World Access to Higher Education Day

Perspectives on the challenges to access and equity in Higher Education across the world in the context of COVID

**A National Education Opportunities Network (UK)
World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) publication**

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National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) is a UK based organisation that supports equitable access and success in higher education in the United Kingdom, but also globally via its role as convenor of the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED). NEON was founded in 2012 and is a membership organisation with over 150 organisations as members in the UK including over 100 higher education institutions. NEON delivers training and professional development work working with over 1000 professionals per year alongside undertaking research and advocacy.

To find out more about NEON go to: **https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/.**

World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED)

In 2018 NEON convened the first World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) which a platform to raise global awareness around inequalities in access and success in higher education (HE), and act as a catalyst for international, regional and local action. To date WAHED has engaged over 200 organisations from over 50 countries.

To learn more about WAHED please go to: **https://worldaccesshe.com/about/.**

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Introduction

Higher education across the world has experienced unprecedented challenges to what it does and how it does it over the past year and a half. However, while many students will emerge different, damaged or wiser some may be lost to higher education forever. The millions of students for whom entering higher education was always a major challenge given their economic circumstances are those for whom the pandemic has had the greatest impact. Lost learning time at the pre-HE level, rapid shifts to online learning and the wider economic impact of the pandemic on low income groups combine to both to threaten the dreams of those wishing to progress to HE and those endeavouring to reach their potential against the odds. As we try across the world tentatively to emerge and live with the pandemic it is vital that equitable access and success in higher education are a central and not peripheral concern of institutions and policymakers.

This collection of articles is drawn from the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) 24 event on November 17th 2020. WAHED 24 consisted of 6 different online conferences running consecutively over the third World Access to Higher Education Day, each led by a partner in a different continent. There were over 800 participants in WAHED 24 from across the world and over 20 speakers. World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) is the platform to raise global awareness around inequalities in access and success in higher education (HE), and act as a catalyst for international, regional and local action.

The 17 contributors featured in this publication were all speakers at WAHED 24 and include university leaders, national policymakers, leaders of global education bodies and those working on initiatives to make access/success in higher education more equitable.

The contributions are divided into 4 sections. The first section includes articles form Roberta Malee Bassett, Head of Tertiary Education at the World Bank, Jamal Salmi ex Head of Tertiary Education at the World Bank and now a leading global higher education consultant and Joanna Newman, Chief Executive and Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). It brings together different perspectives on the global impact of the pandemic on higher education equity across countries setting the scene for the articles that follow.

Section 2 examines the how policymakers have responded to the pandemic where equitable access/success in HE is concerned. It transcends Europe, South America, Asia and Australasia and also points to the importance of policymakers retaining their faith in strategies to promote equitable access/success. There is a contrasting picture painted here. While in Austria the government is holding firm in pursuing its impressive national strategy on equity in access and participation over in Australia the need to react to the pandemic has potentially constrained the impact of existing policies in this area.

The third section focuses specifically on what the move to online learning means for equitable access/success in higher education. The introduction of greater digital and virtual elements to the delivery of higher education has been ubiquitous since the pandemic began. These three articles from Australia, Africa and the West Indies suggest that the impact of the digital divide on preventing learners from minority or disadvantaged majority populations accessing higher education is not a transitory one. Universities will continue to integrate digital delivery into their pedagogy and equitable access/success strategies post-pandemic will need to address digital inclusion.

The final section brings together 7 articles from 5 countries looking at what how universities and other have adapted their work to try and maintain, or improve, pathways into and through HE for learners from minority or disadvantaged majority populations. This section illustrates how if we are to really commit to making higher education more accessible, then strategies that both work at the institutional level and across the different aspects of the student experience will be required. Articles from Julian Ledesma from University of California, Berkeley and Marcelo Knobel, University of Campinas (Unicamp), in Brazil look at how universities are working to maintain support for students from diverse backgrounds. In contrast the section also includes articles from Romyen Kosaikanont of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development looking at how the pandemic may have opened up opportunities for innovation in international higher education which may lead to greater inclusivity and from Cathy McLoughlin at Dublin City University on the importance of continuing to offer support enabling students from equity priority groups to gain work experience.

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Global perspectives

1. The Post-Covid Future from an Equity Perspective

2. Understanding Global and Local Equity Divides in Post-COVID Higher Education

It is not the first time that the world faces a major crisis. Wars, natural catastrophes, social unrest, and financial downturns are alas too frequent. But never had the strength of colleges and universities been tested as thoroughly as during the current pandemic. The health crisis has revealed that the digital gap and economic inequalities were not theoretical notions of little consequence for higher education, but painful realities that directly influenced the capacity of colleges and universities to cope with the Covid-19 crisis and offer a high-quality online education experience for all their students.

Equitable access to the full benefits of higher education, instead of being a challenge steadily being resolved, is mired now in a time of enormous barriers and obstacles brought on by the massive shocks to operations, enrolments, financing, and delivery since the pandemic shifts of early 2020. As the compounded challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect the tertiary education systems of the world, questions about whether equity should remain a priority for the sector have been asked with increasing frequency. Immediate considerations of delivery continuity (largely via technology), institutional and systems financing, community health, campus safety and security were more pressing, perhaps, in sustaining the sector through earliest stages of the crisis (which shows no sign of abating in much of the low- and middle-income world). Likewise, arguments abound that technology is an equity driver in higher education—allowing more students to access programs from anywhere, as COVID forced such wholesale change in 2020. But, as resilience activities embed many adaptation changes into standard operations, it is imperative to ask who is losing or missing from these future-forward adaptations.

The adverse equity impact of the pandemic has been tremendous. While the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have affected both rich and poor countries, the impact on students from vulnerable groups has been greater than for the average student population. In low-income countries, students from under-represented groups (low-income students, girls, members of minority groups, students living in remote areas, and special needs students) have been hit especially hard, suffering economic hardship, encountering connection difficulties, and living in emotional distress.

Opportunities for online learning have been drastically constrained in regions with limited Internet deployment and low broadband capacity, particularly in the rural areas. In addition to the digital gap challenges, colleges and universities in low-income nations have struggled to put in place quality distance education programs for lack of experienced academics, adequate educational resources, and strong institutional capacity. It is safe to assume that the many students who have faced difficulties all over the world, either for lack of a device or because of inadequate internet access or insufficient training for online education, will have had an incomplete learning experience and suffered considerable learning losses during the 2019-20 academic year.

The crisis has revealed structural weaknesses in the existing financing models of many higher education systems and institutions. In countries with substantial cost-sharing, universities will be facing diminished resource envelopes. For private higher education institutions that are fully dependent on tuition fees and/or on international students, financial survival will be seriously tested during the deep recession that many economists predict. Large numbers of students with limited resources could drop out of higher education altogether, or at least shift to more affordable public institutions. In the many developing nations that have traditionally allocated insufficient public funding for higher education, usually less than 0.5% of GDP, the consequences could be dire. Reduced public budgets and limited room for increased private funding could translate into many students opting out of higher education.

Students graduating in 2020 and 2021 will likely face difficult prospects in the medium- and long-term. Many will not find a job easily, and those who are lucky enough to find a job will most likely be penalized by receiving incomes below those earned by graduates of the previous years. In developing countries where graduate unemployment was already chronically high before the pandemic, the situation will only get worse.

Moving forward, it will be important to reimagine the university. A growing number of stakeholders have questioned what they see as an outdated, expensive, and elitist higher education model relying excessively on standardized tests for admission, traditional lectures for knowledge acquisition, a rigid structure of semesters and years of study for everyone, and high-stake exams for graduation. Hopefully, the pandemic will accelerate the adoption of flexible pathways and innovative curricular, pedagogical and assessment approaches that are student-centered and take advantage, whenever appropriate, of advanced technologies that can make learning more stimulating, engaging, and effective. To paraphrase the title of a remarkable book on educational innovation, one of the most positive consequences of the COVID-19 crisis could be to reinvent the teaching and learning process as a lifelong education trajectory that has the primary purpose of "sparking curiosity, igniting passion, and unleashing genius".[1]

Furthermore, after the pandemic exposed the extent of the digital divide and the socio-economic inequalities that perpetuate glaring gaps among nations, higher education institutions and the students themselves, it is essential to implement measures, at the national and institutional levels, that focus on achieving fairness in higher learning for students from low-income families, female students, and students from racial and ethnic minorities. These students and their families have suffered most from the health and economic crisis brought about by the pandemic. Higher education stakeholders all over the world must apply solutions that create opportunities for all and empower, as a matter of priority, the very people who have faced formidable obstacles as they embrace the promise of higher learning to achieve economic success and social mobility.

Jamil Salmi[2], Global Tertiary Education Expert'

The humanity of higher education—the people most affected by the enterprise of higher education—include a variety of stakeholders, including future, current, and former students; families; academic and administrative staff; employers; policymakers. Supporting equality of opportunity for individuals to access the direct benefits of obtaining tertiary education is economically and socially efficient, considering the documented evidence on the public and private benefits of attaining a college degree. Individual, private benefits include improved health outcomes, increased earning potential and even greater life satisfaction and expectancy, while the public, societal benefits include lower unemployment rates, increased tax revenues, greater civic and volunteer participation and lessened dependency on social services. Furthermore, expanded access to tertiary education among members of disadvantaged communities extends these public benefits into communities most in need of supportive interventions.

