



### 3. Universal access to higher education: Trends, barriers and drivers

Acceso universal a la educación superior: Tendencias, barreras y factores impulsores

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper develops a global analysis on access to higher education and how it has evolved between 2000 and 2018, and the associated drivers and impediments to its achievement. The paper also addresses the concept of higher education's importance to human, social and economic development, as well as from a human rights' perspective. The study draws from a two-pronged methodology. First, a data analysis on the main indicators used to monitor access to higher education, disaggregated by region, gender and income group. Secondly, a comprehensive literature review on the drivers and barriers to achieving access to higher education. This access has increased globally, however, stark differences are noticed at region, gender, and income-group level. Economic development of nations and the rise of middle-class aspirations, the growth of private institutions and the expansion of distance education institutions have been major contributors to this increase in access. Poverty, crises, adverse institutional admission practices and the location of institutions pose continuous challenges to universal access. A combination of policies and actions can be adopted and taken by national governments and higher education institutions to further increase access, taking into particular account populations which are falling behind.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; SDG 4; Inclusion; Equity; Access

## Acceso universal a la educación superior: Tendencias, barreras y factores impulsores

### RESUMEN

Este artículo desarrolla un análisis global sobre el acceso a la educación superior y cómo este ha evolucionado entre el 2000 y el 2018, así como sus factores impulsores y las barreras para su consecución. También aborda la importancia de la educación superior para el desarrollo humano, social y económico, así como desde la perspectiva de los derechos humanos. Este estudio utiliza dos aproximaciones metodológicas. En primer lugar, un análisis cuantitativo de los principales indicadores utilizados en el monitoreo de la educación superior, desagregados por región, género y grupo de ingresos. En segundo lugar, una revisión completa de la literatura en relación con los factores impulsores y las barreras para el acceso a la educación superior. Este acceso ha aumentado a nivel global; sin embargo, marcadas diferencias se pueden apreciar a nivel regional, de género y de nivel de ingresos. El desarrollo económico de las naciones y el auge de las aspiraciones de clase media, el crecimiento de las instituciones privadas y la expansión de las instituciones de educación a distancia han sido los principales contribuyentes a este aumento del acceso. La pobreza, las crisis, las prácticas institucionales de admisión adversas y la ubicación de las instituciones suponen un desafío continuado para el acceso universal. Una combinación de políticas públicas y acciones puede ser adoptada por los gobiernos nacionales y las instituciones de educación superior para aumentar aún más el acceso, teniendo particularmente en cuenta a quienes se están quedando atrás.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior; ODS 4; inclusión; equidad; acceso

## Acesso universal ao ensino superior: Tendências, barreiras e motivadores

### RESUMO

Este artigo desenvolve uma análise global sobre o acesso ao ensino superior e como ele evoluiu entre 2000 e 2018, bem como seus fatores impulsionadores e barreiras para seu alcance. Este artigo também aborda a importância da educação superior para o desenvolvimento humano, social e econômico, levando também em consideração uma perspectiva de direitos humanos. Este estudo usa duas abordagens metodológicas. Em primeiro lugar, é feita uma análise quantitativa dos principais indicadores utilizados no monitoramento do ensino superior, desagregados por região, gênero e faixa de renda. Em segundo lugar, é feita uma revisão abrangente da literatura sobre

os motivadores e as barreiras ao acesso ao ensino superior. O acesso ao ensino superior aumentou globalmente; no entanto, diferenças marcantes podem ser vistas em nível regional, de gênero e de renda. O desenvolvimento econômico das nações e a ascensão das aspirações da classe média, o crescimento das instituições privadas e a expansão das instituições de educação à distância têm sido os principais contribuintes para esse maior acesso. Pobreza, crises, práticas institucionais de admissão adversas e a localização das instituições representam um desafio contínuo para o acesso universal. Uma combinação de políticas públicas e ações podem ser tomadas pelos governos nacionais e instituições de ensino superior para aumentar ainda mais o acesso, especialmente levando em consideração aqueles que estão sendo deixados para trás.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino Superior; SDG 4; inclusão; equidade; acesso

