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Future-ready Universities and Graduates: Quality Education Beyond the Horizon

Equitable Access and Retention in Higher Education: Challenges and the Road Ahead

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Abstract

The unstoppable and exponential demand of Higher Education is posing serious challenges and raises questions about financial sustainability, quality, access and retention. This paper discusses the relevance of the Higher Education sector in society and the importance of guaranteeing an equitable access to tertiary education but also of ensuring students' retention. Higher Education Institutions have to invest in sustainable methodologies, processes and tools such as those related with quality. They have to be considered as a crucial factor to ensure the adequacy of the study programme offer and the proper inclusion of students at risk of exclusion who will, not only succeed in their education path, but also find a job. The present discussion paper provides insights on both the European and Asian scenarios, and raises key questions on the current contextual advancements and gaps to be merged in the medium long term with strong emphasis on the Asian context.

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Why is the role and impact of higher education so crucial in our societies?

The crucial role of higher education (HE) for the progression of both industrialised and developing countries is widely acknowledged. In the last twenty years higher education has become a central priority in the formulation of public policy both in Europe and in Asia. The main reasons for that have been its intense expansion, increased diversification and the growing evidence of its benefits (underestimated in the past), both at private and social level (Collins, 2011).

HE's positive impacts include **private benefits,** such as higher earnings or increased employability, but also quality of life, improvements in health, longevity or even happiness (OECD, 2016), that also benefit society as a whole. Higher earnings from well-educated individuals raise tax revenues and increase consumption at the same time, which benefits governments (by easing demands on state finances) and producers.

Social benefits of higher education are supported by the Human Capital Theory (McMahon, 2009), which stands that a highly skilled workforce with HE credentials is a prerequisite for economic growth because workers' skills are crucial in technology development, transfer and application (Lucas 1988; Romer 1986, 1990). In recent years, different studies are progressing in assessing the impact of universities' activities on human capital (including productivity increase), but also on their specific contribution towards GDP growth of their country/region (Pastor at al. 2016).

Thus, considering the widespread

Recent studies found that the Spanish University System returns 2,52€ to Spanish society for every Euro invested. The economic activity generated by Spanish universities represents 2,3% of income and 2,9% of employment in Spain. Those studies state that more than 20% of the Spanish economy's growth experienced in the last two decades is attributable directly and indirectly to the contributions made by the Spanish University System[1].

evidence of the many private and social benefits of higher education, establishing sound policies and interventions, which may contribute to equitable access and retention, will promote both social justice and economic efficiency (Birdsall, 1999). On the one hand, in the interest of **social justice,** every individual must be given equal chance to participate in HE and its benefits irrespective of his/her individual characteristics (income, gender, ethnicity, etc.). On the other hand, in the interest of **economic efficiency,** a talented low-income student who is denied entry into higher education signifies a loss of human capital for the individual person and for society as a whole. Thus, this is not only an ethical choice, but also an economic one (World Bank, 2012).

What do we mean by equitable access and retention in higher education?

The OECD (2008) defines **equitable HE systems** as *"those that ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes are based only on the individual's innate ability and study effort. They ensure that the achievement of educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, pace of residence or visibility".*

However, supporting an equitable higher education system is usually not the only issue. Large percentages of students who access HE never obtain a degree. As a result, governments and universities are also devoting a lot of efforts in retaining higher percentages of their students via policies and programs to support them academically, personally, financially but also structurally.

Thus, there are different personal and social circumstances, which can lead to inequitable access and low completion rates at universities. The main **target groups** identified in the present discussion paper are the following: a) individuals from the lower income groups; b) individuals from groups with a minority status (defined on the basis of their ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural or age characteristics); c) females; and d) students with disabilities.

How is equitable access ensured in both Europe and Asia?

Achieving real equity in terms of access to higher education is still a pending issue for the HE sector all over the world. This is because in parallel with the dramatic growth of the global academic systems, different forms of **equity barriers** are arising at various levels depending on each specific national/regional context. In addition to this, the current increasing trend of the importance of knowledge for sustainable economic growth and the globalisation of HE is bringing new and additional challenges to the already existing efforts focused on achieving a real equity.

Thus, the role of effective **inclusive policies** accompanied by clear **institutional willingness and responsiveness** is essential to provide opportunities to all individuals to fairly access a full learning experience and thus have the opportunity to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competences that will be exploited in different ways for the benefit of the society, contributing to sustainable economic growth. Inclusiveness and equitable access to education, especially higher education, are cornerstones for the establishment of a broad and heterogeneous human resource base with value for the society, where the education of excluded groups and their valorisation constitutes an essential development node for the progress of every country.