Perhaps the most visible innovation in the global COVID response in higher education was the adaptation of delivery via technology at the individual institutional level—from the wealthiest research universities to the local community and technical colleges, every institution had to develop a strategy for learning continuity and most chose online options where possible. In many instances, this was merely teaching via remote platforms. In others, it was adoption of wholesale courseware from global providers. Whatever the technological intervention, it was obvious from the earliest days that these changes would have enormous equity implications—at the campus and national levels and at the global level.

While many trumpeted the equity benefits of technology in higher education delivery, in practice, the digital divide will plague societies rich and poor for a generation of students. Policymakers and education leader must acknowledge this up front and continue to evolve policy interventions to minimise the impact of those most at-risk.

In terms of global equity, societies with robust infrastructure (ICT and energy, in particular, but also housing security and social safety nets) were more quickly and comprehensively able to pivot to online and remote learning. The learning loss in terms of time and content will have been minimised as much as possible. On the other hand, countries with low internet penetration, unstable electricity, expensive ICT and mobile networks, and housing instability or crowding have experienced larger break in learning, if any continued delivery was possible at all.

While one generation of students will have faced challenges, other will have faced an insurmountable break in learning and an expanded gap in skills development. Wealthy countries will recover faster, and their students will have minimised learning loss. The gap between those countries and low-income countries will grow, and international equity in terms of economic and social development will become even greater problems.

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1 Martin, K. (2018) Learner-Centered Innovation: Spark Curiosity, Ignite Passion, and Unleash Genius. London: IMPress, LP
2 Global Tertiary Education Expert www.tertiaryeducation.org

3. Bridging divides for a fairer future

Higher education's response to COVID-19 has been a tale of two halves: of challenges and opportunity, of solidarity and divides, and where rapid technological progress on one hand has been counterbalanced by the struggle for basic internet access on the other.

In terms of campus and national equity, what is being seen at the macro, global level is happening at a micro, individual level. Wealthy universities could pivot quickly to remote delivery, training teachers, investing in hard- and soft-ware, enrolling students virtually and teaching over a wide array of platforms. Poorer institutions had to be more frugal in terms of investments, given limited resources, and their students tend to come from homes and communities facing the same arrange of challenges low-income countries face—instability in terms of access to effective, reliable infrastructure, unaffordable technology hardware, living conditions not conducive to effective learning.

Wealthy institutions and individuals will have minimised the disruption on learning and expected timelines toward completion; poorer institutions and individuals will have had to make incredibly difficult compromises and decisions on spending scare time and resources on continuing their work in untenable environments. The equity gap is growing due to COVID at these macro and micro levels, and policies and interventions must acknowledge these gaps and create frameworks that address them head on—for societies, institutions, and all students, but particularly those most in need of support.

'The future' of higher education has long been defined by emerging technologies, though during COVID the future is now. There is no question, however, that education as the particularly human endeavour it is requires a direct focus on the human experience, even in the face of technological wonders and woes. Supporting and promoting the 'humanity' of higher education and its potential to sustainably develop societies and economies will remain the key challenge for higher education stakeholders especially in the face of the technological reforms wrought by COVID-19. Access and success in higher education requires investment in the human experience, teaching pedagogies, and learning science.

Technology must be seen as a powerful and complementary tool to the relationships upon which a lifetime of learning can be built. Ensuring students are at the heart of the long-term resilience response of higher education with allow for technology to be used to support their education experience but not remove them from the social support and networks that lead to transformative education.

Roberta Malee Bassett, Global Lead for Tertiary Education and Senior Education Specialist, PhD, World Bank, United States

University research led the charge against COVID-19, shaping public policy and yielding life-saving solutions. We saw high-profile collaborations with industry and government, and universities turning out to support their local communities. In their teaching and learning too, universities showed remarkable agility in migrating their activities online, radically reimagining their operations and embracing new ways of working.

But these successes were tempered by some sobering truths. The pandemic has stress-tested our societies and highlighted the cracks – and perhaps none more starkly than the perennial gulf between the haves and the have-nots. In higher education, the rapid shift to online teaching laid bare the gaping digital divide – not only between high and low income countries but within countries and institutions themselves. For existing students, access to learning became rapidly reliant on their capacity to access the internet – not just a fast, stable connection, but also the devices, data costs, and infrastructure that enable online learning to happen. What for some may have felt like a seamless transition was for others a daily challenge.

Of course, access to higher education has never been a fair game. While the focus during the pandemic has been on those whose university experience has been turned upside down, we cannot overlook the millions who were already missing out, long before COVID-19 struck. As a Commonwealth organisation, we are only too aware of the structural and systemic inequalities that shape the distribution of opportunities, choices and resources – and of history's role in creating and fuelling these disparities.

The challenge for universities now is to use the considerable innovation and creativity they have shown during this pandemic to build a fairer future for higher education that leaves no one behind: how can we use the acceleration in online learning to open-up universities to all those who would benefit? How can we build on virtual student mobility programmes to engage a greater number of students and build a stronger international community? And how can we translate what we've learned from the pandemic response into redoubled efforts to tackle inequality in our institutions and beyond?
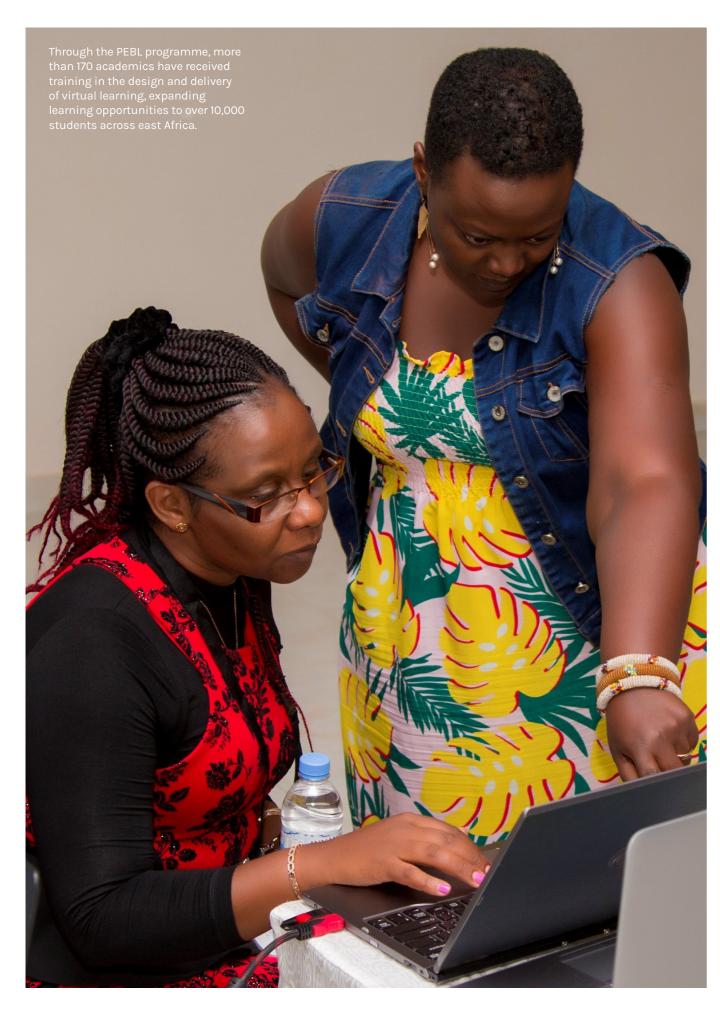
These are questions that no institution or country can answer alone. Just as collaboration was a cornerstone of efforts to tackle the virus, so universities need to collaborate across borders to find solutions to improving access and equity. In this, international networks like the ACU offer transformative experiences and a powerful forum for the exchange of resources, experience, and expertise.

One example is the ACU-led Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL), which combined international collaboration with local delivery to dramatically scale-up access to quality learning in east Africa. The project was launched in response to challenges in accessing higher education in the region, where a shortage of resources and soaring student numbers left universities struggling to meet demand. PEBL worked with universities across east Africa to support their capacity to deliver blended learning – a student-centred approach which combines face-to-face teaching with online learning. Through PEBL, universities were able to share teaching resources and pool expertise to deliver quality assured, credit-bearing degree courses at scale, reaching more than 10,000 students to date. The project is sustainable too: over 170 academics have been trained in the design and delivery of blended learning, including the skills needed to adapt courses into effective online resources.

This same juxtaposition of challenge and opportunity can be seen in the development of virtual alternatives to international and intercultural exchange. While at first it seemed that national lockdowns and closed borders would only narrow these opportunities, our experience suggests that virtual international experiences can be an effective and valuable complement to traditional 'physical' exchange. This is important because virtual experiences have the capacity to engage many more students than could ever benefit from traditional travel-based opportunities, giving more individuals the chance to develop valuable intercultural skills and understanding, and to build international links.

