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Reaching for the right to higher education

Evidence from 15 countries

Education 2030

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Reaching for the right to higher education: Evidence from 15 countries

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Right to higher education policies

Foreword

The right to higher education stands at a critical juncture in our global journey toward educational equity and social justice. While we celebrate that global enrolment has doubled in the past two decades, with over 250 million students now participating in higher education worldwide, we cannot ignore the persistent and deep inequalities in who can access, succeed in, and benefit from higher education. These disparities have been further exacerbated by recent global challenges, from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, making UNESCO's mission to ensure the right to higher education more urgent than ever.

Our commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 demands that we look beyond simple access to higher education. Quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all remain at the heart of UNESCO's vision, with particular attention to those who have been historically excluded or marginalised. This requires a fundamental shift in how we conceptualise higher education – not as a privilege for the few, but as a fundamental right for all, protected by international law and essential for human dignity and development.

The social justice framework presented in this report marks a crucial evolution in UNESCO IESALC's approach to the right to higher education. By focusing on equity deserving groups – including Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, those with limited economic means, women, LGBTQ+ persons, forcibly displaced people, and those from remote or rural locations – we acknowledge that realising the right to higher education requires actively addressing and dismantling systemic barriers that have perpetuated inequality.

This report, synthesising evidence from 15 national case studies, offers both hope and challenge. While countries have implemented various policy measures – from targeted funding to quota systems – the persistence of inequalities reminds us that piecemeal approaches are insufficient. The evidence clearly shows that we need comprehensive, systemic change that not only addresses access, but which drives success and flourishing in higher education.

Let me insist, as I have done at other opportunities, that the exclusion of higher education from many international discussions about educational equality represents a critical oversight that must be addressed. Higher education plays a vital role in fostering social mobility, driving innovation, and building more equitable societies. At a time when our world faces unprecedented challenges, ensuring equitable access to higher education becomes not just a matter of individual rights, but of collective survival and prosperity.

The new typology of policy instruments presented in this report – spanning funding for students, information, infrastructure, pathways, quotas, and regulation – provides a framework for understanding and evaluating different approaches to realising the right to higher education. However, our analysis shows that the most effective interventions combine multiple policy measures and address both structural and individual barriers to participation.

UNESCO IESALC remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing this crucial work. This report represents not just an analysis of current practices, but a call to action. It challenges us to move beyond traditional approaches and embrace a transformative vision of higher education – one that truly serves all members of society, particularly those who have been historically marginalised.

The evidence and recommendations presented here provide a roadmap for policymakers, institutions, and advocates working to make the right to higher education a reality. But more importantly, they remind us that this work is not just about expanding access – it's about reimagining higher education itself as a force for social justice and transformation.

As we look to the future, UNESCO IESALC will continue to champion the right to higher education, working with partners worldwide to build more inclusive, equitable, and just higher education systems. While the challenge before us is significant, so too is the opportunity to create lasting change. The path forward requires sustained commitment, innovative approaches, and collective action from all stakeholders in higher education.

I invite you to engage deeply with the findings and recommendations in this report, and to join us in the crucial work of making the right to higher education a reality for all.

Francesc Pedró

Director of UNESCO IESALC

Executive summary

The right to higher education is an integral part of the fundamental right to education throughout life and is protected in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This right, according to UNESCO, is indisputable:

> *"International human rights law provides 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. If there is no requirement for higher education to be universally accessible, states must ensure that higher education is equally accessible on the basis of 'capacity', with no discrimination."*
>
> (UNESCO and Right to Education Initiative, 2022, p. 9)

In recent years, access to education has dramatically increased, illiteracy rates have plummeted, and provision of education has greatly expanded as a result of demographic, economic, and technological changes. Growing demand for higher education has also been influenced by the heightened recognition of higher education as a human right and the consequent advocacy of its importance. By 2020, just before the onset of the pandemic, the global gross enrolment ratio had risen to 40%, double the rate from 20 years previous. Today, there are over 260 million students in higher education around the world. Looking ahead, it is predicted that by 2040, just short of 25% of the world's population will have at least some tertiary education.

Nevertheless, the right to higher education as part of the overall right to education has received less attention in the past, despite higher education's value at multiple levels. And although the right to higher education is clearly enshrined in international law, the world is far from ensuring that all people can benefit from continuing their education beyond school.

Setting out to respond to pressing contemporary challenges in higher education, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America & the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC) has embarked on an ambitious and ongoing global project since 2021 to build up the evidence base relating to the right to higher education. Ultimately, the objective is to make a stronger case for collective advocacy when it comes to the right to higher education. Synthesising an intense period of activity, this report takes stock of and summarises the key findings regarding the policies, challenges, and possibilities that emerged from 15 national case studies on the right to higher education commissioned by UNESCO IESALC.[1]

The countries included are Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, England, Ghana, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Morocco, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, and Türkiye. The case studies are evaluations of tried and tested policy efforts by different governments to improve the right to higher education, authored by researchers and policymakers with extensive experience and authentic expertise in their jurisdiction. The detailed policy analysis in each case study, the consistent application of a template for the national reports, the global reach of the case studies, and the emphasis on the right to higher education are the factors that differentiate this endeavour from other important recent studies on equity in global higher education.

1 The case studies are available in English and Spanish in the UNESCO Digital Library (UNESDOC) at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/

In addition, this synthesis report presents a new typology through which to analyse policies related to the right to higher education, adding to knowledge of policy change in international and comparative perspective. This typology offers a more expansive range of policy instruments, defining six categories: funding for students, information, infrastructure, pathways, quotas, and regulation. Dedicated sections of the report outline the ways that policies in each of these categories can be understood as well as their key benefits and challenges. Policy examples from the case studies are also provided.

Based on the material presented in the synthesis report, **six key messages emerge from this review** of case studies on the right to higher education:

In the context of growing demand, financing is the biggest challenge to achieving the right to higher education.

Improving participation rates for students from equity deserving groups should be mandated.

The right to higher education goes beyond access; student success and pathways are equally critical.

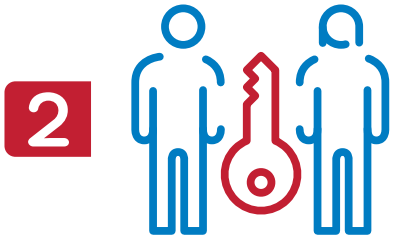
Combining policy measures increases the likelihood of achieving the right to higher education.

More data is needed: Improving the evidence baseline will support positive change.

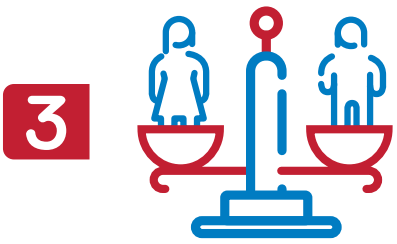
The potential of technology to support the right to higher education remains untapped.

In turn, **these key messages set the scene for five cross-cutting recommendations** for policymakers that seek to support states as they continue to reach for the right to higher education. In summary, the recommendations are:

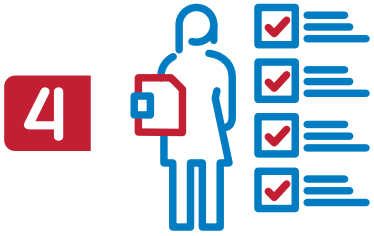
Transition towards removing the cost of higher education from students.



Regulate higher education access and success to reduce inequalities.



Ensure equal access to different forms of higher education provision.



Improve higher education accountability and efficiency through data and reporting.

Harness digital technologies more effectively to improve the right to higher education.

1 Introduction

Although the right to higher education is clearly enshrined in international law, the world is far from ensuring that everyone can benefit from continuing their education beyond school. Debates on how to improve the quality of higher education or how to establish constructive ways to support individual learners to achieve their potential have been overshadowed by global challenges, be that the devastation wreaked by the climate crisis, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating inequalities, or the risks that unchecked artificial intelligence may pose for education systems. Political shifts and a tendency towards short-term policymaking in many countries have ramifications for all levels of education, with higher education sometimes used as a testing ground for reform or seen as a site of anti-government movement to be censured. The legacy of colonialism continues to cause fundamental inter- and intra-systemic educational inequalities. Furthermore, in troubled geopolitical times, it is easy to lose momentum when the struggle to access any kind of education has been so gravely imperilled for many millions of learners around the globe.

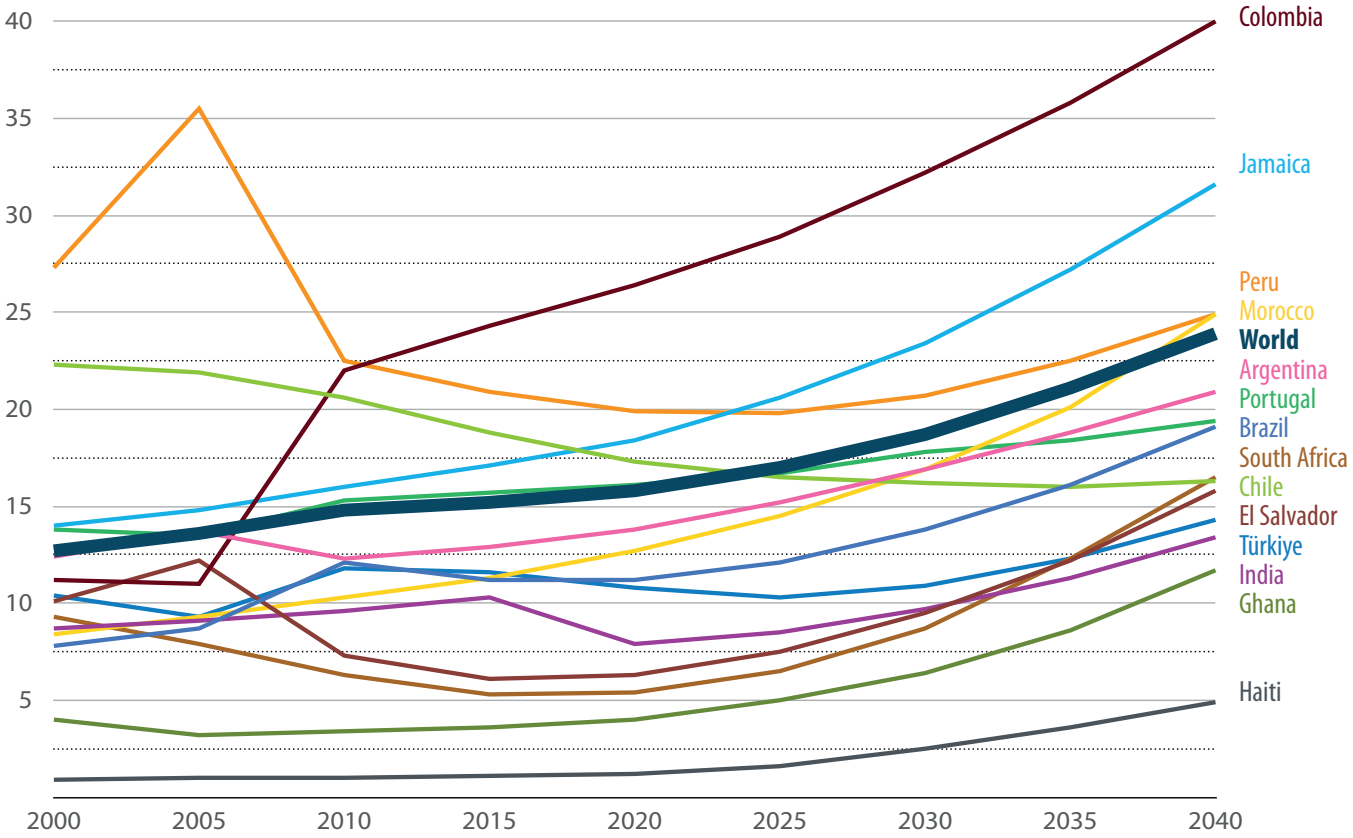
At the same time, it is easy to lose sight of just how much progress has been made. By 2020, just before the onset of the pandemic, the global gross enrolment ratio had risen to 40%, double the rate of 20 years previous. Today, there are over 260 million students in higher education around the world.[2] In many ways our higher education systems are markedly different from the first major wave of expansion in the 1950s to 1970s which extended higher education beyond the small, mostly male, elite that had benefited from it until then. Groups of students for whom higher education had historically been unavailable, whether for social, economic, political or other reasons, are engaging in post-school learning in ever-greater numbers. Looking ahead, it is predicted that by 2040, just short of 25% of the world's population will have at least some tertiary education (see Figure 1 on next page).

Now, as we enter waveringly into what some are calling the post-pandemic era, what is the current status of the right to higher education around the world? Are some policies and practices designed to improve equity in higher education more prevalent than others? What measures can be taken to know whether they are effective? Which equity deserving groups remain the most vulnerable, and how can the right to higher education for these – and all – students be assured?

Setting out to respond to these pressing challenges, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America & the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC) has embarked on an ambitious and ongoing global project since 2021 to build up the evidence base relating to the right to higher education. Ultimately, the objective is to make a stronger case for collective advocacy when it comes to the right to higher education. UNESCO is convinced of the transformative potential of education to build a more peaceful, just and harmonious world. Higher education in particular has a key role to play in shaping individuals' trajectories, benefiting communities from local to global levels, and supporting peace.

2 In 2023, global enrolment in tertiary education (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Levels 5 to 8) was estimated by UNESCO Institute for Statistics at 263,855,482 people.

Figure 1. Share of the population with tertiary education[3], national case study countries and world average, 2000-2040



(Barro and Lee (2015); Lee and Lee (2016) with major processing by Our World in Data, 2023)

In 2022 and 2023 , UNESCO IESALC commissioned a series of 15 national case studies[4] across a range of global contexts to examine policies implemented to enhance the right to higher education. Simultaneously, a series of nine regional and thematic consultations on the right to higher education were organised involving academics, activists, higher education leaders, policymakers, students, and youth representatives from around the world. In 2022, four high profile events at the World Higher Education Conference were convened, including a panel of Ministers of higher education discussing what it would take to achieve higher education for all, a statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, and a youth-led discussion on higher education as a human right. These case studies, consultations, and events were shaped by the creation of a new social justice framework for the right to higher education put forward by UNESCO IESALC (2022b).

