

## SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee

### Making Higher Education more inclusive

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#### Abstract

*The rapid expansion of higher education in the past two decades, as well as the growing diversity of providers and technological models for delivering education, have made higher education accessible to more students globally. Yet significant barriers remain for many vulnerable groups, and women still lag behind in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. A better understanding of inequality as well as new paradigms, strategies and a renewed political will for 'leaving no one behind' are required. Structural equity policies at all levels throughout the education system, as well as extraordinary measures when needed, should ensure that students from any background with the potential to succeed are fully integrated with equal opportunities into higher education. This policy paper reviews the current literature and sets out findings and recommendations to increase and strengthen equity and inclusion in higher education in a lifelong learning perspective. It provides a conceptual framework for equity and inclusion, analyses the urgent need to improve funding and its efficiency, provides insight into the challenges for teaching and teachers, and recommends policy measures for establishing higher education systems that are more equitable and more inclusive.*

## Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.3 aims, by 2030, to ‘ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university’. At the same time, SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities in income, including those based on gender, age, disability, class, ethnicity, religion and opportunity -- both within and among countries. It also aims to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration, and to improve representation of developing countries in global decision-making and development assistance. While the rapid expansion of higher education in the past two decades, as well as the growing diversity of providers and technological models for delivering education, have already made higher education accessible to more students, important barriers remain. And while women are closing the higher education participation gap in certain fields, poor students, ethnic minorities and indigenous groups continue to lag behind (UNESCO, 2019c). There is further evidence that other vulnerable groups -- such as disabled persons, migrant and refugee populations, the LGBTQI community, and people in rural areas -- face continued obstacles to accessing higher education, and women are still under-represented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

*Access to education* implies that student entry is not hindered by barriers, whether these are material, economic or discriminatory. *Inclusion* is a process that helps overcome whatever obstacles limit the presence, participation or achievement of students at all levels (UNESCO, 2017a). Governments and public higher education institutions (HEIs) have adopted a number of measures to improve access and inclusion. The private sector’s entry into education has also had an important impact on coverage (33% globally) (PROPHE, 2010), as well as on the diversification of programmes and modalities. Yet despite these measures, certain student groups continue to face difficulties in accessing, completing and succeeding in higher education programmes and using their tertiary degrees and skills after graduation. The reasons are linked to structural inequality, financing, curriculum, geography, composition of teaching personnel, and wider social and cultural aspects of HEIs (UNESCO, 2019c). In addition, evidence has confirmed that in various contexts there is ‘the cumulative nature of economic, cultural and educational advantage in access to universities (Gonzalez, A., 2018).

Addressing persistent inequalities in higher education is a requirement under international human rights principles concerning education, which stress that higher education should be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable<sup>1</sup> for all, including minorities and vulnerable groups. Effective education and training systems are the basis for fair, open and democratic societies and for sustainable growth and employment (European Commission, 2017a). For education to contribute to such objectives, all groups need to have equitable access to higher education and enjoy the same conditions to achieve results, complete tertiary levels, enter the labour market and to continue learning. Higher education systems must, therefore, be inclusive, offering the right conditions for students from different backgrounds to succeed<sup>2</sup> (European Commission, 2017a). Only then can the collective merit of the cohort enrich the education of all, as a more diverse higher education is not only more intellectually stimulating for the entire academic community but will also improve its quality (Soares, J., 2017; UNESCO, 2019a).

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<sup>1</sup> The essential features of all types and levels of education are: a) availability: institutions and programmes should be adequately distributed throughout the country; b) accessibility: institutions and programmes should be accessible to all, without any type of discrimination; c) acceptability: education must be of good quality; and d) adaptability: education must be meaningful to people of different social and cultural backgrounds, and with different capacities and interests (CESCR, 1999).

This policy paper reviews the current literature on inclusion in higher education and sets out findings and recommendations regarding actions the SDG 4 Steering Committee could take to support higher education stakeholders in their efforts to increase and strengthen equity and inclusion.