## **L'accès universel à l'enseignement supérieur: Les tendances, les obstacles et les moteurs**

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article présente une analyse globale sur l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur et son évolution entre 2000 et 2018 ainsi que ses moteurs et obstacles pour sa réussite. L'article aborde aussi l'importance de l'enseignement supérieur pour le développement humain, social et économique, ainsi que la perspective des droits humains. Cette étude utilise deux approches méthodologiques. Premièrement, une analyse de données sur les principaux indicateurs utilisés dans le suivi de l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur, désagrégés par région, genre et groupe de revenu. Deuxièmement, un examen exhaustif de la littérature sur les moteurs et obstacles à l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur. Cet accès a augmenté au niveau global, néanmoins, des différences importantes peuvent être identifiées au niveau de la région, du sexe et du niveau de revenu. Le développement économique des nations et la hausse des aspirations des classes moyennes, la croissance du nombre d'établissements privés et l'expansion des établissements d'enseignement à distance ont été des facteurs importants pour cette augmentation en matière d'accès. La pauvreté, les crises, les systèmes d'admission défavorables et la situation géographique des établissements présentent des défis à l'accès universel. Une combinaison de politiques publiques et d'actions peut être adoptée par les gouvernements nationaux et les établissements d'enseignement supérieur pour continuer à accroître l'accès en accordant une attention particulière aux populations qui sont laissées pour compte.

**Mots clés :** Enseignement Supérieur ; ODS 4 ; inclusion ; égalité ; accès

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Access to higher education institutions (HEIs) has been a highly debated topic over the past two decades, particularly taking into account the increasing number of individuals (students and non-students) they affect. While contributing to, and in some cases, even enabling the progress of students in their professional and personal lives, HEIs also play a central role in the local development of the regions in which they are located.

The matter of increased access is also important for the HEIs themselves. HEIs per se are facing an interesting and at the same time, challenging historical moment, with variations according to areas: their role as institutions (traditional academic/research values versus increasing market and future of work demands), their target audience (massification of enrollment and diverse student backgrounds), their geographical location (expansion of campuses and transnational online provisions), their curriculum, a more intensive use of technology, etc. A greater understanding of how access to these institutions has advanced over the past years and what the main dynamics behind this phenomenon are, becomes an ever-important area of concern. The purpose of this study is to analyze the evolution of universal access to HE over the past two decades, its main drivers and impediments.

The study's main significance is to identify policy-making data and contribute to an understanding of how universal access to HE institutions can be supported. It informs governments and institutions on recent data and successful global initiatives, highlighting persisting challenges and providing recommendations for future action. Finally, it also seeks to inform on actions geared towards fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The study develops as follows: Section 2 provides a background on the principle of universal access to higher education and reviews the literature which advocates for its importance. Section 3 describes the methodology utilized to lead to the results produced in section 4. Sections 5 and 6 discuss and conclude the observations on access to HE, while proposing some policy alternatives for national governments and HEIs.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

HE encompasses all types of education (academic, professional, technical, artistic, pedagogical, distance learning, etc.) provided by universities, technological institutes, teacher training colleges, etc., which are normally intended for students which have completed a secondary education, and whose education objective is the acquisition of a title, a degree, certificate, or diploma of higher education (UNESCO, 2005).

Universal access to higher education, devoid of discrimination and exclusion, is the cornerstone of the right to education. Yet, it remains a global concern. While the perception of the importance of education for development is generally increasing, the unfair distribution of educational opportunities has led to ongoing international attention, since it represents a drawback to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and the other SDGs. Universal access to higher education is in line with SDG 4, Goal 4.3 which envisages that by 2030 we must "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN DESA, 2021).

This article focuses on universal higher education from the perspective of its access, not from the other characteristics (i.e. in governance and management, curriculum, institutional diversity) that have been attributed to universal higher education systems. These systems stand in opposition to the two types typically referred in the literature: elite systems, where only a minority -either by privilege or by merit- can access, and mass access systems, where a considerable share of the population does enter higher education, but without a guarantee of access for everyone who wants it and has the academic capacity to take advantage of it (Trow, 1970, 1973, 1974, 2000, 2006). Beyond those theoretical categories, more nuanced or intermediate situations can and do take place in practice; for example, as already remarked by Trow (1976), the consolidation of universal systems has not fully eliminated the existence of 'elite' subsystems inside of them.

The newer framing of 'high participation' systems (Marginson, 2016), which uses high quantitative enrolment figures as their main defining feature, also fails to encapsulate the importance of the right to higher education -under a framing of lifelong learning- as a defining element of universal systems

and an overall policy approach, independently of whether the rate of enrolment is high or very high (UNSG, n.d., 2003, 2019). Worth noting here is the literal content of Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "higher education shall be equally available to all on the basis of merit", where the emphasis of the right is the availability of education and its access conditions, not on whether every or most citizens actually enroll in it.

