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Note
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Executive Summary

0.1 Background

This report examines the various approaches by governments across Asia and Europe to support students from all social backgrounds and circumstances to enter higher education. The geographical focus is on countries within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) constituency.¹

It draws upon a survey of national policies in 47 ASEM countries focused on equitable access and success across the two continents assessing what strategies are in place, where targets exist and how they are being measured and whether COVID-19 has impacted on this work.

Access to higher education refers to participation by students from all backgrounds. Equitable access refers to participation by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a ‘disadvantaged majority’ who on average earn less/experience greater social/economic challenges than a minority population. The nature of the specific minorities or disadvantaged majority is defined by the social, economic and political context of a particular country. These groups are usually (although not exclusively) drawn from one or more of the following categories: a low income/socio-economic group, students belonging to ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, female students, students with disabilities, students belonging to sexual or gender minorities, older students or those from rural backgrounds.

This report is a collaboration between the Education Department of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON). ASEF liaised with national ministries responsibility for higher education and experts in equitable access/success in higher education on the survey and data input over the period of September 2020 to July 2021. The data was analysed and the report written by Professor Graeme Atherton, Director of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) in the United Kingdom and World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED).

¹ The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. ASEM addresses political, economic, financial, social, cultural, and educational issues of common interest in a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership. ASEM brings together 30 European countries, the European Union, 21 Asian countries and the ASEAN Secretariat.
https://www.aseinfoboard.org
Executive Summary

Key Findings

In all countries higher education equity features in government produced higher education policy documents.

Less than a third of countries – 30%, have a specific higher education equity strategy with 6 from Europe and 7 from Asia.

There are 8 countries with equitable access and success plans/performance agreements.

The most common equity target groups are lower income/socio-economic background students and students with disabilities.

There are 28 countries where at least 6 different equity target groups are identified.

Only 34% of countries have specific targets related to the access and success in higher education of equity target groups.

Despite students with disabilities being a priority group in every country in the survey, only 3 countries have targets for such students.

Over two-thirds – 68% of countries are supporting non-monetary equitable access/success instruments of which the most common are preferential admission arrangements followed by national outreach programmes.

There is some form of additional financial support available for students from equity target groups identified by 47 of the 51 respondents who participated in the study. The most common form of support offered though is some form of scholarship which is only available to certain cohorts or any equity target group and usually the most able.

Almost all – over 90%, of countries consult with higher education associations in the formation of equitable access/success policy but less than half consult with civic society organisations.

Inter-governmental/international organisations should focus on policy setting and facilitating peer learning/exchange of experience if they want to maximise the support they can offer in formulating effective policy in this area.

In 84% of countries COVID-19 has had a significant impact on policies related to equitable access and success.

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2 For Belgium, two survey responses were submitted by both the French community (Ministry of Wallonia Brussels Federation) and the Flemish Community (Ministry of Education and Training). For the United Kingdom, the four nations England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were included as separate entities given that each has its own different approach to equitable access/success in higher education.
Equitable access/success in higher education is recognized as a universal issue across the 47 ASEM countries which participated in this study. However, a detailed focus on the issue via specific policy documents related to the issue or targets that relate to access or success in higher education for particular target groups is far from universal.

Fortunately, there are some excellent examples, drawn from both Asia and Europe, of what more well developed policy approaches in this field look like and a recognition of the value of international dialogue to form relationships of mutual support which can enable countries to construct approaches that work in their own particular context. These examples are drawn from countries of differing sizes and income levels. There is a need for further work to assist countries from across the income/participation spectrum in developing policies in this area but the foundations are there to identify what policy commitments really mean and where they are supported by real investment and effort and where this is less so.

International dialogue and collaboration can have a vital role here in taking this work forward. There are a network of organisations/groups who working with national governments are able to assist in this further work including the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) and the European Commission Working Group on the Social Dimension.

As we hopefully take the tentative steps across two continents to emerge from the shadow of the pandemic it is vital this work is done. The risk is that the post-pandemic period will see existing inequalities in access/success in higher education only worsen. There is the opportunity to avoid this but to do so action must be taken now.
Executive Summary
Recommendations for ASEM governments and ministries

1. The production of specific strategies to address equitable access/success in higher education should be explored with clear progress targets learning from established practices in other Asian and European countries.

2. Schools and teaching unions should be more closely involved in the development of equitable access/success policies.

3. Monitoring/evaluation and data collection needs to be built into the development of equitable access/success policies and the production of international standards and practices in the field explored.

4. Non-monetary instruments and outreach work should be extended via pilot work led at the national/institutional level.

5. A suitable ASEM platform and forum to share practice and policy development in equitable access/success amongst policymakers should be established in partnership with appropriate inter-governmental/international bodies.

