



**Towards universal access to higher education:
international trends**

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Foreword

Universal access to higher education (HE) is more than ever a key aspect of social justice and one of the main drivers of development in a country. As such, governments, institutions and society should commit strongly to ensuring that higher education is universally accessible to all, as also stated in SDG 4 on quality education.

While contributing to, and in some cases, even enabling the progress of students in their professional and personal lives, higher education institutions also play a central role in the local development of the regions in which they are located. Therefore, a greater understanding of how access to these institutions has expanded over the past years and what the main dynamics behind this phenomenon are, becomes an ever-important area of concern.

To this end, this brief analysis is an attempt to address this thematic, to inform the relevant actors in government, institutions and society on the progress made worldwide as well as the remaining challenges, and ultimately to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

We hope that this research will assist in moving those groups involved with higher education institutions, towards the expansion of universal access and that it will also serve as a relevant source for future research and development initiatives in this area.

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Finally, the team would like to highlight the fact that this document is intended to be an initial analysis and will be subject to updates, new ideas and additional information. One of the main rationales of this report is to stimulate reflection and contribute to debates on access to higher education institutions (HEIs). We therefore wish to encourage contributions as part of the continuous development of this research. For more details on how to contribute, please write to info-iesalc@unesco.org.

Executive Summary

Access to higher education institutions (HEIs) has been a highly debated topic over the past two decades, particularly taking into account the increasing number of individuals (students and non-students) they affect and their central role for the social and economic development of nations. While access to HEIs has indeed expanded in many countries, resulting, for example, from the support of national policies – there are aspects such as the scope of equity, quality and performance of HEIs which remain an area of concern. Understanding these aspects and the continuous dynamics of access to higher education institutions globally, remains a challenge. Nevertheless, this report gives an initial overview of some trends and patterns regarding universal access to HE globally over the past two decades, including those factors which have served to promote or impede the process.

This report – prepared by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC) – starts with an introductory section briefly detailing the document’s background, rationale, objectives, and data collection procedures. It also describes the limitations encountered during the development of the study. The report comprises six thematic sections: (a) the concept of universal access in higher education, (b) global patterns in access to higher education, (c) drivers in achieving universal access to higher education, (d) barriers to achieving universal access to higher education, (e) enabling policies for universal access to higher education, (f) access versus success rates in higher education, and (g) effects of increased access on quality, equity and performance in higher education. Finally, the document offers some recommendations for future action, followed by concluding remarks.

Key takeaways from the Report:

1 Universal access to higher education over the past two decades has increased overall in all the regions. Between 2000 and 2018, the global higher education gross enrollment ratio (GER) increased from 19% to 38%. For the same period, the male GER increased from 19% to 36%, while that for females went from 19% to 41%. This demonstrates that women have benefited more from increased access to tertiary education.

2 Universal access to higher education is not only a human right but also a key component of social and economic development, generating more opportunities to underprivileged groups in society and contributing to a more educated workforce.

3 Important drivers of the increase in access to higher education in the past 20 years include: the economic development of nations and consequently the rise in the aspirations of the middle class to access tertiary education, the growth of private institutions, and the expansion of distance education institutions.

4 Inequalities in access to higher education have persisted over the past two decades. Barriers such as poverty, crisis and emergency situations, high tuition fees, entrance examinations, geographical mobility, and discrimination, pose continuous challenges, particularly in marginalized communities, to tertiary education access.

5 While the effect of increased access to higher education on the performance and quality of the institutions and of the education provided, is difficult to assess, there are some clear correlating patterns regarding equity: while access to higher education for women has increased greatly worldwide over the past twenty years, increase in access to HEIs for the

same period differs a lot according to income level, with the upper middle income group benefiting the most.

6 Higher education remains out of reach for many of the world's poorest people. As such, countries must develop national mechanisms and sound strategies to continuously evaluate progress and ensure the inclusion of the most disadvantaged.

7 Higher education institutions should develop strategies to reduce the gap between enrollment and graduation, especially among disadvantaged groups, and reinforce data collection on completion rates to arrive at a clear retention scenario.

The concept of **universal access to higher education** is closely linked to the debate on the right to education, which is considered a human right. This concept, which has been evolving over the past two decades, has been embraced by many international, regional and national instruments, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development being the most prominent one. In addition to the humanistic approach to the concept, one cannot forget the impact that access to HEIs has on the development of countries. There are important development externalities impacted by higher education, be they social (besides being part of the social aspirations of the middle class, higher education supports social engagement, contributes to societal needs and progress particularly through research and knowledge generation, and supports citizenship education); economic (higher education contributes to economic progress of countries by forming a more educated work force and responding to the needs of the world of work); or political (higher education helps to keep democratic societies alive). Therefore, assuring universal access to higher education is not only important from a humanistic perspective, but a must for countries that want to fully enjoy socially and economically developed societies.

Global trends in access to higher education clearly show that universal access to HE increased in all regions of the world over the past two decades, and more than a third of the global population now continue with some form of post-secondary study. However, this does not mean that all segments of society are equally able to benefit from higher education and there are still significant differences in access, particularly in respect of income groups.

The past two decades have seen some **drivers of universal access to higher education** resulting, inter alia, from the overall economic development and growth of private and distance education institutions. On the other hand, there are still important **barriers to achieving universal access to higher education**. The inclusion of marginalized communities persists as a key outstanding component for HE universal access. While data shows that overall access over the past 20 years has been improving, marginalized groups, particularly from low-income settings, remain underrepresented in these institutions.

Policies in support of universal access to higher education have been expanding throughout the last two decades, with, for instance, specific laws, funding schemes, and the creation of specialized universities designed for disadvantaged students. Still, **enrollment versus graduation rates** remains an important dilemma when assessing universal access to HEIs and institutions must ensure that the students they accept, successfully complete their studies.

Although it is difficult to fully express the **effects of increased access on the quality, equity and performance of higher education** at this initial stage, we can already state that performance is an area of concern when considering the drop-out rates in the face of increased access to the institutions. In terms of equity, increased access to HE has been impacting differently, depending on gender, urban/rural dynamics, income levels, and ethnic background. When it comes to quality, we must acknowledge the fact that further and more detailed information needs to be collected to fully understand this highly subjective domain. Nevertheless, there are initial identifiable correlations between the impact of increased

access on quality in terms of the process (e.g. quality of teaching) and the outcome (e.g. graduation rates and employability).

1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale

The purpose of this report is to map and analyze emerging trends in universal access to higher education (HE) over the past two decades. The document draws on an initial review of the literature, and a review of international policies on the topic, to identify policy-making data and contribute to an understanding of how universal access to HE institutions can be supported. Finally, it informs governments and institutions on recent data and successful global initiatives, highlighting persisting challenges and providing recommendations for future action. It also seeks to inform on actions geared towards fulfilling SDG 4 goals.

The report was developed in solidarity with the third World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) event, held on 20 November 2020. UNESCO IESALC reinforces its commitment to the global conferences, interactions and debates of WAHED, an important international platform to promote access to higher education and raise awareness on the critical issues impacting higher education access. The Institute plans to revise the report annually, taking into account WAHED's developments, and to continuously contribute its expertise to the debates organized for the event.

The phenomenon of increased access to higher education, observed as a global trend in recent decades (UNESCO, 2009) continues to be a reality in all regions, proving not only that tertiary education is an area of great interest but also that special attention should be given to these institutions. To this end, the mapping of the process of increased access to HE in the past two decades not only contributes to the promotion of universal access as a concept, but also lays the foundation for an understanding of the main dynamics involved, including the driving forces, the obstacles, the groups benefiting from increased access, marginalized groups, etc.

As tertiary education expands, it becomes *sine qua non* for countries to develop/provide the necessary policy and regulatory frameworks for HEIs to operate, as well as to understand the trends of the increased access in order to promote sound strategies. The matter of increased access is also important for the tertiary institutions themselves. Higher education institutions per se are facing an interesting and at the same time challenging historical moment, with variations according to areas: its role as institutions (traditional academic/research values versus increasing market and future of work demands), its target audience (massification of enrollment and diverse student backgrounds), its geographical location (expansion of campuses and transnational online provisions), its curriculum, a more intensive use of technology, etc. Additionally, there is an overarching element, requiring additional consideration, which is the aspect of access to higher education. Although access is advancing worldwide, as the report will illustrate in the sections below, this is not happening without a cost and persistent challenges. Therefore, from the perspective of governments and institutions, an appreciation of the current status of universal access to higher education is a pertinent and pressing area of study.

1.2 Objectives

This report gives an international perspective of the main elements surrounding universal access to higher education. For the purpose, the study highlights the following key areas:

1. The progression of increased access to higher education in all regions over the past two decades;
2. Which policies have effectively promoted access worldwide, and how;
3. The effect of increased access to higher education in:
 - a. The quality of higher education systems
 - b. The equity of higher education systems

- c. The performance of higher education systems
- 4. How to encourage further development of universal access to higher education.

1.3 Data collection

The data for the study compiled by the UNESCO IESALC technical team, emanated largely from desk research and document analysis, constituting a review of existing literature. Online documents published in English and Spanish including, for example, policy documents and official reports from countries, as well as academic articles, were also utilized.

Examples of those countries which are advancing in the provision of increased access to higher education have also been included throughout the document. It is important to highlight that the objective of the Report is to encourage policy debate on the topic, and not to comprehensively represent the world or a given region. It does not focus on a specific region but rather provides some examples and successful measures to illustrate and develop guidelines for future action. Therefore, the examples included in the study are intended to be illustrative.

The study develops as follows:

1. A review of the literature on the concept of universal access to higher education;
2. Compilation of data leading to the systematization of increased higher education access according to region over the past two decades;
3. Data gathering on policies that have effectively promoted access to higher education in the past two decades;
4. Data gathering on the effect of increased access to HE on the following aspects: quality, equity and performance.
5. Data gathering on persistent challenges and areas for improvement.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

This report, as is the case for other research and studies, has its limitations. Most importantly, that of access to information. Since not all initiatives for global increased access to HE are well documented, available data is quite limited. As mentioned earlier under acknowledgements, this is an initial document and does not aim to be a finite source in itself. Over time and as more information is made available on the progress made by countries, further review of the literature will be welcome. Second, this report is meant to be an initial analysis which UNESCO IESALC plans to expand with future updates. A longer project timeframe will allow for enhanced data collection. Nevertheless, we are confident that these limitations do not prevent the report from providing a good overview of the topic under analysis, nor do they reduce the quality of the material included in this study.

2 The concept of universal access in higher education

2.1 Universal access to education

Higher education encompasses all types of education (academic, professional, technical, artistic, pedagogical, distance learning, etc.) provided by universities, technological institutes, teacher training colleges, etc., which are normally intended for students having completed a secondary education, and whose education objective is the acquisition of a title, a degree, certificate, or diploma of higher education.¹

Universal access to higher education, devoid of discrimination and exclusion, is the cornerstone of the right to education. Yet, it remains a global concern. While the perception

¹ Definition by the World Declaration on higher education:
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141952>

of the importance of education for development is generally increasing, the unfair distribution of educational opportunities has led to ongoing international attention, since it represents a drawback to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and the other SDGs. Universal access to higher education is in line with SDG 4 Goal 4.3 which envisages that by 2030 we must “ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.”²

Education is essential for both individual and societal development. As part of UNESCO’s *Futures of Education* initiative, it is classified as transformative: ‘Knowledge and learning are humanity’s greatest renewable resources for responding to challenges and inventing alternatives. Education does more than respond to a changing world. Education transforms the world.’³

As such, policymakers and educational institutions and policies should ensure that all students have equal and equitable opportunities to obtain an education. The widespread use of the term *access* in education, along with related terms such as *equity* and *inclusion*, is indicative of increased global attention to the needs of the populations which have historically been underserved by schools, who have failed to take full advantage of their education, whose learning needs have been overlooked, and/or who have otherwise “fallen through the cracks.”⁴

Universal access to education refers to people’s equal opportunity to participate in an education system regardless of their characteristics. Education must be inclusive and accessible to all, by law and in deed. This means that aspects such as social class, race,

² <https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>

³ <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/sites/default/files/2019-11/UNESCO%20-%20Futures%20of%20Education%20-%20Brochure%20-%20ENG.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.edglossary.org/access/>

gender, sexuality, ethnic background or disabilities should not be grounds to impede a person's access to education (UNESCO, 2006a).

The [Education 2030 Agenda](#) reiterates the importance of ensuring access to, and completion of, quality education for all children and youth and promoting lifelong opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016). The right to education is the fundamental principle of education for all. The fundamental principles of non-discrimination, solidarity, equality of opportunity and treatment and universal access to education are enshrined in UNESCO's Constitution.⁵

The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education occupies the frontline position among UNESCO standard-setting instruments in the field of education, and is the first international legally-binding instrument protecting the right to education for all. This instrument encompasses the idea that education is not a luxury, but a fundamental right and underscores the state obligation to proscribe any form of discrimination in education while promoting equal educational opportunity (UNESCO, 2007a). The main provisions in this Convention include:

- Free and compulsory primary education;
- Secondary education in its different forms, generally available and accessible to all;
- **Higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity;**
- Equivalent education standards for all public educational institutions of the same level and conditions relation to quality;
- Opportunities for continuing education (lifelong education);
- Training opportunities for the teaching profession without any discrimination.