Education is essential for both individual and societal development. As part of UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative, it is classified as transformative: 'Knowledge and learning are humanity's greatest renewable resources for responding to challenges and inventing alternatives. Education does more than respond to a changing world. Education transforms the world' (UNESCO, 2019a, p.1). As such, policymakers and educational institutions should ensure that all students have equal and equitable opportunities to obtain an education. The widespread use of the term "access" in education, along with related terms such as "equity" and "inclusion," is indicative of increased global attention to the needs of the populations which have historically been underserved by schools, who have failed to take full advantage of their education, whose learning needs have been overlooked, and/or who have otherwise "fallen through the cracks" (ED Glossary, 2014).

The Education 2030 Agenda reiterates the importance of ensuring access to, and completion of, quality education for all children and youth and promoting lifelong opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016). The right to education is the fundamental principle of education for all. The fundamental principles of non-discrimination, solidarity, equality of opportunity and treatment and universal access to education are enshrined in UNESCO's Constitution (UNESCO, 2020a). Moreover, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education occupies the frontline position among UNESCO standard-setting instruments in the field of education and is the first international legally-binding instrument protecting the right to education for all. This instrument encompasses the idea that education is not a luxury, but a fundamental right and underscores the state obligation to proscribe any form of discrimination in education while promoting equal educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2007a). The main provisions in this Convention include:

- Free and compulsory primary education;
- Secondary education in its different forms, generally available and accessible to all; Higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity;
- Equivalent education standards for all public educational institutions of the same level and conditions relation to quality;
- Opportunities for continuing education (lifelong education);
- Training opportunities for the teaching profession without any discrimination.
- Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The freedom of choice for parents regarding their children's education, in accordance with their moral and religious beliefs;
- The right of members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities. (UNESCO, 2007a, p.1)

Economic and social development are other important dimensions relating to wider access to education, in addition to being an extension of basic human rights and a key to achieving all other human rights. Education is expected to foster socioeconomic development through four separate but interrelated missions: humanistic, through the development of individual and collective humane virtues to their full extent; civic, through enhanced public life and active participation in a democratic society; economic, by providing individuals with intellectual and practical skills that make them productive and enhance their, and society's living conditions; and through fostering social equity and justice (Spiel et.al, 2018). More so, disparities in educational opportunities reinforce and often amplify disparities in outcomes throughout people's lives. Thus, it is critical to ensure that all students receive comprehensive support in order to improve the well-being of underrepresented individuals.

Universal access to HE has also been recognized by governments as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. This recognition is captured in the international goals, strategies and targets that have been set during the past 20 years including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs. The set of MDGs formulated in 2000 with targets for 2015 cry-

tallized the growing consensus which emerged during the 1990s, namely, that poverty reduction and the provision of basic social services need to be at the center of development policy. Of the eight MDGs, two were directly related to education systems. MDG2 called for the achievement of universal primary education by 2015 whereby every child will complete full primary education. MDG3 called for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women specifically with the elimination of gender disparities at the primary and secondary school levels by 2005 and across all education levels by 2015. The remaining MDGs focused on other interrelated development areas that are greatly influenced by the progress made towards the achievement of MDGs 2 and 3 (UNESCO, 2010a).

In the case of the SDGs, access to HE remains a high priority in the development agenda with SDG4 as the education goal which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." SDG4 has one specific target (4.3) devoted to HEI access: "by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN DESA, 2021). Access to HE plays a well-recognized role of enabler for many areas under the SDGs; conversely, progress in other areas may affect education in many ways. Whether contributing by research, by knowledge generation, by awareness campaigns, by granting access to universities, or by forming a more prepared work force, tertiary education is critical for the overall achievement of the SDGs.

In other words, despite the relatively limited explicit references to HE within the SDG framework, none of the SDGs can be achieved without the contribution of HE through research, teaching and community engagement, emphasizing the need to ensure its universal access. More specifically, through their research function, HEIs play a fundamental role in creating knowledge and underpinning the development of analytical and creative capacities that enable solutions to be found for local and global problems in all fields of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016). Thus, accelerating the movement towards universal access to HE will therefore lead directly to acceleration in other SDGs. For instance, HE forms an important part of other goals related to poverty (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality (SDG5) governance; decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and

strong institutions (SDG16) (UNESCO, 2019b). Conversely, progress towards achieving the SDGs will be retarded if the universalization of HE is not accelerated. A stronger focus on equity can generate a virtuous cycle to achieve other SDGs (UNESCO, 2019b).

