

# Social Dimension Within a Quality Oriented Higher Education System



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## Introduction

*Equality of opportunity: the impertinent courtesy of an invitation offered to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances will prevent them from accepting it.*

*R.H. Tawney*

The European higher education systems have experienced two major transformations in the past decades. First, traditionally elite systems have become mass education systems as a result of the rapid increase in the proportion of each age group entering higher education. Today the EU-28 countries enrol close to 20 million of students. Second, the Bologna process has led to the harmonisation of degrees and quality assurance approaches within the European higher education space.

However, in spite of the spectacular growth in student numbers, higher education generally remains elitist, with a disproportionate share of students enrolled in the best institutions coming from wealthier segments of society (Marginson 2016). The various Excellence Initiatives aiming at making research universities more globally competitive, such as those in France and Germany, bear the risk of accentuating this trend. Even when they get access to higher education, students from under-represented and traditionally excluded groups tend to have lower success rates.

Even though the social dimension was not specifically mentioned in the 1999 Bologna declaration, it was explicitly underlined in the 2001 Prague communiqué as an important area deserving further attention. The 2007 London communiqué defines the social dimension as follows:

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Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximize the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. (p. 5).

Since then, European higher education systems have worked to ensure that efforts to raise the quality of teaching and research would go hand-in-hand with raising opportunities for under-represented groups, instead of bringing about increased social exclusion. The commitment to making higher education more socially inclusive was firmly inscribed in the 2015 Yerevan communiqué announcing the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) social dimension strategy.

Looking at the social dimension in higher education requires focusing on the needs and trajectories of at least four equity target groups:

- Individuals from the lower income groups,
- Women,
- Groups with a minority status linked to their ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, or residence characteristics, and
- People with disabilities.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The principal dimensions of inequalities often overlap in several ways. For example, ethnic minorities tend to be more predominant in rural areas and are commonly affected by poverty. Being a girl with a disability in the Roma community is almost certainly the passport to a life of exclusion and discrimination.

In the European context, the drastic increase in refugees and illegal immigrants, fuelled by conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East, has translated into an additional category of students deserving careful attention from an equity viewpoint: refugee students.

Against this background, this introductory chapter explores various aspects of the social dimension in the European higher education space. After presenting a theoretical framework explaining the importance of the social dimension and explaining how under-represented students are defined in Europe, it reviews the articles included in this section and draws broad conclusions based on the findings of the studies.

## Theoretical Framework<sup>1</sup>

Given the extensive social and private benefits that result from higher education, inclusive access and success are essential for achieving social justice and ensuring the realisation of the full potential of all young people. While acknowledging fully

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<sup>1</sup>This section builds on earlier work by Bassett and Salmi (2014).

the impact of disparities in primary and secondary education which shape the size and characteristics of the pool of potential students at the tertiary level, there is no doubt that improvements in equity in higher education can offer meaningful and sustainable development potential.

Eliminating inequality is imperative for two complementary reasons: fairness and efficiency. In the first instance, religious, philosophical and legal traditions in most cultures emphasize equity as a pervasive concern. The 2006 World Development Report (WDR) on Equity and Development documents how several major religions endorse the notion of social justice as a basic tenet of their beliefs and values (World Bank 2006).

The WDR also analyses notions of equity as a fundamental theme in secular philosophical traditions. In ancient Greece, for example, Plato maintained that “if a state is to avoid [...] civil disintegration [...] extreme poverty and wealth must not be allowed to rise in any section of the citizen-body because both lead to disasters” (Cowell 1995, 21). Modern theories of distributive justice have shaped societies’ thinking about equity. The contributions of four prominent thinkers, John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Ronald Dworkin, and John Roemer, are particularly relevant in that respect. While their theories are characterized by significant conceptual differences, they all converge in moving the traditional focus of social justice from outcomes—such as welfare or utilities—to opportunities (World Bank 2006).

The economic efficiency argument in favour of equity promotion is just as strong. A talented, low-income and/or minority high school graduate who is denied entry into higher education represents an absolute loss of human capital for the individual person her/himself and for society as a whole. The lack of opportunities for access and success in higher education leads to under-developed human resources and a resulting shortfall in the capacity to generate and capture economic and social benefits (Harbison 1964; Bowen and Bok 1998; Ramcharan 2004). The public, societal benefits accrued by having higher levels of education present in the workforce include low unemployment rates, increased tax revenues, greater inter-generational mobility, greater civic and volunteer participation and lessened dependency on social services. Research has shown the positive effect of educational attainment on crime reduction, improved health and better citizenship (Lochner 2011).

