



The GAPS Think Piece – 22

Equity building blocks: Six tools for affordable access

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Under the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on education and lifelong learning, Target 4.3 states that, by 2030, countries should provide equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and higher education, including university. Achieving this target will facilitate the achievement not only of SDG4 but also of all other SDGs. But a defining characteristic of most higher education systems today is the large disparity in access and completion, especially by income. In the absence of policies and programmes to support disadvantaged students, as [a new paper by the Global Education Monitoring \(GEM\) Report and the UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning \(IIEP\)](#) shows, efforts to expand higher education systems risk widening these gaps.

Global demand for higher education continues to increase

Between 2000 and 2014, the number of students in higher education institutions more than doubled, rising from 100 million to 207 million. In the same period, the global higher education gross enrolment ratio increased from 19% to 34%. Enrolment rates have risen by 7% per year in upper middle income countries and 5% in lower middle income countries. Even low income countries are picking up speed, matching the global average growth rate of 4%. By contrast, high income country participation growth has slowed to 2% a year.

Providers are becoming more diverse: Higher education institutions are diversifying alongside their student bodies. Private enrolments now account for 30% of all global enrolments, rising to 49% in Latin America. Open education providers are also gaining ground. Gross enrolment rates in Turkey grew from 30% in 2004 to 86% in 2014 in part due to distance education enrolments.

Women are closing the participation gap: On average, women and men attend bachelor and master's programmes at more or less the same rates. But women still lag behind men in doctorate programmes (44%). Men still dominate bachelor programmes by three to one in low income countries.



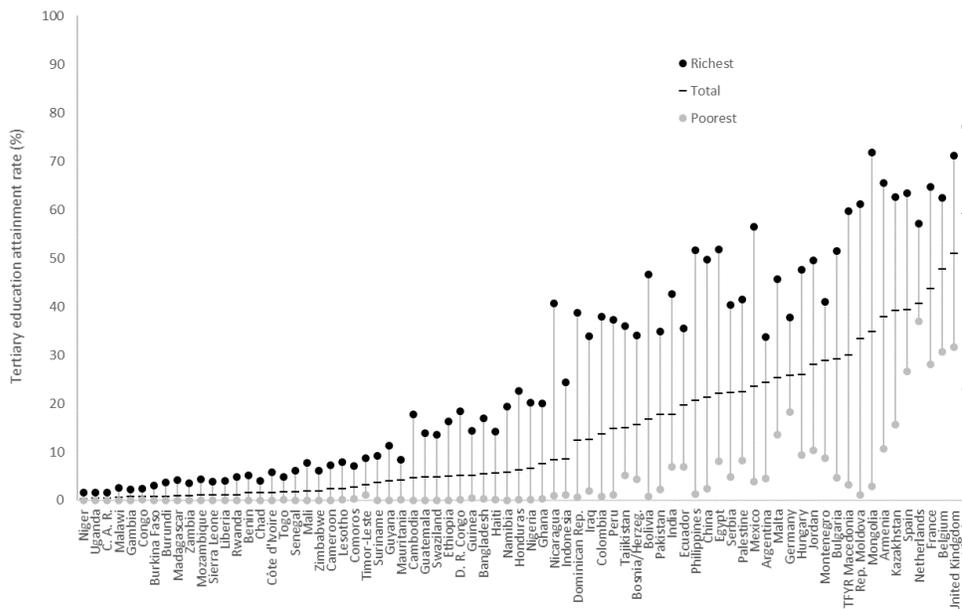
In most countries, disparity between women and men increases between entering higher education and completing it, with women more likely to graduate than men. In Caribbean countries, and in Northern Africa and Western Asia, about three times more women than men graduated from higher education.

...But poor students, ethnic minorities and indigenous groups lag behind: Across 76 countries, 20% of the richest 25–29 year olds had completed at least four years of higher education, compared with less than 1% of the poorest.