## Higher education and the challenge of inclusion

### Context

Tertiary education builds on secondary education, providing learning activities in specialised fields of education that extend learning to a higher level of complexity and specialisation.<sup>3</sup> As part of tertiary education, higher education leads to the earning of an academic degree. For the purposes of this paper, *higher education* is understood as ‘all types of education (academic, professional, technical, artistic, pedagogical, long distance learning) provided by universities, technological institutes, teacher training colleges., which are normally intended for students having completed a secondary education, and whose educational objective is the acquisition of a title, a grade, certificate, or diploma of higher education’ (UNESCO, 1998). A *higher education institution* is ‘authorised to issue diplomas, degrees and certificates at the higher-education level’.<sup>4</sup>

Access to higher education leading to the awarding of academic degrees should be understood as an individual choice among other post-secondary school pathways that are equally relevant and also part of tertiary education, such as technical education, apprenticeships or vocational training (UNESCO and Right to Education Initiative, 2019). A wider range of course choices, including two-year short cycle degrees and options for continuous professional development, help higher education to respond better to individual needs (European Commission, 2017a). TVET, when it is part of the tertiary system, includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development which may lead to qualifications. In this document, TVET is understood ‘as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods’ (UNESCO, 2015a; OECD, Eurostat, UIS, 2015).

Higher education is, by definition, selective. The Declaration of Human Rights states that *higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit*. According to the right to education, tertiary education should be accessible, without discrimination, by every appropriate means, on the basis of *individual capacity* and progressively free (UN, 1966). As talent is equally distributed across the population, in all groups, regardless of their characteristics, it is possible to find students with *the potential to succeed* in higher education in all contexts. By using the concept of *merit*, the international normative and policy frameworks seek to protect the right to higher education from the use of unjustifiable criteria associated with discrimination. However, the concept deserves more consideration if it is to be implemented in the manner and spirit intended by the international normative frameworks.

Several authors have questioned the use of *merit* and *equality of opportunity* as concepts because of their potential to generate a ‘winners and losers’ situation that could end up leaving many people behind and outside of equity policies. It is argued that policies based on such constructs may not address the social inequalities dividing different groups, and that rather than question them, they only address their consequences.

<sup>3</sup> Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education. Tertiary education is an umbrella term that covers all post-secondary education, including TVET and higher education. However, as TVET covers all levels of education, it is not exclusively tertiary (UNESCO ISCED, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (adopted November 2019) a ‘higher education institution’ is ‘an institution providing higher education and recognised by the competent authorities... as belonging to its higher education system and authorised to issue diplomas, degrees and certificates at the higher-education level.’ (UNESCO, 2020a)

This document follows the sense and purpose of international normative frameworks and agreements. It therefore recognises that dealing with inequality and its consequences must always be the primary objective of policies and actions. Thus, to address the gaps between different social groups and to better distribute the social benefits, equal opportunities must always be preceded and permanently accompanied by equity measures; the causes of inequality - not just its consequences - must be addressed across all levels of learning. Working to achieve greater equality in society is undoubtedly the basis for 'better achieved equality of opportunity' (Dubet, F., 2011). In this context, the current document will refer to *merit*, or *academic merit*, as *the potential to succeed* at the higher education level.

### Recent trends and tensions in higher education

In a global scenario characterised by growing inequality and permanently tense and shifting political contexts, higher education has evolved tremendously.

The number of students enrolled in higher education at global level increased by 89% in 15 years, from 117 million in 2002 to an estimated 221 million in 2017, and has more than doubled in the past two decades. This 'massification' has produced an average annual increase in enrolment of nearly 7 million students. The access figures, however, do not reflect the number of higher education places available even though availability is also a part of right to education indicators (McCowan, T., 2015). Moreover, while access has increased, HEIs face difficulties in accommodating student 'diversities' on an equitable basis, in particular within a context of inadequate funding.

Reduced public financing and a more market-driven approach to public services have prompted countries to seek funding stability through privatisation and by requesting that HEIs generate their own revenue. Public HEIs are increasingly required to cover their own operating costs. Reduced public financing is thus a matter of great concern for equity as 'the mere increase of students, without other considerations, has not been sufficient as a development policy... rather, it has made society aware of multiple conflicts and challenges in the political, social and educational fields' (McCowan, T., 2015)'.

Recent technological trends have become firmly embedded in academic communications, tools for managing HEIs (HEMIS), and teaching and learning methodologies. The Internet has enabled the development of online courses and degree programmes, virtual academic institutions and massive open online courses (MOOCs). The crisis generated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its lessons will undoubtedly redefine the uses for technology in education by increasing its pedagogical applications, innovating platforms, methods, and evaluation systems. As a result, HEIs will certainly have to review their regulations, capacities, teaching, and budgets, among other considerations. Teachers at all levels will be specially called upon to diversify and continuously update their knowledge and skills in this regard.

