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International Institute
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in Latin America and
the Caribbean

The right to higher education:

A social justice perspective

CONTENTS

Executive Summary

The right to education is a fundamental right for people and is integral to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Since the right to education was first advanced at the international level in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global landscape has changed immensely. At the same time, higher education has progressed from being a pursuit for the elite in selected countries to being an integral part of the education continuum, accessed by at least half of the population in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, the right to higher education (RTHE) as part of the evolving landscape of the right to education has received less attention than education at other levels.

This conceptual paper advocates for the RTHE by developing a framework that takes a social justice perspective on this issue. Using a social justice lens, it highlights the unfair distribution of and lack of equitable access to higher education and the need for systems and institutions of higher education to change to accommodate students' diverse backgrounds and needs. The RTHE social justice framework takes a systemic and structural approach to the issues facing students in higher education today. It embraces four inter-related dimensions: the 5As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality. Under the social justice lens, each dimension attracts important considerations relating to the RTHE.

The next step is to apply the social justice framework to the processes in higher education that relate to the RTHE. This starts even before a student reaches higher education when the emphasis is on access: access to quality school education that equips people well for higher education, and fair access to relevant and good quality higher education. Once in higher education, the emphasis is on success, which, although an evidently subjective term, engages constructively with how to support students to fully participate, be well, and engage in good quality and relevant higher education provision. Institutional policies and administrative arrangements intersect in both processes of access and success, and it is there where the RTHE is engendered, in the perennial question of how to finance higher education, and how these processes translate across borders, considering human movement as a result of forced and voluntary migration, and the international recognition of qualifications.

The conceptual paper identifies three areas of growing concern – how to rethink 'merit', how to fund higher education, and how to assure students' rights in a global context – and discusses their implications for future considerations on the RTHE. These are concerns because they have no obvious solutions and because current global circumstances seem to be exacerbating them. Overall, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the RTHE as an integral component of the evolving right to lifelong education, setting the context that will fuel continued research and action so that the right to higher education is truly a right enjoyed by all throughout life.

This conceptual paper is linked to the RTHE project launched by UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) in 2021 within the framework of UNESCO's overall efforts to enhance the right to education at all levels.

1 Introduction

Since the right to education was first advanced at the international level in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global landscape has changed immensely, with important consequences for education (UNESCO, 2000, 2022). Access to education has dramatically increased, rates of illiteracy have plummeted, and opportunities to embark on lifelong learning have greatly expanded as people are living longer and the nature of work is shifting. Education is no longer offered only by states but by a range of providers including not-for-profit and commercial organizations. Rapid technological change since the latter part of the twentieth century means that technology 'has become an intrinsic part of our day-to-day existence' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 1), including in education.

In this context of the evolving right to education, higher education has progressed from being a pursuit for the elite in selected countries to being an integral part of the education continuum, accessed by half or more of the population in many parts of the world. The very existence of higher education, especially in countries that had previously been subject to colonial domination, and its popularization, were factors not envisaged at the time that the Universal Declaration came into effect (UNESCO, 2000). Furthermore, current political, social, and economic trends together with global challenges continue to question the concept of higher education – who it is for, how it should be offered, and who takes responsibility for it.

Objective and contents

Taking these considerations into account, the objective of this conceptual paper is to advocate for the right to higher education (RTHE) as part of the evolving right to education. To this end, the RTHE is examined within a social justice framework. This new approach to the issues facing students in higher education today is both systemic and structural. This conceptual paper forms part of a project dedicated to the RTHE, launched by UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) in 2021, and is within the framework of UNESCO's overall efforts to enhance the right to education at all levels.

Section 2 of the conceptual paper identifies the links between higher education and social justice. It provides a four-dimensional framework for examining the right to higher education (RTHE) using a social justice lens. The four dimensions – the 5 As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality – focus on how systems and structures need to change so that **students, who are at the center of higher education,** have better opportunities to access higher education and better chances of succeeding after they enroll.

The framework developed in section 2 is then applied to those processes relating to higher education that are relevant when considering the RTHE. These commence even before a student reaches higher education when the emphasis is on **access**: access to quality school education that equips people well for higher education, and then fair access to relevant and good quality higher education. These issues are taken up in **section 3** on access to higher education and **section 4** on the need to rethink merit.

Once in higher education, the next stage can be called **success**, which, although an evidently subjective term, can be constructive in terms of supporting students to fully participate, be well, and engage in good quality and relevant higher education provision. **Section 5** of the conceptual paper addresses the issue of student success and **section 6** examines the quality and relevance of the provision.

There are three other issues which intersect with both processes of access and success: the institu-

tional policies and administrative arrangements which engender the RTHE, addressed in **section 7**; how to finance higher education, discussed in **section 8**; and how these processes translate across borders, considering human movement resulting from forced and voluntary migration, and including the international recognition of qualifications, which are examined in **section 9**.

The final section of the paper compiles the key findings from the report and highlights three areas for future consideration to develop the RTHE as an integral part of the evolving right to education.

The evolving right to education

The right to education is a fundamental right of people and is integral to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). UNESCO has been engaged in actions to broaden the right to education at all levels and considers education to be key to the full participation of all children and adults in the life of communities. For this reason, it is essential for education to be freely accessible and guaranteed for all.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966, emphasizes that 'Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education' (Article 13(2)(c)). The Convention against Discrimination in Education (Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960) establishes the obligation of the State to eliminate any form of discrimination in the field of education and to promote equal opportunities (The Abidjan Principles' Drafting Committee, 2019; UNESCO, 2015, p. 7). Likewise, SDG 4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals speaks to Quality Education and promotes lifelong learning which implies extending and recognizing the right to higher education for all throughout

their lives. Indeed, access to higher education is a necessary condition to fulfil all SDGs (UNESCO IESALC, 2020b). The Abidjan Principles establish that States must respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education of everyone, commit to providing public education, and to regulating the participation of the private sector in education (The Abidjan Principles' Drafting Committee, 2019). This clearly follows UNESCO's 'no one left behind' policy (UNESCO, 2015, p. 7).

The right to higher education as part of the right to education and lifelong learning

Global expansion and increased demand for higher education has also been influenced by the increased recognition of higher education as a human right and the consequent advocacy of its importance (UNESCO IESALC, 2020). UNESCO's commitment to the right to education extends to all levels of education because the right to education is the right to lifelong learning. This is an agenda that has received renewed attention with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and as higher education institutions increasingly position themselves as spaces for lifelong learning (Atchoarena, 2021).

Nevertheless, the **right to higher education** as part of this right has received less attention in the past, despite higher education's value at multiple levels. For example, at an instrumental level, higher education enhances individual status through knowledge and diplomas, increased political awareness, the ability to function as an informed or active citizen, the enjoyment of the experience of studying at a higher level, and the value of interaction with other students and staff or making friends (McCowan, 2012). At an intrinsic level, higher education enables the acquisition of knowledge, supports deep enquiry, and critical reflection (McCowan, 2012).

Higher education is both a public good and a common good. As a public good, higher education should be available to all and access to it should not be impeded. This is reflected at the national level within existing documents such as legislation, national education plans and strategies that emphasize quality assurance, non-discrimination, universal access, and inclusion as key components of the right to higher education.[1] As a common good, higher education 'promotes the development of instruments of participatory democracy and places greater emphasis on networks of solidarity among citizens and groups to overcome the utilitarian and individualistic approaches that the commercialization of higher education has brought in the last decades' (UNESCO IESALC, 2022d, para. 6).

Every right in itself is unlimited and enduring in nature, so the right to education should not have any restriction or expiry time. For this reason, access to lifelong education must also always be guaranteed and, being a stage in the lifelong educational journey, higher education should also be considered a right that must be guaranteed to everyone. This is why UNESCO considers that 'raising awareness on the right to higher education as a social justice imperative is not only timely, but also crucial in respect of the principles and obligations that relate to this level.'[2]

A social justice approach

Social justice is a broad spectrum, covering many major social issues such as wealth, land, property, the environment, race and gender. The pursuit of social justice can be seen as the search for a fair (not necessarily equal) distribution of what is beneficial and valued in a society. Such

benefits are not only in the form of material advantages but include non-material targets as well, for example, access to possibilities for extending 'people's democratic ability to shape their lives' through real choices (Gindin, 2002, p. 1). Thus, social justice has associations with notions of human and socio-economic rights, social inclusion, equity and access to resources and capabilities for human wellbeing (Singh, 2011).

Social justice work addresses inequality and oppression in all its nuances, including but not limited to racism and xenophobia, classism and economic discrimination, sexism and misogyny, homophobia, religious and political persecution, the abuse of civil liberties, and ableism (Rankin et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2018). When these factors determine what kind of an education an individual can receive, that is an example of social injustice. Social justice in education refers to a commitment to challenging social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individuals arising from any differential distribution of power, resources, and privileges (Mills School of Education, 2019). At the compulsory levels – that is, primary and secondary education – the social justice lens is more visible as education at these levels is a right[3] and its non-fulfillment has to do directly with socio-economic barriers that do not depend on choice.

By examining the current higher education landscape using a social justice lens, its unfair distribution and inequitable access based on geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds come to the fore. A social justice perspective examines the very structure of higher education itself and what the systems and institutions of higher education need to change to accommo-

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1 Examples are lodged in the UNESCO Right to Education Observatory at https://en.unesco.org/themes/right-to-education/database and discussed in the UNESCO policy paper, *The Right to Higher Education: Unpacking the International Normative Framework in Light of Current Trends and Challenges.*

2 https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/the-right-to-higher-education/

3   According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26: 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'

date students' diverse backgrounds and needs. This fundamentally changes the focus from previously dominant approaches that have tended to assume that individual students need to be 'fixed' to fit in with the dominant (typically Eurocentric) conception of higher education.

The urgency of the right to higher education for a more socially just post-pandemic world

The evolving COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted higher education in myriad ways and in particular, it has laid bare longstanding issues of social justice and exposed a digital divide (Sabzalieva et al., 2021). Although every group and sector has felt the effects, these impacts have varied widely and had the greatest impact on minoritized communities (Hottenstein et al., 2021). The intersection of the pandemic and equity challenges have seriously impacted students and institutions (Kelly, 2021).

Some institutions are declaring fiscal crisis and initiating funding reforms to close financial gaps in an effort to survive, further exacerbating pressures on families and young people who are seeking post-secondary educational achievement as their road to success. These additional challenges have put first-generation students, immigrants and other vulnerable populations at risk of unequal educational opportunities and professional development (Taner, 2021). In this context, it is particularly relevant to defend the right to higher education so that economic responses to the crisis are not implemented at the expense of students' wellbeing.

In addition, the move to deliver higher education purely online has been seen as a violation of the principle of equality and equal opportunity that the right to higher education defends. Not all students have personal computers, tablets, smartphones, or reliable internet access (Sawa-

hel, 2020), which poses significant barriers to the exercise of the right to higher education as it impacts learning and the successful completion of studies. With a changing landscape, the sector now faces a critical need for transformation that ought to promote social justice principles by encompassing inclusivity, equitability, accessibility, and connectivity (Fraser-Moleketi, 2021).

On the other hand, the pandemic has shown that higher education is key to developing solutions and helping society to envision a fairer world. In particular, higher education has had a key role in knowledge production, and it has actively engaged in institutional responsibility to advance social justice for learners and their communities (Bergan et al., 2021). From creating awareness about rising inequalities, to direct engagement with communities, public and private stakeholders, the importance of higher education has become even more evident during the pandemic. Despite the barriers higher education has faced, especially regarding teaching and learning, global examples of resilience, resistance, and innovation show how the RTHE is an imperative to support the work and advocacy for a just society in the years to come.

2 A social justice perspective on the right to higher education

This section explains the features of a social justice lens on higher education, discussing four perspectives that inform the social justice approach to the RTHE taken in this study. The components are the 5 As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality. These perspectives are summarized at the end of this section and then applied to examine different aspects of the RTHE in the following sections.

Features of a social justice lens on higher education

Higher education and social justice can be understood in two ways: the contribution of higher education to social fairness and the efforts towards equitable student access (Singh, 2011). In terms of the former, the distribution of higher education should be fair and based on the individual and societal benefits and values it produces once attained. Individual benefits include social mobility, higher income compared to holders of lower qualifications, and better health. Social benefits are wide-ranging and may mean, inter alia, less crime, greater democratic participation, heightened climate awareness.

Although there are many other definitions of social justice, they tend to address access (e.g., to justice, opportunities, resources) and the adoption of a pedagogical approach that responds to diversity (Ross, 2014). As such, 'widening access to and participation in higher education is primarily a social justice project' (Burke, 2012, p. 177) which has direct implications for contending issues of inequality, exclusion, institutionalized subordination and violation of rights (Burke, 2012). Similarly, for Singh (2011), social justice in higher education is not just about widening participation. Access has to take on board new obstacles to substantial and comprehensive inclusion. It is just one aspect of what

comprises social justice. In higher education, this also implies creating teaching and learning environments that support all students equitably (McPhail, 2021).

