
NORTHERN CONSORTIUM

The equity crisis - higher education access and success to 2030



A report for the Northern Consortium

by Professor Graeme Atherton, Director
National Education Opportunities Network (NEON),
UK University of West London

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Professor Graeme Atherton

Professor Graeme Atherton is Director of the Centre of Inequality and Levelling Up (CIELUP) at the University of West London, leads the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) which is the UK professional organisation for access & equity in higher education (HE) with over 100 universities as members and has also founded World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN). He is a trustee of the National Union of Students (NUS) and holds visiting professorships at the Centre for Higher Education Research, Sunway University, Kuala Lumpur and Amity University London. He is a Parliamentary Research Fellow with the House of Commons Library and has produced over 200 publications and conference papers.

Contact: graeme.atherton@uwl.ac.uk

University of West London

The University of West London is the career university. It was voted top modern university in London in The Guardian University Guide 2022; in the top 10 universities in the UK for teaching quality in The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2022 and the University of the Year for Student Experience in The Times and Sunday Times University Guide 2021.

Contents

	Foreword	05
	Executive Summary	06
1	Introduction: Making equity matter	08
2	How the data was collected	09
3	Why does equitable access and success in HE matter?	10
4	The equity data gap	11
	4.1 What data is collected on equitable access and success?	
5	What does the data tell us?	13
	5.1 Long term progress globally is happening	
	5.2 Also long term progress in Latin America and the Caribbean	
	5.3 Less progress in Europe	
	5.4 And things going backwards in the larger systems	
	5.5 UNESCO Global Goal 4.3 not likely to be achieved.	
6	The policy gaps in equitable access and success	17
7	Covid-19 and the equity crisis	18
	7.1 Who was most affected by Covid-19?	
8	How did Covid-19 affect equitable access and success?	20
	8.1 The digital divide is ubiquitous	
9	The equity crisis: access declining and success decreasing?	22
10	Addressing the impact of Covid 19 on equitable access and success	24
	10.1 Covid 19 as a catalyst for positive change	
11	How can ongoing inequalities in access and success be tackled?	27
	11.1 A holistic approach to equitable access and success	
	11.2 Digital learning and changing mindsets	
	11.3 Using data to affect change	
	11.4 Enabling progression through outreach work with schools and colleges	
	11.5 Providing financial support for low-income learners	
	11.6 Building the capacity to make change	
12	3 calls to action: Lead - Target – Invest	31
13	Can higher education reach its potential?	34
	Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion Aide memoire	35



Foreword

Northern Consortium are proud to sponsor this research project and the production of the report addressing the equitable access to higher education across the globe. Understanding the issues and challenges of widening access will inform the future focus of the Charity's work and, hopefully, how other organisations, institutions and governments can address the inequalities which clearly exist. The pandemic has negatively impacted so many people and in so many ways, this report identifies that it has also compounded existing inequalities in access to education.

Our sincere appreciation is expressed to Professor Graeme Atherton for his drive and determination in shining a light on the equity issue. Access to higher education is at the very heart of the Northern Consortium charity, which was set up in 1993 through a collaboration of a group of like-minded institutions with aim to facilitate access to universities in the UK for international students. Ten years later our subsidiary company, NCUK Ltd was created and has since assisted over 40,000 students with their route into higher education.

The Charity is funded through the success of NCUK, which provides vital funding to support initiatives such as this primary research as well projects enhancing student participation. Northern Consortium is committed to engaging in charitable activity which explores, addresses and removes barriers to accessing global higher education.

Dr Malcolm Butler

Chair of Trustees, Northern Consortium

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Executive Summary

1. Background

UNESCO's Global Goal Target 4.3 states that 'By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.' However, where higher education is concerned access and success is profoundly unequal across every country in the world where evidence exists and like broader inequalities in society is likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. As the peak of Covid 19 passes the challenge now is to use this moment to re-evaluate what policymakers and universities are doing across the world to drive forward equitable access and success in higher education.

This report focuses on equitable access i.e. participation by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a 'disadvantaged majority' who on average earn less/ experience greater social/economic challenges than a minority population. It provides an overview of the available evidence on participation in higher education amongst minority and disadvantaged majority groups before drawing upon extensive consultation undertaken with universities and others in the global higher education sector over the past year. This consultation included a global survey of 317 individuals from over 80 organisations in over 50 countries and 7 online discussion sessions delivered in partnership with a range of international organisations.

2. Why is there an equity crisis?

Our global survey of higher education stakeholders indicated that the pandemic had led to lower participation, more drop out, poorer degree results and a reduced likelihood of getting a job after graduation for those from equity groups and these trends would continue into the 2020s.

Key Findings

It seems highly unlikely that UNESCO Global Goal 4.3 on equal access to higher education by 2030 will be achieved with equitable access and success in higher education forecast to go into reverse up to 2025.

- Reviewing available evidence of higher education participation from the Eurostudent; World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE); the Socio-Economic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean (SEDLAC) and OECD shows that there is little chance of equal access to higher education by socio-economic background by 2030.
- Over 80% of survey respondents said that applications to higher education in the organisation they were working had fallen from equity priority groups during the pandemic. A quarter of respondents said this fall had been over 20%.
- Over 80% of survey respondents believe that the pandemic has impacted on the ability of students from equity priority groups to get graduate level jobs.
- Around 90% of respondents thought that between now and 2025 for equity groups participation would decrease, attainment fall, student drop out increase and progression to graduate employment decrease. Nearly a quarter of respondents feared that this fall in participation would be over 20%.

Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are most affected by the pandemic.

- More than those from specific ethnic backgrounds, rural students, disabled students and those from rural backgrounds according to the survey respondents it is those from lower socio-economic groups who were most negatively affected by the pandemic.

Work being done to avert the crisis not significant enough.

- A review of the available evidence collected for World Access to Higher Education Day shows that less than 20% of countries in the world have specific policies in place to address inequalities in access and success in higher education.
- Nearly all survey respondents (over 95%) said that they moved teaching and learning online during the pandemic to enable equity groups to continue with their studies. But nearly 90% of respondents also said that study performance was negatively affected by problems with accessing digital learning provision.
- Additional financial support for students from equity groups was provided by 77% of organisations who responded to the survey. However, in only 25% of cases was this support described as significant.
- Enhanced outreach work to support the progression of equity groups into higher education was identified by 80% of respondents. But this support was judged as significant by only 30% of respondents.

3. 3 calls to action: Lead - Target – Invest

The pandemic only exacerbated existing inequalities in equitable access and success. To prevent such inequalities worsening 3 major calls to action for policymakers, universities and other stakeholders are proposed.

Lead

Create a global task force by 2024 to galvanise commitment to enhancing equitable access and success by 2030.

Organisations with international reach and influence should come together to lead a global task force that is focused specifically on equitable access and success. This task force would then lead a campaign to galvanise commitment from policymakers and universities.

Target

Kickstart a culture of target setting across nations, regions and universities to make equitable access and success targets the norm by 2030.

Only a minority of countries are collecting data and even fewer setting targets. Unless this changes then the equity crisis is unlikely to be averted. The global task force should initiate a worldwide summit which attempts to better understand what data on equitable access and success exists at institutional, national and international level.

Invest

Encourage all universities to commit to investing at least 5% of their annual income in equitable access and success work and governments at least 5% of their higher education spend by 2030.

Many universities across the world put equity at the heart of their mission but they are a minority - a culture change is needed in higher education. This change needs to be expressed in concrete financial commitment not supportive statements whose impact can't be measured.

4. Can higher education reach its potential?

Inequality is one of the major challenges facing the world in the 21st century. For any progress to be made in reducing it a collective effort from all the major sectors in society is needed. No one sector can opt out. Especially one as important as higher education. This study has shown that examples of universities, governments and other organisations endeavouring to make higher education more equitable exist. But that this will not be enough to prevent equitable access and success going backwards and making the achievement of the UNESCO goal of equal access by 2030 highly unlikely.

1. Introduction: making equity matter

As we learn to live with Covid 19 enduring social and economic problems inside and outside higher education return to the fore. Inequality is one of the foremost of those problems. As the Head of the United Nations stated in July 2022 we are facing a ‘perfect storm’ of crises in widening global inequality¹ Higher education is part of this storm. It suffers from endemic inequities stretching over its history since the first universities were founded to the present day in terms of who enters and succeeds within it. UNESCO have recognized the existence of these inequalities and made addressing them part of its sustainable development goals with Global Goal 4.3 which states that:

‘By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.’

The challenge now is to use this moment to re-evaluate what policymakers and universities are doing across the world to drive forward equitable access and success in higher education and assess the likelihood of this goal being achieved.

This report will provide an overview of the available evidence on participation in higher education amongst minority and disadvantaged majority groups before drawing upon extensive consultation undertaken with universities and others in the global higher education sector to outline what needs to be done if the dial on equity in higher education is to really shift over the rest of this decade. It will include examples of what universities, policymakers and other organisations did during the pandemic to address equity challenges and what they are doing now moving forward. It will also gather the perspectives of student leaders, policymakers and higher education leaders on the where major gaps where equitable access and success are concerned exist.

In the maelstrom of concerns that higher education institutions and policymakers have to contend with as the world deals with the aftershocks of the pandemic and implications of conflict in Europe the risk is that equity in access and success will be forgotten or at best relegated down the list of priorities. This report argues that we are facing a crisis in equity in equitable access and success unless there is concerted, collaborative action and global leadership to prevent generations of potential students being locked out of higher education across the world.

This research report has been supported by Northern Consortium.



1. McVeigh, K. (2022) *Perfect storm’ of crises is widening global inequality, says UN chief*, Guardian, 2nd July 2022, - <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/02/perfect-storm-crises-widening-global-inequality-says-un-chief>

2. How the data was collected

Before outlining how information has been collected to produce this report it is important to outline the definition we are using where equitable access and success in higher education is concerned. The definition below was formulated for the ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education Report 2021 produced by the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF).²

Access to higher education refers to participation by students from all backgrounds. Equitable access refers to participation by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a ‘disadvantaged majority’ who on average earn less/ experience greater social/economic challenges than a minority population. The nature of the specific minorities or disadvantaged majority is defined by the social, economic and political context of a particular country. These groups are usually (although not exclusively) drawn from one or more of the following categories: a low income/ socio-economic group, students belonging to ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, female students, students with disabilities, students belonging to sexual or gender minorities, older students or those from rural backgrounds.