In South Africa, in 2013, around one in six Africans and Coloureds enrolled, compared to around half of Whites and Indians (CHE, 2013). In Mexico, less than 1% of the indigenous population were enrolled in post-secondary education (UNICEF and INEE, 2016). In China, rural youth are seven times less likely to attend university than those from urban areas (Hongbin et al., 2013).

Vast differences exist in higher attainment between the poor and the rich

Percentage of 25–29 year olds who have completed at least four years of higher education, by wealth, selected countries, 2008–2014



Source: GEM Report team analysis of household survey data.



Governments have many policy tools to foster equity

A study in 15 countries in Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America (Shavit et al., 2007) concludes that greater inclusion in higher education can be achieved by a combination of expansion and differentiation. This is because, simply speaking, increased enrolments include more students. However, inclusion can be relative. Research conducted in several developed countries shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to concentrate in lower prestige higher education. Expansion increases competition for a limited number of high status positions, and it often leads to disadvantaged groups enrolling in lower prestige subject areas and in lower prestige institutions (Marginson, 2016).

National legislative frameworks can provide a basis for equity

Many laws and acts guaranteeing access to higher education prohibit discrimination and encourage access for minorities and disadvantaged groups. Brazil's Law No. 10,558 promotes access to higher education for people from socially disadvantaged groups, for example, specifically targeting Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples (Art 1, 2002). Similarly, the education framework developed by the Lao People's Democratic Republic Ministry of Education emphasises equality of access in all of the country's 17 provinces (Education Sector Development Framework 2009–2015 §2.4).

Steering and implementation capacities are essential

Legal and policy frameworks are an important first step, but they are not enough: Countries need monitoring and compliance authorities, commissions and agencies to support equity policies and ensure affordability in higher education. National monitoring of equity policies is particularly important when higher education institutions determine their own admission policies, which statistical reporting can help with. However, statistics by themselves will not suffice. Additional insight can be generated through institutional audits or regular qualitative reporting mechanisms (Martin, 2010).



Disadvantaged students often need additional support to help them successfully graduate. Special incentives for institutions to recruit students from specific groups can help provide this support. Students with special needs can also be targeted through funding allocations. For example, in 2015, Poland allocated \$11.5 million for sign language interpreters and disability awareness training for faculty and students (OECD, 2015).

Diversified admission requirements can support disadvantaged groups
Giving higher education institutions some leeway in deciding on admission requirements can be helpful to disadvantaged groups. When entry into higher education is selective, such as for example through centralized examinations, disadvantaged groups often fare less well. In Turkey, low income students find it difficult to compete on entrance exams with applicants from advantaged backgrounds who have more resources to spend on private tutoring and exam preparation (Caner and Okten, 2013).

Affirmative action policies may help address deeply rooted social inequities. These include quotas for members of disadvantaged groups, or other preferential treatment, such as bonuses on admission scores, need-based scholarships or outreach programmes. India has one of the world's oldest quota systems for higher education, which divides the population into five hereditary and occupation-specific castes. An empirical review of the admissions policy in 225 Indian engineering colleges shows that targeted enrolments increased almost three times. Even so, the most disadvantaged castes still attend in smaller proportions than their population shares, leaving room for improvement (Bagde et al., 2016).

Affirmative action policies remain a controversial issue. A comparison of a race-based policy in the United States and a class-based policy in Israel shows that each policy works to improve the target audience, but neither by themselves can generate broad diversity that cuts across both race and class. In order to do so, the affirmative action policy would need to include socioeconomic diversity from the design stage (Alon, 2015).



Higher education must be affordable as well as accessible

As demand for higher education places has risen, governments have responded by shifting some of the cost burden onto individuals. Since the mid-1990s, countries have either increased tuition and fees or encouraged the private sector to provide degree programmes to compensate. Both strategies reflect a global trend towards reduced public expenditure and increased privatisation and cost-sharing (Yang and McCall, 2014).