Higher education has also followed the general world trend of increasing globalisation and internationalisation of research and the economy as a whole. This trend is supported by increased harmonisation of qualifications, mobility and cooperation programmes, cross-border delivery of academic programmes and offshore satellite campuses. From 1980 to 2014, the number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education worldwide increased nearly five-fold (UIS, 2018*b*). Nevertheless, this mobility has been asymmetrical since of the 5.3 million students studying outside their place of origin (2017), 3.6 million come from non-OECD countries (OECD, 2019*a*), implying brain drain for some least developed countries.

Another important dimension of higher education concerns the refugee and displaced persons crisis. Globally, 68.5 million individuals are either displaced within their home country or living in exile as refugees. Displaced persons and refugees chronically lack access to education: only 1% of refugees are enrolled in tertiary education, compared to 37% of young people worldwide (UIS, 2020).

Higher education is also being called upon to produce more significant social benefits. Within their so-called ‘third mission’, HEIs are increasingly pressured to transfer knowledge and contribute towards national and regional development. Partnerships with civil society, government and the private sector are growing, and this trend is producing challenges for teachers, researchers and students.

Evidence demonstrates that in seeking to advance equity in higher education, both policy makers and society as a whole must first confront two urgent matters: inclusion and sustainable development (UN General Assembly, 2015). In other words, within the framework of their academic autonomy and freedom, HEIs should use the knowledge and skills they impart to serve society and address the main human and sustainable development challenges.

### The challenge of inclusion and higher education

The *structural inequality* engrained in some countries creates barriers to the participation of large population groups in the economy, social and political life, and represents the main challenge for progress towards fair and sustainable development (UN, 2017). Vulnerable groups are also affected by the *intersectionality* of discrimination (UN, 1989).<sup>5</sup> That is, the different grounds, factors and forms of discrimination are interconnected, and overlap and aggravate discrimination in such a way that these disadvantages reinforce each other (UN General Assembly, 2001).<sup>6</sup> Each of these categories requires attention, and together they have been recognised as ‘prohibited grounds’ by the United Nations (UN, 1966).<sup>7</sup> Inclusion in higher education thus refers mainly to the generation of opportunities for access, achievement and completion for people at this education level without discrimination.

Creating equal opportunities requires adopting measures to ‘defend redistribution policies, which continue to be the most effective means for ensuring moderate and acceptable inequalities’... ‘the most egalitarian societies are also the most equitable, insofar as they have the highest equality of opportunity’ (Dubet, F., 2011). Achieving equity in educational outcomes needs equity measures for the entire educational process to compensate for existing inequalities. Applying these measures will also have a positive impact on gender inequalities.

A school trajectory is defined as the distance between the academic level students achieve and the disadvantages beyond their control that they face. When gaps in academic achievement between students in primary and secondary education reflect structural socio-economic inequality (or inequalities based on any other form of discrimination), offering equality of opportunities is not enough to close the gap; rather, additional equity measures are also needed to compensate and account for this

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations defines ‘discrimination’ as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms (UN, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> ‘The idea of ‘intersectionality’ is intended to capture the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination’... ‘Whatever the type of intersectional discrimination, the consequence is that marginalised women [or others] tend to experience different forms of discrimination simultaneously.’ A/CONF.189/PC.3/5 27 July 2001, paragraphs 23 and 32 (UN General Assembly, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> UN ‘International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights’ (1966), Article 2 Non-discrimination and economic, social and cultural rights, para 2. According to Observation No. 20, ‘multiple discrimination: some individuals or groups are discriminated against on more than one of the prohibited grounds, for example women belonging to an ethnic or religious minority. Such cumulative discrimination affects individuals in a special and specific way and merits particular consideration and specific measures to combat it’ (UN, 1966).

context (Gonzalez, A., 2018). In other words, equal opportunities must recognise the individual trajectory as measured in context and must be complemented by equity measures too (Gonzalez, A., 2018). Some authors refer to this as ‘merit in context’, thereby linking equality of opportunities and equity.

We cannot expect our higher education systems to improve inclusion unless we adopt a structural approach ensuring a fair distribution of opportunities from the first educational levels and beyond. We need an ‘equitable distribution of opportunities’, which encourages ‘the controlled and reasoned distribution of the resources attributed to public and private education, in order to build greater equality in school competition’ (Dubet, F., 2011). States must ‘invest in higher education as a major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity’ (UNESCO, 1998).

