

Equity, inclusion and pluralism in
higher education

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This paper was commissioned by UNESCO and is part of 3rd World Higher Education Conference organized by UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022, with the purpose of enhancing the contribution of higher education institutions and systems world-wide, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its pledge to leave no one behind, and looking at the Futures of Education. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to UNESCO.

This paper can be cited with the following reference: Salmi, J., 2022, *Equity, Inclusion and Pluralism in Higher Education*. Paper commissioned for the World Higher Education Conference 18-20 May 2022.

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For further information, please contact: hed@unesco.org



Summary

Around the world, many children face challenging circumstances beyond their own control— due to discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, socioeconomic background or other attributes – that drastically affect their opportunities to go to school, stay in school, and complete secondary education. This has a particularly strong impact on children in developing countries, and for disadvantaged groups across the world. At the tertiary level, young people encounter barriers reflecting the cost of studying, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, and lack of access to information about labour market prospects. The need to achieve greater inclusion and promote pluralism¹ in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative, as reflected in target 4.3 of the SDGs.

To be effective, equity promotion policies must be defined in a comprehensive way, taking both financial and non-monetary aspects into consideration, coordinating national-level and institutional level actions in a complementary manner, and putting as much emphasis on completion as on access, which has traditionally received more attention. A long-term view is key to guaranteeing continuity and consistency in effective equity promotion policies, which require well-established information systems to identify all equity groups, measure equity gaps, and assess progress in terms of access and graduation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions and students have experienced unprecedented disruption and new challenges. Severe reductions in financial resources, the digital gap, and the lack of preparation of instructors have exacerbated disparities in access and success, and created social distress, especially among vulnerable students. Countries and institutions must therefore accelerate efforts to remove barriers to quality higher education for all learners from under-represented groups.

1. The report refers to pluralism rather than diversity. Diversity describes the existence of many groups of people within a society, whereas pluralism means a society in which diversity is widely accepted, genuinely embraced, and actively supported.

Acknowledgements

With the purpose of producing updated analysis and recommendations for the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), UNESCO organized the Technical Expert Group (TEG), whose members were tasked with preparing background documents on each of the main themes of the Conference. Experts participating in the TEG included César Guadalupe, Dag Olav Hessen, Susanna Karakhanyan, Achim Hopbach, Mpine Makoe, David Mills, Ka Ho Mok, Kilemi Mwiria, Jamil Salmi, Sylvia Schmelkes, Francesc Pedró, Damtew Teferra. This is one of the TEG's background documents, which respectively approached the following themes:

- Impact of COVID-19 on higher education
- Higher education and the SDGs²
- Equity, inclusion, and pluralism
- Quality and relevance of programmes
- Academic mobility in higher education
- Governance in higher education
- Financing higher education
- Data and knowledge production
- International cooperation to enhance synergies
- The futures of higher education

The following UNESCO focal points participated in or provided support, at different moments, to the TEG's activities: Dana Abdrasheva, Daniele Viera, Phoebe Kirkup, Paz Portales, Victoria Galán, Huong Nguyen, Hassmik Tortian, Qingling Kong, Peter Wells, Harold Mera, Takudzwa Mutize, Talal El Hourani, José Antonio Quinteiro, Keith Holmes and Emma Sabzalieva. The TEG's activities were directly coordinated by José Luis Guzmán.

The TEG met online four times throughout 2021 (March 24, May 19, July 21, and September 8) and held an in-person meeting in Barcelona on 29-30 November 2021. Besides extensive literature review, the process of elaborating the documents included 24 online consultation meetings facilitated by the TEG members. These meetings involved more than 180 experts or stakeholders from all regions of the world. In addition, the TEG members considered comments provided by diverse reviewers for each theme and a technical team of UNESCO specialists reviewed the final versions.

This background document on equity, inclusion, and pluralism is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Francisco Javier Gil, a professor and researcher at the University of Santiago in Chile (USACH), who held the UNESCO chair for 'Inclusion in Higher Education' until he passed away in March 2021. Professor Gil was a champion of social justice and pioneered several initiatives to promote equity and inclusion in the Chilean higher education system. He was driven by the belief that 'talent is equally distributed among the poor and the rich, and among all ethnic and cultural groups.' The PACE programme that he designed and piloted has transformed the life of thousands of young Chileans who would not have had the opportunity of becoming successful professionals without Professor Gil's determination and commitment to equity.

2. A synthesis based on the report of the UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda (EGU2030): Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (2022). The full report can be found here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380519> (Accessed 9 February 2022.)

Acronyms

IESALC	International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
NUC	National Universities Commission (Nigeria)
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization
WDR	World Development Report

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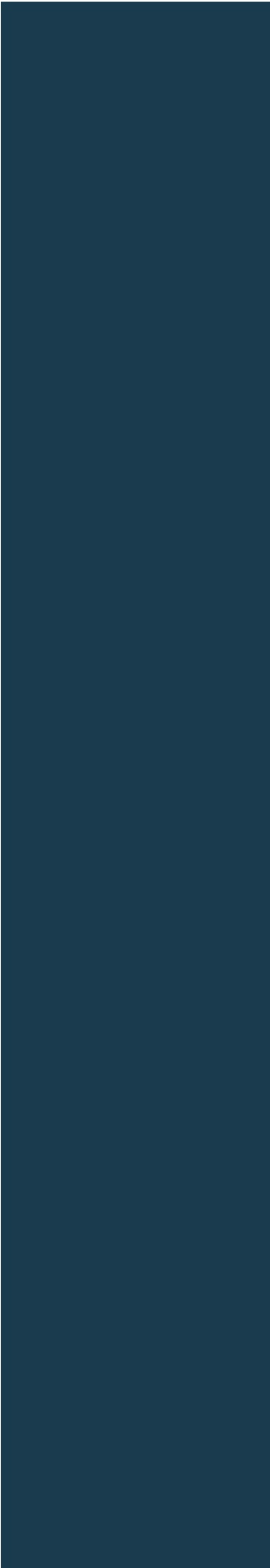
01.

Introduction

Equality of opportunity: the impertinent courtesy of an invitation offered to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances will prevent them from accepting it.

R.H. Tawney³

3. Tawney, R.H. (1952). Equality in historical perspective. In Johnston, David (ed), (2000). Equality., pp. 90-106. Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Company.



While less than 1 out of 10 young people were enrolled in higher education in 1970, today 40% of the relevant age cohort access higher education worldwide. However, despite the spectacular expansion that has occurred in many parts of the planet in the past 60 years, severe disparities persist in higher education. A disproportionately high share of students enrolled in higher education still comes from wealthier segments of society (Marginson, 2016). Even when they gain access, students from under-represented and traditionally excluded groups tend to have lower completion rates (Salmi, 2020). They are often tracked into less prestigious higher education institutions and face reduced and sometimes lower-quality labour market opportunities as a result. Increased cost-sharing and the rapidly rising proportion of private higher education providers—enrolling more than half the students in several African, Asian, and Latin American nations—have been associated with growing inequality in access and success at the post-secondary level.

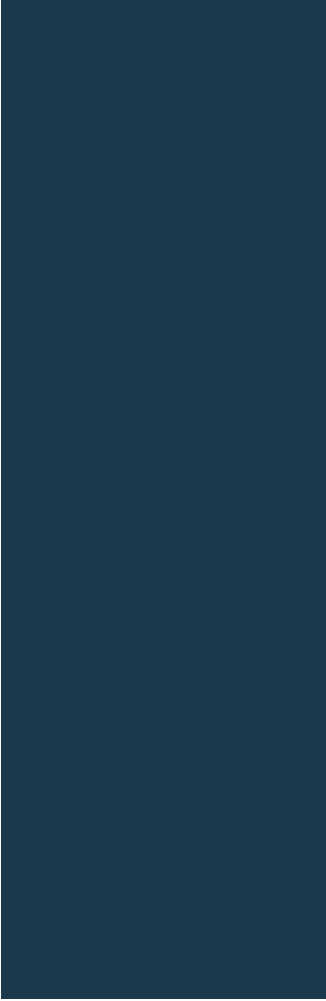
Structural inequality and disparities exist across groups and societies, often due to historic discriminatory norms around social attributes such as economic class, gender, minority status based on ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, or age characteristics, and disabilities and others.

