PUBLIC POLICIES IN SUPPORT OF BROADER ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Higher education is regarded as a core societal and economic value and is among the key prerogatives of each national state. Nowadays it is no more a privilege for selected groups with higher social and financial status and attracts people with diverse backgrounds looking for better employment options and self-realization. However, in many countries regardless of their level of development and welfare, there are visible gaps with reference to access and attainment of higher degree from students with disadvantageous background. The educational systems, based on equality show insufficiencies with regard to inclusion of all socio-economic groups. The current focus is shifting on equity as various policies for broader inclusion are adopted on global, regional and national levels. If they are properly designed and enacted, more students will stand a higher chance to contribute to their individual growth and to the society as a whole.
Keywords: *higher education, equity, inclusion, disadvantaged groups, public policy framework*

Introduction

The industrial and technological advancement in the recent decades transformed the educational systems worldwide and increased the value of higher education both for society and individuals. The rising demand for more skilled workforce and the growing personal aspirations for better and more secure future significantly influenced the public policies in the sector. The national policymakers were compelled to concentrate their efforts on improvement of the connection between the market and educational goals and to engage in coherent actions to leverage the present and upcoming societal and economic challenges.

For a long time, higher education was perceived as a privilege for a small group of people with higher socio-economic status. At present it is regarded more as a common value and all who wish to enrol should have equal chances for access and success. Renown global and national organizations have engaged in various activities to broaden the access to higher educational institutions for people that have diverse economic and social backgrounds as they seek options for more flexibility with reference to admission, tuition and participation.

The purpose of the present study is to review and summarize the existing global and European public policies in the area so as to combine them into a common framework that could serve as guidance for policymakers or researchers. Each public policy should be based on structured and evidence-based approach and such framework could be used by the engaged stakeholders to arrange their priorities with reference to the key elements of the process. The chosen methods are qualitative – desk, content and comparative analysis of official and academic materials, supplemented with secondary processing of existing statistical data.

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From Equality to Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education – Definitions and Key Drivers
Along with the mass expansion of higher education (HE) since the mid of 20th century (Kottmann et al., 2019) the issues of equity and equality has closely attracted the attention of policymakers, analysts, governmental official, practitioners and scholars (Espinoza, 2007). Although the purpose of the present study does not imply for an in-depth analysis of the topic, it is important to distinguish the two terms since they are often improperly used as synonyms. A principal, comprehensive definition is provided by Corson (as cited in Espinoza, 2007) who states that the 'equity' concept is commonly associated with fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits and it takes individual circumstances into consideration, while 'equality' usually connotes sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons.