6. Progress in the development of effective equitable access/success in higher education policies should be reported on bi-annually via a Higher Education Policy Study report, to be presented at ASEM Senior Officials Meetings and ASEM Education Ministerial Meetings.
As economies across Asia and Europe seek to recover from the ongoing impact of the pandemic, it will be increasingly important to ensure that higher education participation is open to those from all social backgrounds. The pandemic has accelerated shifts from low skill to higher skill employment and made the attributes that higher education graduates develop increasingly important to society. However, enabling those from equity target groups to enter higher education is challenging. This report examines what approaches are being taken by governments in Asia and Europe to meeting this challenge. The geographical focus is on countries within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) constituency. It draws upon a large survey of national policies focused on equitable access and success across the two continents examining what strategies are in place, where targets exist and how they are being measured and whether COVID-19 has impacted on this work.

The purpose of this study is to examine the policies adopted by 47 ASEM countries regarding equitable access to and success in higher education as opposed to access overall. Access to higher education refers to participation by students from all backgrounds. Equitable access refers to participation by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a ‘disadvantaged majority’ who on average earn less/experience greater social/economic challenges than a minority population. The nature of the specific minorities or disadvantaged majority is defined by the social, economic and political context of a particular country. These groups are usually (although not exclusively) drawn from one of more of the following categories: a low income/socio-economic group, students belonging to ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, female students, students with disabilities, students belonging to sexual or gender minorities, older students or those from rural backgrounds.

As will be evident in the results outlined below this distinction between equitable access/success and access/success overall is not always clear in what differing countries are doing in this area. However, it is equitable access and success which is the focus of this research project because the evidence shows clearly that participation by those with different characteristics/backgrounds is unequal across every country in Asia and Europe. The extent of this inequality differs across the two continents and overall participation in higher education is generally lower in Asia.

This study will build on previous work that has been undertaken as part of the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) initiative examining the policy approaches taken by different countries to addressing inequalities in access and success in higher education. The ‘All around the world: Higher Education Equity Policies across the globe’ study covered over 70 countries across the world looking at whether policy commitments were in place, details regarding how any such commitments would be delivered and information on how progress in terms of promoting equitable access and success was assessed. It resulted in a final report and an interactive ‘global equity access map’ which can be found on the WAHED website at https://worldaccesshe.com/.

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5 ASEF (2021) ARC8 Outlook Report 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe
The study found that the large majority of countries refer to equitable access or success in their higher education policy documents. However, only a very small majority – just over 10%, have a specific policy document related to higher education equity and only 32% have defined targets where equitable access/success is concerned. The Salmi (2018) study included 15 countries from Europe and 16 countries from Asia.
A total of 47 ASEM countries responded to a request to complete an online questionnaire which looked at what policy commitments in relation to equitable access and success exist, how they are implemented, targets with relation to equitable access/success and their measurement and the impact of COVID-19 on progress in making higher education more equitable. The survey was sent to national ministries with responsibility for higher education and experts in equitable access/success in higher education over the period September 2020 and July 2021 by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). For Belgium, two survey responses were submitted by both the French community (Ministry of Wallonia Brussels Federation) and the Flemish Community (Ministry of Education and Training). For the United Kingdom, the four nations England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were included as separate entities given that each has its own different approach to equitable access/success in higher education.

The data was analysed and the report written by Professor Graeme Atherton, Director of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) in the United Kingdom and World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED).

In Appendix 1 the ASEM countries which participated in the study are listed. For each country, an individual Country Brief was developed, which is available on the WAHED website (https://worldaccesshe.com/research/higher-education-equity-policies/). The questionnaire used can be found in Appendix 2.

In the rest of this report the responses from the 47 ASEM countries will be examined looking first at whether policies are in place to support equitable access/success and who they are targeted at. It then outlines the extent to which there are specific policy documents which focus on equitable access/success, specific policy targets and how progress is measured. Finally, the engagement of different stakeholder groups in the formation of policy and the impact of the pandemic are considered.
Equitable access/success in higher education features somewhere in government higher education policy documents where every country in the survey is concerned. Given the diversity of the 47 ASEM countries included in this study in terms of their size and nature of their educational systems the fact that in all of them inequalities in participation and progress in higher education is seen as an issue is an important finding. It shows that this is an issue that unifies both Asian and European countries and provides the foundation for further action at both the individual country and regional levels.

How equitable access/success features in different policy documents does differ greatly across countries though as does the type of document they feature in. Broadly speaking it features either in a legal decree which frames the nature of the higher education system and in particular its responsibilities with regard to discrimination/support for particular minority groups or in a wider plan that has been established to orientate the future development of the higher education system. For example, in the Bangladesh Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2018-2030 the following objectives are specified:

- Enhancing equal access to university education in terms of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics
- Making university education affordable for all qualified students
- Sizeable government budget for need-based scholarship
- Financial aids, grants for meritorious students from poor families.

In Malaysia and its 2015-2025 Higher Education Blueprint equity is one of its 5 aspirations and it includes a commitment to reduce achievement gaps in terms of urban-rural, socio-economic background and gender by 50%.

