English, a paper published in a conference, a paper published as a book chapter, a paper published in predator journals, or a gray paper.

2.3. Quality Assessment

The following factors were considered as eligibility criteria in selecting the papers: Are the research goals clearly stated, are the papers peer-reviewed, and are the papers full-text, and are the contents accessible? Only peer reviewed full-text available journal articles written on affirmative action in higher education were used in the systematic review.

2.4. Search Strategy and Source of Information

Search terms were formulated and applied to the online databases. Key terms were developed using various Boolean operators, such as "AND" and "OR." The following search terms were used: "Affirmative Actions", OR "Equal Rights Policy", OR "Anti-discrimination", OR "Positive Affirmative Action" AND "Higher Education", OR "Universities", OR "Colleges". A search on ERIC database on November 23, 2023 gave a result of 12 articles. A search in JSTOR on November 25, 2023 resulted in 19 journal articles. A search of journal articles in Willey on December 6, 2023 resulted in 11 journals. A search in Google Scholar on December 19, 2023-February 12, 2024 resulted in 38 journals.
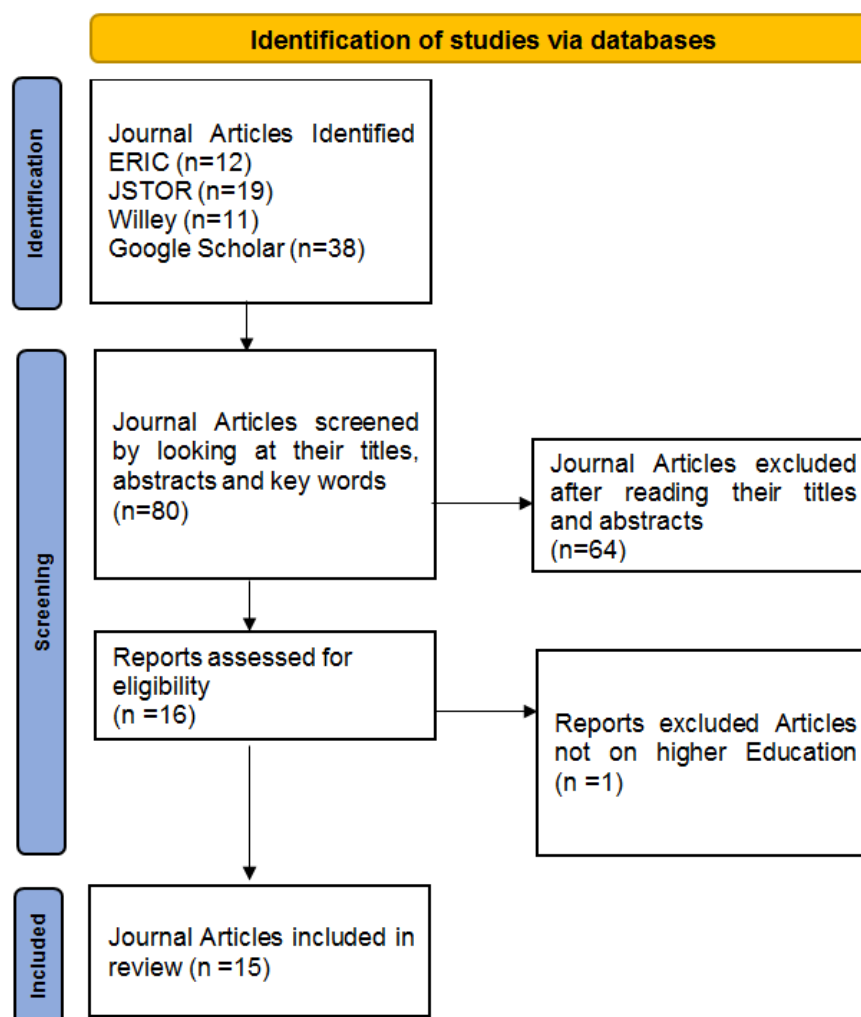

Figure 1. Search Strategy.