The recent expansion of higher education has led to ‘unequal’ or ‘segmented’ massification by type of institution and/or careers into which ‘non-traditional’ students<sup>8</sup> enter (UNESCO, 2017c; Gonzalez, A., 2018). For expansion to become fair, it must ensure quality while working to make access less dependent on social origin and more on individual merit in context. Massification may lead to a genuine ‘democratisation’ of higher education and, notably, increased access to quality studies if it is accompanied by a broad range of programmes able to serve a diversity of publics. There should not be a trade-off between efficiency/quality and equity/inclusion. If quality is assured and students from all contexts and social groups have the opportunity to access quality education, not only is there no risk, but the entire education system – and society at large - benefits.

The shortage of adequately qualified school teachers graduating from the tertiary level also negatively affects the opportunities and quality of students’ learning and their educational trajectories. School teachers are required to assume new, increasingly complex teaching tasks and roles while their working conditions also need to be improved (UNESCO, 2013). HEIs face challenges regarding both the need to better train school teachers in order to improve the quality of education, and the need to train more tertiary level teachers who would take on this task. In higher education, too many teachers have received little or no pedagogical training, and systematic investment in continuous professional development remains the exception (European Commission, 2017a). Even though the number of tertiary education teachers has increased by 72% during the last ten years, learner enrolment rates also continue to grow, and the absolute new numbers of teaching staff available is unclear by being split between those engaged in research and those in teaching, or both (ILO, 2018a).

Additional needs for HEIs include adopting comprehensive approaches to inclusion, revising how teaching and assessment are organized; preparing teachers to address diversity; offering mentoring opportunities (European Commission, 2017a); and better reflecting the diversity of society in the teaching force itself, including researchers. These challenges become even more complicated where distance education is concerned, but which is certain to become increasingly the norm in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

Policy makers should recognise that research has much to contribute to increasing inclusion. HEIs can and should support research to generate knowledge regarding inequality and its consequences, and also study the impact of inclusion when government and institutions take action (McCowan, T., 2015), so as to better understand the dynamics of social exclusion. This work should demonstrate how ‘the

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<sup>8</sup> Those who are the first generation in their families accessing higher education.

structural influences, by constraining poorer students' range of options, operate to maintain hierarchies of distinction and differentiation within the field of higher education' (Reay, D., 2007).

### Who are the stakeholders in addressing inclusion in higher education?

The 2009 Declaration of the Second World Conference on Higher Education states that 'Higher education as a public good is the responsibility of all actors involved, especially governments' (UNESCO, 2009). However, the system cannot 'move the boundaries' by itself. Since the State is ultimately responsible for guaranteeing the right to education without exclusion, its ministries and services are required to work together in designing and applying integrated policies for inclusion in different sectors. All actors play an active role and must be involved: teacher and student organizations; researchers; quality assurance agencies; national education councils, decentralised education authorities, employer organizations, business councils. Of course, other *State* and *non-State* actors in public spheres, such as institutions related to the world of work, parliamentarians, organized civil society, think tanks, the private sector, and local development groups are also important.

These public and private actors share a public responsibility. Within the framework of their autonomy and academic freedom, HEIs collaborate for the common good, producing indispensable knowledge, thus acting as vital sources of information and providing essential support for the education system and society as a whole.

## Addressing inclusion through legislation, policy and practice: concerns and recommendations

### International standards on inclusion

Education as a fundamental human right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The right to education is also one of the key principles underpinning the Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) adopted by the international community.

A number of key normative instruments lay down a series of international legal obligations, including 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* (1988), 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; the *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel* (1997); the *Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers* (2017).

The United Nations and other international agencies regularly convene summits on the implementation and observance of the above instruments. These summits result in agreements and commitments that become common road maps and shared agendas to accelerate progress. In response, governments may decide to reinforce their national regulations in order to progress in line with international frameworks.

### Equitable financing for higher education (Higgins, J., 2019; Technopolis Group, 2019)

During the last decade, we have seen a combination of global trends leading to increased demand yet less public funding for higher education. The consequence is unequal access. Regions with the highest growth in demand face the dilemma of how to finance such increasing demand, while nevertheless ensuring both quality and equal access.

Research has documented the existing link between household funding levels and access, thus highlighting how factors other than the potential to succeed in higher education are additional challenges for both public and private provision. Higher education must find ways to prevent governments from decreasing public funding and relying more on increased private funding. European countries have taken this to heart and are seeking to gradually improve the public funding available for HEIs.