In France in contrast higher education systems have a role in combating wider social and economic inequalities as stated in the Education Code, and thus is positioned as part of a wider societal commitment to addressing inequality. In other countries such as Indonesia, Mongolia, Romania and Spain, a form of commitment to equity is positioned with ministerial decrees or higher education law and associated as well with anti-discriminatory practice. This brief overview of a selected group of countries shows that quite contrasting countries can have some commonalities in their approach to this issues and countries which may appear to have broad similarities can also diverge in their approach.
4 Are policies in place and who are they targeted at?

4.2 Equitable Access/Success Target Groups

However, while there may be evidence of some form or recognition of equitable access/success as an issue, in keeping with the findings of the Salmi (2018) report, countries then take differing, individual paths in terms of their commitment to addressing this form of inequality and how this commitment manifests itself. Diagram shows the extent to which differing groups are identified in government policy documents.

The diagram shows that not all countries prioritise all equity groups, as well as illustrating the range of equity groups that exist. Students from lower income/lower socio-economic backgrounds alongside disabled students are the groups who appear to be common across virtually every country but even here there will be significant differences in how these students are defined. Where socio-economic background is concerned in particular, research has shown that this can be measured through a range of mechanisms including parental occupation, household income or via eligibility for state benefits.\(^7\)

Within the countries included in the survey there are some differences between respondents in terms of the number of target groups prioritised.

As Diagram 2 shows, there are a small number of respondents that identify over 10 priority groups. The remainder of respondents nearly equally identify 1-5 and 6-10 groups as policy priorities. The number of countries identified does not necessarily imply a greater practical commitment. Specifying actual equitable access/success targets and having in place an actual specific higher education equity policy document are of greater importance. These first two diagrams do show though the range of different, contrasting target groups that are encompassed by equitable access/success policy and practice and hence the scale of the challenge that policymakers are setting themselves.

\(^7\) Atherton et al (2018)
Diagram 1
Equitable Access/Success Target Groups

Children of people affected by historical violence 5
Students with disabilities 49
Gender groups 27
Indigenous populations 25
Low-income or lower socio-economic background students 50
Members of the LGBT community 10
Older or mature learners 26
Other groups under-represented in HE 10
People from rural backgrounds 23
Refugees of all kinds (internally and externally displaced; deported) 25
Students with care experience, orphans, youth without parental care 24
Victims of sexual and gender violence 10

Diagram 2
No of target groups

1 to 5 22
6 to 10 25
10+ 4
Making access and success in higher education equitable is a major challenge. As illustrated in section 2 no country in the world appears to have achieved it and it is complex challenge involving groups with quite differing characteristics. In this context, a specific set of policies that builds on legal frameworks or higher education sector strategies may be needed. The existence of a separate strategy therefore, could in principle be seen as welcome. However, it does not on its own guarantee that progress will be made, nor does its absence necessarily imply a lack of commitment to making higher education participation more equal. Countries such as Bangladesh, the Czech Republic, France, Malaysia, New Zealand and Romania have made clear expressions of commitment via broader higher education policy documents and do not have a specific equity policy document. In Finland and Norway equity in higher education is seen as something integrated into all aspects of higher education policy and practice thus a separate strategy is not needed.

Nevertheless, specific policies may play an important role here. They create a focus on this issue and a mechanism of levering in commitment from policymakers and in particular higher education providers.

But this survey has found, as did the Salmi (2018) report that only a minority of countries have such a strategy. Of the 47 ASEM countries which participated in the survey 13 have a specific higher education equity strategy with 6 coming from Europe and 7 from Asia (this is a higher % of countries than found in the 2018 Salmi study however). These countries are listed below:

Australia, Austria, Belgium, China, Croatia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Korea, Lao PDR, Malaysia, New Zealand, Romania, United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales).

Not all these strategies are equally detailed and comprehensive. Austria, Croatia and Ireland have particularly well-developed strategy documents. In Australia and the nations of the United Kingdom there is a significant amount of work being undertaken with regard to equitable access/success and different forms of strategic approaches exist. Whilst in the remaining countries there is evidence of distinct policy commitments additional to what may be stated in national higher education strategies/legal frameworks the evidence provided through the responses to the survey as regard to the nature of these commitments is less detailed.