Increased access to HE enables people to maximize their potential and further universal sustainable development. HE enables individuals to expand their knowledge and skills, clearly express their thoughts both orally and in writing, grasp abstract concepts and theories, and increase their understanding of the world and their community (UK BIS, 2013). It has also been shown to improve an individual's quality of life in studies which illustrate that:

compared to high school graduates, college graduates have longer life spans, better access to health care, better dietary and health practices, greater economic stability and security, more stable employment and greater job satisfaction, less dependency on government assistance, greater understanding of government, increased community service and leadership, more self-confidence, and less criminal activity and incarceration. In addition, college graduates have higher rates of access to the internet, more time to devote to leisure and artistic activities, and higher voting rates. (UK BIS, 2013, p.1)

However, despite all of these benefits and its key role as an enabler of personal and societal development, increased access to higher education cannot be expected to singlehandedly eliminate inequalities between graduates. As some authors argue, even once quantitative outcomes of education have been equalized (such as the total number of years of education), inequalities can persist in the form of a qualitative educational advantage for socioeconomically well-off students (such as the nature and features of the programs studied, for example). These dynamics, which have been referred Effectively Maintained Inequality, can allow patterns of advantage and disadvantage to reproduce over time, well beyond the point in which countries have ensured universal access to higher education (Lucas and Byrne, 2017; Lucas, 2017). Similarly, the concept of Maximally Maintained Inequality is used to argue that those from advantaged socioeconomic status are better placed to benefit from emerging educational opportunities while the expansion is still ongoing

(Raftery and Hout, 1993; Hout, 2006). These two limiting factors to the equalizing power of higher education access should lead to paying closer attention to ensure the quality and relevance of all programs, therefore minimizing them as differentiating factors between graduates.

On a societal level, HE has a vital role to play in a country's development and participation in the international economy. More importantly in low- and middle-income countries which are still on the path to industrialization, HE is important as it offers higher levels of science, technology, innovation and eventually research capacity which are essential for industrial development and trade competitiveness. Developing countries get left behind in a global marketplace, if adequate attention is not paid to developing countries' "knowledge economies" (St. George, 2006).

Noting the importance of HE for the development of individuals, societies and countries, tracing how its access has evolved over the years is imperative, firstly, to see whether the world is on track to achieve SDG4 targets; secondly, a comparative analysis of regions which have outperformed others in closing the access gap would help identify good practices that can be applied to other regions; and thirdly, to assist in making evidence-based policies that target those sectors of society which are lagging in access to HE.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study draws from a two-pronged methodology. First, data analyses on the performance of the main indicators used to monitor access to HE. There are three indicators associated with SDG4.3 which assist in measuring the progress made in access to higher education, namely:

- 4.3.1 - Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by sex;**
- 4.3.2 - Gross enrollment ratio for tertiary education;**
- 4.3.3 - Participation rate in technical-vocational programs (15- to 24-year-olds).**

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is the most commonly used indicator in monitoring how different regions have fared in increasing access to higher education (Mittal et.al, 2020). This ratio expresses enrollment as a percentage

of the population who are in the five-year age group span immediately following secondary school graduation (typically ages 19 to 23) (UNESCO, 2020b).

A high GER generally indicates a high degree of participation, whether the pupils belong to the official age group or not. When the GER exceeds 90% for a particular level of education, the aggregate number of places for pupils is approaching the number required for universal access of the official age group. (UNESCO, 2020b, *n.d.*)

Data on the GER is collected from universities and national governments and published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). The data is publicly available.

Secondly, a comprehensive literature review will be undertaken on the drivers and barriers in achieving access to HE. Document analyses, constituting a review of existing literature, online documents including, for example, policy documents and official reports from countries, as well as academic articles, are utilized.

It is important at this point to address some limitations which accompany this study. The GER does not take account of differences in duration of programmes between countries or between different levels of education and fields of study. It may "underestimate participation especially in countries with poorly developed tertiary education systems or those where provision is limited to first tertiary programmes (which are generally shorter than 5 years in duration)" (UIS, *n.d.*). More so it can exceed 100% due to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged students because of early or late entrants, and grade repetition. In this case, a rigorous interpretation of GER needs additional information to assess the extent of repetition, late entrants, etc. (UNESCO, 2020b).