Figure 1: Equality vs Equity
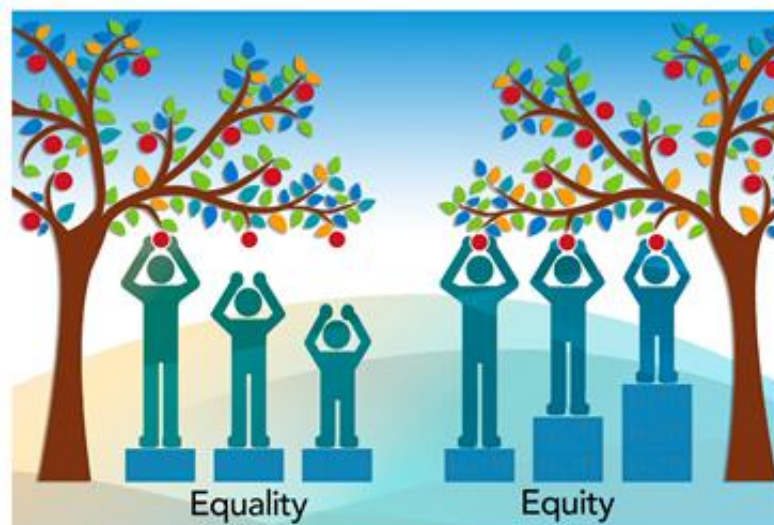

Source: Northwestern Health Unit, 2014

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) along with fairness adds a second dimension of equity in education – inclusion (Moen et al., 2011). It is defined as setting a basic minimum standard for education that is shared by all students regardless of background, personal characteristics, or location. The present widening participation policies (Kottmann, 2019) address a more diverse range of student background characteristics that include gender, socio-economic background and ethnic or migration backgrounds as students that have one or more of these characteristics are frequently identified as disadvantaged students. As awareness about different aspects of diversity has broadened, inclusion has come to mean embracing this diversity and working to make groups identified as 'diverse' an integrated part of the university community (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). The OECD considerations are embedded in a definition of equity that is adapted for the HE sector in particular (OECD, 2009), and will serve as a basis for the creation of a reference framework for creation and evolution of inclusion policies:
"*Equitable tertiary systems are those that ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study effort. They ensure that the achievement of educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including of factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability.*"
Amongst the various factors that urge the authorities and higher educational institutions (HEIs) to engage with policies for broader inclusion, two increasingly attract the attention of the stakeholders. The first one is connected with one of the most pressing demographic problems - the aging of the world's population. The group of those *aged 65 and over is growing faster than all other age groups as in* 2018, for the first time in history, persons aged 65 or above outnumbered

children under five years of age globally (United Nations, n.d.). This change inevitably impacts
the educational systems and HE in particular. For instance (OECD, 2009), in the Netherlands the
main source of demographic growth and the driver of future educational expansion is immigration.
The number of inhabitants of "non-Western" origin, principally from Northern Africa and the
Middle East, is 10% overall but exceeds 30% in the four largest cities - Amsterdam, Rotterdam,
the Hague and Utrecht. In these cities 51% of the population aged 0-14 are "non-Western". The
inclusion of currently underrepresented groups in the system provide opportunities for the HE
sector to successfully meet this challenge and thus to contribute to the economic growth of the
national and regional economies by supporting broad access, participation and lifelong learning.
The aging population requires more resources that should be provided by the active workforce.
The economic development and growth are highly interrelated with the educational sector - an
educated workforce attracts businesses (Lennon, 2018) and creates higher output. It is
acknowledged that HE degree usually results in increased levels of labour productivity (Figure 2)
and in lower levels of unemployment. For example, the statistics for the EU region (EUROSTAT,
2019a) shows that in 2019 the unemployed people with HE are 3,9 % while the percentage of those
with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education is three times higher - 12,5 %.

Figure 2: Tertiary level of educational attainment and labour productivity in 2014
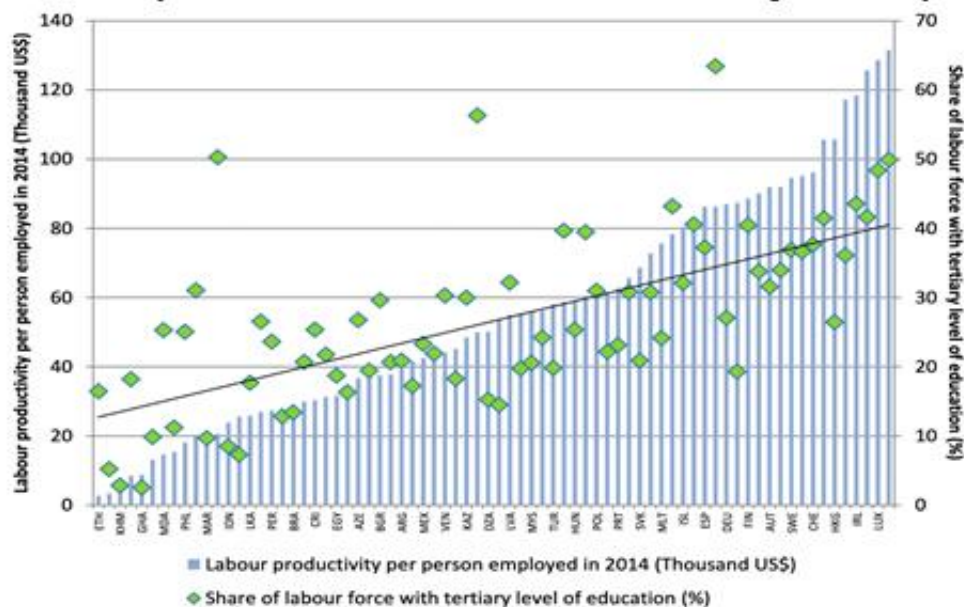
The concept of equity further upgrades those of equality (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019) by including
needs-based support to level out relative disadvantages and considers that there are often structural
barriers towards participation that sometimes are impossible to be removed. Since education is
regarded as a national state prerogative it depends on the local governments to adopt adequate
policies and strategies for broader inclusion, based on the principles of equity, and support the
HEIs to attract students with diverse background. Globalization at the same time requires common
standards as the educational mobility is constantly rising and the convergence of HE systems and
international recognition arrangements (OECD, 2009) become more important. For example, 1.7
million students from abroad were undertaking HE level studies across the EU in 2017 as more
than one third (37.8 %) were from Europe, 30.1 % were from Asia and 13.0 % were from Africa
(EUROSTAT, 2019b). The authorities should ensure that educational opportunities (OECD, 2008)
are not a function of factors such as socio-economic status, region of residence, religion, ethnicity,
disability or gender by designing, implementing and supporting programmes to promote access to
and successful completion of HE by groups identified as having a specific type of disadvantage.