Considering the extensive social and private benefits that higher education generates, ensuring inclusive access and success is indispensable to achieve social justice and economic efficiency. From a human rights perspective, encouraging the realization of the full potential of all people is intrinsic to the fourth United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.’⁴

As emphasized in UNESCO’s *Making Higher Education More Inclusive* (2020), several key normative instruments lay down international legal obligations towards inclusive higher education. These are particularly captured by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), article 13 and General Comment 13; the Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), article 1; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), article 28; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), article 24; the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989), articles 26 to 29.

Individual, private benefits of attending higher education include improved health outcomes, increased earning potential, and greater life satisfaction. On a broader systemic level, the public and societal benefits accrued by having higher levels of education in the workforce and among citizens include lower unemployment rates, increased tax revenues, greater intergenerational mobility,

4. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>



deeper civic and volunteer participation, and lessened dependency on social services (Salmi, 2017).

Furthermore, a talented, low-income and/or minority high school graduate who is denied entry into higher education represents an absolute loss of human capital and potential contributions to knowledge generation and the development of the arts and culture, not only for the individual person but for society as a whole. The lack of opportunities for access and success in higher education leads to under-developed human resources and a resulting shortfall in the capacity to generate and capture economic and social benefits (Harbison, 1964; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Ramcharan, 2004).

This background document takes stock of what is known about equity and inclusion in higher education, focusing on the policy implications of disparities in pluralist societies. After examining how equity target groups are defined across countries, it provides a sense of the scope of disparities along their main dimensions. It then analyzes the main drivers of inequality in higher education. Finally, it reviews the range and effectiveness of equity promotion policies adopted at the national and institutional levels to remove the financial and non-monetary barriers constraining students from underprivileged groups with the potential to succeed in higher education. Pluralist societies cannot exist without the removal of these disparities.

02.

**Who is
under-
represented
in higher
education?**

Even though many countries have implemented policies, programmes, and projects to support equitable access to higher education for students from under-represented groups, there is no universally agreed definition of ‘target equity groups.’ Definitions and classifications vary across continents and countries, even where nations have set the common goal of increasing participation in higher education (Salmi and Sursock, 2017). The groups most often covered in policy documents include individuals in the lowest income/wealth groups, women, minorities (ethnic, linguistic, etc.) and people with disabilities (OECD, 2008; Salmi and Bassett, 2014). In addition to these groups, the consultations undertaken with experts from all over the world as part of the preparation process for this Background Document emphasized the need to pay more attention to the challenges faced by students coming from rural and remote areas.

A 2018 survey of 71 countries, carried out ahead of the first celebration of the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED), found that several new equity group categories have emerged (Table 1). Based on the results of the survey, just 11% of the countries surveyed have formulated a comprehensive equity strategy (Salmi, 2018). Another 11% have elaborated a specific policy document for one equity group, either gender, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples or others. In the countries surveyed, students with disabilities were the category most frequently targeted.

Table 1. New categories of equity groups

Equity groups	Country examples
First-generation students	Australia, United States
LGBTQIA ⁵	Brazil, Colombia
Victims of sexual abuse / violence	Colombia, Ecuador, Spain
Deported migrants	Ecuador, Mexico
Children of invalid veterans or civil servants	Mexico, Russia, Vietnam
Foreign refugees	Australia, Colombia, New Zealand
Children of military families	England
Internally displaced people because of civil war or natural catastrophes	Colombia, Georgia
Demobilized guerrilla fighters and paramilitaries	Colombia
Students who do not speak the national language	Denmark
Students with care experience, orphans, youth without parental care	Austria, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia
Single mothers	Ecuador
Families with more than 3 children	Georgia, South Korea
Children of parents deported during the Soviet era	Georgia
Jailed people, ex-offenders	Venezuela, Wales
Students from occupied territories	Georgia

Source: Salmi (2018; 2020)

5. LGBTQIA stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and others.

Attempts to measure equity in higher education assume that the proportion of target equity groups should be equal to their share in the general population (Bohonnek et al, 2010). In practice, however, the choice of indicators to measure disparities in higher education has been heavily influenced by the availability of data to analyze the situation of each equity group. Overall, countries tend to focus mainly on participation data, which can then be used only to measure access disparities (Salmi, 2020).

Selecting appropriate indicators to measure equity in higher education for the different groups depends on two main considerations. The first criterion is whether there is an inherent ranking among individuals within an equity category. This is the case, for example, with respect to socio-economic background, but not for other groups such as women and men, or people with and without disabilities who are non-ordinal categorical variables from a statistical viewpoint (D'Hombres, 2011). The second consideration is linked to the perspective (local, national and/or international) of equity assessments. From an international perspective, for example, it makes only sense to analyze equity groups that are comparable across countries. This is often limited to socio-economic background and gender because of data availability (Atherton et al, 2016).

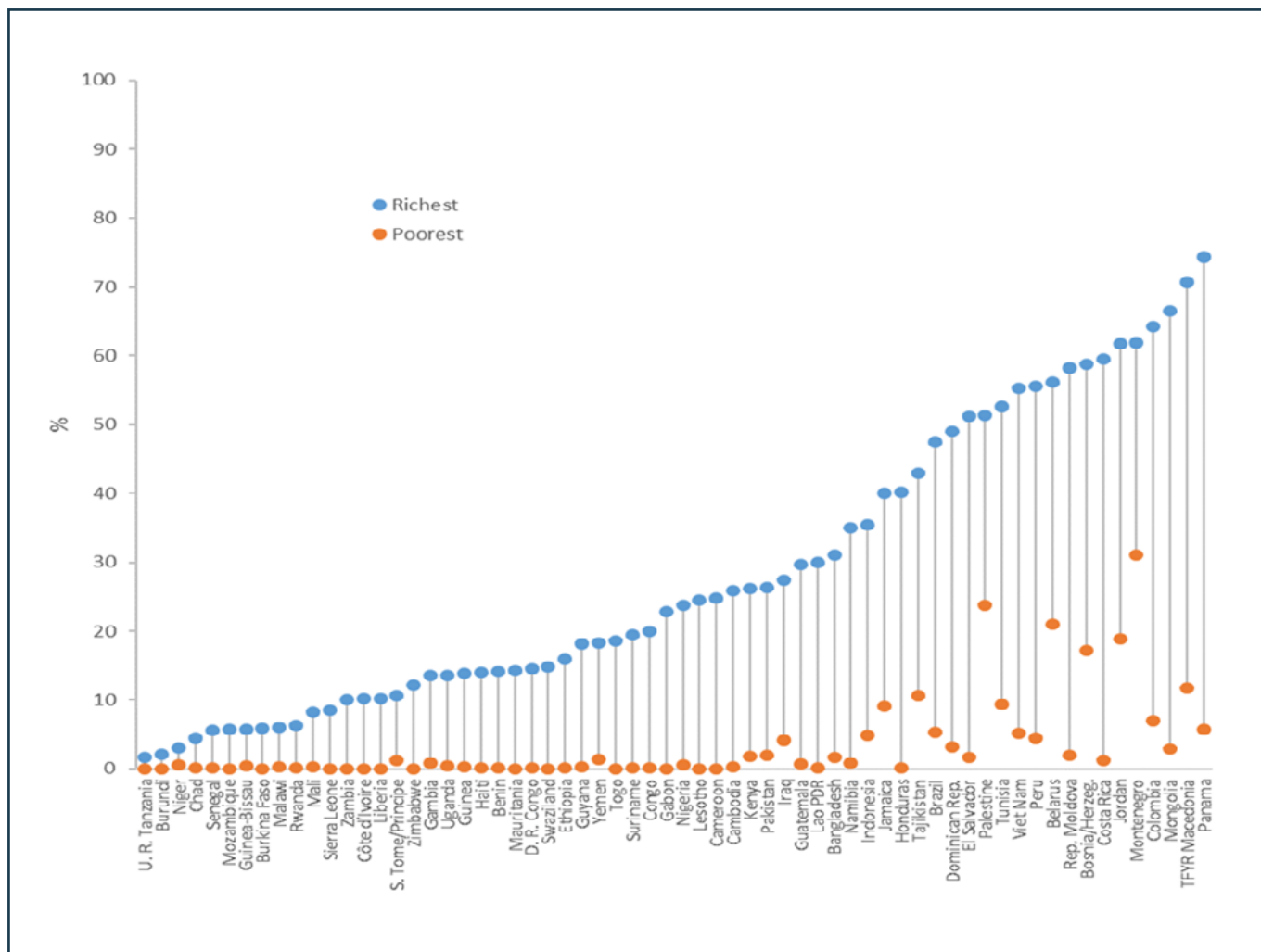


03.