Ensuring the right to education demands that every State ‘employ multiple means’, take steps ‘by all appropriate means’ and to ‘the maximum of its available resources’ (UNESCO & Right to Education Initiative, 2019). This means taking concrete steps to make free secondary and higher education a reality. Nevertheless, in most cases the financing of higher education is a combination of both public and household funding. Across OECD countries, in 2016 ‘32% of all spending on tertiary educational institutions came from households and other private entities’ (OECD, 2019b). As the body responsible for ‘levelling the playing field’, the State needs to find a way to strike a fair balance between financing sources and the aim to even out inequalities.

Knowledge and education are global common goods that evolve from a collective social enterprise that should be regulated and protected from commercialisation (UNESCO, 2015b). This requires diversified financing systems that combine different instruments such as fee waivers, grants, income-adjusted loans, scholarships, tax deductions and others (UNESCO, 2017c). Such measures will also help to improve graduation rates by improving access for those who might otherwise be excluded. Although governments may provide public funding to HEIs so they can offer tuition-free (or low tuition) higher education to students, the assistance may still not be sufficient, in which case household funding would also be needed. Any loans and grants should be means-tested to income levels and their repayment after completion based on a fair, reasonable and closely monitored State-wide system. In such cases, the government acts as an investor to guarantee funding for the transaction between the education provider and the student using a fair and transparent basis.

A well-functioning system for funding higher education will demand political will and political commitment at the national level to provide long-term investments in a publicly governed system for financial means-tested support to the students. At the same time, national policies must strongly regulate entry of for-profit providers of higher education. The for-profit private sector may have a conflict of interest with the public sector, and therefore its growth requirements may not contribute to equity of access (McCowan, T., 2015).

Along with the need to increase public resources, the question of the efficiency and the capacity to meet policy goals in a cost-effective way is highly important (European University Association, 2020). Efficiency may include adjusting public funding in terms of changes in student numbers and economic growth (total GDP); linking funding to institutional performance; funding centres of excellence supported by several HEIs collectively, among others. Policies should always strive to design a fair distribution of resources. A lack of resources cannot justify or hide the weakness of policies when they are not oriented in the right direction. Fair access must also include concern about the availability of study places; it is insufficient to have equitable procedures for selecting students when there are study places for only 1% of the age cohort (McCowan, T., 2015).



## Teaching policies that improve quality, relevance and strengthen inclusion

Inclusion in higher education should promote diversity among both students and staff. Considerable advances have been made concerning gender equality, with roughly 42% of tertiary teaching personnel (worldwide) being women (UIS database). However, the proportion of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines remains low (UNESCO, 2017b). Motherhood and other family obligations can result in career penalties for female academics, especially when it comes to their completing graduate school, obtaining research funding, and securing tenured positions (Goulden, M., Frasch, K., Mason, M. A., 2009). While more women are obtaining higher education positions, there are still significant gender imbalances in senior and leadership positions (Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2016). Pay gaps between female and male academics persist in all regions (CAUT, 2016). Sexual harassment and gender-based violence in HEIs of both staff and students are also widespread but under-reported (Joseph, J., 2015).

Minority ethnic, indigenous and other disadvantaged groups are in many cases under-represented in academic positions (UCU, 2013), as well as disabled persons (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2017). There is evidence that in some countries higher education teachers are drawn from privileged classes and institutions, thus replicating social divisions within HEIs (Clauzet, A., Arbesman, S., Larrenmore, D., 2015). Countries are addressing some of these challenges through affirmative action policies<sup>9</sup> (Wintour, N., 2014; Altbach, P.G., 2014; UGC, 2016a; American Federation of Teachers, 2013).

The concept of inclusion applied to higher education staff also needs to be understood as a question of decent work and equality across different types of employment. Fixed-term and part-time employment contracts are a common feature in HEIs in both developing and developed countries, and teaching personnel on such contracts often face job insecurity, poor recognition by tenured peers, and disassociation from institutional governance and academic decision-making. Further difficulties faced by casual employees often include exclusion from paid leave entitlements, social protection and career development, and an inability to apply directly for research funding. In some regions<sup>10</sup> up to 80% of academics are employed part time, with many such ‘taxicab professors’ holding more than one job (ILO, 2018a). These labour conditions can have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and academic freedom (Civitas, 2016).