Social justice in higher education is not about economic gains, skill enhancement, and development. It is rather about critical reflexivity and developing inclusive, equitable, and ethical practices in an inclusive, participatory, redistributive, and transformative framework (Burke, 2012). It is also about the contributions of higher education to societal progress (Singh, 2011). Inclusion has been an important consideration in UNESCO's work on higher education and is understood as 'a process that helps overcome whatever obstacles limit the presence, participation or achievement of students at all levels' (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020, p. 2). Other UNESCO studies have found that access and inclusion in higher education continue to be hindered by structural inequality, financing, curriculum, geography, composition of teaching personnel, and wider social and cultural aspects of higher education institutions (HEIs) (UNESCO, 2018).

RTHE social justice framework

The social justice framework developed in this conceptual paper allows for the analysis of the RTHE from a new social justice perspective. The framework combines four factors that together bring a different dimension to the framework: the 5 As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality. The framework is summarized visually at the end of the section.

The 5 As framework (Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, Adaptability, Accountability)

The 4 As framework, developed by the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, approaches the right to education in an actionable way. It is grounded in the idea that

education can only become a meaningful right – instead of a 'quasi-right'[4] - if governments can act on it. Thus, its four dimensions – availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability – can be understood as fundamental government responsibilities that ought to be assessed for the full realization of education as a human right (Tomaševski, 2001). In this way, governments are obliged not only to recognize but to promote and to protect the right to education for all people.

Notwithstanding the importance of its contribution, previous applications of the 4 As framework demonstrated the need for proper accountability measures so that commitments and progress are sustained over time, and that it evolves as new challenges arise (Hajrullai & Saliu, 2016; Mutswanga & Chataika, 2016). In this line, UNESCO has further acknowledged the need for and importance of accountability by pointing to its inclusion as a fifth dimension completing the 5 As framework (UNESCO, 2020b).

The five dimensions can be summarized as follows:

- Availability: educational institutions must have infrastructure, trained teachers, teaching materials, be appropriately funded and affordable to all.

- Accessibility: educational institutions must be accessible to everyone, and affirmative efforts made to support equity deserving groups.

- Acceptability: educational institutions must offer education that is acceptable in form and content; institutions must be non-discriminatory, offer quality education, and be culturally appropriate.

- Adaptability: educational institutions must be flexible, responding always to the needs of students. They adapt to local contexts and respond to rising inequalities.

- Accountability: educational institutions must be transparent and responsible for each action and public policy undertaken.

Although the framework has been instrumental to secure the right to children's education at compulsory levels and widely agreed upon internationally (Barros & Biasin, 2019), it is also relevant for the right to higher education, from a social justice perspective.

The framework supports calls to make higher education fairer and to dismantle systemic barriers that have excluded and oppressed people – particularly those from equity deserving groups. By adopting this framework, the right to higher education can be assessed to the extent each dimension has been materialized.

Inclusive excellence

The second dimension for understanding social justice in higher education is the notion of fostering **inclusive excellence**. This is the purposeful deployment of inclusive practices toward multiple student identity groups (Salazar et al., 2010). The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) has developed a framework for an Inclusive Excellence model that incorporates diversity, inclusion, equity and equity-mindedness. The development of these characteristics will support the emergence of equity-minded practitioners who will be able to achieve bigger goals, lead a transformational change for student communities, engage with society, and improve institutional operations (Clayton-Pedersen et al., n.d.).

The benefits of inclusive excellence include increased student academic outcomes, diversity, and civic outcomes. Students feel welcome and campuses are inclusive (Sabharwal & Malish, 2017). Improved academic outcomes are evi-

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4 Tomaševski (2001) uses this term to refer to rights that, although are widely recognized as such within national legislations, governments have limited tools to protect and guarantee that right for their citizens.

denced in higher educational aspirations, motivation, and self-confidence, heightened creativity and innovation, and stronger critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Milem, 2003). Inclusive excellence positively affects diversity outcomes such as experiences with diversity, cultural awareness, and commitment to issues of equity (Milem, 2003). Finally, inclusive excellence leads to a higher level of civic engagement and a more informed citizen.

This dimension is important due to its focus not on students but rather on the other stakeholders working in higher education. It adds value to the social justice framework by emphasizing the specific roles that leaders, staff and institutional policies should play in the right to higher education. This aligns to the need not to 'fix' individual students but to address the systemic barriers that hinder the enjoyment of the RTHE.

Equity deserving groups

It has become common to refer to marginalized student groups in higher education as 'equity seeking'. While this phrase makes some headway into identifying the systemic barriers in higher education, the emphasis remains on those under-served students to strive for equity and inclusion and it therefore remains problematic in the context of this conceptual paper's social justice approach. In response, this paper takes up the proposal to 'start by thinking of, and relating to, those who are marginalized or are constrained by existing structures and practices as '**equity deserving groups**' and not 'equity seeking groups' – a concept which, while well-intentioned, perpetuates a perception of these groups as interlopers.' (Tettey, 2019).

The purpose of including this dimension in the framework is two-fold. First, it ensures that specific attention is paid to groups of students in higher education who have been overlooked and/or poorly treated in the system. Without this focus and the actions that would relate to it, it would not be possible to claim that the RTHE truly is a right. The second reason is the choice to recognize and call these groups equity deserving, not seeking, for the reasons mentioned above.

Equity deserving groups in higher education have been disproportionally impacted by higher education policies and structures that discriminate against them in visible and less visible forms, with lasting consequences in their academic, personal, and professional lives. There is no common definition of equity deserving groups in higher education (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021) and it is important to recall that the local context also influences who is under-represented or marginalized by higher education. With that in mind, it is nevertheless possible to identify the following equity deserving groups who are prevalent in most, if not all, societies:

Racialized people: This refers to people who have been negatively impacted by racism, that is, by the discriminatory ideology and regimes of power that consider some 'races' as 'superior' to others (Mato, 2020; UNESCO IESALC, 2020b). Although who is considered to be a racialized person is highly context specific, historically it has included Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and other people of color. Structural racism has been embedded in HEIs from their origins and throughout their role in the history of colonization and slavery (Museus et al., 2015) and it continues to be reproduced in many forms (UNESCO IESALC, 2022).

Indigenous peoples[5] and minorities: Indigenous peoples have been arbitrarily racialized and have historically faced injustices derived from colonization of their communities and dispossession from their lands, as well as various forms

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5 The term 'peoples' is used to acknowledge the diversity of different Indigenous communities, their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies.

of discrimination including those based on language, culture and heritage, etc. Such discrimination also applies to other minority groups. These have resulted in systematic exclusion from higher education, under-representation, and a disregard of their cosmologies within higher education curricula, teaching methodologies, and governance (Brayboy et al., 2015; Curtis, 2009). As an equity deserving group, and in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), higher education should respect Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, to non-discrimination, and to receive culturally appropriate education.

People with limited economic means: The economic background of students and their families is one of the determinants of the transition and success of students in higher education. Although many countries have made significant progress to make higher education more affordable or free, people with limited economic means continue to face barriers to access. The ongoing processes of privatization and marketization of higher education are expected to increase income inequality, decrease social mobility, and hinder people's right to access quality education (Cerro Santamaría, 2020; Velayutham, 2021). Beyond the cost of accessing higher education, students with low-income backgrounds have other economic burdens that can impact their overall experiences in higher education as well as their performance. For example, the lack of access to adequate food, housing and technology (especially in the context of COVID-19) negatively impacts students' retention and graduation (Patel & Field, 2020).

Persons with disabilities: There are multiple barriers preventing persons with disabilities from full participation and success in higher education. Major obstacles include lower per-

formance expectations, lack of awareness and discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities from the rest of the higher education community including students, faculty, and staff (Barida et al., 2020; Hanafin et al., 2007). The physical design of HEIs may not be inclusive of diverse needs, creating technical and other barriers (Gómez & Fernández, 2018). Furthermore, assessment practices such as written examinations with a rigid time frame can discriminate against neurodiverse people with disabilities who learn and express their understanding differently (Hanafin el al., 2007). It is important to understand that there is no 'one-fits-all' response as disabilities affect the individual in different ways, which requires flexibility and constant evaluation (Mestre-Escrivá, 2022).

Women: Women, historically, especially women of color or from poor backgrounds, had a very limited right to higher education. Nowadays, women make up a slightly larger share (53%) of graduates with Bachelor's and Master's degrees, but at the doctoral level, the share of female graduates drops to 44% (UNESCO IESALC, 2021a). There are also differences among regions; special attention should be given to Sub-Saharan Africa, where 73 female students are enrolled for every 100 males (UNESCO IESALC, 2021a). Women's right to higher education is also limited by subject; for example, there are fewer females enrolled in STEM careers due to cultural norms and stereotypes (UNESCO IESALC, 2021a).

LGBTQ+ persons[6]: LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff are more likely to experience harassment and hostile environments than their cis-gender or heterosexual peers, negatively impacting their interpersonal, academic, and professional performance (Rankin et al., 2010; Garvey et al., 2015). Although there is limited data on LGBTQ+ persons in higher education, available

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6 This report uses the acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer and others) to recognize the need for inclusivity and the very broad spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations, while also noting the existence of other acceptable terms.

studies show that negative perceptions, lack of monitoring and lack of support systems are associated with poorer performance and feelings of discrimination against LGBTQ+ students (Rankin et al., 2010; Grimwood, 2016). Along this line, supporting the right to higher education for LGBTQ+ persons requires policies to ensure campus safety and inclusivity. Campuses that are not safe or do not respect LGBTQ+ identities may limit the access and retention of students who consider themselves within those categories (Gate & Ward, 2017).

Forcibly displaced people (FDP): FDP[7], including refugees, internally displaced people (IDP) and asylum seekers, are put in that situation due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, climate-driven events or other seriously disturbing events affecting the public order. Only 5% of refugee youth is enrolled in higher education and even fewer complete their studies (UNHCR, n.d.-a). Considering that the refugee population in the world is increasing, this is a crucial element to consider in policies that secure the right to higher education in the present and the future. However, it is not just refugees, internally displaced people and most migrants are also vulnerable, undermining their right to higher education.

People from remote and/or rural locations: Access to higher education in terms of travel distance can be a very real issue for some, particularly those who live in remote or rural areas (Mullen, 2010). Most HEIs are located in urban areas, an evident barrier to access, notably for those students who reside in rural areas, with some studies suggesting that distance has a negative association with university enrollment (Museus et al., 2015; Spiess & Wrohlich, 2010; White & Lee, 2020). The mobility cost to attend higher education, merged with other factors such as race, ethnicity, income, and lack of access to technology, are barriers to accessing higher education for students in remote and/

or rural communities (Kuh et al., 2006; Spiess & Wrohlich, 2010). These barriers have amplified due to the pandemic (Trahar et al., 2020).

Intersectionality

More than 30 years ago, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality is a lens for 'seeing the way in which various forms of inequality operate together and exacerbate each other' (Steinmetz, 2020, para. 4); it is not just the sum of inequalities. Intersections explain power relations perpetuated by privileged groups in an institution or context; marginalized individuals along multiple identities, on the other hand, often carry less power (Chan et al., 2017). In higher education, the most frequent identity vector used in combination with others is gender, followed by race and later by social class and sexuality (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

This dimension has been added to the framework to recognize the different intersections that exist in different contexts and to underpin the necessity of planning and taking actions that account for and seek to overcome intersections of inequality in higher education.

Social justice framework on the RTHE

The four inter-related perspectives discussed in this section – the 5As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality – each help to bring out important considerations when applying a social justice lens on the RTHE. As shown in figure 1, when connected together, these four perspectives create a new framework through which to view the RTHE.

The 5 As framework focuses on the human rights obligations of all states to make education avail-

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7 A full definition can be found at https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/definition/

able, accessible, acceptable, adaptable, and accountable. These principles connect to broader rights frameworks, setting the macro-level environment in which the right to higher education can exist. Inclusive excellence, on the other hand, gives HEIs the impetus to make purposeful changes that have a positive impact on student achievement and wellbeing by focusing on the actions that need to be taken by leaders and staff and through institutional policies. This adds an institutional dimension to the framework. Within the broader environment of the 5 As framework and the institutional level dimension of inclusive excellence, the dimension of equity deserving groups adds a focus on the students who are at the center of all considerations of the right to higher education. The use of the term 'equity deserving groups' shifts the focus away from the student being at a deficit and towards the need of higher education systems and underpinning societal structures to change.

Finally, the dimension of intersectionality ensures that equity deserving groups are not considered in silos but rather in their holistic complexity.

In the following sections, the framework is applied to the processes in higher education that connect with the RTHE. In practical terms, this means that the ideas and perspectives put forward in the framework underpin the content and emphasis placed on different topics connecting to the RTHE. In most cases, aspects of all four dimensions of the framework are relevant as, for example, is the case of the section on access to higher education. In some cases, certain dimensions of the framework are relied on more heavily to inform the content, such as the section on institutional policies and administration which has a more obvious link with the dimension of inclusive excellence.