Over recent decades, the expansion of HE has been considerable, and people with tertiary education represent the largest share of 25-34 ¬year-olds in many OECD countries. On¬ average, across OECD¬ countries, the tertiary-educated account for 35% among 25-64 year-olds and 42% among 25-34¬ year-olds (OECD, 2016). In many developing countries HE remains a phenomenon related with urban areas and for those with higher incomes (Altbach & Davis, 2004); according to Alan R. Sadovnik, it is urgent to find the reason why **students from a lower socioeconomic background** perform less well at school and provide pragmatic policy proposals for effective reforms in HE and beyond (Sadovnik, 2004).

In terms of **students with disabilities,**

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[1] *The Valencian Institute of Economic Research (IVIE)*

and according to the Code of Practice of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA), -Section 3 on Disabled Students, (2010) *"the educational disadvantage and exclusion faced by many disabled people is not an inevitable result of their impairments or health conditions, but arises from social, attitudinal and environmental barriers"*. As such institutions have the responsibility to ensure that all their policies, procedures and activities (including strategic planning and resource allocation) are devoted towards removing barriers to support disabled students' and foster their full participation in the academic and social activities of the institution.

The HE admission panorama in Asia can be defined as extremely heterogeneous, where universities in India, Malaysia, and Singapore utilize only secondary school examination performance for admission, while in almost all other countries they employ both school examination results, and special entrance tests (Asian Development Bank (2012). Policy makers consider the entrance tests as adequate and objective measures to assess the suitability of a student, since they treat all applications with the same criteria; thus, the expectation of the admission process is to ensure all admitted students meet the same required standards. However, and according to Helms (2008), such procedures have at least two unintended biases: 1) the content of the examination may be biased against certain groups by presupposing specific cultural knowledge; and 2) segments of a society may not have the necessary resources to adequately prepare for the examinations, such as better quality schools and personal tutoring. As a consequence, in all the countries where these tests are employed, serious concerns have been raised on their value, appropriateness, fairness and usefulness; strong pressures are on-going for a more equitable basis of providing access which may need to consider other factors in addition to the scoring tests, that may be used as additional assessment to ponder the entrance test scores. Aspects such as quality of schooling (rural vs. urban), language difficulties (local dialects vs.

the national language), family economic and social background, preparedness (Santelices and Wilson 2010), but also level of impairment should be contemplated key to achieve equitable access.

According to statistics, those who fail in the accession process are forced to wait until the following year to have another chance; however, there is unfortunately a high percentage of students who drop their intent of accessing HE and prefer directly joining the workforce, while others opt for private colleges and universities, where, (excluding the elite ones for example in the Philippines) generally, such entrance tests are not required. In addition, it must be underlined that it is often those from poor and marginalized communities who perform worst in these tests and for them applying to private HEIs (with high fees) is an impossible option, resulting in a risk of exclusion for low income students and students with special needs.

The HE admission panorama in Europe is also complex. Real equitable access is still a challenge and an open debate. Over the past decade, equity has been addressed in both policy initiatives from the European Commission, as well as those promulgated by the Bologna Process, where the social dimension has a predominant role and was first brought to discussion by the *Prague Communiqué* (2001)[2]. In the *Berlin Communiqué* (2003)[3], the role of the social dimension of HE was better defined: *"The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level"*. Some years later, in 2007 the *London Communiqué* (2007)[4] stressed on the link to the general role of HE as: *"raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society"*. This communiqué also transfers the idea and overall aim of the social dimension policies, namely that *"the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of populations"*. The importance of

"maximising the talents and capacities of all citizens" through higher education is later on reiterated by the Leuven Communiqué (2009) in particular given *"the challenge of an ageing population"* (Westerheiden et al., 2010).

Having underlined the relevance of a full social inclusive dimension in HE, all European Union member states were requested to provide a report on progress towards an action plan on the social dimension as part of the 2009 reporting of the Bologna Process. As expected, the result of the exercise was highly heterogeneous in terms of practicality, applicability, and specificity (Bohonnek et al., 2012).