⁵ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

The Convention also provides that:

- Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The freedom of choice for parents regarding their children's education, in accordance with their moral and religious beliefs;
- The right of members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities.

In the next subsection, the subject of discussion will be the development of universal right to education, which has been enshrined in a range of international rights instruments. Nevertheless, to fulfill the right to education, countries must ensure universal and equal access to equitable quality education and learning.

Economic and social development are other important dimensions relating to wider access to education, in addition to being an extension of basic human rights and a key to achieving all other human rights. Education is expected to foster socioeconomic development through four separate but interrelated missions: humanistic, through the development of individual and collective humane virtues to their full extent; civic, through enhanced public life and active participation in a democratic society; economic, by providing individuals with intellectual and practical skills that make them productive and enhance their and society's living conditions; and through fostering social equity and justice (Spiel *et.al*, 2018). More so, disparities in educational opportunities reinforce and often amplify disparities in outcomes throughout people's lives. Thus, it is critical to ensure that all students receive comprehensive support in order to improve the well-being of underrepresented individuals.

2.2 Concept development

Education has been formally recognized as a human right since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Article 26 of the UDHR states that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least at the Elementary and Basic levels. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”⁶ Many international agencies have, therefore, increasingly turned to a human rights-based approach. This has since been affirmed in numerous global human rights treaties, including the following:

- Geneva Convention III relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1949)
- Geneva Convention IV relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949)
- Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951)
- UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)⁷
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination (1966)
- Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (1977)

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁷ Other UNESCO recommendations include:

- Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers, 1966
- Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1974
- Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education, 1976
- Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education, 1993
- Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994
- Recommendation concerning the status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel, 1997
- Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace
- Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning, 1997
- Dakar Framework for Action – Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitment, 2000

- Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (1977)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- UNESCO Convention of Technical and Vocational Education (1989)
- ILO Convention No.169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989)
- Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990)
- Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National of Ethnic, Religious and Linguistics Minorities (1992)
- ILO Convention No.182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor (1999)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)

At the regional level, universal access to education is promoted within the framework, for example, of the Council of Europe - Protocol 1 to the European Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1952), Charter of the Organisation of American States (1967), African Charter on Human Rights and People's Rights (1981), Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001), Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004), and ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012).

These treaties establish an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children; an obligation to develop secondary education, supported by measures to render it accessible to all children, as well as equitable access to higher education; and a responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education.

Universal access to higher education has also been recognized by governments as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. This recognition is captured in the international goals, strategies and targets that have been set during the past 20 years including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The set of MDGs formulated in 2000 with targets for 2015 crystallized the growing consensus which emerged during the 1990s, namely, that poverty reduction and the provision of basic social services need to be at the center of development policy. Of the eight MDGs, two were directly related to education systems. MDG 2 called for the achievement of universal primary education by 2015 whereby every child will complete full primary education. MDG 3 called for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women specifically with the elimination of gender disparities at the primary and secondary school levels by 2005 and across all education levels by 2015. The remaining MDGs focused on other interrelated development areas that are greatly influenced by the progress made towards the achievement of MDGs 2 and 3 (UNESCO, 2010a). In the case of the SDGs, access to higher education remains a high priority in the development agenda with SDG 4 as the education goal which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” SDG 4 has one specific target (4.3) devoted to HEI access: “by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university”. Access to higher education plays a well-recognized role of enabler for many areas under the SDGs; conversely, progress in other areas may affect education in many ways. Whether contributing by research, by knowledge generation, by awareness campaigns, by granting access to universities, or by forming a more prepared work force, tertiary education is critical for the overall achievement of the SDGs.

In other words, despite the relatively limited explicit references to higher education within the SDG framework, none of the SDGs can be achieved without the contribution of higher education through research, teaching and community engagement, emphasizing the need to ensure its universal access. More specifically, through their research function, HEIs play a

fundamental role in creating knowledge and underpinning the development of analytical and creative capacities that enable solutions to be found for local and global problems in all fields of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016). Thus, accelerating the movement towards universal access to higher education will therefore lead directly to acceleration in other SDGs. For instance, higher education forms an important part of other goals related to poverty (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality (SDG5) governance; decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16)⁸. Conversely, progress towards achieving the SDGs will be retarded if the universalization of higher education is not accelerated. A stronger focus on equity can generate a virtuous cycle to achieve other SDGs⁹.

2.3 Why universal access to higher education matters

Education transforms lives, builds peace, eradicates poverty and drives sustainable development; however, a significant number of individuals miss out on education due to discrimination preventing access to higher education, or lack of equal opportunities. If universal access to higher education is denied or left unaddressed, some populations will struggle academically or drop out, learning gaps may compound or widen over time, students may graduate unprepared to enroll and succeed in a postsecondary-degree program, or students may be unable to participate in certain courses, school programs, extracurricular activities, or sports, among other undesirable outcomes.¹⁰

Starting from the last decade of the 20th century, there has been greater emphasis on the importance of higher education for sustainable development (St George, 2006). Development-related rationales for expansion of access to higher education are centered on

⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/sdgs>

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ <https://www.edglossary.org/access/>

how higher education is crucial for success in the global knowledge economy, for individual employability; and in national development and international competitiveness at the macro-level. There has now been a shift from factory-based production to hi-tech and knowledge intensive industries. The demand for highly skilled workers has increased while the demand for workers with less education and lower skills has decreased.¹¹ In this vein, higher education institutions support knowledge-driven economic growth strategies and poverty reduction by (a) training a qualified and adaptable labor force, (b) generating new knowledge, and (c) building the capacity to access existing bodies of global knowledge and to adapt that knowledge to local use. HEIs are unique in their ability to integrate and create synergy among these three dimensions. In addition, the norms, values, attitudes, ethics, and knowledge that HEIs can impart to students constitute the social capital necessary to construct healthy civil societies and socially cohesive cultures (World Bank, 2002).

Moreover, higher education has a vital role to play in a country's development and participation in the international economy. More importantly in low- and middle-income countries which are still on the path to industrialization, higher education is important as it offers higher levels of science, technology, innovation and eventually research capacity which are essential for industrial development and trade competitiveness. Developing countries get left behind in a global marketplace, if adequate attention is not paid to developing countries' 'knowledge economy' (St. George, 2006). However, despite its importance, as a result of constraints in public resources, higher education systems in lower-income contexts have traditionally been restricted to a small elite population (Schendel and McCowan, 2016). This reminds us of the importance in expanding the provision of higher education.

¹¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>

In addition, discrimination affecting access to higher education is conspicuous. For example, girls can face gender-based barriers such as child marriage, pregnancy, and gender-based violence, which often prevent them from going to or contribute to them dropping-out of college (Wodon *et al*, 2017). Often, people with disabilities literally face accessibility issues, such as a lack of ramps or appropriate transportation, making it difficult to get to universities, and students who are blind may not be provided with magnified printed materials or tests and those with hearing impairments can fail to be provided with sign language instructors.¹² Migrants often face administrative barriers that prevent them from enrolling, effectively barring them from education systems (UNESCO, 2018a). More so, in some contexts, resources to HEIs such as funding and teachers, are allocated along income-group and ethnic lines.¹³ These figures also reinforce the importance of HEIs access for all.

Finally, the SDGs recognize that access to higher education is vital to lifelong learning. The third target of SDG 4 emphasizes that higher education must be globally accessible to all and of high quality. As such, the importance of higher education cannot be exaggerated. Increased access to higher education enables people to maximize their potential and further universal sustainable development. Higher education enables individuals to expand their knowledge and skills, clearly express their thoughts both orally and in writing, grasp abstract concepts and theories, and increase their understanding of the world and their community. It has also been shown to improve an individual's quality of life in studies which illustrate that, compared to high school graduates, college graduates have longer life spans, better access to health care, better dietary and health practices, greater economic stability and security, more stable employment and greater job satisfaction, less dependency on government assistance, greater understanding of government, increased community service and leadership, more self-confidence, and less criminal activity and incarceration. In addition,

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/07/15/long-they-let-us-stay-class/barriers-education-persons-disabilities-china>

¹³ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unequal-opportunity-race-and-education/>

college graduates have higher rates of access to the internet, more time to devote to leisure and artistic activities, and higher voting rates (UK BIS, 2013).

Without a doubt, higher education must be viewed as an enabler in human development and functionality, regardless of barriers of any kind, physical or otherwise. Therefore, disability of any kind cannot be a disqualifier. Inclusion, therefore, involves adopting a broad vision of *Education for All* by addressing the spectrum of needs of all learners, including those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (UNESCO, 2006a).

3 Global trends in access to higher education: progression towards universal access

There are three indicators associated with SDG 4.3 which assist in measuring the progress made in access to higher education, namely:

- 4.3.1 - Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by sex;
- 4.3.2 - Gross enrollment ratio for tertiary education;
- 4.3.3 - Participation rate in technical-vocational programs (15- to 24-year-olds).

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is the most commonly used indicator in monitoring how different regions have fared in increasing access to higher education. This ratio expresses enrollment as a percentage of the population who are in the five-year age group span immediately following secondary school graduation (typically ages 19 to 23).¹⁴

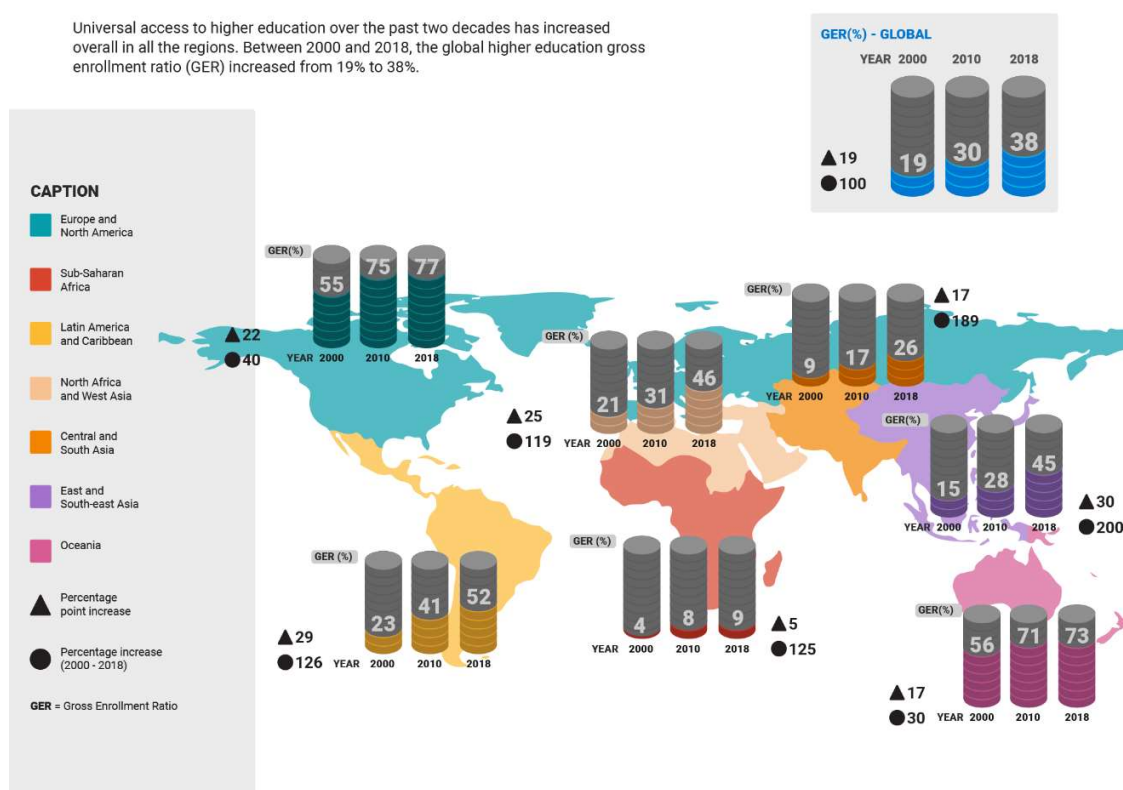
¹⁴ <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/4-3-2-gross-enrolment-ratio-for-tertiary-education/>

In general, universal access to higher education has been increasing worldwide over the past two decades. Following a historical path of expansion – enrollment worldwide went from 13 million students in 1960 to 137 million students in 2005 (UNESCO, 2008) – in the first decade of the 2000s, participation rates in higher education institutions increased by 10 percentage points or more in many regions like Europe, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean (Altbach *et al.*, 2009: 198).