Figure 1: **Social justice framework on the right to higher education**
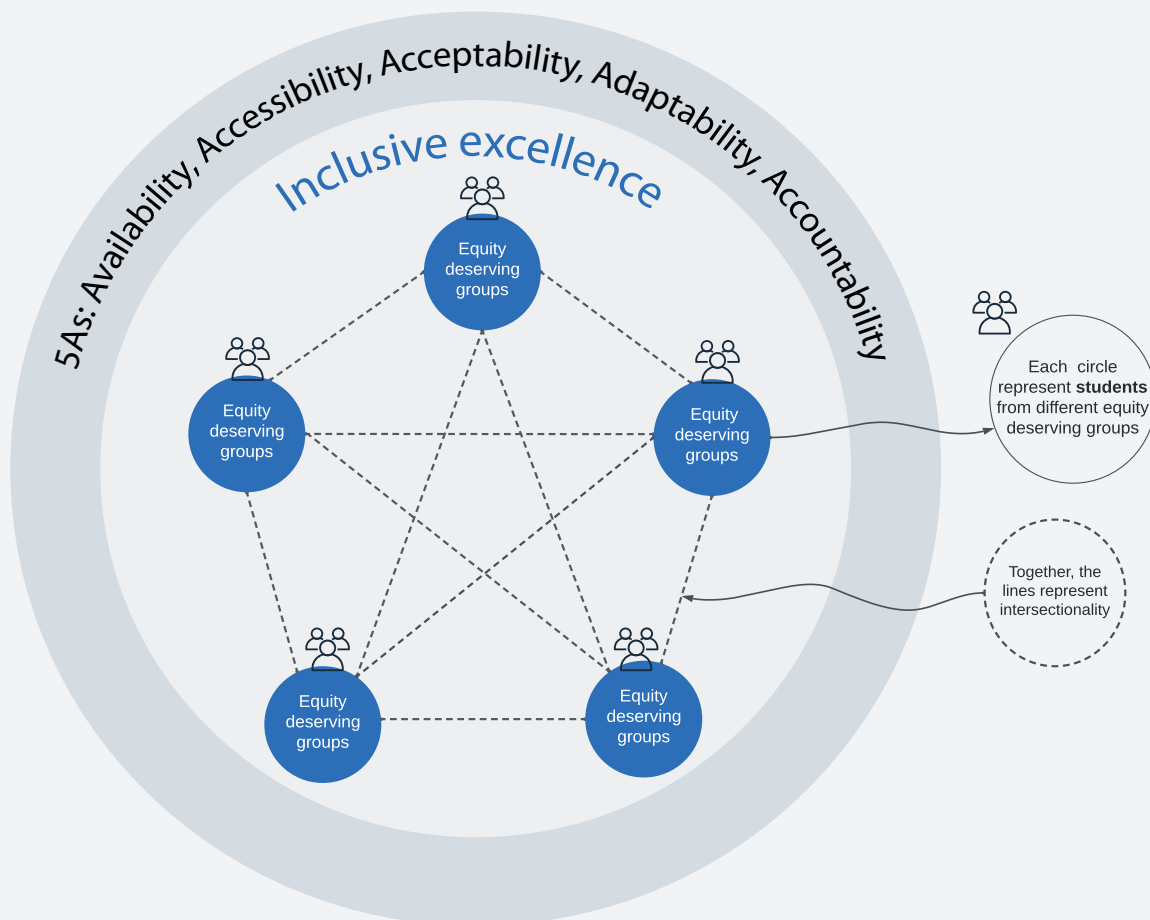
Source: UNESCO IESALC

3 Access to higher education

This section discusses the inequality of access to higher education by demographic and socioeconomic factors which have their roots in lower levels of schooling. It also sheds light on how these inequalities have been exacerbated and made more apparent by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The narrowing education pipeline

Given that higher education builds on early childhood, primary and secondary education, the unequal distribution of opportunities affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds must be recognized and taken into account. As has been noted, 'higher education systems will only improve inclusion if they adopt a structural approach, ensuring a fair distribution of opportunities from the first educational levels and beyond' (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020, p. 6).

Social, economic, and cultural factors can impact participation in early childhood care and education (ECCE), especially when determined by gender norms (UNESCO, 2021c). SDG Target 4.2 raises the importance of ensuring at least one year of universal quality pre-primary education, by making it free and compulsory. For example, 'among low- and middle-income countries, where fewer than two in three children attend organized learning one year before the official primary entry age, the average participation gap between the richest and the poorest 20% is 48 percentage points' (UNESCO, 2021c, p. 3). In Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, and Pakistan the participation gap in pre-primary education between the richest and the poorest quintiles exceeds 60%, while it reaches the highest level in North Macedonia, where this gap is of 79% for 2019 (UNESCO, 2021c).

Ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees have been seen to have a lower propensity to partic-

ipate in early childhood education. At the same time, son-preference in some cultures leads to families investing less in early education for girls (Wang, 2005). Early childhood education has been considered by some as a great equalizer to prevent intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion (Morabito et al., 2013). Given that most children's cognitive, social and emotional development happens at this stage, this suggests that a large number of children from these excluded groups cannot benefit from this development, influencing lifelong achievement, including education. An efficient strategy to reduce inequalities in early childhood education would require adequate public expenditure to ensure major expansion of high-quality funded (affordable) places available for all children across the socioeconomic spectrum (Japel & Friendly, 2018).

These inequalities at the earliest level of education are significant because they are replicated at higher levels of compulsory education. In terms of gender, of the 258.4 million out-of-school children, girls of primary school age are still more likely to be out-of-school compared to boys (UNESCO, 2019). While both out-of-school adolescent boys and girls face social and economic marginalization, out-of-school girls are at greater risk of early and forced marriage and adolescent childbearing which may affect their participation in higher levels of education (Bajracharya et al, 2019). Nonetheless, and paradoxically, women have been the main beneficiaries of the rapid increases in tertiary education enrollment, with a Gross Enrollment Ratio of 41% compared to 36% for men as of 2018 and they are still more likely to graduate than their male counterparts (UNESCO IESALC, 2021a).

Children from poor backgrounds often fail to progress to higher education because they drop out or underachieve throughout primary and secondary school (Ilie et al., 2021). System level policies such as strict attendance or zero

tolerance policies can have a negative impact on student motivation and engagement and may eventually lead to dropout and failure to progress to higher education. Policies that stream students into different pathways such as academic or vocational tracks may also reduce students' right to higher education. In addition, a school system that lacks teachers, infrastructure, and textbooks will almost certainly perform at lower levels (OECD, 2012). Research in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam shows that promising but poorer students 'fall away' during their school years, as challenges associated with their socio-economic circumstances gradually erode their potential (Ilie et al., 2021).

Mass expansion of access to higher education

For those students that make it through the narrowing education pipeline into higher education, recent trends in the expansion in higher education open greater opportunities to access higher education. Often referred to as massification, this large-scale expansion is one way in which States have sought to address inequitable access to higher education to include groups of people who do not have a tradition of higher education in their families (Tehmina N. Basit & Tomlison Sally, 2012). It reflects notions of equity and social justice, and the idea that if higher education is a public good, then no group should be excluded.

While the rationale for massification is increasing access, which in turn can lead to greater equity and equality (Gandhi, 2018), mass higher education does not automatically reduce social inequality and may in fact benefit those who are already socially advantaged (Brennan et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2016). The deflation of higher education credentials as a result of massification and the consequent intensified competition for admissions enlarges the class difference among

those entering higher education (Mok, 2016). Other challenges include inadequate physical infrastructure, lack of adequate staffing, poor educational quality, graduate unemployment (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Mohamedbhai, 2014) and more importantly, the continued reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities not addressed at the lower levels of education (Kamanzi et al., 2021).

Global disparities in access to higher education

While massification has increased global access to higher education, such evidence also needs to be assessed within particular national contexts, taking account of the wide variation in starting points for higher education access and whether it has benefitted disadvantaged groups. For example, although access to higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa almost doubled between 2000 and 2018 (4% to 9%), its starting point is much lower compared to the increase in Europe and North America (55% to 77%), a 40% increase (UNESCO IESALC, 2020a).

First generation students

The massification of higher education also creates a new equity deserving group: first generation students (where neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree) who are more likely to come from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds than their most advantaged peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These students need continuous monitoring throughout their higher education to ensure that, more than accessing or enrolling into HEIs, they also complete and do not drop out or repeat.

Impact of COVID-19 on access to higher education

While COVID-19 disrupted higher education activities globally, its impact on enrollment

has varied by region and income level, with high-income countries and countries in Europe and North America better able to cope with the disruption through government funding and an increase in domestic enrollment while some low-middle and low-income countries experienced reductions in enrollment (UNESCO, 2021). The crisis has exacerbated pre-existing disparities at all educational levels by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning (United Nations, 2020).

The pandemic has also had a disproportionate impact on students from low-income countries as most of these countries lack the necessary infrastructure to support learning continuity, while the students are more likely to have poor digital skills and least access to hardware and connectivity required for distance learning solutions implemented during school closures (UNESCO, 2021a). In light of the pandemic, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may find it less likely to complete primary and secondary education than those from more privileged ones, with negative impacts on their access to higher education and reversing decade-long gains made through massification in higher education.

UNESCO (2020b) estimates that due to the COVID-19 crisis, 23.8 million children, adolescents and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary education) globally will be at risk of not returning to care centers, schools or universities, among which 10.9 million are primary and secondary education students. These numbers are in addition to the 258 million children and youth of primary and secondary school age who were already out-of-school prior to the crisis. These students risk losing out on becoming the higher education students of tomorrow.

Increasing access for equity deserving groups

Addressing inclusive access to higher education should be seen as the responsibility of all actors at all levels of education. Nonetheless, the State is ultimately responsible for guaranteeing inclusion in accessing higher education through providing an enabling environment of funding, supportive legislation and policies targeting equity deserving groups (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020). The State also has the power to hold HEIs responsible and accountable for implementing these frameworks. The wide range of strategies that address inequality of access range from state legislation to institutional policies. Funding which is targeted for disadvantaged students is also another mechanism promoting inclusion, as discussed in section 8.

As noted in this paper, improvements in higher education cannot be made in isolation from the reforms at lower levels of schooling. By working together with schools, HEIs can better understand the learning needs and trajectories of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the measures that can be taken to support them before completion and during their transition to higher education (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020). Some interventions that have had considerable success in facilitating the transition to higher education and increasing participation of disadvantaged students include providing information, counselling, and, or focused academic tutoring in upper secondary schools (Hervaut & Geven, 2019).

Governments can prevent school failure and reduce dropout by eliminating system level practices that hinder equity such as grade repetition; and providing targeted support to low performing disadvantaged schools – this can be through attracting, supporting and retaining high quality teachers, providing classroom materials and textbooks (OECD, 2012; Waslander et al., 2010).

Bringing higher education closer to potential beneficiaries through the creation of new HEIs in underserved regions, and/or offering subsidies or free transport to students from distant communities are other strategies that have been used to expand access (UNESCO IESALC, 2020a; White & Lee, 2020).

National legislative frameworks can be utilized to remove barriers to participation for equity deserving groups. These can come in the form of laws that establish institutional quotas for students from certain backgrounds or those which prohibit discrimination and encourage access for minorities and disadvantaged groups, for example, those targeting Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples in Brazil (UNESCO IESALC, 2020a). In England, HEIs are required to set out their plans to improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education (Office for Students, 2018). As a result, the number of equity deserving young people going into higher education has risen significantly in the 2010s, despite a large increase in tuition fees in 2012 (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018).

The criterion of equity should be mediated and harmonized into admission systems for them to be fair, offering equal opportunity for students with the potential to succeed from all groups and contexts (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020). Affirmative action policies to correct social injustices in terms of access may include numerical quotas for members of disadvantaged groups, or other preferential treatment, such as bonuses on admission scores, need-based scholarships or outreach programs (Schendel & McCowan, 2016).

4   The need to rethink merit

This section builds on the barriers to accessing higher education discussed in the previous section by taking a critical approach to the traditional understanding of merit, showing how it falls short from a social justice perspective for the right to higher education. It discusses how meritocracy privileges students who are already in a privileged position and explores ways in which the limitations of merit can be addressed.

Moving beyond 'winners and losers'

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit' (United Nations, 1948). Thus, selectiveness is structurally embedded in HEIs as prospective students must be assessed (e.g., on their prior academic performance) in order to determine admissions in contexts where placements are lower than student demand to engage in higher learning across the world. Although merit aims at protecting the right to higher education from discriminatory criteria by standardizing an 'objective' predictor of a student's ability (Klitgaard et al., 1979, p. 280), there is a growing debate on the negative, long-lasting consequences of creating 'winners and losers' through the current meritocratic process (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020; Soares, 2017). In moving away from a traditional, instrumental understanding of merit, it may be preferable to refer to the student's potential to succeed throughout their life in higher education (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020), including but not limited to the admission process.

Current conceptions of merit – mostly linked to indicators of academic merit – are always imperfect and socially constructed as there is not a single way to determine the 'best, right or most fair' criteria (Warikoo, 2019, p. 457). Studies of admission systems in the United States and the

UK show how these imperfect approximations of merit have tangible consequences as students perceive that racial and power dynamics impact their ability to succeed. This is due to two determining factors: first, equity deserving groups are less likely to meet the score of tests such as the SAT/ACT; and second, even when admitted, the score disparity between equity deserving groups and other students (e.g., between Black and white students) can create long-term prejudices (Soares, 2017; Warikoo, 2016). Thus, the academic merit criteria chosen by HEIs can set unachievable standards for equity deserving groups with the potential to succeed, systematically stigmatizing 'underperformers'. The selectiveness on the basis of academic merit perpetuates the inequalities that students face at lower levels of education.