**What is the
scope of
disparities?**

Household surveys available for 64 countries reveal large gaps in participation rates among income groups across all levels of enrollment (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Tertiary level enrollment rate by household wealth in selected low- and middle-income countries (2010–2015)

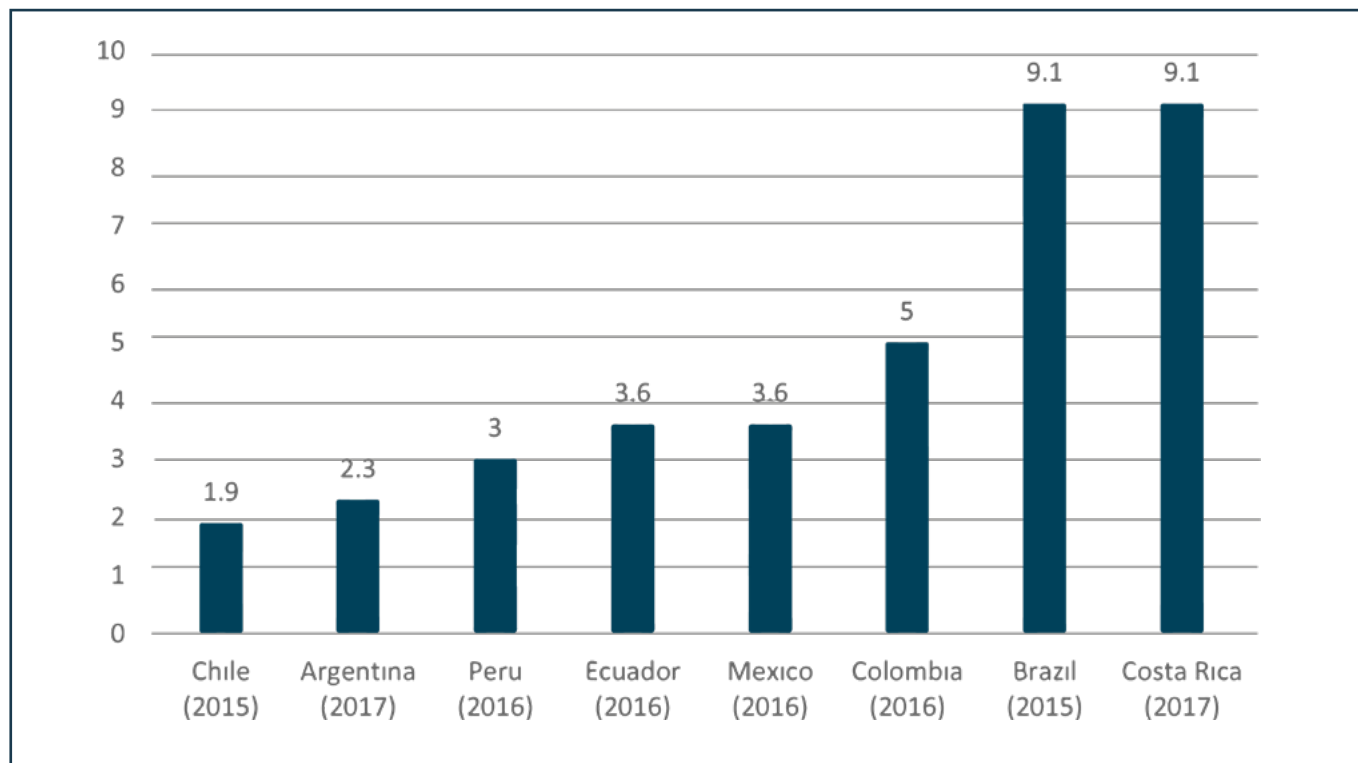


Source: UNESCO (2017) Global Education Monitoring Report 2017 Accountability and Education; Meeting Our Commitments/18, p.162

Looking at the disparity index for several Latin American countries, which measures the enrollment rate for the richest income quintile divided by the enrollment rate for the poorest quintile, shows large variations in the degree of inequality in access to higher education (Figure 2). It is noteworthy to observe that Brazil, which offers free higher education in its public universities, is much more unequal than Chile, where until a few years ago students paid high tuition fees. In the former case, public universities enroll a high proportion of students from rich families, who have studied in private high schools and are better prepared to take the competitive standardized entrance examination. In Chile, a comprehensive student aid system helps partially overcome the financial barriers faced by academically qualified low-income students⁶.

6. González, A. (2018), Cátedra UNESCO Inclusión en la Educación Superior, Transición con Equidad hacia Universidades Selectivas: El caso de las Vías de Acceso Inclusivo en la Universidad de Santiago, Universidad de Santiago, Editorial USACH, Santiago.

Figure 2. Differences in disparities in enrollment in higher education in Latin America



Source: Salmi (2020)

Large disparities are found in many other countries in other parts of the world. In Vietnam, for instance, where despite improvements over the past decade the absolute gap in enrollment rate between the richest income group and the poorest has increased, from 34 percentage points in 2006 to 57 in 2016. In Kenya, young people from the richest quintile are 49 times more likely to enroll in university than those from the poorest quintile.

Gender balance in higher education has improved substantially in the past two decades. Today, women represent the majority of enrollment in higher education in most countries, except for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, females represent only 42.3% of all students. In South Asia, their proportion is 47%. However, significant gender inequalities persist in access to STEM institutions and programmes⁷. Data from 18 countries across the world show the rate of female graduates in STEM varying from a low of 11% in Switzerland to a high of 47% in Argentina (Salmi, 2020).