Synthesising this intense period of activity, this report takes stock of and summarises the key findings regarding the policies, challenges, and possibilities that emerged from the 15 national case studies. The countries included are Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, England, Ghana, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Morocco, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, and Türkiye. The case studies are evaluations of policy efforts by different governments to improve the right

3 Percentage of the population aged 25 to 65 years who have either completed or partially completed tertiary education. Tertiary education includes ISCED Levels 5 to 8.

4 The case studies are available in English and Spanish in the UNESCO Digital Library at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/

to higher education. They are all authored by researchers with extensive experience and authentic expertise in their jurisdiction.

This report is organised as follows:

- **Section 2** discusses the importance and meaning of the right to higher education, introducing and explaining UNESCO IESALC's social justice framework introduced that has shaped this work.
- **Section 3** explains the methodology used in this synthesis report and introduces a new typology through which to analyse policies related to the right to higher education.
- **Sections 4 to 9** follow the order of the six parts of the new typology: funding for students, information, infrastructure, pathways, quotas, and regulation. Each section outlines the ways that policies in these groupings can be understood as well as their key benefits and challenges. Policy examples from the case studies are also provided.
- **Section 10** summarises the key messages of the synthesis reports and presents cross-cutting recommendations for government policymakers.

It is critical to recall that the right to higher education invariably differs in every context as a result of each country's unique set of historical and current circumstances. It follows that the recommendations provided in this report stem from the experiences of the countries surveyed by the UNESCO IESALC case studies. A policy or practice that works in one place may not serve in another or be relevant to the challenges faced elsewhere, but this does not diminish the importance of continually learning from both tested and innovative approaches in the quest to reach for the right to higher education for all.

2 What is the right to higher education? [5]

The right to higher education is an integral part of the fundamental right to education throughout life and is protected in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This right, according to UNESCO, is indisputable:

> *"International human rights law provides 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. If there is no requirement for higher education to be universally accessible, states must ensure that higher education is equally accessible on the basis of 'capacity,' with no discrimination."*
>
> (UNESCO and Right to Education Initiative, 2022, p. 9)

In recent years, access to education has dramatically increased, illiteracy rates have plummeted, and the provision of education has greatly expanded, driven by demographic, economic, and technological changes. Increased demand for higher education has also been influenced by the increased recognition of higher education as a human right and the subsequent advocacy of its importance. Nevertheless, the right to higher education as part of this right has received limited attention, despite higher education's value at multiple levels. For example, while the right to education is legally recognized in 85% of countries,[6] only 36% explicitly recognise the right to **higher** education in national legislation.[7]

Access is most commonly associated with the right to higher education, including matters such as who can participate in higher education, how people become qualified to enter higher education, the connections between other levels of education and higher education, how participation may be widened, how higher education should be financed, and the relative equity of access to higher education. Given the importance of these considerations, it is unsurprising that this access dimension has received the most consideration by policymakers, practitioners, researchers, students, and the general population. This is also reflected in the emphasis of the policies featured in the national case studies on the right to higher education that are analysed in this report. Nevertheless, it is crucial to ensure that **student success**, which may be understood as student wellbeing, flourishing or thriving, is equally central to the right to higher education. This aspect focuses on the support provided for students to be able to fully participate in and benefit from higher education, both in their individual capacity and as part of wider society. Students' ability to succeed is underpinned by quality higher education that is well-governed.

5 Parts of this section first appeared in UNESCO IESALC's 2022 report, "The right to higher education: A social justice perspective." https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381750

6 This is comprised of 124 out of 146 countries included in the UNESCO IESALC HE Policy Observatory (as of March 2024). There is no recognition in 8% of countries and the information is unknown or not applicable in 7% of countries. https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/policy-hub/observatory

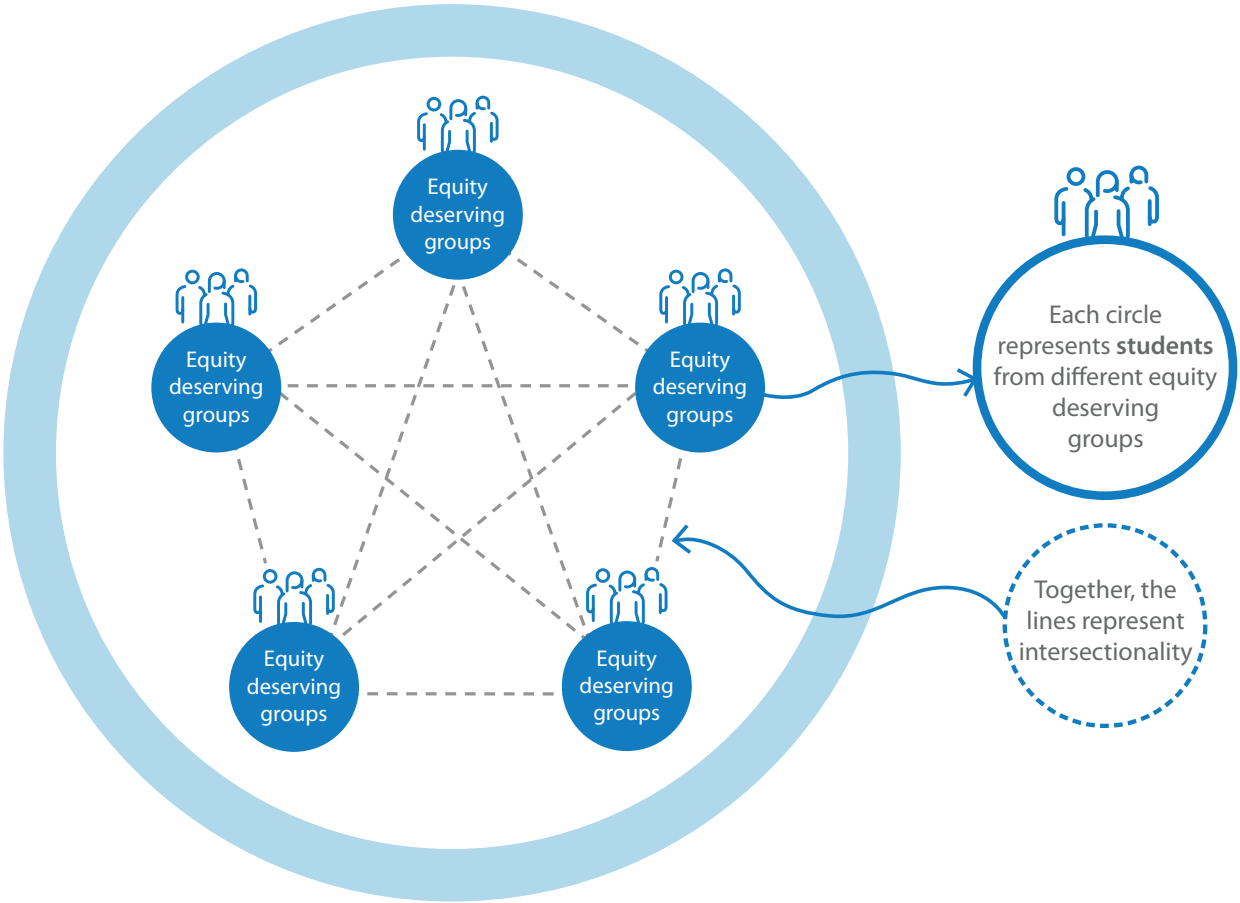
7 This is comprised of 53 out of 146 countries included in the UNESCO IESALC HE Policy Observatory (as of March 2024). There is no explicit recognition in 38% of countries and the information is unknown or not applicable in 25% of countries. https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/policy-hub/observatory

2.1 Social justice framework on the right to higher education

To better understand the right to higher education, a social justice driven framework has been developed (Figure 2). This approach highlights the unfair distribution 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 framework is inter-related with four perspectives: the role of states (through the 5 As), institutional responsibilities (inclusive excellence), and the overlapping nature of inequalities experienced by students (the twin perspectives of equity deserving groups and intersectionality).

The 5 As framework outlines all states' human rights obligations to make education available, 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, provides higher education institutions (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. In 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 centre of all considerations of the right to higher education. The use of the term 'equity deserving groups'

Figure 2. A social justice framework on the right to higher education



Source: (UNESCO IESALC, 2022b)

shifts the focus away from the student being at a deficit and towards the higher education systems' and underpinning societal structures' need to change. Finally, intersectionality ensures that equity deserving groups are not considered in silos but rather in their holistic complexity.

This social justice framework underpins the national case studies on the right to higher education synthesised in this report. In practical terms, this means that the ideas and perspectives put forward in the framework bolster the content and emphasis placed on different topics connecting to the right to higher education.

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

The original 4 As framework was developed by the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education to outline actionable approaches to the right to education. It is grounded in the idea that education can only become a meaningful right (instead of a 'quasi-right'[8]) if governments can act upon 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 realisation of education as a human right (Tomaševski, 2001). In this way, governments are obliged not only to recognise but to promote and to protect the right to education for all people. In order for commitments and progress to be sustained over time, and to account for the evolution of the 4 As as new challenges arise, UNESCO has further acknowledged the need for and importance of **accountability** and included it as a fifth dimension, completing the 5 As framework (Saffirio, 2020).

The five dimensions can be summarised as follows:

- **Availability**: educational institutions must have infrastructure, trained teachers, teaching materials, and be appropriately funded and affordable to all.
- **Accessibility**: educational institutions must be accessible to everyone, with 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 regarding the needs of changing contexts, always responding to students' needs. 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.

The framework supports calls to make higher education fairer and to dismantle systemic barriers that have traditionally 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 materialised.

2.1.2 Inclusive excellence

The second dimension for understanding social justice in higher education is fostering **inclusive excellence**. This is targeted at higher education institutions as a framework for incorporating diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness (Williams, Berger, and McClendon, 2005); in other words, the

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

purposeful deployment of inclusive practices toward multiple student identity groups (Salazar, Norton and Tuitt, 2010). Inclusive excellence positively affects diversity outcomes such as experiences with diversity, cultural awareness, and commitment to issues of equity (Milem, 2003).

The benefits of inclusive excellence include improved student academic outcomes, diversity, and civic outcomes. Students feel welcome and campuses are inclusive (Sabharwal and Malish, 2017). Improved academic outcomes are evidenced in higher educational aspirations, motivation, and self-confidence, heightened creativity and innovation, and stronger critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Milem, 2003). Inclusive excellence can also lead 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 emphasising the specific role 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 right to higher education.

2.1.3 Equity deserving groups

It has become common to refer to marginalised 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; as such, it 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 marginalised 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 right to higher education truly is a right. The second reason is the choice to recognise and call these groups 'equity deserving' for the aforementioned reasons.

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 and D'Addio, 2021) ensuring inclusive access and success is essential to achieve social justice and economic efficiency. With this premise in mind, this article reviews current knowledge about equity promotion policies in higher education and what is known about the effectiveness of various policies, drawing from experience in various parts of the world. It starts with reviewing definitions of under-represented groups in higher education, which can be considered as 'equity target groups'. After examining the depth and scope of disparities across regions and countries, it analyses studies focusing on the effectiveness of equity promotion policies and measures. For this purpose, it distinguishes between financial aid programmes (grants, loans

and it is important to recall that the local context also influences who is under-represented or marginalised by higher education. Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify the following equity deserving groups who are prevalent in most, if not all, societies:

Racialised 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). Although who is considered a racialised person is highly context specific, historically it has included Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and other people of colour. Structural racism has been embedded in HEIs from their origins and throughout their role in the history of colonisation and slavery (Museus, Ledesma and Parker, 2015) and it continues to be reproduced in many forms.

Indigenous peoples[9] and minorities: Indigenous peoples have been arbitrarily racialised and have historically faced injustices stemming from colonisation of their communities and dispossession of their lands, as well as various forms of discrimination including those based on language, culture, 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, Solyom and Castagno, 2015). 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 students' transition and success 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 privatisation and marketisation of higher education are expected to increase income inequality, decrease social mobility, and hinder people's right to access quality education (Velayutham, 2021). Beyond the cost of accessing higher education, students with low-income backgrounds have other economic burdens that may include a lack of access to adequate food, housing, and technology that negatively impact their retention and graduation (Patel and Field, 2020).

Persons with disabilities: Major obstacles for persons with disabilities include lower performance expectations, lack of awareness and discriminatory attitudes from the rest of the higher education community (Barida, Rofiah and Fitrianawati, 2020). The physical design of HEIs may not be inclusive of diverse needs, creating technical and other barriers (Gómez and Fernández, 2018). Assessment practices such as timed written examinations can discriminate against neurodiverse people with disabilities who learn and express their understanding differently (Hanafin *et al.*, 2007). There is no 'one size fits all' response as disabilities affect people in different ways, which requires flexibility and constant evaluation (Mestre-Escrivá, 2022).

Women: Women now make up a slightly larger share (53%) of graduates with Bachelor's and Master's degrees worldwide, but at the doctoral level, the share of female graduates drops to

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

44% (UNESCO IESALC, 2021). Higher female enrolment is not universal: in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 73 female students are enrolled for every 100 males (UNESCO IESALC, 2021). Women's right to higher education is also limited by subject; for example, there are fewer females enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers due to cultural norms and stereotypes (UNESCO IESALC, 2021).

LGBTQ+ persons: 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 (Garvey, Taylor and Rankin, 2015). Although there is limited data on LGBTQ+ persons in higher education, available 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 (Grimwood, 2017). Campuses that are not safe or do not respect diverse identities may limit the access and retention of LGBTQ+ students (Ward and Gale, 2017).

Forcibly displaced people (FDP):[10] FDP, including refugees, internally displaced people (IDP) and asylum seekers, are subject to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, climate-driven events, or other seriously disturbing events. Only 7% of refugee youth is enrolled in higher education and even fewer complete their studies (UNHCR, 2023). Considering that the FDP 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.