The GER is a good measure for tertiary participation rates, but it does not measure outcomes of that participation such as graduation rates and employability. While these are important metrics to analyze, the interrelation of access, graduation and employability rates are more broadly covered by UNESCO-IESALC (2020), primarily from a quantitative perspective. By contrast, this study provides a wider analysis of secondary sources, with the aim for better understanding the dynamics that lie underneath these global and regional trends.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Main global and regional trends in HE enrolment

Overall, universal access to HE has been increasing worldwide over the past two decades. Following a historical path of expansion – enrollment worldwide went from 13 million students in 1960 to 137 million students in 2005 (UNESCO-IESALC, 2008). In the first decade of the 2000s, participation rates in HEIs increased by 10 percentage points or more in many regions like Asia, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean (Altbach et. al., 2009).

Between 2000 and 2018, the global HE GER increased from 19% to 38%. The global figures obscure major differences within regions. The percentage points increases (Table 1) between 2000 and 2018 show that East and South-east Asia and Latin America and Caribbean regions have had the most rapid expansions of tertiary education participation since 2000; while Sub-Saharan Africa has had the slowest increase in participation rates. However, when we look at percentage increases (using the baseline GER), East and South-east Asia and Central and South Asia have been the global leaders in terms of expansion of tertiary education. There are a few things worth noting about the huge increases in tertiary enrollment in South-east Asia within the selected timeframe. Curaj et al. (2015) note that the changing landscape HE in this region has been chiefly characterized by massification, diversification, marketization, and internationalization. The increase in demand for HE has manifested in three forms: larger number of student population, higher interest in cross-border knowledge and experience, and the need for greater variety in academic programs. To address this, the governments of these countries have built more HEIs, allowing private sector to play a bigger role, while granting greater autonomy to public universities. HE restructuring in a number of South-east Asian countries has led to the establishment, for instance, of autonomous HEIs.

Although access to tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa doubled between 2000 and 2018, the enrollment rate remains low at 9% in 2018, the lowest regional average in the world, about a quarter of the global average. The growth has been insufficient to match the rising demand driven by improved access to primary and secondary education, a growing young population, and em-

**Table 1.** Regional tertiary education percentage change between 2000 - 2018

	GER (2000) %	GER (2010) %	GER (2018) %	Percentage point increase (2000 – 2018)	Percentage increase (2000 – 2018)
World	19	30	38	19	100
Sub-Saharan Africa	4	8	9	5	125
Latin America and Caribbean	23	41	52	29	126
North Africa and West Asia	21	31	46	25	119
Oceania	56	71	73	17	30
Central and South Asia	9	17	26	17	189
Europe and North America	55	75	77	22	40
East and South-east Asia	15	28	45	30	200

**Source:** UIS data (2020)

ployment shifting away from the agriculture to manufacturing and services (Gandhi, 2018). The region faces several challenges in its HE systems. For many countries in the region, it is extremely difficult to secure adequate funding for tertiary education and the costs for tertiary education remain high. Compounding these challenges, these countries have very limited options to acquire additional resources, women are still under-represented in terms of access to tertiary education in the region and large numbers of students pursue tertiary education abroad (UNESCO, 2010b). However, it is very important to acknowledge that the region has come a long way since 1970, when the GER was only about 1% (World Bank, 2020).

#### 4.2. The impact of income inequalities in HE enrolment

HE has seen astounding growth across the world in recent decades, and according to the most recent (2019) data from UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, more than a third of the population globally now go on to some forms of post-secondary study. Yet, while there are increasing participation rates in all regions, there remain significant disparities among different groups. While there is agreement in the literature that, for low-income students from mar-

ginalized ethnical groups, education is the most powerful factor to bring about a different outcome for their lives (Gray, 2013), these groups still face a harsh reality when trying to access HEIs.

As shown in the table below, the highest increase in participation rates has been in upper middle-income countries (35 pp) while the lowest has been in low-income countries (5pp). Between 2000 and 2018, GER in upper middle-income countries increased by more than 200%. There seems to be a strong relationship between GDP per capita and tertiary GER. An increase in university enrollment tends to coincide with the rise of GDP per capita.

**Table 2.** Change in tertiary participation rates between 2000 - 2018, by income group

	GER (2000) %	GER (2018) %	Percentage point increase (2000 – 2018)	Percentage increase (2000 – 2018)
Low income	5	10	5	100
Lower middle income	11	24	13	118
Upper middle income	17	52	35	206
High income	55	77	22	40

**Source:** UIS data (2020)

HE remains out of reach for many of the world's poorest people. For example, an analysis of enrollment data at the regional level across wealth quintiles in Africa showed that those in the top wealth quintile do better in tertiary education enrollment than those in the poorest and middle quintiles.

