



# 8<sup>th</sup> ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC8)

Outlook 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe

ARC8 EG4 Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education

Session 1 | Wednesday, 9 December 2020

Memo

## Presentation of Dr Graeme AHERTON, Director, National Education Opportunities Network, United Kingdom

Graeme was asked to make a 10-minute presentation on the following questions to serve as an input to the expert group discussion:

1. What is your take, how inclusive are the national, institutional policies and **practices currently**? Do you have any numbers to show or any story to tell?
2. What **potential risks** do you foresee in the coming years that could jeopardize greater inclusion, access and success efforts?
3. What **leverage points** do you see to promote inclusion?

Graeme's presentation focused on some of the major issues in terms of access and success to higher education and the challenges faced in terms of developing support both from policymakers and institutions.

He introduced the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) initiative, which aims to raise awareness on the issue of access and success in higher education, and encourage organizations across the world to support activities related addressing it. Each year a new research is released. In 2017, the study released was titled "[All Around the World: Higher Education Equity Policies](#)

Salmi (2018) *'All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe'* – Lumina Foundation for World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED)

#### Global survey of 71 countries across all continents

- Overall, only 32% of the countries surveyed have defined specific participation targets for any equity group.
- Overall, 11% of the countries surveyed have formulated a comprehensive equity strategy. Another 11% have elaborated a specific policy document for one equity group: gender, people with disabilities, or members of indigenous groups.
- The countries that are most advanced in their policy commitment on behalf of providing equal opportunities of access and success in higher education have a comprehensive equity strategy—sometimes even a dedicated agency—and they seek to ensure consistency over time in terms of alignment among policy objectives, improvement targets for various equity groups, resources, and quality assurance criteria.
- Among all the countries surveyed, Australia, Cuba, England, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland stand out in that respect.

[Across the Globe](#)" authored by Lumina Foundation and Jamil Salmi, who used to be ex-head of tertiary education at the World Bank. This paper looked at the nature or existence of equity policies across 71 countries encompassing both access and success, based on secondary data. The findings of the research were also visualised on a map, and country briefs are available on the WAHED [website](#).

In the study, the overall conclusion was that majority of countries do not have significantly developed policies with regard to access and success in higher education. It is important to look into the context and it is difficult to compare policies across countries. However, it was possible to identify whether there seemed to be more comprehensive levels of commitment to equity. From among the countries surveyed there were only six countries that stood out in terms of their overall policy commitment. The policies in these six countries were short, identified real targets, or included comprehensive strategies.

There was quite a lot of what was described as "lip service" commitment to these issues, which means there would be statements by ministers and policymakers with regards to the importance of ensuring that those from all different social backgrounds are able to enter higher education.

There was less focus on success, but there was rhetorical commitment. Availability of data is also an issue, which is very sparsely collected in an accurate and timely fashion with regards to who participates in higher education. This is a major issue to formulate effective policies you normally need some data to base the policy on and persuade policymakers that something needs to be done.

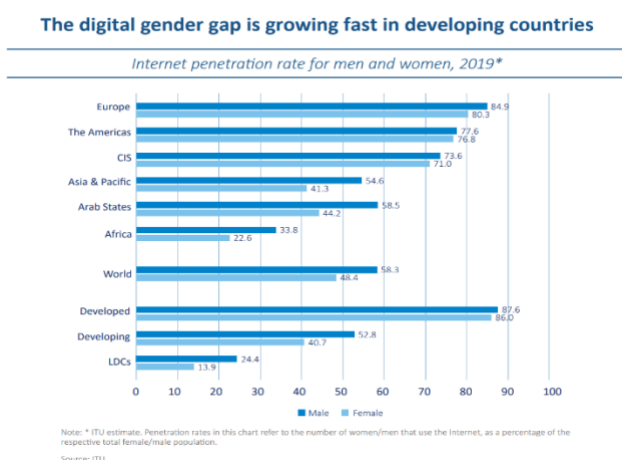
Another recent piece of work is the “Bologna With Student Eyes Survey 2020” conducted by the European Students’ Union (ESU). It describes that “*Social Dimension being considered a moderately to highly important subject on both the governmental and HEI levels in 2/3 of the countries that participated in the survey, while being assigned no importance in only 10% of cases in relation to governmental prioritization and slightly less than 10% in relation to HEIs.*” It seems to be the social dimension in which equitable access to education is actually described. In the context of the work of the European Commission and now European countries this phrase describes access and success broadly speaking. It seems to be an important subject in Europe, but in reality “*only 6 out of 39 countries have national targets in place to enhance participation of underrepresented groups in HE, with another 9 countries having targets in place which are not being followed*” according to the survey. While European countries have agreed to have actual national targets (2015 Communique) a very few actually have policies in place, and even if they do, monitoring is an issue.