Equitable access only becomes a desirable policy goal if it is associated with productive outcomes and ‘success’ for those who attend higher education from minority or disadvantaged majority populations. What constitutes such ‘success’ needs to be seen in the broadest terms though. While employment related outcomes such as higher earnings, occupational progress and employment in graduate occupations is extremely important it is not the only metric of a successful higher education experience. Developing the capabilities of students to be productive citizens and their ‘humanistic’ identities is also very important and evidence also shows that increased higher education participation can lead to greater civic engagement, improved health outcomes etc. There are also subject areas where students may not derive significantly higher earnings than non-graduates but who contribute in very significant ways to society and also derive great personal satisfaction from their work e.g. arts and creative specialisms, public service related courses etc.

To produce this report, information was collected in a number of ways. To establish the present picture on equitable access and success across the world the available data on participation and policy engagement was gathered through a systematic assessment of the outputs relevant to equitable access and success from organisations and researchers active in this field. To establish the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on equitable access and success we undertook a global survey of universities and other organisations who have been engaged with the World Access to Higher Education (WAHED) Initiative. The questions used in this survey can be found in Appendix 1. WAHED is the annual international day of action focused on inequalities in access/success in higher education launched in 2018. Since its launch WAHED has engaged over 1000 organisations from over 100 countries. For more information on WAHED please go to www.worldaccesshe.com.

The survey was completed by 317 individuals from over 80 organisations and over 50 countries. We also undertook 7 online discussion sessions in partnership with the World Bank, Magna Charta Observatory, European Students Union (ESU), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Lumina Foundation USA. Each session lasted between 60 minutes and 2 hours and involved invited representatives from universities; student organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and policy related bodies. The focus group sessions were transcribed and analysed to identify key themes from these discussions. These themes are brought together in an appreciative enquiry fashion to produce the findings outlined in the report. Appreciative enquiry is defined as an approach that ‘aims to identify good practice. It focuses the research process around what works, rather than trying to fix what does not and offers an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice’.³ The aide memoire used to orientate the discussion sessions can be found in Appendix 1.

2. Atherton, G. (2021) *ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education 2021*, Singapore: ASEF - https://asef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/211029_ASEM-Equity-Policy-Report-V2.pdf

3. Shuay B, M., Sharp, C., Judkins, M., Hetherington, M. (2009) *Using Appreciative Inquiry in Educational Research: Possibilities and Limitations* London: NFER - <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/aen01/aen01.pdf>

3. Why does equitable access and success in HE matter?

Before examining the evidence on equitable access and success across the world it would be valuable to reflect on why it matters. This report is primarily focused on assessing the present situation regarding higher education equity but nevertheless a brief outline of the rationale for equity is important.

Providing the opportunities for those from low income and other marginalised groups to enter higher education and then work to ensure they achieve their potential is both an economic and societal imperative. The pandemic exacerbated ongoing labour market trends that are shrinking the number of jobs that don't require higher level skills and advanced qualifications. As research from the McKinsey Institute published in 2020 looking at eight countries which account for almost half the global population and 62% of GDP stated:

*'Because of the pandemic's impact on low-wage jobs, we now estimate that almost all growth in labour demand will occur in high-wage jobs. Going forward, more than half of displaced low-wage workers may need to shift to occupations in higher wage brackets and requiring different skills to remain employed.'*⁴

At the individual level there is already an earnings premium associated with higher education entry. According to the latest OECD report Education at a Glance (OECD, 2021), young adults (25 to 34 years old) with a higher education degree can earn on average 38% more than their peers who have only completed secondary education.⁵ It is becoming apparent that obtaining a higher level qualification will over time become not just a means to extra income but a route to employment itself. Finally, there are gaps across countries in terms of jobs that require higher level qualifications that need filling thus equitable access becomes an economic necessity. Across the OECD more than half of those working in occupations where there are skills gaps are working in high skill occupations.⁶

To be sure there are still millions of jobs that do not require higher level qualifications and this will continue for the foreseeable future but reserving these only for those from lower income backgrounds is extremely problematic. It challenges notions of fairness with associated implications for societal relationships and societal stability.⁷ Higher education participation brings with it a range of individual and societal benefits that are not solely connected to economic progress.⁸ These include better health, greater civic engagement and an enhanced understanding and awareness of climate change.

To lock low-income groups out of these benefits only further exacerbates and retrenches inequality.

There is also significant evidence to suggest that at the national level expanding higher education participation can drive economic growth.⁹ But making the case for expansion overall does not necessarily imply that it should be those from lower socio economic or other low income/marginalised groups that benefit from this expansion. When university systems expand there will inevitably come a point when those who have yet to benefit will finally enter. However, the danger here is that by the time they are allowed to enter the more affluent have already monopolised what achievement means in a system or moved the bar to a higher level – post Bachelor degree for example. Addressing higher education equity in terms of access and success needs to be a priority now and not something that will trickle down in decades time.

4. The equity data gap

Key message Only a minority of countries collect and publish data on who enters and succeeds in high education by background characteristic.

The World Bank estimated that, in April 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 175 countries and communities, and over 220 million post-secondary students had their studies significantly disrupted due to COVID-19.¹⁰ In early 2022 UNICEF estimated that there were still schools in 23 countries, with 405 million pupils, partially or fully closed because of Covid.¹¹ These children are predominantly in lower income countries. This loss of learning at the compulsory school level is likely to feed into higher education rates amongst those from the lowest income backgrounds over the next ten years. There are options to mitigate this impact on equitable access such as lowering entry requirements, but this will not work if learners have been lost to the system all together and may also be problematic if the students entering higher education are then not sufficiently prepared for the courses they choose.

4.1 What data is collected on equitable access and success?

Quantifying the impact of pandemic across the world on equitable access and success in higher education is not as straightforward as understanding its impacts at school level.

The collection of accurate data in a systematic way on equitable access and success in higher education across the world is uneven. The Drawing the Global Access Map study by Atherton et al in 2017 was an attempt to bring together the data available on equitable access available across the world and outline the challenges regarding data collection and how to address them.¹² The report, drawing on data from the OECD, Eurydice and the World Bank showed that in all the countries where data could be located, which was around 90%, inequities in higher education participation by some measure of social background exist. However, while there is enough data to be able to say with confidence that inequalities in access to higher education is a global issue obtaining and collecting data on equity across the world is a challenge. Data on access by social background characteristic – socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity etc. is far from uniformly available; data is produced but not disseminated, comparisons between countries come with major caveats and common approaches across countries cannot be identified as everyone goes their own way.



4. McKinsey Global Institute (2021) *The future of work after Covid-19* - <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19>
5. OECD (2021) *Education at a Glance*, Paris: OECD
6. OECD (2022) *Skills for Jobs 2022 Key Insights*, Paris:OECD -https://www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org/data/S4J2022_results.pdf
7. Gu, Y., Wang, Z. Income Inequality and Global Political Polarization: The Economic Origin of Political Polarization in the World. *J OF CHIN POLIT SCI* 27, 375–398 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-021-09772-1>
8. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) *Things we know and don't know about the Wider Benefits of Higher Education: A review of the recent literature*, London: BIS https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251011/bis-13-1244-things-we-know-and-dont-know-about-the-wider-benefits-of-higher-education.pdf
9. Valero, A. & Van Reenen, J. (2016) *How universities boost economic growth* - <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/how-universities-boost-economic-growth>
10. Coulter, S. et al (2022) *We Don't Need No Education? The Case for Expanding Higher Education*, London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change - <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/We-Don-t-Need-No-Education-The-Case-for-Expanding-Higher-Education.pdf>

5. What does the data tell us?

More data has been produced and analysed since the release of the Charting Equity report. But overall, there is still not any visible collaborative work being undertaken between the major global stakeholders or individual countries to produce regular global reports on who actually makes it to higher education and who does not.

Some individual countries are producing significant information. Evidence suggests that a small number of high-income countries i.e. the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, United States collect comprehensive data across several dimensions of equity.¹³ Through collaborative work such as WAHED awareness of who across the world to collect data is growing. In Europe for example Austria and Croatia are collecting such data from their universities systematically on one or more dimension of equity as are South Africa, the Philippines, India, Colombia and Brazil to name just several more.

Yet across countries the evidence suggests that the majority may not be collecting such data. Research undertaken for the Asia Europe Foundation in 2021 looking at equity policies in 47 European and Asian countries found that less than a third were collecting data from equity priority groups.¹⁴ Countries in Europe are collecting data on some student characteristics. Eurydice (the European Commission (EC) agency focused on data collection in education) collects regular data from

European countries on their work in relation to equitable access and success through the EC's policies in relation to the social dimension of higher education (the social dimension is a concept utilised by the European Commission that incorporates equitable access and success in higher education).

The 2022 EC which aims to pilot indicators in relation to the social dimension it shows that while nearly all the 37 countries examined collect some data related to equitable access and success in higher education (only 4 do not) disability data is only collected by 16 systems, data on low socio-economic status by 14, and data on migrant status in 11.¹⁵

While only a small number of countries appear to be collecting data directly via higher education enrolments from universities systematically, there are other sources of information available via surveys with students and broader national populations. Table 1 below shows where such information can be found regarding participation by proxy measures of socio-economic background. This dimension of equitable access, while not the only one is crucial as it captures to a significant extent other forms of inequality such as rurality for example. Gender exists as an element of equity in access as does disability for example, but socio-economic background occupies a crucial place.

Table 1: Global Data collection by proxy-measure of socio-economic background

Source of data	Content
Eurostudent	Eurostudent project, which covers 29 European countries, and brings together national student survey data. These use parental participation in HE as the marker of socio-economic background. ¹⁶ Eurostudent also collects data on students ethnic background and disability.
World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)	WIDE uses household surveys to measure inequalities in education cross nationally. Its data comes from the demographic and health surveys (DHS), multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), the European Union's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SIL) and other national household surveys
SEDLAC	The Socio-Economic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean (SEDLAC), ¹⁷ which collates information from national surveys in 24 countries, and categorises students' socio-economic background based on parental income.
OECD	Data is not produced annually with last report released in 2014. which uses information on parental education to indicate a student's socio-economic group. ¹⁸

10. The World Bank Group (2020) *The COVID-19 Crisis Response: Supporting tertiary education for continuity, adaptation, and innovation*. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/621991586463915490/The-COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Supporting-Tertiary-Education-for-Continuity-Adaptation-and-Innovation.pdf>
 11. Jeffreys, B (2022) *Covid closures still affecting 400 million pupils*, BBC Education online 30th March 2022 – <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-60846683>
 12. Atherton, G, (2016) *Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map*, London: Pearson
 13. Salmi, J. (2018) *All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe* Lumina Foundation. Available at: <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>
<https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>
 14. Atherton (2021) *ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education Study 2021*. Singapore: ASEF
 15. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022. *Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union
 16. Hauschildt, K, Gwosć, C, Schirmer, H. & Wartenbergh-Cra, F (2021) *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe: EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators 2018–2021*,
 17. For more information please go to: <https://www.cedlas.econo.unlp.edu.ar/wp/en/estadisticas/sedlac/>
 18. OECD. (2015) *Education at a glance*, Paris: OECD education/education-at-a-glance-2015_eag-2015-en

Key message Some progress is being made but it is gradual and hard to establish. But what the evidence available does show is that there is little chance of the UNESCO Global Goal 4.3 being achieved.