In order to understand better what a national strategy focused specifically on equitable access/success in higher education may include then in Box 1 the Austrian ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education Strategy’ is outlined.
Box 1
Equitable Access/Success strategy in Austria

The ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education’ was launched in 2017. It was developed over a two year period utilising data from the 2015 national student social survey which collected information on the background of students and their progress through higher education and through a process of workshops and consultation with a range of key stakeholders. Three ‘target dimensions each underpinned by three goals as described below:

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<tr>
<th>Target Dimension</th>
<th>More inclusive access</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improve quality and accessibility of information materials</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outreach activities and diversity-sensitive course guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal skills.</td>
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<th>Target Dimension</th>
<th>Avoiding drop-out and improving academic success</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ease entry into higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure of study programmes and quality of teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase compatibility of studies with other areas of life</td>
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<th>Target Dimension</th>
<th>Creating basic parameters and optimizing the regulation of higher education policy</th>
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<td>System-related issues in higher education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Integrate the social dimension into strategic planning for higher education and create appropriate governance structures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Further develop the Student Support Scheme</td>
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The strategy is delivered via performance agreements between the Federal Ministry and each of the 22 public universities. To ensure the implementation of measures outlined in the agreements the federal minister can retain up to 0.5% of a university’s overall budget. There is an interim evaluation of the national strategy planned for 2021 and a final evaluation for 2025.
4 Are policies in place and who are they targeted at?

4.4.1 Equity policy targets

Along with a specific policy focused on equitable access/success another expression of strong policy commitment would be specific targets related to the participation of particular priority groups in higher education and/or their attainment in higher education or progression afterwards. As Diagram 3 shows, of the 51 responses to the survey only 16 indicated the existence of such targets.

Amongst the countries with targets, the majority of these focus on addressing inequalities in access/success related to ethnicity, gender and socio-economic group. Where gender is concerned in two countries – France and Germany targets are in place related to the participation of female students entering science related subjects. It is noticeable though that despite students with disability being a priority group in every country in the survey, only 3 countries have targets for such students.
Diagram 3
Number of respondents who have/do not have equity policy targets

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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>35</td>
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4 Are policies in place and who are they targeted at?
4.4.2 Equitable access and success plans/performance agreements

A small number of countries with a strong focus on equitable access/success in higher education have introduced plans/performance agreements specifically in this area. There are 8 countries who have such agreements and Finland is working toward the development of such arrangement. Of the countries with such plans – 6 are from Europe with the 4 nations from the United Kingdom and the others are Austria and Croatia and 2 are from Asia being Australia and New Zealand. Box 2 describes how the Access and Participation (APP) system in England works.
Box 2
Access and Participation Plans in England

Access and participation plans set out how higher education institutions will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. They include:

– the institution’s ambition for change
– what it plans to do to achieve that change
– the targets it has set
– the investment it will make to deliver the plan.

They are monitored by the Office for Students (OfS) which is the body that oversees and regulates higher education in England. The role of the OfS is to make sure that the providers honour the commitments they make to students in these plans, and take action if they do not. If providers want to charge a tuition fee over £6000 per year, their plans must be approved by the Director for Fair Access and Participation who works for the OfS. A plan is submitted for a 5 year period.

The activities in the plan will include both what are described in this report below as ‘non-monetary’ and ‘monetary instruments’ i.e. any preferential admission arrangements for specific equity groups, outreach work and scholarship programmes. The plans include not just work to support greater entry into higher education for target groups but also to enable them to achieve their potential in higher education. A key part of the plan is evidence of strategic commitment to equitable access/success from the higher education institution. This means showing that this work is built into the planning structures of the institution and responsibility for targets in the plan are held at senior management level.

The plan must include quantitative targets to address the individual challenges of the institution showing how many more students they will admit each year from target groups. Activities both monetary and non monetary are funded by the institution itself from the fee income it receives.
How are policy objectives achieved?

There are a number of ways in which policy targets in the field of equitable access/success can be achieved, but a demarcation that has been used effectively in previous international research studies is between ‘non-monetary’ and ‘financial’ instruments. Non-monetary instruments include outreach work where higher education institutions work with students from equity priority groups to support their attainment and provide them with careers/higher education progression advice. Also included in this category of work are special considerations/pathways for students from priority groups to progress to higher education. Financial instruments included bursaries, scholarships and loans which are provided for specific priority groups.

Diagram 4
Non-monetary equitable access/success instruments

Yes: 34
No: 17

Diagram 5
Non-monetary equitable access/success instruments

- Special institutions: 2
- Bridging programmes: 4
- Specific pathways: 2
- Preferential admission: 19
- Outreach programmes: 15
5 How are policy objectives achieved?

5.1 Non-monetary instruments

As Diagram 4 shows for two-third of respondents their higher education institutions are engaged in systematic work of a non-monetary nature or such programmes are funded by central government and delivered on a national basis.

The nature of the non-monetary activities undertaken are illustrated in Diagram 5. Some respondents indicated more than one activity.

As can be seen the most frequent practice pursued by different governments is some form of preferential admission arrangement for priority groups which includes a set quota for entrance by one specific group. Examples of how preferential admissions work in practice are outlined below:

**Ireland**
Separate admission schemes for students with disabilities (Disability Access Route to Education, DARE) and for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Access Route, HEAR) exist. HEAR and DARE are joint initiatives agreed between the higher education institutions themselves and originally seed funded by the government but are now funded by the higher education institutions. They offer places in higher education at lower entry requirements to eligible students.