Across regions, South and Central African countries perform worst in enrolling students from the poorest and middle quintile of households. When looking at enrollment ratios across some African countries, between 1998 and 2012, post-secondary enrollment for the bottom 80 percent income percentile increased 3.1 percent whereas the top 20 percent saw an 8 percent increase. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the poorest 50 percent of the population only represented about 25 percent of higher education students in 2013. In the United Kingdom, entrance to

higher education is seen to be more common for students from more geographically affluent areas as compared to the most disadvantaged. (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000, *n.d.*)

Within specific countries there are marked inequalities in opportunity. Rates of access are significantly higher for more privileged social groups, while lower-income and other marginalized communities struggle for entry, particularly in the poorest countries (McCowan, 2016).

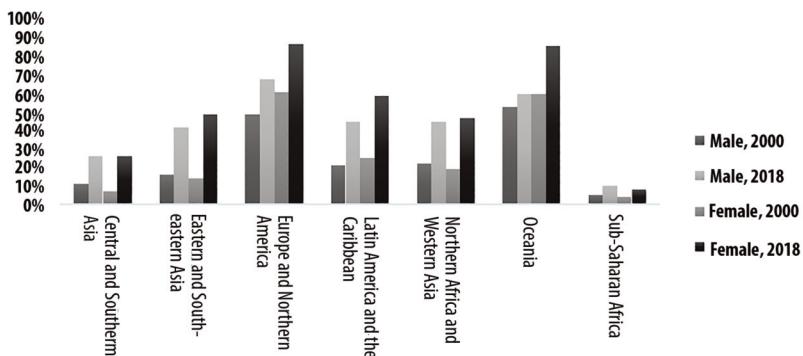
#### **4.3. The impact of gender in HE enrolment**

Globally, there have been disparities in tertiary education participation by gender. Between 2000 and 2018, the GER for males increased from 19% to 36%, while that for females went from 19% to 41%. Women have therefore been the main beneficiaries of the rapid increases in tertiary education enrollment, especially considering that the two gender groups had the same starting point. In tertiary education, only 4% of countries have achieved gender parity, with the gender imbalance increasing at the expense of males. As South Asia moves towards closing the gap, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where women still enroll in or graduate from tertiary education at lower rate as men. Furthermore, there is a range of less visible inequalities among the disciplines studied. In many countries, although women outnumber men as graduates in general, they lag behind men in completing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees. In Chile, Ghana and Switzerland, for example, women account for less than one-quarter of all STEM degrees (UNESCO, 2018).

#### **4.4. Main drivers of the global increase in HE enrolment**

The increase in access to HE is a result of many factors, including a set of driving forces which are highlighted below in this study: economic development, rise in middle-class aspirations, growth of private institutions, and growth of distance education institutions. In addition to this, there are other several reasons for the rise in HE participation rates, including increased demand partially driven by the global shift to the knowledge economy rationale, more supportive government policies and a growing sense of responsibility for social equity (Oketch, 2016).

**Figure 1.** Regional tertiary GERs, by gender (2010 & 2018)



**Source:** UIS data (2020)

While the paper recognizes that the increase in access to, HE has been influenced by a myriad of factors such as increased global recognition of HE as a human right and the consequent advocacy of its importance by international agencies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank as well as in national legal instruments and policies, for this study specific attention is given to a few main drivers from both a supply and demand perspective.

The growth of HE participation is often represented as a function of the economic need for more skills and higher productivity in the markets for human capital (Marginson, 2016). There is a well-established relationship between gross domestic product (GDP) growth and tertiary education enrollments. This relationship is particularly strong for emerging economies with GDP per capita less than US\$10,000 where a small increase in the GDP contributes to a significant rise in the enrollment rate. In practice this is likely to reflect rising household incomes, greater wealth, growing middle classes, demand from parents to provide their children with a tertiary education, and a higher gradient of skills demand from structurally changing economies. It may also reflect an increased fiscal capacity of governments to fund and expand access to tertiary education (British Council, 2012). The high growth rates experienced in South Asia may be a reason why the GER of the region is expanding at a fast pace.

The expansion of HE is not only powered by economic growth but also by the ambitions of families to advance or maintain social position and of students for self-realization. In contemporary societies, those desires, particularly the hopes of parents for children, have become primarily focused on formal education, which is seen as the privileged pathway to professional work. Over time, the social demand for HE accumulates and trends towards the universal, and HE provision becomes large, growing and increasingly ubiquitous. Thus, universal desires for social betterment are articulated through HE systems that are themselves expanding. Socially, HE functions as a positional good in which its sorting role is as important as the absolute opportunities that it brings (Marginson, 2016).

