

Who has more responsibility in making higher education more **equitable and accessible**: universities or policymakers?

A narrative report on the ARC10 Debate Webinar on Rethinking Equity & Access held on 07 November 2024

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About the 10th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC10)

The [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#) is an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to fostering bi-regional dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration among its 51 partner countries, along with ASEAN and the European Union. As the only permanent institution within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Process, ASEF plays a pivotal role in addressing pressing global challenges through multi-sectoral initiatives in various thematic areas.

A key component of ASEF's work in Education is the [ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC\) Programme](#). Conducted on a biennial cycle, ARC serves as the Official Dialogue Partner of the [ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting \(ASEMME\)](#), making it the only bi-regional, multi-stakeholder dialogue platform that brings together university and student leaders, policymakers, and ministers to shape the higher education landscape in Asia and Europe.

The [tenth edition of ARC \(ARC10\)](#), running from 2024 to 2025, focuses on the future of higher education in response to global trends. Climate change, geopolitical disruptions, social inequalities, rapid digital transformation, and the urgent need to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the necessity for innovative and adaptive higher education strategies. Business-as-usual approaches are no longer viable.

As a launching point for ARC10, ASEF organised the [ARC10 Debate Webinar Series](#) from October to December 2024, structured around three key themes: Digital Transformation, Access & Equity, and Recognition & Balanced Mobility.

Each webinar featured a thought-provoking debate, framed by a compelling prompt and explored by distinguished experts from across Asia and Europe, who engaged in an assigned or chosen stance. Do note that with this, their position during the debates may not reflect their personal or professional opinions on the topic.

This Narrative Report provides a comprehensive summary of the diverse perspectives shared during the [ARC10 Debate Webinar on Rethinking Equity & Access](#), held virtually on 07 November 2024.

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Overview

To support the ARC10 process, a series of webinars relating to the project's thematic areas were delivered. The webinar focused on equity and access was delivered in November 2024. This report will bring together the contributions to the webinar and the key issues emerging, which will be further explored through the ARC10 Policy Dialogue Series in 2025. The topic of the webinar was:

***“Who has more responsibility for making
higher education more equitable and accessible:
universities or policymakers?”***

There were two speakers in favour of the proposition that universities should have more responsibility:

- **Prof Verity FIRTH AM**, Vice-President for Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement at University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia; and
- **Dr Huw MORRIS**, Honorary Professor of Tertiary Education at the Institute of Education (IOE) – University College London (UCL) Faculty of Education and Society, United Kingdom.

There were also two speakers in favour of the proposition that policymakers should have more responsibility:

- **Ms Lisa SCHIVALOCCHI**, an Executive Committee Member of the European Students' Union (ESU); and
- **Dr Edizon FERMIN**, Vice President for Academic Affairs, National Teachers College, the Philippines.

The session was moderated by **Prof Graeme ATHERTON**, Vice-Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford and Director of the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN).

Context

Before the perspectives of the different contributors are presented it is important to outline the global context where equitable access and success in higher education is concerned.

Inequalities in access and success are pervasive

Equitable access and success is defined as participation and then successful progress by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a ‘disadvantaged majority’ who on average earn less and/or experience greater social/economic challenges than a minority population. Such students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, specific ethnic groups, experience disabilities and are 25 years old and above. Inequalities also exist within countries, types of university and subject by gender. Across different countries these inequalities

manifest themselves in different ways depending on the broader nature of inequality in that country.

In all the countries in the world where data could be located, which was around 90%, inequities in higher education participation by some measure of social background exist (Atherton, 2016). Differences in terms of access and success are present and co-exist in different ways. In Malaysia for example, only 5% of young adults in the lowest income bracket complete a bachelor's degree compared to 40% in the highest income bracket. In Europe students with tertiary educated parents are in the majority across countries with 52% of students having at least one parent with a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree and 7% have parents whose highest degree is at ISCED Level 5 (short-cycle) (Hauschild et al., 2024). Students whose parents did not complete tertiary education are in the minority (41%).

Policy commitment to reduce inequalities is variable

ASEF's 2021 study of 47 countries in Asia and Europe showed that in all countries higher education equity features in government produced higher education policy documents nearly all offer financial support for students from equity target groups (Atherton, 2021). But less than a third of countries (30%) have a specific higher education equity strategy and only 34% of countries have specific targets related to the access and success in higher education of equity target groups.

What are universities doing?