Global and European Policies in support of Equity in HE

The implementation of public policies focused on increasing the access and success rates of disadvantaged students in HE requires a structured, evidence-based approach. The OECD definition of equity provides the policymakers with two major reference points: 1) the areas that require intervention - access, participation and outcomes, and 2) the social groups that should be targeted. Although each country has its specifics that influence the HE system, there are common problems that could be addressed with the support of the existing supranational and regional policies and practices.

Renown organizations like the OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission (EC) have a long-term commitment to develop and provide comprehensive guidance for the national policymakers with reference to promotion and support of equity in the HE sector though inclusion and connectedness. The content analysis of their relevant publications reveal common understanding of the problem and call upon enactment of policies by the two key stakeholders in the system – the local governments and HEIs.

In a UNESCO policy paper from 2017 are presented six ways that ensure HE leaves no one behind (UNESCO, 2017). They are systemized in two major thematic areas: governmental interventions and funding policies. It is indicated that a defining characteristic of most HE systems are the large disparities in access and completion, especially by income and wealth. To support this assertion data is gathered from 76 countries revealing that 20% of the richest 25–29 year-olds had completed at least four years of higher education, compared with less than 1% of the poorest.

The legislative frameworks and monitoring bodies are identified as key policy tools in the national efforts to expand and diversify HE offerings as the governments possess many policy mechanisms to foster equity in the system. The Organization provides four policy guidelines in this direction:

[1] Legislating for equal opportunity and against discrimination as a key governmental strategy to foster equity and affordability in HE systems. Although legal frameworks mention the cost and affordability of HE education less often, they can provide a useful tool for setting expectations about the balance between public investment and household spending.

[2] The establishment of monitoring and compliance authorities, commissions and agencies to support equity policies and ensure affordability in HE. In countries with strong equity frameworks quality assurance agencies also support monitoring of national equity policies, and thus create synergy between policy design and implementation.

[3] Providing more autonomy to HEIs with reference to admission requirements, especially those targeting disadvantaged groups, represent an important policy lever for increasing equity. Some countries with deeply rooted social inequities found it necessary to set policies which provide special access to underrepresented groups. Affirmative action policies, although controversial, may include numerical quotas for members of disadvantaged groups, or other preferential treatment, such as bonuses on admission scores, need-based scholarships or outreach programmes.

[4] Establishment of special universities designed for disadvantaged groups, such as women's universities in South Asia and universities for ethnic minorities. These special educational institutions could help to create an environment that is culturally more familiar to the underrepresented groups, who often control and manage them on their own.

The second major area of concern in the policy paper is related to the affordability and accessibility of HE with reference to the financial barriers for the disadvantaged groups. While the demand for HE is rising globally, the local governments experience difficulties to provide the needed funding and therefore shift some of the costs to the households (Figure 3) using two strategies to expand cost-sharing. The first is to increase tuition and fees, either for everyone or by establishing 'dual-track' enrolments at public universities, where some students pay fees while others are state subsidized. This allows the pubic HEIs to compensate for reduced direct government allocations with households covering part of the cost of their education. The second is encouraging the private

sector to provide degree programmes that broaden the options for student enrolment while allowing governments to focus their financial efforts on the public system.