Despite the existence of the data described in Table 1 above it is far from straightforward to ascertain what progress is being made on a global level and the extent of this progress.

5.1 Long term progress globally is happening

Buckner's comprehensive analysis of over 300 surveys from 122 countries from the WIDE databases in 2020 states:

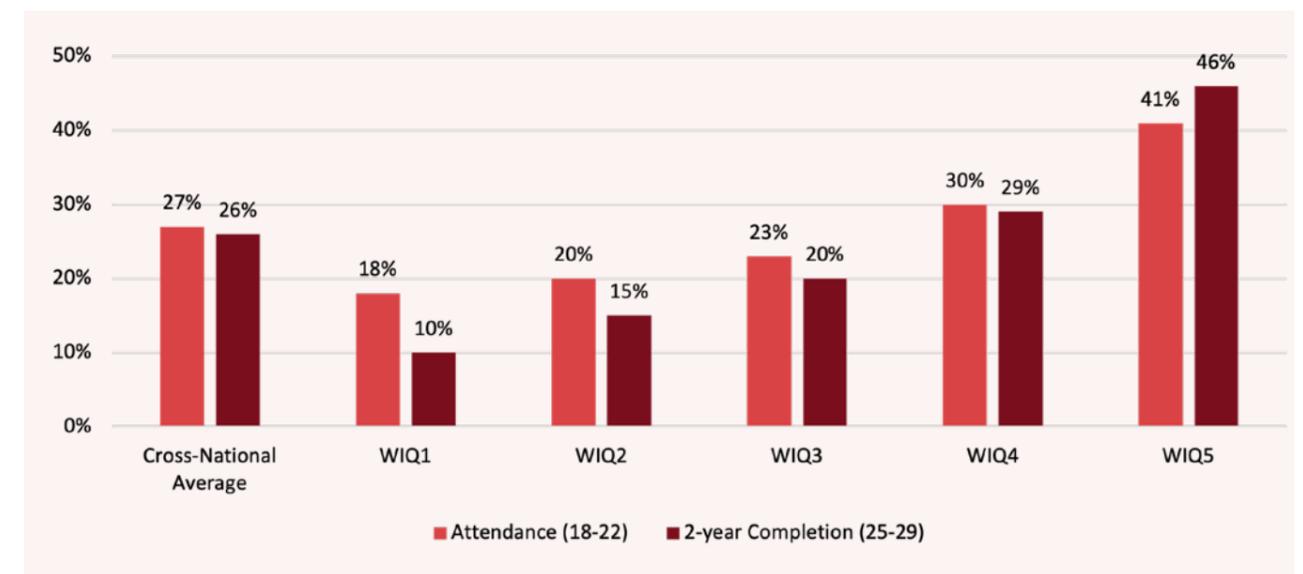
'tertiary education attendance and completion is unequal, according to various measures of inequality, and inequalities are highest in low-income countries. However, in almost every region in the world, inequalities in tertiary attendance and completion have declined over the past two decades'.¹⁹

However, while there may be progress in some regard the gap between the poorest and wealthiest groups where higher education participation is concerned has widened. Diagram 1 below shows participation or attendance at higher education and then completion of at least 2 years of higher education by wealth income quintile. The data is taken from analysis of surveys conducted between 2010-2016 by Buckner.

The comparability of these surveys is limited though with different terms used across countries and measures of inequality also differ. Thus, while it can be said with a degree of certainty there is progress the extent of it is hard to ascertain.

This progress may be associated with the expansion of higher education systems- particularly in the global south. The role of system expansion as drawing in more students may account for why progress in Europe is also slow in terms of equitable access to higher education. As recent work by Usher et al shows that the number of students in the Global North peaked in 2011 and has since been declining, to around 58.3 million in 2018. However, the number of students in the Global South has almost doubled, from some 78 million in 2006 to 150 million in 2018.²⁰

Diagram 1: Participation and 2 years of higher education completed by wealth quintile



19. Buckner, E. (2020) *The non-state tertiary sector and inequalities in tertiary access and completion*, UNESCO GEM 2020 Fellowship Programme
 20. McGregor, K. (2022) *Higher education report charts rise of the Global South* – 18th March 2022 - <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220311151815827>

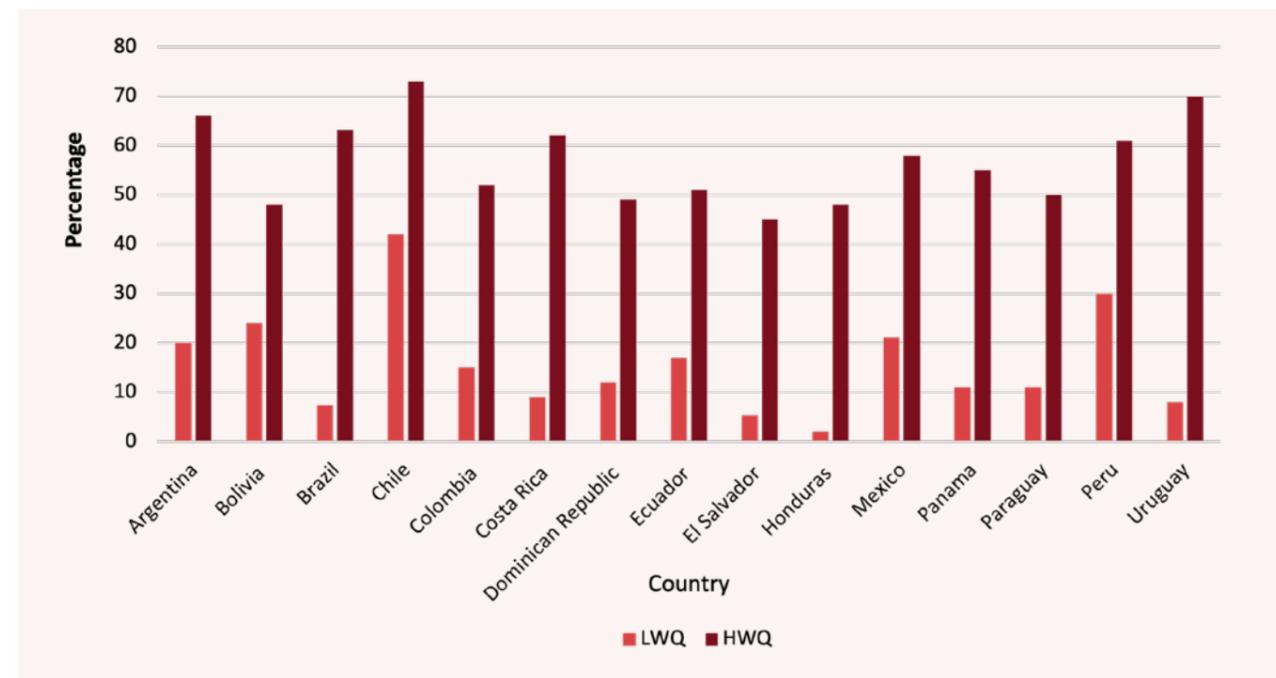
5.2 Also long-term progress in Latin America and the Caribbean

Looking specifically at Latin American and the Caribbean, the probability of accessing higher education is only 6 percent for young people in the poorest percentile growing to almost 70 percent in the richest percentile. But there has been progress in the region in terms of expanding higher education access to disadvantaged groups. As Paz (2017) states on the basis of his analysis of data from the SEDLAC database *‘the poorest 50 percent of the population (B50) represented only around 16 percent of higher education students circa 2000, this group comprised approximately 25 percent of higher education students circa 2012’*.²¹

Assessing the most recent data from SEDLAC again shows progress but this is not likely to be sufficient to close participation gaps by income by 2030.

Diagram 2 shows the share of young people in higher education by income quintile for countries covered by the SEDLAC database described in Table 1 above. Any countries where data is not available for 2019 or later is not included. The diagram shows the extent of the gaps in the different countries. The extent of these gaps is striking with the smallest being in Chile which is 30% and the largest in Uruguay of over 60%.

Diagram 2: Tertiary participation by income quintile for countries in central and Latin America



21. Haimovich – Paz, F. (2017) Equity, Quality and Variety in Higher Education In Marta Ferreyra, M., Avitabile, C., Botero Álvarez, J., Haimovich Paz, F & Urzúa, S. (2017) At a Crossroads: Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, Washington: World Bank Group

5.3 Less progress in Europe

The Eurostudent data described in Table 1 has been used by the European Commission to map the relationship between the educational background of students and their parents. There is little change in the data here over the two periods – 2015 to 2018 when data has been collected and the relationship between parental education background and higher education entry remains very strong. Diagram 3 below shows the relationship between the % of students with fathers who are educated up to secondary level or below versus the % of fathers in the population who are educated up to secondary level or below. If the proportion of students in higher education with fathers who have less than secondary level education matched the proportion in the population then the country would be positioned on the diagonal line.

As can be seen the majority of countries are below the line, indicating that there are fewer students whose fathers have secondary education or less than expected. Looking at the countries together there are only 80% of the students in higher education from this background than we would expect given their proportion in the population.²² Given the relatively stronger policy commitment in Europe than in other continents there is a greater chance of these gaps being closed by 2030. However, it is still very unlikely and moreover even if all the countries were to be above the trend line by 2030 then there would still need to be further work done before it could be said with any confidence that access was equal. The Eurostudent data is based on student surveys where samples differ greatly in size across Europe.

Diagram 3: Participation of students whose parents do not hold a tertiary degree in Europe



22. Hauschildt, K., Gwosć, C., Schirmer, H. & Wartenbergh-Cra, F. (2021) Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe: EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators 2018–2021 https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VII_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf



5.4 And things going backwards in the larger systems

In some of the larger higher education systems in the world where there is a history of policy commitments to equity the picture here is a mixed one. In England there has been significant progress over the last 10 years in the participation of students in higher education from those areas where participation is lowest.²³ But it has still been estimated that it would take 300 years to close the access to higher education gap.²⁴ The US is one of the world's biggest higher education systems with 16 million students. The evidence here suggests that the estimated gap between those who enter and complete higher education from higher and lower income quartiles has increased over recent decades.²⁵ There is a range of data pertaining to access and success in the US in what is a federal system so fully understanding progress here is a significant undertaking but the existence of entrenched gaps in participation in higher education by socio-economic group is well accepted. In India which has around 40 million students (the most of any country in the world) there are higher education places reserved for students from lower caste groups. However, recent analysis shows that the inequality in access to higher education has increased substantially by household economic status in the early 2010s.²⁶ In 2007-08, the difference in the gross attendance ratio between poorest and richest families was 29.5% but by 2013-14 this gap had gone up to 43.5%.