These examples remind us that there is a window of opportunity here and now: to diversify learning experiences, to expand learning opportunities, and to enable many more people to surmount the traditional barriers of geography, wealth and circumstance that still dictate who gets to learn and who gets to teach. But for this to happen, digital equity must become a priority for the sector and for society. The pandemic has shown that internet access isn't a luxury but a necessity – not just for access to learning but to enable graduates to thrive in a world of work increasingly reliant on digital technologies. If we are to prevent unequal access to the internet from further entrenching existing inequalities in education, then we cannot and must not wait for another crisis to force our hand.

Dr Joanna Newman, Chief Executive and Secretary General, Association of Commonwealth Universities

Through the PEBL programme, more than 170 academics have received training in the design and delivery of virtual learning, expanding learning opportunities to over 10,000 students across east Africa.

Policy and equitable access/success – challenges and responses

4. Australian access and equity in the COVID era

Mirroring the global experience, COVID-19 impacted every aspect of Australian society, disrupting how citizens live, work and learn. Educational disadvantage for many learners, including those in higher education (HE), both broadened and deepened. Structural inequalities were underscored and inequities across the student lifecycle exacerbated. At the pre-uni stage, outreach activities, that rely on relationship building to widen participation particularly for Indigenous, rural and regional students, were forced online. Secondary schooling was disrupted, impacting student preparedness for first year study. Displaced workers became mature aged students needing personalised support for learning success. Students in their first year struggled with online academic and social belonging, which especially impacted those needing to connect quickly with supportive communities and allies. Graduates transitioning out faced employment and employability challenges. Equity students confronted intersecting issues of digital poverty, mental wellbeing, complicated life circumstances and financial precarity. Staff mental wellbeing also emerged as a significant issue.

An Australian strategic vision for student equity set out in 2019 that our "future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning" (Zacharias and Brett, p. 7). When COVID hit, almost 50% of students in Australian HE belonged to at least one of the six designated equity groups (Brett, 2018).[3] But despite this, in 2021 access and equity gains in Australian HE are as vulnerable as ever, having already been set back by the cessation of the demand driven system in 2018. Urgent ecosystemic reform of post-secondary education is languishing, despite a raft of reports urging its transformation, while calls for funding and policy coherence via intergovernmental cooperation have been largely ignored (Kift 2021).

In October 2020, the Australian government passed the *Job-ready Graduates Package* (JRGP), which reduced university funding to a record low of 23.5% of the total education spend across all sectors, almost half what it was in 1996 (Megalogenis 2021). The JRGP cuts combined with border closures and falling international student enrolments to challenge university finances. International education revenue will continue to decline if borders remain closed, potentially costing "Australia about A$20 billion a year [in 2022], half its pre-pandemic value" (Hurley 2021, para. 1). The result has been rolling course cuts and job losses. In February 2021, Universities Australia said that at least 17,300 HE jobs were lost in 2020 (Universities Australia 2021).

Precarious university finances have impacted HE student equity. A recent survey conducted by the Equity Practitioners in HE Australasia identified the following trends (Austin, Kift and Zacharias 2021):

- Reduction in dedicated equity teams, which are being subsumed into other units (eg, student recruitment, student support);
- Substantial loss of equity-focused staff, in some instances of over 50%;
- A sense that, while equity still features in strategic plans, it is not being enacted;
- Absence of an executive equity champion.

JRGP will likely have other dampening effects on access and equity. It includes measures that increase fees for non-STEM related courses, ignores students with disability and problematises failure. From 2021, students who fail 50% of first-year subjects will no longer be eligible for Government subsidised places or student loans in their course of study. The JRGP implications for funding equity work are also still to be worked through. From 2021, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, that has existed since 2010 to increase access and equity, has been amalgamated with other equity funding to form a new 'Indigenous Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund'. Enabling funding, that supports open access, free HE academic preparation, is again under threat.

There have been some equity gains over COVID. Coordinated, whole-of-university attention to assuring the quality and accessibility of online learning, teaching and 24/7 support has increased substantive flexibility for all students. Significant policy relaxations and accommodations were made to take equitable account of students' complicated life circumstances. And there has been increased mainstream regard to important equity-based research to enable inclusive practice and universal design for learning and assessment. In some instances, the outcomes gap between equity and other students narrowed over 2020 (Lloyd, Sealey and Logan 2021).

But new threats are evident. At a time when lifelong learning must become a practical reality for all to respond to the double disruption of Industry 4.0 trends accelerated by COVID-19, the unmediated embrace of micro-credentials as pathways to employability must be challenged. How do we support *all* students, and particularly equity and first-in-family students, to navigate the dizzying array of short courses on offer in the absence of a coherent, overarching lifelong learning narrative? Issues here include: availability of quality careers advising; unhelpful fragmentation of education; an inability to assure micro-learning in ways recognisable by employers; and the untested promise of stackability, which may actually lead to incoherent qualifications (Austin, Kift and Zacharias 2021).

As we move into the next phase of COVID recovery, Australian HE equity's hard-won gains are looking quite precarious in 2021.

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3   The six Australian equity groups, identified on the basis of their under-representation in HE, are: students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (LSES); students with disability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; non-English speaking backgrounds students; students from regional and remote areas; and women studying in non-traditional areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 1990).

5. The social dimension of higher education in Austria before and throughout Covid-19

Austria's HEIs went into distance mode due to the first lockdown at the beginning of summer term 2020. This required rapid legal adaptations for admission and selection procedures, online assessment and examinations, and ad hoc measures to avoid hardships for students. Summer term 2020 was declared as a "neutral" semester for recipients of student support (but also with regard to child benefit, etc.), and the regulations for Erasmus+ students were adapted. In addition to that, psychological student counselling services were expanded and the emergency fund of the Austrian Students' Union was increased.

The "controlled re-opening" of HEIs (strict Covid-19 safety regulations) started in April 2020 to enable teaching activities that could not be held online (laboratories, practical courses, art and music courses etc.). Nevertheless, HEIs continued their online provision of teaching and student support services until winter term 2020.

In general, the Covid-19-pandemic caused a 'digital leap', as Universities Austria president, Sabine Seidler, called it end of March 2020. However, digitalization had already been on the agenda of Austrian HE policy makers prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, e.g. in January 2020, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) launched a 50 million € call for 'digital and social transformation' for universities.

The BMBWF commissioned two (small) student surveys on the Covid-19 effects in April 2020 and February 2021. The results showed that the great majority of students were satisfied with their HEI's distance teaching offers, but it also became evident that students' motivation and well-being had decreased notably within the first year of the pandemic. The overall effects of Covid-19 on the social dimension of higher education are, however, more complex. Taking a closer look at the 'National Strategy on the social dimension of higher education', published early 2017, it becomes obvious that the HE community is working towards equal access and participation strategically. We have to assume, however, that some of the ad hoc measures for students that were introduced under pressure when the crisis hit, might not fully take the diversity of students into account.

The Austrian National Strategy is based on a one-year participative process with HE stakeholders, and formulates three target dimensions. The first two target dimensions cover measures throughout the student lifecycle ("More inclusive access" and "Avoid dropout and improve academic success") and identify HEIs as being responsible for implementation. The third target dimension focuses on the improvement of the higher education policy framework ("Create basic parameters and optimise the regulation of HE policy"), and the BMBWF is in charge of its implementation. This strategy also contains nine quantitative goals, and an implementation plan.

Steps towards a successful implementation and milestones since 2017:
- **Student support system** was reformed (improvements for older students and increase of the overall funding amount)
- Social dimension was included into the **performance agreements** with public universities (i.e. funding contracts) for the periods 2019-2021 and 2022-2024: the Federal Ministry can retain 0.5% of the global budget of each university in case of non-implementation of strategic SD measures
- Two **networking conferences** and a webinar with the higher education SD community; topics included e.g. "student engagement", "transition from school to higher education"

The implementation process was disrupted forcefully by the Covid-19 pandemic that seemed to overshadow and hamper measures in the field of equal access and participation in all fields of HE. Building upon the emergency responses mentioned above, Austria has constantly been working on more sustainable measures as well as further surveys to gain evidence on the Covid-19 impact on the social dimension:

- **July 2021 -** Results of a secondary analysis of available surveys/data from Austrian HEIs on "Lessons Learned" from the pandemic for teaching & learning.
- **December 2021 -** Results of the mid-term evaluation of the National Strategy, including:
  - updated survey on SD measures at HEIs
  - update of indicators for quantitative goals: some are improving, some are stagnating or worsening (presumed Covid-19 effect)
  - results on impacts of Covid-19 crisis on vulnerable groups
- **2022-2023:** survey among upper-secondary students in graduation year; Student Social Survey 2023 (especially in comparison with results from the Student Social Survey 2019) will contribute to the further development of measures.

Austria has laid foundations for the promotion of the SD long before the Covid-19 pandemic started. However, it is these foundations that could be relied on throughout the pandemic (as seen in the field of "emergency measures" for HE), and that will ensure future developments – e.g. in the fields of on-boarding new entrants, developing new teaching methods (media didactics etc.) – contribute towards equal access and participation, rather than hinder them.