**Finland**
From 2020, more than half of the study places will be filled on the basis of matriculation grades, and in universities of applied sciences on the basis of matriculation grades and vocational upper secondary qualification. Selection based on common marks obtained from the selection test and the grades will be abandoned.

**Russian Federation**
According to paragraph 2 of article 34 of the Federal Law „On Education in the Russian Federation“ special rights in admission to higher education institutions are granted to the following groups of persons: orphans and children left without parental care, children with disabilities, people with disabilities, citizens under the age of twenty who have only one parent with disabilities and with a low income, children of military personnel who died in the line of their military service, military veterans, participants in military operations.

**Thailand**
A quota for ethnic and local students exists among certain public and autonomous higher education institutions.

Outreach activities are relatively frequent where the kind of non-monetary instruments implementd are concerned but still only taken forward by a minority of respondents. When delivered consistently over time evidence shows that outreach work can have a real impact on equitable access to higher education. In some

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9 Herbaut & Koen (2019)
countries, for example Sweden and also the nations of the United Kingdom the higher education institutions themselves have the primary responsibility for undertaking (although in the UK there are also centrally funded outreach programmes). Outlined below are 5 examples of how governments are supporting coherent, targeted outreach programmes at the national level.

**Australia**
The Higher Education Partnership and Policy Programme (HEPP) was introduced in 2011. It now provides funding to universities to increase the participation of domestic students from low socio-economic backgrounds in accredited undergraduate qualifications, and support the retention and success of those students. Funding is allocated to universities by formula, based on the number of students from low SES backgrounds enrolled at each university. In the wake of the pandemic, in late 2020 the Australian Parliament passed the legislation for the Job-ready Graduates Package. As part of the Job-ready Graduates package, from 2021 the HEPPP has been refocused to support students who are from regional Australia, remote Australia, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and from low socio-economic backgrounds.

**France**
The „cord for success“ scheme aims to develop the academic ambitions of middle and high school students and broaden their horizons, introducing them to the diversity of possible paths to higher education. The scheme is targeted at students attending secondary schools in urban underprivileged neighbourhoods or isolated rural areas, as well as vocational secondary school students. It is based on partnerships between higher education institutions and secondary schools. The aim is to provide comprehensive support including support social and cultural outreach and tutoring/mentoring actions on the other. There is a continuum of support starting for 13-year-olds and up to their entry to higher education, with the objective to making guidance support a real lever for equal opportunities.

**Malaysia**
The MOHE hold a series of tours throughout the country working with HEIs to disseminate information on, higher education opportunities in HEIs and other agencies related to higher education; admission to higher education nationwide and procedures and requirement for program admission offered by the HEIs and programmes intake policy by HEIs.

**Romania**
The Ministry of Education and Research carries out the Romania Secondary Education Project (ROSE) Project, in which students at risk take part in university activities, by
attending summer schools organized at different universities in the country. Students can participate in workshops, study visits, sports competitions and cultural events directly related university life over a two/three week period. The ROSE project is worth a total of 200 million euros.

**United Kingdom/Wales**
Established in 2002/03 as a Wales-wide, collaborative, long-term programme to widen access to higher education and higher-level skills, the Reaching Wider Programme aims to increase higher education participation from priority groups and communities in Wales by raising educational aspirations and skills, and creating innovative study opportunities and learning pathways to higher education. Three regional Reaching Wider Partnerships lead activities in North and Mid Wales, South West Wales and South East Wales. All higher and further education institutions in Wales are members of Reaching Wider Partnerships. Other regional partners vary, but include local authorities, employers, schools, the voluntary sector and Careers Wales.

It is also notable that in two countries – China and New Zealand there are special higher education institutions that have been created to cater for specific ethnic groups.
Of the 51 respondents 48 described some form of financial support for students from equity priority groups. As with non-monetary instruments, each country has its own individual approach and some offer more than one form of financial assistance. In Diagram 6, the frequency of different forms of support is outlined. Some respondents described more than one form of financial support.

Scholarships are by far the most common form of financial support offered. These scholarships are offered mainly to low income students and those with disabilities and less commonly those from specific ethnic groups including refugees. The scholarships can be attached to performance thus being available for the most able students e.g. in Cyprus, Czech Republic and the Russian Federation.

Less frequently provided forms of support are grants and loans which can support students in either paying student tuition fees or their living costs with less than a third of countries offering grants and only just over 20% loans. The most comprehensive packages of support are found in Europe with Belgium, France and Hungary offering support for students with housing costs. Ireland, France and Romania also provide additional funding for higher education institutions to undertake activities such as outreach with students from equity groups whilst Germany, as well as having no students tuition fees, provides a range of grant/loan support. There are examples of financial support offered by Asian nations provided by respondents though with Korea for example offering scholarships for low income students which enable them to also work whilst studying, study abroad and pursue particular subject disciplines.