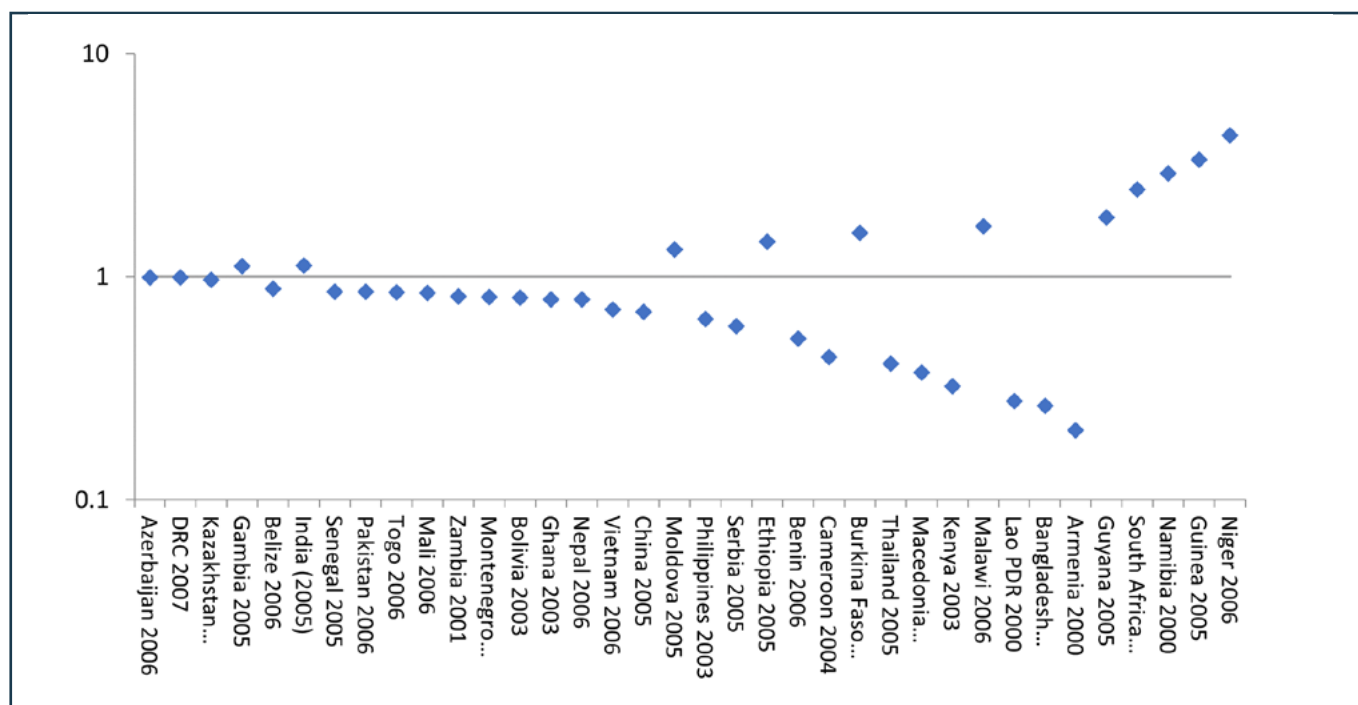
Few data are available to assess differences in access to higher education across ethnic, racial, or religious minorities. Where they exist, data reveal vast disparities. For instance, in South Africa, despite the increase in overall enrollment in higher education, less than one in five Black South Africans access it, compared to 55% among whites (Salmi and Van der Berg, 2019). Similarly, in Vietnam enrollment rates of the Kinh/Hoa are four times higher than those of ethnic minorities (Salmi, 2020, based on Linh and Thuy, 2019). In Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala, Indigenous presence in tertiary education is very low. For example, in Colombia, where Indigenous represent 10% of the total population, they are only 5% among students enrolled in higher education. In Guatemala, where more than 40% of the population is Indigenous, they account for only 11% of the total student population. In Chile, by

7. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

contrast, 8% of students are Indigenous, which is higher than their share in the total population (5%). In Australia, a review of 39 studies published between 2000 and 2016 on barriers and enablers of access to higher education highlights that the proportion of Indigenous students in higher education remains significantly lower than their non-Indigenous peers and that they are at risks of dropping out more often (Gore et al, 2017). In this country, while their number has increased over time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students still represent less than 2% of the domestic student population, while they are about 3% of the Australian working age population.

The probability of attending higher education is generally much lower for ethnic minorities, unless the minority is historically advantaged such as in South Africa (Figure 3). Using the results of household surveys in several low- and middle-income countries, the graph shows that in most countries for which data are available, students from minority groups have a lower probability of attendance than the general population (in all the countries with a probability lower than 1, considering 1 being the reference value for the general student population).

Figure 3. Probability of attending higher education among minorities



Source: González Rubio and Macdonald (2011)

People with disabilities, often called the ‘invisible minority’, are also widely under-represented in higher education. In Nigeria, for example, the main government agency in charge of university education recognizes that, notwithstanding the absence of comprehensive statistics on opportunities for students with special needs, much more action is needed to offer students with disabilities adequate facilities and services (NUC, 2018). In Thailand, less than 1% of the youth with disabilities are found in higher education. In South Africa, they represent about 0.6% of the total student enrollment comparing to an estimated disability prevalence of 3.5% within the corresponding age group (20-29 years of age) (Salmi and Bassett, 2014). In Colombia, the proportion attending a tertiary education institution is 6.7% (Salmi, 2019).

Among the world’s more than 82 million refugees, the UNHCR estimates that only around 5% of the relevant age cohort have access to tertiary education (including tertiary technical and vocational education), whereas comparative enrolment figures for primary and secondary education are 68% and 34%, respectively (UNHCR 2021).

In summary, despite data and methodological limitations affecting the analysis of disparities in higher education, there is strong and overwhelming evidence of acute inequalities in most parts of the world, playing out along the various dimensions of equity: socio-economic, gender, minorities-related, and affecting people with disabilities. Furthermore, it is important to note high degrees of intersection among these dimensions. These disparities usually have an overlapping and cumulative effect across equity groups, thereby amplifying the impact of socio-economic inequality (UN, 2017). Gender discrimination tends to impact girls from low-income groups more prominently. For example, in Peru and Mexico, where female enrollment is lower than male enrollment—contrary to the general trend in Latin America—the difference between low income and high-income students is striking. In Peru, the enrollment rates of girls from the poorest and richest groups are 13.3 and 24.9%; in Mexico, they are 9.1% and 37.4% respectively (Fanelli and Jacinto, 2010). Several studies have documented how poverty, ethnicity and rurality are also closely linked in North and South America, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, poverty amplifies the obstacles encountered by people with disabilities and girls with disabilities have a lower probability of entering higher education or completing a degree than boys with disabilities.



04.

**What are the
main factors
driving unequal
access and
success?**

From a structural viewpoint, two dimensions of equity, vertical and horizontal, deserve to be analyzed in equal measure. Examining the vertical dimension requires looking at the entire educational cycle, starting with children's experience at the primary and secondary level, their transition from secondary to tertiary education, the progression of students, and the completion of their studies. The vertical dimension is the most salient aspect of an expansionary system, and the most studied one.

The horizontal dimension becomes more significant as systems expand and diversify into a large range of various types of institutions, often extending academic 'tracking' from primary and secondary education into tertiary. This 'tracking' or 'streaming' of students becomes an increasingly powerful channel of inequality, as equity concerns encompass not only who enrolls into and completes higher education, but also what kind of institution students attend and what labour market opportunities various types of qualifications and degrees offer to graduates.

Most children in developing countries face challenging circumstances beyond their own control—linked to their ethnicity, gender, geographical origin, and socioeconomic background—that drastically curtail their opportunities to go to primary school, stay in school, complete secondary education, and develop their full potential. As a matter of fact, what happens—or does not happen—in pre-school, primary school, and during secondary education shapes the pipeline of young people likely to seek entry into higher education.

At the higher education level, young people from underprivileged groups encounter additional barriers reflecting the cost of studies, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, lack of information about the labour market prospects of various institutions and academic programmes, and unequal job opportunities.

4.1. Non-financial barriers

Inadequate academic preparation and schooling, low educational expectations and aspirations, absence of knowledge or awareness about higher education options, scarcity of support for higher education planning, competing family or cultural interests and personal uncertainties are some of the obstacles preventing students from marginalized communities from successful participation in higher education (Eggins, 2010). Indeed, information access, motivation, inflexibility of university admission processes, lack of flexible learning pathways, family environment and others forms of cultural capital, are some of the non-monetary reasons that have been recognized as crucial factors in explaining poor participation of low-income individuals in higher education (Nybroten, 2003; Finnie et al, 2004; Gerald and Haycock, 2006).

Academic preparation is among the most powerful predictors of students' enrollment in tertiary education (Adelman, 1999). Students who have lower grades in high school and/or who do not get much support for their academic work from their parents are less likely to attain the necessary grades to go to university. Such students are also less likely to be motivated to partake in higher education, as they will assume that going to university is not a viable option for their futures.