Elmar Pichl, Director General of Higher Education, Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research

6. Why higher education must be in the international education agenda

The absence of higher education from the debates around the international education agenda may hide the relative importance that the sector has for international development aid and no longer reflect developing countries' policy priorities.

Over the past decades, a consensus about prioritizing universal basic education and increasingly preschool education has developed. Such a consensus emerges from the international community's commitment to enforcing the right to education and draws on the evidence of the rate-of-return of universal basic education. This primary emphasis has situated higher education in the margins of the international policy debates about development.

However, data shows that higher education is the education subsector that benefits the most from international aid, well beyond basic and secondary education: in 2017 one third of all official development aid for education went to post-secondary education. This fact may look surprising at first glance, given that the international debates focus mostly on basic education and, yet, it is an indication of several facts converging.

On the one hand, in developing countries, the proportion of each cohort that gets access to higher education yearly ranges from 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa to 52% in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to UNESCO data on target 4.3 of SDG 4 for 2018. These figures may look still low, but in Martin Trow's seminal classification, they indicate the transition from elite to mass higher education -with 50% gross enrollment taken to indicate a country's entering the so-called *universal* higher education stage (Trow, 2007) -indeed actual universal access to higher education may be seen as a dimension of the right to education and lifelong learning opportunities, UNESCO Institute for Higher Education claims. On the other hand, recent evidence (McMahon, 2018) suggests that the return of the investment in higher education is not only relatively high for the individual but also for society and the economy at large with some researchers claiming that private and public returns are equivalent in size. Public investment in higher education creates well-documented externalities that, among other things, contribute to socio-economic development through health and civic outcomes, not to mention the direct effect on the labor market and the resulting prone environment for more knowledge-oriented economies.

However, these economic analyses do not show the complete picture. No other education subsector has more potential than higher education to contribute to each Sustainable Development Goal, mainly through the combined three missions that universities pursue: teaching, research, and the contribution to social and economic development. On top of this, developing countries need to enlarge their professional and scientific capacities, both in the public and private sectors, to generate and manage their avenues to socio-economic development; again, no other subsector is better positioned to do this than higher education.

Even more during the pandemic, countries are being reminded of their public responsibility towards higher education. As urged in a recent appeal to African ministers of higher education by the secretary general of the Association of African Universities, governments have the duty to strengthen their higher education institutions "by making them future-ready and able to survive and thrive in a world of uncertainty". Nevertheless, the diminished presence that higher education has in the international debates about education development is, first and foremost, a severe constraint to its further development. First, it prevents the international community from factoring in higher education as a lever for development, with significant effects, through training and research, on health and education -the two cornerstones of development. Second, it reduces the opportunities for multilateral cooperation, particularly South-South, and the creation of regional networks that can promote peer-learning and collaboration. Finally, instead of getting a transparent conversation about the dynamics of North-South cooperation in higher education, and the industry of international education that frequently is behind it, it prevents multilateralism from nurturing the debates and promoting disruptive concepts as open science or open knowledge. Moreover, it reduces the opportunities for creating cooperative efforts to address the most pressing challenges that higher education faces in developing countries through peer learning and joint capacity development.

Indeed, there is an urgent need to sustain countries' reform efforts to address their most pressing challenges. Two of them are the two sides of the same coin: quality and equity. The expansion of the higher education provision, with many States failing to provide an adequately matching offer, has resulted in the proliferation of low-cost, low-quality private institutions. The many avenues that could lead to better quality assurance and regulatory arrangements depend on capacity development efforts, mainly focusing on public governance of higher education. The relatively high gross enrollment figures in higher education mask profound inequities that persist even when countries become middle-income, with striking differences across socio-economic strata, gender, ethnic origin, and location.

The pandemic has brought to the forefront two more challenges that were already there. One is innovation in teaching and learning. The growing importance of connectivity cannot be underestimated: on the one hand, it is an opportunity for many institutions to leapfrog in teaching methods through technology-supported educational innovations; and the other hand, it can reinforce regional virtual cooperation. However, technology adoption and wider connectivity just create an enabling environment that can only become fertile if capacity development efforts are successful. A second challenge is internationalization, where the pandemic has given rise to <u>virtual formats of student mobility</u>. These new formats could open the way to a radical reconsideration of mobility, where the current emphasis on quality assurance and mutual recognition, reflected in several <u>global and regional conventions</u> promoted by UNESCO, could be supplemented with an equity dimension. For example, a more sustainable and rational approach to mobility can expand its benefits beyond the elites, and regional efforts could rebalance the direction of travels, contributing to the consolidation of regional knowledge and research spaces, as a recent UNESCO Institute for Higher Education <u>report</u> revealed.

The pandemic will have for sure a negative impact on international aid for education development, and the resulting context may make it even more difficult now than before to rethink whether higher education should be a priority in the debates and the resulting strategies -at least, at first glance. A more thoughtful approach, yet, would consider what the effects of not embedding higher education in the international development agenda could potentially be, not only for economic recovery and development but also for equity in post-pandemic higher education.

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**Francesc Pedró, Director, UNESCO Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
Lessons from Thailand on Ensuring Access and Success for Marginalized Groups in the Time of Pandemic**

7. Lessons from Thailand on Ensuring Access & Success for Marginalized Groups in the Time of Pandemic

"…I wish all people knew they have rights to deserve good things in their lives, not just getting what they are given. The responsible authorities should recognize such rights as well. For example, the disadvantaged group or those at the margins of society have rights to have good standard of living. Regarding the right, access to education is a fundamental human right. Education provides opportunity to learn and live sufficiently. Besides, knowledge can be valued resources to help others or community…". The speech delivered by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in 2005 reflects the imperatives of inclusive education in Thailand which have been implementing even before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accordingly, the country was selected as the "birth place" of UNESCO 1990 World Declaration on Education for All or Jomtien Declaration. We have played an active role and ratified many international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons.

Within the country, the right to education for all marginalized groups has been guaranteed in our Constitution, National

Education Act, and other related laws. Measures have been provided to assure the right and opportunity to receive 15 years of free quality basic education for persons with physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, societal, communicational, and learning deficiency or with disability or infirmity, and other underprivileged groups. The government first launched policies to confirm access to education for disadvantaged groups of children, including migrant children in 1980s. Later, in 1992, Ministry of Education circulated, for the first time, its policy to receive non-Thai children, residing in Thailand, to study in public schools. Recently, we have promulgated an important law – the Equitable Education Act 2018 to assure that all people are equally entitled to receive and access education and development; assistance is given to financially deprived persons to alleviate educational inequality and enhance the quality and efficiency of teachers. The Equitable Education Fund (EEF) was then established for these purposes.

Examples of education for underprivileged students at basic education level besides special schools for students with all disabilities are the "inclusive school" project which has been implemented in regular public schools, the "welfare school" operated as a special school for underprivileged persons who need support from the State and the Education Provision Project for Disadvantaged Children in the Highlands and Marginal Areas. These marginalized groups are also eligible to many scholarships including the Royal Scholarships of King Rama IX and X. It should also be noted that H.M. King Rama X provides 70 million Baht per year since 2009 through the Research and Development Institute of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Foundation.

At higher education level, every higher education institution has the duty, in accordance to the government regulations, to accept a proper proportion or number of persons with disabilities to study in their institution. In doing so, the institution shall be entitled to receive financial support both for providing education for these groups and for the establishment of the Disability Support Service (DSS) Centre which is a service center to facilitate their learning effectively.

The Covid-19 pandemic has a tremendous effect on education provision and learning loss not just for the marginalized

groups – closure of the schools, delay of school semester, etc. Unavoidably, technology comes to play a great role in providing education. We are very fortunate that the royally-initiated projects such as the Distance Learning Information Technology (DLIT) and the eDLTV, e-learning system for Grade 1 -12 students have laid a strong foundation for distance learning for quite some time. Many upskill and reskill workshops to train teachers and school administrators in this crisis have to be urgently organized. At present, the government provides education to all group of students through "5 ON" – on air, online, on demand, on hand, and on site (where possible).

However, some issues have been raised especially the "digital divide". In some areas, in equalities are widen among vulnerable students due to their relative socioeconomic status, the rural urban divide, and migrant status. Certain pupils have fewer opportunities and less support for learning at home, and may not have access to the technology required for remote learning.

The world we know will not be the same after the pandemic. It is time to rethink how to provide equal opportunity for access and quality education for all.

Professor Dr. Chanita Rukspollmuang, Vice President for Academic Development, Siam University; Chairman, Committee of National Education Council, Office of the Education Council, Thailand

The digital divide – can we address it?

8. COVID-19: Setting The 'New Normal' For Higher Education

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) requires that countries ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Globally, the gross enrolment ratio stands at 38% (World Bank, 2020). This suggests that over 60% of prospective students globally do not have access to tertiary education. COVID-19 has compounded the challenges associated with access and equity in higher education owing to the static nature of traditional teaching methods.

Access here relates to challenges to entry and Equity in education relates to fairness in the distribution of resources, equal standards and academic support for all students irrespective of background, race, colour and inclusivity. This article shares some perspectives on how I believe COVID -19 has challenged both access and equity.

