Conclusion: Learning from the Past to Shape Future Policies Towards Equity in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Equity in higher education remains a widespread international concern (James et al., 2008). Higher education is often described as both a private and a public good (Deem & McCowan, 2018; Dunham, 2018; Marginson, 2011a). As it is assumed to benefit students individually (personal development, social status, career prospects and lifetime earnings), and the

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O. Tavares et al. (eds.), *Equity Policies in Global Higher Education*,
Issues in Higher Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7_10

society as a whole, it is seen as crucial for national development. Encouraging higher education participation of disadvantaged groups is deemed vital for their long-term social and economic integration, being associated with lifelong wellbeing and poverty prevention (McNamara et al., 2019). Therefore, widening participation and boosting intergenerational social mobility is alleged to lead to more cohesive and more economically successful societies (James et al., 2008). That is why the level of access to higher education, in many countries, is often presented as an indicator of the level of development and the capacity to produce knowledge, as well as of a workforce adapted to the economic and social development (Goastellec, 2008).

Globally, the issue of equity in higher education emerged on the political agendas as a consequence of the combined effect of three types of pressures: demography, the economic pressure to efficiency and the political call for the diversification of the student body (Goastellec, 2008). However, as Marginson (2011b) argues, the strategies to improve socioeconomic equity in higher education are driven by different goals: fairness or inclusion. While fairness implies changing the composition of participation, aligning higher education with the ideal model of a socially representative system, inclusion involves broadening the access and completion of under-represented groups. When the goal is inclusion, each improvement in the participation of people from disadvantaged groups is understood as a move forward, regardless of whether the participation of the middle class has also progressed. Yet, inclusion does not necessarily lead to a socially representative system, especially when under-represented groups can only take advantage of opportunities offered by expansion when the needs of the upper classes are fully satisfied, as proposed by the Maximally Maintained Inequality hypothesis (Raftery & Hout, 1993). Indeed, inclusion may bring to higher education more people from disadvantaged groups, but, as more does not mean they are fully represented, higher education systems which solely foster inclusion cannot be labelled as fair. For this reason, in spite of the massive increase in the number of students worldwide (Marginson, 2016), no significant change in class-specific inequality relations can be observed (Wakeling, 2018). The consequences of unequal opportunities to access scarce positional goods (Marginson, 1998) reflect on people's ability to access the labour market and thus to individual life chances (Blome et al., 2019).

The term "equity" used in this book is therefore close to "fairness". Indeed, it may be fair to treat people differently (e.g. admission criteria or admission exams) when it is recognised that there are groups with specific

needs and facing barriers of different natures (McCowan, 2016). Whereas concerns on equity are somehow convergent across many national systems, there are divergences on what a fair system is. Some of these divergences are evident in political debates about equity and efficiency, public versus private, academic versus vocational and views on human ability and potential (Ibidem). Whether unequal opportunities arise on the basis of gender, social class, race/ethnicity, among others, is somehow related to specific historical factors of different contexts (McCowan, 2016). Above all, the principle of social justice requires that class, ethnicity, geographical location or other personal characteristics should not determine access to and success in higher education (James et al., 2008).

POLICIES TO PROMOTE EQUITY AND TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS AND SUCCESS

The chapters integrated in this volume have revealed a variety of policies that have been taken in different national contexts to tackle inequality in enrolment and attainment in higher education. Although the majority stem from national initiatives, probably due to the high degree of national regulation of the higher education sector in most countries, there are also examples of institutional initiatives in the case of the United States, showing that institutions can also be proactive in addressing educational inequality.

To begin with, it is worth noting that achieving equality in higher education participation and attainment is a rather impossible task if reforms fail (or have failed) to equally target primary and secondary education. Thus, a first set of policies have addressed achievement in previous education levels. As Aamodt's chapter showed, the Nordic countries—which have gone a long way in addressing equity in higher education—started to reform the school system already in the mid-nineteenth century, based on the belief that an individual's life chances could not depend on their family's socioeconomic status. Given the significance of education for social emancipation, the segregation between schools for the rich and the poor was gradually eliminated and compulsory education was extended already in the 1960s with the inclusion of lower secondary education in the 9 years' compulsory schooling, thus abolishing the selection between primary and lower schooling. The chapter by Baptista et al. on the transition to higher education in Portugal also refers to political measures at previous education levels, taken in recent decades, such as fighting early

educational drop-out by consolidating the public sector and offering support to low income families (Amaral et al., 2016), the diversification of secondary school offerings, the provision of alternative curricular routes in lower and upper-secondary education or making education compulsory until the age of 18. Tackling equity in higher education has therefore acknowledged that achievement and choices in previous levels of education have a direct bearing on higher education participation and success.