Financial instruments to support equitable access/success need to be seen in a context where the cost of higher education differs hugely across Asia and Europe ranging from countries where tuition is free to the most expensive on average country in the world (England). Addressing financial barriers to progression is a necessary, but not on its own a sufficient approach to promoting equitable access/success. Any form of financial assistance is welcome for students from equity priority groups but performance based scholarships will inevitably favour only a certain proportion of any cohort and miss out others. They need to sit alongside the wider provision of financial support in the form of grants/loans.
Diagram 6
Different forms of financial support offered to students

- Scholarships: 30
- Grants: 17
- Loans: 13
Addressing inequalities in access/success in higher education is inherently a multi stakeholder effort. It requires work partnership between schools, higher education institutions, insights from students and civil society organisations have a key role to play engaging with different priority groups. As Diagram 7 shows there is a considerable amount of engagement from different stakeholders in how policies are formed across Asia and Europe.

Virtually all countries engage with their Higher Education Institution associations, and a large majority (around two thirds) with student organisations. This engagement with students is also relatively evenly split across the two continents. Private sector organisations seem to be engaged in more countries than those from civil society and only a minority work with international organisations on policy formulation. Only 2 countries mentioned working with unions and one only with schools. There may be considerable potential to extend engagement with these groups given that they have such an important role to play in supporting students to progress to higher education. Overall, further work would be valuable to explore in more detail how these different stakeholders are engaged in policy formation across different countries and the added value such engagement brings.

As was discussed above a minority, around a third, of countries are working with international organisations. Respondents were also asked about how such organisations could play a greater role in supporting the development of equitable access/success policies. This study adds to the growing amount of evidence that points to equitable access and success in higher education being a challenge that is shared across countries and one that is achieving increasing attention from policymakers. As in other parts of the higher education field international dialogue and sharing of knowledge/practice can play an important role in enabling individual countries to better utilise the resources they have to address the issue. Diagram 8 outlines 4 areas in which respondents were asked to rank in terms of how valuable they thought the contribution of inter-governmental/international organisations could be from 4 (most valuable) to 1 (least valuable). It shows that respondents perceive policy setting to be the area where inter-governmental/international organisations have the greatest role to play. However, the combined rank scores across the 4 areas are within a fairly close range. This shows that to some extent these organisations can support different countries in each of these areas dependent on the particular circumstances of that country.
Diagram 7
Stakeholder engagement in policy formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Type</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International associations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Society organisations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector organisations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student associations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Institutions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diagram 8
Role of inter-governmental/international organisations in supporting equitable access/success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Contribution</th>
<th>Combined Score across all countries (4 most valuable to 1 least valuable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy setting</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating peer learning/exchange of experience across countries</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance/grants/loan financing/scholarships</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical assistance and capacity building</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Putting in place systems to capture the progress being made in enabling equitable access/success and also the impact of differing policy interventions is vital. However, previous work has shown that such data collection systems can take significant time and resource to develop and for cultural or legal reasons it is very difficult in some countries to collect information on the progression into/through higher education for particular equity priority groups. As Diagram 9 shows the majority of respondents are undertaking activities related to the systematic collection of data on students progressing into higher education but only a minority are collecting such information with regard to priority equity groups.

The monitoring of progress in this area is a challenge in many countries for the reasons outlined above but unless impact can be established then it will be difficult to secure further resources and policy commitments. There is a potential role for inter-governmental/international organisations to support the policy setting/exchange of practice highlighted above in this area. Countries could benefit from learning more about how others are building evaluation into specific policy initiatives and also collecting data on the progress into and through higher education of equity priority groups within resource and cultural constraints.

10 Atherton et al (2018)
Diagram 9
Monitoring of equitable access/success and data collection

Data collected on students from priority equity groups

Data collected on all students

15
36
What has the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic been on policies related to equitable access and success?

The pandemic has had a seismic impact on higher education across the world, but it has borne down particularly on those students from minority or disadvantaged majority backgrounds. Of the 51 respondents only 8 felt that it had not had a significant impact on such students and in 3 cases they were still awaiting data to be collected to establish the nature of this impact. The answers to this question focused in particular on the need to support students from equity priority groups in terms of digital access to teaching/learning resources and also providing additional financial resources.

A number of respondents described activities which were undertaken to support students affected by the pandemic to progress to higher education or succeed/complete their studies. Examples of such activities are described below:

**Ireland**
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government announced a €168 million once-off support package for higher education institutions and students in July 2020. This funding included a doubling of the Student Assistance Fund which is the money allocated for students who are experiencing financial difficulties when studying; a COVID-19 Contingency Fund to enhance the delivery of access and support services for vulnerable students from target groups and a COVID-19 grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices.

**New Zealand**
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on Pacific learners, the Ministry of Education established the Pacific Education Support Fund and the Pacific Education Innovation Fund. The Support Fund aims to help fund community providers, groups, and organisations that help learners, and their families, meet education and wellbeing needs arising from, and/or exacerbated by COVID-19. The Innovation Fund provides targeted funding to support innovative practices that support Pacific learners’ wellbeing and curriculum needs, where they have been impacted by COVID-19. The Innovation Fund is open to educators, places of learning, community groups, providers, researchers and academics.