Current Situation

Over the years, there has been great dependency on 'traditional methods of educational delivery'. In the year 2020, the entire globe was hit by an unexpected phenomenon that changed the normative methods of communication and this subsequently went on to affect a core in our lives – education. The new normal, ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic pushed institutions to incorporate an online/blended format of educational delivery which came with several challenges. Some of these challenges include but are not limited to:

Technical Constraints

Moving teaching and learning online is dependent on the availability and reliability of an active internet connection as well as the availability of devices to access course information and guidance. However, there are structural challenges when it comes to that because students from marginalized groups do not have such access. According to the International Finance Corporation, internet coverage in Africa is 22% as of 2019. That means that 78% of the population does not have access to the internet which is a key requirement to facilitate online learning. In comparison with Western nations, this poses an issue in education with regard to equity. This requires appropriate interventions to ensure that no one is left behind.

Preparation of Staff and Student Support

Due to the unexpected digital transition of teaching, most students/staff are unable to partake/contribute effectively to study sessions. During this lockdown period, student support has been largely affected owing to skeletal staff in most universities. Responses to emails, phone calls and general inquiries have been highly affected. Often, students have reported receiving automated responses to their email and phone queries.

Staff and students were largely unprepared for full-scale online/blended education especially for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics courses and this is causing a lack of motivation from students and a complete disconnect from students to staff. For schools with no virtual learning options, this leaves the students stranded and might put them in a situation where an entire semester or academic year could be lost to this pandemic.

Internationalization & Mobility

Internationalization of education has also been affected in diverse ways. Owing to restrictions on movement implemented by respective governments there have been embassy/consulate closures and the cancellation of visa appointments. Due to this, the implementation of foreign exchange programs has been adversely impacted.

The Maintenance of Quality and Standards

Moving lectures online requires its own Quality Assurance practices. For example, how do universities ensure that a particular learning outcome has been achieved by a student adequately? How do institutions ensure that students are actively engaged? It appears a vast majority of students find virtual learning difficult as it requires more intrinsic motivation to study online as opposed to traditional learning. How is the attendance of online studies monitored? And how are students prepared for online examinations including ensuring both academic honesty and integrity from students?

Some schools incorporate proctoring systems, which involve the utilization of webcams, website blocking and activity monitoring during exams to ensure academic honesty and integrity. Universities must start to explore other forms of assessments that do not require any form of invigilation but manage to assess the learning outcomes adequately. In the real world, no individual is invigilated while applying the knowledge they have acquired from university in solving an occupational/societal problem. To make learning truly useful and applicable in a practical sense, it should be possible to assess student learning outcomes in a way that departs completely from the traditional system of examination.

The traditional system of examination checks a students' ability to memorize information prior to an exam rather than the mastery and full grasp of their expected learning outcomes. COVID-19 is forcing us to seek other potentially better and more progressive forms of assessment for students. Quality of education should definitely not decline under the pretext of COVID-19 or virtual education.

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9. Higher Education in a time of lockdown. A Melbourne perspective on COVID impacts

Amidst a strategy of elimination rather than control of COVID, the city of Melbourne, Australia, has just come out of our fourth COVID lockdown: two weeks stay at home except for grocery shopping and exercise within a 5k radius. The first lockdown came very suddenly and commenced in March 2020, just a month into Semester One. It lasted 141 days. Whilst I was in New Zealand enjoying a late summer holiday, the University closed, and a week later all classes resumed, totally online. That week was perhaps the most intense in any academic's life, used as they were to face to face teaching, and for me watching from afar and unable to assist my team as they stripped their offices and decamped, it was a deeply disturbing experience. Boarding one of the last planes to depart Wellington, NZ, I returned to an uncertain and anxious Melbourne where the streets were deserted and the news was bleak. Yet we were doing well in comparison to much of the world. Fifteen months later, there have been several attempts to resume face-to-face learning, however, sporadic lockdowns and exposure sites on the main campus have made the return to face-to-face delivery a lurching process.

What did it mean to transition to online learning? For some students it was initially a blessing, saving travel time and the need to dress their bottom half. For some students living with disability it was a welcome equalizer as for the first time they could participate in the classroom on the same basis as other students. For others, it was a nightmare. The social isolation quickly became intense and wearing, the concentration required to be on camera for hours a day led to previously unexperienced fatigue or anxiety. The practical problems were many: available computers and who got to use them in the household hierarchy; were there suitable locations for all members of the household to study and work remotely; were available computers modern enough to cope with the software requirements of online delivery; what if there were no computers in the household and you were previously relying on access to the now closed or out of range on-campus computer labs; what if you don't have a broadband plan at home or sufficient internet access and data to enable video calls, or the money required to set it up; what if you're using a smart phone to access your classes and complete your assignments and tests: the list goes on.

On top of this were the very real and hard issues of poverty. All the jobs that students traditionally do were suddenly gone, and the funds from overseas that supported our International students dried up. When the State Government and eventually the Federal Government announced income support, all those students who worked cash in hand and were off the books were not eligible and could not apply. Students were uncertain of where their next meal would come from. In response, the University distributed over Ten Million dollars in emergency grants in a matter of days, but it was nowhere near enough to meet the desperate needs evident from the stories of hardship shared by our students.

And yet still the learning continued with the impetus of both required and inspired innovation. Our International students who could no longer afford to stay went home to an uncertain future, if they could, or continued to study with payment plans to manage their fees. The Government moratorium on evictions for failure to pay rent were good for those who held formal leases, but many students are not on formal leases, and their housing was at risk or lost altogether. Students who had relocated from rural and regional areas also went home, leaving their former housemates with the burden of rent that could not be paid or agreements that could not be honoured.

In spite of the extraordinary circumstances, Australia lived up to its ideals as 'the lucky country'. Our infection and death rates due to COVID are insignificant when compared to the world stage, and our access to high quality free health care remains unabated. Retention rates for local students have held their ground whilst International student numbers have reduced significantly. The higher education sector nationally is experiencing a massive retraction as a result, with thousands of job losses across the country from both voluntary and targeted redundancies. Students and academics have had no choice than to adapt, but at what cost?

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10. Access to Higher Education in Small States: Challenges Posed by COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the service delivery model for almost all institutions globally and including those in the Higher Education Sector. With lockdown of economic space and restriction on the movement of people, organizations found innovative ways to deliver service to their customers without having them be physically present to consume the services. The delivery of online services is not new, but the pandemic has accelerated the scale and scope of this delivery mode. This was felt even more significantly in the higher education sector. While many universities, including the UWI with its Open Campus, has been delivering teaching and learning activities online long before the pandemic, the scope of delivery has expanded more rapidly since March 2020. The pandemic has forced almost all institutions to go virtual with their classes and other teaching and learning initiatives.

The model of have teaching and learning delivered via a hybrid model where; students at some point, enter the physical class room but at other times, conduct classes online, seems to be emerging as the new normal for educational institutions as the pandemic unfolds. This new normal however, will not be without critical challenges for many students; especially those from countries with limited access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and the supporting broadband connection. With these expected challenges; the question is: Will access to higher education in small vulnerable states be equitable and who will be the winners and losers from this new model of service delivery?

Access in Caribbean Small States

There is a troubling trend in the English speaking Caribbean regarding the number of students who leave secondary education to pursue post-secondary education. Data on access to higher education from UNESCO and other reputable sources show that, on average, only 2 of every 10 children who graduate from secondary schools move into post-secondary education. When this is compared to more developed and emerging developed countries, the data show that; average 7 out of every 10 students move from secondary level to post-secondary level. With this trend, the competitiveness of Caribbean economies in this new economic model will be challenged. The services sector, a major driver of economic growth in these city states will require high quality human capital in order to survive. With such large number of persons not be able to access high quality, post-secondary education, the higher value added services such as; software development, robotics, machine learning etc, will not be possible. Therefore; economic growth will continue to be anemic. The pandemic, having changed the way higher educational institutions will deliver their teaching and learning, will exacerbate the situation in these small states.

Challenges to Equitable Access

With almost all institutions now delivering the educational product online either through emergency remote teaching or, strictly online education as a described by scholars such as Fernando Ferri, Patrizia Grifoni and Tiziana Guzzo (2020), for students to access the product in the new normal, they will need access to electronic devices, stable and affordable broadband and also, comfortable living space to be engaged in the learning process. Unfortunately, access across the Caribbean to these enablers; for children to be able to participate in the teaching and learning process, is uneven.

The vast majority of citizens cannot afford tablets, payment for broadband and, living conditions at home are not always suitable for engagement in school activities. As such, many students who are expected to participate in teaching and learning activities have not been able to do so, consistently. With this new normal, policy makers will need to address urgently, the gaps in access to; Devices, Broadband and, other Information and Communications Technologies to prevent a vast number of children in the Caribbean from being left behind. Inequity to access will significantly hinder the development potential for the region in the long-term as its human capital stock will not be able to compete effectively, in the global marketplace.

Conclusions

The Covid- 19 pandemic will make access to higher education much more difficult for many citizens, globally, who do not have equitable access to the technological hardware and software needed to enable teaching and learning. This is especially more pronounced for those from citizens from low income and working class families who cannot afford devices and payments for broadband from services. Public policy-markers will have to find new ways to bridge the technological divide among their population in order to ensure greater access to higher education. Without this, the effects of the pandemic on the economic and social transformation of their societies will take decades to be remedied.

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Making a difference – innovation in equity across higher education

11. Challenges to access and equity in the Australian higher education context

Access and equity in the Australian higher education context has shifted dramatically due to changes in the national policy landscape occurring concurrently with institutions responding to COVID-19.

At a national policy level, there has been a refocus of student equity groups, changes in the funding arrangements and further plans to reform higher education equity policy and funding programs over the next three years. Notably absent from the national policy landscape and the ongoing conversations about higher education equity reforms is widening access and participation for students with disability. This piece draws together key insights from students and staff, focusing on the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 presents for students with disability in the Australian higher education context.

Whilst in Australian higher education institutions, there are fewer staff dedicated to student-facing equity initiatives, "core" university support services that are critical for underrepresented groups of students are under resourced and equity programs are being realigned into new cost-effective university structures. However, the greatest shift for students during this period has been the adjustment and continued persistence of universities to offer courses exclusively in an online or blended learning environment, despite relatively few COVID-19 cases nationally. This has led to increasingly disparate experiences of how students, particularly students with disability, access and participate in higher education.

For many students with disability, as well as the wider student population, the shift to a digital learning environment and the introduction of associated supports presented a significant opportunity and enabled students to participate in their learning in ways that were previously unavailable to them. In the teaching and learning space, this included the provision of accessible materials ahead of time, flexible learning options such as self-paced modules and knowledge articles that assisted students with how to navigate the requirements of their course. This also extended to the university's support services, with increased access to specialist staff through telehealth appointments and peer learning communities that were established across disciplines (ADCET, 2020). These institutional changes, combined with many students feeling more comfortable learning from within their home environment, resulted in positive learning experiences and increased participation in higher education for some student groups (ADCET, 2020). Many of the students who have reported positive experiences of the shift to digital learning, have subsequently shared concerns about adjusting to the reintroduction of face-to-face learning.

For other students, including students with disability, the rapid shift to the digital learning environment impeded their ability to access and participate in their studies. In some cases, access requirements such as live captioning or language interpreters, notetaking and options for non-verbal forms of communication were not considered or the need to engage with multiple means of communication simultaneously caused significant fatigue. In other cases, academic teaching staff did not feel equipped to cater for students with disability in an online environment (ADCET, 2020). In addition to this many students experienced a sense of isolation from their peers and academic teaching staff as well as anxiety from the absence of the routine provided by attending class on campus. Students with disability, also disproportionately experienced increased financial and employment pressures (Sutton, 2020) with many students with disability reported a decline in support levels from their university (Pitman, 2020).

The challenge for higher education institutions, as we learn to live with COVID-19, is that equity of access to higher education does not mean providing the same experience to all students. As can be seen, students, including students with disability, reported different experiences of digital learning, with some students excelling in online learning environments and others having a clear preference for being on campus. Higher education institutions now have an opportunity to reshape the teaching, learning and student support experiences that are available to students. In considering what access and participation in higher education looks like moving forward, there is a critical need to ensure that students have choice and flexibility in their learning. However, these choices should not be determined by higher education institutions and staff alone. It is essential that students, particularly students with disability, have a seat at the table when designing the future learning options available to them.

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12. The Pandemic Has Made Equity in Higher Ed Worse. It's Time to Fix It.

COVID-19's impact on higher education has been profound. It widened equity gaps. It further limited access. And it forced many students to give up on their dreams.

The health crisis, and accompanying economic crisis for many colleges and universities, hit students of colour and those from low-income backgrounds especially hard. They lost jobs, fell ill and died at higher rates, and many saw their paths to higher education ruined.

At Lumina Foundation, an independent, private foundation in the U.S., we fight for racial equity as we help all Americans get the education they need after high school. As we emerge from the pandemic, we have a lot of work to do.

In the U.S., even before COVID struck, nearly every state had persistent college attainment gaps for Black, Hispanic and Native American students. The pandemic only widened the chasm; as it surged, job losses drove tuitions further out of reach, and caring for families took precedence over pursuing higher education.

Yet, we also know that a college degree is more valuable than ever. For example, of the 916,000 jobs added back by the U.S. economy in March 2021, just 7,000 went to adults with high school diplomas but no college degrees. And the shift to virtual learning during the pandemic made college more accessible to millions of students who juggle school with jobs and caregiving responsibilities.

Of course, these issues are global. Data from World Access To Higher Education Day show:
- In more than 90 percent of countries studied, access to higher education is unequal.
- In 76 of the lowest income countries, the poorest people are 20 times less likely to complete a higher education course than richer students.

Just as deliberate policies created or contributed to these unjust conditions, I believe it will take equally focused efforts to remove those barriers and achieve racial equity. Higher education has always faced a challenge to assure equity – but today's circumstances demand that we address it head-on.

In a world where the costs of not having postsecondary skills and education are increasing, the fact that millions are denied meaningful opportunities because of their race, nationality, or other circumstances of their birth is **unacceptable.** But it's not enough just to say we need more equitable outcomes. We need to think seriously about equity and ensure that everyone gets the valuable learning opportunities they deserve.

A unique moment

Higher education is central to repairing lives, careers and our economy. The pandemic has created a unique moment where institutions and systems are rapidly adapting practices to better serve students.

In the U.S. and many other countries, this crisis helped to open up access and increase support for students. We have seen universities abandon required entry testing, provide more faculty and administrators for student advisement and counseling, change residency requirements, and focus on student needs beyond the classroom such as food insecurities and mental health.

This is just a start. To speed progress, we must focus our efforts on people whom colleges, universities, and other education and training providers have served poorly, or not at all.Temporary band-aid solutions aren't enough. We need sustained, equity-minded, broad-based, proactive efforts. We need coordinated education, economic development, and workforce policies.

We need fresh ideas. Here's one: **Cuyahoga Community College** in Ohio is partnering with three local groups to provide academic and workforce training resources in economically distressed neighborhoods. These serve as an entry point to the college with strong connections to students' real lives.

And a new **report** by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College offers a clear roadmap. It urges three steps to get adult students back on track: build smoother paths to valuable credentials; improve advising services, and create classes and programs specifically for students of color.

While I've focused mostly on the U.S. here, its's clear that many nations are grappling with the same issues –the relentless march of technology and AI, a fast-changing marketplace, and waves of people seeking better lives and careers through timely, accessible, affordable learning.

To make progress – across borders and mountains and oceans – we must work together to turn the best ideas into policies, and implement them with all due speed. I look forward to a future where we can all learn, earn and contribute to a better world, and leave no one behind.

Dr Courtney Brown, Ph.D., Vice President of Strategic Impact, Lumina Foundation, USA

13. Challenges to access and equity in higher education across the world in the context of COVID: An Australian perspective

In the last decade, Australia has channelled substantial resources into ensuring that higher education (HE) is accessible to students from a diversity of backgrounds. These efforts have been successful with almost 50 per cent of students enrolled in university classified as belonging to at least one of the major student equity groups[1]. However, whilst the numbers of equity bearing students entering HE has increased, their ongoing access and retention (attrition) is still of concern. This fragility of the widening participation agenda within Australia was further exposed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Whilst recognising that the disruption generated by COVID-19 is a global problem, this editorial will focus on three key challenges that have particularly impacted on the HE environment within Australia, as follows:

1. Learning loss and admission
2. Distance and digital exclusion
3. Border closures and student markets

Learning loss and admission

Australia, like other countries, has experienced school closures throughout the pandemic with estimates that every week of school closures results in **significant learning loss for students.** For those individuals who were in the final years of schooling during 2020, not only was preparation for final examinations impacted, but equally for some, school closures may have severed an already tenuous link to formal education settings (UNESCO, 2020). Both factors, learning loss and early departure, particularly impact equity students who are at risk of seeing their positions deteriorate further relative to the general student population.

To ensure universities retained student numbers in the 2021 admission year, a number of Australian institutions implemented alternative entry and admissions processes. In some cases, students were offered university places based on previous year's examination results, equally a range of alternative entry processes were introduced to bolster enrolments. Whilst these strategies arguably increased accessibility, there are concerns about the implications of this approach, recognising that such access needs to be accompanied by ongoing and targeted support. The necessity of this support is particularly key for students from equity backgrounds, many of whom may require additional assistance to attain the academic and cultural capitals needed to underpin a successful transition into the university environment.

Distance and digital exclusion

Geographic distance is a key equity mediator in Australia, with students from rural and remote areas having poorer educational outcomes compared to their **urban counterparts.** The onset of the pandemic introduced additional factors that have impacted on HE access for those who are located at a significant distance to university campuses. For example, the ability to travel between or within states can no longer be guaranteed, which can influence decision making for students who need to relocate due to study purposes.

Another factor that impacts on HE access for this cohort is the disparity in the provision of stable internet in locations outside of metropolitan Australia. The most recent **Australian Digital Inclusion Index Report (2020)** indicates a continuing and significant gap in the ability to access digital infrastructure, based on location. With the onset of COVID-19, this difference was thrown into sharp relief, the move to online learning and the closure of campuses meant that rurality was a key mitigating factor in learning loss for certain equity cohorts.