People from remote and/or rural locations: Most HEIs are located in urban areas, an evident barrier to access, notably for those students who reside in rural areas. Travel distance has a negative association with university enrolment (White and Lee, 2020)there are few studies investigating the interplay between geography and the decision to attend university, particularly in the UK. This study aims to establish if distance to university is associated with the probability of enrolling in higher education in England and forms the quantitative half of a mixed-methods study on the subject. An ordinal logistic regression analysis of HESA enrollment data, which controls for deprivation, is employed. The investigation uses average direct measures of distance between each census area and university campus in England to determine the relationship between distance and enrollment. The findings suggest that geographical distance to university has a negative association with university enrollment. Students within the 10 km measure had a significantly increased odds of enrolling at university than students in the 40 km and above category (odds ratio 10.89; 95% CI 1–2. 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). These barriers have amplified due to the pandemic (Trahar *et al.*, 2020).

2.1.4 Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw initially 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,

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

1991). As Crenshaw explained in a more recent interview, intersectionality is a lens for 'seeing the way in which various forms of inequality operate together and exacerbate each other' (Steinmetz, 2020, para. 4), not just the sum of inequalities. Intersections explain power relations perpetuated by privileged groups in an institution or context; on the other hand, marginalised individuals with multiple identities often wield less power (Chan, Erby and Ford, 2017). In higher education, the most frequent identity vector used in combination with others is gender, followed by race and then social class and sexuality; the most common intersection was gender, race, and social class (Nichols and Stahl, 2019).

This dimension has been added to the framework to recognise the multiple intersections that exist in different contexts and to underpin the need to plan and take actions to overcome intersections of inequality in higher education.

3 Methodology

UNESCO IESALC commissioned 15 national case studies during the first phase of its ongoing project on the right to higher education. The selected case study countries (Figure 3) had implemented policy changes since 2000 (or in some cases, starting slightly earlier). Following a common template, each case study identified up to three key policies on the right to higher education, including relevant contextual data, and provided recommendations for next steps in the quest for equity. Almost all the case studies focused on national (or federal, as applicable) policies, although the case of Ghana includes institutional level policies because national policies were emergent or lacking information.

The distribution of the case studies is concentrated in Latin America and the Caribbean where UNESCO IESALC has historically focused its research and advocacy efforts. It also includes countries in other regions based on their recent policy efforts. The case studies were authored by higher education/country experts. Based on their authentic expertise in the country setting, the policies to be included were proposed by case study authors and discussed with the Right to Higher Education team at UNESCO IESALC. All case studies were subject to a detailed review process. Each case study has been published in English and Spanish and they are available in the UNESCO Digital Library.[11]

A total of 35 policies are included in the 15 case studies (see Appendix I for details). The detailed policy analysis in each case study, the consistent application of a template for the national reports, the global reach of the case studies, and the emphasis on the right to higher education

Figure 3. Map highlighting countries covered by the national case studies

11 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/

are the factors that differentiate this endeavour from other important recent studies of equity in global higher education (e.g. Salmi, 2018; Atherton, 2021; Tavares *et al.*, 2022). In addition, this synthesis report presents a new typology to analyse right to higher education policies, adding to knowledge of policy change in an international, comparative perspective.

Whereas a two-part classification - monetary and non-monetary policy instruments - has typically been applied to studies of higher education equity policies, the typology in this report offers a more expansive range of policy instruments, defining six categories: funding for students, information, infrastructure, pathways, quotas, and regulation. Some of the policy instruments are predistributive, seeking to reduce inequality through regulation, for example, whereas others are redistributive (such as funding for students) in that they disburse public finances to improve equality (Donald and Lusiani, 2016).

Countries have typically used a mix of policy instruments to address the right to higher education, notwithstanding often significant variation in the context of each country. As the typology presented in this study was devised based on the collective practices of 15 countries, it is adaptable to a range of experiences. It is also important to note that policies may cut across categories, especially those that are designed to be comprehensive. As such, the typology is designed to indicate the main features of a given policy, not to be an exclusive designator. Table 1 provides details of the policy instruments and where they are evidenced in the case studies. Appendix I offers further information about each policy in the case studies, categorising the main type of reform, providing the high-level rationale

Table 1. Typology of policies on the right to higher education

Policy instrument	Summary	Evidenced in case study countries
Funding for students	Scholarships, grants, fee removal, loans to students from equity deserving groups.	Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Morocco, Peru
Information	Measures to improve awareness of, information about, and support in higher education to increase school students' interest in post-school study and to better prepare students; information requirements placed on HEIs.	Argentina, Chile, England
Infrastructure	Expansion of a country's higher education infrastructure by creating new HEIs in under-served regions.	Argentina, Chile, Haiti, India, Morocco
Pathways	Recognition of alternative routes to higher education; creation or improvement of pathways within and between HEIs/ educational sectors (college/university, for example).	Argentina, El Salvador, India, Jamaica, Portugal
Quotas	Singular or packaged measures for specified equity deserving groups, including reserved vacancies, differential admissions requirements, and/or financial support.	Brazil, Ghana, Portugal
Regulation	Requirements placed on HEIs to improve equity as a condition of being able to operate.	England, Peru, South Africa

behind the policy, and summarising the main actions undertaken.

It is important to clarify that this report is principally based on information that was available at the time of conducting the case studies in 2022 and 2023. Subsequent political and socio-economic changes are therefore not discussed. At the time of writing the case studies, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was known but not fully understood. Only in the years to come will the longitudinal effects of the pandemic become more evident.

The sections that follow examine each of the categories in this new typology in turn, offering selected examples from the national case studies to illustrate the range of policy mechanisms. Unless otherwise indicated, all data is drawn from the respective national case study.

4 Funding for students

The most widespread policy mechanism to improve the right to higher education is funding for students. Indeed, 73% (11/15) of the national case studies featured financial policies that have been directed towards student support – Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Morocco, Peru, South Africa, and Türkiye.[12] These policies can be further divided into three sub-categories: **targeted scholarships for equity deserving students**, **financial aid schemes**, and **student loans**.

In systems where tuition is charged, a common policy measure has been to provide specific equity deserving groups scholarships that offset some or all of the cost of study. Equity deserving groups discussed in the case studies include those that were marginalised by settler colonial societies such as **Black/Afro-descendants, Indigenous** and **mixed-race people**, other groups that have faced societal discrimination including **females** and **people with disabilities**; and groups that have been under-represented in higher education such as **mature students** and **refugees**. The most common equity deserving group is students from **low-income backgrounds** or challenging socio-economic circumstances.

In some systems, student financial aid policies have been packaged to include a range of policy measures that may include scholarships and loans. As a step towards the right to higher education, student funding has received the most attention both from policymakers and in the literature; the examples provided here from the case studies of Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, and India are illustrative. Although loans are widely used, non-repayment and high threshold/repayment requirements have the dual disadvantage of adding to state costs while disincentivising students from accessing higher education.

The main differences between countries lie in the relative prioritisation of various equity deserving groups, the balance between non-repayable (bursaries, grants, and scholarships) and repayable (loans) funding, and whether private or public HEIs are eligible to receive funding (directly via government offsets or indirectly when funding follows the student). There is also variation in the administration of student funding, for example how it is managed (e.g., by a designated scholarship body, typically run at arm's length from the Ministry of Education), how students apply/become eligible, and funding repayment terms. There is no compelling evidence from the case studies to suggest that any one mode operates more efficiently or produces more equitable outcomes.

That said, the more straightforward the opportunity is to apply for and receive student funding, the more students stand to benefit from it. Low scholarship take-up in Jamaica, for example, can be partly attributed to the complicated conditions attached to funding. It also stands to reason that funding which covers all of a student's costs is more likely to support students' fulfilling their right to higher education. In situations where not all students can be funded, the focus on equity deserving groups is justified. Some countries use national/jurisdiction-level information systems/vulnerability assessment and identification systems (such as the case studies found in Colombia and Peru) and coordinate their use

12 Other countries also provide funding for students, but these may not have been discussed in the case studies given their focus on other policy measures.

with higher education admissions to provide data on socio-economic status. Processes like these can simplify the administrative burden of managing funding schemes by creatively deploying existing databases.

In addition to these redistributive measures, **free higher education** is a predistributive mechanism featuring in four of the national case studies. Fully removing the cost of higher education has been a rallying call in debates on the right to higher education, particularly from students' perspective. Without tuition and other fees and costs, one key barrier to entry – that of finances – is removed. This in turn enhances the prospects for wider socio-economic participation and demonstrates that higher education is considered as vital to society as school-level education which, in public systems, is available free of charge. In the case of free higher education, the state undertakes the costs of providing teaching and supporting HEIs. There may be additional or alternative funding from private providers such as privately run HEIs or privately funded scholarships, but the core funding is assumed to be governmental.

To date, however, there is no higher education system in the world that provides free higher education for *all*. Just under 30% of countries guarantee free public higher education by legally mandating this at national level.[13] By region, the highest prevalence of free higher education is in Central & Eastern Europe, where 58.33% of countries guarantee free public higher education, followed by Latin America & the Caribbean (54.55%), and Central Asia (50%). The lowest rates by region are found in East Asia & the Pacific, where 5.88% of countries uphold this guarantee, and in the Arab States (10.53%).[14]

University for All (Prouni)
Brazil

Prouni was created in 2004 as a scholarship programme offering full and partial funding to low-income students with quotas for people with disabilities and those self-declaring as Indigenous, Black or mixed race in alignment with the representation of each group in each state's general population. Income is evaluated according to the gross family income compared to the minimum wage. Non-means-tested scholarships are also offered for teacher training courses in line with the National Education Plan goal to promote teacher training.

A unique feature of Prouni compared to other targeted scholarships is that it provides funding for students to study at private HEIs (both non-profit and for-profit), recognising that 90% of HEIs in Brazil are private and that the much smaller public sector is under major duress from high demand. In this public-private partnership, private HEIs must commit to offering at least one full scholarship for every 10.7 paying students (or one full plus some partial scholarships per 22 tuition payers). Scholarships must be available in all subjects as long as the courses' quality standards have been approved by the National Higher Education Assessment System (Sinaes). Failure to meet the requisite number leads to a penalty, while in meeting commitments the private HEIs receive tax exemptions, which according to the case study has no upfront cost for the government to implement.

13 43 out of 146 countries included in the UNESCO IESALC HE Policy Observatory (as of March 2024). https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/policy-hub/observatory

14 Based on the total number of countries in the region, including those for which data on free higher education is not available.

Prouni has had a significant impact on expanding access to higher education in Brazil, with around 20% of all undergraduate enrolments now being scholarship holders. Around 2/3 of HEIs offer scholarships. Between 2005 and 2020, approximately 2.8 million scholarships were offered through Prouni in Brazil, of which an estimated 70% are full scholarships and 30% are partial. A notable trend has been the increased number of distance-learning scholarships, up from 5% of the total in 2005 to almost one-third in 2020. Almost 75% of those studying in-person are enrolled in evening programmes, suggesting that many students are combining study with work. The dropout rate of Prouni holders was 10% in 2012, much lower compared to the average 41% in private HEIs and 34% in public HEIs.

While Prouni has significantly diversified the student population in Brazil, graduates are concentrated in subjects that may lead to lower professional remuneration. For example, among students whose mother had partial schooling, the percentage of graduates in social work increased from 27% to 51% in private HEIs, whereas the number remained at 3% for medicine.

Ser Pilo Paga and Generación E
Colombia

Colombia's flagship policies to support students from low-income backgrounds are *Ser Pilo Paga* (SPP), which ran from 2014-18, and its successor *Generación E*. These built on a longstanding tradition of education loans but took a new direction by offering a tuition and expenses loan that converts into a scholarship upon successful completion of an academic programme at an accredited HEI.[15] SPP was offered to applicants that qualified under three criteria: 1) who had scored over a certain threshold on the national standardised test *Prueba Saber 11*, taken upon completion of secondary school, 2) whose *Sisbén*[16] score was under a certain range (the range being determined differentially based on main city/urban/rural distinctions), and 3) who had been admitted to an accredited HEI.

Generación E expanded the remit of SPP by creating two tracks for students. Under the *Equidad* (Equity) track, a specific score in the *Prueba Saber 11* was not required but the *Sisbén* score was lowered. Those who were eligible received a tuition subsidy instead of a potentially repayable loan. In the *Excelencia* (Excellence) track, the required *Prueba Saber 11* score was raised was as well as the number of eligible HEIs to include private HEIs, which were required to cover 25% of the tuition (the remaining 75% being covered by the government). *Generación E* also included an

15 Accreditation is a voluntary process overseen by the Ministry of National Education and awarded based on the recommendation of the National Accreditation Council. In 2021, 76 of the country's HEIs (26% of the total) had received accreditation.

16 Sisbén is the Identification System of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes, a nationwide scheme that classifies the population based on socioeconomic criteria with a score of 0-100, where 0 represents the highest level of poverty and vulnerability.

Equipo (Team) track to enhance operating resources in public HEIs, but this has not been enacted in recent policy documents.

Almost 40,000 students were supported by SPP between 2014 and 2018, expanding access to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, **Colombia's SPP policy doubled the likelihood of accessing accredited HEIs and decreased dropout rates after the first semester**. Between 2018 and 2021, nearly 228,000 students received support under *Generación E*, 96% of whom qualified under the *Excelencia* track.

Criticisms of the SPP policy in Colombia led to its replacement by *Generación E*. A major complaint about SPP was its inadequate coverage: although it reached almost 40,000 students, this represented on average only 2.15% of the number of students who were assessed in the *Prueba Saber 11* test. SPP was also critiqued for strengthening the private higher education sector, as an average of 83% of beneficiaries in 2014-17 enrolled in private HEIs with the government paying their fees. At the same time, the case study reports a significant increase in the tuition at private HEIs. SPP also came under fire for the immediate repayment terms for students who dropped out (10% of the total), although repayment terms have become more flexible over time. If Colombia continues to deploy policies that depend on a construction of academic merit assessed by school exam score, the case study notes the equal importance of addressing structural inequalities in the school system that continue to disadvantage the country's low-income population.