A recent study of nearly 500 university leaders in Europe showed that 59% were targeting more socio-economically disadvantaged students (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). In terms of activities universities undertake they, can be broadly divided into non-monetary access outreach measures and monetary support for access. A World Bank study of over 75 non-monetary measures such as work with school children from low-income and other backgrounds to support their attainment, give them information about higher education and raise their future aspirations found that such outreach policies are broadly effective in increasing access for disadvantaged students (Herbaut & Koen, 2019).



The Debate

Who has more responsibility for making higher education more equitable and accessible: universities or policymakers?

UNIVERSITY SIDE

**A synthesis of the case made by
Prof Verity FIRTH AM**

Prof Firth made the first presentation in support of the importance of universities in equitable access to higher education. Drawing on the Australian experience and the work of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) where she is based, her argument centred on three points:

Longevity of Universities vs Terms of Government

Political parties and their policies can change with each election cycle, while universities are long term institutions and even in countries like Australia, often have 100-150-year histories. Political changes can disrupt efforts to maintain equitable access and success work as programmes may be defunded or deprioritised with each new government. For example, the 2008 Bradley Review set bold targets for low socioeconomic status (SES) participation in Australian higher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). In December 2017, however, a new government changed the system of higher education funding and stalled the progress that was being made in driving up the participation of those from low SES backgrounds in Higher Education. But in 2022, a new Labor leadership was re-elected, launching a large-scale review of higher education with equity targets and promised new funding (Australian Government, 2023).

Internal Motivation vs Government Mandates

University staff and equity practitioners are motivated by a shared goal to improve access and drive positive societal change: This intrinsic motivation leads to more genuine and sustained efforts to improve access and success. In contrast, government mandates may not always align with the specific needs and contexts of individual institutions and communities and may impose policies and practices which do not consider the unique and contextually appropriate requirements of each community.

Universities' Ability to Drive Systemic Change

Even though policies to affect equitable access and success may be put in place, it requires universities often working collaboratively to make these policies have any impact. As an example, networks such as the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) play a crucial role in Australia by facilitating collaboration among universities to share best practices and resources for promoting equity.

UNSW Sydney has worked in partnership with the University of Sydney and University of Newcastle, Australia to produce the Uni Ready Toolkit. The Uni Ready toolkit is a digital resource hub, that seeks to bridge the knowledge gap regarding academic expectations from high school to commencing university for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Since its launch, Uni Ready has been accessed by 7,643 active users, including 23,833 interactions with embedded interactive content.

In conclusion, Prof Firth argued that while policymakers play an important role in shaping the broader educational landscape, the stability, adaptability, and intrinsic motivation of universities make them better suited to lead efforts in advancing equitable access to education.

A synthesis of the case made by

Dr Huw MORRIS

This presentation from Dr Morris described a number of reasons why universities are fundamental to achieving progress in equitable access and success. However, he also presented some of the challenges that universities face in trying to support equitable access and success. These reasons are outlined below.

University expansion drives access

Across the world higher education participation has expanded across the world over recent decades. Universities themselves have been the driving force in creating new opportunities, courses and formats to enable expansion which goes together with equitable access to occur.

Earnings need to keep up for low-income students

Whilst universities have been able to expand their numbers this has led to increased earnings for university graduates. However, gaps in earnings by students from different socio-economic backgrounds remain. These gaps, however, are often due to labour market conditions showing that while universities are key here what they can do is also constrained by economic and social factors.

Universities are flexible in supporting access

Universities have also been able to offer different kinds of provision to meet the needs of students often alongside other forms of post-compulsory tertiary education. For example, many countries in Europe offer a significant amount of their higher education provision in the form of 'short cycle' degrees.

Universities need a social 'license to operate'

Finally, Dr Morris pointed to the need for universities themselves to take ownership of the equitable access and success agenda. In some countries, most recently the United States, there have been questions posed regarding the role of the university in society today. They have been accused by some politicians of being out of touch with local communities. To meet this criticism, they must be at the centre of efforts to embed equitable access and success in all the work that they do.

POLICYMAKER SIDE

A synthesis of the case made by Dr Edizon FERMIN

The first presentation arguing for the importance of policymakers in shaping equitable access and success in higher education was delivered by Dr Edizon Fermin from The National Teachers College, The Philippines. He drew on the experience of the Philippines and the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act to argue that while universities can create localised and contextualised processes and programmes that promote equitable access and learner success, they can do more if policymakers create a more enabling and empowering environment for them.