Figure 3: Distribution of expenditure on education (excluding early childhood educational development) by sector, 2016
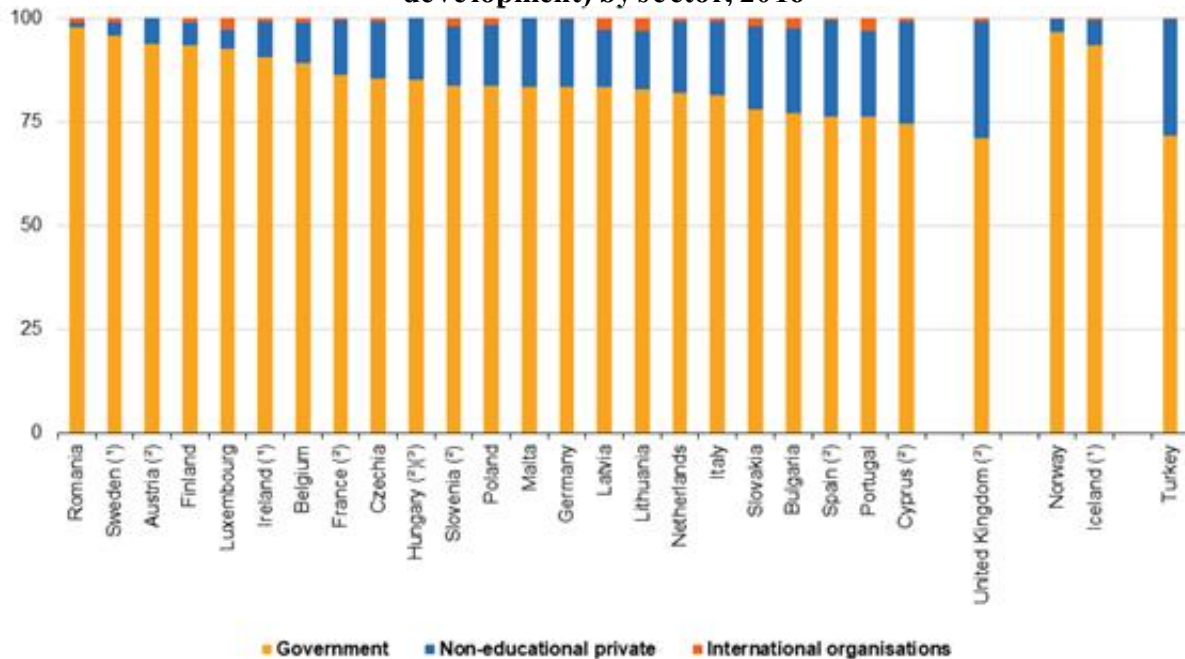
Source: EUROSTAT, 2019c

To overcome these barriers, UNESCO makes two recommendations:
- Free-for-all HE: the discussion of fee tuition is on the agenda for example in Germany and the United States but to be successful such policy should be combined with additional support for disadvantaged groups.
- Low tuition fees should be combined with financial aid programmes such as grants, loans and tax benefits. Low tuition fees, need-based scholarships and income contingent loans work together to fix the quality–affordability gap.

The World Bank Group (WBG) also declared its support for equity in HE as in a report from 2017 (IEG & World bank Group (2017). It reviews the topic with respect to trends and challenges in the sector development. The WBG points out that in both developed and developing countries HE sectors face persistent obstacles related to access, equity, and diversity. Nowadays, when HE is no more reserved territory for students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, there are still clear disparities in access mainly related to wealth status, gender and disabilities. On regional level - in East Europe and Central Asia, they are more successfully addressed but in many countries the problems still persist due to a lack of or impartial actions of the intuitional stakeholders.

Like UNECSO, the WBG points out that policy makers have at their disposal a wide range of policies to improve equity in the sector. They could be generally divided in four groups:
[1] financial assistance, including targeted scholarships and student loans;
[2] academic support, covering supplemental teaching and tutoring;
[3] personal support, including academic guidance and counselling;
[4] institutional support, comprising affirmative action, accommodation, and tracking.