Beca 18
Peru

In **Peru**, higher education reforms starting in 2010 and a change of President the following year created the conditions for new policies aiming to increase social inclusion for the country's poorest people. At this time, there were major disparities in access to higher education between income quintiles: over 30% of those in the highest income quintile accessed university compared to fewer than 5% of the lowest. In this context, the *Beca 18* scholarship program was established in 2011 to provide access to undergraduate courses for academic high performers from low socio-economic backgrounds or vulnerable groups (e.g., disabled people, those from Amazonian and Afroperuvian Native Communities, victims of armed conflict).

Fully funded by the government and implemented by the Pronabec agency, *Beca 18* covers fees and living costs in public and private HEIs that meet governmental quality criteria. Pre-existing tools to identify eligible candidates are used; in this case, the National Preselection Test for academics and the Household Targeting System (SISFOH) for poverty level.

Over 73,000 Beca 18 scholarships were awarded between 2013 and 2021, representing 42% of all government scholarships. Research has shown that the scholarship has had a positive impact on inclusion and social cohesion. Around a third of scholars come from rural schools. Persistence rates have improved over time: in 2019, fewer than 2% of awardees dropped out within the first year of study. A government

study of the 2013 cohort showed that 87% of graduates had a job and 72% were formally employed.

Several administrative challenges to *Beca 18* have been simplified over time (e.g., the requirement to have a letter of admission prior to applying for funding) but other bureaucratic obstacles remain (e.g., registration in SISFOH). More needs to be done to improve coordination with secondary schools and to provide better support for applicants before applying and during their higher education studies.

Beca 18 recipients have primarily been awarded for university programmes, leading to two further challenges: on the one hand, addressing the continued disparities in university access by income group as those from the lowest quintile still represent less than 10% of the student population – and on the other hand, to the need to improve the attraction of technical higher education in the country.

Tertiary Students' Assistance Programme

Jamaica

Introduced in 2019, **the Tertiary Students' Assistance Programme (TSAP) created for the first time a policy framework for the various types of financing offered in Jamaica**. TSAP has three main streams:

1. Merit-based scholarships in areas that meet workforce needs, and which legally requires students to work in Jamaica in their field for a specified period after graduating. Scholarships may cover up to 100% of tuition and other costs such as accommodation.

2. Needs-based grants for vulnerable students, with vulnerability assessed on household living conditions and socio-economic and demographic characteristics (e.g., age, access to social amenities). Needs-based grants are for a maximum of $1,900, covering a small percentage of the overall cost – a first-degree programme is estimated to cost between $10,000 and $37,400.

3. Jamaica Values and Attitudes (JAMVAT), a needs-based work/study programme providing a 30% tuition discount (capped at $2,300 per academic year) in exchange for 200 hours of public service.

Scholarship and grant eligibility criteria includes a residency requirement, being enrolled in a full-time in-person locally accredited associate, diploma or undergraduate programme, being aged 30 years or younger (with some exceptions), and maintaining a minimum academic standing. Students may only hold one award per course of study, and all are required to complete community service hours as a way of giving back to the country.

Between 2019 and 2023, 1,411 scholarships were offered through TSAP in Jamaica, half of which went to students training in secondary mathematics education. In 2022-23, over $3.4 million was allocated under a total of 2,304 awards: 158 scholarships, 1,149 grants, and 997 JAMVAT awards. While award values may vary, this represents an average of $1,475 per award and coverage of just under one third of the tertiary student population.[17]

17 Assuming a maximum of one award per person and based on the most recent enrolment figure of 74,537 students (2015).

The case study suggests that the requirement to work in the public sector in Jamaica after graduation is an aspect that both students and their parents would prefer to see removed to offer greater flexibility in employment and location. With this requirement still in place, scholarship take-up has been low. In 2022-23, the rules were adjusted to allow students to accept private sector jobs; the impact of this change on take-up is not yet known. Administration of the TSAP and timely communication with students are also seen as challenges to the effectiveness of the programme.

Educational Loan Scheme
India

India's Educational Loan Scheme, first established in the 1960s, was restructured in 2001. The new policy included a national model loan scheme that commercial banks could adopt instead of operating a myriad of locally developed offerings. Educational loans have lower interest rates, flexible and longer repayment terms, and lower amounts do not require collateral or guarantors. Loans are repaid with interest over a period of 5-7 years either shortly after graduation or after obtaining a job. Tax rebates are offered to students or their parents, and interest rates are subsidised for disadvantaged groups. With the changes to India's Educational Loan Scheme, women make up one third of those eligible for interest-rate subsidies and more than 70% of all borrowers are in the lowest income category (with annual household income of less than $4,000). An online portal launched in 2015 simplified and unified loan administration.[18]

Following the loan scheme restructuring, the number of loan recipients increased exponentially from around 110,000 in 2000-01 to 2 million in 2020-21. This has coincided with a period of rapid expansion in the Indian higher education system, and the number of borrowers has declined as a proportion of the overall student body from a peak of 9.5% in 2009-10 to just under 5% in 2020-21. Concurrently, the amount of loan funding has also declined. However, the case study notes that in some states, the availability of loans has been shown to increase participation in higher education.

Non-repayment of educational loans has become a major challenge and is one reason for declining rates in new loan approvals. The total owed as at 2021-22 was over $10.2 million. High default rates are due to high interest rates, the high proportion of collateral-free loans, and graduates' low rates of employment and salary. In 2015, the government established the Credit Guarantee Fund for Educational Loans to cover up to 75% of defaults on non-collateral based educational loans of up to $9,000. The case study also suggests that the growing availability of educational loans has led to tuition fees increasing in some parts of the country.

18 https://www.vidyalakshmi.co.in/Students/index

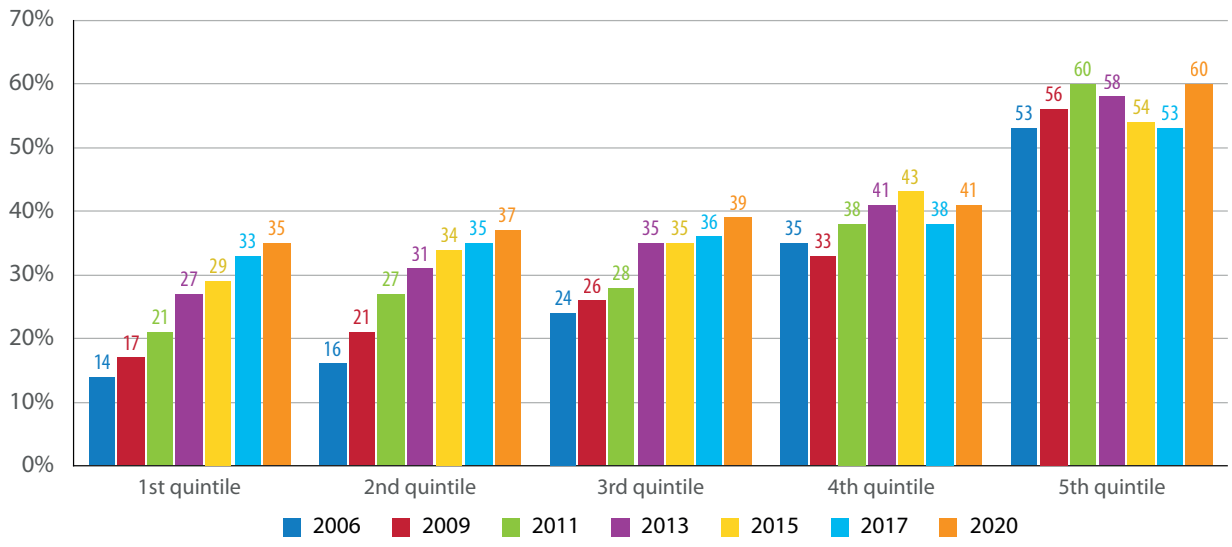
Free Higher Education
Chile

Among the national case studies, Chile provides an example of the complexities of introducing free higher education. Following the end of a military dictatorship in 1990 that had seen an intense period of educational privatisation, the policy focus shifted to expanding enrolment, especially for students from lower-income quintiles, primarily via a revised loan scheme introduced in 2006. While the loan scheme did drive enrolment growth, the combination of a popular movement - spearheaded by students protesting over deregulation, quality, and increasing student indebtedness - and government loan obligations[19] led to the introduction of free higher education through the National Budget Law of 2016. The Constitutional Court also played an important role in shaping the policy as it ruled that only students' socio-economic backgrounds could be used to target free higher education and not, for example, institutional type (private/public). The ensuing Higher Education Law (21.091) of 2018 grants free access to students from the lowest six income deciles.

The number of enrolled students benefiting from free higher education in Chile has grown 187%, from 138,951 when the policy was introduced in 2016 to 399,165 in 2020. In the same period, public expenditure for this policy more than doubled from $0.6 million to $1.4 million. Historically, students from higher income backgrounds in all countries have been more likely to participate in higher education, and the data for Chile (Figure 3) is no exception. However, the gap is narrowing.

In 2006, for example, 53% of those from the highest (fifth) quintile attended higher education compared to just 14% from the lowest (first) quintile, a gap of 39 percentage points. By 2020, students in the fifth quintile continued to be over-represented but the

Figure 3. Net attendance rate (%) in higher education by quintile, Chile, 2006-2020



Source: (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2021)

19 Low participation by private banks in the revised loan scheme meant that the government was increasingly financing the student loan portfolio and subsidising banks and private HEIs.

difference had been reduced to 25 percentage points. Growth in participation has been relatively stable for students in the top two quintiles – increasing by 6 percentage points for those in the fourth and 7 percentage points for those in the fifth over the 14-year period. This compares to a much greater rate of change for lower quintile students: 21 percentage points for the first and second quintile and 15 percentage points for the third. In this way, breaking down enrolment by quintile helps to demonstrate the positive impact of the free higher education policy as an equity measure.

Although the Higher Education Law in Chile has built-in mechanisms to gradually expand coverage of free higher education based on economic growth and tax collection, the case study reports that both these factors have proven difficult to achieve, and as such, free higher education remains partial. It is argued that this may be due in part to the entrenched neoliberalism in the Chilean education system. Chile still has a tuition fee regime and fee regulation has led to what the case study refers to as significant financial deficits in HEIs. While the participation of students from the lowest two income quintiles has grown more dramatically than for those in the upper quintiles, the participation gap between the richest and the poorest students remains significant.

5 Information

As a policy tool, governments use informational instruments to provide communication and to require information from students and/or HEIs. In the national case studies, both uses were evident.

In terms of the **provision of information and guidance to students**, Argentina's NEXOS Programme and Chile's PACE Programme are similar examples of how information and guidance can be used to better articulate pathways for students in preparation for their admission to higher education and to support them after enrolment. These policies appear to be an efficient way to reach large numbers of high school students through a partnership approach that also sees HEIs taking on some of the responsibility for expanding access to higher education. Data from Chile indicates the effectiveness of information-based policies, demonstrating almost identical first-year retention rates for students supported by the PACE Programme compared to their peers from more affluent backgrounds who have been historically more likely to participate in higher education. These policies are also examples of efforts to incorporate student success, which in the case of PACE is measured by retention. Although a lack of data on effectiveness is a challenge for the policies in the case studies, an important takeaway is their emphasis on extending the right to higher education beyond simply access. PACE is an example of a policy that considers the student within the broader education ecosystem, widening the pipeline from secondary school to higher education as well as improving persistence in higher education. Its positive outcomes speak to the need for and success of holistic programming.

Policies that **require information from HEIs** are another way to use informational tools to enhance the right to higher education. The case of Access and Participation Plans in England is an example of the government requiring HEIs to provide data and targets on access to higher education. This shifts the focus from using information to support (future) students to using information to stimulate institutional-level change. As Access and Participation Plans have been made mandatory in England, there is an even greater incentive for HEIs, as failure to comply or to include sufficiently ambitious targets could lead to their official status as higher education providers being revoked. In turn, this would mean students would be unable to access financial support. Given the importance of reputation and prestige to HEIs, the public nature of the data dashboard on access and participation is an additional inducement to HEIs to demonstrate equity improvements. While the impact of the Access and Participation Plans has seen gaps narrow between the most and least advantaged students, the challenge remains in effectively supporting students once they have been recruited into HEIs.

Overall, the case study examples of information-based policies demonstrate that both mandatory and voluntary initiatives can bring about change, with compulsory policies that have negative consequences for non-compliance (as in the case of England) appearing to demonstrate more rapid progress in narrowing equity gaps. Informational policies are relatively cost-effective ways to reach large numbers of students, but challenges remain in finding ways to measure their effectiveness and in deploying these types of policies to improve student success once in higher education.

NEXOS Programme
Argentina

In Argentina, the NEXOS Programme was created following a Ministry of Education resolution in 2017 that sought to establish better connections between different levels and institutional types within the educational system. It is an integration strategy that aims to build up links between high school students and universities through career planning and university preparation workshops, with tutorials led by university students and faculty for new university students. In addition to providing information to high school students about university and how to prepare for success, NEXOS also seeks to facilitate partnerships between educational institutions in the co-design and delivery of programming.

The first call for partnerships between universities and high schools led to 71 projects being selected with funding from the Argentinian government of over $70,000.[20] **In the first two years of NEXOS, over 200 projects between 79 universities and numerous high schools were created, covering all provinces in Argentina**. This included 54 public national universities, five public regional universities and 20 private HEIs. In the same period, academic tutorials reached over 55,000 high school students in more than 1,500 schools.

A longer-term assessment of the NEXOS Programme's impact was not available at the time of writing. As the case study notes, this may be difficult to quantify because of the scope for local application of the programme according to the preferences and needs of each project and partnership. Improved data collection and monitoring would also help to determine the programme's impact on participants.

Higher Education Support and Access (PACE) Programme
Chile

Introduced in 2014, PACE guarantees access to higher education for the top 20% of students coming from schools in poor areas in Chile.[21] Schools are assigned to a selected number of HEIs; 29 are currently included. Selected students receive academic preparation, career guidance, and psychosocial support in their last two years of school that continue through the first year of higher education. PACE aims not only to expand access to higher education but to reduce dropout rates through the provision of academic and social support.