Between 2000 and 2018, the global higher education gross enrollment ratio increased from 19% to 38%. The global figures obscure major differences between regions since among regions, there are large differences. The following infographic shows the rise of the GER in tertiary education across regions.

Evolution of higher education 2000-2018: towards universal access

Universal access to higher education over the past two decades has increased overall in all the regions. Between 2000 and 2018, the global higher education gross enrollment ratio (GER) increased from 19% to 38%.



Source: Data from UIS database

The percentage point increases between 2000 and 2018 show that East and South-east Asia and Latin America and Caribbean regions have had the most rapid expansions of tertiary education participation since 2000; while Sub-Saharan Africa has had the slowest increase in participation rates. However, when we look at percentage increases (using the baseline GER), East and South-east Asia and Central and South Asia have been the global leaders in terms of expansion of tertiary education. There are a few things worth noting about the huge increases in tertiary enrollment in South-east Asia within the selected timeframe. Curaj *et. al* (2015) note that the changing landscape in higher education in this region has been chiefly characterized by massification, diversification, marketization, and internationalization. The increase in demand for higher education has manifested in three forms: larger number of student population, higher interest in cross-border knowledge and experience, and the need for greater variety in academic programs. To address this, the governments of these countries have built more higher education institutions, allowing private sector to play a bigger role, while granting greater autonomy to public universities. Higher education restructuring in a number of South-east Asian countries have led to the establishment, for instance, of autonomous higher education institutions.

Although access to tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa doubled between 2000 and 2018, the enrollment rate remains low at 9% in 2018, the lowest regional average in the world, about a quarter of the global average. The growth has been insufficient to match the rising demand driven by improved access to primary and secondary education, a growing young population, and employment shifting away from the agriculture to manufacturing and services.¹⁵ The region faces several challenges in its higher education systems. For many countries in the region, it is extremely difficult to secure adequate funding for tertiary education and the costs for tertiary education remain high. Compounding these challenges,

¹⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/01/10/figures-of-the-week-higher-education-enrollment-grows-in-sub-saharan-africa-along-with-disparities-in-enrollment-by-income/>

these countries have very limited options to acquire additional resources, women are still under-represented in terms of access to tertiary education in the region and large numbers of students pursue tertiary education abroad (UNESCO, 2010b). However, it is very important to acknowledge that the region has come a long way since 1970, when the GER was only about 1%.¹⁶

In addition to this, when briefly assessing the aspect of internationalization in HEIs, the access of international and foreign students to HEIs has grown on average by 4.8% per year between 1998 and 2018. Although OECD countries host the great majority of international and foreign students, the fastest growth has been among internationally mobile students enrolled in non-OECD countries (OECD, 2020).

¹⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZG>

3.1 Examples of increased universal access to higher education in different regions

Comparatively, several countries worldwide have seen a particularly high increase in access to and completion of higher education in the last twenty years, in their respective region. In order to illustrate this, the table 1 below presents data from a few countries per region¹⁷.

The indicator used to generate the analytical data was the gross graduation ratio from first degree programs (ISCED¹⁸ 6¹⁹ and 7²⁰) in tertiary education, including both sexes (%)²¹. Here, it is very important to explain why the gross graduation ratio was chosen over gross enrollment ratio²² for this analysis. First, the graduation ratio measures a final outcome, while enrollment ratio measures active students, which does not take into account that a percentage of them will eventually drop out of HEIs before graduation. Since the rate of student retention from first to last year of studies varies widely from country to country, graduation ratios are affected more by country-specific conditions. Second, enrollment ratios have the advantage of providing a slightly more recent image. Since tertiary degrees typically take several years to complete, graduation rates do not immediately reflect the outcome of the policies implemented on the year of reference. It is for this reason that this list often takes an average of several years as a reference for comparison. Finally, the gross enrollment ratio can potentially exceed 100% due to the inclusion of over-age and under-age students because of early or late entries, and grade repetition. The need to consider

¹⁷ Except for the Pacific region, due to lack of enough comparable data.

¹⁸ International Standard Classification of Education

¹⁹ Bachelor or equivalent

²⁰ Master or equivalent

²¹ Number of graduates from first degree programs (at ISCED 6 and 7) expressed as a percentage of the population of the theoretical graduation age of the most common first-degree program <http://data.uis.unesco.org>

²² In the UIS database enrollment ratio refers to data provided by the national authorities, while the equivalent concept of attendance ratio refers to data gathered from household surveys.

these additional variables makes it more difficult to compare results across regions and countries, based purely on GER.

Regarding the selection criteria for the analysis, many countries lacked data for several years and a few had sudden changes in the ratio from one year to the next. In order to focus on the long-term trends, the average of five-year periods was used as a reference. The completion percentage of the first and last five-year period were compared both in terms of difference in percentage points and as a ratio between both percentages. This highlighted the countries whose graduation ratios were increased by the highest amount of percentage points, and also those countries that had very low starting points but multiplied their initial percentage several times over the last twenty years. For each country presented in the table, averages are given when the ratio was relatively stable for the period, otherwise the first and last data point of the series serve as a reference. In addition, intermediate points were included to show if the increase was gradual or happened after a specific timeframe and for some reasons were included. For most of the countries, the 20 - year period (research timeframe) was included.

Table 1: Examples of expansion of access to higher education

	Country	Graduation rate evolution (1999-2019)	Remarks
Central and South Asia	Iran	From an average of 10% between 2004 and 2008, to an average of 35% in 2014-2018	Steady increase for the entire period
Central and South Asia	Kazakhstan	From 20% in 1999 to 51% in 2006. From 2006 to 2019, fluctuating between 51% and 63%	No clear long-term trend since 2006. Peak in 2015
Central and South Asia	Kyrgyzstan	From an average of 21% between 1999 and 2003, to an average of 30% in 2004-2013, to an average of 37% in 2014-2019	

East and South-east Asia	Indonesia	From an average below 8% between 2000 and 2004, to an average of 14% in 2009-2012, to 21% in 2015-2018	
East and South-east Asia	Mongolia	From below 18% in 1999 to above 51% in 2018	Steady increase for the entire period
East and South-east Asia	Republic of Korea	From below 26% in 1999 to above 50% in 2009, remaining near this value ever since	
Europe and North America	Albania	From an average of 10% in 1999-2003 to an average of 41% in 2014-2019	
Europe and North America	Germany	From an average below 19% between 1999 and 2003, to a steady increase between 2003 and 2015, then staying on an average of 42% in 2015-2018	
Europe and North America	Russian Federation	From 28% in 2001 to 51% in 2009, to 75% in 2016, to 58% in 2018 (rapid reversion of the trend in the last 2 years of the series)	The peak from 2016 was the 2nd highest for any country in the region
Europe and North America	Slovenia	From an average of 17% in 1999-2003 to an average of 53% in 2014-2018	
Latin America and the Caribbean	Colombia	From less than 5% in 2002 to above 25% in 2018	Steady increase for the entire period
Latin America and the Caribbean	Cuba	From an average of 11% in 1999-2003, to an average of 47% in 2009-2013, to an average of 28% in 2014-2018, ending below 17% in 2018	Steady increase for 15 years, followed by a steady decline in the last 5 years
Latin America and the Caribbean	Honduras	From an average below 3% between 1999 and 2003, to an average of 10% in 2014-2018	
North Africa and West Asia	Jordan	From 19% in 2000 to 39% in 2011	No data after 2011

North Africa and West Asia	Morocco	From 5% in 2001, to 18% in 2019	
North Africa and West Asia	Saudi Arabia	From an average of 11% in 1999 to 19% in 2009, to 41% in 2019. During 2014-2019, the rate was duplicated	Steady increase for the entire period, especially at the end
Sub-Saharan Africa	Burundi	From below 1% in 2001-2004 to 4% in 2014	
Sub-Saharan Africa	Lesotho	From an average of 1% in 1999-2003 to 4% in 2018	
Sub-Saharan Africa	Rwanda	From 1% in 2004 to an average of 7% in 2017-2019	

Source: Data generated from UIS database

For the vast majority of countries for which there is comparable data (UIS, 2020), graduation rates increased within the respective timeframes. However, there are large differences in completion rates across countries in different regions. For the selected countries above, the greatest growth was recorded in Slovenia (36pp), Mongolia (33pp) and Albania (31pp). Where student participation rates are high, such as in North America and Europe and parts of Asia, attention has tended to turn to equity of access and the retention and throughput of students. In countries where access remains low, such as in Africa and parts of Latin America and Asia, there remains a focus on moving from elite to mass higher education – but with concerns about an accompanying decline in quality and the impact this has on drop-out and graduation rates.²³ In many low-income settings, such as rural Africa, there may be intense pressure for young people (girls especially) to assist families with work post-school as well as during school education.²⁴ Low graduation rates across Africa are also attributed

²³ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200904081106566>

²⁴ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200904081106566>

to soaring student numbers accompanied by declining per student funding, overcrowding and deeply inadequate resources (World Bank, 2010).

It is important to note at this point that graduation rates discussed here do not assume that an education system has adequately equipped its graduates with the basic skills and knowledge necessary to enter the labor market, because this indicator does not capture the quality of educational outcomes. However, these rates do give an indication of the extent to which education systems succeed in preparing students to meet the labor market's minimum educational requirements.

3.2 Disparities in universal access to higher education

Higher education has seen astounding growth across the world in recent decades, and according to the most recent (2019) data from UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, more than a third of the population globally now go on to some forms of post-secondary study.²⁵ Yet, while there are increasing participation rates in all regions, there remain significant disparities among different groups. While there is agreement in the literature that, for low income students from marginalized ethnical groups, education is the most powerful factor to bring about a different outcome for their lives (Gray, 2013), these groups still face a harsh reality when trying to access HEIs.

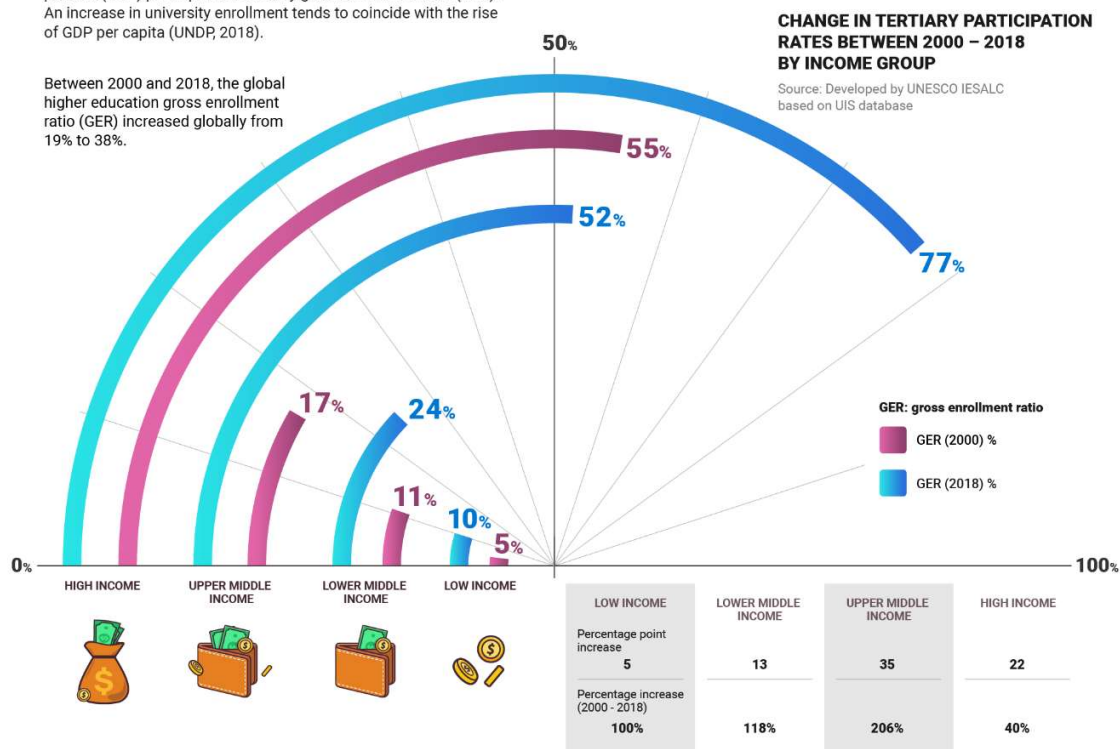
As shown in the infographic below, the highest increase in participation rates has been in upper middle-income countries while the lowest has been in low income countries. Between 2000 and 2018, GER in upper middle-income countries increased by more than 200%. There seems to be a strong relationship between GDP per capita and tertiary GER. An increase in university enrollment tends to coincide with the rise of GDP per capita (UNDP, 2018).

²⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR>

Higher education remains out of reach for many of the world's poorest people

There seems to be a strong relationship between gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and tertiary gross enrollment ratio (GER). An increase in university enrollment tends to coincide with the rise of GDP per capita (UNDP, 2018).

Between 2000 and 2018, the global higher education gross enrollment ratio (GER) increased globally from 19% to 38%.



Source: Data from UIS database

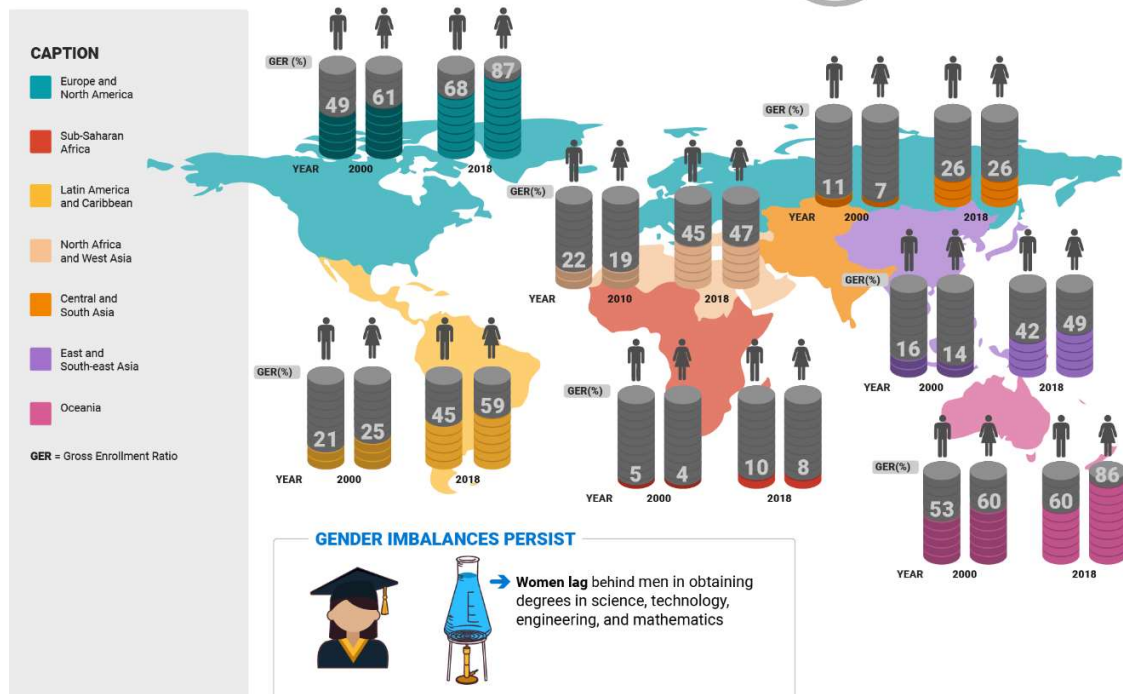
Furthermore, globally, there have been disparities in tertiary education participation by gender. Between 2000 and 2018, the GER for males increased from 19% to 36%, while that for females went from 19% to 41%. Women have therefore been the main beneficiaries of the rapid increases in tertiary education enrollment, especially considering that the two gender groups had the same starting point. In tertiary education, only 4% of countries have achieved gender parity, with the gender imbalance increasing at the expense of males. As South Asia moves towards closing the gap, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where women still do not enroll in or graduate from tertiary education at the same rate as men. Furthermore, there is a range of less visible inequalities among the disciplines studied. In many countries, although women outnumber men as graduates, they lag behind men in

completing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees. In Chile, Ghana and Switzerland, for example, women account for less than one-quarter of all STEM degrees (UNESCO, 2018b). Please refer to the following:

Beneficiaries in access to higher education by gender: 2000-2018

Between 2000-2018 the male GER increased from 19% to 36%, while that for females went from 19% to 41%.

4% of COUNTRIES → In tertiary education, only 4% of countries have achieved gender parity.



Source: Data from UIS database

Within specific countries there are marked inequalities in opportunity. Rates of access are significantly higher for more privileged social groups, while lower-income and other marginalized communities struggle for entry, particularly in the poorest countries (McCowan, 2016).

Higher education remains out of reach for many of the world's poorest people. For example, an analysis of enrollment data at the regional level across wealth quintiles in Africa showed that those in the top wealth quintile do better in tertiary education enrollment than those in the poorest and middle quintiles. Across regions, South and Central African countries perform worst in enrolling students from the poorest and middle quintile of households. When looking at enrollment ratios across some African countries by the top 20 percent and the bottom 80 percent income quintiles, between 1998 and 2012, post-secondary enrollment for the bottom 80 percent increased 3.1 percent whereas the top 20 percent saw an 8 percent increase.²⁶ In Latin America and the Caribbean, the poorest 50 percent of the population only represented about 25 percent of higher education students in 2013.²⁷ In the United Kingdom, entrance to higher education is seen to be more common for students from more geographically affluent areas as compared to the most disadvantaged (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000)

Although in absolute terms there has been an increase in participation in higher education across all social groups, in relative terms the gap between disadvantaged young people and their more advantaged peers has remained. Ideally, qualified school-leavers should choose to advance directly to the course in higher education best suited to their abilities and interests. However, there are many factors which may deter some young people from making this transition. These include financial, geographical and social considerations, all of which may act as 'barriers' to full participation in higher education (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). Section 5 below, details the main barriers identified to achieving universal access to HE.

²⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/01/10/figures-of-the-week-higher-education-enrollment-grows-in-sub-saharan-africa-along-with-disparities-in-enrollment-by-income/>

²⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/05/17/higher-education-expanding-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-but-falling-short-of-potential>

Certainly, one of the most pressing challenges is not only the expansion of tertiary participation, but rather reducing the long tail of disadvantaged students failing to access tertiary education. Inequality of representation is certain to have negative consequences for both economic efficiency and social justice. As countries around the globe contend with issues of increased demand for, and access to, higher education institutions, policy reforms are increasingly shifting the costs of higher education to students and their families. Thus, while children of lower socioeconomic status are underrepresented in higher education, an impending risk is that higher tuition fees due to increased demand for higher education will act as a further barrier to access education for this group. Another related issue is that of access to lower levels of schooling for disadvantaged groups. For example, despite secondary enrollment increases from 11% in 1970 to 32% and 22% for lower and upper secondary, respectively in 2018 in Africa, for most young Africans, education still ends at primary school. The biggest beneficiaries of secondary education are wealthier urban boys. Conflicts across Central Africa and the Sahel region and government policies that limit compulsory education to six years have exacerbated this exclusion.²⁸ This has implications for access to higher education, as poor participation rates at lower levels of education affect participation in higher education.

Increased demand and enrollment rates in the higher education system do not indicate that all segments of society are equally able to benefit from higher education. In many countries, there is a huge difference between higher education participation rates of different social and cultural groups. Despite various projects and policies of governments, institutions and other political entities, there is still inequality in access to higher education in many countries. A closer look at a few country examples shows that low enrollment rates persist among disadvantaged groups. For example, in South Africa, in 2013, participation rates for Africans

²⁸ <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/blog/sub-saharan-africa%e2%80%99s-secondary-education-challenges>

were at 16% and for non-Whites 14%, considerably lower than the national goal of 20%, and significantly lower when compared to rates for Whites (55%) and Indians (47%) (CHE, 2013). In Mexico, only a quarter of indigenous students from 18 to 22 years old were enrolled in college in 2010, compared with over a third of their non-indigenous counterparts (Cortina, 2017). In China, youth who live in rural areas are seven times less likely to attend university than those from urban areas (Li *et al.*, 2013). Thus, in spite of the strides these regions have made in expanding access to education, their governments still face significant challenges in providing equitable educational opportunity.

4 Drivers in achieving universal access to higher education

The increase in access to higher education is a result of many factors, including a set of driving forces which are highlighted in this report: economic development, rise in middle-class aspirations, growth of private institutions, and growth of distance education institutions. In addition to this, there are other several reasons for the rise in higher education participation rates, including increased demand partially driven by the global shift to the knowledge economy rationale, more supportive government policies²⁹ and a growing sense of responsibility for social equity (Oketch, 2016).

While we are cognizant that the increase in access to higher education has been influenced by a myriad of factors such as increased global recognition of higher education as a human right and the consequent advocacy of its importance by international agencies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank as well as in national legal instruments and policies, for this report we give specific attention to a few main drivers from both a supply and demand perspective.

²⁹ These are detailed in section 7.

4.1 Economic development

The growth of higher education participation is often represented as a function of the economic need for more skills and higher productivity in the markets for human capital (Marginson, 2016). There is a well-established relationship between gross domestic product (GDP) growth and tertiary education enrollments. This relationship is particularly strong for emerging economies with GDP per capita less than US\$10,000 where a small increase in the GDP contributes to a significant rise in the enrollment rate. In practice this is likely to reflect rising household incomes, greater wealth, growing middle classes, demand from parents to provide their children with a tertiary education, and a higher gradient of skills demand from structurally changing economies. It may also reflect an increased fiscal capacity of governments to fund and expand access to tertiary education (British Council, 2012). The high growth rates experienced in South Asia may be a reason why the GER of the region is expanding at a fast pace.

4.2 Rise in middle-class aspirations

The expansion of higher education is not only powered by economic growth but also by the ambitions of families to advance or maintain social position and of students for self-realization. In contemporary societies, those desires, particularly the hopes of parents for children, have become primarily focused on formal education, which is seen as the privileged pathway to professional work. Over time, the social demand for higher education accumulates and trends towards the universal, and higher education provision becomes large, growing and increasingly ubiquitous. Thus, universal desires for social betterment are articulated through higher education systems that are themselves expanding. Socially, higher education functions as a positional good in which its sorting role is as important as the absolute opportunities that it brings (Marginson, 2016).

Middle income countries with rapid growth rates in higher education have a few things in common. Along with a growing pool of eligible students, they have a growing middle class with higher occupational aspirations and a regulatory environment that is becoming more stable. They provide funding for educational infrastructure and for salaries and development of teachers, staff and administrators (Marginson, 2016).

4.3 Growth of private institutions

Higher education institutions are diversifying alongside their student bodies. Private institutions in particular have grown in numbers, sizes, specialization and mission. New kinds of private providers have emerged, which include transnational provision in the form of international branch campuses and international online providers (Kinser and Lane, 2012). These are creating more places in HE systems while many governments reduce their direct funding role in higher education.

Private enrollments have been growing steadily: they now account for 30% of all global enrollments (UNESCO, 2017). In Latin America, private enrollments account for 49% of the total. In Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru, more than 60% of students in 2015 were enrolled in private institutions, along with more than 80% of students in Chile and Paraguay. In Asia, private enrollments make up 36% on average, where countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are experiencing the same trend.

It is important to note, nevertheless, that there are doubts regarding the quality of private higher education institutions worldwide. While they have contributed significantly to the expansion of HE in all regions, granting access to tertiary education to many students, this sometimes happened at the cost of quality. Moreover, in many countries, for instance those in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, middle and upper classes are the ones

benefitting from quality education provided in public institutions, while low-income students are more often granted access to private institutions with lower quality provision.

4.4 Growth of open distance institutions

Similarly to private institutions, open distance education institutions have grown as well, as a result also of new technologies and internet dissemination. Instead of research programs or other types of specialized study, many new institutions provide broad access programs that have less stringent entrance criteria (Levy, 2013). Open education providers are also gaining ground. Gross enrollment rates in Turkey grew from 30% in 2004 to 86% in 2014 in part due to distance education enrollments. Over 1.7 million undergraduate students enrolled at Anadolu University³⁰ in 2014, almost a third of all higher education enrollments in the country (UNESCO, 2017).

5 Barriers to achieving universal access to higher education

Access to higher education is very crucial for every country. It is the basis for a wide range of other critical issues such as reduction of unemployment, which in turn can lead to a decrease in poverty. However, not every country can easily provide an increase in access to HE, and there are many barriers to achieving universal access, the most critical and wide-ranging of which are: poverty, crisis and emergency, high tuition fees, entrance examinations, geographical mobility and discrimination. In addition to this, there are other numerous aspects, many of which are infrastructural, hindering universal access, that could also be pointed out: insufficient numbers of teachers being trained; teachers leaving the profession; insufficient facilities such as electricity, internet and computer access; low budget; low

³⁰ Public university in Turkey, ranked by Times Higher Education among the best in the country.

aspirations in some contexts; and too few classes available. Universal access to higher education becomes then a challenging objective that requires sound political strategies, sufficient time and proper resources to overcome the barriers highlighted here below.