Middle income countries with rapid growth rates in higher education have a few things in common. Along with a growing pool of eligible students, they have a growing middle class with higher occupational aspirations and a regulatory environment that is becoming more stable. They provide funding for educational infrastructure and for salaries and development of teachers, staff and administrators (Marginson, 2016).

HE institutions are diversifying alongside their student bodies. Private institutions in particular have grown in numbers, sizes, specialization and mission. New kinds of private providers have emerged, which include transnational provision in the form of international branch campuses and international online providers (Kinser and Lane, 2012). These are creating more places in HE systems while many governments reduce their direct funding role in HE.

Private enrollments have been growing steadily: they now account for 30% of all global enrollments (UNESCO, 2017).

In Latin America, for example, private enrollments account for 49% of the total. In Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru, more than 60% of students in 2015 were enrolled in private institutions, along with more than 80% of students in Chile and Paraguay. In Asia, private enrollments make up 36% on average, where countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are experiencing the same trend. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 3)

#### **4.5. Global, regional and HE system-level challenges to the universal access to HE: low quality, lack of resources and humanitarian crisis**

It is important to note, nevertheless, that there are doubts regarding the quality of private higher education institutions worldwide. While they have contributed significantly to the expansion of HE in all regions, granting access to tertiary education to many students, this sometimes happened at the cost of quality. Moreover, in many countries, for instance those in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, middle and upper classes are the ones benefitting from quality education provided in public institutions, while low-income students are more often granted access to private institutions with lower quality provision.

Similarly, to private institutions, open distance education institutions have grown as well, as a result also of new technologies and internet dissemination. Instead of research programs or other types of specialized study, many new institutions provide broad access programs that have less stringent entrance criteria (Levy, 2013). Open education providers are also gaining ground. GERs in Turkey grew from 30% in 2004 to 86% in 2014 in part due to distance education enrollments.

Access to HE is crucial for every country. It is the basis for a wide range of other critical issues such as reduction of unemployment, which in turn can lead to a decrease in poverty. However, not every country can easily provide an increase in access to HE, and there are many barriers to achieving universal access; some critical and wide-ranging of which are: poverty, crisis and emergency, high tuition fees, entrance examinations, geographical mobility, and discrimination – the main focuses of this paper. Universal access to HE becomes then a challenging objective that requires sound political strategies, sufficient time and proper resources to overcome the barriers highlighted here below.

One of the reasons some students are not in HEI is that their families cannot pay for their education. Prospective students usually have to choose between attending school and working to support their families. Child labor lowers net primary enrollment rates (ILO, 2015). In Africa, for instance, population growth, a weak economy, famine, and armed conflict have contributed to keeping child labor high and school attendance low. Low enrolment at these lower schooling levels affects tertiary GERs, which may partly explain the low

GER in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest incidence of poverty and child labor. Another critical issue related to poverty is poor nutrition, which leads to illnesses and obstructs educational capabilities. This not only affects enrolment into HE, but poverty also affects academic performance and completion.

Since some countries still cope with crisis and emergency situations, proper educational services are dysfunctional, such as countries which deal with wars and political conflicts. Teachers and students often have to find some location in their refugee camps to accommodate teaching and learning. In 2016, 24 million children living in crisis zones were out of school while nearly one in four of the 109.2 million school-aged children who live in conflict areas were missing out on their education. Without a doubt, this has a direct influence on HE access. For example, it was shown that in two European countries involved in WWII – Austria and Germany – children who were ten years old during the conflict were significantly less likely to proceed into HE and lost around 20 percent of a year of schooling on average (UNESCO, 2010c). Conflicts in Tajikistan (1992-97) had a negative effect on completion of secondary schooling, particularly for boys (O'Brien, 2020). Following the sectarian conflict in Iraq in the 2000s, 84% of the HEI infrastructure was burnt, looted, or severely destroyed in some form (Milton and Barakat, 2016). The destruction of infrastructure, the absence of lecturers and recruitment of young soldiers all affect access to HE. Only 1% of the world's more than 65 million people displaced by war and conflict are attending university (ReliefWeb, 2021).

#### **4.6. Institution-level barriers to the universal access to HE: enrolment fees, selection criteria, geography and diverse needs**

The two primary institutional barriers present in most HE systems are tuition fees and entrance examinations. Tuition increases are very clearly associated with diminished attendance and completion rates. The university will be out of reach for those who come from poor households and do not have significant financial support. Entrance examinations and requirements seem a justifiable means of assessing whether students are equipped to engage in a particular course. Yet, in many cases, they privilege students from high-quality schools and those who have been able to pay for preparatory courses. The meritocratic principles of university admissions are hard to disentangle from previous

unfair social advantages and disadvantages. On the other hand, the introduction of standardized national entrance exams and affirmative actions in many countries, e.g., Brazil and Tajikistan, has reduced this entrance gap (Sabzalieva, 2015).