5.5 UNESCO Global Goal 4.3 not likely to be achieved.

The picture is still not as clear as it should be and there is a pressing need for work that brings together the data that does exist on a regular, preferably annual, basis so the global picture on equitable access and success can be seen. But what the evidence available does show is that there is little chance of the UNESCO Global Goal 4.3 being achieved.

23. UCAS (2020) More students from disadvantaged backgrounds across the UK are set to start degrees this Autumn - <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-students-most-disadvantaged-backgrounds-across-uk-are-set-start-degrees-autumn>
 24. <https://taso.org.uk/news-item/ucas-report-300-years-to-close-he-access-gap/>
 25. Mortenson, T. & Brunt, N (2022) The Cancer of Inequality: Higher Education's Contribution - The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
 26. https://iariw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Pradeep_Paper.pdf

6. The policy gaps in equitable access and success

Key message There is a lack of commitment to equitable access and success from national policymakers across the world.

As with data on access and success in higher education establishing an accurate picture regarding the level of policy commitment at the national level is challenging. However, again as with data the picture that can be seen is not encouraging.

The World Access to Higher Education initiative has brought together data on the policies of national government and their relationship to higher education equity to produce 'The Global Equity Map'. This map includes summary information on policy approaches in over 100 countries covering the existence or not of targets; funding allocations and specific

policies related to higher education equity. It is based on two studies: the 'All Around the World' report from 2018 which looked at policies in over 70 countries²⁷ and 'ASEM National Policies in Higher Education' which examined policies in over 40 Asian and European countries.²⁸ The studies show that very few countries have specific policies focused on access and success and/or targets related to participation by those from low income or other disadvantaged groups. The All Around the World report attempted to classify the 71 countries examined by equity policy category. The findings are outlined below in Box 1.

Box 1: Equitable access and success policy commitment across the world

Emerging: the country has formulated broad equity policy principles and goals but has accomplished little in terms of concrete policies, programs and interventions (9 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).

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).

Advanced: the country has formulated and implemented a comprehensive equity promotion strategy. Some countries in this category even have a dedicated equity promotion agency (6 countries).

The European Commission have also undertaken work to identify which countries in the region have policies in place related to equitable access and success. They have found a similarly variable picture. Across Europe only Croatia, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and Switzerland have a higher education strategy which focuses exclusively on social dimension, equity, inclusion or diversity.²⁹

27. Salma, J. (2018) All Around the World – Higher Education Policies across the Globe - <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>
 28. Atherton, G. (2021) ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education Study 2021. Singapore: ASEM
 29. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022. Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

7. Covid-19 and the equity crisis

Key message Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the most affected in equitable access and success terms by the pandemic.

Quantifying the impact of Covid-19 on equitable access and success is hampered by the limitations in data collection and collation described above. Some work has already been done on this issue though. In August to October 2020 World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) led a survey involving 45 countries around the world, including nations across all continents.³⁰ Of the countries surveyed, in 80% of cases university admissions had been disrupted. Where admission was disrupted in 75% of cases this was via some form of cancellation of examinations. In 60% of countries some form of additional financial support in place for low-income students, usually as grants or reduced tuition

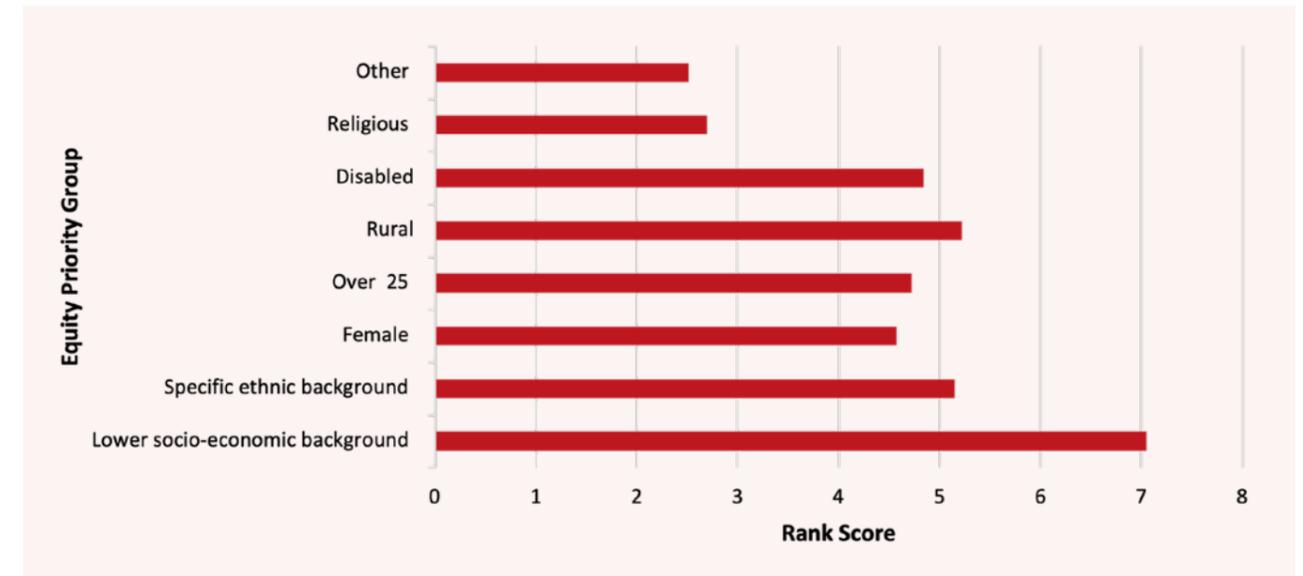
fees. The International Association of Universities (IAU) has been undertaking much more extensive work than this encompassing a range of higher education issues affected by the pandemic via 2 major global surveys.³¹ The first delivered across March to April 2020 received over 500 replies from over universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 109 countries. It showed some real contrasts across the global north and south in how respondents saw the initial impact of the pandemic on the enrolment of their learners. In Africa 36% of respondents reported a decrease in enrolment whilst in Europe this dropped to 13% of respondents.



7.1 Who was most affected by Covid-19?

In the survey conducted for this project there were 4 questions asked that focused specifically on the impact of Covid-19. The first looked to gauge effect of the pandemic on equity priority groups. The responses are shown in Diagram 4 below.

Diagram 4: Equity priority groups most badly affected by the pandemic



Respondents were asked to rank in order of importance the equity priority groups most affected by the pandemic from a choice of those described in Figure 1. The rankings were combined together to produce an average score for each equity priority group.

As is clear from Diagram 4, they felt those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the most affected. This supports the focus in terms of data collection on socio-economic background suggested above. However, Diagram 4 also shows that a range of equity priority groups were impacted by the pandemic and those from rural backgrounds particularly so.

The focus group discussions brought home the impact of the pandemic on those on low incomes from rural backgrounds. As Ian Wairua from Strathmore University in Kenya stated:

'Since we came back last year face-to-face we've noticed many, many issues. Participation is poor, even among those who are back. We have students who can no longer afford to pay fees. Their breadwinners have lost their jobs during the Covid period or they are just playing new socioeconomic roles as parents. Maybe the guardian has died or is still sick during Covid and the young person has now taken over as the head of the family.'

In richer countries in the global north the pandemic pulled new groups into the equitable access space as well as doubling down on the impact on those already long-established equity priority groups. As Cara Crowley Vice President of Strategic Initiatives from Amarillo College in the USA said:

'COVID highlighted the poverty barriers that existed in what we saw as the middle class. Many individuals lost their jobs that were middle class and now had poverty barriers.'

Angela Coleman is the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at North Carolina Central University which is a historically Black university³² located in Durham, North Carolina. As she says:

'Everything you hear about the pandemic impacting college students, it's impacted our historically black university students, probably fivefold, tenfold in terms of food insecurity, anxiety, loss of family members and loss of wages.'

30. Atherton, G. (2020) University Access, Student Success and COVID-19 in a Global Context, London: Sutton Trust - <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Covid-and-Global-University-Access.pdf>
 31. Marinoni, G., Van't Land, H., & Jense, T. (2020) The Impact of Covid-19 on higher education across the world, Paris: IAU - <https://iau-aiu.net/COVID-19-HIGHER-EDUCATION-CHALLENGES-AND-RESPONSES>

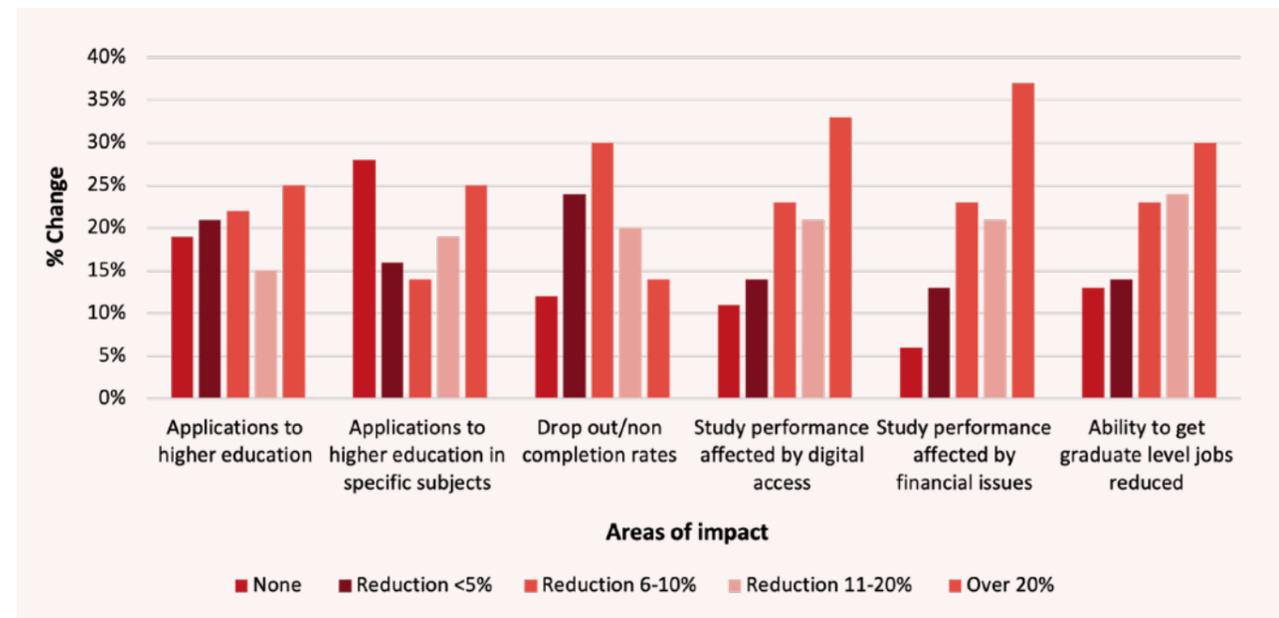
32. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are institutions of higher education in the United States that were established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention of primarily serving the African-American community.