The low expectations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be understood as a social phenomenon, not the result of personal choice. Students whose families or community members have not historically had access to higher education may not be exposed to role models who illustrate the possibility and promise of advanced study. Moreover, in these communities, school officials—teachers, counselors, administrators—often face complex and challenging environments that lead to a focus on persistence in secondary education and low

expectations for their students' accessing higher education. In these instances, norms for promoting access to post-secondary education are not emphasized or institutionalized. Instead, students and their communities may assume that higher education is only accessible and valuable to those with advantaged backgrounds. In each of these areas, however, there is no question that non-financial barriers are intertwined with monetary barriers.

Another important barrier is linked to what is called epistemological or epistemic access. A growing number of scholars have been studying how the type of knowledge transmitted through the curriculum, the language of instruction and research, and the explicit and implicit values embedded in the dominant institutional culture, can adversely affect the learning and research experience of students from traditionally under-represented groups, and their professional career (Morrow, 1993; Woolcock, 2002; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Looking at the experience of South African universities since the elimination of apartheid in 1994, Cross (2018) analyzes the 'histories, legacies, traditions, values and ethos that the dominant culture tends to privilege—discourses and assumptions as well as related institutional policies and practices that form the basis of routine processes of the university's academic and student practices' (p. 13). In many former colonies, universities perpetuate knowledge and research modes that perpetuate elitism in higher education.

4.2. Financial barriers

Among the many structural mechanisms at play to prevent students from under-represented groups from entering and graduating from higher education, some of the most important ones are the financial barriers faced by low-income students in most parts of the world because of the direct and indirect expenses involved in being a student. The cost of attending higher education represents a major challenge, especially in countries where public universities charge tuition fees. Even where university education is almost or completely free, living expenses and the opportunity cost of studying may be an impediment for low-income students, in the absence of adequate financial aid and social protection policies to guarantee a zero cost of education for students in need. Students who must work while studying because of economic need are at an additional disadvantage.

Children from underprivileged families often attend lower-quality primary and secondary schools, especially in countries with a dual system of private elite schools for the wealthiest groups and less-resourced public schools for the general population. Even when they exist, not all financial subsidies promote equitable access. This happens notably when they are unconditional and universal, as is the case when education is free of charge, since more students from richer households benefit from the subsidies, especially in institutions where access is restricted, such as the elite public universities in Brazil or the selective engineering schools in France and India. As Marx and Engels observed in 1875 in their Critique of the Gotha Programme, 'if in some states of the (United States) higher education institutions are also "free", that only means in fact defraying the cost of education of the upper classes from the general tax receipts.'

4.3. Inequality traps and intergenerational mobility

The 2006 World Development Report (WDR), which focused on equity and poverty, elaborated on the notion of inequality traps to single out disparities that ‘tend to perpetuate differences across individuals and groups over time, within and across generations’ (World Bank, 2006, 28). Eliminating inequality traps is a priority not only because they are morally unacceptable but also because the reproduction of intergenerational inequalities is likely to hinder a country’s social and economic development. Using nationally representative household survey data, an econometric study looking at the persistence of inequalities of opportunity in Brazil over time clearly showed that race, region of origin and father’s occupation continued to be strong predictors of an individual’s education level across generations, even though parental education had increased on average (World Bank, 2006).

Gender disparities are considered as the archetypical inequality trap. In many societies, cultural and religious norms ascribe distinct roles and spheres of influence to men and women. Because in many cases the latter are restricted to serving the household and contributing to its wellbeing from inside the home, their life chances are influenced more through marriage than labour market participation. This explains why parents invest less in their human capital, as evidenced by the lower rates of female enrollment in secondary and higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Even when women are active in the labour market, their lower earnings constitute an additional disincentive that works only to buttress traditional views about their social role. Shaped by these social norms, mothers are highly likely, in turn, to instill and reinforce the same values and behaviors into their daughters and daughters-in-law.

The 2006 WDR concludes that these inequality traps affect not only the distribution of the products of growth but also the dynamics of economic and social development because of market imperfections and the unequal distribution of power reflected in the way institutions such as universities operate. If anything, this confirms the importance of considering equity and efficiency as mutually reinforcing factors rather than in a trade-off perspective.

This concept of inequality traps is reminiscent of the work of Bernstein and Bourdieu on cultural capital and social reproduction in the 1970s. Bernstein (1973) studied the differences between the culture of the middle class and the culture of the working class in Great Britain, with particular emphasis on the forms and uses of language and linguistic codes prevailing in each case. His analysis showed how social relations determine a person’s speech, and that a person’s speech determines educational attainment. One of Bernstein’s crucial findings was that the ‘formal language’ of the middle class was much more relevant to academic success than the ‘popular language’ of the working class. In the same vein, Bourdieu developed the notion of ‘cultural capital’, arguing that educational performance is dependent on each student’s cultural capital, which in turn is unequally distributed among the various social classes. Stressing the importance of language in that context, Bourdieu paid particular attention to the distance between the sophisticated language used in school for pedagogical communication and knowledge acquisition and the home language of students. His empirical surveys showed that language played a key role in explaining the correlation between social origin and academic achievement.

Given that the informative efficiency of pedagogic communication is always a function of the receiver’s linguistic competence (defined as their variably complete mastery of the code of university language), the unequal social class distribution of educational profitable linguistic capital constitutes one of the best hidden mediations through which the relationship between social origin and scholastic achievement is set up ... Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, p.144).

05.

**How has COVID-19
exacerbated
disparities in
higher education?**

The commotion and confusion brought about by the abrupt closure of campuses and the rapid switch to online education have disrupted the lives of students all over the world. Table 2, based on interviews with key informants, attempts to capture the degree to which the COVID-19 crisis has affected vulnerable students, depending on the economic level of the countries they live in (Salmi, 2020). Vulnerable students refer to students from traditionally under-represented groups, such as low-income students, girls, members of minority groups, and special needs students.

Table 2. Readiness of students to move online

Factors of Readiness	High-Income Countries	Middle-Income Countries	Low-Income Countries
Financial difficulties to continue living as a student	X	XX	XXX
Lack of device and internet connection	XX	XX	XXX
Academic difficulties	X	XX	XX
Emotional distress	XX	XX	XX
Risk of dropping out	X	XX	XX

Note: XXX = seriously challenging for most students; XX= seriously challenging for some students; X= seriously challenging for a few students.

Source: Salmi (2018; 2020)

While the disruptions caused by the pandemic affected both rich and poor countries and upended the lives of every societal group, students from vulnerable groups have been hit especially hard. In wealthy societies such as the United States, where most residence halls were shut down—often suddenly— many first-generation students and students from low-income families had problems finding off-campus housing on short notice, lost access to campus-based health care, (both physical and mental) struggled to pay unexpected living expenses and felt unprepared for a sudden shift to online studies. In this context, community college students, who are more likely to be people of color, have lower family incomes, are more likely to care for dependents, and are much more vulnerable than those attending four-year institutions.

Even in high-income countries, internet connection has been a challenge for a substantial proportion of the population. In Australia and the United States, for instance, 13% and 6% of households do not have a high-speed connection, according to the World Economic Forum. In the latter country, one-third of low-income people are not connected. In France, a survey carried out in June 2020 found that at least 50,000 students had dropped out of university due to lack of connection, equivalent to 4% of the total student population (Habermush, 2020).

In poorer countries, students from disadvantaged groups have faced even greater difficulties. Opportunities for online learning have been drastically constrained in developing nations with limited internet access and low broadband capacity, especially in rural areas. Many students from low-income households—sometimes even faculty members—lack laptops or tablet computers and live in crowded spaces. In addition to digital-divide

challenges, colleges and universities in poor nations—even in affluent countries—have struggled to rapidly launch quality distance learning programmes. Many lack experienced instructional designers, sufficient educational resources, an adequate grasp of the specifics and nuances of online education, and strong institutional capacity to deliver it. The African University Association already has signaled that, among the 700 universities operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, very few were well prepared and sufficiently equipped to deliver their programmes online⁸. Reports from South Africa show how COVID-19 has been the ultimate revelator of existing disparities.