**Vietnam**
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two periods of university entrance examinations were established. The exams in those areas affected by the pandemic were also conducted later compared to that in the other areas across the country as were enrolment and admissions at universities.

The pandemic is still exerting a huge influence on higher education, but this influence will one day abate.

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What is crucial looking forward are the implications of the pandemic for equitable access/success over the next decade. The activities described earlier were important but they need to act as a platform for an enhanced commitment to equity in higher education and a permanent recognition of the challenges priority groups face.
In all countries higher education equity features in government produced higher education policy documents.

Less than a third of countries – 30% have specific higher education equity strategy with 6 from Europe and 7 from Asia.

There are 8 countries with equitable access and success plans/performance agreements.

The most common equity target groups are lower income/socio-economic background students and students with disabilities.

There are 28 countries where at least 6 different equity target groups are identified.

Only 34% of countries have specific targets related to the access and success in higher education of equity target groups.

Over two-thirds – 68% of countries are supporting non-monetary equitable access/success instruments of which the most common are preferential admission arrangements followed by national outreach programmes.

There is some form of additional financial support available for students from equity target groups identified by 47 of the 51 respondents who participated in the study. The most common form of support offered though is a scholarship which is only available to certain cohorts or any equity target group and usually the most able.

Almost all – over 90% of countries consult with higher education associations in the formation of equitable access/success policy but less than half consult with civic society organisations.

Inter-governmental/international organisations should focus on policy setting and facilitating peer learning/exchange of experience if they want to maximise the support they can offer in formulating effective policy in this area.

In 84% of countries COVID-19 has had a significant impact on policies related to equitable access and success.
Equitable access/success in higher education is recognized as a universal issue across the 47 ASEM countries who participated in this study. However, a detailed focus on the issue via specific policy documents related to the issue or targets that relate to access or success in higher education for particular target groups is far from universal. Similarly, while virtually every country has some form of additional financial support in place for equity groups only a minority are pursuing the use of non-monetary instruments in a systematic way. The study shows the complexity of the challenge that policymakers face with every country prioritising at least 2 target groups and the majority at least 5. To make a significant difference implementing non-discrimination legislation and funding a scholarship programme are unlikely to be sufficient.

Fortunately, there are some excellent examples of what more well developed policy approaches in this field look like and a recognition of the value of international dialogue to form relationships of mutual support which can enable countries to construct approaches that work in their own particular context. These examples are drawn from both Asia and Europe. It is a fact that participation in higher education per head of the population is on average higher in Europe and a significant number of European countries are able to fund higher education well. However, this does not mean that it is only richer countries or countries with a high higher education participation that can afford to develop coherent policy approaches focussed on equitable access/success. There are examples of smaller countries from different income brackets who have placed policy focus on this issue. There is a need for further work to assist countries from across the income/participation spectrum in developing policies in this area but the foundations are there which can be built on through dialogue and collaboration.

Further work is required, though it is substantial in nature and is not confined to a focus on a particular sub-set of countries from Asia or Europe. As Salmi (2018) indicated in his study, and his follow up research in 2019 which took a more detailed look at policy/practice in a small number of countries, establishing the evidence base which can point to which policies deliver the most impact for investment is a major challenge. It is vital as Salmi argued as well that we look to identify what policy commitments really mean and identify where they are supported by real investment and effort and where this is less so. This study provides the platform for this work though. There are networks of organisations/groups that work with national governments and are able to lead this further, including the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) and the European Commission Working Group on the Social Dimension.
As we hopefully take the tentative steps across two continents to emerge from the shadow of the pandemic it is vital this work is done. The risk is that the post-pandemic period will see existing inequalities in access/success in higher education only worsen. There is the opportunity to avoid this, but to do so action must be taken now.

Recommendations

1. ASEM countries should explore the production of specific strategies to address equitable access/success in higher education with clear progress targets learning from established practices in other Asian and European nations.

2. Schools and teaching unions should be more closely involved in the development of equitable access/success policies.

3. Monitoring/evaluation and data collection has to be built into the development of equitable access/success policies and the production of international standards and practices in the field explored.

4. Non-monetary instruments and outreach work should be extended via pilot work led at the national/institutional level.

5. A suitable ASEM platform/forum to share practice and policy development in equitable access/success amongst policymakers should established in partnership with appropriate inter-governmental/international bodies.

6. Progress in the development of effective equitable access/success in higher education policies should be reported on bi-annually via a Higher Education Policy Study report, to be presented at ASEM Senior Officials Meetings and ASEM Education Ministerial Meetings.
A A.1 Participating ASEM countries in the National Equity Policy Survey\textsuperscript{12}

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<td>Lao PDR</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
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\textsuperscript{12} For all countries, responses from the respective Ministry of Education or Higher Education Authority were received and included except for Bangladesh, Croatia, England, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales within the timeframe of the survey outreach. For these countries, higher education or other education institutions provided the survey responses.