Within the Bologna Process, the 2009 Communiqué calls for member states to *"set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade"*. Two working groups of the Bologna Process (the one focused on social dimension and the one on data collection), have been working on strategies to collect reliable information and their resulting indicators show progress in terms

Alternative arrangements including reservation of places for marginalized communities are in place in PRC, India, Malaysia, and Viet Nam (Asian Development Bank, 2012). They may be one solution to balance participation across socioeconomic groups even if this represents a public burden and causes concern, especially in cultures where excellence is seen as the only condition to access to higher levels of learning. A shift of the accession paradigm would be seen as an erosion of quality standards and an impoverishment of the study programme offer.

of social dimension (main source of information: independent Eurostudent initiative[5].

Due to the high heterogeneity of the European Higher Education Area, given the different national contexts, each Bologna process signatory country

[2] https://media.ehea.info/file/2001_Prague/44/2/2001_Prague_Communique_English_553442.pdf (last access 24 July 2017)
[3] https://media.ehea.info/file/2003_Berlin/28/4/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf (last access 24 July 2017)
[4] https://media.ehea.info/file/2007_London/69/7/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf (last access 24 July 2017)
[5] www.eurostudent.eu (last access 24 July 2017)

has its own specific approach towards equity in access and inclusion. However, of special relevance is the *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in higher education* (QAA, 2010). It consists of a set of interrelated documents, which form an overall Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education for the guidance of HEIs subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education and other bodies providing UK HE. It is a valuable reference tool that identifies a comprehensive series of system-wide principles addressing matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in HE, thus being a reference point for institutions whose priority is to assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications.

Why should quality always be considered when improving equitable access and retention in higher education?

The expansion of access in the last 30 years has put pressure on higher education quality in many countries, especially in Asia. The main challenge in this area for both governments and HEIs is to balance attention to participation and inclusiveness without forgetting the attention to quality (Maclean et al., 2012).

Modern quality culture and its effective implementation is the cornerstone for the success of HE systems in responding to continuous societal, economic and political changes and it is a common concept nowadays in both Europe and Asia. This means defining and implementing Quality Assurance

In Europe, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) include a set of standards related to policy for QA, design and programme approval, but also key aspects, such as the provision of student-centred learning- teaching and assessment, student admission, progression and certification, teaching staff, learning resources and student support, information management, public information, monitoring and periodic review of programmes, cyclical external QA. Students are the focus point of the ESG and the provision of the best conditions and support to them is considered a crucial issue to allow them making progress in their academic path. The needs of a diverse student population, such as students with disabilities, are underlined as of importance when allocating planning and providing the learning resources for a specific programme and the student support services adequate to ensure inclusion that will foster retention (ESG, 2015)

An experience of harmonising the HE sector for the ASEAN countries is the SEAMEO RIHED proposal for a "Roadmap for harmonisation of HE" . The ASEAN QA Network (AQAN) was established and was given the mission of promoting QA within the ASEAN member states. In 2013 AQAN developed the ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework AQAF), approved by the Ministers of Trade, Labour and Education (2015). AFAQ had a strong QA predominance with views on setting up an area of HE provision comparability, transparency and mutual trust. This was not an isolated attempt to tackle QA for HE and other initiatives are for example the SHARE project focused on policy dialogues, capacity building in the field of QA, qualification framework, ASEAN credit system, and student mobility programme. Quality systems are in place at national level and at regional level, the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) has been established in 2003 "to enhance the quality of higher education in Asia and the Pacific region through strengthening the work of quality assurance agencies and extending the cooperation between them" and the ASEAN University Network is promoting QA awareness and different activities in the QA framework.

mechanisms to ensure student recruitment (including the target groups previously identified), but also retention towards the attainment of their degrees.

Why is funding crucial in the assurance of equitable access and students' retention?

In addition to what has been discussed above, and given the expansion context, governments/universities are also tackling the challenge of finding a correct balance among sustainability and costs, and to explore options to ensure fair and equitable access, without overlooking the assurance of adequate quality standards.

With regards to access, first of all it is difficult to find evidence on the progressivity or regressivity of public expenditure in higher education. However most of the analysis shows that a larger proportion of public funds for higher education are targeted to the wealthiest groups in countries where post-secondary education participation rates are highly unequal. In these cases, cost-sharing instruments may contribute to increasing inequality because only those who can afford to pay tuition fees have access (McMahon 2009). The most frequent instruments to avoid this issue are well-targeted scholarship and loan programs. Those instruments usually contribute to reduce income inequality (OECD and World Bank, 2009), and have a direct impact on the target groups identified in the previous sections.

With regards to retention, it has been identified that insufficient academic preparedness, usually associated with poor-quality secondary education contributes clearly to drop out during the first year of studies at university. Outreach and bridge programs between secondary and higher education institutions have been identified as a good practice to expand tertiary enrolment among disadvantaged populations.