Data on PACE demonstrate its effectiveness in widening the pipeline from school to higher education and in retaining students in higher education in Chile. By the start of the 2023-24 academic year, the transition rate of PACE students into higher education was over 90% and the first-year retention rate of 80% was almost identical for both PACE and

20 https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/programa-nexos-por-un-sistema-educativo-articulado-e-integrado; 62 million pesos in local currency, covered using December 2017 mid-market exchange rate.

21 This had been increased from the top 15% of students at the time the case study was published.

non-PACE students.[22] This is considered particularly successful given that many PACE students come from groups that have historically had lower levels of access to higher education.

Challenges for the PACE Programme include significant unmet demand: fewer than 50% of applicants in 2021 were selected for support. Although gender inequalities have not been identified in PACE support, or in general for higher education enrolment for female students, the distribution of students by different subject areas perpetuates gender differences in some job fields such as STEM. As noted in the case study, this phenomenon is widespread and presents a challenge that goes beyond Chile's higher education and labour market links.

Access and Participation Plans
England

The introduction of Access and Participation Plans in England in 2019 stems from another policy mechanism, the creation of the Office for Students. This new regulator had greater powers than its predecessors and was therefore in a stronger starting position to enact change. At the same time, the government had acknowledged that more needed to be done to widen access to higher education, especially in universities with higher admissions requirements. Specifically, the Office for Students tasked HEIs with reducing the differences in access to higher education between areas with the highest rates and the lowest rates of participation from 7.37:1 in 2017 to 3:1 in 2024-25, ultimately eliminating this gap by 2038-39.

Subsequently, Access and Participation Plans were introduced and made mandatory for all registered HEIs. The Plans were to include ambitious targets for widening access as well as the policies and procedures that would facilitate implementation of the targets. The targets and evaluation mechanisms could be set by HEIs. While this reflected a continuation of previous arrangements with the forerunner Access Agreements, a change was that the Office for Students could reject plans that were deemed insufficiently ambitious. In turn, this could ultimately lead to HEIs losing their status as officially registered higher education providers, therefore jeopardising their students' eligibility for financial support. Currently, a public facing access and participation data dashboard is maintained by the Office for Students[23] that can be filtered according to higher education provider and student characteristics.

The England case study found **that 84% of the most academically selective universities in England set much more ambitious access targets as a result of the requirement to submit an Access and Participation Plan**. Furthermore, the ratio of highest to lowest participation rates was reduced to 5.6:1 in 2021. This suggests that this information requirement has changed the understanding towards the systems and structures that cause and perpetuate

22 https://acceso.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/reporte-3-divia-10-mayo.pdf

23 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/

socioeconomic inequalities and away from a mindset of assigning responsibility to individual students.

Challenges to the success of Access and Participation Plans stem not from the plans themselves, but from proximate factors. The case study identified the unintended consequences of COVID-19 in widening socio-economic gaps in university admissions due to changes made in high school assessments that negatively impacted the most disadvantaged students. The right to higher education was also seen to potentially be at risk should political change follow government consultations on higher education and leadership changes in the Office for Students that were taking place at the time of writing.

While HEIs in England showed willingness to accept more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the case study found that this was not matched by structural changes to better support students to flourish at university. Finally, England's ongoing moves away from free higher education and a fluctuating financial aid regime also pose risks to achieving the right to higher education.

6 Infrastructure

Five of the national case studies (Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Haiti, and India) included policies to **create new HEIs** and two (India and Morocco) focus on **improvements to the infrastructure of existing HEIs**. These large-scale infrastructure projects require significant resources and policy ambition given the scope involved in establishing a new HEI or significantly renovating an existing institution. Infrastructure policies have been employed in countries with differing economic capacities: in the case studies included in this report, for example, Chile is high income, Argentina and El Salvador are considered upper middle income, and Haiti, India, and Morocco are lower middle income.[24] This suggests that investing in higher education infrastructure is widely considered an important mechanism to redistribute the physical provision of higher education more equitably within countries.

The expansion of provision in unserved and/or underserved regions is typically given as the policy objective for infrastructure reform. This recognises the growing demand for higher education outside of capital cities (as in the case of the small island nation of Haiti) and major/larger cities/regions in Argentina, Chile, and India. In some cases (e.g. El Salvador), the policy aim is to diversify the post-secondary education system by adding new institutions that act as a bridge between school and university. Some of these examples innovatively extend quality provision into new regions through partnerships with existing HEIs. Similarly to satellite or domestic branch campuses, the 'sponsorship' of new institutions by universities transfers their established reputations and know-how, something that would be difficult to achieve quickly if creating an HEI from scratch.

Across the case studies, it is noteworthy that all the new HEIs have public status. Enrolment figures in the new HEIs indicate that they are playing a demand-absorbing function for students who would otherwise have to commute to the capital or larger urban areas. This high demand indicates the importance of equitable distribution in the provision of higher education across geographic spaces. The cases also show the relevance and possibility of public education in systems that are or have been subject to privatisation.

In addition to addressing regional imbalances, some of the policies have the objective to better serve equity deserving groups, as shown for example in the Moroccan policy of expanding accommodation provision for female students. In Argentina, the case study indicates that most of the students at the new universities are first generation students.

The primary challenge of this type of policy measure is sustainability. Creating a new HEI comes at a high financial cost and, as the case studies show, work most effectively as partnerships between levels of government (national and/or subnational) and other stakeholders. Both resources and partnerships require long-term commitment to flourish. Despite the significant financial investment required in infrastructure policies, the depth of inequalities within higher education systems means that despite the creation of new universities in regions that had previously not had any provision of higher education, education systems remain deeply unequal.

24 Based on the World Bank's income group classification, https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html

Public Universities of the Region
Haiti

Between 2007 and 2016, 10 *Universités Publiques en Régions* (Public Universities of the Region, or UPRs) were created in Haiti, expanding a programme first established in 1999. Regional development needs were part of the rationale for the UPRs, spurred later by the devastating impact of the 2010 earthquake that led to significant migration from the capital Port-au-Prince.

In Haiti, there is now a UPR in each of the country's 10 administrative departments and in 2020, enrolment in these HEIs stood at 10,329. **As a result of Haiti's investment in new HEIs, public higher education is responding to localised demand in all parts of the country**. Subjects receiving the highest enrolments include administration, law, agronomy, and education. According to the case study, the UPRs contributed to the increased public financing for higher education seen between 2000 and 2014, when the proportion of expenditure increased from 0.26% of GDP to 0.56% in 2011-14. However, this proportion fell back to 0.26% in 2016 and, despite the investment in new HEIs, the case study notes that most financing goes to the State University of Haiti, the country's flagship university based in the capital city.

Other challenges associated with the construction of new HEIs are similar to those found across the higher education sector, for example in relation to the ongoing lack of teaching and material resources. It is also important to note that the UPRs were established by ministerial decision, which does not have the same status as legislation, and could render them precarious in the case of political change.

MEGATEC
El Salvador

After the end of a civil war in 1992 and a series of education reforms later that decade, El Salvador entered a new phase of education policymaking in the 2000s. In the context of reduced insecurity and improved relations between higher education and the state, a primary objective of the new stage was to diversify the educational offer to increase participation (which at the time was less than 10% and is currently at 25%), improve quality, and expand the geographic provision of higher education. The vehicle selected was MEGATEC, new technical institutes that are attached to and run by an existing HEI which does not have to be in the same department.

Established in 2002, there are currently MEGATECs in seven of the country's 14 departments, including three departments that historically had very limited academic and scientific infrastructure. They provide technical courses in subjects related to the local economies. For example, port administration and logistics courses are available at MEGATEC La Unión where the port of Cucuto is located. MEGATECs are regulated by the state and all students are fully funded by the government. Students enter MEGATECs after the end of free compulsory education (ninth grade, aged 15) and have various routes to terminal qualifications or to transition to other forms of higher technical education.

A key achievement of the MEGATEC policy in El Salvador has been to enhance educational provision: without it, there would be no higher education in some parts of the country. This policy has been critical in extending post-compulsory education beyond the capital city and more economically

developed departments in the country. The number of students enrolled has grown from 45 in the first year of operation to 1,131 in 2022, the increase primarily due to the gradual addition of new MEGATECs.

Enrolment in six of the seven MEGATECs is stable, with significant growth only in the seventh in Sonsonate region. Females outnumber males in graduation rates in all courses except information technology and port activity. In some localities, the employment rate of MEGATEC graduates has been extremely high (no precise figures are available) due to the relevance of the training offer and the relative diversification of the local business base.

A challenge related to the MEGATEC policy is the lack of data on students' trajectories, making it difficult to analyse its impact on local economies and employment rates. Similarly, this hinders an analysis of the transition between MEGATECs and 'traditional' higher education and of the effectiveness of the ostensible flexibility of MEGATECs as a bridge within the post-compulsory education sector.

While MEGATEC continues to be funded by the government, the case study notes the difficulties this posed during the pandemic, which may affect the longer-term stability of this already well-established policy. An additional challenge for this vehicle is whether the current model of campuses being attached to existing HEIs should continue, or whether MEGATECs may become independent education institutions. The country's first National Higher Education policy, released in 2021, may also impact the future direction of MEGATEC.

National Campaign for Higher Education (RUSA)

India

As part of India's larger National Campaign for Higher Education (RUSA), 19 universities and 130 model colleges have been founded since the policy was inaugurated in 2013. In addition, infrastructure grants accounted for 62.3% of all funding released under RUSA between 2013 and 2019. By 2023, 140 infrastructure grants had been awarded to universities and 1,961 grants given to colleges. These grants have been used for a range of purposes including building new classrooms, laboratories, libraries, toilets, faculty accommodation in rural areas, and establishing drinking water facilities.

While growth in the number of HEIs in India has been impressive, the case study notes that this has been in the context of overall system expansion – a total of 170 universities and 1,731 government/government-aided colleges were added between 2013 and 2022. Colleges alone enrolled on average 38,000 students per year in 2013-20.

Under RUSA, inter-state inequality in the gross enrolment ratio in India was reduced from 1.57 in 2012-13 to 1.32 in 2020-21, with notable increases in enrolment for female students (up 7.8%) and those from scheduled castes (up 7.1%) and tribes[25] (7.8%) during the same period. The

infrastructure grants have been seen to re-energise states and HEIs into invigorating their higher education systems. The case study gives the example of Maharashtra state, which

25 Scheduled castes are also known as *Dalits*, and Scheduled tribes are *adivasis*. The Constitution of India listed the various castes that come under these two categories in two separate schedules. There are also separate National Commissions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which protect these groups from discrimination and exploitation in society.

used RUSA funding to create resource centres for inclusive education at four universities.

A governance challenge for the new HEIs arises from the expectation that state (sub-national) governments will be more involved in planning and developing higher education. However, as the case study notes, not all states have managed to convene the State Council of Higher Education that is expected of them under RUSA. Furthermore, the shortage of funds at the state government level makes it challenging to provide the matched funding required for the creation of new HEIs. Financial constraints are also a significant barrier to continued infrastructure investments. The necessity for joint funding between the central government and state governments at a ratio of 65:35 or 90:10, depending on location/level of economic disadvantage, has proved challenging for states.

Expanding Provision of Student Accommodation

Morocco

A reform process initiated in 2000 in Morocco has affected all aspects of the education system, through the National Education and Training Charter and Law on Higher Education (law no. 01-00). The charter and law set out a 10-year roadmap for higher education and include a range of reforms. To address unequal access to higher education and improve student services, the *Office National des Oeuvres Universitaires Sociales et Culturelles* (National Office of Social and Cultural University Works) was created to provide accommodation, catering, scholarships and cultural/sport activities for students.

Under this policy, six new halls of residence were built between 2005 and 2021 and overall student accommodation capacity increased by 59% to 53,653 beds in public universities in 2022-23. Including private HEIs, accommodation capacity reached nearly 90,000 beds in 2019-20, 61% of which were reserved for women. **Increased provision of accommodation for female students is part of the reason that Morocco has achieved near-gender parity in higher education enrolment** (45.8% in 2021, up from 18.7% in 2012).

In addition to infrastructure grants from the government, support has also come from charitable associations and the private sector in Morocco. The Mohamed V Foundation for Solidarity, a charity managed by the King, has created partnerships with regions to build student housing specifically for female students from rural areas. This aligns to the government's policy of positive discrimination towards female students.

Despite an overall tripling of the state budget for higher education between 2000-01 and 2022-23 and increased public-private partnerships, the budget allocated to housing remains insufficient. Substantial expansion in enrolment during this period – from 262,000 to over 1.13 million – means that despite new investment, annual per-student spending has effectively decreased from approximately $1,542 to $1,293. Demand for student housing continues to outstrip supply by some measure, and some cities with a university have no student housing at all.

7 Pathways

Countries have created pathways policies that aim to create new or expanded routes to and throughout higher education. Typically, these policies either expand access by opening **alternative routes into higher education** or by creating or facilitating **flexible learning pathways** within higher education systems.

Policies offering alternative routes into higher education do so by enabling the recognition of non-traditional means of demonstrating candidates' merit in systems that have admissions requirements. This can be designed to increase access to higher education by groups who have been traditionally under-represented such as mature students (as in the Portugal case study). Under this type of pathway policy, the entry route is changed but the higher education offer remains the same. As such, when that offer continues to be designed with full-time students who have recently completed school, there may be a mismatch for other groups of students. This demonstrates the importance of policies that incorporate support for students during higher education as well as policies that enable more people to access higher education.

For students who are already in the higher education system, moving between institutions has often been challenging. Pathways policies can therefore also act as broader vehicles to improve credential articulation and allow transfer within or between university, college, and other forms of higher education. Such flexible learning pathway policies were highlighted in the case studies of Argentina and Jamaica. India stands out among the case study countries for its innovative use of technology to provide a wider variety of higher education courses for all students. Through a government-provided e-learning portal, students can choose from thousands of courses offered by different HEIs and study for free to the point of certification. What differentiates this from other e-learning portals is that students can bank credits received from online courses towards their higher education degree, supporting greater flexibility and mobility within the higher education system. As a public endeavour, the portal is not profit oriented and has access, equity, and quality as the main stated objectives.