Socio-economic factors

Those from wealthier backgrounds are still more likely to progress to higher education (Ilie et al., 2021). This situation is seen in countries such as the United States where only 31% of undergraduates are from low-income households (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019) and in England where access to higher education is much lower for those with Special Educational Needs and those eligible for free school meals[8] (Hubble et al., 2021). Therefore, when access to higher education becomes a function of financial capability rather than educational ability, higher education seemingly becomes a privilege and not a right.

Academic performance and educational attainment are influenced by the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and their families. Research on educational transitions shows how socioeconomically disadvantaged students are

less likely to enroll in higher levels of education because of barriers such as lack of resources, lack of support networks, poor quality of prior education, and urban vs. rural divides; furthermore, higher drop-out rates translates to lower enrollment rates at higher levels (Lucas, 2001; UNESCO IESALC, 2020a). This effect starts at the primary and secondary levels, or even before in early childhood education, and continues in the transition to higher education. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds have been shown to be less likely to access higher education because of debt aversion, poor cost-benefit analysis[9], lack of access to information about program options and admission processes, and other financial barriers (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Usher, 2017).

Quotas

In response to the issues with merit, some HEIs have taken measures to address systemic inequality and exclusion of equity deserving groups. The most notable strategies for admissions have been quotas based on the socioeconomic background of students and using contextual data to evaluate a student's capabilities beyond grades. In Indonesia, for example, the enrollment of the poor has remained low especially in the country's top public universities. In response, the government created the Equity and Access Policy in 2013, calling on all HEIs to enroll at least 20% of its students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021).

As more HEIs acknowledge the problem with the current assessment of students' qualifications, especially at the admission stage, policies on quotas have been implemented. Quotas have

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8 Eligibility for free school meals (for children in Year 3 of school and beyond) is used as a proxy for students from lower economic backgrounds as eligibility is based on family means-testing

9 The cost-benefit barrier occurs when an individual decides that the costs of attending university (including tuition and living expenses as well as opportunity costs of not working during the duration of the course) outweigh the returns to their education. The accuracy of a cost-benefit analysis depends on the correctness of the information used in the calculations of both costs and benefits.

worked as an affirmative action strategy to increase the diversity of students. Brazil and India are examples of countries with strong affirmative action policies at the national level. Brazil mandates a 50% quota for historically disadvantaged students entering the public higher education system. Quotas in Brazil have been linked with increased representation and graduation rates of disadvantaged students; these students come from public high schools and are often underperformers in the university entrance exams (Giardili, 2018). Similarly, positive results have been found regarding student quotas in India where quotas have increased the number of women in higher education, as well as more diversity of students from different castes (Bagde et al., 2016).

Standardized testing

Many countries have expanded access at public HEIs through standardized testing for all upper-high school students and lowering entry points for people from some backgrounds. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the introduction of a standardized National Scholarship Test (NTS) with quotas for students from remote areas resulted in important achievements for equitable access to higher education (Shamatov, 2014). Prior to the NTS, admission processes to higher education in Kyrgystan was perceived as highly competitive, questionable, and even unfair, and people from equity deserving groups were clearly underrepresented (Shamatov, 2014). With the adoption of the NTS, students from remote areas are between 60% and 70% of the total number of grant recipients; those same students had limited or no access at all to grants prior to the NTS (Shamatov, 2014).

Although standardized testing could reduce inequities in admission processes, it does not overcome the structural barriers that the narrowing education pipeline creates. Students from wealthier backgrounds can access mentoring and preparation courses for standardized testing making them more likely to get higher scores (Mani, 2018; Shamatov, 2014). Furthermore, standardized testing requires coordination and collaboration between governments and HEIs. In South Korea, the government considers the test more 'objective' and 'socially equitable' as it is adapted to test students from different socio-economic backgrounds resulting in high success rates (Mani, 2018, para. 98), however only 22.7% of HEIs considered this result only for admissions in 2018.

Use of contextual data

Implementing contextual data to assess a student's performance and capabilities is increasingly gaining relevance. This strategy incorporates non-academic aspects to determine admission decisions, parallel to academic scores (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016). In the United Kingdom, some universities collect and evaluate socioeconomic indicators to adjust their undergraduate admission criteria to the educational, geographical and individual contexts of applicants. For example, if a student comes from a disadvantaged background, the university uplifts the points given to a personal statement to balance out the lack of access to writing support and expertise that other students do have (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020, p. 759)

In Pakistan, universities are required to implement a quota system to include students with disabilities, which has been paired with contextual information to create alternative modes of entrance examinations that are appropriate to students' needs, as well as more flexibility in age limits and fee payments (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). In Georgia, an alternative admissions system for students from Armenian or Azerbaijani communities was established to account for the language barriers as traditional HEIs do not process admissions in their mother tongue (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

Quotas, contextual data, and alternative admission systems are targeted and limited to a reduced number of people. This is a step forward but is far from changing a system that continues to reward competition and selectiveness. Additionally, these measures have been criticized and leveled as subjective or favoritism rather than inclusion because the criteria are not universally agreed upon and because it could mean that 'less qualified' people would gain access (Njoku, 2016; Wallon et al., 2015). As previously noted, meritocracy does not account for the heterogenous backgrounds and barriers faced by equity deserving groups throughout their academic lives (Morgan et al., 2018).

Higher education pathway programs

A more holistic view of merit would accommodate the diverse starting points of prospective higher education students. To guarantee equitable access to higher education, this diversity of backgrounds and knowledges should be accounted for, especially in the search for sustained transitions between secondary and higher education. In this regard, many higher education programs have started to implement 'pathway programs' as alternative routes to the traditional meritocratic admission systems to access higher education (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). These programs aim at leveling the admissions playing field for students and providing them with the foundational knowledge to succeed once they transition to undergraduate courses.

Canada and New Zealand have implemented university pathway programs to facilitate access and inclusion of Indigenous and First Nation Peoples in higher education (Brett & Pitman, 2018). In Australia, such programs have worked as 'enablers' for equity deserving students from low-income families: transition through free or low-cost pathway programs were associated with higher first-year retention rates (McKay et

al., 2018). These and other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have also created programs for international students that cannot meet the language requirements but otherwise have the potential to succeed (Brett & Pitman, 2018). While these programs are not meant to guarantee admission, they can bridge some of the barriers students (especially those in the public school system) may face.

In a context where selectiveness and limited availability of resources challenge the right to higher education for all, states need to acknowledge higher education as a public good and a public responsibility (Nyborg, 2010). This includes prioritizing and protecting students' access and success. Based on the social justice framework used in this paper, higher education stakeholders need to rethink merit so that it responds primarily to the needs of the students they ought to serve.

5 Student success

This section goes beyond access to higher education and focuses on what happens once a student has enrolled in higher education. It discusses student success and how it relates to the RTHE from a social justice perspective[10]. The section also identifies the barriers to students' success and how these might be exacerbated by COVID-19. Finally, the section introduces three specific mechanisms that support student success in HEIs: academic and pastoral support, mechanisms targeted for first-year students, and digital literacy promotion.

Defining student success

Although access is a crucial element of the RTHE, it is also essential for HEIs and governments to pay attention to the entire higher education journey: once enrolled, students – especially from equity deserving groups – may face struggles that prevent them from finishing their studies or from having the best possible experience. This relates directly to the 5 As framework, especially to the component of adaptability. While many countries have implemented policies that have made it possible for equity deserving students to have greater access to higher education, opening the door is not enough. This is evident in graduation, dropout, throughput[11] and completion rates across the world, as the following examples show:

- In the United States, on average, 41% of undergraduates complete their studies in 4 years, which is higher than the same indicator for Black (21%), Hispanic (32%), Pacific Islander (31%), American Indian or Alaska Native (23%) undergraduates (NCES, 2019)

- In Israel, the dropout rates are as high as 50% for Arab students and Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Bamberger, 2019)

- In Argentina, although public universities are free for all with unrestricted access to any graduating high school student, the dropout rate is among the highest in the world (73%) (Bonasegna Kelly, 2013)

- In South Africa, the throughput rate for white students for a 4-year degree is higher (51%) than for African, colored, or Indian students (37-38%) both in the minimum time possible and three years after the minimum expected completion time (Essop, 2020).

- In India, a study of 72 public-funded institutes showed that scheduled tribes[12] have disproportionately higher dropout rates than any other group (Radhakrishnan et al., 2021).

Student success has many definitions and, therefore, many ways to be measured. A cross-national survey with more than 7,000 submissions from students, administrators, and faculty of HEIs, asked how important a particular factor is to measure student success (Canvas, 2020). Among the 22 options, the three most important were: work/career readiness, student education goals, and holistic development. In the open answers, success is defined holistically for both faculty and students, with output-related elements (e.g., obtaining a degree, knowledge, getting a job) and others more related to the process (e.g., satisfaction, mental well-being, student engagement) (Canvas, 2020). Similarly, other researchers have found that all elements are essential, defining student success as 'academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, at-

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10   Much of the literature on this topic in English is written about the United States, the United Kingdom, or other Western contexts. Nevertheless, the authors have endeavoured to bring in diverse contexts into this section as far as possible.

11   Throughput 'calculates the number of graduates in a given year expressed as a percentage of that year's total' and is 'skewed by fluctuations' in total s annually (CHE, 2013: 40) in The Changing Size and Shape of the Higher Education System in South Africa, 2005-2017

12   Officially designated groups of people and among the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India

tainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance' (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7).

Success is important from a social justice perspective because, as Singh (2011) stated, access to higher education is accompanied by a new set of obstacles; inclusion does not stop there. Having a social justice perspective in higher education allows for spaces where marginalized points of view are considered and addressed. Finally, from a social justice perspective, success in terms of completion is significant because it facilitates closing gaps between privileged and marginalized groups.

Barriers to student success

As student success is moving up in the higher education agenda, efforts have been made to identify the main barriers to student success and to create models that predict which students are more at-risk and may not succeed. Although context is crucial, there are some barriers to student success which are evident worldwide.

First, economic hardship or responsibilities: students who need to work to sustain themselves or their families may not have the time to participate in higher education life like their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They have less time to study, and this could affect their grades to the extent that some may eventually be forced to leave their studies. Students who work also have less time to engage in academic and social integration activities, such as study groups, interacting with faculty and other students, extracurricular activities, and accessing support services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Furthermore, undergoing economic hardship may cause stress or other mental health concerns that further prevent them from participating in higher education life and studies (Patel & Field, 2020).

Second, caring responsibilities could be a barrier for students to succeed in higher education.

Students with these responsibilities have less time to study and participate in academic and social integration. Having caring responsibilities can also cause the student added stress or other mental health issues that might hinder their ability to participate in higher education (Patel & Field, 2020). It is important to note that the caring responsibilities of older family members or children are given disproportionately to women (Chiarelli-Helminiak & Lewis, 2018).

A third barrier to higher education success is the low quality or lack of adaptability of previous education, as discussed previously in the context of the narrowing education pipeline. Studies have shown that if students come from low-quality schools, they most likely will face academic challenges in higher education (Kuh et al., 2006). The inequalities in access and quality at the earliest level of education are significant as they are further replicated at higher levels of education and ultimately in higher education. Moreover, poor academic performance may also generate stress and anxiety for students, further affecting their studies and higher education experience (Patel & Field, 2020).

Fourth, many equity deserving groups may face social isolation on top of the aforementioned barriers. For some students, the transition to higher education can be very challenging. It may involve living in a new city or even a new country or speaking a different language. It may also mean a challenge to their culture or identity (Kuh et al., 2006). Therefore, some may face discrimination or racism, which can cause anxiety and stress and may affect their participation in higher education (Patel & Field, 2020) and prevent them from participating in academic and social integration activities.

A clear example is first generation students. They may face pressure from family to succeed, not only as the first to progress to higher education, but they also face the pressure of not changing

their identity and not forgetting where they come from (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This pressure may lead them to focus on their studies and allocate less time for academic and social integration (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020). Being the first in the family to navigate higher education can also add stress for students who lack family members to turn to with questions or for advice. First generation students are overall more likely to drop out of higher education even if they can meet the academic standards (Flanagan Borquez, 2017). Although these barriers have been mentioned independently, they operate together and exacerbate each other. This intersectionality can make it even more difficult for equity deserving students to succeed. For example, a study of student success of Māori in a public university in New Zealand found that Māori suffer from transgenerational poverty, inadequate secondary schooling, racism, and an unwelcoming environment (Reid, 2006).

Impact of COVID-19 on student retention

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the barriers to student success more salient; therefore, targeted support and funding for vulnerable students are needed to ensure continuity of studies during crises. A national survey in the United States found that almost 50% of college students thought COVID-19 would negatively impact their ability to complete their degree and these percentages are higher among Black and Hispanic students (Marken, 2020). In 2021, the first-year persistence rate fell in the United States after remaining stable for the past four years, especially among Latinx students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). In Japan, more students dropped out because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 than in 2020 and in the same period, more students took a temporary leave of absence from their university studies (Kakuchi, 2021). Still, according to Japanese experts, the numbers are lower than expected because of the

support of the governments and HEIs to help students stay enrolled (Kakuchi, 2021).

