

# Measuring the Impact of Equity Promotion Policies

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## Abstract

This article analyzes five case studies of what works in equity: Australia, Austria, Colombia, South Africa, and Vietnam. The studies confirm that achieving strong equity results requires a high degree of alignment among leadership, policy goals, policy instruments, and resources. They also show the interaction of structural elements influencing disparities in higher education: streaming within high schools, selectivity in university admissions, institutional differentiation of higher education systems, and availability of financial aid for disadvantaged groups.

A 2018 study sponsored by the Lumina Foundation, *All Around the World*, reviewed the policy commitments of national governments to promote equal opportunities in access and success in higher education. The study found that, with the exception of a few fragile states recovering from a natural catastrophe or a major political crisis, equity is a priority theme in the higher education discourse of most governments.

Leading up to this year's World Access to Higher Education Day (26 November 2019), the Lumina Foundation sponsored a follow-up study to explore which equity promotion policies seem most successful. The new study followed a mixed-method approach combining a literature review of methods to measure the impact of equity policies in higher education and case studies focused on a small sample of countries from all continents: Australia, Austria, Colombia, South Africa, and Vietnam.

International studies on disparities in higher education are few and far between. The choice of indicators to measure inequalities is heavily influenced by the availability of data about various equity groups. On the whole, countries tend to focus mainly on access data, at the expense of graduation results. By and large, gender and socioeconomic background are the two variables most often collected across the globe.

## Results of the Country Studies

Australia stands out as one of the few countries in the world with a comprehensive higher education equity strategy supported by a wide array of policies, instruments, and measures with both universal and targeted elements. It has a good information system that produces detailed data disaggregated by equity groups. This has enabled proper targeting, adequate accountability, and performance-based funding. With HECS-HELP, the income-contingent loan system, Australia has been a pioneer in developing a universal funding system that is both financially sustainable and socially equitable. The HEPPP institutional grant mechanism has been a catalyst for organizational change by increasing university focus on student equity, promoting understanding of barriers to participation, and creating an expert workforce on equity issues.

Austria has one of the highest enrollment rates, which can largely be attributed to the open-access nature of its higher education system and the absence of financial barriers. Gender parity is quite good, even in STEM programs. Data collection and monitoring are well established for gender. Finally, institutions have responded positively and effectively to the recent refugee crisis.

In Colombia, the increased presence of public and private universities in the regions has helped achieve an impressive expansion of enrollment, with higher participation of low-income students and minorities. ICETEX, the first ever student loan agency in the world, has been the principal equity promotion instrument at the national level. The leading public universities implement equity promotion interventions through financial aid and nonmonetary instruments. Some of the private universities have also implemented substantial retention programs. Finally, the Colombian government has included new equity target groups to recognize victims of violence, displaced population groups, and gender diversity.

In South Africa, a more balanced geographical spread of higher education institutions since the end of apartheid has helped serve underrepresented groups and drastically augment the number of black students. Improved funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds through grants and, more recently, the elimination of tuition fees for the lowest income groups, have raised access. The government has put pressure on universities to diversify their racial composition and, by and large, universities have been responsive in enrolling a more diverse student and academic body. Finally, South Africa has the largest open university in the continent, offering opportunities to students who cannot access regular higher education institutions.

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In Vietnam, the rapid expansion of the higher education system has helped increase the number of students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Affirmative action policy has helped give better access opportunities to students from ethnic minorities. Vietnam has also achieved good results in reducing the gender gap. Finally, tuition exemptions, small scholarships, and loans are available to help needy students overcome financial barriers.

### Common Findings at the National Level

The country studies confirmed one of the major findings of the 2018 Lumina study: to achieve strong equity results requires a high degree of alignment among leadership vision, policy goals, policy instruments, and allocated resources. Continuity in equity policies is also essential. Too often, politics get in the way of sound policies. To improve access and success for underrepresented groups in the long run, it is important to stay the course and carry on with both financial and nonmonetary equity policies in a consistent way, independently of which party is in government. Additionally, the study noted that Austria is the only country surveyed with equity promotion policies influenced and strengthened by supranational considerations (the Bologna process and the social dimension agenda of the European Commission).

Finally, the case studies confirmed the interaction of four structural elements that strongly influence disparities in higher education. First, the extent of streaming between general education and vocational training within high schools negatively affects the chances of children from low-income families. The level of selectivity in the admission policies of universities is the second factor affecting opportunities for students from underrepresented groups. The third contributing factor is the degree of institutional differentiation of higher education systems. Last but not least, the availability of financial aid for students from disadvantaged groups is an important determinant of equity.

### Key Findings at the Institutional Level

The five case studies also included a review of institutional approaches and experiences to promote access and success for underserved students. They revealed that institutions must have a clear strategy that can either take the form of a stand-alone document or be embedded in the institutional strategic plan. The University of Wollongong and Deakin University in Australia, and Uniminuto in Colombia, are good examples. All three have put a strong emphasis on equity as part of their core mission. In this regard, having a department responsible for all equity-related activities under the direct authority of an institutional leader is also an important factor of success. In low- and middle-income countries, innovative partnerships between higher education institutions, local authorities, and local businesses can generate additional resources to finance scholarships for needy students. In addition to ensuring greater access, elite public or private universities that want to be more inclusive should strive to provide a welcoming environment for first-generation students, who often feel uncomfortable within an elitist institutional culture.

### Areas for Further Research

Policy makers, university leaders and researchers interested in advancing further equity in higher education could bear in mind some of the results of this study. Moving forward, it will be important to undertake impact studies to measure which equity promotion interventions and combinations of interventions are most effective, building on the work of [Geven and Herbaut on financial aid strategies \(IHE #99\)](#). Countries and higher education institutions need to put in place comprehensive information systems to identify all equity groups and measure their progress in terms of access and graduation. With respect to gender disparities, it is necessary to identify effective policies to improve gender balance in STEM institutions and programs, in the top academic positions, and in university leadership functions. Finally, it is indispensable to better define the needs of students with disabilities, provide them with sufficient resources, and empower universities to place this dimension higher on their equity agenda (see [Thompson on inclusive universities in IHE #100](#)). ▲

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