While the policies in the national case studies deal with pathways for domestic students, similar challenges exist for students coming into higher education systems from abroad, especially for refugees and forcibly displaced people who may lack documentation or who may have an incomplete or interrupted formal educational record. The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications[26] entered into force in 2023, creating a framework for the fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications that complements the Regional Conventions to which many states are party. As of September 2024, 33 states had ratified the convention. Future studies will be able to explore the extent to which the Global and Regional Conventions are impacting domestic policymaking on higher education pathways.

26 https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention

+M23
Portugal

The +M23 policy, enacted in 2006, created a specific entry route into higher education for mature students (defined as candidates aged 23 and over), allowing both for those with a high school qualification as well as those who had not completed secondary school. This was prompted by Portugal's accession to the Bologna Process[27] in the same year and the recognition that the country had been slow to integrate its adult population into higher education.

Under +M23, public and private HEIs allocate an additional 5-20% of the number of slots provided through the main application quota. +M23 candidates are selected based on a practical or theoretical skills test, an assessment of the candidate's CV, and an interview. +M23 candidates can apply to any level of study and to all subjects except dentistry, medicine, health sciences, and nutritional sciences which typically require perfect scores from high school and university entrance exams.

In Portugal, the +M23 policy created on average 9,000 places a year across all HEI types between 2007-08 and 2013-14. However, the enrolment rate has not matched the number of vacancies: on average between 2015-16 and 2018-19, just under 4,000 students began their studies each year. The case study suggests that the slow growth may be attributable to candidates' socio-economic backgrounds and growing precariousness in the Portuguese labour market, which has led to an overall decline in interest in higher education.

This also points to challenges that policies only designed to increase access do not address. Merely creating a space for a 'non-traditional' student does not automatically lead to persistence or flourishing if there are no changes to the provision of teaching and learning or provision of specialist support. Such pathways may also inadvertently favour some groups over others: in the case of Portugal, for example, more men than women have enrolled through the +M23 route. Further, despite the +M23 efforts to expand higher education access to mature students, the system still prioritises younger students, with the average age of 19 and 21 for new entrants to Bachelor's and Master's programmes respectively.

Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM)
India

Introduced in 2016, Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) is a home-grown e-learning platform of online, blended, and flipped-class courses in India. It aims to expand access to higher education by offering all courses free of charge, with a fee payable by students wishing to receive certification. Students in India are also able to take up to 40% of their higher education credits through SWAYAM and can deposit

27 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process

accrued credits into their record in the Academic Bank of Credits.[28]

With the innovative recording system to build up academic credits, SWAYAM is also designed to support mobility within higher education systems. Teachers are incentivised to participate and those who develop courses for SWAYAM receive special scores that can be used towards promotion. Nine National Coordinators (a mix of HEIs and national educational bodies) have been appointed to oversee the quality of content.

The take-up rate of SWAYAM since its launch has been very strong. **Between 2017/-8 and 2022-23 in India, nearly 10,500 courses were offered through SWAYAM with a total enrolment of almost 38 million students**. Of these, 34 million were enrolled in higher education, an average of 5.6 million students per year. In addition to demonstrating how rapidly SWAYAM courses have become integrated into 'traditional' higher education, this data also indicates a potential extra demand of four million students who might consider higher education after completing a course on SWAYAM but who are not currently enrolled.

The most significant challenge to the success of SWAYAM is the availability of digital infrastructure. Although 70% of youth in India have access to a mobile phone, SWAYAM is not particularly compatible with this form of technology. Access to the internet, another prerequisite for participation in SWAYAM, is also limited (despite internet penetration increasing from 4% in 2007 to just under 50% in 2020): only 40% of households have broadband internet access.

Furthermore, the digital skills needed to succeed in SWAYAM courses are currently deemed rudimentary, with one study cited in the case study finding that only 10% of students could undertake basic IT-related tasks such as downloading software. Some of these challenges may be addressed over time as the impact of another major government initiative, Digital India, gains traction.

National Academic Recognition System (SNRA)
Argentina

The National Academic Recognition System (SNRA), implemented in 2016, seeks to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles faced by students who need to move between universities, which in turn helps to address the high drop-out rates that are characteristic of Argentinian higher education.

The SNRA has created voluntary agreements between universities, providing funding to bring together discipline (subject) families within which universities have mapped common training pathways. Each contains units named Recognition of Training Paths, with each unit equivalent to 27-30 hours of work and one academic year being comprised of 60 units. This model aims to be more

28 https://services.india.gov.in/service/detail/academic-bank-of-credits-1

student-centric, akin to the European Credit Transfer System.[29]

In Argentina, 91 HEIs (55 state and 36 private) signed up to the SNRA, leading to the creation of 1,423 pathways in 11 subject families, mainly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) areas. In total, this involved over 1,000 courses, reaching over 425,000 students. Beyond the numbers, the SNRA has simplified administrative processes as well as the amount of time required for students to transfer.

The main challenge to the SNRA in Argentina is the risk of discontinuity due to political change. The case study noted that under a new government, no information about the policy's continuity had been provided in the preceding two years, and another change of government in late 2023 after the case study was published suggested further education reforms may be on the horizon.

National Qualifications Framework

Jamaica

The principle of flexible learning pathways is being realised in Jamaica through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), implemented in 2017. **While NQFs are often used to classify qualifications in a country, in Jamaica it also has the aim of providing recognition and credit for different types of learning and skills across the spectrum of education and training, including microcredentials.**

The NQF creates more flexibility by making clear that secondary school qualifications are no longer the only route to higher education. The introduction of the NQF has been accompanied by a series of supporting policies that collectively aim to assure the quality of prior learning and qualifications as well as suitability for lifelong learning and learners with special needs. Quantitative data on the impact of the NQF in Jamaica is not available in a context where, as noted in the case study, tertiary education data is often absent. Nevertheless, experts in the sector believe that the NQF has the potential to be a gamechanger for widening access to higher education.

By 2023, over 400 qualifications had been mapped in the NQF to reflect equivalencies between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and academic programming. A draft credit accumulation and transfer system is also in place. It is worth noting that as of 2020, NQF coverage extended to over 140 countries in the world (UNESCO, European Training Foundation, and CEDEFOP, 2023). As such, Jamaica's adhesion to this established policy practice reflects a shared commitment to navigating the "complex territory of the validity, transferability, and recognition of qualifications" (ibid., p. 89).

As many higher education systems have universities as the foundational organisational type, with colleges, institutes, and other HEIs typically forming later, assuring pathways

29 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system

between these largely independently developed sub-systems remains challenging, such as the case of recognising credits earned in one organisational type and applying them to learning in another. In Jamaica, the ongoing need to decolonise the education sector and provide access for all is required to produce the cultural shift that that would allow the full operationalisation of the National Qualifications Framework.

8 Quotas

Quotas are often used in combination with other policy measures such as student funding or in the design of alternative pathways into higher education. By their nature, quota policies do not focus on all potential students in higher education but target specific equity deserving groups. Among the national case studies, the equity deserving groups include Black, Indigenous, and mixed race students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, females, and refugees. Some quota policies serve as the starting point for more comprehensive reforms targeted at specific equity deserving groups.

Quota policies typically seek to rebalance the composition of students in higher education to mirror that of the general population. Evidence from the national case studies indicates that quotas are an effective way of increasing the participation of equity deserving groups that can be implemented at governmental as well as institutional level. However, quota policies have sometimes been seen as controversial and have faced contestation and resistance. This is often the case with affirmative action policies that aim to redress historic inequities, especially when distrust comes from those who have historically held more power. In some cases, the resistance may come from targeted students themselves, who may feel that securing a place in higher education due to being eligible for a quota spot masks their ability to gain admission in their own right. When the quota places are assigned to students from outside the system (as in the case of refugees, for example), this may additionally trigger nationalist sentiment or concerns about the capacity of the domestic system.

Despite contestation, the case studies demonstrate that overall, quotas are an impactful way of addressing equity issues in higher education. Nevertheless, quota policies alone cannot remedy the historic discrimination against many groups and would be more effective if accompanied by other measures to support students and address broader socioeconomic issues that may hamper domestic higher education capacity. Information campaigns by governments could also improve understanding and reduce prejudice.

Quota Law
Brazil

Brazil introduced a Quota Law in 2012 to reserve places in over-subscribed federal (public) HEIs for students from lower income backgrounds who are Black, Indigenous or mixed race. At the time, these groups made up one third of the students at federal HEIs but half of the general population. The Quota Law faced a legal challenge, indicating that support for affirmative action was not universal in the country, but the Federal Supreme Court ruled on its constitutionality.

Under the Quota Law, 50% of all places in federal HEIs are reserved for those who have graduated from public high schools. This allocation is then equally divided between low-income and non-low-income students. As with the Prouni scholarships in Brazil, the allocated places include quotas for people with disabilities and those who are Indigenous, Black and mixed race that must align to the representation of each group in the population of each state. Implementation of the reserved places was phased in over a four-year period.

Between 2012 and 2020, the Quota Law saw representation expand in Brazilian federal universities for Black, Indigenous and, most noticeably, for mixed-race students.

For Black students, enrolment increased from 5.93% to 10.68%, for Indigenous students this went from 0.22% to 0.77% and the number of mixed-race students grew from 15.02% to 36.19%. Federal HEIs exceeded the 25% target number of students from lower income backgrounds by 2016, reaching 33%.

Despite these quantitative changes, structural racism in Brazil has not disappeared and the case study points to studies showing discrimination and prejudice against so-called quota students. Resourcing for student services and support in federal public HEIs has not been adjusted to account for the diversification of the student body, with the responsibility of providing effective support being passed to the HEIs themselves.

Quotas for Females and Those from Less Well-resourced Schools

Ghana

As a standalone policy, quotas have been used in Ghana to increase access to higher education for female students and for students coming from less well-resourced schools. In the absence of a system-level policy, the University of Ghana introduced affirmative action measures to drive gender parity. Since 1999, female applicants can be admitted with lower grade point averages than their male counterparts based on the number of places available in each programme.

A second grassroots initiative, the Less Endowed Secondary School (LESS) policy has been offered by the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) since 2003-04. LESS automatically admits and waives the application fee of the top performing students from schools that are classified by the national government agency Ghana Education Service as less well resourced. These students would typically have been excluded from higher education (over 80% do not progress to any form of tertiary education) due to the cost as well as the high competition for entry.

As a result of its affirmative action policy, the University of Ghana improved female enrolment from 25.9% in 1998 to 48% in 2021. Starting with 239 places in 2007-08, KNUST now offers up to 1,500 places through LESS each year. Removing the application fee removes a major barrier for many potential students, and the case study notes that awardees often perform well at university with some outperforming their classmates from more privileged backgrounds.

Although the University of Ghana's affirmative action policy for female students remains in place, it has been criticised as reverse discrimination and challenged by female students themselves, who say that the policy reinforces perceptions of their inferiority. The case study points to the importance of tackling broader sociocultural norms that impede gender equality for females in higher education in Ghana.

In relation to the LESS programme at KNUST, the lack of funding to cover students' tuition fees and expenses has been a significant challenge. This may help explain why les

than half (47%) of those admitted between 2007-08 and 2013-14 were able to enrol. In response, KNUST created a partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that provides scholarships and has also created a Student Financial Services Office that offers financial aid to LESS students.

Quotas for Syrian Refugees
Türkiye

Since 2011, Türkiye has maintained an open-door policy to Syrian refugees fleeing conflict at home. After initially under-calculating the number of people who would enter the country, the government has been required to formulate longer-term policies to address the educational needs of a population group that has now grown to 3.6 million.[30]

In 2012, the government requested a small number of universities in the south of the country (closest to Syria) to admit refugees to non-degree courses. This admissions policy was expanded to provide admission to non-degree courses in 2012, the new admissions policy expanded a year later to cover all degree programmes at all universities, subject to Syrian refugee applicants having proof of prior qualifications. Admission for refugees was capped at 10% of the number of local students, although the cap was removed in 2019.

Linguistically, a free intensive preparatory Turkish course was offered to all refugee students, and a small number of universities in the south were asked to launch programmes taught in Arabic in 2015. From 2014, tuition fees for Syrian refugees were removed in public universities and a financial aid programme to help with other costs followed in 2015, both funded by the government body addressing migration management. However, as of 2021-22, universities reinstated the charge of tuition to Syrian refugee students.

In Türkiye, the number of Syrian refugees has increased considerably since 2011, when 608 students were enrolled, increasing to almost 48,000 in 2021, although this is a tiny proportion of the total 8.24 million students in the system. The removal of tuition fees in 2014 and the cap on enrolments in 2019 stimulated the increased participation of Syrian refugees in Turkish higher education. The impact from the reinstated tuition in 2021-22 is not yet known, but demand may continue given that around 1.8 million Syrian refugees in the country are aged under 18.

By 2021, Türkiye had spent at least $71 billion on Syrian refugee integration in general (data on the allocation to higher education is not available). Challenges to ongoing support have surfaced from economic instability and rising inflation, growing political nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, and societal tensions in a context where only one third of local high school graduates can find a place in higher education. Among those Syrian refugees who are able to study, the student population is predominantly male at a ratio of 3:1 and overall graduation rates appear to be low, estimated at around 25% according to the case study.

30 https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey

International financial support for refugees is minimal although it is a transnational challenge. While international aid worldwide more than doubled to $5.3 billion between 2002 and 2019, over 70% of the total was allocated to scholarships to be held in the donor country (UNESCO IESALC, 2022a). Effectively this means that countries are reinvesting their funding in building domestic capacity, rendering the effect on equity deserving groups such as refugees who are in other locations minimal at best.