It is still challenging to adequately understand and assess the impact of COVID-19 on retention and drop-out rates (Gaebel & Stoeber, 2021). For example, out of 26 higher education systems in Europe, ten reported not having information on drop-out rates compared to pre-COVID-19 times. It is also important to note that three systems mentioned retention had increased, and in 13 systems it was about the same (Gaebel & Stoeber, 2021).

Academic and pastoral support

Students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, need 'more than just financial security to thrive' (Patel & Field, 2020, p. 8) and to meet their entire needs. For many HEIs, their first answer is academic support services, including academic advising, tutoring, remedial learning, among others (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Academic advising positively affects student success; advisors can help students navigate the higher education system and assist students in major academic decisions (e.g., change of major).

Likewise, tutoring is significant for those hard-to-pass courses or for people with diverse learning needs and can take many forms: one-on-one individual tutoring or group tutors, peer-tutoring or professional-tutoring (Kuh et al., 2006). Remedial learning is provided for students to overcome any academic gaps that they might have from their secondary education; this typically includes subjects such as math, reading, and languages. Other services can include writing centers, digital skills training, and study skills workshops (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kuh et al., 2006).

However, academic support is not enough when students have poor mental health (Patel & Field, 2020), which is a common reason for students to stop or altogether drop out of higher education

(Davis & Hadwin, 2021). Evidence from the Global North suggests mental health in university students is deteriorating (Davis & Hadwin, 2021). Mental health issues are prevalent globally; in South-East Asian countries, the most common issues are depression, anxiety and addictive behaviors (Dessauvagie et al., 2022). As such, mental health services are crucial for any student success strategy, even more so in light of evidence showing deterioration in students' mental health during and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ochnik et al., 2021).

Services attending to students' mental health needs, ranging from difficulty concentrating to suicidal tendencies include therapy/counseling, but also social and wellness programming, peer mentors, mental health or wellness workshops, sexual assault prevention, among others (Patel & Field, 2020). Other related personalized support services are mentorship, often by peers who have been through similar experiences, coaching by professionals that blend motivation and guidance, or career counseling (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). Nonetheless, these services, although offered and available, may be limited to on-campus, hindering students' opportunities to access them (Mowbray et al., 2006).

HEIs, especially in the Global North, may also use student data to predict who is at risk or has not yet engaged in higher education life. Universities store extensive data on their students: demographic factors, grades, student ID, campus expenses, logins, ID swipes, among others. All this information is used to build predictive models that can alert faculty, staff, and the students themselves to behaviors that might jeopardize their success at the institution (Cele, 2021). These early warning systems combined with adequate support services have yielded results (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Patel & Field, 2020). Of course, this is not easy, especially for resource-constrained HEIs. There are challenges with technology deployment (e.g., interoperability, training, ethics,

and privacy concerns), and the models require personnel to keep perfecting across time (Altıok et al., 2021; Cele, 2021; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). They also require staff buy-in for data to be used and translated into actions (O'Farrell, 2019).

First-year students

Many HEIs focus their support for student success on first-year students, considering that becoming a first-year student can be filled with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, and most students who drop out do so in the first year (Cele, 2021). Some strategies directly target first-year students, such as orientation programs, first-year seminars and learning communities, helping students get familiarized with the institution, building relationships, and creating a sense of belonging (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kuh et al., 2006). Strategies of first-year students should be seen as a timeline with different phases, each phase with different needs and goals where HEIs support students throughout the journey until the end of their first year (Whittaker, 2008).

Some HEIs have a first-year provost or a senior administrative officer in HEIs to monitor these strategies and prevent first-year students` dropout (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021); others have special programs and strategies designed for students before they even enroll. These strategies aim to engage students with the institution and prepare them as much as possible to ease the transition to higher education. Pre-entry strategies include dedicated websites, social platforms to connect students, online mentoring, pre-course materials, among others (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee International, 2009).

Student engagement

One of the goals of first-year strategies is for students to engage on campus because engaged students use support services more, have greater

levels of satisfaction with the HEI, and are more likely to develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, HEIs encourage student engagement on campus, not just for first-year students but across the student body. There are multiple strategies, for example, normalizing support services to be part of students' everyday experience rather than used when a student fails or is in a crisis (Whittaker, 2008).

Quality infrastructure can also promote engagement by designing environments that encourage students' interaction with faculty and peers or providing an environment where people with disabilities feel comfortable (Kuh et al., 2006). Another way to engage students on campus is by organizing or promoting social and cultural activities and groups where they can meet students and faculty with similar interests and backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Student engagement on campus can also be encouraged within the classroom by incorporating topics that are relevant for students and encouraging discussion and the participation of students (O'Farrell, 2019). Engagement in class is critical, especially for students with other responsibilities (work or caring responsibilities) that prevent them from spending more time on campus; this is why work-study programs are also encouraged (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

For online learning, evidence suggests that introducing synchronous activities in the programs can help with student engagement (McBrien et al., 2009). Assignments should be focused on engaging students with the content but also with each other and the professors. This can be done both synchronous and asynchronously, not just as an opportunity or possibility but as a requirement (Dixson, 2010).

Digital literacy

UNESCO affirms that digital literacy is a life skill (Karpati, 2011) and as such, a key component for student success. Digital literacy goes beyond being able to handle technical skills and incorporates the capability to apply these skills in life and develop higher-level skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and self-regulation skills (Bawden, 2001). Without digital literacy, students struggle in today's higher education and can be neglected and become isolated in both socioeconomic and cultural areas (Bennett et al., 2008). This calls for the inclusion of digital education rights (digital literacy rights or media literacy rights) related to access, inclusion, and quality in the use of ICT in teaching and learning; a methodology and understanding of ICTs so that it may be used in a safe, conscientious, and responsible way (Ranieri & Barbosa Lima, 2018).

Many HEIs are making major efforts to involve students and teachers in increasing their digital literacy. For example, in Brazil, public HEIs must provide ICT access and, in parallel, promote the development of digital skills among those who are already connected, in order to enact what is provided in the civil framework of the internet with the possibility of reducing regional disparities and promoting digital inclusion (Ranieri & Barbosa Lima, 2018). A training program on competency development for non-presential teaching-learning environments in emergency situations offered to 13 public universities in Peru combined synchronous and asynchronous activities in which 2,800 teachers and technicians and more than 2,300 students participated (UNESCO IESALC, 2021b). The program also included a digital leaders competition targeting students, with laptops and tablets as prizes. Digital literacy programs for teachers and students alike should be replicated, especially in low-income and developing countries and focusing on women, who are less likely to be online than men (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014).

6 Quality and relevance of provision

This section addresses the links between quality and relevance and the RTHE, in close relation to the 5 As framework, particularly in the acceptability and adaptability dimensions. HEIs should offer higher education in an acceptable form and substance and adapt to local contexts and inequalities. This section discusses the importance of quality in the context of increased access to higher education and how quality and relevance can be provided through institutionally differentiated, culturally appropriate higher education and using online/distance provision. Quality and relevance also include the ability to access knowledge and lifelong learning.

The importance of quality

The growing demand for higher education puts enormous pressure on governments worldwide to ensure that the higher education offer meets national (and international) quality standards. Efforts towards inclusion that are not accompanied by quality considerations serve only to replicate existing inequalities in society (UNESCO IESALC, 2022b). This extends to the quality of students' experiences as well as the quality of institutional provision. For example, in Lesotho, students enroll in high numbers but not all HEIs have been able to handle the influx of students due to lack of infrastructure, equipment, human resources (including faculty) and other requirements for the provision of quality education, which in turn resulted in the overall quality being undermined (Tlali et al., 2019).

This extends to the quality of students' experiences as well as the quality of institutional provision. In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education expects HEIs to operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, to enable every student

to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcome for the credit or qualification being sought (QAA, 2015). The (voluntary) UK Quality Code promotes and considers equality of opportunity and inclusive learning in higher education which anticipates the varied requirements of learners because of declared disability, cultural background, location or age. An emphasis on the quality of provision also supports students' RTHE beyond higher education, with a study in Lebanon finding that graduates of a good quality HEI were more in demand in the local labor market (Nauffal & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2018).

Institutional differentiation

Institutional differentiation, which refers to diversification of the types and functions of HEIs within a higher education system, can support quality and relevance as the options available to students become more diverse, numerous and tailored to their needs and their contexts (Altbach et al., 2017; UNESCO IESALC, 2022b). It can encompass vertical differentiation in which HEIs are usually more stratified with one or a small number of elite HEIs at the top, or horizontal differentiation, in which HEIs have different functions but are less stratified (Jungblut & Maassen, 2020). Institutional differentiation can also take place as part of the overall expansion of a higher education system through the addition of different types of HEI. These include domestic branch/satellite campuses designed to build on the status of an existing HEI and serve less populous areas or international branch campuses/universities that are seen to bring prestige and pre-established quality (Hope & Quinlan, 2020; Knight & Motala-Timol, 2020).

Nonetheless, differentiation in the provision of higher education cannot be separated from the right to receive quality education. If quality is removed from the equation, less privileged students can drift to lower levels, while elite in-

stitutions remain highly selective in favor of the most privileged social groups (Reimer & Jacob, 2011). In England, while the universal loan system facilitates entry to fee-charging institutions, students from equity deserving groups are predominantly filling the low prestige institutions (McCowan, 2012). The 'blind expansion' (Vasavi, 2020, p. 2) of higher education across the world, especially in the Global South and through online formats, has been seen as a threat to the right to higher education as poor-quality provision fails to fulfill its social, economic, intellectual, and democratic missions. Institutional differentiation, as part of the right to higher education, should expand people's choices and self-realization journeys in ways that are realistic and appropriate to each context.

Specialized provision

Specialized universities designed for disadvantaged groups, such as women's universities in South Asia (India and Pakistan) and universities for ethnic minorities (for instance in Australia, Mexico and New Zealand) can increase participation of these groups by creating an environment that is culturally more familiar to under-represented groups, who often control and manage the institutions themselves (UNESCO, 2017). Rather than strategies that seek to create diversity within institutions, specialized universities target a certain type of student population and have a stronger potential for creating more diversity across the entire higher education system).

Culturally appropriate provision

Culturally appropriate HEIs promote better student experiences and more relevant provision, following the 5 As framework, given that they offer education in an acceptable form and sub-

stance. In order to qualify as a culturally appropriate HEI, HEIs have had to adapt to local needs. For example, the Ministry of Education in South Africa developed and promulgated the Language Policy for Higher Education in 2002. The aim of the policy was to promote multilingualism[13] in institutional policies and practices of South African public HEIs to facilitate meaningful access and participation by university communities (students and staff) in various university activities, including cognitive and intellectual development (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). Another example is Indigenous centers at HEIs which are culturally safe places for Indigenous students and instrumental for their success (Taylor, 2022). Evidence suggests that having these types of centers, or a culturally appropriate education offer, was a decisive factor for these students in choosing an HEI and pursuing higher education (Gallop & Bastien, 2016).

So-called 'alternative' HEIs have the potential to integrate other kinds of knowledge which are often excluded in 'traditional' models. The reference here is to institutions that integrate different cosmologies in the design, functioning and evaluation of higher education as per the examples of Indigenous Universities in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador (UNESCO IESALC, 2022b). In these alternative HEIs, interculturality and responsiveness to the community's needs are considered key to evaluating the quality and relevance of the provision, which would be limited in traditional institutions. Similarly, Wānanga (publicly owned tertiary institutions) in Aotearoa New Zealand created by and for the indigenous Māori community are a clear example of how differentiation can support the holistic inclusion of diverse cosmologies and epistemologies of education and therefore expand the right to higher education.

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13 South Africa has 11 official languages and a multilingual population fluent in at least two. IsiZulu and isiXhosa are the largest languages. The other nine are: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele. https://southafrica-info.com/arts-culture/11-languages-south-africa/

Online and distance teaching and learning

Online and distance education can help increase access and completion in higher education. This is especially true in certain circumstances, for example, in cases where the population is dispersed and it would be hard to have physical HEIs close to everyone (UNESCO IESALC, 2022b). Another scenario is when students have work or caring responsibilities that make it challenging to attend in-class learning. In some cases, this might also be the case for disabled students who do not have the opportunity to physically attend an HEI that allows them to undergo studies. Online learning environments may also help students with disabilities through tools that range from the readily available e.g., screen readers to more advanced technology such as virtual reality (Meskhi et al., 2019). These benefits of online and distance higher education, plus the advance of technology have led to the growth of this type of education in the past couple of decades, even outpacing traditional higher education (Palvia et al., 2018). For example, in Latin America, in 2000, just 1.3% of all higher education enrollments were for distance learning, increasing to 7.5% by 2012 (Arboleda Toro & Rama Vitale, 2013).