\textsuperscript{13} For Belgium, two survey responses were submitted by both the French community (Ministry of Wallonia Brussels Federation) and the Flemish Community (Ministry of Education and Training).

\textsuperscript{14} For the United Kingdom, the four nations England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were included as separate entities given that each has its own different approach to equitable access/success in higher education.
The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) Team are seeking your kind cooperation in creating an Equity Policy Map in Asia and Europe.

The map aims to serve as a database on national equity policies in higher education and will be used to produce an Higher Education Equity Policy in Asia and Europe Report. The Report will be launched on 17 November 2020, on the occasion of the World Access to Higher Education Day.

The findings of the Report will also feed into the 8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC), the official dialogue partner of the ASEM Education Ministers’ Meeting (ASEMME).

We kindly ask you to contribute to the research by filling up this survey by Wednesday, 23 September 2020.

Thank you very much in advance for your assistance and continued support of our work!

Survey on Personal Particulars

Policy Frameworks

1. Does equity with regard to supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education feature in any government produced policy documents?

2. Which government policy document(s) are these and can you provide website link(s) to them?

3. What policies and actions are described in these government policy documents in terms of supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education?

4. Is there a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education?

5. Which equity target groups are identified in the policy documents? (Please choose as many groups as apply in your own country).

6. Does the country have concrete targets for the participation of specific equity groups in higher education?
7. Which agency has responsibility for policies related to equity in student participation/success in higher education?

8. Which stakeholder groups are consulted during the equity policy formulation? (Please choose all the stakeholders that are invited to the consultation process in your own country.)

9. If there are non-monetary instruments such as outreach work between schools and universities, reforms to university admission etc. used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education can you describe what they are?

10. If there are financial instruments such as bursaries, scholarships and loans used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education can you describe what they are?

11. Who is responsible for monitoring the impact of measures used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education?

12. What instruments, methods and data are in place to carry out the monitoring and evaluation?

13. What kind of autonomy do higher education institutions enjoy in reaching the policy targets set by government?

14. How do you see the role of inter-governmental/international organisations in supporting higher education equity policies? In which areas would be their contribution the most valuable? (1= most valuable contribution 5=least valuable contribution)

COVID-19 and Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education

15. How, if at all, has COVID-19 affected the existence and implementation of policies designed to encourage greater access and success on higher education of those from low-income/marginalized groups?
The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) promotes understanding, strengthens relationships and facilitates cooperation among the people, institutions and organisations of Asia and Europe. ASEF enhances dialogue, enables exchanges and encourages collaboration across the thematic areas of culture, economy, education, governance, public health, sustainable development and media. ASEF is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation located in Singapore. Founded in 1997, it is the only institution of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

ASEF runs more than 25 projects a year, consisting of around 100 activities, mainly conferences, seminars, workshops, lectures, publications, and online platforms, together with about 150 partner organisations. Each year over 3,000 Asians and Europeans participate in ASEF’s activities, and much wider audiences are reached through its various events, networks and web-portsals.

For more information, please visit www.asef.org

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) is a UK based organisation that supports equitable access and success in higher education in the United Kingdom, but also globally via its role as convenor of the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED). NEON was founded in 2012 and is a membership organisation with over 150 organisations as members in the UK including over 100 higher education institutions. NEON delivers training and professional development work working with over 1,000 professionals per year alongside undertaking research and advocacy.

To find out more about NEON go to: https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/. In 2018 NEON convened the first World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) which a platform to raise global awareness around inequalities in access and success in higher education (HE), and act as a catalyst for international, regional and local action. To date WAHED has engaged over 200 organisations from over 50 countries. To learn more about WAHED please go to: https://worldaccesshe.com/about/.
The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. ASEM addresses political, economic, financial, social, cultural, and educational issues of common interest in a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership.

ASEM brings together 53 partners: Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Lao PDR, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Viet Nam, plus the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Union.

For more information, please visit www.aseinfoboard.org

Visual explainer

The pencil, paper and book are still the most common icons to illustrate education. With technology significantly transforming the sector, this image symbolises the evolution from analogue to digital education formats and methodologies. To ensure diversity, equity and inclusion in education, tools and approaches have to be adjusted and sharpened – like this pencil – to address important areas of action.

Photo references

Page 8: 2nd ASEF Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS2) 2017, Seoul, Korea
Page 22: 6th ASEF Rectors’ Conference and Students’ Forum (ARC6) 2017, Singapore
Page 30: 21st ASEF Summer University (ASEFSU21), 2018, Melbourne (Australia) & Christchurch (New Zealand)
Page 37: 21st ASEF Summer University (ASEFSU21), 2018, Melbourne (Australia) & Christchurch (New Zealand)
Page 46: 7th ASEF Rectors’ Conference & Students’ Forum (ARC7), 2019, Bucharest, Romania