8. How did Covid-19 affect equitable access and success?

Key message Over 80% of survey respondents said that there had been a fall in applications to higher education during the pandemic from equity priority groups and that it had impacted on the ability of students from equity priority groups to get graduate level jobs.

How the pandemic has impacted on equitable access and success in the view of the survey respondents is summarised in Diagram 5 below.

Diagram 5: How the pandemic has affected access and success from equity priority groups



Respondents were asked estimate the percentage of equity priority group students who would be negatively affected by the pandemic in different ways. They were able to choose more than one type of potential impact from the options provided. Diagram 5 suggests then that equity priority groups were affected across each of the dimensions of equitable access and success.

It shows that the greatest concerns regard study performance and ability to get graduate jobs. Over a third of respondents feel that over 20% of students from equity priority groups will have their study performance negatively impacted by financial issues and nearly a third believe that over 20% will have their study performance negatively impacted by issues related to digital access.

There are also some worries about how the future employment prospects of students from equity priority groups may be affected. Over 80% of respondents believe that the pandemic impacted on the ability of students from equity priority groups to get graduate level jobs. There is relatively less concern about drop out/non completion although nearly 90% of respondents think there was some negative impact here. In terms of access, around a quarter of respondents felt that applications from equity priority groups had fallen by over 20%.

8.1 The digital divide is ubiquitous

The focus groups built on the findings of the survey. The first area discussed was the challenges that equity priority groups faced in accessing the digital learning offers from universities. As Dr Lim Tien Hong from the National Higher Education Research Institute in Malaysia stated:

'One of the problem Malaysians face is internet connection. While there is almost 90% Internet coverage throughout our country, in certain areas the connectivity for internet is not as good as the government declares. Some students they can't access the internet very well. Some of them even need to climb through the tree to receive a strong enough signal.'

This issue of internet access came through repeatedly across the world. In the Australian context, Sue Bennett from the University of Wollongong who is Executive Dean of the Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities points to how *'in some of regional areas, so you have to drive in for 30 minutes to access even something that is sort a of decent connection'*. Very similar issues pertained in both Kazakhstan. As Loretta O'Donnell, Vice Provost Academic Affairs at Nazarbayev University in the Sultan Kazakhstan said: *'...in a big country like this, there just isn't great access everywhere. It is actually pretty good, but it's not 100% coverage'*.

Candice Burnett D'Boskie from Western University in Canada pointed to the impact here specifically on indigenous learners *'The digital divide has deepened existing inequalities. A lot of indigenous students early on the pandemic started to show that they didn't have access to technology, to computers. When they returned home to their first nations communities they didn't have access to the Internet. Reliable internet is still an issue in Canada.'*

The Colombian Association of Universities has undertaken a programme of research to understand the impact of the pandemic on equitable access. Elizabeth Bernal from the Association described the impact not just on higher education students but those in schools and how the move to online learning across the educational system poses huge issues for those from low income backgrounds: *'We didn't know what was happening with high schools. And what we realised is that many students, were in remote areas where they didn't have any access to internet and some of them had the access to internet, but they didn't have the laptops or desktops, or they just had a computer at home with four students depending on it.'*

Issues of rurality and internet access intersected with poverty in the Philippines. *'I work for an agricultural university, just try to imagine how poor our students are. Most of them are sons and daughters of farmers. And, you know, having gadgets is not really a priority in the Philippines.'*

Glenn Calaguas, Pampanga State Agricultural University

In Romania again the issue of rurality, poverty and adequate access to online learning was apparent. As the President of the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania (ANOSR) said:

'The universities and the governments made sure that almost everyone had access to digital devices. However, usually students went back to homes in their rural areas and usually they had to stay with multiple siblings in the room and they couldn't prepare for university. The dormitories were closed in the university centres, so they didn't have the opportunity to go in there either.'

However, the pandemic's impact on equitable access and success needs to be seen in the context of other things that were happening at the time. Candice Burnett D'Boskie from Canada describes vividly how the pandemic interacted with other events to produce a combination of issues for students from indigenous backgrounds.

'in May 2020 we all heard around the world of the brutal killing and murder of George Floyd, a black man, by a police officer in the United States and this ignited the Black Lives Matter Movement, even in Canada. So a string of protests and local marches and solidarity happened. Then in May of 2021 a former British Columbia residential school found the remains of 200 indigenous children who were buried at the former site. This pushed first nation and indigenous communities to start to put together the 'Find the Children Campaign' and we've discovered thousands of children's bodies at residential school states across our country and this has also impacted vulnerable groups, particularly indigenous groups triggering historical trauma and grief.'

It is important to consider this broader impact of the pandemic on those from equity priority groups who have borne the brunt of it. As Sue Bennett from Australia stated:

'I think the impact has been on motivation, engagement and connection and for our students who are in the most vulnerable categories we know already that they often have fewer resources to draw on.'

Finally, the pandemic had a huge impact on students who work whilst they are studying, many of whom are from equity priority groups. As Angela Coleman said:

'...we have a lot of students that work in low wage jobs. If they don't work, they don't eat. They had to make some tough decisions and university was the last thing on their minds. We need to be empathetic and mindful of what those students were going through.'

9. The equity crisis: access declining and success decreasing?

Key message Around 90% of respondents thought that between now and 2025 for equity groups participation would decrease, attainment fall, student drop out increase and progression to graduate employment decrease. Nearly a quarter of respondents feared that this fall in participation would be over 20%.

It is clear from the evidence presented thus far that the pandemic's effect on equitable access and success was considerable but how long will it last? The respondents to the survey were asked to estimate the extent to which the pandemic will have a lasting effect on equitable access and success. Their views are summarised in Diagram 6 below.

Diagram 6: Impact of the pandemic on access and success in higher education for equity priority groups from now until 2025

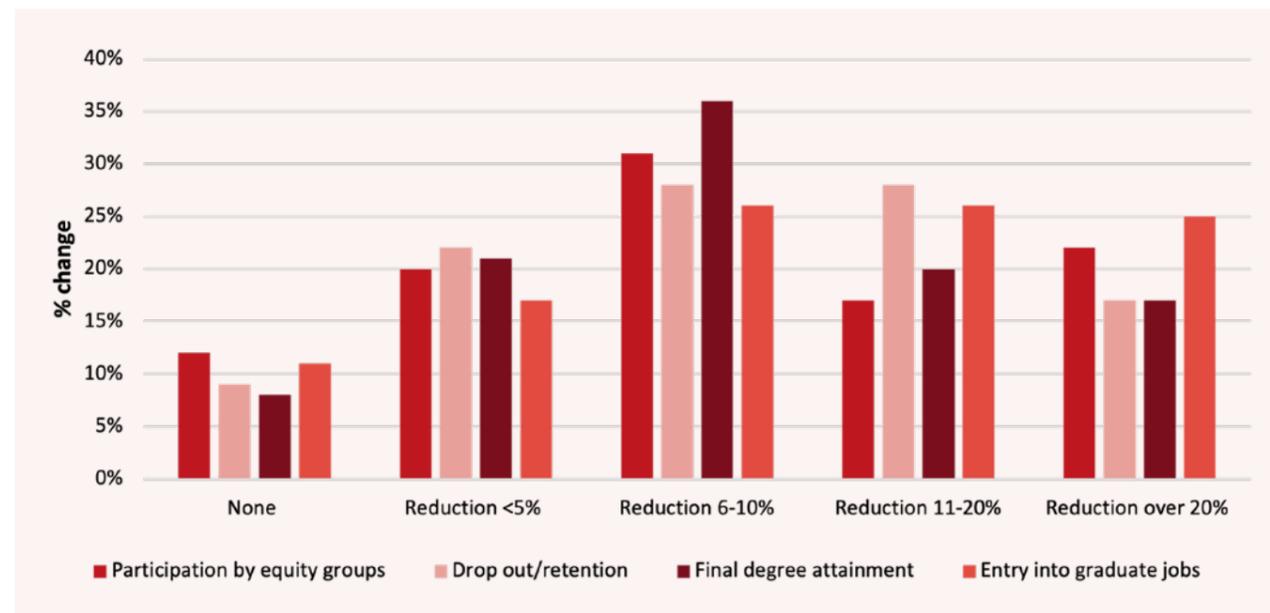


Diagram 6 shows that around 90% of respondents felt that there would be a negative impact on each dimension of equitable access and success up until at least 2025. The most common estimate of the magnitude of this impact was 6-10%, as is shown in Diagram 6 as the category with overall the tallest bars. The biggest predicted impact was in participation by equity groups and entry into graduate jobs where it was felt there may be a reduction in over 20% by 2025 – shown by the tallest bars in the final category. Establishing these estimates is difficult, but this question illustrates the extent of the concern that those engaged in work related to equity in higher education have for forthcoming years.

This concern though reflects the fact that in trying to gauge the extent of the impact of the pandemic on equitable access and success it is important not to lose sight of the deeply rooted nature of the issue. Arturo Cherbowski is the Executive Director of Santander of Santander Universities in Mexico. As he said:

‘On the question of access and success I would say that for us it is not a pandemic driven issue. The pandemic just made more apparent a number of structural factors and dynamics that were there before the pandemic. The pandemic perhaps exacerbated the gaps but they did not create them.’

These deep-rooted issues are a result of the interplay of structural factors within systems and institutional cultures which combine together in order to make access and success for equity priority groups a difficult and if not impossible journey into and through higher education.



Denise Pires de Carvalho is from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. She describes how these structural factors manifest themselves in the Brazilian context.

‘In Brazil only 20% of people from 18 to 24 years old access higher education – so we are talking about a minority. But even these people that can be admitted to our institutions, the greatest challenge is to maintain them in our institutions. During the last 10 years, there is a law in Brazil, the quota law, for the inclusion of the most vulnerable population. So that’s about 50% in public universities that are reserved to allow socio minorities and disabled people to enter. But the problem now is that not only people that enter by the quota programme, but all of the students, they do have a problem to continue with their courses.’

These structural factors also manifest themselves in the way that university systems are constructed as they combine with institutional cultures. Iris Kimizoglu is a student leader in Germany.

‘I’ve studied in southern Germany where it’s very elitist, you have a lot of universities which are very old and have a high reputation and are called ‘excellent’ universities and they always say equity is important to them but in fact when you talk to the people who make the decisions, they couldn’t care less. Then there are other universities, especially the younger ones, one of them where I’m studying right now. It is in an area which is very industrialised with a lot of migrants, where the professors and the whole academic community really engages and also sees the opportunities of diversity. It’s a whole different culture here.’