Online and distance learning can help in terms of access, nonetheless, it also brings challenges that undermine the RTHE, especially for those who are more vulnerable. Paradoxically, online and distance learning can increase inequality. When talking about online learning, the digital divide is always present, where students may lack access to the internet and devices and have poor digital literacies, all of which can prejudice their higher education experiences (Musingafi et al., 2015). Globally, data shows that certain regions of the world like North America and Europe have an internet penetration rate of around 90%, whereas Africa has an internet penetration rate of 43% (Sabzalieva et al., 2021). This has become more manifest with the emergence of COVID-19 and the shift to digital pedagogical tools and virtual exchanges between students and their teachers, and among students, to deliver education as HEIs closed (UNESCO IESALC, 2022a). In this regard, it is crucial to ensure that vulnerable students do not drop out of institutions due to the disadvantages they face in adapting to the new modes of learning resulting from the pandemic. Beyond the pandemic, online learning requires further attention and support (OECD, 2020) so that students receive a quality education that does not undermine their RTHE.

Open access to knowledge

The RTHE also encompasses fair access to knowledge, which can be supported by open education and open science. Open education allows people to access and participate in higher education regardless of their geographic location and regardless of time, allowing for adult learners and/or those with other responsibilities (work or caring) to access higher education (Berti, 2018). Open education reduces traditional barriers that people often face in obtaining higher education, including, but not limited to, cost. In this way, the right to higher education is supported. OERu[14] is an example of an initiative designed to make higher education accessible by offering free online courses through a global network of institutions. In 2020, OERu provided access to more than 200,000 learners using the platform (Mackintosh, 2021). Naturally, for persons to participate in open education, they should have access to devices and technologies. Nonetheless, as mobile and other information technologies become more affordable, the opportunity to access these resources increases.

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14 https://oeru.org/

Open science extends access to knowledge by increasing access to the results of scientific work and by engaging more people from diverse backgrounds in science. The UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021) places equity and fairness as a core value of open science. Open science is defined by UNESCO as 'an inclusive construct that combines various movements and practices aiming to make multilingual scientific knowledge openly available, accessible and reusable for everyone, to increase scientific collaborations and sharing of information for the benefits of science and society, and to open the processes of scientific knowledge creation, evaluation and communication to societal actors beyond the traditional scientific community' (UNESCO, 2021b, p. 7) Open science initiatives promote the RTHE by providing resources and opportunities for equity deserving groups that face barriers to engaging in science and research, such as financial burdens and time constraints (Grahe et al., 2020).

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning promotes people's (re)training throughout their lives, providing access to new and updated knowledge and developing new skills. In the current context of continuous environmental, scientific, and technological transformations, and globalization, it is important that HEIs pay more attention to teaching and providing lifelong learning opportunities to help people adapt to such changes throughout their lives (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, n.d.). For this reason, technical and vocational training (TVET) and higher education have shifted from receiving students directly out of school to receiving a diversity of students who enter, re-enter, or enter higher education late, at different ages and in various phases of their personal and professional lives, to providing diverse, shorter,

and flexible learning opportunities (Atchoarena, 2021). Thus, the RTHE must be understood from a lifelong perspective: the right to education at all levels is the right to lifelong learning.

As new challenges emerge and knowledge evolves, lifelong learning is key to ensuring the right to higher education of adults since they can benefit from new knowledge that might not have been available before. The recently created Academic Bank of Credits[15] (ABC) in India represents a policy effort to promote the RTHE. The ABC is a digital repository where higher education credits earned by students over time can be 'banked' and, when sufficient credit has been accumulated, converted into a degree or diploma, offering 'quality life-long education to the learner with complete freedom on what to learn, where to learn, how to learn and when to learn' (Mittal, 2021, p. 3).

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15 https://www.abc.gov.in/

7 Institutional policies and administration

How students from equity deserving groups access and succeed in higher education also relies heavily on how institutions prioritize inclusivity and the efforts they make to achieve it. This is often reflected through the institutional culture created by HEI leaders and administrative processes and policies that take into account the diverse needs of these groups. This section discusses how HEIs can create an enabling environment through which the RTHE can be promoted.

Leadership: Fostering a social justice mindset

HEIs' strategies for student support thrive where there is a success culture in the HEI, one that promotes inclusive excellence. This requires bold and intentional conversations and action about university structures, student supports, data use, professional learning and instructional improvements that help meet individual student needs. In Canada, the Scarborough Charter is an example of a recent institution-led effort to effect systemic change by addressing anti-Black racism and promoting Black inclusion in Canadian higher education. The Charter proposes specific measures such as creating a baseline on the extent of the (under) representation of Black faculty, staff, and students in the HEI and acting on those numbers by setting targets, timetables and transparency commitments. It has been designed to benefit multiple HEIs. At the time of writing, it had been signed by over 50 HEIs across the country (Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee, 2021).

The values of equity should steer the conduct of faculty members or administrators. Equitable institutions allow for all stakeholders to participate in decision-making and contribute to efforts to improve and transform. They also use disaggregated data for reflection and there is a well-es-

tablished culture of inquiry. Strategies found in the research on equity and leadership include:

- 'A shared understanding of a vision and mission that prioritize equity beliefs: high achievement, access, and opportunities for all students, regardless of background, paired with a culture that understands openly discusses the impact of biases;

- Continuous and data-based monitoring of student progress and achievement to identify underperforming groups. Studying various sources of disaggregated data to monitor achievement and opportunity gaps is a core equity practice. It is paired with the use of inquiry and research-based practices to improve teaching and learning and the allocation of resources where they can best serve the students with the greatest need;

- A culture of collaboration and shared responsibility where educators work together to solve instructional problems and provide each student with appropriate supports and strategies based on their individual needs; and

- Community involvement that embraces diversity, avoids deficit thinking, and seeks ways to establish authentic relationships among culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families and students.' (Kinard et al, 2019, no page number)

Strong leadership within HEIs is required, allocating the necessary resources, providing the necessary incentives, and coordinating a comprehensive support system (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Structural diversity

Structural diversity, defined as 'relationships among the diversity of the student body' (Pike & Kuh, 2006, p. 426), is a key component for student success and promotes a sense of belonging among equity deserving groups on campus. Structural diversity can be fostered in multiple

ways. A common strategy is to diversify faculty and the student body. Diversity, however, should not be perceived as a numerical goal (Kuh et al., 2006) or based only on color or ethnic backgrounds (Collins & Kritsonis, 2006). The importance of having diversity on campus is twofold. Students who identify with one or more equity deserving groups benefit from interacting with students and faculty that are like them, and this helps students' sense of belonging on campus. The student body benefits from being exposed to experiences and knowledge with which they may not be familiar. For example, a study on the Latinx faculty members in HEIs in the United States showed that they provided Latinx students with role models and that Latinx faculty were crucial in encouraging students to stay focused on their degree completion goals (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016).

Faculty diversity also helps the process of curriculum diversification and decolonization, where equity deserving groups have access to courses and discussions that cover their realities and consider their points of view and where all students have access to knowledge unencumbered by colonial and other structural biases. The diversification of course reading lists is a first step towards achieving this. Although courses are more than just reading lists, evidence shows that these formative documents are extremely skewed, with one study in the United Kingdom finding that over 70% of primary authors of compulsory readings were white men (Arshad et al., 2021). Curriculum diversification and decolonization also need to happen within the classroom. Faculty can engage students to challenge dominant points of view and discuss the historical legacy of colonization in any subject area (Arshad, 2021).

Structural diversity should also lead to changes in other services and infrastructure on campus. For example, obvious changes to the campus environment such as clearing walkways, adding braille blocks and installing equipment on the ground floor at appropriate heights would increase inclusion for blind students (Bualar, 2017). A diversity-friendly campus would have, for example, adequate rooms for praying in different faiths, lactation rooms for student mothers and full accessibility for students with different types of disabilities. In terms of services, one example is the provision of sufficient food options for the diversity of students on campus is important for students' success and satisfaction. This can be achieved by providing food options from different countries or in keeping with different religious customs. A study of international students' relationship to food in a Canadian HEI suggests that eating their national food allows them to maintain their social, cultural, and religious identities and provides them with comfort and a sense of belonging on campus (Stewin, 2013).

Administrative processes

Removing institutional barriers

For some students, navigating their HEI can be a huge challenge, for example, knowing and finding the support services they need such as financial aid, academic advisors, support services, and others (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students from equity deserving groups may not have the social capital to navigate these services (Chiarelli-Helminiak & Lewis, 2018). Nonetheless, not all HEIs have the systems in place to provide this support to students or, if they do, they might be tailored for students other than those of equity deserving groups. Some institutions create these barriers, for example, beyond support services, the curriculum does not represent equity deserving students or deal with their issues. This and other barriers (e.g., lack of technology or infrastructure for people with disabilities) create an unwelcoming environment in which it is harder for students to succeed.

In some countries, legislation promoting equality is also accompanied by guidance to counter

discrimination. In England, for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission produced guidance on the Equality Act 2010 for further and higher education providers. This explains how HEIs can ensure that the provision they offer does not discriminate against people with 'protected characteristics'[16]. Some of the guidance measures were: support for students with disabilities, mental health problems and intensive support needs (such as health centers, counselling services, chaplaincy, welfare support and academic support), support for students whose first language is not English (providing clear guidance and academic support including language proficiency), and financial support for disadvantaged students (Eurydice, 2019).

Coordinating support for students

Students benefit from a comprehensive support system, where all services are profoundly interconnected and have the student at the center as it is a critical factor for improving persistence and completion (McDonnell & Soricone, 2014). As shown in figure 2, student data can help to generate early warning systems for these support services to reach out to students (supply), but it is also possible for students to seek these services independently (demand). In that case, HEIs are advised to implement a 'no-wrong-door' policy, in which it does not matter which service (financial aid, academic support, mental health, other services) students seek or get to first; students get the support they need regardless of if it is one service or the combination of many (Francis & Horn, 2016). For example, the University of Hong Kong took this approach and created one help desk (both physical and online) that combined all services from different departments in one (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee International, 2009).

Student data can help personalized student support services, giving students the specific support they need, at the moment they need it. Moreover, these individualized interventions and coordination or support systems for students shift the focus from blaming students, to holding institutions accountable for students' outcomes.

Figure 2: Coordination support model for students
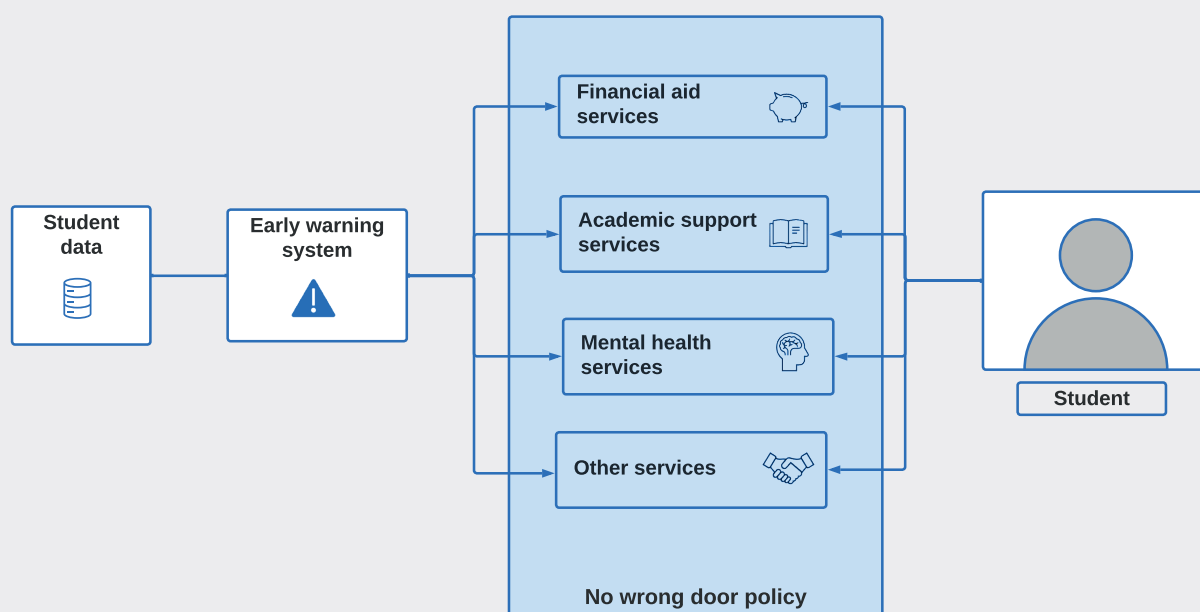
Source: UNESCO IESALC

16 Age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation

8 Higher education financing

The changing demographic and socio-economic landscape impacting higher education have pressured governments to maintain public funding levels for the sector. This section discusses these pressures, and the different options governments use to fund higher education and how they enable or impede access for equity deserving groups.

Pressures on funding for higher education

Demographic bulges toward a more youthful population in some regions, increasing secondary school completion, the increasing need for skilled professional workers, a renewed emphasis on employability and recent growth in private providers have expanded the demand for higher education (Oketch, 2016). In addition, the rise in middle-class aspirations to advance and maintain a social position through higher education, the growth of open and distance institutions due to new technologies and internet dissemination, and supportive government policies promoting universal access to higher education have contributed to increased enrollments globally (UNESCO IESALC, 2020). At the same time, HEIs and governments are operating in a context where there is international competition for students based on the perceived benefits to a nation's economic health (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009).

