Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

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Abstract
Around the world, many young people face challenging circumstances beyond their own control, due to discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, socioeconomic background, or other attributes, which drastically affect their opportunities to access higher education and graduate successfully. This article reviews the scope of disparities, assesses the equity impact of COVID-19, and outlines the main elements of effective national- and institutional-level equity promotion policies.

Despite the spectacular expansion that has occurred in many parts of the planet in the past 60 years, severe disparities persist in higher education. A disproportionately high share of students enrolled in higher education still comes from wealthier segments of society. Structural inequality and disparities exist across groups and societies, often due to historical discriminatory norms around economic class, gender, minority status based on ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural characteristics, and disabilities. Even when they gain access, students from underrepresented and traditionally excluded groups tend to have lower completion rates. They are often tracked into less prestigious higher education institutions and face reduced, lower-quality labor market opportunities as a result.

Drivers of Inequality

Around the world, many children face challenging circumstances beyond their own control—due to discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, socioeconomic background, or other attributes, which drastically affect their opportunities to go to school, stay in school, and complete secondary education. At the tertiary level, young people encounter additional barriers reflecting the direct opportunity cost of studying, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, and lack of access to information about labor market prospects. The need to achieve greater equity and inclusion in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative, as reflected in target 4.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Scope of Disparities?

Efforts to measure equity in higher education assume that the proportion of target equity groups should be equal to their share in the general population. In practice, however, the choice of indicators to measure disparities in higher education has been heavily influenced by the availability of data to analyze the situation of each equity group. Household surveys available for 64 countries reveal large gaps in participation rates among income groups across all levels of enrollment, from the poorest nations with the lowest participation rates to countries with much higher average participation rates.

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

Less data is available to assess differences in access to higher education across ethnic, racial, or religious minorities. Where it exists, data reveals vast disparities. For instance, in South Africa, despite the increase in overall enrollment in higher education, less than one in five Black South Africans access it, compared to 55 percent among whites. Similarly, in Vietnam, enrollment rates of the dominant Kinh/Hoa group are four times higher than those of ethnic minorities living in remote parts of the country. Among the world's more than 82 million refugees, the UNHCR estimates that only around 5 percent of the relevant age cohort have access to tertiary education, whereas comparative enrollment figures for primary and secondary education are 68 percent and 34 percent, respectively.

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People with disabilities, often called the "invisible minority," are also widely underrepresented in higher education. In Thailand, for example, less than 1 percent of youths with disabilities have access to higher education. In South Africa, they represent 0.6 percent of the total student enrollment, compared to an estimated disability prevalence of 3.5 percent within the corresponding age group.

Furthermore, it is important to note high degrees of intersection among these dimensions as disparities usually have an overlapping and cumulative effect across equity groups. Gender discrimination tends to impact girls from low-income groups more prominently. For example, in Peru and Mexico, where female enrollment is lower than male enrollment—contrary to the general trend in Latin America—the difference between low-income and high-income students is striking. In Peru, the enrollment rates of girls from the poorest and richest groups are 13.3 and 24.9 percent, respectively; in Mexico, they are 9.1 percent and 37.4 percent. Several studies have documented how poverty, ethnicity, and rurality are also closely linked in North and South America, as well as in Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, poverty amplifies the obstacles encountered by people with disabilities, girls with disabilities having a lower probability of entering higher education or completing a degree than boys with disabilities.

Impact of COVID-19

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

Equity Promotion Policies

The higher education ecosystem includes the following key elements specifically influencing the equity situation and results in any country: admission policies; pathways and bridges; quality assurance framework; government subsidies for institutions and students; tuition fees; and financial aid. The state can define policies and measures to improve equity in higher education along all these dimensions.

Within higher education institutions, several measures can help boost the access and success of students from various equity groups: outreach activities; targeted admission policies; retention programs; and additional financial aid.

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

Seventy years ago, Tawney wrote about equality of opportunity as being "the impertinent courtesy of an invitation offered to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances will prevent them from accepting it." Today, equity in access and success at the higher education level cannot be regarded anymore as a luxury or an afterthought. The need to achieve greater inclusion in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative. Higher education systems in which opportunities are equally distributed are the basis for sustainable development and the construction of fair and democratic societies. ◢

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