

Higher Education Equity Policies Across the Globe

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The full report on which the article is based can be found at <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-.pdf>.

A recent study sponsored by the Lumina Foundation aims at assessing the nature and extent of policy commitments of national governments to address inequalities in access to and success in higher education. Besides reviewing the policies of 71 countries on all continents, the study also analyzes the equity promotion policies of relevant multilateral and regional agencies involved in providing policy advice, technical assistance, and financial support.

With the exception of a few fragile states recovering from a natural catastrophe or a major political crisis, equity is a priority theme in the higher education agenda of most governments. This official commitment reflects the fact that young people all over the world are keenly aware that opportunities for professional success and social mobility are directly linked to opportunities in higher education.

EQUITY, FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

However, beyond official statements about equity, which tend to reflect commonly shared principles of inclusion, the survey found a wide range of situations when it came to translating these principles into actual policies and interventions. A number of countries are still only paying lip service to the equity agenda, in the sense that they do not spell out clear equity promotion strategies, define concrete targets to enroll and support students in vulnerable conditions, mobilize sufficient resources targeted to underrepresented groups, and put in place actions to help students complete their degrees.

Many countries still adopt a narrow definition of equity target groups. As a result, the existence of equity target groups that suffer from neglect or discrimination does not translate into official recognition and actual compensatory policies. Minority ethnic groups are the frequent victims of these “blind spots,” as governments may see the recognition of their rights as a threat to the power, prestige, or resources of the dominant group.

While most nations focus on the barriers faced by traditional equity target groups, including students from low-

income households, women and girls, members of ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities, several countries have added nontraditional equity target groups, reflecting the social transformation of these countries:

- Victims of sexual and gender violence
- Members of the LGBT community
- Refugees of all kinds (internally and externally displaced; deported)
- Children of people affected by historical violence
- Students with care experience, orphans, youth without parental care.

Overall, 11 percent of the countries surveyed have formulated a comprehensive equity strategy. Another 11 percent have elaborated a specific policy document for one equity target group: women, people with disabilities, or members of indigenous groups.

Many countries’ definition of equity policies is still traditional in focus, with a heavy emphasis on financial aid as principal instrument, and a tendency to look at access barriers instead of promoting interventions to boost the chances of success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are enrolled in higher education institutions.

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The survey highlighted much variety in the choice of instruments used to promote equity, beyond the traditional financial aid mechanisms—grants and student loans—that are widely available. Twelve countries use their budget allocation funding formula or earmarked grants to support equity promotion efforts at the institutional level.

PROMISING TRENDS

The survey identified two promising trends. First, a growing number of countries have realized the importance of combining both financial and nonmonetary interventions to remove, in a comprehensive way, all barriers faced by students from disadvantaged groups. The most frequently supported nonmonetary programs are affirmative action and reformed admission criteria, outreach and bridge programs, and retention programs.

Second, a few governments have begun to complement the direct support offered to students with incentives for the universities themselves, as a means of pressuring the

latter into taking a more proactive role in improving access and success opportunities. This is achieved by incorporating an equity indicator into the funding formula, setting up earmarked funds for equity interventions that universities can benefit from, and/or including equity-related criteria in the quality assurance process.

COMPREHENSIVENESS AND CONSISTENCY OF EQUITY POLICIES

The study attempted to compare national equity policies internationally from the viewpoint of comprehensiveness and consistency. The 71 countries surveyed were classified into four equity policy categories defined in the following way:

- Emerging: the country has formulated broad equity policy principles and goals but has accomplished little in terms of concrete policies, programs, and interventions (nine countries).
- Developing: the country has put in place the foundations of an equity promotion strategy, but has not defined many policies and programs, is not investing much in this area, and has implemented few policies and programs (33 countries).
- Established: the country has formulated an equity promotion strategy and has put in place aligned policies, programs, and interventions to implement the strategy (23 countries).
- Advanced: the country has formulated and implemented a comprehensive equity promotion strategy. Some countries in this category even have a dedicated equity promotion agency (six countries).

Most countries fall into the second or third category (developing or established). The distinction between the two is not due principally to the wealth of the countries concerned. The “established” category includes several developing countries that may not be able to devote the same amount of resources as OECD economies, but have fairly comprehensive policies to promote equity in higher education.

The countries that appear as “emerging” from an equity policy viewpoint are essentially fragile states that have had neither the resources nor the political stability necessary to elaborate and sustain robust equity policies for higher education over the long run.

The few nations labeled as “advanced” show a high degree of consistency over time in terms of comprehensive strategy, policies, goals and targets, and alignment between equity goals and the range of instruments—financial and nonmonetary—used to promote equity in higher education. Some of them even have a dedicated equity promotion agency. Most of these countries (Australia, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland) are relatively rich Commonwealth countries with mature higher education systems,

which have paid increasing attention to the obstacles to success faced by students from underrepresented groups. The other nation included in the list is Cuba, which for ideological reasons has consistently put a great emphasis on equity since the 1959 socialist revolution. ■

Two Cheers for US Higher Education: International Implications

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In my recently published book, *Two Cheers for Higher Education: Why American Universities Are Stronger than Ever – And How to Meet the Challenges They Face* (Princeton University Press), I argue that the success of the US system is due to high levels of investment from multiple sources of revenue combined with the sometimes contentious, but ultimately compatible interplay of three propulsive “logics of development.”

Compared to the state-dependent systems in most of the world, the US system is distinctive in the variety of revenue sources on which institutions can draw, including federal and state research funds, state subsidies, student tuition, and philanthropic support. By 2015, the federal government alone poured \$65 billion into student financial aid and made hundreds of billions available in subsidized loans, and it disbursed more than \$30 billion to universities for research and development. Donors provided billions of dollars more. It is hard to overestimate the importance of these multiple and comparatively abundant sources of revenue.

By “logics of development,” I mean guiding ideas joined to institutional practices. The first of these logics is the traditional one: the commitment to knowledge discovery and transmission in the disciplines (and at their interstices). I refer to this commitment as academic professionalism. It remains fundamental and provides a necessary autonomy for universities from the priorities of the state and the economy. During the period following 1980, two movements hit colleges and universities with great force: one was the