The current crisis has made it impossible not to recognize the historical, geospatial, economic inequalities of the country and the world students live in. In a certain sense, the pandemic, and the pivoting to online made visible the invisible or ignored manifestations and mechanisms of inequality... The lockdown has forced us to look much closer to where our students are - where they are positioned - what resources they have - what opportunities to engage in teaching and learning (Czerniewicz et al, 2020).

UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) estimates that about 30% of students in the Latin America and Caribbean region were unable to participate in online education for lack of computer and/or adequate internet connection, in a region where only half of the households are connected⁹.

The situation has also been difficult for students in South Asia. A recent assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on Indian universities concludes that 'social disconnectedness in higher education is an indicator of the continuity of deep-rooted social division rather than a mere aberration. It also indicates how educational inequalities are being reproduced during the pandemic, sometimes with tragic human consequence' (Malish, 2020). A survey carried out by the University of Hyderabad in India revealed that 63% of the students could not access online classes regularly (Jahangeer, 2020). In the Indian state of Kerala, a female Dalit student committed suicide by fire on 1 June 2020, because she was unable to attend online classes (Outlook, 2020). This tragedy reflected the connectivity challenges faced by many Indian students (BBC, 2020).

The gender gap also intersects with the digital gap, especially in Africa and South Asia. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa are 41% less likely to use mobile internet than men; in South Asia the probability is 58% (Broadband Commission, 2019). Furthermore, studying online under lockdown conditions has taken a special toll on women. Researchers have coined the term 'shadow pandemic' to refer to increases in domestic and sexual violence (Mutavati, Zaman, & Olajide, 2020). Beyond aggravated violence, COVID-19 has had a disproportionately high impact on the daily lives of women, especially mothers and caregivers. Women in professional careers who have children have been most affected as they had to take on the additional role of teacher. Female researchers have seen their output drop compared with their male colleagues.

8. Interviews with AAU officials.

9. Webinar statement by director of IESALC, the UNESCO Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

While detailed information on how students with special needs have fared during the pandemic is not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that few higher education institutions were able to make the necessary adjustments to facilitate their access to online education. In Kazakhstan, for example, a survey during the pandemic revealed the absolute lack of study materials and computer software adapted for use by people with sensory impairments, such as physical disabilities, sight issues or hearing loss. Blind students in Cambodia have voiced concern about the lack of books in braille. In the United States, the increase of lawsuits against colleges and universities by students with disabilities reflects the difficulties encountered as their institutions moved to online teaching (Salmi, 2020).

It should also be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has made large numbers of international students vulnerable as never before, creating serious emotional stress and anxiety. Many of them have found themselves stranded far away from their home country, facing economic and psychological hardship. Because the pandemic started in China, Asian students have often been stigmatized and have faced a hostile environment in several countries, especially in the United Kingdom, and in the United States (Andrew, 2020). At the same time, racial profiling of African students has been reported in nations as diverse as China, Cuba, and India (Ligami, 2020).

This picture of international students would not be complete without mentioning the plight of the least visible among international students, namely refugee students living in refugee camps or in precarious accommodation outside the camps. As happened in Kenya, the occupants of refugee camps have been often left to fend for themselves during the pandemic or ostracized for fear of contagion (O’Keefe, 2020). While information is available for only a few countries, it is likely that, because of COVID-19, refugee students everywhere have suffered more severe disruptions to their living conditions and study plans than regular students.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in some countries, academics and student activists have been targeted by political and university authorities, who used COVID-19 as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression. The Scholars at Risk Network has identified several cases, notably in China, India, and Turkey¹⁰.

10. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>

06.

Equity promotion policies around the world

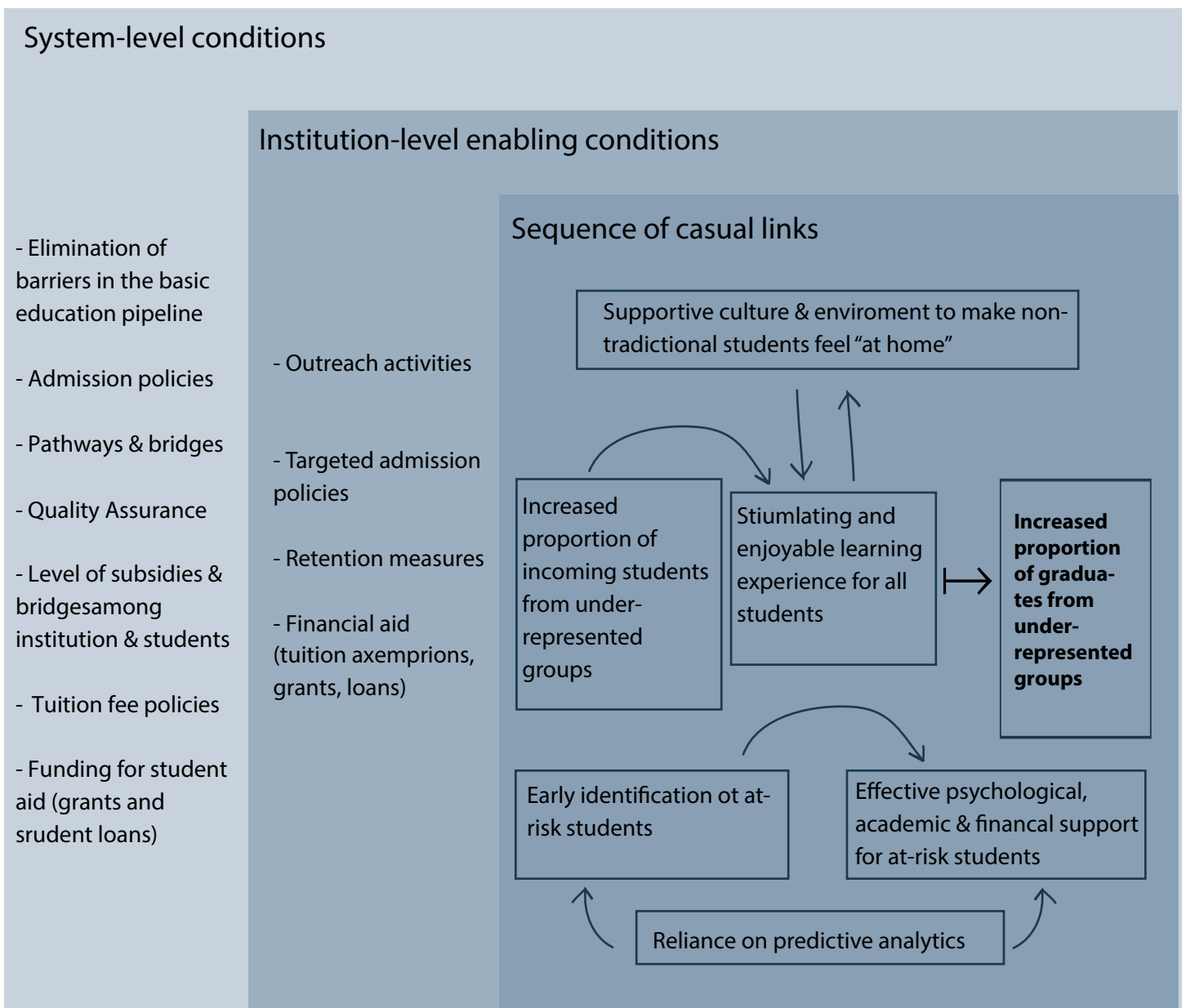
The potential consequences of failure include the corrosion of aspirations, damage to social fabrics, the loss of leadership and other skills that are critical to cohesive societies and the unforgivable waste of human potential.

Emerging Markets Symposium (2012)

6.1. Inequality traps and intergenerational mobility

Figure 4 presents a theory of change for reducing disparities in higher education and increasing access and success for students from disadvantaged groups. It identifies two sets of factors —system-level and institutional level dimensions— that affect the equity performance of higher education institutions, and outlines a sequence of inputs, interventions, and intermediary results that could lead to better equity outcomes for individuals and society as a whole.