The graph next page shows the distribution of the articles by country. Four (4) of the studies were from Brazil, three (3) of them were from the USA, three (3) of them were from India, two (2) of them were from Nepal, and one (1) each from Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa.
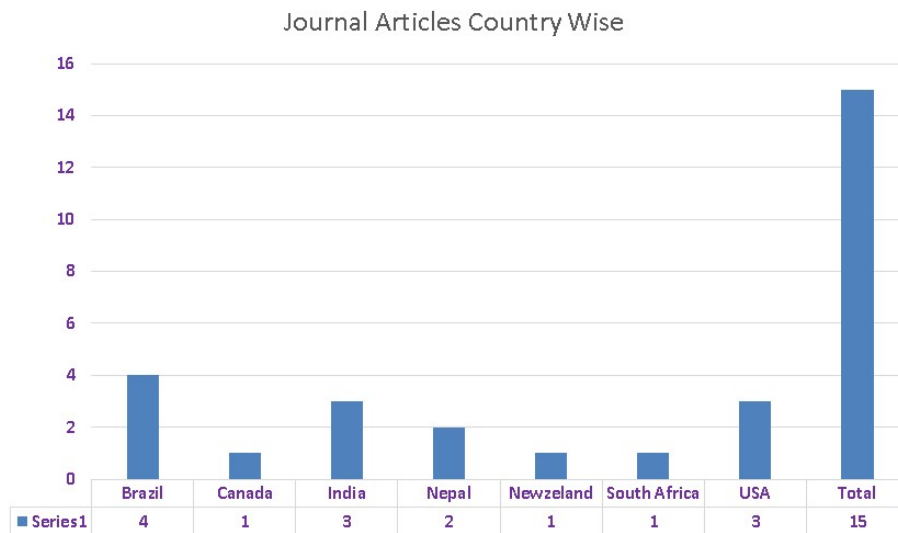
Figure 2. *Articles by Country.*

The line graph below shows publications year wise that were included in the systematic literature review. Six (6) of the articles were published in 2019, two (2) articles in year 2021, another four (4) articles in year 2022, and the remaining three (3) articles in 2023.

Figure 3. *Articles by Year of Publication.*

3. Results

In this section of the paper the researcher reports the findings of the systematic literature review in the form of answers to the research questions.

3.1. Justifications and Mechanisms of Providing Affirmative Action in Higher Education

Researchers in the study of affirmative action provided various reasons for providing affirmative action in higher education. The educational opportunities for disadvantaged people help them to break the vicious cycle of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination by enabling them to improve their social and economic status [10], to promote equity and access for minority and historically discriminated subgroups who wish to participate in tertiary education [12], and it is intended to increase access to education for the marginalized sections [15]. The following mechanisms of providing affirmative action in higher education were also given by the researchers in the studies. Reserve [7], percent plans, which guarantee admission to top high school students, and holistic review, in which applications are evaluated on a comprehensive set of merits [14], Quota [6, 16], and income and racial-based quotas [4].

3.2. Arguments Against Affirmative Action in Higher Education

Affirmative action is a controversial issue in higher education. Opponents of affirmative action have argued that it results in preferential treatment, impermissible quotas, and reverse discrimination [12]. Legal challenges to affirmative action have been common in some overseas jurisdictions and have resulted in some instances in weaker, or absent, affirmative action [2]. Affirmative Action (AA) policies aim to provide or increase access to preferred jobs or seats in educational institutions to individuals who would not have been selected otherwise. The policy is meant to benefit designated social groups, such as racial, religious, or ethnic minorities, or lower-ranked caste groups who are socially stigmatized on account of their group identity. However, an unintended consequence of AA might be that it harms the very beneficiaries it aims to help by further stigmatizing them as incompetent, on account of the fact that they would not have gained entry in the absence of AA [9]. One of the arguments against affirmative action is that it causes internal and external stigma towards its actual or perceived beneficiaries [22]. One of the key criticisms of such policies is that they undermine meritocratic principles [23].

3.3. The Effects of Affirmative Action in Higher Education

Research on the effects of affirmative action in higher education has resulted in mixed outcomes. This affirmative action policy also had a significant spillover effect on high-school completion rates and school enrollments in higher grades [3]. Affirmative action policies have changed the educational attainment of the average scheduled Caste population [6]. Affirmative Action increases study effort and exam performance for the majority of disadvantaged students targeted by the policy [7]. Despite the constitutional commitment to provide equitable opportunities for educational development, Dalits who comprise above 13% population have been facing multitudes of exclusion in HE opportunities [10]. The educational attainment of black children has improved but the translation of that education into jobs has not—South Africa. Increased years of schooling for non-Whites-Brazil. Educational affirmative action in India has benefited a small segment of the target groups, the creamy layers of the Dalit and Adivasi population. In USA affirmative action has increased access to higher education but did not contribute to social movability [12]. The reservation policy was formulated to bring equity among different social groups but it has created inequality within the social groups which was not expected [15]. Affirmative Action increased enrollment of disadvantaged students to elite institutions [16]. Affirmative Action led to an increase in the enrollment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazilian universities [24]. Affirmative action improves the outcomes of targeted students. Specifically, race-based quotas raise the share of Black students in federal universities, an effect not observed with income-based quotas alone. The results suggest that income and race-based quotas beneficiaries experience substantial long-term welfare benefits. There is no evidence of mismatching or negative consequences for targeted students' peers [26].