5.1 Poverty

Poverty is a key factor impeding enrollment, primary and secondary completion, and learning outcomes - aspects that have a direct impact on HE access and partially explain why students from ethnic minority and indigenous communities consistently underachieve (UNESCO, 2007b). Poverty is one of the major problems in developing nations. One of the reasons why students are not in HEIs is because families are not able to pay for their children's education. They usually have to choose between attending school or to working in order to support their families. Another critical issue related to poverty is poor nutrition which leads to illnesses and obstructs educational capabilities. It has been shown that regional non-enrollment percentages vary in line with the incidence of child labor, with Africa taking top place (41%), followed by Asia (21%) and Latin America (17%). In Africa, population growth, a weak economy, famine and armed conflict have contributed to keeping child labor high and school attendance low. If primary and secondary school attendance is low, this in turn affects tertiary GER.

5.2 Crisis and Emergency

Since some countries still cope with crisis and emergency situations, proper educational services are dysfunctional, such as countries which deal with wars and political conflicts. Teachers and students often have to find some location in their refugee camps to accommodate teaching and learning. In 2016, 24 million children living in crisis zones were out of school while nearly one in four of the 109.2 million school-aged children who live in

conflict areas were missing out on their education.³¹ Without a doubt, this has a direct influence on HE access. For example, it was shown that in two European countries involved in WWII – Austria and Germany – children who were ten years old during the conflict were significantly less likely to proceed into higher education and lost around 20 percent of a year of schooling on average (UNESCO, 2010c). Conflicts in Tajikistan (1992-97) had a negative effect on completion of secondary schooling, particularly for boys (O'Brien, 2020). Following the sectarian conflict in Iraq in the 2000s, 84% of the higher education institution infrastructure was burnt, looted, or severely destroyed in some form (Milton and Barakat, 2016). The destruction of infrastructure, the absence of lecturers and recruitment of young soldiers all affect access to higher education. Today, only 1% of the world's more than 65 million people displaced by war and conflict attend university.³²

5.3 Institutional barriers: High tuition fees and entrance examinations

The two primary institutional barriers present in most higher education systems are tuition fees and entrance examinations. Although many public universities charge fees, these are a primary characteristic of private universities –the increasing popularity of 'cost-sharing' policies has meant that public institutions are sometimes free-of-charge, despite a range of other direct and opportunity costs of full-time study. Entrance examinations and requirements seem a justifiable means of assessing whether students are equipped to engage in a particular course, yet in many cases they privilege students from high quality schools and those who have been able to pay for preparatory courses. The meritocratic principles of university admissions are hard to disentangle from unfair social advantage and disadvantage. On the other hand, the introduction of standardized national entrance exams

³¹ <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/conflict-remains-major-barrier-schooling>

³² <https://reliefweb.int/topics/education-emergencies>

and affirmative actions in many countries, e.g. Brazil and Tajikistan, has reduced this entrance gap.³³

5.4 Geographical mobility

Participation in higher education can be impacted by the domicile of the individual, and the geographical distance of institutions. The reasons for this are complex, as regional disparities may be due to socio-economic and geographical factors. However, access to higher education in terms of travel distance can be a very real issue for some, particularly those who live in remote or rural areas (Mullen, 2010) and where HEIs are concentrated in urban parts of the country.

Moreover, while the number of branch campuses is increasing in order to accommodate underprivileged populations, their choice of location is often dependent on the commercial forces funding them (Briscoe and Oliver, 2006).

5.5 Discrimination

Discrimination in the education system is another element and occurs most obviously in education access. It can also occur within education systems and may manifest as certain groups receiving an inferior quality of education compared with others (for instance, the quality of education in urban schools tends to be higher than that found in rural areas, as mentioned before). Also, discrimination can occur as part of the education process itself, when different groups of people are not able to draw the same benefits from the education they received.

³³ <https://emmasabzalieva.com/2015/05/15/university-admissions-reform-in-tajikistan/>

Girls can face gender-based barriers such as child marriage, pregnancy, and gender-based violence which often prevent them from going to or contribute to them dropping-out of college. Gender in itself is not a 'barrier' to higher education, and statistical trends shown in this report illustrate the differences in levels of participation by men and women in higher education, with men being under-represented as a proportion of the higher education population.

People with disabilities or additional support needs also experience a number of barriers to higher education access (Mullen, 2010). People with disabilities literally often face accessibility issues, such as a lack of ramps or appropriate school transportation, making it difficult to get to college.

Another example refers to migrant groups. Migrants often face administrative barriers that prevent them from enrolling, effectively barring them from education systems. These include lack of supportive infrastructure and capable teachers to address cultural issues and differences.

The barriers to participation in higher education mentioned above are wide ranging and are not mutually exclusive. Limited access to higher education entails a host of other related social, political and economic problems. The road to economic growth and prosperity in the developing world will either stagnate or be bound to end altogether, if the progress from limited access to education does not succeed. This will deprive many poor nations from growth brought by a highly-skilled workforce with post-secondary education. The gap between the poor and rich will widen, leading to a rise in worldwide inequality, creating more global despair and conflict (Goel *et al.*, 2008).

6 Inclusion of marginalized communities: access of vulnerable groups to higher education

The barriers to HE access presented above sends a clear message: marginalized communities tend to face more difficulties to access higher education. This means that any efforts to promote universal access to tertiary education should entail minority groups as a priority.

The principle of universal access to higher education combines the *Education for All* movement with inclusion. Inclusion is about access to education in a manner that there is no discrimination or exclusion faced by any individual or group within or outside the school system. It is also a process whereby all students and children can learn together in the same institution. This entails reaching out to all learners and removing all barriers that could limit participation and achievement. Therefore, universal access to higher education ensures that *all* people, including the disabled, the economically disadvantaged and minority groups, participate and are included in higher educational systems.

In addition to this, international and regional human rights treaties apply the rights to non-discrimination and equality to the right to education of specific marginalized groups. Marginalized groups are those who have suffered prolonged and historical discrimination, usually, but not exclusively, on the basis of identity (gender, for example), characteristics (ethnicity, race), or circumstance (refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons) (UNDP, 2010). Examples of vulnerable groups include:

- girls and women
- national, ethnic, and linguistic minorities
- people with disabilities
- indigenous people
- migrants

- refugees
- asylum-seekers
- stateless persons
- internally displaced persons (IDPs)
- persons in detention / persons deprived of liberty
- people living in poverty
- people living in rural areas
- people affected by HIV
- people affected by albinism
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTQI)
- older people

Marginalized groups, such as the ones mentioned above, exist nearly everywhere and are very likely to be subject to multiple, compound, or intersectional forms of discrimination along education lines. The dire situation of these populations is often exacerbated by numerous and complex factors including discrimination and inequality in respect of life opportunities, and denial to equal access to quality higher education (UNDP, 2010). Therefore, it becomes necessary to promote the rights of these groups not only to access HE, but also to access quality education (see section 8.1 for more details on the aspect of quality).

It is also important to note that the levels of educational attainment among minority groups are often lower (Gao and Thompson, 2003). Curriculum reform that takes into account minority cultures and languages and tackles discrimination will contribute towards achieving education for all, particularly when considering that the social and cultural norms in many countries might exclude some groups from higher education.

In terms of poverty, educational outcomes are one of the key areas influenced by family incomes. Individuals of the worse-off groups are still more likely to have less education and less access to basic services (UNDP, 2010). Consequently, students from low-income families often start HE already behind their peers who come from more affluent families. The incidence, depth, duration and timing of poverty all influence a student's educational attainment, along with community characteristics and social networks (Ferguson *et al.*, 2007).

Data shows that only 3 percent of refugees have access to higher education.³⁴ Such a small percentage clearly demonstrates how opportunities and access to rights are reduced by the refugee experience. Challenges faced by refugees in accessing higher education include the lack of necessary documentation for enrollment purposes and/or application for scholarships, lack of knowledge and access to information about opportunities, language and culture barriers (Sherab, 2016).

Students with disabilities face multiple forms of discrimination which leads to their exclusion from society and HEIs. Attitudes toward student with disabilities, as well as a lack of resources to accommodate them, compound the challenges they face in accessing higher education.

Consequently, these few examples show that more coherent efforts and targeted strategies in ensuring access to higher education are required to directly address the plight of these disadvantaged minorities. Targeting or ignoring one group can ultimately affect the whole spectrum of HE access. There must be recognition that the right to education or access to HE benefits all.

³⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

7 Policies supporting universal access to higher education

Many countries have set goals to increase the share of the population with higher education and/or broaden access to higher education for individuals that are under-represented because of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, disability or location.

Policies supporting universal access to HE in different countries target different groups, and use a range of strategies to do so. For example, financial premiums to schools attracting disadvantaged pupils, formative assessments for students at risk and admission quotas for minority groups are a few examples (OECD, 2008). To create opportunities for students with more varied needs and expectations, many countries are trying to expand and diversify higher education offerings and to create multiple pathways between secondary and higher education. Legislative frameworks with monitoring bodies are also key policy tools in this effort. Admission requirements can be engineered to help achieve access objectives as well. And bringing higher education closer to potential beneficiaries through the creation of new higher education institutions in underserved regions has proven to be an effective strategy for greater access in many countries (UNESCO, 2017).

Consequently, widening participation initiatives aim to improve access to higher education opportunities for all people. Driven by increased demand and interest for education from all segments of society as well as legal reforms and human rights declarations, the highlighted supportive policy initiatives below, focus on improving access for students, including those from historically marginalized backgrounds, to address inequities and inequalities in higher education.

7.1 Laws

Ecuador and Greece are constitutionally bound to provide free post-secondary education to all citizens, while Tunisia guarantees free public higher education through a law rather than the constitution (Law No. 19-2008). The constitutions of Brazil, Finland, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation guarantee access to higher education based on ability. For example, the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil guarantees free education according to the capacity of the individual (Art. 208, No. 59, 2009) and the Constitution of the Republic of Korea states that 'all citizens have an equal right to receive an education corresponding to their abilities' (Art. 31(1), 1987). Many laws and acts guaranteeing access to higher education prohibit discrimination and encourage access for minorities and disadvantaged groups. Brazil's Law No. 10,558 promotes access to higher education for people from socially disadvantaged groups, specifically targeting Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples (Art 1, 2002). Similarly, the education framework, developed by the Lao People's Democratic Republic Ministry of Education, emphasizes equality of access in all of the country's 17 provinces (Education Sector Development Framework 2009–2015). Kenya's Higher Education Loans Board Act of 1995 increases access for socio-economically disadvantaged students by 'granting loans out of the Fund ... as the Board may deem fit, to any eligible person to enable him, or assist any student, to meet the cost of higher education' (UNESCO, 2017).

In South Africa, education legislation guarantees the right to education for all children irrespective of migration or legal status, but immigration legislation prevents undocumented migrants from enrolling. School gatekeepers may insist on complete documentation, believing the law requires it, as with Central Asian immigrants in the Russian Federation. In the United States, anti-immigration raids led to surges in dropout among children of undocumented immigrants wary of deportation, whereas an earlier policy providing deportation protection had increased secondary school completion (UNESCO, 2017).

7.2 Formula funding

Some countries use formula funding to help meet equity objectives, some of which relate public allocations to performance indicators (Salmi and Hauptmann, 2006). In South Africa, national higher education institutions receive a share of their funding on the basis of their success in enrolling historically disadvantaged black students (Ouma, 2010). Disadvantaged students often need additional support to help them successfully graduate from higher education, and special incentives for institutions to recruit students from specific groups can help provide this support. Students with special needs can also be targeted through funding allocations: Governments can provide special purpose funding to higher education institutions for adapting buildings or other accommodations. For example, in 2015, Poland allocated \$11.5 million for sign language interpreters and disability awareness training for faculty and students to help raise sensitivity (OECD, 2015).

7.3 Admission requirements

Admission requirements are an important policy lever for increasing equity in higher education. Admission policies to higher education can be decided nationally or at the institutional level, or in some cases jointly (Stead, 2016). Giving higher education institutions some leeway in deciding on admissions can be helpful to disadvantaged groups. When entry into higher education is selective, such as for example through centralized examinations, disadvantaged groups often fare less well. In Turkey, low income students find it difficult to compete on entrance exams with applicants from advantaged backgrounds who have more resources to spend on private tutoring and exam preparation (Caner and Okten, 2013). However, when admission policies are decided at the institutional level, individual circumstances can more easily be taken into account. Affirmative action policies may include numerical quotas for members of disadvantaged groups, or other preferential treatment, such as bonuses on admission scores, need-based scholarships or outreach programs. Brazil,

a country with a centralized exam admissions system, passed a national law in 2012 that imposed quotas on the country's 63 federal universities, which are among the most prestigious institutions in the country. Under the law, half of all university places were guaranteed to students from public secondary schools, including African or indigenous descent. Universities' admission policies were changed to reflect the ethnic profile of the state in which they were situated. Lower income students began to receive bonuses on entrance examinations, which helped boost their enrollments (McCowan, 2016). Initial program reviews show that students that use the quotas come from family backgrounds with up to 50% less money than other students (Norões and McCowan, 2016).