9 Regulation

Regulation is used as a right to higher education policy tool through the creation of **higher education regulatory bodies.** Policies that establish regulatory bodies address concerns around accountability and quality in the higher education system. This may be in response to expansion and/or privatisation of the higher education system and related concerns about the quality of provision. Ultimately, these policies aim to better hold HEIs to account. From the case studies, this has been approached in Peru through National Superintendency of Higher Education (SUNEDU) and in England through the Office for Students. The regulatory advantage of these bodies, which are usually part of government but run at arm's length, is their authority to suspend HEIs that are not acting in accordance with the quality standards. On the other hand, the governmental status of regulatory bodies leaves them prone to politicisation and presents challenges in retaining their independence.

As a policy lever, regulation has also been applied more broadly to promulgate an **equitable framework for higher education**. This is differentiated from laws on higher education that serve a more general purpose of setting the legislative baseline for the operation of higher education in a given setting. Whereas almost all countries have national legislation regulating higher education,[31] fewer have established policies focusing on equity. South Africa is among the exceptions. Motivated by the need to reconstruct the country after apartheid, South African policies have aimed to transform higher education to make it more accessible and better coordinated, with higher quality. As with many other policy measures, meeting aspirations with sufficient funding is a key challenge in establishing more equitable frameworks for higher education.

National Superintendency of Higher Education (SUNEDU)

Peru

Having experimented unsuccessfully with market self-regulation, Peru created the National Superintendency of Higher Education (SUNEDU) in 2014 to monitor quality in the higher education system. Previous legislation had enabled growth in the number of for-profit private HEIs but without any accountability measures to assure quality. A 2010 Constitutional court ruling established the State's responsibility for guaranteeing the right of young people to access quality education, paving the way for the University Law which established SUNEDU as the higher education system's regulatory body.

SUNEDU oversees the accreditation of public and private universities based on quality criteria, with licences granted for 6, 8, or 10 years. For universities that do not meet accreditation criteria, SUNEDU has the power to halt their activities for up to three years. In these cases, admissions are suspended, and a plan must be put in place to ensure students can continue their studies elsewhere.

Peru's SUNEDU had reviewed 145 universities (49 public, 96 private) and granted licenses to

31 91% of the 146 countries included in the UNESCO IESALC HE Policy Observatory (as of March 2024). https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/policy-hub/observatory

94 (65%) of them as of the time of writing the case study. Of the 51 universities denied a licence, 48 (94%) were for-profit or private associations, confirming previously held concerns regarding quality in the private higher education sector. In 2022, 82% of all higher education students in Peru were enrolled at universities that had met quality criteria.

Via SUNEDU, the state-assured basic quality guarantee of higher education has made a significant impact on students and their families. It has also meant an increased focus on public universities: the Ministry of Education has provided financial resources ($273 million in total between 2016 and 2019) to improve quality and technical support to the three public universities that were denied accreditation. In 2021, the first of the three was granted a licence.

At an institutional level, one of SUNEDU's main challenges has been to support students at universities that were not accredited. Around 70% of the 247,351 affected students either graduated or moved to another HEI, but the trajectory of the remaining 30% was unknown. The case study suggests a need to strengthen SUNEDU's supervision and oversight mechanisms.

The denied accreditations also had the effect of reducing the higher education offer in six regions, where only public universities remained in operation. With limited slots, this restricted the supply of higher education in these areas. Belatedly, the government offered around 4,000 transfer scholarships and created a fund to increase slots in public universities, but this has been unable to meet full demand.

Furthermore, there have been multiple unsuccessful judicial actions, parliamentary commissions and bills launched to shut SUNEDU down since its creation. This is an indication both of its use as a political tool and of the unstable political situation in Peru.

Office for Students
England

In England, the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) created a new regulatory body for the higher education sector. The mission of the resulting Office for Students was to ensure that every student 'has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.'[32]

As a regulator, England's Office for Students has the power to require HEIs to meet certain quality standards, enable equality of opportunity, and hold providers accountable for promises made to students (in terms of the academic experience) and to government (in terms of financing and governance). For HEIs, a 'transparency condition' requires them to share information on admissions as a condition of official registration.

According to the case study, the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act in England has led to increased transparency and accountability in the admissions process. It has almost equalised the admission of Black British students relative to white British students to universities with high admissions requirements, from 0.68:1 in 2017 to 0.92:1 in 2021. As ethnicity is a protected characteristic under British equality law, the greater

32 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-strategy/

transparency requirements on universities have led to many improving their internal processes (e.g., through anti-bias training).

Despite the Higher Education and Research Act in England ostensibly reducing some measures of ethnic discrimination, disparities for students from ethnic minorities continue to exist. For example, the case study notes that the rate at which white British students complete their degree with an excellent or good grade (first class or upper second class) continues to outpace British ethnic minority students, especially Black students. This gap declined from 17.2% in 2003-04 to 8.9% in 2019-20 overall but remains at 15% in teaching-intensive universities. This has led the Office for Students to introduce a new target to eliminate this gap and initiatives by universities to become more inclusive by decolonising curricula, pedagogies, and assessment, for example.

Education White Paper 3 and National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE))

South Africa

Education White Paper 3, *A Programme for the Transformation of the Higher Education System*, published in 1997 a year after a new constitution, was a key policy to emerge in the immediate post-apartheid period in South Africa. White Paper 3 lays out a vision for higher education as more accessible, higher quality, better coordinated and within a restructured system. Ultimately, these goals were to redress past inequalities in higher education. It identifies Black, female, disabled, and mature students as equity deserving groups.

This was followed in 2001 by the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), which offered a framework through which to implement the vision set out in White Paper 3. In particular, NPHE focused on creating a single coordinated higher education system no longer skewed along racial lines.

In South Africa, White Paper 3 helped change the context for higher education, and its commitment to equity facilitated the creation of affirmative action policies that were subsequently enacted in the Higher Education Act (1997) and acts in other social spheres. Black students have increased from 53% to almost 85% of the student body between 1993 and 2017 (Essop, 2020) whereas the proportion of female students increased from 43% to 59% between 1993 and 2019. The NPHE has achieved its aim of restructuring the South African higher education system, with greater diversity of institutions in the country including the category of Historically Disadvantaged University that has seen the highest increase in student enrolment.

Although White Paper 3 created a favourable context for greater inclusion of disabled students, other barriers – from cuts in disability funding to inaccessible buildings – continue to restrict this group's full right to higher education. The NPHE was limited by financial constraints which had a detrimental effect on the ability of Historically Disadvantaged Universities in particular to provide quality undergraduate education. Despite increases in enrolment, Black and low-income students continue to be marginalised, and while more Black students are enrolled in Historically Advantaged Institutions, numeric diversity has not given way to the desired goal of structural transformation.

10 Key messages and recommendations

While the analysis in this report has provided insights into how much the needle has moved on equity, the issue of what more can be done should also be raised, as should discussions around how policies would change if they were to address structural inequities, not only individual constraints. In turn, this should also impact student success (alternatively labelled as wellbeing, thriving, flourishing) and expand the policy focus beyond access.

This section summarises the material presented in the synthesis report and identifies six key messages that emerge from the new typology presented as part of this review of case studies on the right to higher education. These key messages are about financing, students from equity deserving groups, focusing on student success, combining policy measures, improving the evidence base, and the untapped potential of technology.

The key messages lead to five cross-cutting recommendations for policymakers that seek to support states as they continue to improve the right to higher education. These are:

1. **Transition towards removing the cost of higher education from students**
2. **Regulate higher education access and success to reduce inequalities**
3. **Ensure equal access to different forms of higher education provision**
4. **Improve higher education accountability and efficiency through data and reporting**
5. **Harness digital technologies more effectively to improve the right to higher education**

In line with the focus of this report, the recommendations are designed for policymakers working at the level of higher education systems unless otherwise noted. Equally, other higher education stakeholders – international organisations, advocacy groups, HEI leaders and so on – are encouraged to take up these recommendations in shaping their own policies and strategies for coordinating with responsible government bodies.

10.1 In the context of growing demand, financing is the biggest challenge to achieving the right to higher education

For all the talk of the end of higher education or its replacement by microcredentials, AI, or the latest technological fad, demand for higher education around the world continues to grow. Enrolment has increased and, according to predictions, will continue to rise in the coming years. Yet, the expectation of continued growth appears largely unsustainable given the resources that policymakers can or are willing to put towards supporting higher education. This is mirrored across the case studies, where a recurring challenge is lack of financial capacity. The **twin pressures of growing demand and financial constraint** raise questions about states' obligations to provide higher education in the context of the clear inclusion of the right to higher education in international law. Calls for free higher education have largely gone unheeded.

Ultimately, the goal of every higher education system should be to **eliminate costs from the students** to enable states to meet the 'progressive introduction of free education' as envisaged in international law. A second major objective related to funding is to **assure the public good and non-commercial nature of higher education**, which is especially pressing in systems where private higher education has a demand absorbing function.

10.2 Improving participation rates of students from equity deserving groups should be legally mandated

As the case studies make clear, while progress has been made when targeted scholarships have been introduced, the baseline is often extremely low. **Some equity deserving groups, such as students with disabilities and refugees, remain extremely under-served** and under-represented in higher education. While there have been reductions in inequalities, disadvantages still exist such as linguistic barriers and lower enrolment at institutions and in courses that are considered more prestigious.

According to the social justice framework on the right to higher education, students are at the centre of this right. As such, it is important to identify lessons learned from the case studies on ways to improve participation, specifically for students from equity deserving groups. **Laws and regulations appear to have been the most effective policy mechanisms in improving participation for students from equity deserving groups**. Their effectiveness may be largely attributable to the legal basis they are grounded in, which usually include repercussions for non-compliance. The formal recognition of equity measures through their consecration in legally binding form also serves as an incentive to induce systemic change.

10.3 The right to higher education goes beyond access; student success and pathways are equally critical

Most policies featured in the case studies relate primarily to access to higher education, even though **student success (wellbeing, flourishing, thriving) is equally critical to assuring the right to higher education**. Creating additional places in higher education is an important step but one that should go hand in hand with introducing or enhancing support for students during their studies, especially for those from equity deserving groups. Student success policies need to consider the structural change to higher education systems that would make them more inclusive for the majority who have historically been excluded.

On the one hand, going beyond access considers **higher education within a broader education ecosystem of lifelong learning;** on the other hand, it takes into consideration the **evolving right to higher education**, what is counted as being part of the right to higher education, and how to ensure that higher education is of good quality. The case study of Peru's *Beca 18* scholarship demonstrates the importance of both aspects: the funding policy's effectiveness can be enhanced by improving coordination with secondary schools and by providing better support for applicants during their higher education studies. In other words, **by only focusing on the number of people entering higher education, the interconnected nature of a person's experiences in education is overlooked**. As such, the effectiveness of the right to higher education depends on the nature and quality of the higher education sector's relations with school sectors.

10.4 Combining policy measures increases the likelihood of achieving the right to higher education

Efforts by policymakers to improve the participation of students from equity deserving groups can be combined with other policy measures seeking to widen participation more generally. In addition to **legal mandates**, **targeted scholarships** are a frequently used policy measure to increase access to higher education for students from equity deserving groups. Other policy measures in

this regard include the **creation of new HEIs in under-served regions** and the **expansion of pathways** into and throughout higher education.

However, recognition of the right to higher education is minimal in national legislation, and very few countries (among the case studies or globally) are taking comprehensive policy measures to achieve the right to higher education for all. **In almost all cases, policies on access and success in higher education are conditional** on the type of student, the number of places, public higher education sector capacity and so on. Given that states that do not provide higher education for all have an alternative mandate to ensure that higher education is equally accessible on the basis of merit, this also raises questions about the governments' responsibility regarding private HEIs, which are now pervasive. In some countries, private higher education fills a gap in demand that public higher education cannot meet, but this often leads to vertical stratification and different forms of inequality.

10.5 More data is needed: Improving the evidence baseline will support positive change

In some countries, it is **challenging to access basic data pertaining to the right to higher education**, and which is reported on by UNESCO. **Without this data, it is difficult to understand the rate of progress and to effect change**. The longer-term quantitative impact of policies to improve the right to higher education is not always evident, although the national case studies and this report have been one important opportunity for analysis. However, more action needs to be taken to improve data collection at the national and international level, at the least for the Sustainable Development Goals and other policy indicators collected by UNESCO on a regular basis.

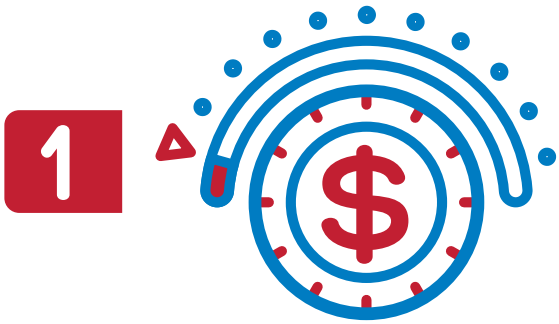
Two of the featured case study countries, Colombia and Peru, use **existing household classification systems** to identify potential beneficiaries for scholarships. This appears to be an efficient, socially acceptable method that reduces the need to create new or additional selection processes at the national or institutional level, providing government agencies the opportunity to improve coordination. Improving the evidence baseline through improved quantitative data reporting should go hand in hand with measures to assess policy effectiveness in more qualitative ways that offer greater insights into the rich diversity of human experiences.

10.6 The potential of digital technology to support the right to higher education remains untapped

Perhaps surprisingly, only one of the case studies – SWAYAM in India – demonstrated how digital technology can support the right to higher education. Notwithstanding, there are **myriad possible uses of digital technology**, from the use of **blockchain to facilitate credential recognition** to the role that **AI, appropriately and ethically harnessed**, could play in higher education (UNESCO IESALC, 2023, 2024). For example, while National Qualifications Frameworks exist in most countries, processes for the recognition and validation of credentials within systems need to be improved. Some countries have already conducted mapping processes to enable comparison between courses and programmes, a measure that should be extended to better support inter-system mobility and transfer.