Collating information on the direct costs of higher education is not easy. Fees often differ by subject area and by institution. Not much information is available on indirect costs to government, such as tax benefits for parents whose children are students. The affordability of higher education also depends on the relationship between costs and income. Household surveys show that the total cost of higher education in Mexico is 1.75 times the level of the average national household income, while it is only half that in Canada and New Zealand (Usher and Medow, 2010).

Comparing the financial burden on households with the financial assistance they receive can highlight differences between countries (Orr, 2016). Across 26 countries in Europe, households contributed an average of 15% of total expenditure for higher education institutions in 2011; student aid made up 18% of public higher education expenditure. National education accounts for 2013 show that households bear an even greater share of the cost in non-European high income countries: it was 40% in Australia, 52% in Japan, 42% in the Republic of Korea and 46% in the United States. (OECD, 2016).

One size fits all programmes do not work

One approach to affordability is to make higher education free for all. However, a free-for-all tuition policy without additional support for disadvantaged groups can exclude poor students and subsidise the rich. In the Philippines, a 2016 law abolished tuition fees for about 40% of students (CHED, 2017). The new law does not apply to any of the 2.45 million students enrolled in private institutions or in other public institutions, such as local or special colleges. Neither does the policy cover costs associated with attending classes.



The policy seems like a move towards affordability, but in fact, students who enrol at a state college are already more likely to be able to afford higher education, as compared to their peers in private institutions (Orbeta and Paqueo, 2017).

In Argentina, public universities have free tuition, but almost 90% of students at these institutions have per capita family income that is higher than the median, and almost 50% attended tuition-financed private high schools (Rozada and Menendez, 2002). So, to increase equity, any effort to keep tuition fees low at public universities has to happen in conjunction with pathways for admission for talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds and financial aid programmes for all.

Low tuition fees should be combined with financial aid programmes

Low tuition fees, need-based scholarships and income contingent loans work together to fix the quality–affordability gap. Studies from China, India and the Russian Federation show that as these countries' higher education systems expanded, elite research universities received more public spending and often charged higher tuition and fees (Carnoy et al., 2014). Meanwhile, comprehensive or non-elite colleges and technical institutes received less public funding and charged their students lower tuition fees. Evidence from Chile shows that a combination of need-based grants and loans not only helps increase equitable access for low income students but also improves persistence through to graduation (Santelices et al., 2016).

Means testing can be difficult in countries with less reliable measures of household finances. Some sub-Saharan African governments use proxies to gauge need, such as the level of education of the parents, the characteristics of the home or the family's possessions (ICHEFP, 2003). Another difficulty is the lack of an effective collection mechanism, since income contingent loans usually require a comprehensive income tax system. Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania address the challenges of not having effective collection mechanisms for repayments by instructing employers to deduct repayment from wages (Pillay, 2013).



Recommendations

1. **Keep an eye on the target:** Make sure those who need help the most are getting it.
2. **Put it in law:** Guarantee equity and affordability in regulatory frameworks
3. **Step up monitoring:** Establish national agencies to ensure equal opportunities
4. **Vary admissions criteria:** Use different admissions criteria to respond to different individuals' needs
5. **Provide varied student aid:** Establish an agency to coordinate different forms of student aid, such as loans and grants
6. **Limit student loan repayments** to <15% of their monthly income.

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The [Global Education Monitoring Report](#) (the GEM Report, formerly known as the Education for All Global Monitoring Report) is an editorially independent, authoritative and evidence-based annual report published by UNESCO. Its mandate is to monitor progress towards the education targets in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. The substance of the GEM Report is developed and its quality assured by an experienced team under the leadership of the GEM Report Director.

[IIEP](#) is the only specialized organization with the mandate to support educational policy, planning and management. It was established in 1963 as an integral part of UNESCO. It develops the capacities of education actors to plan and manage their systems through its programmes of training, technical assistance, policy research and knowledge sharing.



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