Increasing participation in higher education also depends on the availability of sufficient educational offerings. Consequently, a second category of policies was aimed at the expansion of higher education systems as a necessary condition for widening access to new publics. This has been achieved, among others, through the diversification of higher education provision by fostering the growth of private education (Brazil and Portugal) and the creation of binary systems (Portugal and the Nordic countries). More recently, Portugal also saw the creation of short-cycle tertiary courses which aim to attract students with a vocational profile or students who have not got satisfactory grades in the national competition for access to higher education. However, these non-degree awarding programmes can afterwards be used as entry points to a HE degree. Dill's chapter draws attention to the fact that policies for the expansion of the higher education system need to be accompanied by effective quality assurance policies in order to ensure that the new educational opportunities are valid. This is especially the case following the emergence of for-profit higher education institutions in the United States which have targeted mainly poorly informed students from low economic backgrounds or with no family tradition of higher education participation. Quality assurance policies could protect these students from the danger of enrolling in programmes with low completion rates, poor graduate prospects and high default rates on federal loans. Measures in this sense were taken by the Obama administration, but the Trump administration subsequently reversed these quality assurance policies affecting for-profit high education institutions (see chapter by Dill).

In addition to expanding higher education, other policies intended to create conditions to allow the democratisation of access by fostering the participation of under-represented groups. The chapters on the United States (by Dill) and Brazil (by Bertolin and McCowan) provide examples of widening participation by means of affirmative action policies. Such policies aim to promote inclusion by increasing the participation of under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education. In the United

States, according to Dill, affirmative action goes back to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex or national origin and which at the time led many colleges and universities to adopt policies aimed at increasing the recruitment of students from racial minorities. However, more recently, these policies have caused mounting opposition, with consequences going as far as, for instance, banning race-based affirmative action in admissions in California's selective public universities, which resulted in a decrease in the enrolment of under-represented racial and ethnic minority students. Very recently, Brazil also adopted affirmative action public policies in order to democratise access. The Quotas Law of 2012 established a 50 per cent quota for public school students (usually of socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds) in all courses in federal institutions, in addition to sub-quotas for lower-income, black, mixed-race and indigenous students.

In her chapter on England, Thomas, quoting Tinto (2008), invokes the argument that diversifying the student population but failing to support non-traditional students to succeed does not contribute to reducing social inequality or increasing social justice. Thus, in England, equity policies have taken a step further and now contemplate the whole student life-cycle, including progression and attainment. This has become even more pertinent in a context in which the state has progressively transferred the cost of higher education teaching to students through the introduction of student fees in the late 1990s and their consecutive increases over the next two decades. National regulators have been urging institutions to employ the additional income from fees to promote social justice. Policy instruments were created, currently in the form of the Access and Participation Plans, to monitor institutional commitment to equality in participation and to equality of outcomes, focusing on access, success (incorporating retention and attainment) and progression to (graduate) employment and further (postgraduate) study. Institutions are required to self-assess their performance in relation to these dimensions and six specific target groups (including socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity and disability). According to Thomas (this book), such measures place fairness and inclusion 'at the heart of institutional priorities, rather than on the margins, and create a system-wide framework for improving the outcomes of all students'.

Student support policies in the form of grants and loans represent another set of political measures aimed at increasing participation in higher education. Grants can be universal, as in the Nordic countries, or

means-tested depending on family income, as in Germany (see Aamodt's chapter for more detail). The Brazilian case presents another example of non-refundable credits (Prouni) offered, since 2005, to students attending higher education courses in private colleges and universities. Economic circumstances, race and disability are criteria for the attribution of this type of financial support. Scholarships are given to students with low family incomes who attended public secondary schools or received scholarships to attend private secondary schools. Additionally, institutions are required to set aside quotas for students with disabilities and those self-declaring as black and indigenous, matching the respective proportions in the population according to the most recent census. In exchange for the scholarships, institutions are exempt from a given set of taxes and fees. Merit-based aid programmes in the United States are another example of student support (see chapter by David Dill). This is financial aid offered by a number of US states for their residents further to the escalating costs of higher education (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). However, while effective in increasing overall enrolment, academic performance and degree attainment, these merit-based state aid policies are also inequitable, as they do not benefit those most in need. A high-proportion of the in-state students receiving this aid come from well-off families who could afford higher education.