Thus, in the interest of both social justice and economic efficiency, every individual must be given an equal chance to partake in higher education and its benefits irrespective of income and other individual characteristics including gender, ethnicity, religion, language, and disability. Considering the strong correlation between higher education enrolment and family background (McPherson and Schapiro 2006), concrete initiatives are necessary to provide better opportunities of access and success for students from lower-income families and disadvantaged minority groups. Without such purposeful action, the cycle of inequity can only continue, and disparities will endure.

The importance of ensuring equal opportunities is reinforced by recent advances in biology, neurology and genetics, which are challenging traditional views about the distinction between innate and acquired abilities. A growing body of evidence is

showing that the line between what is attributed to genetic heritage and the psychological, on the one hand, and cultural and social factors that shape each individual's development, on the other hand, is much finer than previously thought. Robert Sternberg from Tufts University leads this movement, which views intelligence as a set of competencies in development (Sternberg 1997; Sternberg et al. 2001).

## Defining Underserved Students in the European Context

Despite the common goal of increasing participation in higher education, there is hardly a common European definition of under-represented groups. Instead, it is up to each country to define how it views underserved categories of students according to its specific social context. With respect to national widening participation policies, very few systems in Europe set targets for specific groups. The majority tend to set general objectives and mainstream their policy approach instead of identifying specific groups (Eurydice 2015a). In addition, few institutions collect social data on their students. In countries such as France, Germany and the Nordic countries, strict privacy laws make it illegal to gather such data.

Similarly, a recent report on “study success” in 35 European countries revealed that the definition varies across Europe (EC/EAC 2015):

- Completion: students succeed when they have completed their study and earned a degree.
- Time-to-degree: students succeed when they have earned their degree within a set period (e.g., during the nominal period, plus one year).
- Retention or dropout: students re-enrol in a program until they earn a degree successfully; students fail when they drop out before completing their studies.

Almost half of the countries included in that report places a high policy priority on student success. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of data on completion. Only 12 countries report regularly data on completion and even fewer countries report on retention, dropout rates and time-to-degree. Referring to previous work done in this area, the study stresses the need (i) to harmonize definitions and data collection in Europe to allow meaningful comparisons and (ii) to promote research to evaluate which policies are effective.

Eurydice notes that, in most cases where completion and dropout rates are monitored, this is done without distinguishing students' profiles. Only ten countries look more specifically at under-represented groups. These groups are defined differently depending upon contexts.

The first academic year is critical to student success. “Yet, only about half of the EHEA countries have developed policies and practice focusing on the retention of first-year students”; of those, only one half (12) apply the full set of measures: introductory or insertion courses, tutoring and mentoring, and specific courses and supports to acquire learning and organisational skills (Eurydice 2015b).

## Overview of the Contribution of the Papers to the Social Dimension Theme

The eight contributions included in this sub-theme on the social dimension within a quality higher education system come under three categories. The first three articles analyse national level conditions and factors that influence inclusion. The second group reviews policies that have the potential of improving inclusion. The last group of articles is devoted to institutional responses to growing numbers of refugee students in Germany and Turkey.

The full list is as follows:

1. A Typology of Admission Systems Across Europe and Their Impact on the Equity of Access, Progression and Completion in Higher Education (Cezar Mihai Haj, Irina Mihaela Geanta and Dominic Orr).
2. The Social Dimension and the University Rankings (José M. Nyssen).
3. Study Success at the Clash Point of Excellence and Social Dimension? (Aleš Vlk and Šimon Stiburek).
4. Studying and Working—Hurdle or Springboard? Widening Access to Higher Education for Working Students in Malta (Christine Scholz Fenech and Milosh Raykov).
5. The Role of Student Counselling for Widening Participation of Underrepresented Groups in Higher Education (Janine Wulz, Marita Gasteiger and Johannes Ruland).
6. Inclusive Practices in Response to the German Refugee Influx: Support Structures and Rationales Described by University Administrators (Lisa Unangst and Bernhard Streitwieser).
7. A New Aspect of Internationalisation? Specific Challenges and Support Structures for Refugees on Their Way to German Higher Education (Jana Berg).
8. Access, Qualifications and Social Dimension of Syrian Refugee Students in Turkish Higher Education (Armagan Erdogan and M. Murat Erdogan).

The first paper, by Mihai Haj, Geanta and Orr, is based on a comprehensive study of admission systems in the European higher education space. In spite of the complexity of admission modalities and contrasting approaches across European countries reflecting a variety of philosophical views regarding access to higher education, the authors were able to create a comprehensive classification of admission systems. They identified four main categories along the two dimensions of (i) selectivity upon entering higher education and (ii) degree of streaming in upper secondary education. They then proceeded to analyse the implications of each model in terms of equity and social inclusion, complementing their comparative assessment of the admission system of the 34 members of the European Higher Education Space with in-depth studies of eight countries.

The first group of countries—including for example Germany and the Netherlands—are those that stream students in high school, but where higher

education institutions are not allowed to select incoming students (*selection by secondary schools*). The researchers found this model to be the least favourable to low-income students.

The second group of countries—including for instance Finland and Portugal—are those where there is no streaming, but where higher education institutions are allowed to apply additional criteria to select their students (*selection by higher education institutions*). This model is not as restrictive as Type 1, but nevertheless higher education institutions tend to use academic achievement as a main selection criterion, which generally plays against under-represented students.

The countries in the third cluster have neither streaming in secondary education nor further selection upon entering higher education (*least selection*). Students in these countries—including, for example, Ireland and Sweden—have the widest options for choosing an academic pathway and the most equitable education attainment results.

The last group of countries—including for instance Romania and Spain—have both streaming at the secondary education level and additional selection upon entering higher education institutions (*double selection*). Paradoxically, these systems do not have the worst equity results but come in second place after the third model. This unexpectedly good result is due to the fact that these systems are doing relatively well in terms of female completion and participation of mature students.

The comparative evaluation of admission systems carried out in this article led the authors to make a few policy recommendations. First, the data suggest that, among the most effective ways of improving equity in higher education, eliminating early streaming comes as a priority. Second, the evidence shows that, by and large, higher education institutions in Europe do not consider the pursuit of inclusion as their responsibility. It is, therefore, important that governments put in place incentives to increase inclusion, following the example of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Finally, a closer articulation between secondary and higher education would go a long way towards increasing inclusion, particularly through joint services for academic and career counselling and bridge programs to improve the transition from high school to university education, as happens, for instance, in the United States.

The second article, written by Nyssen, looks at the relationship (or lack thereof) between university rankings and a range of purposes linked to the social dimension, stressing not only equity aspects but also those relating to democratic citizenship, sustainability and human rights. The author starts from the observation that, in spite of their many methodological flaws, the rankings have come to be seen as a proxy for quality in higher education by a wide range of stakeholders. Bearing in mind the advantages and disadvantages of university rankings, rather than just criticising them, it may, therefore, be more useful to see how they can foster the social dimension outcomes of higher education.

Nyssen goes on analysing the most frequently mentioned international rankings, (ARWU, THE, QS, Webometrics and U-Multirank) to find out whether they include any indicators related to the social dimension of higher education. The main

finding is that U-Multirank is the only ranking with a few relevant indicators, namely those on gender equity and community service learning. The other rankings are all biased in favour of the research function of universities.

In the second part of the article, Nyssen proposes a set of indicators reflecting the social dimension of higher education that international rankers could take into consideration to widen the scope of their university classifications. The choice of indicators is based on a review of EHEA, UNESCO, UN, Council of Europe and EU statements about equity, inclusion and others aspects of the social dimension and also on the results of a Delphi survey made in the context of the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI).

The third article, prepared by Vlk and Stiburek, examines the tension between the search for excellence and the concern for equity, with a focus on four former socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The authors use study success, completion and dropout as a filter to assess the impact of national and institutional policies to foster excellence in research and teaching. The purpose of their research is to test whether excellence and inclusion can be promoted at the same time.

Relying on information from the Europe-wide report on success (HEDOCE study), data from the OECD's Education at a Glance and national reports for each of the four countries reviewed in their article, Vlk and Stiburek review the range of national and institutional approaches used to promote success. In all four countries, the government introduced negative financial incentives to discourage students from taking too long to complete their studies. This meant, concretely, that they would have to pay fees if they exceeded a set time for finishing. Acting in a more proactive way, the Czech Republic has established social scholarships targeted for students with special needs. The beneficiaries appear to be more successful than the other students. Besides financial incentives, Poland and Hungary are providing students with detailed information on labour market outcomes to help them in their choice of academic programmes. Some universities have put in place counselling and support services for at-risk students.

Looking in more depth at the Czech experience, the article finds out that, due to the high degree of institutional autonomy, the government's ability to boost completion rates and reduce the number of dropouts is limited. The main instrument is the funding formula which takes graduation rates into account in the budget allocation to universities. The Ministry of Education also relies on institutional performance plans to boost social integration and improvements in academic success among at-risk students. At the same time, however, the priority given to excellence and increased research productivity appears to take the attention of university leaders away from teaching effectiveness and the need to decrease dropouts.

Based on the results of their case studies, the authors conclude that striving for excellence may lead universities to neglect important aspects that are not at the heart of national policies or measured by international rankings, such as the quality of teaching and learning, student support, diversity and other key elements of the social dimension. To reverse this trend, they argue convincingly in favour of

devoting additional resources to curriculum reform and innovative pedagogical initiatives to stimulate student engagement and recommend that QA evaluations take completion rates more systematically into consideration.

The article written by Scholz Fenech and Raykov is a case study of working students in Malta, investigating whether the fact that they are studying and working at the same time is an impediment in terms of social inclusion opportunities or an advantage from a skills building viewpoint. Relying on the results of the 2016 Eurostudent survey carried out in Malta, the authors analyse the profile and experience of working students and compare them with the situation of non-working students. The specific context of Malta is that of a still under-developed higher education system because of the lasting dependence on Great Britain, the former colonial power, even after independence, resulting in many labour market opportunities for unskilled workers and a higher share of students from well-off families than in other EU countries.

As reported in the article, the literature on working students points to the additional difficulties that these students encounter. In many cases they are at risk of enjoying the education experience less fully, suffering from mental stress, achieving lower levels of academic achievement and dropping out more easily because of the conflicting demands on their crowded schedule as working students. At the same time, some researchers argue that working students enjoy a motivational advantage in so far as they can more readily see the positive impact of their studies on their labour market situation.

The results of the Malta Eurostudent survey are consistent with what has been observed elsewhere. Close to 53% of all Maltese students work and study simultaneously. Working students tend to be older and come from under-represented groups with limited financial resources. Combining work and studies is more frequent among those students with a delayed entry into higher education, who tend to prefer part-time, short-cycle programmes. A positive finding of the survey is that students who combine work and studies are often enrolled in programs directly related to their job, despite the increased workload. This means that they are likely to improve their labour market outcomes in the long run.

One important finding of the study is that the impact of students' work on their academic achievement depends on the characteristics of their job and the intensity of their work. Students working more than 20 h per week alongside their studies are challenged by a considerably high workload resulting from the combination of their paid job and studies. The policy implication is that offering part-time and/or short cycle study programs with flexible hours is likely to encourage workers to pursue their studies and help low-income students who must work and study at the same time. Under these conditions, combining work and learning can be a springboard to increase the share of non-traditional students in higher education, thereby contributing to raising educational attainment in Malta.

The fifth paper, authored by Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland, gives a student perspective on the role and importance of academic and career counselling for widening the participation of under-represented students. Using survey data collected in nine European countries, it explores how counselling services offered by



student unions operate, what challenges they face, and what contribution they make to promoting the social dimension in higher education.

Together with financial aid and student-centred teaching and learning, counselling is considered to be one of the most effective measures to reduce dropout rates, especially among disadvantaged students. The literature reviewed in the article confirms that counselling helps students make the right choice of study programmes, thereby increasing their motivation and the likelihood of academic success.

In three out of the nine countries (Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom), the student unions do not provide counselling services as such, the task being undertaken by the universities themselves. But in the other six, the student unions are all directly involved in such activities. The survey results show a wide range of practices. The student unions offer both services to the general student population and targeted counselling in support of carefully identified groups of underserved students, the definition of these groups varying from one country to the other. They also work closely with other actors (government agencies, higher education institutions, NGOs) to coordinate counselling services and avoid duplications.

The article highlights two interesting trends regarding evolving practices in the area of student counselling. First, there is increasing reliance on online and social media mechanisms to support students in need of academic and career advice. Second, a growing share of the advice is provided by other students, confirming that peer counselling can be as effective or even more effective compared to advice offered by professional counsellors, especially when the role model relationship involves a student who comes from an under-represented group.

In the first of three papers on student refugees, Unangst and Streitwieser study the responses of German university administrators faced with rising numbers of refugee students in the wake of the Syrian civil war. Combining background reports and interviews with administrators and academics in 12 universities, they explore the main barriers encountered by would-be refugee students and the range of measures put in place by universities to facilitate access for refugee students.

Even though higher education policies are set in Germany at the state level rather than the federal level, several mechanisms operate at the national level to help universities confronted with the challenge of welcoming a larger number of refugee students. These include funding provided by the Federal Government and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) through the *Integra* programme, a central system to recognize foreign qualifications, a testing platform to evaluate the scholastic aptitudes of potential students, and language proficiency assessment tests. At the university level, however, few institutions have put in place a clear information system to monitor the academic progression of refugee students. This is further complicated by the strict privacy laws enforced in Germany, which make it difficult to access and analyse the personal data of students. Some universities have also been overwhelmed by the surge of applications in 2015 and 2016.

Based on the results of their interviews and review of relevant reports, the authors found that many refugee students interested in studying do not succeed in enrolling partly because of the language proficiency barrier. There is a considerable

variation in the type of support programs offered by German universities linked to differences in institutional decisions and administrator experience/interests regarding the refugee issue. Most universities, however, show an explicit effort to increase access for Muslim refugee women. The authors conclude that university administrators and academics involved in supporting refugee students would highly benefit from sharing relevant information and experience across universities and identifying which practices seem to be most effective in promoting success among refugee students.

The second article on refugee students in Germany, written by Berg, looks at the challenges experienced by refugee students in a complementary way, introducing a new angle by examining the role played by international offices at five universities. The paper reports on the findings of a series of interviews of international office officers at five universities in four states. In addition to the standard difficulties identified in the case of refugee students (funding, language, administrative requirements to prove one's academic qualifications, residential status and conditions), the study documents the social isolation and psychological distress experienced by Syrian students as a key integration barrier at German universities. In response to these challenges, most universities in the study sample have created positions to deal specifically with refugee students, most often as part of their internationalisation activities.

In the conclusion, the author underlines the positive contribution of preparatory colleges in preparing potential refugee students for the achievement and language tests. She also innovatively suggests that German universities, or for that matter all universities enrolling refugee students, should view the presence of refugee students as an enriching element of their internationalisation strategy with potential benefits for the entire student community.

The article ends with a few policy recommendations concerning the need for dedicated financial resources to institutionalise support structures for refugee students and help fund their living expenditures, and the usefulness of establishing networks bringing universities and outside agencies together to share relevant information and good practices. Regarding the general topic of social dimensions, the article argues that the implementation of support structures for refugees can, on the long-term, apply in a beneficial way to addressing the needs of other equity groups.

The last article, written by Erdogan and Erdogan, focuses on the experience of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Out of a 3.3 million refugee population, close to 15,000 Syrian students are enrolled in about 140 Turkish higher education institutions. The article, which draws on the findings of a survey of a representative sample of refugee students, analyses the challenges faced by these students in being able to access higher education and successfully complete their degree.

As mentioned in the two Germany cases discussed previously, Syrian refugees in Turkey must also overcome the language barrier and get their prior qualifications recognized in order to be able to study successfully in a Turkish university. In addition to these factors, the survey revealed the importance of providing specific information for refugee students about academic opportunities and funding sources.

While the Turkish government provides grants earmarked for refugee students, only 20% of Syrian students actually receive financial assistance. The majority of the students is funded by their families.

In spite of all the difficulties encountered, the Syrian students report that they are happy with the quality of education received and that they are achieving satisfactory results in terms of academic progression and success. This confirms that a high level of motivation—what some education researchers now call mindset—helps overcome the academic and financial barriers that refugee students are confronted with (Claro and Loeb 2017).

## Conclusion

*The willingness of nations to work together not just for refugees but for the collective human interest is what is being tested today, and it is this spirit of unity that badly needs to prevail.*

*Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees*

The collection of articles presented in this book section on the social dimension of higher education shows that the Bologna process and the creation of the European Higher Education Space have resulted in a growing emphasis on equity and inclusion for all groups in society. At the same time, some of their findings illustrate the persisting gaps between policy and practice, between intentions and reality, between rhetoric and concrete actions.