The guidance and recommendations in support of increased equity in HE of the three renown organization consistently focus on enactment of public policies, based on comprehensive regulations, funding, information and organizational support for the disadvantaged students. They fully correspond with the vision of the EC, presented in a 2019 technical report dedicated to social inclusion policies in HE in the EU 28 Member States. The various existing policies in the region

are divided into four main categories of policy instruments that include 16 typical social inclusion policies:

[1] regulations, explicitly governing access and social inclusion (e.g. laws):
- Measures to widen participation in accreditation criteria;
- Change in admission rules for specific groups of students;
- Rules for the recognition of prior learning that provide alternative access routes to HE;

[2] funding incentives (for students and for HEIs):
- Financial support for students (and their parents) such as need-based grants, family allowances, tax-benefits for parents, student welfare benefits/support;
- Financial incentives to HEI to address widening participation related to increasing access as well as retention and completion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

[3] organisation related policies (e.g. relating to educational structures and organisational units);
- Organizational services to better prepare students from disadvantaged groups in terms of their academic competencies;
- Differentiation/Introduction of (new/shorter) study programmes;
- More flexible provision of education (distance education) that addressed non-traditional target groups of students, such as mature students in the labour market, students with family obligations, etc.

[4] information policies (to guide and inform (prospective) students).
- Information policies for students: special support for specific groups for study choice and special regulations and programmes for refugees;
- Information policies for HEIs and stakeholders: monitoring of students' access, progress and retention; dissemination of knowledge from research on barriers to access HE for disadvantaged students.

The EC recognizes inclusion and equity in HE as key contributors in resolving Europe's social and democratic challenges (European Commission, 2020). Despite the serious progress that has been made in area, there are still disparities to be addressed related to disadvantaged socio-economic and migrant backgrounds as well as gender segregation by field of study. To support the broader inclusion and cohesion in the sector, the Commission has engaged to monitor the challenges related to HE attainment in the Member States, as well as the progress made towards reaching attainment targets through the framework of the European Semester. It also initiated the EUROSTUDENT project, that documents the social and economic conditions of student life in Europe and supports regular surveys among more than 320, 000 students and self-assessments in 27 participating countries from the European Higher Education Area. In the Renewed EU agenda for HE, the Commission also committed to:

[1] Direct Erasmus+ support to help HEIs develop and implement integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, gender equality and study success from admission to graduation;
[2] promote the development and testing of flexible and modular programmes of study supporting access to higher learning through specific priorities for Erasmus+ strategic partnerships;
[3] support HEIs wishing to award European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points to students for voluntary and community activities based on existing positive examples;
[4] to support the recognition of qualifications held by refugees to facilitate their access to HE.

The EC states that evidence-based policies for enhancing inclusion in HE requires identification of the disadvantaged groups, measurement of progress in the achievement of the targets, monitoring of the intended and unintended effects of the inclusion policies and analysis of the

complexity of underlying factors. Greater investment is also needed in the training of HE staff to enhance and adapt learning and teaching practices so as to better respond to the needs of the disadvantaged groups.

The common elements of the reviewed global and regional policies in support of equity in HE are imbedded in a conceptual framework (Figure 4) that could be used by the local authorities and HEIs to address key areas of concern when designing their inclusion policies. The elements of the framework are interrelated and should be synchronized and adequately adapted so as to correspond to the local specifics of each national system and the diverse needs of the target groups. If the policy design process is properly structured and systematic, it could ensure better allocation of resources, while the subsequent monitoring and supervision of the policies would allow a better alignment of the initiatives with the constantly changing socio-economic environment.