Student loans, too, can help increase participation although some argue that they are less effective than grants in encouraging poorer students to access higher education. For governments, they are cheaper than grants, especially in a situation of mounting costs due to the expansion of the sector, because at least some of the money borrowed is repaid. This was probably the logic which guided the replacement of maintenance grants for poorer students in England with maintenance loans (see chapter by Callender). As a form of refundable financing, the major difference between national contexts is represented by the repayment conditions, which are more or less favourable. In Brazil, for instance, students who benefit from the Higher Education Student Fund (FIES) public scheme have to return the funds after graduation at below-market interest rates.

Loans are often discussed in relation to tuition fees, especially in those higher education systems where high fees pose a potential obstacle to participation (see chapters on England by Callender and on the United States by Dill). Consensus is lacking among researchers and policy-makers as to whether tuition fees represent a source of inequality. Some consider that fees act as a barrier for the participation of low income students, while

others claim that they are necessary precisely as a way to avoid benefiting the more economically advantaged classes. The latter argument applies mostly in countries with low or no tuition fees in public institutions, which are more prestigious and selective and, therefore, attract those students who are academically best prepared. Most of these happen to come from a high socioeconomic background and whose families have the resources to invest in their education in order to reach a level that allows them to enter the most competitive institutions (e.g. the case of Brazil described by Bertolin and McCowan or of Portugal described by Sá et al.).

The policies on tuition fees differ by country and, as argued by Aamodt, they are most probably associated with the type of society and welfare state model characteristic of each country (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In the Nordic nations, where the social democratic model in place favours redistribution of wealth and income differences are small, tuition fees are deemed to be unfair and are absent from the political agenda. In contrast, countries with liberal models, such as England or the United States, have tended to limit public expenditure on higher education and to resort to tuition fees as a means of cost-sharing. According to Callender, the revenue from tuition fees had, by 2012, replaced most of the funding universities used to receive from the state for the teaching of undergraduate courses, which to some is equivalent to the privatisation of higher education (Shattock, 2017). However, while in England loan repayments are income-contingent, thus protecting graduates with low earnings from high repayments and financial constraints, in the United States they are “mortgage style”, aggravating the risk of high debt and default (see chapter by Dill). In this sense, Dill refers to Barr’s recommendation (Barr, 2009) on caps on tuition and income-contingent repayments on loans.

A final set of measures adopted to promote equity in higher education participation are related to information provision, acknowledging the fact that imbalances exist between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and more privileged students regarding the access to and the ability to understand information. These examples come from the United States (see chapter by Dill). One refers to an institutional initiative meant to ensure a better understanding among disadvantaged students of the information on financial aid, by making publicly obvious the fact that a family bears no formal responsibility for college financial support. According to Dill, this had a positive influence on parent and student behaviour on access to higher education. A second and recent initiative came in the form of rankings based on social and economic diversity, meant to support

choice for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The College Access Index indicates how many low and middle-income students in each college or university receive a specific federal scholarship awarded to students from the bottom 50 or 40 per cent of the income distribution (the Pell Grant) and how much these students pay for their education. This has had the expected impact, resulting in more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

PERSISTENT (SOCIAL) INEQUALITIES

Despite these policies to promote equity in participation and to reduce inequalities in access and success, equity issues are still a major problem in higher education systems worldwide, as it was recognised in all chapters.

The goals of fairness and inclusion, the two main dimensions of social equity, have hardly been accomplished, no matter the stage of the massification process the country is in and irrespective of the implemented policies. Although England has been seen as advanced in reaching the goal of widening participation, students from lower socioeconomic groups and ethnic minority groups are considerably under-represented in higher education, especially in traditional universities when compared to the post-1992 institutions, revealing stratified choices (Thomas, in this book). The gender gap in university entrance has widened over time, with men showing lower participation rates than women, and being the highest among white students when compared with minority ethnic groups. As concluded in the chapter by Callender (this book), neither fairness nor inclusion has been achieved.

Expansion of higher education systems was believed to contribute significantly to reduce socioeconomic inequalities, but it appears most countries have not been successful in diminishing educational inequality and promoting social mobility. Although this has progressed to a different extent in different countries, the fact is that the most privileged students are not only taking the most, but also the best opportunities in higher education, consistent with the so-called Maximally Maintained Inequality and Effectively Maintained Inequality hypotheses outlined by Amaral (this book). In England, for instance, the extra supply that followed higher education expansion was mainly taken up by middle class students. The first generation of students from the poorest households and ethnic backgrounds tend to enter new universities that used to be polytechnics, whereas their wealthier peers are more likely to go to the most selective

and prestigious institutions, enjoying all the present and future benefits which these institutions provide their graduates (Callender, in this book; Thomas, in this book).

In Portugal, it was evident that non-privileged students could only access higher education when the system expanded to include new universities, polytechnics and the private sector (Sá, Tavares & Sin, in this book). Socioeconomic inequalities are apparent in both the choice of higher education institution and of study programme. Students from privileged families tend to prefer universities, perceived as more reputed institutions than polytechnics, and are admitted in the most prestigious programmes (like Medicine, e.g.). Students who are the first generation in higher education, from poorer households, go more to polytechnic institutions, which reveal a more diversified student body that better mimics the Portuguese social composition.

Although to a different extent, a similar picture is found in the Nordic countries. Known to rank high on educational access and low levels of inequality, there is still a non-negligible degree of inequality in access to higher education in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Aamodt, in this book). Their higher education systems have globally moved to more equalised systems of access, which has been accompanied by a change in the institutional structure, with new less prestigious institutions coexisting with universities. Upper class students keep attending the most prestigious institutions and programmes (like Law and Medicine), whereas low income students attend the less prestigious institutions that receive a more diverse student body, resulting in increasing stratification within higher education.

Several explanations might be pointed out to justify the social inequalities in higher education that the under-representation of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds makes evident. Cognitive and other attributes shaped since the early years in family and educational contexts are key determinants of ability, and consequently are of major significance for higher education participation. This means that inequalities may start well before students cross the higher education gate, as shown throughout the chapters in this book. Most Brazilian students attend public secondary schools, but their outcomes are clearly worse than their privileged background peers' who go to private schools, as they experience lower participation rates and tend to enrol in programmes with lower perceived social status (Bertolin & McCowan, in this book). Higher income Portuguese students are more likely to follow the secondary education

academic track that puts them in better situation to have a successful higher education application (Sá, Tavares & Sin, in this book). Their families can afford private high schools, usually offering better education and higher grades (Batista, Sin & Tavares., in this book). Privileged English students who are sent to private high schools show higher participation rates and are more likely to attend the best universities than their poorer peers (Callender, in this book). Even in Nordic countries, where the relationship between social class and student performance tends to be weaker, low income students tend to choose more the vocational upper secondary track, which makes them more vulnerable in access and less likely to successfully complete higher education (Aamodt, in this book). Also, James et al. (2008) consider that inequalities in higher education participation tend to echo endemic educational disadvantage that starts in the earliest years of schooling. Therefore, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more prone to develop worse perceptions of the attainability of a university place, less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education and may be more likely to experience alienation from the cultures of universities.

Individuals from poorer families face higher costs of attending higher education, which are relevant for both the *whether to go* decision and the *where to go* choice. Financial aid seems to be crucial for these students, especially in contexts such as the American and the English characterised by rapid rising costs, but generates inequities in itself. High achieving, low income students often face difficulties in dealing with the complexity of the application process that discourage them to apply (Dill, in this book). Even among those who overcome the application process barriers, debt aversion seems to constrain choices, and it frequently happens that the choice of a programme and an institution is made considering the option that minimises living costs (Callender, in this book). Thus, as families and students are not fully aware of all costs and benefits associated to each option, namely the characteristics of each institution and programme, as well as graduation and labour market outcomes, they are unlikely to choose the option that benefits them the most. Callender concludes that loans are not necessarily perceived by students as fair, affordable or risk free. On the contrary, some students are deterred from participating in higher education because of fear of debt, concerns about loan repayments and the amount they need to borrow. Hence, in many countries like the UK, the shift from public funds to individual fees is likely to remain a financial barrier for those from poorer economic backgrounds, which in

turn reflects on employment, as lower socioeconomic and minority ethnic backgrounds keep on earning significantly less than the average (Burke, 2017).

Low income students are confronted with information and behaviour constraints that push them towards choices that are not the most beneficial for them. They are often the first generation of applicants to higher education, so they cannot benefit from parents' knowledge of the process itself, and of the mechanisms of acceptance (e.g. the advantages of applying simultaneously to alternative institutions). Other high achieving students that are likely to apply to selective institutions mostly do not take part in their high school peer network. Without any role model or any guidance through the process of choosing the higher education institution and the programme, they end up attending programmes and institutions that do not match their skills and needs. Without help and support, these students even become the target of very low performance institutions, such as for-profit higher education institutions in the US (Dill, in this book).

Access rules and practices can also drive social inequalities in higher education, of which the United States is a good example. As highlighted by Dill (in this book), equity and fairness of some of the access practices in place in the United States have been publicly questioned and some prestigious and selective colleges and universities have been accused of biased admission procedures that favoured athletes, children of both alumni and faculty members, and under-represented minorities. Furthermore, higher education institutions, in response to the need to improve their quality rankings, are more inclined to select the highest-performing students to improve success measures and the wealthiest candidates to pay high tuition fees.

Equity is about opportunities in higher education, but it is also about educational outcomes and performance. Thus, a further issue is whether different groups perform and achieve differently in the educational system. As students from lower socioeconomic groups gain access to higher education, new challenges emerge. As mentioned by Bertolin & McCowan (this book), the new life in academia is usually very different from the one they are familiar with, and scholarship students are often discriminated based on their cultural and socio economic status. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Brazilian students from lower income households face higher failure chances and drop-out rates and graduate from lower quality institutions, programmes and modes of education (e.g. in private

distance education). Social inequalities by no means disappear when students enter higher education; inequalities persist within the higher education system and even after graduation. According to Callender (this book), labour market returns differ considerably by socioeconomic background, even when comparing with peers with the same prior attainment and attending the same higher education institution and programme. Students from non-traditional groups, in turn, experience poorer progression to the labour market and, when deciding to continue studying after graduation, they tend to prefer postgraduate programmes to research degrees. In the United States, low income and first-generation students have been attracted by for-profit private higher education institutions, which perform poorly in completion rates, labour market returns to graduates and default rates on student federal loans (Dill, in this book). The actual probabilities of success are higher among high achieving students, as they may benefit directly from the support and help of their educated parents, but also indirectly when families provide their children access to the best educational institutions and programmes.

MOVING FORWARD

The evidence presented in the chapters of this book confirms that individuals' social class is one of the most important predictors of their educational path and success. Although several countries have made some progress towards reducing inequalities and ensuring no one is left behind, it is imperative to learn from their past experiences and those of other countries, designing new policies to address persistent inequalities in access and success.

As mentioned earlier, under-representation of disadvantaged students in higher education is partly the result of lower levels of educational achievement in schools, lower educational aspirations and poorer school completion rates. Therefore, new policies to address this inequality are needed. Aamodt (in this book) acknowledged the problem of the strong impact of school achievement in primary education, and therefore argues that early childhood education should be given priority, supporting learning so that as many students as possible reach a satisfactory performance level.

As cultural factors are also involved in access equity, recent debates have put forward the discussion of what has been called as 'epistemic access' (Stevenson et al., 2014). Because curricula and institutional cultures seem

to favour socially dominant groups, it is discussed, then, whether or not disadvantaged groups, when accessing higher education, are in fact meaningfully accessing the curriculum or converting acquired knowledge into better opportunities in the labour market or in life.

Financial factors also play an important role in the persistence of inequalities. However, since broader social, educational and cultural factors are involved, scholarships, bursaries, loans and fee remissions are not the entire solution to increasing access. Therefore, as Burke (2017) argues, it is important that equity-promoting policies move away from a utilitarian, individualistic and instrumental plan, mainly driven by economic imperatives, and get closer to a broader project fuelled by social justice principles and concerns. This implies, in her perspective, a reconceptualisation of access and widening participation as a project of transforming educational cultures, practices, and structures, as well as understanding the complex nature of the reproduction of social inequalities in, through and beyond HE (Burke, 2017).

The three principles proposed by McCowan (2016), namely availability, accessibility and horizontality, are very helpful in assessing whether policies that have been developed over time are equitable or not. Availability refers to the existence of available places for students who want to get a higher education degree. Accessibility is related to students' opportunity to actually enrol and occupy those available places. Horizontality is the opposite of stratification and occurs when institutional differentiation is solely based on orientation, area or mission, rather than on quality or on the existence of positional goods. Expansion of higher education systems, which occurred more or less everywhere, contributed highly to availability and less so to accessibility or horizontally. Indeed, the increment of places in higher education does not mean that these places are accessible to all individuals or groups, because many barriers hinder specific groups from accessing higher education: tuition fees, high admission standards, competitive exams that put in a disadvantage position those who had poorer performance in earlier schooling, geographic location, along with other limitations such as language, culture or identity. Of course, the strategies to overcome these barriers and ensure accessibility are different according to the nature of the barriers and to the history of different countries. When accessibility is ensured, the problem of horizontality still remains, as most higher education systems are stratified. Within stratified systems, some institutions and some study programmes enjoy greater prestige and higher quality, and disadvantaged students tend to enrol in lower ranked

institutions. The application of the principle of horizontality, then, would neutralise the effectively maintained inequality hypothesis, according to which students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are better placed than others to obtain a qualitatively better kind of education at any given level (Lucas, 2001). Horizontality implies the inexistence of qualitatively better kind of education. Quality agencies, in this respect, assume a central role in guaranteeing quality of all higher education institutions and programmes. However, as quality agencies ensure that study programmes comply with minimum quality standards, they do not possess the power to avoid institutional hierarchy and ranking based on cultural or historic reasons. Many of the hierarchies between institutions and study programmes are raised by the quality of employment that they give access to.

While a significant evolution regarding availability is evident from the cases presented in this book and policies have been developed to increase accessibility, it is less obvious that efforts are being made to ensure horizontality. Higher education systems seem more on a trajectory towards the marketization of access, economisation of curriculum and stratification of institutional type, with inequalities persisting within the system, as consistent with the effectively maintained inequality hypothesis (Lucas, 2001; McCowan, 2016).

The responsibility to improve equity, especially referring to horizontality, does not lie exclusively with the state. In fact, as Goastellec (2008) argues, the responsibility of fair access is shifting, since public authorities are making institutions more accountable and transparent regarding the role they play in reproducing the social structure and in promoting social mobility (see Dill's chapter on the example of selective United States colleges). The responsibility must lie, as Fradella (2018) argues, across all levels of administration rather than on a 'top-down' approach. In this sense, department chairs and school directors should be a part of the overall institutional strategy. Thomas (in this book) goes even further, claiming that the responsibility for improving retention and success lies with institutions and their teaching and support staff, who have an obligation to provide the necessary conditions, opportunities and expectations for such engagement to occur. Higher education institutions should therefore introduce targeted interventions to identify students' learning difficulties, bringing their knowledge up to the appropriate levels, getting help from teaching staff in terms of specific study techniques and improving motivation. Therefore, the responsibility placed on the institution is supposed to act at student level. On the other hand, public authorities and

nation-states are being scrutinised in the international arena according to the level of democracy that their higher education systems present. Democratic warrant is, therefore, as Goastellec (2008) argues, the core global referential to describe higher education systems.

Equity in access and success as an essential condition to ensure that higher education is democratic needs embedding in several structures and changing processes, which bring consequences for research and policies. In order to comprehend these multidimensional processes, it is necessary to bring together multiple research approaches (Goastellec & Välimaa, 2019). Moreover, as the processes producing inequalities are continuously evolving, the way towards equity must be seen as a continuous journey that requires ongoing and critical reflection.

Without radical transformation of institutional environments, curriculum or pedagogy, widening access might be a ‘vaunted concept’ (Dear, 2019). As the under-represented student population is expected to grow (Shah & McKay, 2018), it is imperative to reformulate funding models which have proven to fail the equity as fairness goal (see Callender’s chapter in this book), to create new strategies, structures and reforms to accommodate the needs of these students.

Several challenges are still to accomplish, although with different achievement levels. First, it is necessary to continue to widen participation in higher education in order to guarantee availability, but expansion should be accompanied by effective quality assurance to protect students from substandard provision. Second, accessibility needs to be reinforced through a set of measures that might include investment in earlier schooling (see Aamodt’s chapter in this book), affirmative action (see Dill’s & Bertolin and McCowan’s chapters in this book), financial aid (through grants and scholarships and less so through loans, as Callender argued in her chapter), or changes in admission criteria (see Baptista et al. and Sá et al. in this book). Finally, multiple actors—from national authorities to institutions and staff—could actively contribute to horizontality. Horizontality, the ultimate stage of equity as fairness, may be fostered through institutional policies targeting the representativeness of their student body, providing identical success opportunities for students with different academic and socioeconomic backgrounds (for instance, by adapting pedagogies or the curriculum). Although horizontality may be out of reach, it is important that higher education policies hold it as an ideal in order to ensure a gradual process towards more and more fairness in access, participation and success.

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