10.7 Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are offered in light of these key messages:



1. Transition towards removing the cost of higher education from students

With the aim of eventually removing the cost of study, shift the cost of higher education away from students, **regulate tuition fees** in systems, and **simplify financial administration** by direct transfer between the relevant authority and HEIs, or by providing students with a full scholarship.

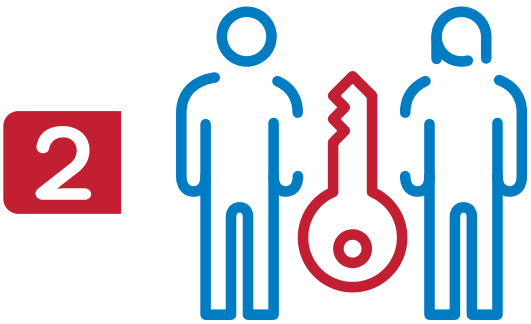
In contexts where higher education is not freely available to all, **policies may initially target** the following groups:

a. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and/or

b. Students from equity deserving groups, and/or

c. Students studying at public HEIs

In the process of transition, it may be necessary to continue using loans as a tool. However, loans, where they continue to be used, should not be a substitute for public subsidies. **Loans should be more accessible**, both in terms of qualifying for a loan and in their repayment terms. Repayments should not begin immediately after completion of studies and should not take up a disproportionate percentage of a graduate's income.

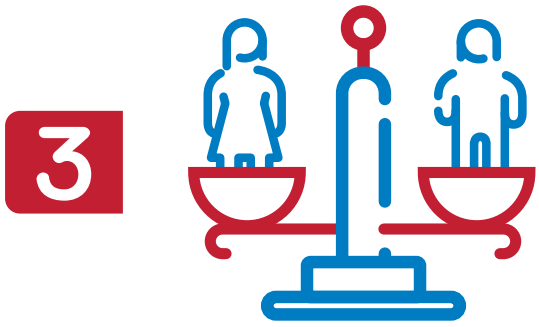


2. Regulate higher education access and success to reduce inequalities

Directive regulation and/or legislation to improve the right to higher education should be created or enhanced. This has been shown to **reduce inequalities in higher education systems**. Regulation/legislation can be targeted to areas of greatest need, for example improving the participation of students from equity deserving groups and/or ensuring equitable distribution of higher education around the country.

In contexts where higher education is not available to all, **admissions policies should be contextualised**. This is especially important for students who are more likely to be socio-economically marginalised. Contextual admissions should account for structural inequalities at both institutional (e.g. school performance, geography, type of school) and individual (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, disability) levels. Governments can mandate the use of contextualised admissions and require progress reports, and HEIs can implement processes tailored to their local realities.

Increased policy attention to **supporting every student to flourish in higher education** has the longer-term benefit of **reducing dropouts and inefficiencies** in higher education systems. Resources and training for HEIs are required to improve student support strategies, especially for at-risk students, and to reform discriminatory pedagogical and assessment practices. HEIs should be held accountable for the effectiveness of additional resources.

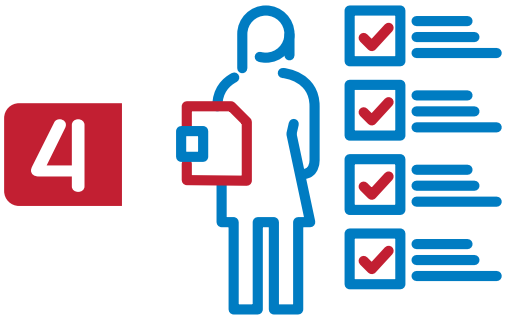


3. Ensure equal access to different forms of higher education provision

Countries should ensure the **provision of quality higher education in all regions**. This is particularly important in contexts of low geographic mobility. This can be achieved by creating new HEIs, by strengthening existing HEIs, and/or through partnership arrangements such as the satellite or branch campus model. This could be extended more broadly within education ecosystems, with HEIs taking responsibility for providing other levels of education such as schools or colleges/technical institutes.

Students should have equal access to **different forms of learning** (e.g., academic, technological, vocational) and programmes. This could be achieved by ensuring a more balanced regional distribution of higher education opportunities and by expanding quality online/distance education.

Policies that **strengthen the connection between schools and HEIs** will help level the playing field in preparing youth, especially first-generation students, to understand what to expect and how to succeed in higher education.



4. Improve higher education accountability and efficiency through data and reporting

A **nationwide higher education equity audit** should be conducted to assess current levels of participation in and graduation from higher education by equity deserving groups. This requires an agreed definition of which groups are equity deserving in a given context. Data should be collected by HEI and by programme/course and should be made publicly available. In countries where this data already exists, the recommendation is to ensure that data adequately captures the intersectional nature of marginalisation (for example, not simply recording how many women are studying in different programmes, but how many women who are also Indigenous/low-income, etc), and that there are regular and consistent modes of data collection.

Countries that use national/jurisdiction-level information systems/vulnerability assessment and identification systems or similar should **cross reference data gathered by information systems with higher education admissions data** to provide data on socio-economic status when cost removal is initially targeted at specific groups.

Independent policy evaluations can be commissioned to increase accountability of the use of public funds for right to higher education policies, provide a route to monitor the effectiveness of interventions, and lead to policy improvements.

5. Harness digital technologies more effectively to improve the right to higher education

Digital technologies can be more effectively harnessed as tools to improve the right to higher education. Policy recommendations depend on countries' technological starting point and may include **investing in digital infrastructure and internet connectivity** as a foundational imperative; **digital skills training and capacity building** for students, faculty, and other higher education stakeholders; and **deployment of blockchain technology** to provide secure digital-based evidence of prior learning.

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Appendix I: Summary of policies on the right to higher education implemented in the 15 national case studies

Country	Policy	Introduced	Category	Rationale	Summary
Argentina	Creation of new universities	2007	Infrastructure	Expand higher education provision in under-served regions and for equity deserving groups	13 new national universities created: six in Buenos Aires metropolitan region and seven elsewhere in the country.
Argentina	NEXOS Programme[33]	2017	Information	Build better connections between secondary school and higher education	Career planning and university preparation workshops for secondary school students; tutorials led by university students/faculty.
Argentina	National Recognition System (SNRA)[34]	2016	Pathways	Reduce obstacles for transfer courses or between HEIs	Development of subject families and estimates of working time to create over 1,400 training pathways.
Brazil	Prouni (University for All)	2004	Funding	Reduce educational inequality, especially among those from low-income backgrounds	Full and partial scholarships for low-income students; students with disabilities; Indigenous, Black and mixed race students.
Brazil	Quota Law	2012	Quotas	Redress structural racism and social inequality	50% of places in federal public HEIs reserved for students based on socioeconomic and racial criteria.
Chile	Budget Act / Higher Education Law	2016 / 2018	Funding	Respond to popular movement against deregulation and privatisation; address government loan obligations	Free tuition for students in lowest six socio-economic deciles
Chile	Higher Education Support and Access Programme (PACE)	2014	Information	Support access for economically disadvantaged, academically able students	Highest 15% performing students are guaranteed admission to selected HEIs; additional support in last two years of secondary school for all students in PACE schools.
Chile	Creation of new universities	2015	Infrastructure	Expand higher education provision in under-served regions	Two new state universities created in Aysén and O'Higgins, the only regions without a state university.

33 Reformed in 2021 and currently operating as the *Seguimos Estudiando* ('We Continue Studying') programme.

34 *Sistema Nacional de Reconocimiento Académico* in Spanish

Country	Policy	Introduced	Category	Rationale	Summary
Colombia	*Ser Pilo Paga*[35]	2014	Funding	Support access for academically able students from equity deserving groups	Full loan coverage for high performing students from equity deserving groups to selected universities, convertible to grant upon graduation
Colombia	*Generación E*	2018	Funding	Improve on predecessor (*Ser Pilo Paga*) to promote equitable access	Tuition subsidies for vulnerable students to most public universities; loan convertible to grant for high-performing students with some vulnerability.
Colombia	Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX)	1952 (with a major reform in 2005)	Funding	Provide financial credit to support those from low-income families to access higher education	Umbrella body for loan and grant programmes for use in higher education in Colombia and abroad; also responsible for internationalisation programmes.
El Salvador	Gradual Model of Technical and Technological Learning (MEGATEC[36])	2004	Infrastructure	Make higher education more accessible and improve employment rates	Full funding for students to pursue a higher technical degree in the last two years of high school plus a final year at a technological institute attached to an HEI.
England[37]	Higher Education and Research Act	2017	Regulation	Tackle ethnic discrimination in admissions processes	Created a regulator (the Office for Students) with powers to require HEIs to publish disaggregated admissions data.
England	Access and Participation Plans	2019	Information	Widen access, in particular at the most selective universities	All HEIs required to produce 5-year Access and Participation Plans with widening access targets, many introducing contextualised admissions.
Ghana	Affirmative action admissions	1999	Quotas	Increase female enrolment	Lower admission requirements for female undergraduate applicants at University of Ghana.
Ghana	Less Endowed Secondary School (LESS) Initiative	2003	Quotas	Expand access for students from rural and resource-poor schools	Top performing students from LESS automatically offered admission at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

35 In the Colombian context, the word "pilo" refers to a person's dedication, skills and abilities, and "paga" means that "it's worth it." In this sense, "Ser Pilo Paga" means that being a devoted student is worthwhile (Source: Case study on the right to higher education in Colombia, p. 9)

36 Modelo Gradual de Aprendizaje Técnico y Tecnológico

37 The Act is applicable for all nations of the United Kingdom; the right to higher education case study focusses on its impact on England.

Country	Policy	Introduced	Category	Rationale	Summary
Ghana	Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy	2017	Pathways	Address geographical imbalances and wealth-based inequities in access to education	Government absorbs all costs (fees, boarding/meals as applicable, etc) of upper secondary education at public high schools.
Haiti	New Constitution	1987	Regulation	Meet growing demand for higher education	Confirmed free nature of higher education but also paved way for emergence of private HEIs.
Haiti	Creation of new HEIs	2007	Infrastructure	Respond to growing demand for higher education outside of the capital city	Created 10 Public Universities of the Region (UPR).
Haiti	National Education Fund	2017	Funding	Increase funding available for higher education	Provides scholarships (some as public-private partnerships) reducing tuition and living costs for students.
India	National Campaign for Higher Education (RUSA[38])	2013	Infrastructure	Improve access in under-served regions and for equity deserving groups	Creation of 19 new universities, 130 new model colleges, and over 2,000 infrastructure grants (to date).
India	Educational Loan Scheme	2001	Funding	Remove financial constraints from participation in higher education	Provision of loans for higher education with an interest rate subsidy for equity deserving groups.
India	Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM)	2017	Pathways	Expand access to a wide range of courses using technology	Creation of an indigenous massive open online course (MOOC) programme with free courses and a small charge for certification; credits can be counted towards formal programmes.
Jamaica	Tertiary Students Assistance Programme	2019	Funding	Create a policy framework to administer financial support designed to increase access to higher education	Includes merit-based scholarships, needs-based grants, and a needs-based work/study programme.
Jamaica	National Qualifications Framework	2017	Pathways	Address the effects of inequitable school education	Allows for equivalences between academic and technical education and recognition of prior learning/ skills.
Morocco	National Education and Training Charter/ Law no.01-00 – Grants	2001	Funding	Improve access for low-income and rural students	Increased number of needs-based scholarships.

38 Rashtriya Uchathar Shiksha Abhiyan. This is conceived as an integral part of the larger national higher education mission.

Country	Policy	Introduced	Category	Rationale	Summary
Morocco	National Education and Training Charter/ Law no.01-00 – Accommodation	2001	Infrastructure	Improve access for low-income and rural students, students with special needs and female students	Increased capacity in university halls of residence with all places reserved for vulnerable or non-working students.
Peru	*Beca 18* Scholarship	2011	Funding	Support access for academically able students from equity deserving groups	Scholarships for high performing students from equity deserving groups at universities meeting a quality threshold.
Peru	National Superintendency of Higher Education (SUNEDU)	2014	Regulation	Improve educational quality in HEIs	Creation of a licensing process for public and private HEIs as a condition of operation.
Portugal	+M23	2006	Quotas	Increase access for adult students, address lower levels of participation compared to other European countries	Minimum of 5% places at all HEIs reserved for students over the age of 23 with incomplete secondary education or ineligible for other admissions routes.
Portugal	Technological Specialisation Courses (CETs) and Higher Professional Technical Courses (CTeSP)	1995 (CETs) / 2014 (CTesP)	Pathways	Improve professional and intermediate training, build links with labour market	Creation of 1–2-year courses with strong practical components targeted at adult learners.
South Africa	Education White Paper 3	1997	Regulation	Achieve equal access and end discrimination, post-apartheid	Provides the context of redress and social justice in higher education, identifying the categories of equity as Black, female, disabled, and mature students.
South Africa	National Students Financial Aid Scheme	1999	Funding	Provide equitable access for students from equity deserving groups	Provides loans and needs-based scholarships for Black students and students from marginalised communities at public HEIs.
South Africa	National Plan for Higher Education[39]	2001	Regulation	Ensure equitable access for all	Restructure the higher education system and set participation and completion targets.
Türkiye	Access to higher education for Syrian refugees	2012	Quotas	Support integration of influx of Syrian refugees	Admission to public universities, intensive Turkish lessons in public universities, Arabic-taught courses, tuition fees removed, financial support scheme in public universities.

Source: UNESCO IESALC based on national case studies

39 Presumed to be replaced by the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training 2021-2030.

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The right to higher education

Higher Education Research

The UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) stands as the only institution within UNESCO and the United Nations system exclusively dedicated to higher education. Specializing in policy-driven research, capacity building, advocacy and technical cooperation on critical tertiary education issues, UNESCO IESALC assists Member States in evidence-based policymaking, facilitates networking, and advocates for change to promote advancements in higher education, addressing various priority areas.

This report sheds light on the persistent inequalities in higher education around the world, emphasizing the challenges faced by marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds. Advocating for higher education as a fundamental right, the report employs a social justice framework to synthesize the findings of 15 national case studies that explore effective policies aimed at enhancing access and promoting equity in education systems.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals