

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1 Background

Around the world, many children and youths face challenging circumstances beyond their own control—due to discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, socioeconomic background, or other attributes—that drastically affect their opportunities to go to school, stay in school, complete secondary education, and access higher education. This has a particularly strong impact on young people in developing countries and disadvantaged groups across the world. At the tertiary level, young people encounter barriers reflecting the cost of studying, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, and lack of access to information about labor market prospects. The need to achieve greater inclusion and promote pluralism in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative, as reflected in target 4.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Experience shows that to be effective, equity promotion policies must be defined in a comprehensive way, taking both financial and non-monetary aspects into consideration, coordinating national and institutional actions in a complementary manner, and putting as much emphasis on completion as on access, which has traditionally received more attention. A long-term view is key to guaranteeing continuity and consistency in effective equity promotion policies. These require well-established information systems to identify all equity groups, measure equity gaps, and assess progress in terms of access and graduation (Salmi, 2018 and 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions and students have experienced unprecedented disruption and new challenges. Severe reductions in financial resources, the digital gap, and the lack of preparation of instructors have exacerbated disparities in access and success and created widespread social distress, especially among vulnerable students. Countries and institutions must therefore accelerate efforts to remove barriers to quality higher education for all learners from underrepresented groups.

In the United States, the Lumina Foundation is the most active foundation involved in promoting equity measures to improve access and success in colleges. To complement and inform its mainstream work, the Lumina Foundation has explored international experiences through three studies carried out over the past four years. The first one, **All Around the World – Higher education equity policies across the globe**, documented the range of equity promotion policies designed and implemented in 71 countries. The second one, **Measuring the Impact of Equity Promotion Policies: Lessons from National and Institutional Case Studies**, analyzed what worked and did not work in five

national settings (Australia, Austria, Colombia, South Africa, and Vietnam). The most recent one, **COVID's Lessons for Global Higher Education: Coping with the Present while Building a More Equitable Future**, reviewed the impact of the pandemic on higher education through the equity filter.

1.2 Objective

Against this background, this study seeks to explore which equity promotion interventions appear to be most successful at the institutional level and to assess under what conditions some interventions work better than others. It documents good practices and failed approaches in many different country contexts that could provide relevant lessons to inform the Lumina Foundation's domestic work on equity promotion in tertiary education.

1.3 Methodology

This study followed a mixed-method approach reflecting the results of the following activities:

- A series of virtual meetings involving 8 researchers with extensive experience working on equity in higher education and Lumina Foundation representatives to share and discuss equity policies around the world. The group included the following geographical representation:
 - Australia and the Pacific;
 - East Asia;
 - Eastern Europe and Central Asia;
 - Latin America;
 - North America;
 - South Asia;
 - Sub-Saharan Africa and
 - Western Europe.
- Formulation of an analytical framework and template to document relevant examples of innovative equity policies or measures from the respective regions/countries of the participants at the institutional level.
- Preparation of mini case studies in each region (four in most regions, five in East Asia) based on interviews and available documentation. Each short case study provides a summary description of the context and background, the rationale behind the launch of the innovative policy or measure, a presentation of the policy and measures, an identification of linkages with national policies when relevant, a discussion of obstacles encountered and mitigation measures adopted, an analysis of the impact based on available information, and an assessment of the potential for replication and scaling up. All studies were analyzed and written up using a common template (see Annex 1).

- Preparation of a synthesis chapter on common issues and lessons learned from successful and less successful approaches.
- Final meeting of the group in person to review the draft publication and define relevant dissemination activities.

The following analytical works guided the elaboration of this template:

- The 2008 OECD study *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*, which defines equity in higher education, looks at the role of higher education in reducing disparities and reviews country policy responses.
- 2011 World Bank study *Opportunities for All? The Equity Challenge in Tertiary Education* proposes an analytical framework to measure the scope of inequalities in higher education, understand their determinants, and assess equity promotion measures.
- 2014 Sutton Trust study *Higher Education Access: Evidence of effectiveness of university access strategies and approaches*, which reviews a number of evaluations of equity programs in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- 2018 Lumina study *Access and Completion for Underserved Students: International Perspectives*, which explores the range of equity promotion policies that can be observed at the national and institutional levels.
- 2019 World Bank study *What Works to Reduce Inequalities in Higher Education*, which reviews 76 impact studies on retention and financial aid from from all over the world.
- 2019 Lumina study *Measuring the Impact of Equity Promotion Policies: Lessons from National and Institutional Case Studies*, which examines national and institutional policies in five countries across the world: Australia, Austria, Colombia, South Africa, and Vietnam.
- 2020 Lumina study *COVID's Lessons for Global Higher Education: Coping with the Present while Building a More Equitable Future*, which looks at the impact of the pandemic on higher education through the equity lens.
- 2022 background paper on *Equity, Inclusion and Pluralism* prepared for UNESCO's World Higher Education Conference (Barcelona, May 2022).

1.4 Outline of the Study

The report successively presents case studies from seven regions of the world, with a brief overview of each set of studies to set the stage. The last chapter is a synthesis of lessons learned, reflecting the cross-cutting findings of the case studies.

To download the entire publication, *Transforming lives at the Institutional Level*, please [click here](#).