India has one of the world's oldest quota systems for admission to higher education, enshrined in the country's constitution adopted in 1950. The social system in India is strongly shaped by the 2,500-year-old system that divides the population into five hereditary and occupation-specific castes. The lowest, known as the Dalits, comprises 16% of the population. Despite the abolition by law of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, members of this group continue to be impoverished and are the target of discrimination, oppression, violence and exclusion. In addition, 50 million Indians belong to tribal communities. They live on the margins of society and are often excluded from mainstream development processes (UNESCO, 2017).

The quota-based affirmative action program in India targets tribes, lower castes and other so-called 'backward' classes recognized in the list of scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). Under the system, 22.5% of all places in educational institutions that have complete or partial government funding are reserved for SC and ST youth. The rule's inclusion in the constitution means it cannot be easily changed, but in 2005, the policy was extended to cover private as well as public higher education institutions. An empirical review of the admissions policy in 225 Indian engineering colleges shows that targeted enrollments increased almost three times. Even so, the most disadvantaged castes still attend in smaller

proportions than their population shares, which means that there is still room for improvement (Bagde *et al.*, 2016).

7.4 Specialized universities

Another strategy that some governments use to address severe disadvantage among certain groups is to establish specialized universities designed for disadvantaged groups, such as women's universities in South Asia (India and Pakistan) and universities for ethnic minorities (for instance in Australia, Mexico and New Zealand) (UNESCO, 2017). These specialized universities help to create an environment that is culturally more familiar to underrepresented groups, who often control and manage the institutions themselves. In Latin America, the Universidades Interculturales (UI) were designed to address the access problems of indigenous or Afro-descendant populations in countries such as Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Nicaragua. Mexico, for example, set up several such universities in 2004 in regions with large indigenous populations. UIs are open to all students, but they are grounded in indigenous culture and they offer programs based on indigenous culture or knowledge (Mato, 2009). In 2015, about 10,750 students enrolled in the 11 Mexican intercultural universities. Of these, indigenous women were almost 1.5 times the male students, showing that these campuses are able to provide access to students that typically do not enroll elsewhere (Cortina, 2017).

7.5 Financial support to students: grants and loans

Grants and loans supporting students in higher education can be provided by public or private funding, and includes subsidies to the institutions (which themselves will subsidize the students) or the students directly. Student loans are indeed a common policy across the globe for expanding access to HE for lower income students, though they often lack flexibility. For example, the student loan program in Vietnam dates from the 1990's and in

its current form dates from 2003. The slow increase in the number of students covered by the program means that while it used to cover almost 10% of students in 2002 (UNESCO, 2006a), in 2018 it covered less than 3% (Doan *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, the loan (which is not interest free) does not cover all the student fees and much less the living costs. The program is therefore conceived more like a safety net for particularly complicated cases than as a general incentive to enroll in HE for those who cannot afford it (Doan *et al.*, 2020).

7.6 Massive investments in the universalization of secondary education

The rapid worldwide expansion of higher educational enrollments also has a strong correlation with the expansion of secondary education enrollments. Secondary school graduates are globally a requisite of tertiary expansion, and having more of them is likely to increase tertiary enrollments. Once secondary education is greatly expanded, it will become necessary to obtain a tertiary degree to maintain social distinctions and obtain advantages in the stratification system (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). Many secondary school graduates are also now seeing a higher education as a ticket to much favorable employment outcomes compared to those with only a secondary education. Therefore, higher education expands more rapidly when secondary education enrollments are high. Many countries have invested heavily in secondary education through increase in its funding while development agencies have also called for greater resources to be devoted to secondary education (Glewwe, 2013). The consequent increases in enrollment at the secondary level have been quite dramatic in all regions of the world: from 2000 to 2018, the number of out-of-school children of lower secondary school age shrank from 99 million to 61 million, and the number of out-of-school children of upper secondary school age reduced from 177 million to 138 million. The gender gaps in both lower and upper secondary education have also been closing steadily over last

two decades.³⁵ It is no doubt that the increased enrollments rate at secondary level have had an influence on the increased GER at tertiary level.

8 Access versus success: some initial thoughts

When researching the topic of universal access to higher education, a dilemma in the analysis stands out: enrollment rates versus graduation rates tell different stories. After enrollment, the aspect of access / retention becomes a key component for a HE institution. Although more persons are accessing tertiary education worldwide, drop-out rates are still relevant (OECD, 2020). This means that in addition to recruiting students and expanding access so that marginalized groups can also benefit from tertiary education, HE institutions must also put efforts into ensuring the graduation and completion of studies of the individuals they admit. According to Gray (2013), various actors in society (politicians, grant-makers, journalists, scholars and civil society) have been drawing attention recently to the fact that many HEIs are failing in graduating their students, and in particular those from underprivileged backgrounds.

That means, it is not only important to measure access to higher education in terms of GERs but also the efficiency of HEIs in graduating students and ensuring that especially those from disadvantaged groups are able to complete. Tertiary level graduation rates, dropout and survival rates can be useful indicators of the internal efficiency of tertiary education systems. Countries with high graduation rates at the tertiary level are also the ones most likely to be developing or maintaining a highly skilled labor force (OECD, 2007b).

³⁵ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education/>

Retention problems are a consequence of several factors, such as the lack of appropriate preparation to keep up with institutional standards (academic preparation, social preparation), and students' financial problems and worries about tuition debts, causing many students, particularly those from under-privileged backgrounds, to give up on their studies. In addition to this, students' specific reasons for leaving a tertiary program also include the following: students may realize that they have chosen the wrong subject or educational program, they may fail to meet the standards set by their educational institution, or they may find attractive employment before completing their program (OECD, 2007b).

Nevertheless, dropping out is not necessarily an indication of failure on the part of the individual student, but high dropout rates may well indicate that the education system is not meeting their needs. Students may not find that the educational programs offered meet their expectations or their labor market needs, bringing a more worrying factor that some students might not consider obtaining a degree worthwhile, drawing attention to the fact that for some institutions their degrees offered might be disconnected from the job market reality and world of work needs. Moreover, it may also be that programs take longer than the number of years for which students can justify being outside the labor market (OECD, 2007b).

Costs of non-completion both for students and to tax-payers, in the case of public institutions, are also a case for analysis. In addition, adult learners and part-time students are less likely to succeed as they have a unique set of challenges such as other responsibilities with family and work tasks.

Therefore, this report underlines the importance in addressing the gap between enrollment and graduation/retention rates in higher education. While one might have quite a positive picture based purely on entrance data, this data when compared to graduation and completion rates, may sometimes pose a slightly different reality, which is not always a positive one.

9 The effects of increased access on the quality, equity and performance of higher education

Different variables can be affected by an increased access to HE, whether this impact is positive, negative or mixed. For this specific study, three elements were briefly analyzed: quality, equity and performance. Since the cause and effect relationship can be difficult to identify at a global level, to the extent possible country/region examples were included for each variable.

9.1 Increased access to higher education and quality

As access to HE increases rapidly, the quality and relevance of HE services globally are receiving increased scrutiny and raising concerns (OECD, 2016b). As already pointed out, HE is perceived as strategic for national economic development and competitiveness (World Bank, 2009), but the public expenditure per HE student has often not kept the pace of the increasing enrollment and total HE spending (OECD, 2016b). In this context, the analysis of quality has become an important part of accountability, for ensuring that the resources of families and governments are efficiently used. Nevertheless, despite limited data and indicators for HE quality, this analysis can be split into two broad categories: quality of the process and quality measured by outcomes.

9.1.1 Process Quality

The quality of the processes of accessing higher education is often difficult to compare on an international scale, as comparable and continuous institutional data is not always available. Nevertheless, specific exercises like the 2017 IIES-UNESCO-IAU survey on quality management in HE have identified indicators that are relevant across countries (Martin and Parikh, 2018). With the incorporation of the main indicators from that survey, the following

categories can help conceptualize different aspects of the quality of the processes for accessing higher education:

- Human and material resources: the fast expansion of enrollment in HE can put pressure on the capacity of HE institutions to keep up with the demand, whether that is for a country generally or for an increasingly popular institution or program in particular. Some key indicators include: students to staff ratio, staff qualifications, infrastructure supporting the learning environment (especially for studies requiring costly technical equipment) or ICT facilities (Mambo, 2016). The current use of virtual and hybrid modes of teaching in the context of the global pandemic puts particular stress on the impact of ICT resources on the quality of HE.
- Relevance of the curricula and quality of the learning process: for example: quality of teaching and teaching materials (Mambo, 2016), quality of the students' academic assessment, students satisfaction surveys, academic and non-academic support to students, consultation with external stakeholders (including potential future colleagues or employers of students) on the relevance of the curricula.
- Equity: this is addressed in section 9.2 below.
- Quality of the governance of HE institutions: this can include the monitoring of performance indicators linked to strategic goals, target and service-level agreements, the evaluation of the quality and efficiency of administrative processes, as well as the use of standard processes certification (ISO, EFQM, etc). This aspect of quality is important in order to create efficient and resilient HE institutions that can cope with the expansion of the HE enrollment without a proportional increase in their administrative budget.

- Quality assurance benchmarking and quality management structures (internal and external): this can include the establishment of an institutional quality policy within each HE institution and the incorporation of this policy into its annual strategic plans, with clear allocation of resources. The external quality assurance agencies element is developed in the next section.

9.1.2 The role of quality assurance agencies

The last twenty years have seen the establishment of numerous quality assurance agencies as well as international networks of these agencies across the world. For example, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)³⁶ has gone from eight to three hundred members since 1991. At the regional level, one can now find a number of networks, including in Africa³⁷, Arab countries³⁸, Asia-Pacific³⁹, Europe⁴⁰ and Ibero-America⁴¹, all of which were established in the last twenty years. This shows a growing awareness within the HE institutions about the importance of quality benchmarking, international recognition of degrees and sharing of best practices.

For example, many HE systems in South-East Asia saw private sector and public institutions with market tuition fees driving most of the growth in the enrollment ratios. This preference for a “marketization” of HE has increased the total capacity of the system, but governments have now the challenge of ensuring quality, which has been often linked to the establishment of quality assurance agencies (UNESCO, 2006b).

³⁶ <https://www.inqahe.org/presentation>

³⁷ African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN), est. 2009. <http://www.anqahe.org/>

³⁸ Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), est. 2007. <http://www.anqahe.org/>

³⁹ Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), est. 2003. <https://www.apqn.org/>

⁴⁰ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), est. 2000. <https://enqa.eu/>

⁴¹ Red Iberoamericana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (RIACES), est. 2004. <http://riaces.org>

9.1.3 Outcome quality

The quality of the outcomes of HE can be measured with direct and indirect indicators. The direct outcomes indicators measure the immediate result of the activities of the HE institutions, while indirect indicators focus on the impact of higher education on those who complete their studies.

Direct outcome indicators:

- Graduation rates: students may enter and leave a particular program for any number of personal or contextual reasons. Nevertheless, if a sizable proportion of those who access HE leave the system without a recognized diploma or degree, the investment in time and resources made by the student, the family and society can be open to question, both in terms of return on investment and in terms of lost cost of opportunity. Further details on this concept are addressed in the section below “Increased access and performance”.
- Research indicators: one of the benefits that society gets from HE institutions is their role as a hub for the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This is captured by the widespread use of research publications impact indexes as an important variable of international HE rankings. HE institutions may also have internal pre-publication peer review systems. Students can benefit from belonging to HE institutions offering research opportunities for those more academically orientated. They can also benefit from a teaching staff that is updated in their field and in active research. Nevertheless, the impact of research on institutional reputation has been measured better than whether it has an impact or not on the quality of learning for the majority of the students (McCowan, 2019; Marope *et al.*, 2013).

Indirect outcome indicators:

- Student satisfaction: the subjective perception of the customer is one of the most universal indicators of quality. Since different people have different opinions on what is important in their education, student surveys can be used in order to measure whether the HE offer is responding to the expectations of its immediate beneficiaries.
- Reputation of institutions and programs among potential employers: surveys focused on these stakeholders (Martin, 2017)⁴² can provide useful information on whether the expansion of the HE offer is coming at the cost of the quality of the learning experience and the acquisition of valuable skills.
- Employability: the employment status of former HE students gives us information about the social and economic benefits of these studies, both for the students and for society. Additionally, it can also be an indirect indicator of the degree to which the learning process is providing valuable skills and knowledge to the students (Martin, 2017), which are the essential elements of their employability. As enrollment rates go up, the link between HE and employability cannot be taken for granted. The rest of this section addresses this challenge.

The unemployment rate of graduates points to a mismatch between labor markets needs and HE systems and, particularly in developing countries, of declining academic standards (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). Many countries have incorporated these concerns as part of their external quality assurance programs (Martin and Parikh, 2017). However, for them to be successful, these programs require a robust system of indicators incorporating these

⁴² Some examples of how to conceptualise the reputation of employers are:

<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/employability-rankings/2020>

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/198872b7-1dff-47a7-954c-f27e0115fd5b>

concerns. The following example from Spain shows the relevance of these indicators for discussions on HE policies.