Nonetheless, these trends are taking place when government budgets are increasingly constrained by conflicting public priorities in the social sector (Oketch, 2016) and public expenditure per higher education student has often not kept the pace of increasing enrollment and total higher education spending (World Bank, 2021). In this context, the analysis of funding mechanisms becomes important as the type of instruments adopted by governments will have different effects in different facets of the operation of higher education institutions, including equity of student access (Cheung, 2003).

Private higher education

Amidst constraints of government finance towards higher education, one of the ways in which increasing demand for higher education is absorbed is through the development of private higher education (Goel, 2013). Tuition fees form the financial backbone of many private institutions, and they must meet their expenditure with what they collect from their students (Varghese, 2002). In terms of expansion, the private sector has succeeded in bringing a rapid expansion in tertiary in low-to-middle-income-countries (McCowan, 2007).

The fees for private HEIs tend to be much higher than public institutions, and so some students from poor families find it difficult to gain admission into these private institutions (Goel, 2013). In addition, where a loan scheme facilitates access to private HEIs, students from low-income families may be deterred or face subsequent difficulties as there is a well-known risk which bears more heavily on those without significant family wealth (World Bank, 2001). For these reasons, privatization has been highly controversial as it has been associated with elitism and privilege and their negative effects on social justice.

Thus, from an equity point of view, private HEIs can only contribute to improving equity if greater educational opportunities offer a fair chance for all. As things stand, this is not the case. At the level of compulsory education, for example, concern about the increasing involvement of the private sector led to the formulation of the Abidjan Principles, adopted in 2019, which reinforce the obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in the sector (Aubry et al., 2021). Despite the concentration of private activity in higher education, no such global principles to protect the RTHE currently exist.

The tuition fee debate

There is a permanent debate about the place of tuition fees and the development of a socially equitable higher education system (Baker, 2016). It has been argued that tuition-free higher education policy increases equality (Jääskeläinen, 2021). Examples of some well-funded systems that rely almost exclusively on public funding and public provision include Gulf countries, the Scandinavian countries, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, Singapore, and Switzerland (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). Nonetheless, free higher education seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Rapid student growth has placed heavy pressure on the fiscal burden of many governments, resulting in them encouraging HEIs to generate their own revenues through tuition fees (Cheung, 2003).

Most countries charge some kind of tuition fee. Fewer than 40% of higher education systems in the world today consider themselves free, although they vary in terms of how they apply free higher education. In some countries such as Argentina and Cuba, subsidized education only applies for the public higher education sector. Although Denmark and Sweden do not charge tuition fees for local students, they do charge tuition for international students (Gayardon, 2017). In OECD countries with available data, only about a third of public HEIs do not charge any tuition fees for full-time national students enrolled in bachelor's or equivalent programs (OECD, 2018).

In countries like England, fees for full-time undergraduate courses are currently capped at around US$11,500 per year (Bolton, 2021). Although the intention of fee caps is to widen participation for students from low-income backgrounds, this policy mechanism has been criticized for its unintended consequences of only making higher education cheaper for the rich, while not improving access for poor students, or easing the financial burden they bear. Fee

capping would lead to more students but lower revenue for institutions, undermining quality and academic support services needed most by disadvantaged students. In turn, this could lead to higher drop-out rates and negatively impact equity (Stumpf et al., 2008).

Research shows that students are responsive to tuition fees, with even marginal increases in tuition fees leading to declines in enrollment, especially among students from families of low socio-economic status and low-performing students (Farhan, 2014; OECD, 2020). A major advantage of free higher education would be to open access to higher education for many students, increasing the social demand for higher education (Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2009). Beyond access, it would reduce the likelihood of dropping out from institutions because of a lack of ability to pay. Higher education would be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay.

The availability of free higher education would likely motivate students from low-income backgrounds who would otherwise not enroll, due to credit challenges and risk aversion (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). Free higher education can also be a useful strategy to increase human skills necessary for economic development in skills-scarce developing countries and facilitate upward social mobility for those who obtain it (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012).

Free higher education would also reduce the number of students and families in student debt. It has been shown that in both developed and developing countries, graduates in the bottom 25% of income distribution carry large repayment burdens leading to lower disposable incomes for graduates (Chapman, 2016). Student loans thereby undermine fairness and equity in access, success, and post-graduation. The average student loan debt grew from US$15,257 to US$36,635 between 2007 and 2020 (Han-

son, 2021). Student debt presents a burden to post-higher education prospects that could carry long-term economic consequences. For example, less wealth for younger households, reducing the ability of student borrowers to save and preventing them from leveraging the years in which saving is most valuable – early in the career (Huelsman, 2015).

Arguments against providing a fully free higher education focus on the inequities it creates. Given that students from advantaged backgrounds tend to access higher education disproportionately and obtain higher remuneration after graduation, a fully free higher education would reinforce the structural advantages these students already enjoy. At the same time, this model relies on taxpayers, including those who are less advantaged, to fund their education (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). The large family background gaps in attending higher education that have always existed mean that the funding of all students from general taxation is in effect a middle-class capture of the welfare state (Crawford et al., 2016).

Furthermore, tuition free higher education is only 'free' to those who are allowed in: it does not open access to higher education to all who seek it (Crawford et al., 2016). Unless the system itself has no admissions requirements and is set up with sufficient resources to support universal access, this leads to a situation in which wealthy students who are already academically advantaged have access to free public higher education, whereas underprivileged students with fewer means and less academic preparation are forced to enroll in private, frequently fee-based institutions (Global Education Monitoring Report & UNESCO IIEP, 2017; World Bank, 2017). Another equity-related concern of free higher education is that lower levels of education are not always free, especially secondary education. As a result, many students who cannot afford an education at lower levels can be left out of higher educa-

tion. An equitable financing scheme for higher education would not be arrived at until the lower levels of education enjoy the benefits of an equitable student finance scheme that fosters wide-scale access (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012).

A third approach, income-targeted free tuition, creates free higher education for some while retaining the principle of charging user fees to those who can afford it. It means that students from families with an income below a certain threshold do not pay tuition (Usher, 2017). This is seen to protect the vulnerable while the more affluent are taxed, with the proceeds going to institutions to increase either the quantity of seats or the quality of education (Usher & Burroughs, 2018). Targeted free tuition has the potential to reach the most vulnerable students rather than offering subsidies to all students regardless of their parents' income.

Although not widespread, this model has been taken up in diverse locations including Chile, Ontario, New Brunswick, New York, Italy, Japan and South Africa. However, for income-targeted free tuition to work, the threshold should not be set too high as it will support students who can already pay fees without government help (Cooper, 2016). For example, families earning less than a certain threshold can also include those already benefitting other forms of government grants and those in the middle-class who can afford to pay fees. If there is a weakness in the targeting, the program becomes more expensive, wasting public funds, and becoming less effective (Usher, 2017).

Living costs

Tuition and fees represent only part of the total cost of higher education attendance. In addition to meeting the cost of fees, students or their families also bear their living or maintenance costs during study – these may be high for students who live away from their family home,

as is customary in some higher education systems (OECD, 2020) and as is necessary for some equity deserving groups. Beyond tuition and fees, students may also need to meet the cost of necessities such as textbooks, laboratory fees, a computer, software and internet access, housing, food, and transportation. Due to the combination of tuition fee and non-study costs, many countries have put in place systems of financial student support tailored to solve liquidity constraints. Student support schemes, such as monthly stipends, constitute a key element in assuring equitable opportunities for students in higher education systems, broadening access and supporting completion (Dynarski, 2003).

Grants

Grants can take the form of basic universal grants or means-tested grants. Universal grant schemes in, for example, Korea and Nordic countries are those in which allocation is not based on either financial need or academic merit (OECD, 2020). Basic universal grants may promote access to education and low dropout rates for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups who may underestimate the net benefits of higher education.

Means-tested grants are targeted at students based on financial needs, usually low family/parental income. Means-tested grants can remove liquidity constraints for debt-averse disadvantaged students and minorities, improving higher education access as shown in research done in France, the United Kingdom and the United States (OECD, 2020). Some countries award grants based on academic merit (some states in the United States), typically secondary school results or performance in higher education admission tests, while others are made available based on being a girl (Pakistan), disabled (Ireland and Scotland), coming from a disadvantaged ethnic group or residing in remote areas (Vietnam)

(Salmi, 2018). However, allocating grants based solely on academic merit may also widen inequities among students since higher academically performing students are usually disproportionately from more advantaged backgrounds. Merit-based grants can also be an inefficient expenditure, since they represent an income transfer to students, many of whom would have attended higher education in the absence of the grant (OECD, 2020).

To complement grants, tuition fee waivers or subsidies can be used as a form of student financial assistance whereby families/individuals below a certain income threshold or from underrepresented groups will be exempted from having to pay tuition fees, for example, Catholic universities in Latin America (Salmi & Bassett, 2012).

Loans

As part of their student support systems, loans have been used in various countries, either in isolation or in combination with scholarship/grant assistance, to help students pay for fees or living costs or both (OECD, 2020). While scholarships and grants are non-reimbursable financial aid, loans are a repayable type of student funding. Loans are considered as one way to introduce or increase cost recovery in higher education while maintaining access for students from low-income families. Loans enable students to finance their current studies against future income and remove the upfront costs of paying for higher education (Barr & Crawford, 2005). Loans are also seen to contribute to equity considerations since students of higher education benefit from a relatively high private rate of return on public investment in education (Skilbeck & Connell, 1998).

Three types of student loans exist: direct loans-mortgage type, guaranteed and shared-risk loans mortgage type, and universal income-contingent loans (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). In the first

and most common case, a government agency funds and manages student loans that are repaid monthly after graduation (e.g., Colombian government through ICETEX). In the second case, to reduce administrative costs and limit public funding, many governments partner with private banks. This was the case for Chile, with a loan program known as *Programa de Credito con Aval del Estado* (CAE), where bank loans were offered to students and the state acted as guarantor (Urzua & Rau, 2012). In the third case of income-contingent loans (in Australia, Canada and New Zealand), loan recovery is handled through existing national collection mechanisms, such as the income tax administration or the social security system (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

In the case of classical loans, as in the first two cases, students may face repayment difficulties if their incomes stagnate after graduation thus these types of loans are vulnerable by design (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Due to the nature of these loans, as discussed above, there are concerns regarding the growing levels of student debt, coupled with rising labor market uncertainty (difficulty finding the first job), making it increasingly likely that some students are unable to repay their debts (Lochner & Monge-Naranjo, 2016).

Income-contingent loans (ICLs) - loans with repayments that are contingent on future income- have provided students with the necessary resources, while limiting the risk of a loan default (Diris & Ooghe, 2018). Their advantage over the other two loan funding sources is that they insure individuals against poor labor market outcomes by requiring loan repayment only if they are earning above a certain threshold, thereby removing the risk of large repayment burdens for those on low incomes and reducing the impact of risk aversion on the participation decision (Britton et al., 2019). In terms of advancing equity, ICLs can improve HE access for students

from poor backgrounds, who are debt-averse, who do not have collateral and who are more likely to totally abandon higher educational aspirations for themselves or for their children if borrowing is the price of getting a higher education (Johnstone, 2006).

9 Human movement and international recognition of qualifications

This section focuses on the RTHE related to human movement, dividing the discussion into three sections: forcibly displaced people (FDP), migration, and international recognition of qualifications. It is important to differentiate between FDP and migrants because the first group has layers of vulnerability. FDP are of special interest for UNESCO and its *raison d'être* of building a culture of peace (UNESCO, n.d.-b) and this is why this chapter starts with them. Nevertheless, it is also important to raise awareness of the vulnerabilities of other groups of migrants and how the international recognition of qualifications can help all migrants to exercise their right to higher education.

Forcibly displaced people

By late 2020, there were 82.4 million FDP[17] and this number has been growing steadily, doubling since 2010 (UNHCR, 2021b). Developing countries, countries that do not necessarily have the means to cover the needs of their own population (UNHCR, 2021b), host 86% of FDP. In this scenario, FDPs often see their rights diminished, including their right to education.

The gross enrollment of refugee children in school is 77%, of whom only 31% are enrolled in secondary level (36% refugee boys and 27% refugee girls) (UNHCR, 2021a). Considering that, on average, refugees spend around 20 years in exile (UNESCO, 2017), if they have not attended secondary school in their host or home countries, they have very limited chances to progress to higher education. This explains the extremely low figure of 5% of refugee youth enrolled in higher education (UNHCR, n.d.-a). Other barriers for FDP to higher education include:

- Infrastructure: no presence or low number of HEIs in refugee camps or other settlements for FDP and proper infrastructure,

- Movement: distance to campuses and restrictions on movement,

- Documentation: proof of citizenship, residence or immigration status, and lack of academic certification or recognition required for admission,

- Financial: high tuition, fees, and related expenses, economic or caring responsibilities, limited access to financial aid,

- Information: lack of knowledge or understanding of higher education system in host country or area

- Language: lack of proficiency or knowledge of language in host area or country

- Discrimination: from HEIs in terms of access, but also from faculty and peers on campus based on their racial ethnicity or the fact that they are FDP.