Border closures and student markets

Finally, Australia has relied on international student enrolments to bolster funding across the sector, in 2019 these enrolments were worth $39 billion, making international education Australia's fourth largest export while also accounting for around $10 billion in fee income to universities. The recent, and projected ongoing, decline in international student numbers due to COVID-19 will have devastating long-term fiscal repercussions across the sector, and for higher education in particular (Universities Australia, 2020). The Australian HE system is expecting to have an **estimated overall shortfall of $19 billion over the next three years.**

The most immediate result of this restricted enrolment pattern is the decline in funding for staffing resources. Perhaps one of the hardest hit areas is the student equity field where staff are generally employed on recurrent funding, much of which became unavailable once international markets declined. Whilst the fallout from this financial crisis is still relatively unknown, a recent survey of 22 universities indicated that over half had experienced some decreases in equity staffing, whilst a third reported losing 50% of their staffing compared to pre-pandemic levels (EPHEA, 2021).

Final thoughts…

The challenges Australian HE is encountering right now, and those anticipated in the coming years, confirm that it is imperative that the HE sector deliberately move away from simply adhering to 'the way things have always been done'. The 'established' ways of teaching, learning, working etc. have all shifted because of the health crisis disruptions. Yet, there is **much to be learnt from existing research in the equity field,** importantly as the HE sector moves forward, we need to bring an 'equity lens' to current decision making and those yet to be made.

**Sarah O'Shea, Paul Koshy & Cathy Drane
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Australia**

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1   In Australia there are 6 recognised equity groups namely students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (low SES students); students with disability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) students; students from regional and remote areas; and women studying in non-traditional areas (WINTA students)

14. Perspectives from UC Berkeley: The Pandemic's Impact and Hope for the Future

One of the many things that makes UC Berkeley so special is the rich diversity of its student community. Berkeley is home to large numbers of first generation college students, low-income students, former foster youth, student veterans, student parents, undocumented students, formerly incarcerated students, re-entry students, and transfer students of all ages and life experiences. In my role as Executive Director of the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3), I help ensure that our programs connect this community of historically marginalized students (13,000+ students at Berkeley) with critical resources — from holistic guidance, academic planning, scholarships, mentoring, and career preparation to nutrition and child care support.

Prior to the pandemic, students served by our programs navigated multiple systemic challenges as they pursued completion of their university degrees. With the outbreak of COVID-19 these inequities only worsened. Many students decided to opt out of enrollments by cancelling or withdrawing from classes. Many reported more difficulty paying for essentials related to food and housing as well as struggling with unreliable or non-existent access to learning technology and internet service. Others struggled to make progress academically while operating in home environments that are not conducive to learning (because of multiple students in the home, parenting or care responsibilities, etc.) and with the difficulty of online learning as the sole modality. Nationally, the studies mirror the experience of our Berkeley students. A December 2020 National #RealCollege Survey of 195,000 students conducted by Temple University's Hope Center summarized the impact of the pandemic on students stating, "Enrollment and retention rates are down, and disengagement in learning is profound. Widespread inequality is deepening; while average enrollment is down 4%, enrollment among minoritized students is down by as much as 10.7%." (Goldrick-Rabb, Coca, Kienzl, Welton, Dahl, Magnelia, 2020, p. 1)

UC Berkeley moved all operations to a remote environment as COVID surged in early 2020. Just days after the move to remote operations, CE3 moved quickly to survey students to understand what they were experiencing. They shared their concerns openly:

"We have no idea how we are going to pay rent, or feed our families. It's a difficult time for everyone and it is personally messing with our mental health to the degree that we cannot focus on classes." - Undergraduate Student Respondent

"I need community, I need hugs... the isolation and the lack of community will have deep and resounding impacts." - Undergraduate Student Respondent

UC Berkeley also began to survey students campus wide throughout the year. For most of the year, 40% or more of all undergraduate students reported experiencing significant levels of anxiety and/or depression, with low-income and ethnically underrepresented students reporting levels five to seven percent higher than their peers.

For more than a year, as the data and testimonials suggest, historically marginalized students have encountered additional barriers to their academic success and have endured the prolonged trauma of the pandemic. Today, students are not only continuing their studies and returning to gathering, they are also recovering and healing. As we all physically return to our university campuses there is an opportunity to further align equity values and principles in our practice to best serve students. As institutions of higher education, especially those public institutions that provide so much access and opportunity to historically marginalized students while operating on limited resources, we are not structured to handle crisis well. The pandemic has also made it even more clear that student needs are not bound to the solely academic. While higher education professionals have different roles they play, we must work as a collective support community to help holistically address the complexity of student needs.

Now is the time to challenge ourselves to establish a "new normal" that centers our support of students with more flexibility and understanding for both them and the professionals they count on for support. This comes with important questions. Of the modalities we were forced to pilot during remote operations, what worked and what did not? What version of these approaches makes sense to maintain? And at what scale? What have we learned about systemic inequities that helps us better understand how to address them? More specifically, to address economic inequities that existed pre-pandemic and only worsened during the outbreak of COVID 19, how can we challenge the American model and structure of financial aid to become more expansive and inclusive? Hopefully, our experiences during pandemic operations will provide the insight and organizational confidence that fuels further innovation in developing practices that best support students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

As the pandemic crisis recedes, we can find inspiration in the resilience of students to be bolder and more effective in dealing with the enduring crisis of inequity in higher education.

Julian Ledesma, Executive Director, Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence, UC Berkeley, North America

15. Mobility in a Period of Disruption: SEAMEO RIHED's AIMS Programme Outlook

As the world experiences unprecedented disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, growing inequality in higher education has resulted from a sudden and forced shift to online learning modes where existing digital divides and socio-economic factors of students have been accentuated. Travel restrictions have also placed the international mobility of students on hold, threatening the multifaceted benefits associated with student mobility. It is time to rethink our ways and explore new methods to ensure the continuation of more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities and reach more learners.

Access and equity in higher education is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on Quality Education, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all. SEAMEO RIHED, as the Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, works with 11 SEAMEO Member Countries and partners across the region and the world in areas essential to regional progress in higher education and shares the global commitment towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through its key initiatives, including the Asian International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme.

The AIMS Programme is a multilateral student mobility scheme supported by 9 Member Countries to promote balanced intra-regional mobility and community building, shape responsible global citizens and increase access and opportunities to quality education and cultural exposure for students to enhance inter-cultural competencies, foster friendships and develop future networks. Considering the investment and expenses involved with physical mobility, the number of internationally mobile students has traditionally been limited. With financial support provided by each AIMS Member government and close cooperation among its 78 Member universities, the AIMS Programme has increased mobility opportunities and since 2009 over 5,000 students in the region have received support to study abroad.

When January 2020 arrived, COVID-19 slowly began making its way around the world. Not long after, vibrant cities in the region became still and entire higher education sectors ceased to function as they had before. According to a survey conducted by SEAMEO RIHED, approximately 60% of AIMS Member Universities reported physical campus closures by mid-2020. New student applications to the AIMS Programme were deferred, resulting in an 85% reduction in exchanges compared to 2019. The shift to online learning was fast and widespread, demanding students and lecturers alike to adapt. In March 2021, SEAMEO RIHED organised a Virtual Mobility Roundtable Series of online consultations with AIMS Members to explore both the challenges and opportunities in creating inclusive learning opportunities through an internationalised higher education process.

Clearly, virtual mobility is not a substitute for physical mobility in providing cultural immersion and other life skills, nor can it diminish the digital divide between those that have access to appropriate infrastructure and devices and those that do not. At the same time and compared with the number of internationally mobile students in the region, virtual mobility can encourage a process of massification through open and online collaborative learning. It can also strengthen internationalisation at home for participating universities and greatly enhance the experience of quality education and inter-cultural learning for some beyond the AIMS Programme, who would not normally be able to participate in an international exchange due to socio-economic factors or physical disability.

To accommodate virtual mobility within AIMS, universities need to be committed to shared goals and encourage collaborative design of learning components and courses to arrive at a system with enough flexibility to support recognition and maintain as well as enhance the benefits of mobility, including the gaining of knowledge, skills, and intercultural competencies for a more diverse group of students, while also making learning more inclusive and equitable. With Member Countries spanning Asia, both synchronous and asynchronous online learning modes can help to overcome differences in academic calendars and time zones. Support to lecturers should also be provided in developing innovative and effective online teaching methods that can also account for disciplines that typically require field, laboratory, and hands-on work.

The future of learning and higher education is being challenged, shaped, and tested. So too is the future of work. More resilience, agility, inclusivity, equitability, and sustainability are needed to navigate this next new normal. For SEAMEO RIHED, through our regional efforts, we aim to foster closer collaboration and cooperation between policy makers, education providers, researchers, industry, and society to identify innovative ways to share resources for greater access and equity in higher education and prepare learners for a sustainable future in Southeast Asia and the world.