In 2018, the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that strategies for promoting equity among higher education teaching staff could involve establishing quotas and/or targets for addressing inequity in hiring, disparities in pay structures and benefits, structural discrimination in tenure and promotion procedures, and for bringing about change in institutional cultures. The ILO also called for the promotion of STEM subjects for women and greater access to social dialogue, regardless of employment status (ILO, 2018b).

## Targeted policies to address inequality and discrimination in higher education

For students to be able to access and successfully complete higher education, policies and budgets need to be grounded in the principles of *equity*, *equality of opportunities* and *non-discrimination*. Strong political will is a must. Along **with adequate funding** and **sustained attention to teachers**, certain policy

<sup>9</sup> Canada and Australia have good examples regarding inclusion of indigenous people in HEIs and employment. In India, good practices on ensuring access to government jobs, including faculty positions in central institutions, are being revised. Other measures include broadening qualifications criteria -- by reducing eligibility marks -- for recruitment to teaching positions. In many OECD countries, including in LAC, opportunities for LGBTI teaching staff are promoted (American Federation of Teachers, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Central and South America.

measures that increase equity in access and conclusion in higher education can be distinguished as follows:

**Offer quality learning from early childhood onward.** Quality is part of the right to education and one of its indicators (education must be ‘acceptable’); consequently, it requires continuous attention in all of its dimensions. Increasing access to higher education thus requires *equity measures* from the first educational levels and *specific equity measures* for entering higher education.

**Design targeted actions for under-represented groups,** including those facing geographical or gender barriers. Education systems must recognise students with the potential to succeed, and all constituent education institutions must collaborate to design and implement integrated policies based on, and harmonised with, equity principles, the need for inclusion and ‘merit in context’.

**Seek academic quality** and the creation of an institutional culture of evaluation. The quality of higher education will act as a protective factor for the equity of learning. ‘What students learn... the nature of their experiences and the ability to turn this learning and the resulting qualification into meaningful later opportunities’ (McCowan, T., 2015), is also relevant for equity. Therefore, implementing quality assurance systems is fundamental for equity of outcomes.

**Implement a fair admissions system.** In many countries, entrance into higher education is mediated by a standardised test not harmonised with the criterion of equity. Having a system of equal access does not mean that there are no selection criteria, but that they are fair. Any admissions system must offer equal opportunity for students with the potential to succeed from all groups and contexts. It is therefore necessary to diversify access mechanisms and admission requirements and combine them as necessary so that they take into account the contextual variables to which students are exposed – or ‘merit in context’- and thus ensure fair competition.<sup>11</sup>

**Connect higher education with secondary education.** HEIs should work in partnership with secondary schools to better understand the learning needs and trajectories of good students at risk and the measures being taken to support them (OFFA, 2010) before completion and during their transition to higher education. Developing, strengthening and expanding HEI links with secondary schools is key to improving inclusion (European Commission, 2019).

**Accompany students from disadvantaged groups throughout their studies,** particularly in the first stage. Evidence shows that mere entrance into higher education is often not enough for these students to succeed. Higher education should prepare and guide students on the basis of their capacities rather than their origin (European Commission, 2017a). HEIs must offer academic support as well support and guidance in areas that may negatively influence the academic performance of their students. There is a need for a special follow-up system for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, along with one for all students in need of extra follow up.

<sup>11</sup> A good example is a three-variable equation designed for the new mechanism to access higher education in Chile; the equation uses the following three variables: (1) the student’s secondary school grade point average; (2) the grade point average of all graduates of the student’s secondary school in the previous three years; and (3) the average of the highest grades in each school in the previous three years to which the highest score is assigned. The equation interpolates value (1) on the line connecting the averages (2) and (3). This indicator was called the “Ranking Score”. This way of calculating the ranking does not require knowing the relative position of the grades of the students of the same class, so it does not induce an inhuman competition among classmates. Each student should only compete with himself to raise his grades and thus raise his ranking score. This performance indicator in context is the only one that is available to everyone, so it is a concrete incentive for students and teachers in all schools, but especially for poor students and students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019b).