3.4. Research Methodologies of Affirmative Action in Higher Education

Researchers in the study of affirmative action in higher education used various research methods. Empirical [3, 4, 24] experimental [7] case study review paper [12], review paper [10, 14, 15], cross-sectional Study [16] and survey [2, 26]. In the empirical studies attempts were made to study the impact of India's affirmative action policies for scheduled Castes on educational attainment [6]. Drawing on a case study of an affirmative action policy designed for the inclusion of members from marginalized groups in Nepal's civil service, the article critically examines whether this erodes meritocracy and productivity [23], investigates how the adoption of affirmative action for college admission affected the enrollment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazil [24], investigated if making access to college easier with affirmative action can incentivize students to continue enrollment in secondary school and complete high-school [3], and to examine the impact of policy alternatives to race-based affirmative action on underrepresented minority university enrollment [4]. In the case study review paper [12], attempted to provide a comparative review of the historical and legal evolution of affirmative action in higher education in Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United States and the educational outcomes created by systems of affirmative action around the world. In their review papers [10, 14, 15] attempted to analyze the caste-based system of Nepal, which has a significant impact to the students from the Dalit community in accessing and achieving quality and equitable education in Nepal, to review existing policies related to affirmative action at five major universities in Canada and assesses the equity initiatives undertaken by university authorities to promote greater access and inclusion of different ethnic minority groups respectively. In the cross-sectional study by [16], an attempt was made to assess how affirmative action introduced to expand college access in Brazil impacted enrollment, in a survey study done by [26] an attempt was made to provide insights regarding the future of affirmative action by analyzing the implementation methods and the empirical evidence on the use of placement quotas in the Brazilian higher education system, and lastly in a research done by [2] aimed to define affirmative action and outline the rationale for affirmative policies, give examples of how affirmative action policies have been implemented and give examples of legal challenges to affirmative action drawing on international experience.

3.5. The Future of Affirmative Action Research in Higher Education

The systematic literature review conducted showed that there are still gaps in affirmative action research in higher education. To this effect, the following research areas were identified: Understanding the impact on students' performance and attainment and consequently on their later labor market outcomes is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the overall and lasting impacts of Affirmative Action [16]. Future research on the graduation rates of beneficiaries, the impact of college access on labor market earnings, and the overall effects of the policy on economic inequality is recommended [24].

4. Discussion

Affirmative action encompasses policies and programs designed to advance equal opportunities for marginalized populations, including women and minorities, in higher education. These initiatives aggressively promote diversity and inclusion to overcome systemic obstacles and historical injustices. The need to end institutionalized discrimination and give marginalized groups fair opportunities gave rise to affirmative action in higher education. Colleges and universities seek to establish a more inclusive and representative learning environment by actively seeking out and promoting diversity. Increasing access for underrepresented students, promoting diversity on campus, and preparing students for a globalized workforce are the main goals of affirmative action initiatives in higher education. Admissions processes, quota systems, outreach, and recruitment programs are the mechanisms used to implement affirmative action.

Affirmative action proponents contend that it alleviates systemic disparities, encourages diversity, and advances social equity. Affirmative action promotes equality and inclusivity by giving opportunities to underrepresented groups and leveling the playing field. Affirmative action opponents point out issues with meritocracy, reverse discrimination, and the possibility of tokenism in admissions procedures. Affirmative action, according to some, worsens prejudices and challenges personal success.

Several approaches were used in studying affirmative action in higher education with different objectives. The studies were able to identify future research areas to be investigated by other researchers. Several effects are observed from the implementation of affirmative action in higher education. To this end, affirmative action had a significant spillover effect on high-school completion rates and school enrollments in higher grades, increased educational attainment, increased study effort, increased exam performance, and increased access to higher education.

Last but not least, it is uncertain what the future holds for affirmative action. The significance of affirmative action policies in advancing diversity, inclusivity, and equality cannot be overlooked, despite continuous debate regarding their necessity and effectiveness. Through careful discussion and critical analysis, the higher education system, endeavors to establish an inclusive and equitable educational context that benefits individuals, organizations, and the community at large.

5. Conclusion

The articles used for the systematic literature review have made important contributions to the literature on affirmative action in many areas. It is also important to note that research on affirmative action in higher education have drawn researchers from different countries. The researchers used a variety of research approaches. To name the area in which these studies contributed, the first is on the rationale and the different mechanisms of providing affirmative action. In the articles, there was also identification of the arguments for and against affirmative action and the impact of affirmative action on the targeted groups. The researchers also pointed out future research areas with respect to affirmative action in higher education. The limitations of the articles is that none of them have considered other special needs that should be entertained through affirmative action, namely disability and the gifted. They mainly focused on race and income. The implication of this review is that since affirmative action is a debatable issue higher education institutions should look for other policies and programs alternative to affirmative action.

Abbreviations

AA	Affirmative Action
PICO	Problem Intervention Comparison Outcome
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

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