Figure 4 – Theory of change for promoting equity in higher education



Source: Elaborated by Jamil Salmi

6.2. Inequality traps and intergenerational mobility

Higher education institutions do not operate in a vacuum. To understand their equity situation and equity promotion results, it is not sufficient to analyze what happens in the institutions alone. It is also essential to consider the key forces at play at the level of what could be called the higher education ecosystem within which universities and other institutions evolve. These forces can have a facilitating or constraining effect, depending on the circumstances (Salmi, 2011).

The higher education ecosystem includes the following key elements specifically influencing the equity situation and results: (i). admission policies, (ii). pathways and bridges, (iii). quality assurance framework, (iv). government subsidies for institutions and students, (vi). tuition fees, and (vii). financial aid. The State can define policies and measures to improve equity in higher education along all these dimensions.

Admission policies. The extent to which access to higher education institutions is open or selective is the first determinant of the presence of various equity groups. A 2017 study commissioned by the European Commission identifies four types of national admission systems based on the degree of streaming in secondary education –including streams that offer no direct route to higher education– and the freedom of higher education institutions to set their own criteria to choose their students in a selective way (Orr *et al*, 2017).

Affirmative action is an area of policy directed toward creating differential admission processes to promote equality of opportunity. While it has experienced backlash in the United States, it has received increased attention in many parts of the developing world. India has by far the most elaborate system in the world, with quotas for members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—the two most disadvantaged groups in society—absorbing half of all the seats in some of its public universities. A recent study examining the effects of quotas for disadvantaged castes and women at 200 engineering colleges found that the affirmative action programme had successfully increased college attendance for the targeted students, especially at the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (Bagde *et al*, 2016).

In recent years, the Brazilian government has sought to integrate affirmative action into the national legal framework. The Law of Social Quotas, enacted in 2012, requires public universities to reserve half of their admission seats for high school graduates coming from the public secondary sector and to vastly increase the enrollment of students of African descent (Romero, 2012). In Chile, an effective programme (Programme for Effective Access to Higher Education [PACE]) has been successfully implemented by the Ministry of Education. Connecting secondary and tertiary education, the programme identifies students from under-represented groups with high academic potential, strengthens their academic competences during the last two years of secondary school, recognizes their school grades as sufficient proof of their abilities to enter university, and

accompanies them during the first years of undergraduate studies. The programme has improved equity in the distribution of opportunities for more than 15,000 students in its years of implementation, who previously would never have made it to university and graduated¹¹.

In the past two decades, several countries—notably Australia, Canada, Colombia, Finland, Mexico, Peru and the United States—have set up dedicated institutions and/or programmes to meet the educational and cultural needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Pathways. In countries with a high degree of institutional diversification and, sometimes segmentation, the existence of pathways across types of institutions has a profound impact on the education chances of students from under-represented groups¹². Recognition of prior learning (RPL), which is practiced in several European countries, particularly in the northern and western parts of Europe, varies between those nations allowing entry via RPL to all higher education institutions versus those allowing entry to only a few programmes. A growing number of countries have put in place national qualifications frameworks designed to facilitate the movement of students from one segment to the other, allowing for easy recognition of qualifications and recognition of prior learning. In Canada and the United States, community colleges have agreements with public universities—sometimes using a common course coding system—that allow students from underprivileged background who started with an associate degree to facilitate their transfer to a four-year institution.

Quality assurance. A growing number of quality assurance systems are including equity-related criteria for evaluation and/or accreditation purposes to ensure that higher education institutions pay appropriate attention to the inclusion and success of students from under-represented groups. The accreditation status of universities and other institutions is often used as an eligibility criterion for access to financial aid for students from vulnerable groups. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) plays a key role in promoting the government's equity policy. TEQSA requires new and current providers to give evidence for how they meet standards set out in the Threshold Standards published in 2015, which take elements into consideration at two levels: in teaching and learning, and in monitoring the recruitment and participation of certain sub-groups (low income, Indigenous, etc.).

Level and allocation of public subsidies. The level of funding of public higher education institutions provided by the States directly influences the degree to which these institutions need to generate additional income to finance their operation and capital investments, and their ability to offer financial aid to students in need and support programmes for students at risk of failing and/or

11. UNESCO (2019), *Inclusive and intersectional education throughout life for leaving no one behind*, background document prepared by the UNESCO Chair in Higher Education for the International Forum 'On Inclusion and Equity in Education: Every Learner Matters', Cali, Colombia.

12. <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/our-expertise/flexible-learning-pathways-higher-education>

dropping out.

Among the countries that use a funding formula to allocate public resources to their public higher education institutions, a few (Australia, South Africa for instance) incorporate equity-related criteria in the formula. In the case of Austria, which appears to be the only country in the world that uses a performance grant as main budget allocation mechanism, a very small proportion (0.5%) can be retained by the government if a university fails to demonstrate that it deals adequately with the social dimension.

Several countries utilize special incentives in the form of competitive grants or institutional agreements to widen access to participation. In England, the Office of Fair Access requires the universities within the highest tuition fee band to sign an agreement setting out how they will promote widening participation. In Scotland, 'the Scottish Funding Council is investing just under £40 million of additional funding over four years to support widening access and universities have committed to deliver 727 new widening access places in 2014 to increase the proportion of students entering Scottish universities from disadvantaged and challenging backgrounds' (Eurydice 2015, p.117). The Australian Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) gives grants to higher education institutions to promote access, retention, and completion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Similar programmes are funded in support of Aboriginal students and special needs students.

Tuition fee policies. Countries vary a lot from the viewpoint of tuition fee policies, from some well-off countries offering free higher education for all, countries with significant levels of cost sharing, to countries with limited resources giving access to free higher education to the academically best qualified students while charging fees in selective programmes that cater directly to labour market needs. The presence or absence of tuition fees in public higher education institutions determines the existence of financial barriers for low-income students.

Targeted Free Tuition, an innovative approach that has been recently implemented in Chile and South Africa, seems to be a promising option that nations with limited resources could consider. This approach guarantees free higher education to students from the lowest income groups. From an equity viewpoint, it targets the most vulnerable students rather than offering subsidies to all students regardless of their parents' income. In terms of fiscal impact, it is potentially more financially sustainable than free higher education for all.

Financial aid. The basic principle of equitable higher education financing is that no student from under-represented groups should be denied the opportunity to access and complete higher education for lack of financial resources. Governments all over the world rely on grants and scholarships as non-reimbursable financial aid instruments that can cover both living and tuition expenses. When student aid resources are scarce, grants and scholarships should preferably be need-based, which requires efficient systems for targeting and managing student aid. Depending on the specific equity gaps in a particular country, governments target grants and scholarships to reach low-income students, students from

ethnic minority groups, rural students who are less likely to enroll in higher education compared to urban students, women, or students with disabilities.

While most nations opt to fund only students enrolled in public higher education institutions, in countries that have mixed provision system, governments often provide scholarships or loans to eligible students for access to both public and private institutions, as is the case in the United States with the Pell Grants, in Côte d'Ivoire with the scholarships for high school graduates studying towards a short duration professional degree, or in Colombia the student loans available from ICETEX, which was established in 1950 as the first-ever such institution in the world.

Many countries with insufficient resources to offer grants and scholarships to low-income students have set up student loan schemes, often with mixed results. Traditional, mortgage-type programmes are vulnerable by design, as revealed by the mounting debt burden in the United States. Without an income-contingent provision, times of economic crisis are bound to cause repayment difficulties, as unemployment rises, and incomes stagnate. By contrast, national income-contingent loan systems, such as the programmes operating in Australia and New Zealand, have a better track record of success. Not only are they more efficient in terms of loan recovery through the national tax system, but they have also proven more equitable since graduates pay a fixed proportion of their income and are exempted from repaying when they are unemployed, or their income is below a pre-determined ceiling.