In terms of the **risks that could jeopardize inclusion efforts in the upcoming years**, Graeme has identified the following points:

### 1. Financial impact of COVID19 pandemic

The pandemic will have a huge financial impact on higher education institutions and education systems across the world. Private universities do not operate on big margins, and it is questionable whether they can absorb the financial shock caused by the missing income. These systems often will admit different sorts of students from different backgrounds, so if these universities stop operating, what will be the future of these students. Public universities will be expected to bailed out by governments, however, generally speaking in most countries higher education is not seen as the same kind of business as say aviation or retail etc therefore the relief concepts will differ as well. But bailout often comes with conditions and as we have seen in the slides before, equity and access are not seen as a high priority when it comes to the funding.

### 2. Digital divide



One of the pivots of the covid19 pandemic has been providing online higher education opportunities. However, this comes with serious risks for access and success, because of divides in terms of access to digital infrastructure and networks. This graph shows the gender dimension in the digital divide. We're obviously looking at the global picture overall, but there are differences even within countries. Also in the European Union the overall penetration levels are high, but there are significant numbers of people from lower income backgrounds

who do not have access at all to the internet or their access is very different from those from higher income backgrounds. Access means more than connecting to the Internet, it also means the ability

for stable connection, proper levels of data traffic for downloads, availability of personal devices, personal space. 93% of the world's population are within a distance of an internet connection, so connectivity is not an essential global issue, but only 50% of the population is actually connected to the internet, which means an access issue.

From a policy perspective, the idea of providing online higher educational education is a very alluring and tempting idea, because it looks like an economical solution to access problems, reaching more people in a cheaper way, etc. Online education has huge potential, but we have to be conscientious about its shortcomings. The risk here is that we come out of COVID19 with huge economic pressures on countries and systems, with online provision which will remain a permanent fixture of higher education, and we exacerbate inequality or create new sets of inequalities.

**In terms of opportunities or leverage points, Graeme has pointed out putting equity in higher education into the big inequality agenda as the main opportunity.**

There is a debate whether the characteristics of the pandemic have been associated with inequality because it is those in the poorest situations who have suffered the most. There is a hope that this will make inequality more of a profile issue within social and economic policy making.

*'COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere. The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it is clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris. **Inequality defines our time.**'*

*António Guterres: Secretary-General of the United Nations, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2020*

The challenge really is to place the inequalities in higher education in the bigger inequality picture. At the moment, the social, economic inequality in higher education is not seen as part of the big picture. You might have subtopics like health inequality, income equality, and education inequality is mainly looking at schools but not higher education. The opportunity here is to include a new, small circle onto the big circle of the global inequality agenda.

When we are having these conversations about higher education participation and whether it should be increased or not... it feels like if we were having a conversation 100 years ago whether children should go to school beyond 13 years old. There was a brilliant debate about this 100 years ago in the UK and people had valid arguments pro and contra. But we look back now and do not understand why people would have this kind of debate. Maybe people from the next century will be laughing at us, and questions why we were debating whether all people should go into higher education.

#### **Comments by group members on the points raised**

- Digital gender gap possibly has to do with income inequality but could also have cultural reasons. In the regions that were affected the most with the digital gender gap, it might be also a question of who controls the resources in those families and who has the access to technology. In more masculine culture maybe the male need to use it more often.
- It is interesting to see that there's a hierarchy in what certain countries would like to focus on in terms of inclusion. There is a lot of consensus on tackling gender issues, on helping students with disabilities or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but there's less consensus on having a focus on ethnic or religious backgrounds.

- It is important to have evidence and data for policy making. It is also important to take a holistic approach and examine each policy related to the topic of equity in higher education and see whether there is anything to improve access and increasing participation. However, having a policy does not mean having actual results.
- Regarding the impact of COVID19 pandemic and the digital divide, Indonesia is a good case study. Indonesian universities are hubs, where people from rural and urban areas come together. Because of the pandemic students had to return to home, and people realised that the rural areas and villages are technologically not prepared to serve distance education. It has a huge impact on students. The government has embraced the private sector to contribute to the solution, in terms of providing internet access, devices, phones, etc. This situation provides opportunities for the government to address all those gaps that have been there before the pandemic.

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