Remaining in Europe, Vesa Taatila, Rector of the Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland points to how entrenched practices are often a clear manifestation of how systems view certain students.

‘In Finland the key question is the student selection procedure. At the moment it is rather traditional and it favours the applicants with good academic skills already before their studies. This does not support, for example, the access and integration of the immigrants and the applicants that have taken vocational routes before higher education.’

Structural and cultural factors also manifest themselves in the relationship between higher education and particular groups of students – in particular disabled students. As Glenn Calaguas from Pampanga State Agricultural University in the Philippines said:

‘Sometimes students with special needs, particularly those students who don’t have physical disabilities, but probably have intellectual disabilities are not being assessed properly. For the longest time, we have been too silent about people with disabilities in the Philippines. It’s not something that we usually talk about, even mental health.’

Barriers for disabled students were also identified by Gin Wilcox, Director of the International Office at Paragon International University in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

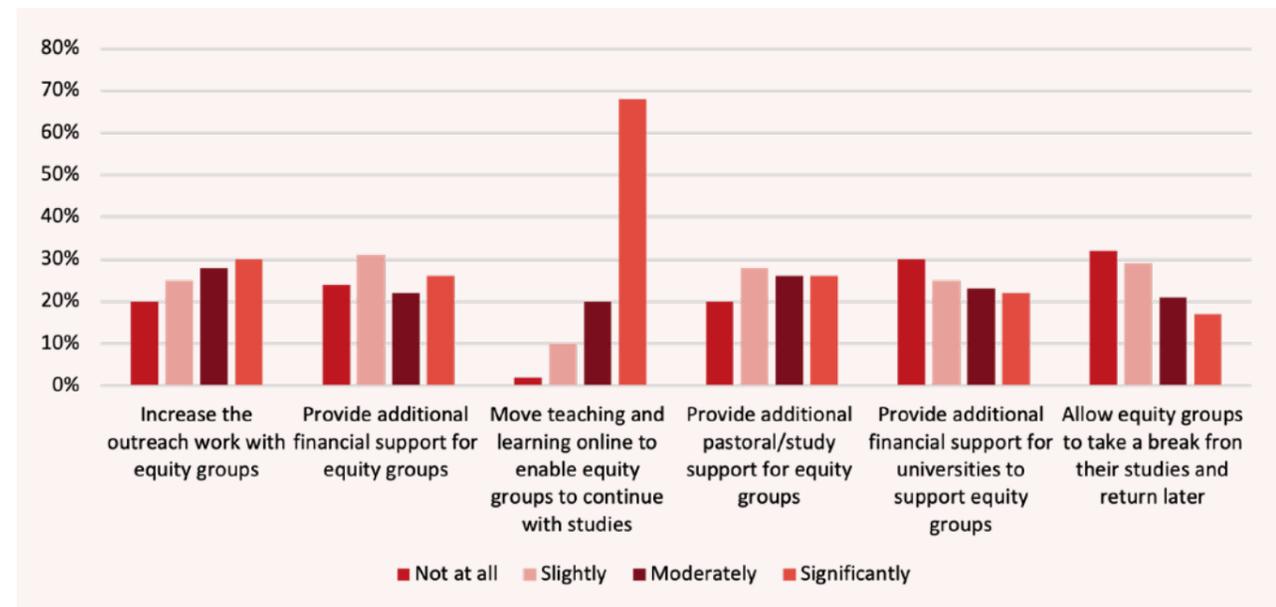
‘I think it’s a big problem in Cambodia as well that there aren’t facilities. So we have a ramp, but it’s like a ski slope you’d need somebody really strong to push you up if you were in a wheelchair. Mental health is a huge problem in Cambodia. It’s been found that the post traumatic distress from the civil war has been passed down to the next generation.’

10. Addressing the impact of Covid 19 on equitable access and success

Key message Nearly 70% of respondents said that they had moved teaching and learning online to enable equity groups to continue with their studies but only around 25% of respondents stated that they had provided significant financial support for equity groups.

Across the survey and the focus group discussions participants were clear that while equity in access/success in higher education was facing ongoing and increasing challenges they also pointed to a range of practical approaches and policies that could make a difference here. Some of these approaches were ones that had emerged through the transformations in how higher education was delivered engendered by the pandemic. Respondents in the survey and participants in the focus groups detailed a range of ways through which they tried to support learners from minority or 'disadvantaged majority' backgrounds. Diagram 7 summarises the results from the survey.

Diagram 7: How university/government/organisations supported access and success for equity priority groups through the pandemic



Consistent with the way in which online teaching featured prominently in the focus group discussions as Diagram 7 shows, it is by far the most common way in which organisations acted to support students from equity groups during the pandemic. Nearly 70% of respondents said that they had significantly moved teaching and learning online to enable equity groups to continue with their studies. The only other area that reached 30% in terms of significant commitments was increased outreach work with equity groups. Only around 25% of respondents stated that they had provided significant financial support for equity groups.

The focus group discussions highlighted numerous examples of how universities supported their students from equity groups to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Professor Sasmita Samanta is the Vice-Chancellor of Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, a large university in India with over 30,000 students. As she states:

'One action we have taken is teaching the students by using mass media. We have our own television channel. We used that for teaching the students for a few hours every day. We have given a full scholarship to the children of the deceased parents. The students who have lost their parents due to the pandemic, either father or the mother we are giving them the full scholarship for their studies in the university'



As Loretta O'Donnell, Vice Provost Academic Affairs at Nazarbayev University in the Sultan Kazakhstan said:

'We quickly bought 200 laptops to give them to students and negotiated with local public libraries to allow our students and other students as appropriate to attend those.'

In Kenya, there was another slightly different approach taken to enabling students from equity priority groups to continue with their studies. As Ian Wairua from Strathmore University in Kenya stated:

'The Internet connection is relatively good in Nairobi and in the bigger cities, but there are students who cannot afford to pay for Internet access and that's an issue even if the Internet connection is good. We negotiated cheap access rates for our students. A move that was picked up by other institutions and actually became government policy.'

However, providing such support was of course challenging.

'We faced a problem with the e-learning platforms for students. In many cases, students would complain that the video didn't work, or the audio didn't work despite the government investing a lot of funds in developing these online tools.'

Loretta O'Donnell, Vice Provost Academic Affairs at Nazarbayev University in the Sultan Kazakhstan

'In Romania it's a very interesting trend because the government and all the universities all hail the importance of physical learning and the future of hybrid learning. However, that is pretty much bogus. First of all, even though, when there wasn't any relevant risk for onsite learning in the academic sense, all the teachers voted to stay online, just because it's more comfortable for them. And the students voted to go to class. And usually digital in Romania means only using zoom, that is the limit of digital education, we are not talking about online services, about online tools, about access to journals and research, about psychological services delivered online and so on.'

President of the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania (ANOSR).

10.1 Covid 19 as a catalyst for positive change

Candace Burnett D’Boskie described earlier how the pandemic combined with a number of other factors related to race and ethnicity in 2020 and 2021 to create an intensified set of pressures for students from indigenous and not white backgrounds in Canada. However, she also pointed to positives emerging from the experience.

‘institutional systemic racism has really had a light shined on it by the whole pandemic and that’s been one positive. As an institution, we’re starting to review and shift our approach to diversity looking at how it can be embedded across the structures. We are developing more institutional approaches to equity, diversity, inclusion and adding decolonisation to our work which has been positive.’

This reviewing of institutional policies and structures could also be seen in Australia and Kazakhstan.

‘As an institution something we’re taking a much harder look at what we think we know about our students. All of them, but particularly students who have been more greatly affected. we’re actually mapping real student lives and understanding what we’ve got to do and how we can change our approach to respond to what they’re saying that they would like to be able to do.’

Sue Bennett, University of Wollongong, Executive Dean of the Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

‘...very much prompted by our entire experience with COVID-19, is finally, the establishment of a special learning needs committee on campus chaired by a professor of education.’

Loretta O’Donnell, Vice Provost Academic Affairs at Nazarbayev University in the Sultan Kazakhstan

There are also examples of strategic change at the policy as well as the institutional level that has emerged through the pandemic. As Glenn Calaguas describes in the Philippines:

‘...there is actually an existing law already in the Philippines regarding distance education that was passed some time ago. The Commission on Higher Education has been planning to implement this within the next 10 years. The good thing about the pandemic is that it made us implement it for less than a year.’

Whilst in the USA what was introduced as temporary policy measure has since become a more long standing feature of the higher education system in Florida. Phil Giraffa is Director of articulation and academic pathways at Miami Dade College in Florida, USA.

‘In Florida, are criteria that requires students to take a college placement test for readiness for dual enrolment and for other programmes. Due to the pandemic these tests were significantly limited. So, an emergency order to essentially create and implement alternate criteria for college readiness was put in place. What that wound up doing was really expanding the net of students that we were not normally getting because of the inability to either A, have access to take a test, or not passing a test.’

‘A statute was recently passed to that permits the use of alternative criteria as of summer 2022. It will be interesting to see a year from now, two years from now, what that looks like, with students in terms of access and success.’

11. How can ongoing inequalities in access and success be tackled?

The participants in the online discussion sessions highlighted where work was needed but also underway to try and avert the equity crisis identified in the survey. This work is described below.

11.1 A holistic approach to equitable access and success

The need for an approach to equitable access and success that is multi-faceted and connected came through across the online discussion sessions and the survey. William Moses is the Managing director for The Kresge Foundation’s Education Programme in the US. He lays out in his survey response 5 things that would support more equitable access and success and in doing so embodies the nature of such a multi-faceted or holistic approach. These different points and some additional ones are discussed further through this section.

1. Reduce cost and increase affordability (including debt reduction for student loan holders).
2. Greater outreach to under-represented groups in high schools to restore the pipeline of higher education enrolment.
3. Improve outreach to “Opportunity Youth” and “Comebackers” to ensure that they have access to affordable, quality and flexible higher education opportunities so that they can better fit the workforce needs of the 21st century.
4. Improve the quality and flexibility of online offerings so that working and older students can still get degrees.
5. Encourage more holistic systemic change at institutions to ensure greater student success using evidence-based reforms and data analytics.’

11.2 Digital learning and changing mindsets

The problems caused by digital divides was discussed repeatedly above, but digital learning also presents opportunities as well as challenges. Max Trejo is Executive Secretary of the International Youth Agency for Ibero-America. He argued passionately in the focus group discussion convened with UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean that, accepting the challenges presented by access to digital connectivity online learning had huge potential:

‘Digital change is going to allow us to be more inclusive. And by being digital, it doesn’t mean that it has to be low quality. So that’s why it is important to have education in different forms available in terms of microcontent and microteaching. The Netflix of education has to be there for universities, schools, academies and institutions. There is an incredible opportunity in education presenting itself here.’