In 2019, the Spanish National Institute for Statistics conducted a survey (INE, 2020a) in order to measure the employment status of recent⁴³ graduates according to their university degrees. The survey found high rates of unemployed or overqualified graduates in a number of degrees. For example, 13.3% of graduates found that their degree was not useful in their current job and 9.5% declared that no university degree would have been useful for their current job. Only 15.3% of graduates in Arts and Humanities studies declared that their current job was exclusively related to their degrees and only 55.5% of them declared that, so far, their degree had been at least useful for obtaining employment. 74.8% of all the respondents declared that the most appropriate level of qualification for their current position was a university degree (ISCED levels 6, 7, 8⁴⁴), while the rest considered that it was not necessary.

This survey is an example of two areas of potential concern when accessing quality equals employability: first, the statistics used in the analysis of the individual and second, the societal benefits of obtaining a higher education degree are most often based on the average for each particular education level (ISCED). These averages do not take into account the potential disparity between the different study programs or, when they do, it is typically merged into broad academic areas. Despite this, statistics for the employment status of graduates of specific study programs are not regularly produced in many countries⁴⁵.

⁴³ Those who obtained their degree during the 2009-2010 academic year.

⁴⁴ Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral level.

⁴⁵ Other countries that do provide this data are, for example, the USA (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_sbc.asp), Costa Rica (<http://radiografia.conare.ac.cr/indicadores-de-empleo/>), or the UK (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-by-degree-subject-and-university>).

Secondly, a net increase in access to higher education does not always guarantee higher employability. While this is the case on average⁴⁶, including in Spain (INE, 2020b), the rate of overqualified and unemployed graduates of certain degrees can be a signal that the allocation of resources is not optimal from the perspective of the education outcomes. In Spain, the allocation of public resources for specific degrees is not determined by or conditional to the demand (or projected demand) of the labor market. Instead, the resources are mainly allocated based on the total number of students that a given institution has⁴⁷. Nevertheless, these data point to the need to further incorporate these employment considerations into the debate about HE access and funding.

9.2 Increased access to higher education and equity

9.2.1 Gender equity

When it comes to the variable of equity, even though policies vary greatly based on the social/cultural barriers existing in each country, some of the most common ones include a variety of initiatives: (a) orientation programs during secondary education, which can help promote career opportunities that do not follow traditional gender roles, (b) affirmative action applied to enrollment requirements, which can be a quick way to balance the resulting proportion of male and female students at a given education level or program, even though it may not change the underlying causes of the initial unbalance, (c) flexibility of the courses for mothers (either in schedules or in access to virtual education), as full-time or face to face programs may be incompatible with active childcare, (d) obtaining gender equity also among the HE institutions' staff, which can show students a variety of role models but can also shape the perception of the institution towards gender-specific issues, (e) fighting against sexist

⁴⁶ For other European Countries as well (EUROSTAT, 2020), as well as, for example, in South Africa (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12121>).

⁴⁷ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/higher-education-funding-79_es

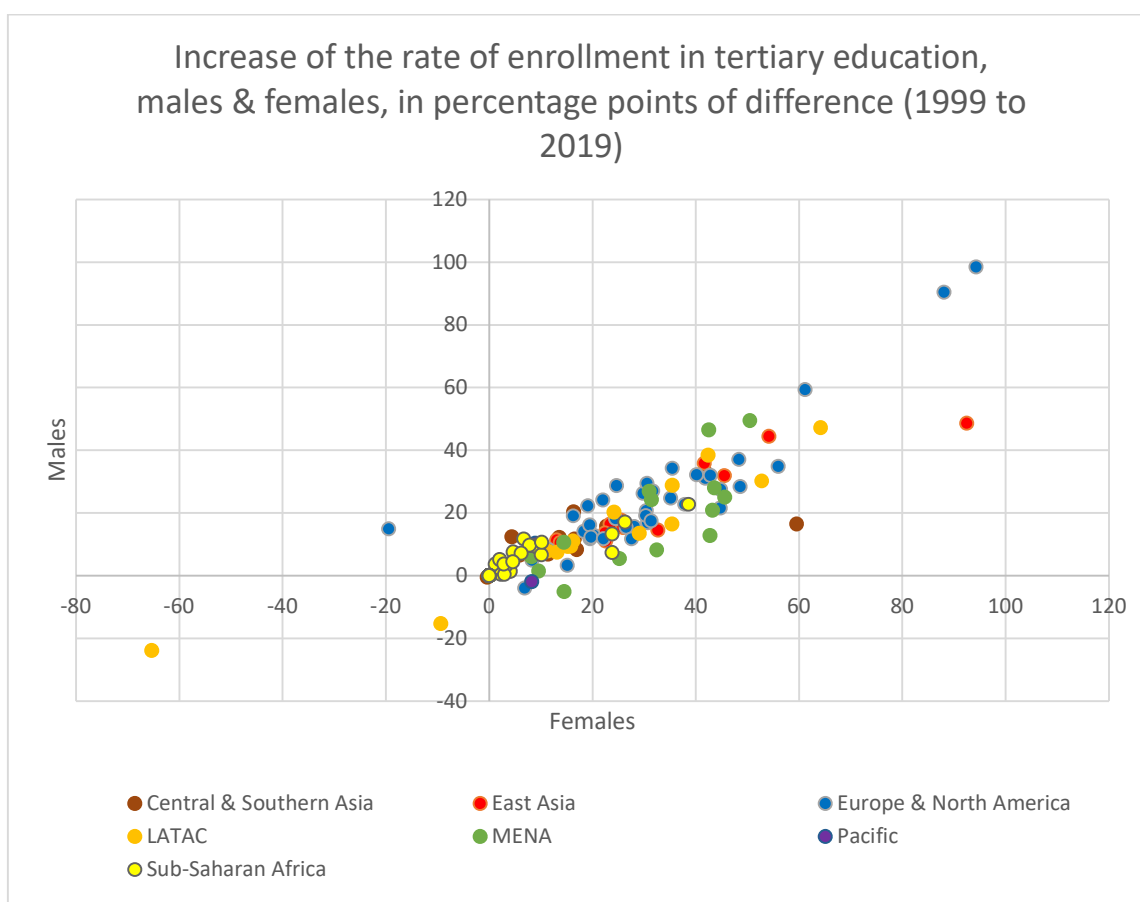
practices within the HE institutions and within the students (including sexual harassment and violence, as no person should feel deterred from or threatened for entering or remaining in HE because of their gender, (f) gender-specific physical infrastructure such as in-campus dormitories when mixed residencies are not allowed, as an unbalanced number of these can impose a de facto quota for a specific gender, (g) wider communication campaigns addressing traditional gender roles, encouraging young students to consider careers where their gender is currently underrepresented (Vimala, 2010).

As previously pointed out, access to higher education for women has increased greatly worldwide in the past twenty years. Nevertheless, access remains lower for women in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, in most of the rest of the world, women have higher enrollment rates than men, but their enrollment remains lower in certain areas of study like STEM, as well as in post-graduate programs (ISCED 7 and 8).

In the graph below, one can appreciate how enrollment in HE has evolved for men and women over the last 20 years. The graph compares the increase (1999-2019) in the gross rate of enrollment for men with the increase in the enrollment rate for women. For example, Saudi Arabia increased the female enrollment rate from 23.2 to 73.7 (slightly above 50 points of increase) and increased the male enrollment rate from 18.8 to 68.3 (slightly below 50 points of increase). This means that even though females continue to have higher enrollment, the increase has been evenly shared by both sexes. By contrast, Argentina had a higher increase in female enrollment, with a 53-point increase for the same period (from 60.1 to 112.8⁴⁸), but a considerably lower increase for male enrollment, with a 30-point increase (from 37.5 to 67.8). Each dot represents a country, grouped by colours according to region.

⁴⁸ The rate above 100% is due to students who are above or below the age of reference for their respective programs, either due to repetition of academic years or due to late/early entry.

Table 2: Increase of the rate of enrollment in tertiary education, males & females, in percentage points difference (1999 - 2019)⁴⁹



Source: Data generated from UIS database

Most dots (countries) have a higher value for the horizontal axis (female ratio) than for the vertical one (male ratio). This means that for a majority of countries women’s enrollment rate has grown faster than men’s. In some countries this has served to fully or partially compensate a previously unbalanced ratio against women. This was the case, for example,

⁴⁹ When there was no data available for 1999, the following year with available data was used as a reference. If no year had data between 1999 and 2004, the country was not represented.

in Tajikistan, Cambodia, Lao, The Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Morocco, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and most of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, with the remarkable cases of Mozambique (with a gender parity index⁵⁰ going from 0.34 to 0.8), Mauritania (to 0.2 to 0.6), U.R. Tanzania (0.27 to 0.65), Niger (0.32 to 0.63), Mauritania (0.21 to 0.61) or Eritrea (0.15 to 0.71). Mali (0.47 to 0.42) is the only country with a ratio below 0.8 where the ratio has stagnated during the entire period.

If measured by regional average, all regions have increased the percentage of HE students who are women. Currently, only Sub-Saharan Africa has more men than women studying in HE. Latin America and Caribbean, North America and Oceania are the regions where women are most overrepresented, with a parity index above 1.3, followed by South-East Asia and Europe, both with a parity index above 1.2. The average for the world is 1.15.

9.2.2 Geographical equity: rural versus urban

The challenge of accessing higher education is sometimes a literal one, as rural areas can have less nearby institutions that provide this service. But it is not just a matter of infrastructure. Inhabitants of rural areas have often a lower income than the national average and, in many countries, belong to ethnical and linguistic minorities more often; both variables often correlated with lower access to HE.

In Latin America, urban young people are 22% more likely to attend HE. This percentage goes up to 35% in Colombia and Bolivia (World Bank, 2017). Besides this, there is an average of 14 points of difference between the regions (within the same country) with highest and lowest

⁵⁰ The gender parity index is the result of dividing the enrollment ratio of women by that of men. In this index 1 represents perfect gender equity, numbers below 1 underrepresentation of women and numbers above 1 overrepresentation of women. For example, a ratio of 0.6 means that there are 0.6 women per each man studying in HE, while a ratio of 1.67 means that there are 0.6 men for each woman studying in HE.

HE access ratio. Although not necessarily due to geographical location, this data shows the regional differences HE access might entail. This difference is down to 5 points in countries like Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, while it is above 20% in Honduras, Paraguay and Peru (World Bank, 2017). In the region, effort has often been focused on support to low income students and the creation of new institutions more widely spread through the territory. In Vietnam, for example, admission scores for the national HE institutions entrance examination are different based on the origin of the student: big cities, suburbs and towns, rural and mountainous areas (UNESCO, 2006b).

9.2.3 Equity across income levels

Across all the regions of the world, wealth correlates positively with the completion rate for tertiary education (UIS, 2020⁵¹). Nevertheless, the distance from the average for each quintile in terms of HE completion can be very different depending on the country. In countries like Mongolia, R. Moldova, Georgia and Mexico the difference between the poorest and the richest quintiles is sixty points or higher. By contrast, in Denmark, where higher education is free of tuition fees, the poorest quintile is actually above the national average. In any case, it must be noted that the cost of HE exceeds that of the tuition fees. Other income-related barriers include the cost of living in another city for the duration of the studies or the need of the students to work in order to sustain themselves or their families. Additionally, it must be noted that income can affect the chances of accessing HE even before reaching the prescribed age for accessing it. Inequalities in income can affect the duration and quality of primary and secondary education, which even when completed can leave

⁵¹ An interactive chart by country, region and quintile can be found here:

https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/comp_higher#?sort=mean&dimension=wealth_quintile&group=all&age_group=comp_higher_4yrs_2529&countries=all

behind learning gaps. This accumulated disadvantage can affect students when taking HE entrance exams or when adapting to their first academic year (Caner and Okten, 2013).

In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the main push for expanded access to higher education has come from private HE institutions (or public ones operating under market prices for tuition fees). Therefore, even when student loans are available, access equity based on income has not been a priority, the focus being still on overall access expansion (Varghese, 2016). Nevertheless, there are policies that do not have a financial cost for the HE system but which can help students from lower income backgrounds. For example, in Malawi, where students from the poorest quintile of households only account for 0.7% of HE enrollments, a Credit Hour System was introduced. This system offered greater flexibility to students that have to combine studies with work, allowing them to spread their studies over a longer period of time (a “multiple-entry multiple-exit” system). It also allows students willing to make the effort to complete a full degree in three years instead of four (Mambo, 2016). Additionally, Malawi removed its previous policy that tied the number of students to the availability of bed-space in official residential facilities. This change had the effect of increasing the total capacity of the HE system (now based on classroom space). The reform also increased equity among students, enabling all students to access the same tuition fees and opportunities previously reserved for those living in the official in-campus residences, as well as student loans and subsistence allowances.