Hue University's Pathways program in Vietnam provides tutoring groups and academic coaching for disadvantaged students whose secondary school did not adequately prepared them for college. This program helps bridging the academic preparation gap, and helps students to transition to the tertiary education system based on textbook and exam-oriented learning (Young & Chang, 2008).

Evidence on funding instruments to avoid gender-related inequalities is usually focused on the fact that women are underrepresented in specific disciplines that lead to high-paying jobs (such as engineering). Those policies try to expand the pool of women who pursue careers in science, technology,

The European Commission has attempted to tackle the matter of gender inequality in STEM through various policies and funding mechanisms. In Horizon 2020, the EU's current major research and innovation funding programme, the objective of gender equality has been enshrined in commitments such as prioritising gender balance in research teams as a ranking factor of project proposals, achieving a target of 40% of female representation in expert groups and evaluation panels and, where appropriate, emphasising gender as a focus of research. This strong emphasis on gender by no means undermines some of the excellent examples of research and mentorship to date, but rather emphasises the goals of gender equality in STEM at local, national and European levels (Shúilleabháin, 2017).

engineering and mathematics (STEM). There is very limited data with regards to policies and programs targeting students with disabilities and learning difficulties, even within OECD countries. At institutional level and in developing countries, few universities have introduced accommodations to address physical and learning disabilities. Equality of access in these cases may entail teaching adaptations because many disabilities affect the way the curriculum is accessed, and funding mechanisms should consider the extra time students may require to complete their studies, as well as their higher accommodation and transportation costs.

Oxford University (Oxford, UK) via the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) is providing support to students with disabilities, which includes teaching adjustments, human support and mentoring, access to adapted technology, medical care, etc. More information about these services may be found in the following link: www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/disability/study?wssl=1

Which recommendations could be done at policy level?

Equitable and affordable higher education is essential in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In a recent Policy Paper (UNESCO, 2017) this organisation proposes six key recommendations at policy level:

1:
Review **equity policies** periodically to make sure that the groups that most need the help are getting it;

2:
Ensure equity and affordability across diverse HE systems by guaranteeing principles of access within **regulatory frameworks**;

3:
Guarantee student protection by establishing **national agencies** to develop and follow-up on equal opportunities policies;

4:
Use a combination of **admissions criteria** to ensure that all students have a fair chance at getting into the best universities, regardless of their backgrounds;

5:
Concentrate **public financial aid** on disadvantage students groups;

6: Combine **low tuition** and **fees with income-based loans** to cap student repayment burdens at less than 15% of monthly income

Which recommendations could be done at institutional level?

There is a range of ways that EU and Asian higher education institutions may contribute to equitable access and retention:

- Higher education institutions should internalize the importance of equitable access in their **vision and mission** in order to make their financial programs and support services better targeted and more effective;

- Establish **institutional support structures** to enable access to HE and foster the consolidation of a social integration culture within universities;

- Build **human capacity** at both academic and administrative levels with a view to enhance their educational and managerial skills in this area;

- Encourage the development and use of **Assistive Technology** in order to improve the teaching and learning process of the disadvantaged groups;

- Involve as active partner of **universities, stakeholders groups**, such as labour market and non-governmental organisations in order to improve access and employment of disadvantaged groups;

- Increase **inter-institutional cooperation** and sharing of good practices for continuous improvement and development between the regions. In this area it is recommended to exploit EU funding programmes which may fund these kind of actions, as the Erasmus+ programme / Capacity Building for Higher Education (e.g. www.indoeduc4all.eu)

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The [6th edition of the ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC6)](#) will address the topic of "Future Universities and Graduate: Quality Education Beyond the Horizon" and invites over 280 representatives from academia, governments, business and industry, students and youth associations as well as NGOs and IGOs.

The ARC6 consists of 2 programme elements: 1) a Students' Forum 2) followed by a Rectors' Conference. Close linkages between the Rectors' and the Students' is assured through a synergic exchange in which 4 Rectors' attend the Students' Forum as Mentors and 4 Students' participate throughout the Rectors' Conference.

Specifically, ARC6 aims to:
- Contribute to the policy dialogue on higher education in Asia and Europe and provide input to the agenda of ASEM Education Ministers
- Support the implementation of the SDGs
  Facilitate cooperation and long-term partnerships among universities across Asia and Europe
- Enable collaborations among student networks and associations
- Strengthen the linkages between universities, governments, business and industry, IOs and NGOs, and local communities

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