- Cultural beliefs: in some cultures, women are not expected to attend an HEI.

- Trauma: displacement, war, conflict, and violence leave FDP more at risk of poor mental health.

(Ferede, 2018; Mooney & French, 2005; Mulcahy et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2017; UNHCR, 2018, 2019)

However, UNHCR has set an ambitious goal of achieving tertiary education enrollment of refugees to 15% by 2030, with matching numbers for young refugee women and men (UNHCR, 2019). Protecting the right to higher education through a social justice lens has positive impacts for FDP, their families, and the societies that host them. Access and retention in higher education are beneficial for displaced students by giving them more opportunities to get a good job and

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17 Including refugees (under UNHCR and UNRWA mandate), internally displaced people, asylum-seekers and Venezuelans displaced abroad.

create a sustainable future for themselves and their families (Ferede, 2018; Lowe, 2019) When higher education is perceived to be more accessible, it can become an incentive for younger FDP to complete their primary and secondary education (Lowe, 2019; UNHCR, 2015), impacting social mobility, financial stability, and better health as discussed in previous sections.

The increased participation of FDP in higher education can strengthen education systems to the benefit of society at large, including FDP and host communities by enriching the academic environment, enhancing social cohesion, and improving academic infrastructure and resources (UNHCR, n.d.-a). Education also serves a protective and reconciliation function, safeguarding FDP from marginalization and abuse and the pull and rhetoric of extremist groups and contributing to solutions in contexts of post-conflict reconstruction (Ferede, 2018; UNHCR, n.d.-a, 2015). Moreover, higher education gives FDP an additional identity, that of a student, that is not heavy on loss and fear but rather hope and possibility (Ferede, 2018).

Some stateless people including the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Nubians in Kenya, Dominicans of Haitian origins, Palestinians in Israel, and the Bidoon are also considered to be FDP (The Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2020). Stateless people are not considered nationals by any State under the operation of its law, either because they never had a nationality or because they lost it without acquiring a new one. By the end of 2020, UNHCR estimates 4.2 million stateless people although other estimates put this as 10 million; 1.2 of them are forcibly displaced from Myanmar (UNHCR, n.d.-b, 2021b). Without citizenship, stateless people are unprotected by national legislation and usually see their rights and freedom diminished, including their right to education. For example, proof of citizenship or an ID is required to be admitted in HEIs or to access financial aid needed to access and complete

higher education. Efforts like the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for refugees and vulnerable migrants play a key role not only in the recognition of qualifications but also in different policies needed to assist displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation in accessing higher education.

Migration

Migration, understood here as a voluntary process, can be internal or international. Internal voluntary migration numbers are hard to identify because of distinguishing internally displaced people (IDP) from voluntary migrants. However, 1 in 8 people live outside the region where they were born. Most of them migrate between the ages of 19 and 31, ages when people usually undertake higher education studies (Bernard et al., 2018). For example, in China, 31% of people aged between 15-24 moved because of education; similarly, in Thailand, it was 21% (Bernard et al., 2018). Education of better quality in urban areas is a prominent reason for the internal migration of younger people (UNESCO, 2018). While the reasons for education-related migration may be multiple, is it important to note that the lack of opportunities in the places of origin of internal youth migrants undermines their right to higher education.

According to the latest World Migration Report, there are 272 million international migrants; although this number is increasing steadily, the percentage compared to the world population is still small at 3.5% (IOM, 2019). Most migrate to higher-income countries, which generally give more opportunities for higher education studies. However, nearly two-thirds are migrant workers, meaning they are likely to have fewer opportunities to participate in higher education due to work responsibilities (IOM, 2019). Young immigrants and first-generation immigrant students often leave education early and usually perform

worse than their host-country counterparts (UNESCO, 2018), limiting their higher education opportunities. Nonetheless, immigrants' educational attainment improves over time relative to their counterparts in their countries of origin (UNESCO, 2018), making it easier to exercise their right to higher education.

Of course, not all migration is the same; hence some challenges may be more present than others depending on the case. For example, migrating with documentation removes the burden on undocumented immigrants of navigating an immigration system that can take years of facing the threat of deportation that has consequences on peoples' mental health and keeps children out of school (Mulcahy et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2018) and higher education in the long run. Like stateless people, the rights of undocumented youth, including their right to higher education, are limited because of the lack of citizenship, proof of residence, or immigration status in the host country. Moreover, even when undocumented youth can access higher education, when they finish their studies, they might not be able to work legally, making higher education less attractive for undocumented people (Frum, 2007).

Barriers for migrants to exercise their right to higher education are similar to those listed for FDP. These barriers do not work in silos; they feed each other, there is intersectionality taking place, making it even more difficult for migrants. For example, governments or HEIs may require for financial aid purposes for students to be a country national or disclose immigration status (combination of documentation and financial barrier) (Zota, 2009). Language certification is also a good illustration of this issue. Many HEIs require specific language certificates that can cost an immigrant much money and effort due to the required combination of documentation, language, and financial barriers (Mulcahy et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that these

barriers limit not only access to higher education but also their success as the United States clearly shows, out of 30,000 undocumented students enrolled each year, fewer than 2,000 graduate (Golash-Boza & Merlin, 2016).

International recognition of qualifications

International recognition of higher education qualifications is a key component of the RTHE, because it enables people to utilize the fruits of their RTHE after completing their studies. It allows people to be global citizens and exercise the opportunities provided by a diploma. International recognition of higher education qualifications allows a qualification from one education system to be acknowledged in another education system (UNESCO, 2020a); in other words, for the diploma holder to enjoy the same rights as nationals with an equivalent degree (UNESCO, 2017). This not only affects FDP and immigrants having already gone through higher education studies (with or without documentary proof), but also those who migrate mainly to get a degree and wish to use it in their home country or anywhere else. Moreover, recognition also facilitates the migration of highly skilled professionals around the world.

To facilitate this international mobility and promote the right of individuals to have their higher education qualifications evaluated in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner, UNESCO adopted the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in 2019 (UNESCO, n.d.-a). The significance of ratifying the Global Convention is that 'countries commit to strengthening international cooperation in higher education, raising its quality at home and worldwide, and helping make academic mobility and the recognition of qualifications a reality for millions around the world' (UNESCO, n.d.-a, para. 3). The Global Convention specifically addresses the recognition of

qualifications of refugees, even in cases where documentary evidence is lacking (UNESCO, n.d.-a)[18]. UNESCO has also pioneered a Qualifications Passport for refugees which 'summarizes and presents available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience and language proficiency' (UNESCO, 2020d, p. 2). In the meantime, bilateral treaties and regional conventions of recognition of qualifications[19] are used for that purpose. However, such treaties and conventions typically do not include inter-regional or international recognition of qualifications.

It is worth mentioning that the recognition process usually implies costs, such as for translation, application fees, or even complementary studies or training (UNESCO, 2017). Although there are significant efforts made by UNESCO and other international/regional organizations on international recognition of higher education qualifications, much work remains to be done regarding international recognition of previous levels of education. For FDP and migrants, recognition of prior learning is critical to exercise their right to higher education. Immigrants, especially those forcibly displaced, might have lost or forgotten documentary evidence in their migration process; however, even when having documentary evidence, this might not be deemed enough by host countries (UNESCO, 2017). Also, in cases where migration occurs when people seek to avoid war and violence, institutions may no longer exist, which adds to the difficulty of international recognition (Ferede, 2018). A similar case is that of persons who flee their country from persecution by the government. Without the support of their government, international recognition can be an impossible feat (Ferede, 2018).

Without the recognition of their primary or secondary studies, depending on the time of

their education, in most cases, immigrants have more difficulties accessing primary, secondary, or post-secondary education in the destination country. Therefore, international recognition of qualifications (higher education and previous levels of education) is a key component of the RTHE of refugees and migrants alike.

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18 At the time of writing, the Global Convention has not yet come into force as it requires ratification by more States.

19 https://www.unesco.org/en/education/higher-education/conventions

10 Conclusion

This conceptual paper has made the case for the RTHE in the context of the evolving right to education and as an integral part of the right to lifelong learning, given that higher education is a public good that should be available to all. The paper sets out a new social justice framework that helps us to better understand the multiple factors that make up the RTHE by emphasizing the need to transform institutional structures to put all students at the heart of higher education.

The framework draws on four established perspectives – the 5 As framework, inclusive excellence, equity deserving groups, and intersectionality – each of which helps to bring out important considerations when applying a social justice perspective to the RTHE. For example, the 'acceptability' component of the 5 As framework raises issues about the relevance of higher education provision and how governments and HEIs can assure the quality of this provision. The notion of inclusive excellence illuminates the ways that change can only be effective at institutional level if it happens from the leadership down. The terminology of equity deserving groups retains the focus on the need to transform structures, underscoring that it is not students who are at fault but the systems that have let them down. Identifying and acknowledging the intersectionality of many students, especially those who are equity deserving, ensures that both barriers and solutions to the RTHE are appropriately crafted.

Although the focus in this conceptual paper is on the RTHE, any discussion about access to higher education must be contextualized as part of the analysis of the entire education system. The narrowing education pipeline restricts people's access to higher education, particularly those from equity deserving groups who become ever more disadvantaged the more they try to progress through the stages of education. This issue is becoming ever more relevant as more students attempt to progress through the pipeline, and in the context of the implications of the massification of access to higher education.

Looking at the right to higher education through a social justice lens requires an understanding of merit that accounts for the intersection of socio-economic factors that can influence a person's performance prior to entering the system. Rethinking merit in this context should also involve the acknowledgement of the role HEIs play in supporting their students to succeed from their initial access to their graduation and beyond. In other words, it is not only about the end result or scores, but also how institutions can support the learning experience to enhance student success.

While student success is not always considered when examining the right to higher education, this conceptual paper has shown the criticality of taking a broader approach. Having overcome multiple barriers to make it to higher education, many students – especially those from equity deserving groups – may continue to experience challenges that threaten their ability either to complete their studies or to fully benefit from the experience of higher education.

Student success can be enhanced when higher education provision is of good quality and is relevant. This requires a system-level examination of institutional differentiation and ensuring that suitable provision is available, whether through specialized HEIs, culturally appropriate forms of teaching and learning, and/or harnessing the benefits of technology. Quality and relevance also stretch throughout a person's lifespan, bringing to attention the connections between the RTHE and lifelong learning.

In the context of inclusive excellence, the conceptual paper examined how institutional policies and administration can further the RTHE. Fostering a social justice mindset in HEI leader-

ship and genuinely embracing structural diversity must form part of efforts to reform higher education structures and systems that for too long have remained exclusive and unwelcoming. Administrative processes that remove institutional barriers and are coordinated in their support for students will reinforce the mindset with concrete actions and strategies.

The perennial question of how higher education should be funded is critical for the RTHE. Those who argue for higher education to be totally free point to countries where this has been introduced and to the risks of relying on private higher education to accommodate student demand. The counter arguments point to ever-increasing pressures on state funding as well as the fact that while students from advantaged backgrounds access higher education disproportionately, free higher education would only serve to reproduce existing inequalities.

With migration expanding around the world, those have been forcibly displaced by war, climate change or other crises, face particular challenges in accessing higher education. Moreover, the growing intensity of human movement has not been accompanied by concerted efforts at international and regional levels to recognize different types of higher education qualification.

Three areas for future consideration

The conceptual paper also identified three areas of growing concern – how to rethink 'merit', how to fund higher education, and how to assure students' rights in global context – and discussed their implications for the RTHE.

Taking appropriate policy measures to enhance the quality of schooling to support all types of learners will widen the education pipeline that is currently restrictive with respect to who is deemed to have sufficient 'merit' to enter higher education. This can be complemented by policies that positively discriminate students from equity deserving groups such as quotas, and a contextualized admissions system should be adopted by governments and HEIs. HEIs should also strengthen policies and procedures to support these students, for example through personalized support services, culturally appropriate courses and curriculum materials, and also through institutional leadership that takes a social justice approach.

To fully achieve social justice, higher education should be provided to all students for free. Recognizing that this systemic barrier may take time to dismantle, states and HEIs may initially target equity deserving groups to assure that they receive higher education at no cost. Private activity in higher education should be regulated to ensure that all students have access to higher education that meets the 'acceptability' principle of the 5 As framework. There is equally a need to reach consensus that no private provision of higher education should be for-profit.

Assuring students' rights in a global context will require intensified efforts to develop mechanisms which recognize prior learning and qualifications, particularly of refugees and forcibly displaced people. At the international level, this can be achieved with more countries signing up to trial the UNESCO Qualifications Passport. Nationally/ institutionally, changes to policies and regulations regarding admission to higher education should aim to reduce administrative and financial barriers for those forced to leave their home country. Each signatory added to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education and the relevant Regional Conventions lends weight to international efforts to strengthen cooperation and improve the quality of higher education around the world.

These three areas continue to be of concern because they have no easy solutions and more importantly, current global circumstances appear

to be exacerbating them. This is why assuring the RTHE across national contexts and putting the social justice framework to work will require considerable long-term efforts that include and engage a wide range of stakeholders. Such commitment by states, HEIs and the international community would serve to fuel continued action so that the right to higher education truly is a right enjoyed by all throughout life.

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