Studying the social dimension in higher education from an international perspective reveals striking differences between policies in Europe and approaches in other parts of the world. By and large, most European countries do not have systematically targeted policies to support clearly identified underserved groups, unlike what happens for instance in the United States or in Australia. A possible exception is Ireland, which is a clear outlier in that respect with its well-articulated equity plan and sets of measures to promote access and success for students from a low-income background. European nations tend to implement mainstreamed strategies to expand access and success on the assumption—not necessarily well founded—that all groups will benefit equally.

An additional complication, in some European settings, is that student background data are not readily available, which makes it difficult to analyse equity needs and design targeted policies to implement the social dimension of higher education. The data limitations sometimes arise from a weak technical capacity at the national or institutional levels. But in some cases, ethical and privacy considerations can result in legal barriers to data collection on the personal characteristics of students, as is the case in France where universities are not allowed to collect or disseminate information on the socio-economic, ethnic or religious background of students, or in Germany and some of the Nordic countries where privacy laws are very strict about the kinds of data that can be collected about individual students.

European nations have sometimes adopted divergent approaches. For example, as documented in the case studies, some countries (Slovakia for example) try to discourage students from enrolling in part-time programmes on the assumption that full-time studies are of higher quality. But there is a growing consensus—illustrated by the results of the Malta Eurostudent survey analysed in this book—that offering flexible pathways is one of the most important ways of supporting underserved students.

On the positive side, a number of important lessons can be drawn. It appears that the most effective ways of increasing opportunities for underserved students are those holistic strategies that combine financial aid with measures to overcome non-monetary obstacles such as lack of academic preparation, information, motivation, time, and cultural capital. Thus, European policy makers, institutional leaders, student unions and NGOs can work together to address the social dimension comprehensively, instead of relying on piecemeal approaches for overcoming barriers to access and success.

Many of the learning difficulties that students bring with them to institutions of higher education result from inadequate secondary education. This is particularly true for students from rural areas and low-income students. Students with inadequate academic preparation and insufficient motivation are more likely to struggle in higher education and are at a higher risk of dropping out before earning a degree. Therefore, secondary and higher education systems can intervene more purposefully by engaging in coordinated interventions—both academic and non-academic—to support success among students from under-represented groups.

Many European countries are dealing with a major new equity challenge due to the rapid rise in the refugee population and the necessity of attending to the higher education needs of refugee students. As demonstrated by the three case studies included in this book, refugee students face significant barriers in the host countries. They must have a proper visa to live and study, get their prior academic qualifications recognized, learn the language of instruction, and find financial resources to study.

The success of refugee students in overcoming these barriers is determined, to a large extent, by the existence of national policies to provide the necessary academic and financial support and the willingness of higher education institutions to put in place adequate systems to orient and accompany their refugee students. Many universities and civil society organisations have established programs to help refugees overcome the various barriers mentioned above. However, three changes are needed in order to scale up the most effective programs. First, rather than compelling refugee students to fit rigidly into existing systems and processes, universities should evolve and adapt to the new groups of incoming students. The same principle should apply to other categories of “equity” groups, for example working students. Second, what is likely to make a real difference in terms of expanding refugee student programs is the direct support from governments and the availability of public funds to help refugees with their higher education. Finally, the dissemination of innovative practices in the area of refugee education is beneficial to spread peer learning about good practices and facilitate collaboration across universities.

Focusing on new challenges, such as the influx of refugees, should not distract policymakers and university leaders away from their efforts to address long-standing equity concerns such as the low participation of students from underprivileged families or the absence of women from engineering and science, especially in top academic positions. All stakeholders interested in developing the social dimension in higher education should embrace a comprehensive view of equity groups.

Finally, one area where Europe seems to stay behind developments in retention policies is the use of learning analytics and big data to identify at-risk students and set support interventions into motion. A recent survey estimated that about 40% of US universities have experimented with novel data analysis methods to follow the digital footprint of their students and detect, very early on, behavioural changes associated with potential academic difficulties (Ekowo and Palmer 2016). European universities could use smart applications of learning analytics to improve their interventions to improve the learning experience and achievements of underprivileged students.

No country or institution has found a magic answer to the question of how best to overcome the historic, cultural and psychological barriers faced by underserved groups. Nevertheless, the components of successful policy approaches outlined throughout the articles in this section provide a useful blueprint for developing new and innovative responses down the road and orienting much-needed further work in the critical area of equality of opportunities in access and success at the higher education level.

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