In Latin America, it is in tertiary education where the gap between access to education and income is more pronounced: from below 10% in the lowest percentiles of income to 70% in the highest ones, following a particularly steep ascending curve starting from the 70th percentile of income. At the same time, it must be noted that access has increased for all levels of income and the 50% of the population with lower income has increased its share in

the total number of HE students⁵². The countries where inequality in HE access was reduced the most were Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Argentina and Chile⁵³. The increase of access to HE in Brazil is also remarkable, which can be partially explained by having had the highest increase in HE institutions and programs in the region, most of which being created in the private sector. However, the increase of the education system capacity works best when the families also increase their financial capacity to pay for these studies. The introduction of government-backed student loans during 2006 in Chile can be a good example of a successful measure in this direction (World Bank, 2017).

Besides the increased offer of the HE system and the capacity of students to finance their studies, eligibility remains the single most important factor that determines equity in access to HE. In other words, following the same data on Latin America, 56% of the HE access gap between the highest and the lowest quintile can be explained by the lower graduation rate in secondary education for the lowest income quintile. The differences in secondary completion rate explain around 81% of the gap in countries such as Nicaragua and Uruguay. The second explanatory variable is the low level of academic preparation of some of the students who finish secondary school (World Bank, 2017).

In countries like Finland, access to HE is already high on average⁵⁴ including for lower income students. This is in great part due to the country's strong social programs that moderate the impact of income inequalities. Additionally, Finland also offers considerable academic and career counselling to students, starting in primary education. Lower secondary students receive two hours of compulsory counselling per week with specialist teachers, who coordinate company visits, occupational films and individual interviews with students and

⁵² From 16% in 2000 to 24% in 2012 (World Bank, 2017).

⁵³ From 23-25% in 2000 to 40% in 2012 (World Bank, 2017).

⁵⁴ Finland is the country in Europe with the highest average for gross graduation rate for the 1999-2018 period (according to UIS data), at 51%, an average that stayed relatively stable during the last twenty years. Finland stands out, not so much in terms of the increased access rate, but because of the consistency in which these high access levels have been maintained.

parents on areas of interest (UNESCO, 2020). This emphasis on counselling can help students to get an accurate picture of the existing labor market opportunities as well as considering career paths outside of their family's professional experience and network, which can be a factor for upward mobility.

9.2.4 Ethnic / linguistic equity

Improving access to HE for ethnic minorities requires targeted measures that go beyond the general programs aimed at supporting the lower income population. For example, the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy includes specific plans for boosting the accession rates for underrepresented ethnic communities, as well as for at-risk young people.⁵⁵

In Latin America, disadvantaged ethnic groups are 15% less likely to access HE. In Brazil, in particular, white people are 18% more likely to access HE than the rest of the population (World Bank, 2017). Nevertheless, particularly since the 1990s, Latin American countries have been developing strategies for increasing the access of indigenous and afro-descendant peoples in higher education (Mato, 2017). The region has witnessed the emergence of HE institutions directly created for and managed by indigenous peoples, as well as the introduction of intercultural adaptations within existing "conventional" HE institutions. The support of the governments of the region for this approach was reaffirmed in the "Final Declaration" of the HE Regional Conference of 2008 in Cartagena de Indias⁵⁶ and the "Panama Declaration on Education and Knowledge Society" in 2012, which in turn subscribe a twelve-point set of high-level recommendations⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ <https://www.tec.govt.nz/focus/our-focus/tes/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.oei.es/historico/salactsi/cres.htm>

⁵⁷ Iniciativa latinoamericana por la diversidad cultural y la interculturalidad con equidad en educación superior. The creation of this document was supported by UNESCO-IESALC.

As another example of affirmative action, Vietnam allows students from certain ethnic minorities to access some HE institutions without taking entrance examinations (UNESCO, 2006b). Zambia and Iran have implemented quotas for the enrollment of female students (UNESCO, 2018c).

9.3 Increased access to higher education and performance

As briefly introduced in section 8, higher access to HE (enrollment) does not always mean an equally higher rate of HE graduates. A percentage of those who start HE studies, do not complete them, either by abandoning their studies or by changing to different study programs⁵⁸. While there are many elements beyond the power of the policy maker, such as drop outs linked to individual life choices made by the students, the great disparity of results among countries suggest the existence of policy and socioeconomic factors as well. Drop outs are not necessarily a sign of failure of individual students (they might have found employment before completing their studies or changed their personal preferences), but high dropout rates can indicate that the education system is not meeting the needs of the students or the labor market (OECD, 2010a). For example, Bolivia is the only country in Latin America where the rate of dropouts is higher than the HE completion rate (World Bank, 2017).

According to OECD data analysis for 18 countries, 30% of students who enter university do not graduate tertiary education and leave without a tertiary qualification of at least a first degree. In countries like Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States, this percentage is higher than 40%, while in other countries like France, Japan, Korea, Spain and the Russian Federation, it is lower than 25%. No clear link was found between completion

⁵⁸ To refer to the drop - out rate in a positive manner, one can say the graduation rate. The rate of progression from one year to the next, within a study program, can also be referred to as the survival rate.

rates and higher or lower tuition fees (OECD, 2007b; OECD, 2010b). In the same study, it was noted that completion rates were generally higher for university students than for vocational tertiary education. Data from Colombia (World Bank, 2017) also shows a higher dropout rate for non-university HE (53%) than for university HE (37%).

To address this challenge, having enough data can be crucial. New Zealand, for example, while having a relatively high dropout rate, had a particularly transparent and accessible system of statistics on performance indicators⁵⁹, gathered by its Tertiary Education Commission (government agency). Any tertiary education institution (universities and others) can be individually compared with the rest in variables such as: first-year retention rate (75% for 2019), cohort-based qualification completion rate (62%), course completion rate (83%) and progression rate (to a higher-level study). There is additional information for the difference between full-time and part-time learners.

Moreover, students that reach HE with insufficient preparation may have an increased risk of dropout. In Peru, for example, the rapid expansion of the HE offer, particularly with the appearance of numerous private HE institutions, was classified as less demanding education programs in terms of both access criteria and the quality of education (OECD, 2016a). A new law⁶⁰ in 2016 enhanced the accreditation and supervision of non-university HE institutions, including new quality standards and with a new body in charge of the task.

In South Africa, slightly less than 50% of students who enrolled in tertiary education dropped out in their first three years. Reasons for dropping out include insufficient secondary school

⁵⁹ <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/performance/teo/epi-reports/>
<https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/performance/teo/epi-reports/interactive-charts/#/>

⁶⁰ Ley de Institutos y Escuelas de Educación Superior (2016).

academic preparation, financial hardships and the long duration of some of the programs (Ferreyra *et al.*, 2017).

10 Recommendations for future action

Based on the preliminary analysis and data gathered for the report, the recommendations below for future action are suggested so as to further increase access to higher education, also taking into account the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development instrument and the 2050 timescale covered in UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative. The suggestions do not intend to be definitive but rather to stimulate policies and actions oriented towards universal access to higher education, taking into particular account the inclusion and retention of vulnerable individuals.

For policymakers:

- Development of national mechanisms to evaluate progress to ensure the right to higher education and inclusion at the national level, in accordance with international norms and standards.
- Engagement of relevant stakeholders from different sectors and domains in an integrative approach. Improved access to higher education requires a holistic, multi-sectoral and participatory approach which engages different stakeholders and reaches all levels and means of education. Evidence-based policy decision-making, backed by comprehensive data, and engagement with stakeholders across sectors is necessary for effective policy development and implementation in higher education.
- Provision of extra support to students classified as "at-risk" individuals, in terms of academic needs and socioeconomic needs, for them to access higher education and increase retention.

- Provision of continuous funding support: grants and financial aid for higher education institutions which have a significant number of students from vulnerable groups.
- Periodic revision of equity policies to ensure that the groups that most need help are receiving it, also aiming at the reduction of the number of early university-leavers.
- Evaluation and monitoring of the institutions' admissions criteria to ensure that all students have a fair chance at getting into the best universities, regardless of their backgrounds.
- Development of affirmative action policies that put equity at the front and center in the admissions process.
- Benchmarking with agencies like UNESCO to share successful experiences and find sound solutions that are participatory and inclusive.

For higher education institutions:

- Provision of continuous support (financial aid, information on classes, overall professional counselling, psychological support) to students in need. This includes the provision of emergency grants and financial aid, especially those targeting students from vulnerable backgrounds and families, and the development of programs and initiatives targeting students' psychological factors: goals, motivations, expectations, etc.
- Development of broad assessment criteria: it is important that HEIs focus also on non-academic aspects in the overall assessment of students. Non-academic aspects include, inter alia, extracurricular activities, soft skills (leadership, collaboration, conflict solving, self-control, etc.), character-related qualities (persistence, resilience, etc.), that are also very important to the job market and might contribute to the retention of vulnerable students in the institutions.

- Development of institutional practices to encourage retention, monitoring the attitude of students before they decide to quit, with strategies to reduce the gap between enrollment and graduation, thereby increasing the retention rate.
- Generation of data disaggregated by sex, disability, race, ethnic or social origin, economic status, religion, language, geographic location and other status to ensure the visibility of all groups of students in relation to higher education enrollment and graduation, thus identifying students who need most support due to family variables, academic deficiencies, socioeconomic status, etc.
- Provision of bridge programs to help compensate the lower academic preparation of certain students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Establishment of mentoring programs and programs about connection with the campus life.
- Engagement in race/gender/inequality conversations and development of campaigns refuting the image of selectivity of higher education institutions: students from underprivileged groups might feel more welcome in the institutions and know that their struggles are acknowledged by the institutions.
- Use of technology to further increase access. Technology is not a panacea for all ills in education but it has certainly proved that it improves access to higher education, especially the use of open, distance and online learning which has enabled access to higher education at low cost. Leveraging appropriate technology is still an important aspect that needs to be focused on. Mobile phones are particularly useful in this regard, given the widespread availability and costs that are becoming increasingly affordable.

11 Concluding remarks

The goal of the report was to map and analyze the main elements characterizing universal access to higher education worldwide over the past two decades. Key aspects highlighted by the study are the evolution of the concept of universal access to HE, the drivers and barriers in accessing higher education institutions, global trends and examples in universal access up to the time of the research, supportive policies contributing to universal access, and the relation between access and three main variables used for the purpose of the analysis: quality, equity and performance.

The data gathered clearly shows that universal access to higher education has increased over the past 20 years in all regions. While this is good news, it is important to reinforce that this increase came at the expense of some vulnerable groups, who overall are still the ones who have less access to tertiary education. In other words, where countries have achieved mass higher education, issues of equity arise, and not only equity of access. For instance, studies around the world have shown that young people from wealthier families and those whose parents hold degrees are considerably more likely to both enroll and succeed than those from poorer backgrounds and/or whose parents have not experienced higher education. The reasons are numerous and universal and include not only schooling quality that may impact on a student's ability to cope with university-level education, but also the financial resources and availability of 'social capital' that support success.⁶¹ This has a clear implication for countries and institutions, which must address this challenge and develop sound strategies to reduce the gap in access/retention among societal groups. Recommendations provided above explore some suggestions in this regard.

⁶¹ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/07/12/study-shows-students-more-likely-graduate-wealthier-institutions>

Although higher education is to be accessible to all, it is worth mentioning that education at the higher level / post-secondary education may not be the pathway everyone wishes to pursue, if it is that they wish to continue in education at all. It must be the choice of the individual to continue on to higher education, or to follow other forms of education, but countries and institutions must assure that this right is guaranteed once the individual decides to continue on to tertiary studies. Overcoming the barriers identified in this report might be a good start for providing increased higher education access.

Monitoring the progress made on SDG4 will require research to capture data on the HE retainment of most disadvantaged individuals, particularly those excluded from formal schooling. Better data makes better policy. For higher educational access, this means gathering more data, over longer time periods, and working to integrate it with existing administrative data to produce richer evidence bases for policymakers. For data to inform anything meaningful about equitable access to education, the first step is ensuring that data collection instruments will gather information on the most disadvantaged. Relying purely on testing and learning assessments however, means that only students already in school will be included in the data. And this is insufficient. In this context, it is reasonable to say that the multiple and diverse aspects related to higher education access, including quality, equity and performance, would benefit from more detailed data.

Overall, it is possible to conclude that increased access to higher education is the result, inter alia, of an interaction between growing family (and country) expectations on the demand side, and on the supply side, expanding economies and HEIs, and a number of public supportive policies, including financial support to students.

Finally, it is difficult to make predictions regarding future higher education access, and this was not the objective of this exercise. However, one important component of this analysis which should be highlighted for future endeavors is that increase in access should be

accompanied by the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Otherwise, higher education systems will be supporting those who already have a privileged starting point.

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