Asst.Prof. Dr. Romyen Kosaikanont, Centre Director of SEAMEO RIHED, Thailand

16. Perspectives on the challenges to access and equity in higher Education across the world in the context of COVID

Research around the world already shows that young people are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (McNeely, C. 2020). «Young adults have paid a high price in the form of foregone opportunities for education, social networks, and labour market integration» (Timonen, 2020). As we enter a time of economic uncertainty following the rolling series of 'lockdowns', the threat of new variants and unequal vaccine rollout, there is a strong likelihood of a recession in Ireland and globally (OECD, 2020a). One of the initial research findings on the impact of Covid-19 on education is that the learning gap between rich and poor will grow and that disadvantaged students will suffer greater learning losses and greater impacts on their lifetime earnings (OECD, 2020). It is highly likely that much of the progress made addressing educational disadvantage and social mobility to date will be reversed unless the appropriate policies and investments are put in place. Policymakers must consider how the lost learning and opportunities of students at all levels of education will be made up in the coming months and years.

Following the 2008 recession in Ireland, with limited employment and apprenticeship opportunities, young people turned to third-level education (HEA, 2012). This economic collapse, in turn, led to a considerable increase in the numbers applying for and being eligible for the national Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) (HEAR, 2021) and college Access Programmes. This may happen again but it is not enough to increase the number of disadvantaged students entering into college programmes, we must ensure they thrive and succeed.

Research by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2019 revealed that graduates from disadvantaged areas continue to earn less than comparable graduates from more affluent areas when all other factors were equal. Against this backdrop, Dublin City University (DCU) developed Access to the Workplace (ATTW), an innovative initiative for socio-economically disadvantaged students to enhance their employability and future career prospects. ATTW is a unique collaboration between the University's foundation, DCU Educational Trust, industry collaborators and DCU's Access Service. This programme provides a holistic package of financial support and work experience that enables ATTW participants to realise the full potential of their degree in the workplace.

ATTW offers full-time, paid, professional summer internships for second-year Access students who often lack the personal networks to secure high-quality work experience independently. The programme includes a comprehensive work-readiness component that includes CV preparation, interview skills and bespoke training to help students fully prepare students for their internships. Crucially, industry partners provide internships and make a financial commitment that provides a sustainable funding base for the DCU Access Scholarship Programme.

Fifty students and thirty-nine companies participated in the 2019 pilot. An independent evaluation (DCU, 2019) revealed that interns earned over €180,000 and 94% reported they would have been unable to source a similar placement through their own networks. 72% reported increased motivation in relation to their degree and career, whilst 100% felt the programme had increased their confidence and capacity across a range of identified workplace skills.

In summer 2020, as industry partners struggled to pivot to virtual internships, ATTW responded innovatively and commissioned research into virtual and hybrid internships by DCU's Leadership and Talent Institute, which resulted in a practical toolkit for participating companies and students (Collins & Gubbins, 2021). In 2021, ATTW experienced strong growth, with 86 students set to complete internships in over 54 leading Irish companies.

The skills gained on ATTW also enhance DCU's pre-entry outreach initiatives to promote progression to higher education. Currently, twenty-six ATTW alumni work as Access Ambassadors. They engage with students in local linked schools in disadvantaged communities, highlighting ATTW as an opportunity to "earn and learn" as a higher education student.

Third level institutions must be creative and innovative in responding to the challenges presented for their most disadvantaged students during this pandemic and beyond. This includes ensuring that as the competition for scarce internships and graduate employment increases, the most disadvantaged are not further marginalised but aided and supported to compete on an equal footing. Disadvantage does not end when students enter the gates of our institution; we must strive to ensure that all barriers are removed as they progress through their academic career and into employment.

Cathy McLoughlin, Head of Access Service, Dublin City University, Ireland

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17. Fighting the pandemic and inequality in higher education: an example from Brazil

Each year, millions of students and their families must deal with the stressful process of admission into higher education all over the world. Countries have different rules and procedures, and several places introduced unified, nationwide selection tests, often justified as being more democratic and meritocratic, since all students had to go through the same procedure. In Brazil, this test is called ENEM, the National Exam for Secondary Education. Although widely used, many universities keep executing their own selection process, called "vestibular".

Brazilian higher education is divided among a small group of selective public universities with free tuition (financed by the federal or state governments), and a large private sector, mostly providing low-cost evening courses attended by students who cannot get admission to the public institutions. The whole system has around 8 million students, which corresponds to approximately 20% of the 18-24 years old age cohort.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been particularly harsh in Brazil, where the federal government assumed a denial vision, gambling on unscientific claims and purposely hindering the availability of vaccines. As it happened in other parts of the world, the higher education sector is suffering to navigate in this complex context. On one hand, the private sector, which essentially depends on the tuition fees, is facing an unprecedented number of dropouts (estimated to be between 30-40% of the enrollments). On the other hand, the public sector has been under constant attack, motivated by ideological reasons, which were undermined by budget cuts. Public universities are facing difficulties to pay even basic expenses (such as energy and water, for example), and are considering closing temporarily.

Paradoxically, the pandemic has been a game changer in terms of the public perception of higher education institutions (HEIs). The current crisis now highlights the importance of public universities and research institutes for the future of humankind to face this and future threats. While the importance of science and education is starting to be appreciated again, HEIs still face major internal challenges and new problems every day, especially in terms of access and retention of students.

Initially, the key question was how should they proceed with teaching activities? Some groups at the universities defended the cancellation of all teaching activities for the semester, a path taken by some public Brazilian universities. However, the wish for a short period in (partial) lockdown rapidly vanished, and the reality imposed itself. HEIs needed to adapt to non-face-to-face educational activities. In doing so, all faced a series of unparalleled problems: how to change a system based mainly on classroom teaching to an online system in such a short time? How to deal with students who lacked the financial resources for the necessary technology or internet access? How to support teachers with no training or experience in online education? How to maintain the quality and excellence of the programs? How to evaluate students? How not to leave anyone behind?

Each institution tried different alternatives. At that moment I was the Rector of the University of Campinas (Unicamp), a public, research intensive University in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. We tried to face up to each challenge, knowing that we were living a unique moment and that the main keyword had to be 'flexibility'. In the case of less-privileged students, we mobilized groups inside and outside of the campus community to get donations of tablets and computers, as well as funds to buy internet plans to allow these students to attend online classes. We also transformed around 2,000 scholarships that covered expenses for commuting students into 'emergency support for off-campus activities'. Several initiatives were launched to increase outreach activities and communicate accurate scientific information to the public. To mention just a few examples: students organised a hotline to deal with doubts and concerns; another group started an 'active listening' group to talk to people who were isolated and lonely; and the university started a programme to seek donations to organise the distribution of food and hygiene products for people in need. Several blogs and podcasts turned to explain different aspects of the pandemic.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the University managed to make its own vestibular at the end of 2020, where 77,653 students applied for 3,237 places. In the last few years Unicamp implemented several affirmative actions and social inclusion programs, and increased the support for low-income students, with housing and different scholarships. The challenges for this new cohort start again, and it represents a unique opportunity for a generation that has been facing extreme difficulties in these pandemic times. These students are starting their freshman year remotely, and they did not have the chance to personally know neither the campus nor their colleagues and professors.

Higher education institutions have a duty to continue their activities, despite the restrictions that the current situation imposes. As harsh as the forecasts are for the future, universities will be up to the challenge. In such a complex environment, their focus must continue to be their mission and they must make every effort to demonstrate that their primary role is the well-being of the society.

Marcelo Knobel, Full Professor of Physics, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil

Summary

The range of the contributions in this publication point to the genuinely global commitment to improving equity in access/success in HE that exists. However, that commitment needs to be nurtured, spread and extended if opportunities for those from all backgrounds to progress to and succeed in HE are to be extended. It was noticeable how despite the differing contexts which the authors described and their variety of roles similar themes were returned to. It is now the task of those committed to higher education equity to coalesce around these themes as a way of extending that engagement across higher education and the broader public/private sectors. There are major challenges to be confronted. As Francesc Pedro states in his article *'the diminished presence that higher education has in the international debates about education development is, first and foremost, a severe constraint to its further development'.*

To address these challenges in the higher education case this means articulating the relationship between equity and internationalisation, equity and employability and equity and the student experience. As the articles in this collection show making such links is crucial if equity is to be re-framed for the post pandemic context as something mainstream to the concerns of higher education institutions rather than peripheral. To engage a wider set of policymakers establishing that connection between inequalities in higher education and inequalities in wider society is crucial. The articles show that this connection does exist in some countries - with Austria being the best example. It is worrying though that a country like Australia, so long at the forefront of this work globally, may now be stepping back in the strength of its commitment to equity.

World Access to Higher Education Day will not be stepping back though and rather re-doubling our efforts to increase the focus on equitable access/success in higher education and initiate the dialogue and collaboration that leads to the actions that students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds. As well as our annual day of action we hope in 2022 to initiate a series of global communities focused on the key areas in equitable access/success to identify new solutions for the post-pandemic context. As Jamil Salmi stated in his article *'the pandemic has exposed the socio-economic inequalities that perpetuate glaring gaps among nations, higher education institutions and the student's themselves'*. If these inequalities are not to widen then we must heed the messages in this collection and work ever more closely together.