This optimism regarding the potential for innovation to drive improvements in equitable access and success was echoed by Dr. Frances J. Santiago Torres from the University of Peuro Rico in his survey answer:

‘Open mindedness and willing to think outside of the box is necessary! We need to put an end to the thought of wanting to “go back to the way things were”. We are facing a new era and new paradigms, we need to be creative and embrace change.’ However, while Iris Kimizoglu pointed to the need for practical changes to student support she also reflected on the case for more fundamental change.

‘I’ve been wondering for a long while, how can we change the culture to be less elitist and not only talk about equity when it comes to getting more money, but to have it as an ideal? I’m not sure how to do that, but that would be good, because if we had it we can change everything. As long as we don’t have this culture, nothing will change.’

33. Atherton, G. (2020) Room at the top: Access and success at leading universities around the world, London: Sutton Trust

11.3 Using data to affect change

In the discussion session delivered at the World Bank Francois Strydom, Senior Director for Teaching and Learning at the University of the Free State in South Africa, spoke at length on how data analytics had driven forward improvements in the number of students completing their courses at the university. The approach undertaken at University of the Free State is summarised in Box 2 below.

Box 2: University of the Free State – Enabling student success

University of the Free State (UFS) is a public university in South Africa founded in 1904. It has over 40,000 students. Over 80% of students are black African in descent with 13% in 2020 white students. The proportion of black students has increased markedly since 2009 when it was 58%. The proportion of students who first in their family to go to higher education is 77%. Via a sustained focus on equity, success and quality concentrating on developing student engagement and using comprehensive data analytical techniques UFS has been able to outperform the national average where student completion is concerned. Nationally, 75% of black students are completing their courses. At UFS in 2010 this figure was 66% in 2010 but has increased to 84% by 2020.

The work of UFS has been long term and consistent over a 10 year period. It is underpinned by consultation and using the student engagement surveys. This has enabled the student voice to drive institutional innovation and design but in an evidence based way. Through that work UFS have prioritised and identified 13 high impact practices or HIPs. They have scaled four of these:

- First year seminars that allow first year students to transition.
- Academic advising – supporting students to navigate the system that UFS have put in place.
- Tutorials creating peer groups where students feel safe
- Academic language - very important because there's such language diversity in South Africa.

The work above is supported by a Vulnerability assessment which uses an algorithm including :-Teaching and Learning data; Institutional data and student narrative. This assessment is used to identify and reach out to students who need further support and covers 99% of all students.

11.4 Enabling progression through outreach work with schools and colleges

Activities led by universities with learners at pre-higher education level to support their attainment in school/college and aid their understanding of higher education, is commonplace in the US, the United Kingdom and Australia although also evident in a range of other countries to a lesser extent especially in Latin America.³³ However, it was encouraging to see evidence of such work in Asia. Thavamalar Balakrishnan is based at the Singapore University of Social Sciences in the Office of Service Learning and Community Engagement.

'we have been working with community partners, who have beneficiaries who are children from low socio economic backgrounds. We got our university students to act as peer mentors for these young people. Alongside the peer mentoring, we also provide them capacity building workshops in the areas of career coaching and academic support.'

11.5 Providing financial support for low-income learners

Financial barriers continue to blight participation in higher education for low-income groups across the world. There are some considerable differences in student finance regimes across the world, including free or targeted free tuition in some countries but even when the direct cost of attending higher education may be low this does not mean financial barriers do not exist. Higher education tuition is free in Germany but students from low-income backgrounds still face barriers that need to be addressed. As Iris Kimizoglu from Germany said in the discussion with other student leaders:

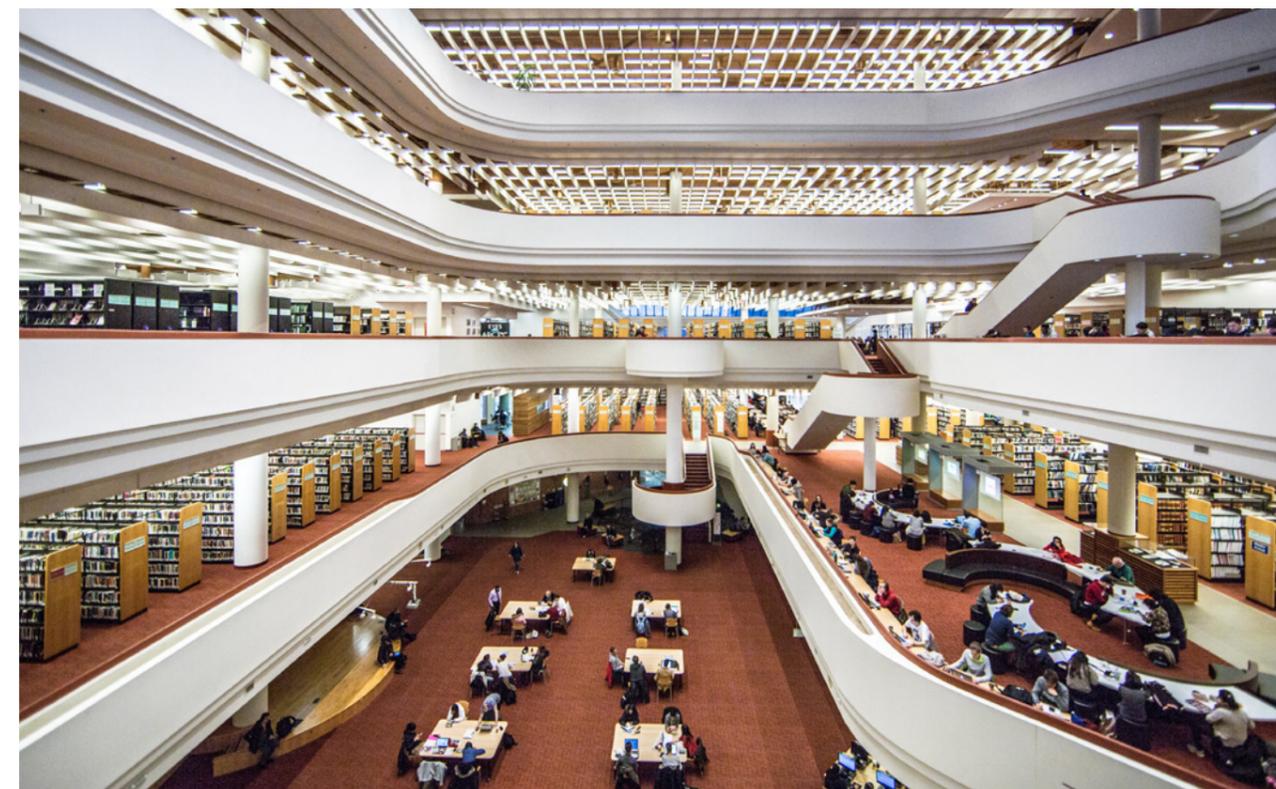
'In Germany the most important thing is to change the financial support system for students. It needs to be independent from a student's parental income, it should be given to students who are studying within the standard period of study + 2 semesters and it needs to be a full grant.'

Addressing financial barriers is primarily the responsibility of governments but there contributions that can be made by non-state actors. Santander Universities have been supporting access to higher education for over 20 years and their work is summarised in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Santander Universities

Banco Santander has invested more than €1.800 million in academic initiatives since 2002 through Santander Universities, with over 430,000 university scholarships and grants awarded since 2005. Santander Universities has agreements in place with 1,000 universities and institutions in 22 countries. In 2020-21 there were over 40,000 scholarships awarded to support access to higher education.

As well as its work with individual universities Santander has supported Fundación Universia, which is a private non-profit entity that for more than 10 years has focused its work on educational and employment guidance, diversity and equity, the digital transformation of universities and entrepreneurship. Amongst the work that Fundación Universia do is mentoring and support work focused on students with disabilities.



11.6 Building the capacity to make change

Equitable access and success shapes and is shaped by a broader inclusion and equality agenda in higher education which includes amongst other things – the decolonisation of curriculum; opportunities for staff from diverse backgrounds to progress within academia and creating an environment which supports the mental health of students. On the latter point as the student leader participant from Austria stated.

‘I’m happy that each of you said something about mental health also because in Austria we see that this is a big problem at the moment and also with the pandemic additionally, it’s important to provide for the mental health support for students from all backgrounds.’

To affect equity in the context of these coalescing agendas capacity building across higher education is essential particularly for those working directly in equity but for all staff as it is a collective responsibility. As Gwin Wilcox from Cambodia argued:

‘There needs to be training, mentorship and guidance. The lecturers and the professors need guidance and training about how to deal with the students, with any kind of issues, special needs, or any disabilities, or even to discuss equity in terms of sexuality or gender. These training needs have to be addressed throughout the university system in the whole country’.

The World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) is a new initiative that has been set up to address this need for capacity building. The work of WAHEN is described in Box 4 below:

Box 4: World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN)

WAHEN is the professional, global organisation established to support equitable access and success in higher education. Founded in 2022, it builds on World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) – the international day of action on inequalities in access and success in higher education. Since 2018 partners, and supporters have held nearly 200 separate events to celebrate and promote equitable access to, and success within higher education and over 1000 organisations including over 700 universities have engaged with WAHED.

WAHEN has 5 strategic priorities:

- **Capacity Building** - To facilitate equity in higher education through the sharing, professionalisation and enhancement of practice related to higher education equity.
- **Collaboration** – To enable and lead new shared partnerships between organisations working together, on a global basis, to achieve shared goals around equity in higher education.
- **Convening** – To bring together those from across countries and sectors to affect change higher education equity.
- **Campaigning** – To advocate to and work with policymakers and governments around the world to make higher education more equitable.
- **Critical thinking** – To create a space where research and scholarly activity related to higher education access, equity and success globally can be produced.

WAHEN undertake activities in a range of areas including:

- **Professional development** – WAHEN offers online, capacity building courses on a range of topics be led by experts in the field of equitable access and success and will focus on supporting members to enhance their skills, knowledge and capabilities. In 2023 we will be launching the first Global MBA in Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education delivered through Ruskin College Oxford.
- **WAHEN Action Forums** – each action forum will consider a different area of practice that is vital in achieving equity in higher education and help to forge new collaborations between members. There are action forums in building progression routes into higher education; policymaking for higher education equity; maximising attainment and success; understanding equity: research, scholarship, and evidence and opening up international higher education to all learners
- **Promoting equitable access and success** – WAHEN develops evidence-based campaigning with other international organisations active in this field and build partnerships with those who share its vision. Members also have the opportunity to participate in the WAHEN Equitable Access and Success Awards.
- **WAHEN Research Group**- The research and evidence base where equity in higher education is concerned is a growing field encompassing academics and policy oriented researchers. This group is a space where evolving research can be shared, thematic sessions curated, theory discussed and those all-important international research collaborations built.