Participation in HE can be impacted by the domicile of the individual, and the geographical distance of institutions. The reasons for this are complex, as regional disparities may be due to socio-economic and geographical factors. However, access to HE in terms of travel distance can be a very real issue for some, particularly those who live in remote or rural areas (Mullen, 2010) and where HEIs are concentrated in urban parts of the country.

Moreover, while the number of branch campuses is increasing in order to accommodate underprivileged populations, their choice of location is often dependent on the commercial forces funding them (Briscoe and Oliver, 2006).

Discrimination in the education system is another element and occurs most obviously in education access. It can also occur within education systems and may manifest as certain groups receiving an inferior quality of education compared with others (for instance, the quality of education in urban schools tends to be higher than that found in rural areas (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Also, discrimination can occur as part of the education process itself, when different groups of people are not able to draw the same benefits from the education they received.

Girls can face gender-based barriers such as child marriage, pregnancy, and gender-based violence which often prevent them from going to or contribute to them dropping-out of college (Wodon et.al, 2017). It is important to note that gender in itself is not a 'barrier' to HE, and statistical trends shown in this study illustrate that men as compared to women are under-represented.

People with disabilities or additional support needs also experience a number of barriers to higher education access (Mullen, 2010). People with disabilities can face literal accessibility issues, such as a lack of ramps or appropriate school transportation, making it difficult to get to college.

Another example refers to migrant groups. Migrants often face administrative barriers that prevent them from enrolling, effectively barring them from education systems. These include lack of supportive infrastructure and capable teachers to address cultural issues and differences.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Increased demand and enrollment rates in the HE system do not indicate that all segments of society are equally able to benefit from HE. Certainly, one of the most pressing challenges is not only the expansion of tertiary participation, but rather reducing the long tail of disadvantaged students failing to access tertiary education. Despite various projects and policies of governments, institutions and other political entities, there is still inequality in access to HE in many countries, which have negative consequences for both economic efficiency and social justice. Consequently, the results of this research show that more coherent efforts and targeted strategies in ensuring access to HE are required to directly address the plight of the disadvantaged minorities. Targeting or ignoring one group can ultimately affect the whole spectrum of HE accesses. There must be recognition that the right to education or access to HE benefits all. Based on the study, the recommendations below for future action are suggested so as to further increase access to HE, in light of its positive impact on individuals, societies and countries. The suggestions do not intend to be definitive but rather to stimulate policies and actions oriented towards universal access to HE, taking into particular account the inclusion and retention of vulnerable individuals.

For higher education institutions:

- Generation of data disaggregated by sex, disability, race, ethnic or social origin, economic status, religion, language, geographic location and other status to ensure the visibility of all groups of students in relation to higher education enrollment and graduation, thus identifying students who need more support due to family variables, academic deficiencies, socioeconomic status, etc.
- Provision of continuous support (financial aid, information on classes, overall professional counselling, psychological support) to students in need. This includes the provision of emergency grants and financial aid, especially those targeting students from vulnerable backgrounds and families.
- Use of technology to further increase access. Technology is not a panacea for all ills in education, but it has certainly proved that it improves

access to higher education, especially the use of open, distance and online learning which has enabled access to higher education at low cost. Leveraging appropriate technology is still an important aspect that needs to be focused on. Mobile phones are particularly useful in this regard, given the widespread availability and costs that are becoming increasingly affordable.

For policymakers:

- Development of national mechanisms to evaluate progress to ensure the right to higher education and inclusion at the national level, in accordance with international norms and standards.
- Provision of continuous funding support: grants and financial aid for higher education institutions which have a significant number of students from vulnerable groups.
- Development of affirmative action policies that put equity at the front and center in the admissions process

Overall, it is possible to conclude that increased access to higher education is the result, *inter alia*, of an interaction between growing family (and country) expectations on the demand side, and on the supply side, expanding economies and HEIs, and a number of public supportive policies, including financial support to students. Finally, it is difficult to make predictions regarding future higher education access, and this was not the objective of this exercise. However, one important component of this analysis, which should be highlighted for future endeavors, is that increase in access should be accompanied by the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Otherwise, HE systems will be supporting those who already have a privileged starting point.

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