**Combine policy measures, monitor them and accelerate their implementation.** To ensure reaching the right groups, combined measures are needed, at both public policy and HEIs levels. Among them are free or very low tuition fees; student subsidies; elimination of registration or examination fees; implementation of support, food and transport scholarships; loan repayments linked to future earning incomes; the organization of adjustments for students from ethnic minorities or with disabilities; recognition of prior studies, degrees and diplomas; and the implementation of incentives for HEIs to address inclusion. In addition, collecting disaggregated data on school trajectories is needed. This requires that HEIs enjoy autonomy and appropriate capacity ‘to support and ensure affordability in higher education... to create synergy between policy conception and implementation’ (UNESCO, 2017c). Implementation of measures should start as promptly as possible, even if the full set of measures is not completed. Ultimately, ‘to increase equity, measures to keep tuition fees low at public universities must be accompanied by avenues for the admission of talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds and financial assistance programmes for all’ (UNESCO, 2017c).

**Contextualise policies.** One of the indicators for the right to education states that education must be *pertinent* (adaptable), that is flexible and meaningful to people from different social and cultural backgrounds with different capacities and interests (UNESCO, 2007). These features must be combined with equity measures for some populations, as is the case for indigenous institutions recognised in ILO Convention 169.<sup>12</sup> Some of these indigenous HEIs have succeeded in increasing opportunities for specific populations and have become spaces for innovation in higher education. However, they face challenges and difficulties, such as adjusting to evaluation and accreditation systems that are often rigid (Mato, D., 2014). The existence of special institutions deserves particular attention; higher education can benefit from new capacities to reflect critically and gain insight from different visions and new perspectives. A diverse student body that also reflects the diversity in society is to the benefit of learners, their institutions and communities.

**Support people on the move.** Academic mobility improves the quality of education in HEIs. It is in the interest of governments and the international community to strategically promote cross-border mobility for the public good (UIS, 2018b). Mobility, therefore, needs clear and transparent policies and be addressed on the basis of equity. Non-recognition represents an additional source of discrimination, particularly for vulnerable populations seeking new opportunities or for those who are forced to move. Societies will benefit from the guarantee of the right to fair recognition procedures, and education systems will benefit from the standards defined in the related normative instruments.

**Implement relevant curricula.** For students to acquire competencies and skills that are useful for dealing with development issues and needed in the world of work, curricula must increase their relevance, be implemented effectively and seek collaboration. ‘Cooperation with employers can allow HEIs to increase the relevance of their curricula and deliver them effectively, and increase opportunities for students to access high-quality work-based learning’ (European Commission, 2017a).

**Have HEIs play a greater role** regarding equity in society and inclusion in higher education. ‘Institutions should be more clearly charged with a responsibility both for enabling the participation of learners from under-represented backgrounds in higher education and for supporting their successful completion’... and HEIs should receive incentives ‘to enrol, support and graduate students from such backgrounds’ (European Commission, 2017b). By being more inclusive and of higher quality, HEIs reinforce their

<sup>12</sup> Article 27 of the ILO Convention 169 establishes that ‘governments shall recognise the right of these peoples to establish their own educational institutions and facilities, provided that such institutions meet minimum standards established by the competent authority in consultation with these peoples. Appropriate resources shall be provided for this purpose’ (ILO, 1989).

character as a social good (Gonzalez, A., 2018). HEIs should also make the voice of their students from under-represented groups heard in discussions about equity and inclusion, and in research.

**Transfer knowledge and skills produced by HEIs** and increase the social benefits this can generate. Within the framework of their autonomy, along with training and research, HEIs need to implement innovative ways of creating and applying technology and knowledge. This growing trend should generate a cultural change in HEIs, their teachers, researchers and students. This will have implications for the curriculum, interdisciplinarity, connection with the environment and with communities, and should be a part of quality assurance policies and procedures.

**Use international normative instruments and programmes relating to the right to education** and the obligations, agreements and commitments arising from them, as a reference framework for policies designed by both higher education systems and institutions. This will help to build and strengthen national consensus while helping to generate justifiable measures for enforcing rights in line with national and international accountability practices, thus giving policies a sense of urgency.

**Produce information and knowledge on a permanent basis** to enhance policy development and enable the effective monitoring of the shared objectives on higher education access, participation and completion among under-represented and disadvantaged groups (European Commission Higher Education Area, 2015). As inequality is intersectional and cumulative, assessments and monitoring must begin in the earliest grades of education, consider transitions, and include tertiary level. Education systems need to conduct systematic collection of data and disaggregated information, and HEIs need to produce information on their actions for equity and inclusion and their outcomes. Information is the key to advancing equity and inclusion (UNESCO, 2014; UIS, 2018a).