12. 3 calls to action: Lead - Target - Invest

Stakeholders have highlighted clearly the real and present threats to equitable access and success in higher education. But examples of innovation and commitment at the level of policy and practice exist if the commitment is there to take them forward. This section describes 3 major calls to action for policymakers, universities and other stakeholders.

Lead

Create a global task force by 2024 to galvanise commitment to enhancing equitable access and success by 2030.

A consistent thread running through the survey and consultation sessions was the need for collaboration across sectors; higher education providers and crucially international borders. This collaboration however will not happen without leadership. Equitable access and success up to now has lacked the international networks that characterise other parts of higher education. There is some evidence that these networks are developing – in Europe via the work of the European Commission’s Bologna Follow Up Group for the Social Dimension for example and the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean in their region but further, wider global is required. There has been work underway in recent years to initiate greater international exchange of practice and dialogue. The 2022 UNESCO Global Conference on Higher Education featured a significant focus on equity. Conferences however are not enough – ongoing work is needed.

How to make this happen?

- **International organisations committed to equitable access and success coming together and showing leadership.**

There are already a range of organisations displaying their commitment to this agenda who could initiate such a task force. This task force could then lead a campaign to galvanise commitment from policymakers and universities. Numerous examples of such task forces/campaigns exist across the education and broader inequality space as well as in higher education equity itself. In California in 2020 during the pandemic the Governor set up the Recovery with Equity Taskforce to establish a vision for higher education equity in the state.³⁴ The organisations leading the task force should make their own public commitments to equitable access and/or success and create an ongoing work programme to support governments and universities to do likewise.
- **Engage students in the equitable access and success agenda**

Throughout the research undertaken for this study consultation and engagement with students was a major theme. But as with so much of the equity global policy and practice agenda there is a paucity of examples of how to effectively engage and they are not being brought together and spread to foster mutual, global learning. As well as being partners in the task force more work needs to be undertaken to understand how and where students can shape equitable access and success work in different countries.
- **Create a high profile visible goal of free higher education for all**

A genuine commitment to equity from the global higher education community must be led by a commitment to free higher education in the long term. In many countries, especially in the global south there are very finite resources to invest in higher education. Free higher education for all is a long term goal that will certainly not be achieved in this, the next or even the decade after that. But the case for adopting a goal of free higher education is compelling from an equitable access and success perspective and as statement of commitment to equity. It positions equitable access at the centre of how economies across the world grow and prosper.
- **Foster the engagement of the employers and broader civil society**

A diverse set of stakeholders including employers, NGOs, and foundations participated in this study. The task force needs to build out a coalition of support from a base within universities and the global higher education sector so that higher education equity can become a strategic goal that is shared across all dimensions of society.

34. For more information go to: <https://postsecondarycouncil.ca.gov/initiatives/recovery-with-equity/about-the-taskforce/>



Target

Kickstart a culture of target setting across nations, regions and universities to make equitable access and success targets the norm by 2030.

Advancements in commitment to equitable access and success are limited by the inconsistencies in data available on who participates and succeeds. The pandemic shone further light on this as it highlighted the contrast between the information generated on the impact on school equity and higher education equity. Only a minority of countries are collecting data and even fewer setting targets. Unless this changes then the equity crisis is unlikely to be averted. Examples of target setting do exist e.g. in Ireland as part of its 2022-2028 National Access Plan³⁵ or the Lumina Foundation in the US taking the initiative to set a national target for 60 percent of adults to have a college degree, certificate, industry-recognized certification, or other credential of value by 2025.³⁶ But this approach needs to become the norm not the exception.

How to make this happen?

- **A worldwide summit on data collection & dissemination in 2023**

The global task force should initiate a worldwide summit which attempts to better understand what data on equitable access and success exists at institutional, national and international level. As outlined in Section 5 data is being collected and released but it is not being brought together and shared to give a global overview.

- **Adopting a global equity data charter**

Achieving a better understanding of the progress or lack of it, being made in equitable access and success is essential to inform the setting of realistic and achievable targets. A set of guidelines needs to be developed which outlines what can and should be collected; when and how it should be disseminated etc. to aid universities and governments in building their equitable access and success data infrastructure. Some work has already been done on this which could inform the development of these guidelines in the Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map study of 2016.³⁷

35. Department of Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) 'New National Access Plan to drive equality of access to higher education launched by Minister Harris', Press Release 31st August 2022, <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/6ff41-new-national-access-plan-to-drive-equality-of-access-to-higher-education-launched-by-minister-harris/#>

36. For more information see: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/our-work/>

37. Atherton, G. et al (2016) Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map, London: Pearson

Invest

Encourage all universities to commit to investing at least 5% of their annual income in equitable access and success work and governments at least 5% of their higher education spend by 2030.

As important as targets and leadership from government are why are they necessary? Why does it require pressure from governments to do what higher education itself should be more than willing to do? Many universities across the world put equity at the heart of their mission but they are a minority. As Iris Kimizoglu from Germany argues above a culture change is needed in higher education. This change needs to be expressed in concrete financial commitment not supportive statements whose impact can't be measured.³⁸ Data led advocacy by the task force pointing to activities/initiatives that make a difference to equitable access and success will be required to secure greater investment. Based on this study 6 of these activities/initiatives are described below.

How to make this happen?

- **Make outreach work with schools and colleges mandatory**

A huge part of the cultural shift required here concerns the role and responsibility of universities in relation to learners at the pre higher education level. Outreach activities featured relatively prominently in the survey described above. However, it was still delivered by only a minority of responding organisations. The evidence shows that such work can have a positive impact on equitable access to higher education.³⁹ While there are limitations to the contribution that higher education can make at the school/college level it is an absolution of responsibility to state that inequalities in access to higher education are entirely the result of achievement gaps amongst children and is therefore a 'school problem' which universities cannot assist with.

- **Enhance financial support for students**

Affordability is axiomatic where equity is concerned. But it is not the entire answer and universities providing financial support is not enough. Competing through financial incentives for the most able students from low income or other marginalised backgrounds via scholarships will do little to change the ability of such communities to enter HE. Needs based approaches delivered across regions/nations in collaboration are required on the road to free higher education.

- **Build certified professional staff development programmes**

The seriousness with which the global higher education sector treats equity can be measured by how much it is willing to develop and invest in professional development in the field. The UK for example has an annual training programme run by the professional organisation for access and success the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)⁴⁰ which is driving forward change but such work is rare across the world.

- **Embrace the possibilities online technology offers for equitable access and success.**

This study highlighted the ubiquitous nature of digital divides but online higher education will increase and its benefits should be embraced. Students from different backgrounds will demand a different, more flexible offer from higher education. It needs to be underpinned though by policies which define the baseline requirements for students are in terms of access to devices, data, training support and engagement from faculty.

- **Fund development of data led inclusive pedagogy and student support**

There is significant evidence, including some outlined in the report above from the University of the Free State, of how initiatives that offer specific support to students from low income and other marginalised backgrounds can improve completion/achievement rates. At the University of Berkeley in the United States the Education Opportunity Program combines peer and academic counselling to support first generation low income higher education students.⁴¹ This work needs to be combined with support for academic staff in developing an inclusive approach to learning and teaching that sees non-traditional student backgrounds as an asset not a deficit.

- **Embed a greater focus on equity in international education**

Again, this part of higher education is ripe for cultural change. The pandemic heralded experimentation with virtual/hybrid programmes that could enable more students from a wider range of backgrounds to have an international higher education experience. However, innovation in delivery will not alone lead to greater equity in international education. Leaders, faculty and administrators in the international education field need to view equitable access as a core priority – not an issue confined to domestic students alone. Examples of such approaches exist that others can build their investment in this area around do exist though.⁴²

38. Baker, S. (et al) (2022) *Engaging 'diverse' students: An audit of strategies to foster intercultural engagement in Australian public universities*, Melbourne; University of Melbourne

39. Herbaut, E & Koen, G (2019) What Works to Reduce Inequalities in Higher Education? A Systematic Review of the Quasi-Experimental Literature on Outreach and Financial Aid, Policy Research Working Paper World Bank

40. For more information on NEON go to :www.educationopportunities.co.uk

41. Educational Opportunity Programme Available at: <https://eop.berkeley.edu/>

42. The Fulbright Commission in the UK for example positions 'social mobility' as one of its 4 key strategic priorities i.e. supporting the progression of participants to more advanced socio-economic positions. The Commission facilitates exchanges between US and UK students and is working to build into its data collection evidence of the background characteristics such as whether students are the first in the family to progress to higher education. The aim is to work with more students from lower socio-economic groups and support their progression.

13. Can higher education reach its potential to transform society?

As argued in the introduction inequality is one of the major challenges facing the world in the 21st century. For any progress to be made in reducing it a collective effort from all the major forces in society is needed. No one sector can opt out. Especially one as important as higher education. This study has shown that examples of universities, governments and other organisations endeavouring to make higher education more equitable exist. But that this will not be enough to prevent equitable access and success going backwards and making the achievement of the UNESCO goal of equal access by 2030 highly unlikely.

It could be justifiably argued that up to recent times what could be done to make higher education participation more equitable wasn't altogether clear. To be sure, there is still a huge gap in the evidence of what policies and practices are the most effective in supporting those from minority or disadvantaged majority backgrounds. But the growing amount of review and analysis of global activities in this area is now creating an understanding of the options available to governments and universities. It is not lack of knowledge that is holding back the proliferation and development of this work – it is commitment. Hence, the three calls to action above.

This study has shown that examples of universities, governments and other organisations endeavouring to make higher education more equitable exist. In the aftermath of the pandemic if higher education is to reach its full potential in shaping the world of the 21st century then it must place much greater focus on who participates in it and their success when they enter.



Appendix 1

Focus Group Discussion Aide memoire

Topic 1: Examining the impact of the pandemic

Question: How did the pandemic affect your most vulnerable/minority learners?

Probes: Follow up areas include asking about admissions, delivery of learning, financial and pastoral impacts

Topic 2: University work on equitable access/success

Question: How are you prioritising equitable access/success in your university?

Probes: Follow up areas include asking about financial investment, practical outreach/student support activities

Question: Have new activities emerged/emerging which can make HE access and success more equitable?

Topic 3: Impact of policy

Question: What are policymakers doing to support this agenda and what more needs to be done if access and success in higher education is to be more equitable by 2030?

Probes: Follow up areas include asking about national strategies for higher education and their relationship to equitable access/success, existence of national targets

Topic 4: Moving forward

Question: What is the role of international collaboration here?

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