Figure 4: HE inclusion policies framework
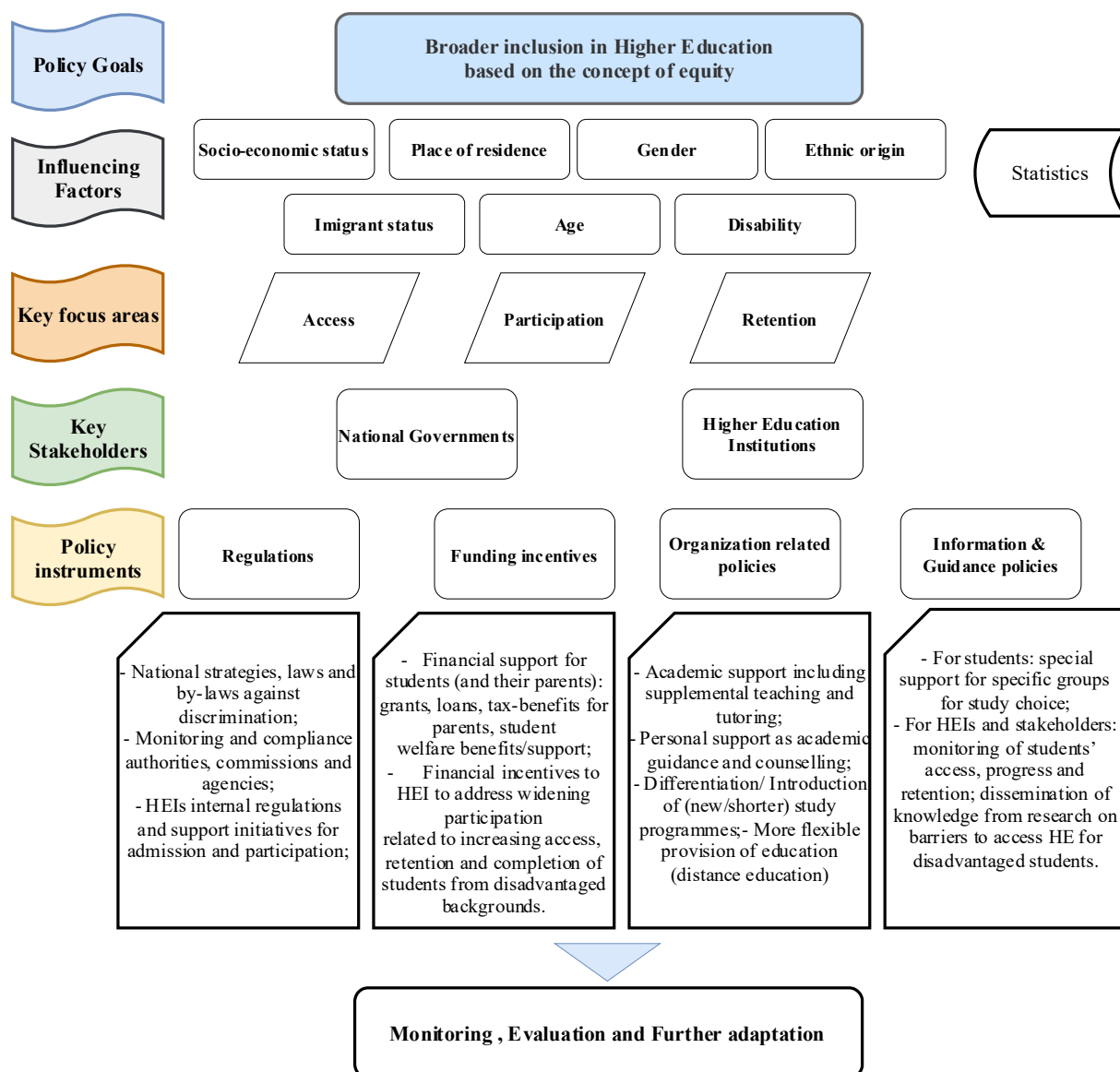
Source: adapted from Robinson et al.(2020), OECD (2009), UNESCO (2017), European Commission (2020), IEG & Worldbank Group (2017)

Each country that wish to develop or upgrade its HE inclusion policies with reference to disadvantaged groups could use the framework as a general guidance on policy design or as a

reference base to check whether its existing policies cover all the key elements. If such policies are intended to address a broader target group, for example in the EU region, they should be synchronized with the respective supranational recommendations so as to facilitate the mobility of the students.

Algorithm of the Framework Application

Models and frameworks are important output of analytical and research work but like public policies, if they are difficult to be implemented in practice all the efforts will remain good intentions. In the following paragraphs a brief presentation is made on how the framework works. For example, a work group is formed in the Ministry of education and Science or equivalent state institution in a EU Member State to check if its national legislation is up-to-date with the latest recommendations on equity and inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the system.

The first step is to look for any official national or regional (EU) statistics on the general and the selected target groups' enrolment rates in HE. The main questions that should be asked at this stage are:
- Is there a comprehensive definition of equity in education and HE in particular?
- Are the disadvantaged groups comprehensively defined?
- Is there any (official) national or regional statistics on the enrolment and success rates in HE of the disadvantaged groups to be compared with the overall enrolment and success rates in the sector?