**Conduct and support research on equity and inclusion.** HEIs could study the effects of structural diversity on faculty and students; impacts on longer-term academic and personal outcomes, as well as outcomes for the labour market, for communities and for civic and social engagement; and examine patterns of access and exclusion at different stages and in different contexts (McCowan, T., 2015).

**Develop policies to strengthen diverse post-secondary options** that should also lead to opportunities for social mobility and constitute equally valid alternatives desired by individuals, while in line with labour market needs and the production model (Gonzalez, A., 2018).

**Collaborate with others.** The problems of knowledge production and sharing are also found in other sectors, collectives, communities, and groups. HEIs should generate collaborative relations with these communities as well as with other institutions, networks, associations, governments and other actors in the public and private spheres. Co-research and research for development purposes should be strengthened.

### Globalisation, internationalisation, and innovation as levers for inclusion

The internationalisation of higher education represents an opportunity for more inclusive globalisation, provided that it can capitalise on the richness of the cultural diversity of those who access it, without any exclusion. As humanity's most significant source of creativity, the world's diversity must necessarily be reflected in global higher education. While internationalisation is not the central goal of learning, it should help to build and disperse capacities.

The UNESCO *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education* (UNESCO, 2020a), adopted in 2019, provides governments, academics, HEIs and students with a legal framework for the recognition of qualifications which will increase the fairness, transparency, predictability and timeliness of recognition procedures worldwide. For instance, its Article VII refers to the recognition of qualifications earned by refugees and displaced persons, the implementation of which is being supported by the pilot *UNESCO Global Qualifications Passport for Refugees* UNESCO, 2020b). This initiative has the potential to significantly increase access to higher education for refugees and other vulnerable migrants.

The new 2019 UNESCO *Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER)*, recognises ‘that the development of ICTs... provides opportunities to improve the free flow of ideas... and ...in building inclusive Knowledge Societies, OER can support quality education that is equitable, inclusive, open and participatory as well as enhance academic freedom and professional autonomy of teachers by widening the scope of materials available for teaching and learning’ (UNESCO, 2019e). Its objectives also include the development of supportive policies and the creation of sustainability models for OER.

At the regional level, 48 European countries have established the European Higher Education Area, with the recognition that ‘people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and those with an immigrant background are still much less likely to reach and complete higher education’, and with the aim to ‘ensuring that higher education is inclusive, that it is open to talent from all backgrounds, and that HEIs are civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities’ (European Commission, 2017a).

## Conclusions

In order to strengthen equity and inclusiveness of higher education, there is an urgent need to change political and social mentalities towards exclusion as well as develop and strengthen policies and mechanisms to counter cultural and social barriers. At the same time, further refinement and expansion of measures are necessary to ensure that no one is left behind at this educational level. Lessons learned have made it possible to recommend paths and measures for a new era in higher education. These measures should continue, while being refined and monitored, to ensure a greater diversity of higher education applicants and enrolments.

Yet such measures alone are not enough to ensure learner success. The notable dropout rates of poor students and minorities, despite their academic capacity, indicate that in many settings the higher education culture is not inclined to fully support policies of equity and inclusion. Thus, it is vital to adopt structural policies capable of addressing the imperatives of inclusion throughout the education system; establish extraordinary measures when there is evidence of exclusion; ensure that students with the potential to succeed from any context are identified; and, finally, to implement equity measures needed to provide these learners with equal opportunities and fully integrate them into the higher education system.

For education to contribute to closing the gaps between different social groups, education policies should always be accompanied by measures of equity in societies seeking social integration and equality (UNDP, 2017). Structural equity policies are necessary in all economic, social and cultural rights dimensions, especially in education from the earliest levels onward. Such equity policies should address the social conditions that allow students to start and finish their educational trajectories by mitigating as much as possible the disadvantages stemming from their origins.

Today, the crisis caused by COVID-19 is challenging education systems and demanding urgent transformations everywhere. Technology is taking the lead in offering possible solutions. But these will require special attention to a multidimensional and multifaceted challenge. It is certain that our best efforts will be needed to ensure that equity and inclusion become realities in higher education.

The SDG 4 Steering Committee Working Group on Higher Education therefore recommends that the Steering Committee, together with UNESCO and partner agencies,

- develop policy guidance materials for States, HEIs and other stakeholders for promoting greater inclusiveness in higher education, including materials on the financing of higher education; and
- develop international data monitoring systems on diversity in higher education systems, including on mobile students, teachers and researchers.

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