As the ultimate authority responsible for levelling the playing field, each government needs to mobilize sufficient financial resources to reduce or eliminate inequalities of access and success in higher education. This means maintaining or increasing public funding as much as possible, rather than cutting higher education budgets, as has happened in many countries over the past decade, and even more recently because of the pandemic. It is imperative to align financial outlets with the official commitments of all countries to ensure the right to education by 'employing multiple means, taking steps by all appropriate means and to the maximum of available resources' (UNESCO & Right to Education Initiative, 2019)¹³.

13. UNESCO SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee (2020), Making Higher Education More Inclusive. UNESCO: Paris

6.3. Institutional level interventions

Within higher education institutions, several measures can help boost the access and success of students from various equity groups: (i) outreach activities, (ii) targeted admission policies, (iii) retention programmes, and (iv) financial aid.

Outreach. Outreach and bridge interventions linking universities and high schools can be effective in reducing the academic, aspirational, informational, and personal barriers that restrict access among students from under-represented groups. Academic and career counseling is an important activity within outreach efforts. In many countries, universities are working with high schools in their regional catchment area to seek out, motivate and help prepare pupils from under-represented groups for easier access to higher education. Another important aspect is to raise interest in science programmes among girls.

Targeted admission. The first pro-equity measure at that level consists in defining admission rules that are not socially biased against students from under-represented groups. One of the side benefits of the pandemic is that, in several countries, universities have dropped the traditional admission requirements such as standardized tests or entrance examinations, and relied instead on high school grades, which are less influenced by unequal cultural conditions and socio-economic origin.

In addition, a growing number of higher education institutions have been offering special admission conditions to students from under-represented groups to overcome the academic deficits these students may have accumulated at lower levels of education. A few Brazilian universities, following the example of UNICAMP in Campinas, pioneered affirmative action initiatives for low-income and Afro-Brazilian students. The success of these programmes influenced the Federal Government's decision to make affirmative action into law applicable to all public higher education institutions. The Chilean PACE programme mentioned earlier was initially piloted by the University of Santiago at the initiative of a professor, Francisco Gil, who dedicated his life to equity promotion. Recognition of prior learning and formal qualifications and flexible admission policies for refugee students also come under this practice of targeted and flexible admission.

Retention. To improve the graduation rates of students from disadvantaged groups, the most effective approach for higher education institutions keen on increasing persistence and retention is to offer a holistic set of services that combine financial, psychological, and academic interventions. In recent years, a growing number of universities, for example in Australia, Canada, and the United States, have harnessed the power of big data and predictive analytics to identify at-risk students early on rather than when they are about to drop out, and accompany them with adequate support measures throughout their higher education.

Financial aid. To complement the financial aid available from the State, many higher education institutions offer their own support mechanisms to help students in need. This additional financial aid can take the form of tuition exemptions, grants to cover living expenses, and student loans, or any combination of the three. All fee-charging institutions—public and private—can implement tuition fee reductions on a sliding scale based on family/individual income, whereby families/individuals below a certain income threshold are exempted from having to pay tuition fees or pay a reduced amount. Exceptions can also be made for groups that are under-represented in higher education, for example students from disadvantaged ethnic groups, rural students, women, etc. In recent years, several US universities have eliminated student loans for low-income students, replacing them with full scholarships.

07.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.

Nelson Mandela

In many countries, children face challenging circumstances beyond their own control—race, gender, geographical origin, socioeconomic background—that drastically constrain their opportunities to go to school, stay in school, complete secondary education, and develop their full potential. This has a particularly adverse impact on children in developing countries, and all disadvantaged groups across the world. At the tertiary education level, young people from underprivileged groups encounter additional barriers reflecting the cost of studying, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, lack of information about the labour market prospects of various institutions and academic programmes, and unequal job opportunities. The end result is a huge loss for the individuals involved and for entire countries. The construction of pluralist societies is severely hampered by the lack of inclusion and enduring disparities.

This document has reviewed the strong and overwhelming evidence of acute disparities playing out along the principal dimensions of equity. These disparities usually have an overlapping and often cumulative effect across equity groups.

Promoting equity and inclusion to build a pluralistic society is not about treating everyone exactly the same, but about providing an equal distribution of opportunities. This requires a combination of general and special measures to establish a level-playing field that can actually promote equity. Concretely, it means designing and implementing policies aiming at removing systematic differences in higher education opportunities for groups and individuals who differ only in terms of their place of birth or residence, ethnic or cultural origin, gender or because of disabilities.

The wide degree of variation in the depth and scope of disparities across regions, countries and equity groups which share similar circumstances indicates that policies matter and can make a significant difference. There is, therefore, an urgent need to better understand where the disparities characterizing higher education come from and which policies are more effective in reducing inequality at that level in the education ladder. Available evidence from around the world reveals positive trends that suggest several relevant policy lessons. National commitment, translating into comprehensive, well-resourced policies, is indispensable to design and implement effective equity promotion policies to overcome both financial and non-monetary barriers. A long-term view is key to guaranteeing continuity and consistency in equity promotion policies.

Countries and institutions keen on reducing disparities and offering equal opportunities for access and success in higher education will hopefully heed the following advice arising from existing studies and impact evaluations:

- Inequality in higher education is, to a large extent, an extension of inequality at lower levels of education, which adversely impact the economic and social opportunities of many talented and capable young people.
- Equity policies must be defined in a comprehensive and integrated way, taking both financial and non-monetary aspects into consideration, coordinating national-level and institutional level actions in a complementary manner, and putting as much emphasis on success as on access.
- Appropriate monitoring of equity promotion policies requires well-established information systems to identify all equity groups and measure their progress in terms of both access and graduation and evaluate efforts to eliminate discrimination of all kinds¹⁴.

14. Australia is quite unique in the world in that the government funds a center dedicated to equity promotion in higher education: the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, which was established at Curtin University in 2013. The Centre is responsible for bringing together research, policy, and practice to advance the participation and success of disadvantaged groups in higher education.

- Impact studies are needed to measure, in a more systematic and rigorous way, which interventions and combinations of interventions are most effective to improve access and success in higher education, as well as labour market prospects and overall well-being. Such studies should be encouraged and supported in all countries that have explicit equity promotion policies in higher education.
- More work is needed to identify and evaluate effective policies to improve gender balance and the participation of all groups in STEM institutions and programmes, in the top academic positions, and in university leadership functions.
- Greater priority must be given to students with disabilities in terms of listening to how they define their needs, providing sufficient resources, and empowering higher education institutions to place this dimension high on their equity agenda.

In conclusion, equity in access and success at the higher education level cannot be regarded as a luxury or an afterthought. The need to achieve greater inclusion and promote pluralism in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative, an objective reflected in SDG 4's target 4.3 to 'ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university'. Countries and institutions must accelerate efforts to remove barriers to quality higher education for all learners from under-represented groups. Effective higher education and training systems where opportunities are equally distributed are the basis for sustainable development and the construction of fair, peaceful, pluralist and democratic societies.



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Equity, inclusion and pluralism in higher education

Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the Government of Spain, the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher education and opening doors to new, innovative, creative, and visionary conceptions that not only serve current agendas for sustainable development, but also pave the way for future learning communities that overcome barriers, speak to all and are inclusive of all lifelong learners.

The WHEC2022 promotes a global conversation nurtured by diverse narratives on higher education through various activities: generation and dissemination of knowledge; formulation of updated policy recommendations; identification and sharing of innovative practices; networking and strengthening of partnerships; broad participation of stakeholders at local and international levels (within and outside higher education systems: professors, researchers, youth, managers, authorities, policy makers, experts, entrepreneurs, social leaders, etc.); and development of renewed paths framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and looking at the Futures of Education.

Section of Higher Education

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 [cum di auae sunt.@CUNESCO.com](mailto:cumdiadaesunt@CUNESCO.com)

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