The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA)

The Act was passed in 2017 and had 4 key elements as a national policy development pathway: 1) free higher education, 2) free technical-vocational education and training, 3) tertiary education subsidy, and 4) student loan programme (Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, 2017). In 2024, a total of 2,149,252 higher education students have benefited from these four policy driven provisions for equitable access. Of these students over 380,000 came from very low-income backgrounds (De Vera, 2024).

■ Ensuring that it is the poorest who benefit

However, while UAQTEA and the Unified Student Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UniFAST) it created shows the central role that policymakers have in driving forward equitable access to higher education recent experiences also illustrate the need for policies to be targeted if what policymakers do is to be impactful. Evidence shows that between 2018 and 2022, the share of the poorest of the poor benefitting from the subsidy declined drastically, from 74% to 31% (EDCOM 2 Communications). There have been renewed political commitment in 2024 to target financial support at those from the poorest communities.

■ Focusing on success as well as access

Research undertaken in the Philippines tracking students through higher education has pointed to the challenges that different students face in terms of student satisfaction (Yee, 2023). It suggests that mandating universities to foster environments where learner engagement is marked by a sense of belongingness, preparedness, interaction, and participation should be regarded as a state priority.

Further research has shown the challenges that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face in labour market progression after higher education. As well as supporting access and academic success it is imperative that policymakers actively focus on work to support such students to navigate their way through the labour market.

■ A synthesis of the case made by Ms Lisa SCHIVALOCCHI

The final presentation focused on the importance of policies being developed across a region and highlighted what governments in Europe need to do to reduce inequalities in higher education access and success. It drew on the work of the European Students' Union (ESU) on the 'social dimension' in Europe and on the Principles, Guidelines and Indicators of the Social Dimension of Higher Education produced by the Bologna Follow-Up Group's Working Group on Social Dimension 2021-2024. The 'social dimension' is a concept that is used in Europe to encompass equitable access and success in higher education. It is defined as a process containing specific and transversal policies aimed at creating an inclusive environment in higher education in which the composition of the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels corresponds to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (EHEA Ministerial Conference, 2007).

■ Principles, Guidelines and Indicators of the Social Dimension of Higher Education (PAGs)

The PAGs is a framework that empowers public authorities and higher education institutions in the EHEA to formulate system-wide and institutional policies, strategies, and action plans for strengthening the social dimension (BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension, 2024). It was developed by a group of representatives from over 30 European countries from 2022 to 2024. There are 10 PAGs and these are listed below:

- The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level.

- Legal regulations or policy documents should allow and enable higher education institutions to develop their own strategies.
- The inclusiveness of the entire education system should be improved by developing coherent policies from early childhood education onwards.
- Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education.
- Public authorities should have policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students.
- Public authorities should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions.
- Public authorities should help higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body.
- International mobility programs in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that fosters diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Higher education institutions should ensure that community engagement in higher education promotes diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders.

Policy commitment in Europe

There are some encouraging signs of commitment to equitable access and success in higher education in Europe, but equally there are some less encouraging signs. In research undertaken in 2024 with national student unions, 34 of the 36 organisations felt that some progress had been made in implementing social dimension policies (Onița et al., 2024). However, it was also found that while in 55% of cases institutional targets for social dimension have been put in place or raised, implementation drops to 16.6% to national targets.

The importance of government action

In conclusion, Ms Schivalocchi argued that higher education is a public good, a public responsibility, and should be publicly funded. It benefits all people, as it contributes to the common good. However, it is still too often portrayed as an expense.

Conclusion

This debate highlighted the role that both universities and policymakers play in addressing inequalities in access and success in higher education. Neither universities nor policymakers can address this challenge without the support of, and dialogue with, the other. Through the four presentations and ensuing debate, the following summary points emerged:

- Making higher education affordable for students through low/free tuition or bursary support is crucial, but it is not sufficient on its own to lead to improvements in equitable access and success.

- Alongside financial support both universities and governments need to deliver activities that can enable young people (in particular from low-income backgrounds) to progress to higher education, bridging the knowledge and attainment gap regarding academic expectations from high school.
- Universities need to take ownership of the equitable access and success agenda themselves, and if they are not doing this, be asked why not. Government policies to support equitable access and success will not be effective without university 'buy in' to them.
- For policymakers, there is an increasing body of evidence regarding what they can do to drive forward equitable access and success in higher education and how effective it can be. They have a responsibility to act on this evidence and open up opportunities to benefit from higher education to all of those in their countries and regions.

Presenting equitable access and success in higher education as either the responsibility of universities or policymakers is a useful way of highlighting the respective roles of both parties. To produce the change that needs to occur in higher education equity both universities and policymakers need to take responsibility and vitally, work together.



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