The second step is to investigate if there are any national legal and regulatory instruments designed to govern and support broader inclusion in the HE sector. The research should be focused on both governmental and HEIs' levels, since universities have certain degree of autonomy and could apply in-house policies consistent with their development strategies. The key questions here are the following:
- Are there any existing public policies or national strategies that regulate and support broader inclusion in the sector with reference to access, participation and retention of disadvantaged students?
- Are they enacted on national or local level and by which institutions?
- Are there institutional organizations engaged with their implementation, monitoring and evaluation?
- Since public policies are complex mechanisms, what is their main focus – on regulation, funding, organization, information and guidance?
- How they could be supplemented/upgraded with regard to current global/regional recommendation on the issue?

Each of the four key policy instruments may include diverse measures. Their expected benefits and negatives should be carefully analysed with reference to the national specifics of each HE system. For example, the UK universities spend £250 million each year on activities to widen access for underrepresented student groups. Although the evidence base for access interventions shows positive results in some areas, there is lack of evidence which interventions are the most effective, and which produce material results (Robinson, 2020). The proper monitoring is even more important when the governments and HEIs face serious problems to fund their core activities. The need to attract more diverse groups of students is more and more pressing, but the chosen methods should be both effective and efficient.

It is important to note that the policies designed to support access to HE should include activities devised for the students while in their upper secondary level of education as its successful completion is an obligatory perquisite for the attainment of a higher degree. This could be done by various initiatives that are mainly focused on distribution of properly structured and easy to access

information. It could include (Osborne, 2003) messages related to general benefits of HE, information on available flexible programmes and financial support, options for individual counselling and guidance, etc. Some HEIs maintain close links with schools of certain profile, organize summer schools and preparatory camps that are open for all who wish to enrol. A research (Robinson et al, 2020) of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) in UK revealed that provision of generally targeted information may not be enough since students from disadvantaged groups need more personalized support to help them to make decisions about their education. The underrepresented students tend to turn to informal sources of information, advice and guidance as they have less access to formal sources and prefer first-hand information. The most successful informational interventions for underrepresented groups appear to be those that are: 1) tailored to the students' needs, 2) start early and 3) are integrated into other forms of support, such as career advice and guidance.

The public policies for broader access and attainment of HE should also address people that are already part of the workforce but do not possess a higher educational degree. As Sibbald and and Troy (2007) comment, life-long education should be part of the fundamental policy and underlying concept to be used for the educational policies of both developed and developing countries since it contributed to economic development and equality of opportunity in society. For example, in 2018 in the 28 EU Member States only 6,4 % of the population aged 30-39 is enrolled in HE for comparison to 41,9 % of those aged 20 (EUROSTAT, 2018). This disproportion reveals a significant potential for broadening the HE systems by attracting people, who are part of the active workforce. Many HEIs have already engaged in the provision of more flexible programs, distance learning, vocational training qualification acknowledgement, customized tuition schemes, etc. The institutional interventions are considerably more pro-active now than in earlier periods of university expansion when policy levers largely took the form of supplying more of the same type of provision (Osborne, 2003) and not on more individualized approach. However adult education policies are still disjointed and incoherent due to weak relationships between formal policymaking and practice (Osborne et al.,2015).The solution is to diversify regulations and policies, and cultivate structural and functional diversity to respond more effectively to the need of the potential students.

Conclusion
The implementation of inclusive policies in HE, based on the principles of equity, has become an integral part of the policymaking process on both global and national levels and attracts the attention of state governments and HE institutions. Diverse public policies and strategies promote measures that could be implemented to support the access and attainment of higher degree for disadvantaged groups. They should be properly structured and monitored with reference to success rates and should constantly evolve to address the needs of the target groups and the society as a whole. The presented reference framework could serve as a guide for the engaged stakeholders and support more effective and efficient approach to the issue by attracting the attention to the most significant areas of concern. The broader inclusion in HE is rather important for the social and economic development of each nation and region and should be open for all who wish to enrol. The customised support mechanisms throughout the entire process should result in more educated and skilled workforce that would significantly contribute to the economic growth of the states and to the better self-realization of the individual members of the society.

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