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working for equitable access to HE in Europe

Enhancing Access through a Focus on Equity - EQUNET

Progress Report   Public Part

Project information

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Executive Summary

Widening participation in higher education is a major component of education policy in many member states of the European Union and the Bologna-Process and should consist of an attempt to increase not only the number of young people entering higher education, but also the proportion of "under-represented groups" (those from a lower social strata, ethnic minorities or people with disabilities). Social inclusion is important to HE as still too many capable students are excluded from the higher education system due to their background, insufficient study support systems or other barriers.

To facilitate this process, eight leading European stakeholder and research organisations (the MENON Network, Scienter, the University of Ljubljana, HIS, ZSI, the European Students Union, EURASHE and EDEN) have decided to join forces with the aim of <u>enhancing equity in European Higher Education through networking among all interested stakeholders</u>, and are receiving the support of the European Commission (Erasmus Programme) to "bring together practitioners, experts and policy makers working for equitable access to HE in Europe and to create an organisational framework for intensive networking". In other words, the EquNet's success depends on how well research and networking work together.

In the period 2010-2012, EquNet is gathering research on the topic, engage with actors in the field through advocacy and through consultation, propose policy solutions to decision makers and network with peers, experts and stakeholders. The grand aim of the initiative is to aggregate energies from the main European networks and organisations that have experience in policy, strategy and implementation of both higher education and equity related activities around a "campaign" for equity in EU higher education.

This report describes the first 18 months of activity of the EQUNET consortium, and as such covers:
- The conclusions of the first state-of-innovation report on equity in Europe
- Details of our research, networking and dissemination methodologies and approach
- A Summary of our achievements, including of the EQUNET conferences organised so far
- Details of our workplan for the next 18 months
- A description of how our workplan relates to the EU's equity agenda

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1. Project Objectives

The EQUNET project was conceived as an independent research and networking initiative, with an aim to increase access to Higher Education for all marginalised and non-traditional groups based on a principle of equity. With the help of European Commission funding under the Lifelong Learning Programme, the project has brought together a consortium of renowned research organisations and stakeholder representatives to work on the project, ensuring a sound methodological base for the research presented here, and a wide audience to which to distribute the recommendations.

As originally conceived, the network has committed to research barriers arising as a result of:

- Educational background (issues revolving around recognition of non-formal and informal education, or non-traditional types of formal learning such as access for young persons who have been schooled at home, and distance learners)

- Socioeconomic conditions (issues revolving around access for people in employment, with family commitments, coming from divergent income groups, by level of dependency upon parents, etc.)

- Structural problems in Higher Education (dealing with issues such as curricula, governance structures, admissions standards, funding policies, etc.).

The project initially set out to analyse the degree and nature of these barriers for individuals from five target groups, namely

- 'traditional' students (i.e. 18-22 year olds)

- Migrants

- Continuing learners (professionals building upon a degree)

- Adult learners (without a degree or changing profession)

- Post-Professionals, i.e. those at the end of the lifelong learning curve

In terms of its networking activities, the EQUNET consortium believes that in order to have an impact on equity in Higher Education, as on any complex and multifaceted societal theme, it is fundamental to involve all possible categories of stakeholders and to mobilize all the existing advocacy and decision making energies and dynamics that lay around the theme. Given the specificity of the theme addressed, EQUNET neither intends to create a "new" network nor a "network of networks", but rather to represent a thematic hub where institutions and individuals working on Higher Education and peers working on equity-assurance can meet, exchange knowledge, and shape a more equitable future for European universities.

In line with this reasoning, EQUNET is aiming at building an evidence-based advocacy network aiming at raising awareness on the issue of equity in Higher Education. The network deals with:

- policy advocacy, by contributing to shaping EU and if possible national policies in its field. Its main concern is to shape agendas by influencing legislation and guaranteeing the representation of interests at the European level (and at a national or regional level);

- dissemination and cross fertilisation, by promoting the EQUNET research findings and by fostering the exchange of best HE equity practices among relevant stakeholders and

communities. As a European dissemination network it acts as a platform for mainstreaming and benchmarking of good practices at the Member states level;

- resources documentation, by supporting the creation of an open archive for equity-related documents and resources.

2.   Project Approach

The project's activities are divided into two major activity clusters:
- Research activities leading towards the creation of the 'state of innovation' reports
- Networking and Dissemination activities, involving the promotion of the reports and the formation of a coalition of organisations working for equity in Higher Education

Research activities began with a specification of the scope of research and the creation of a methodological outline. Research activities involve the use of primary sources of the data in the form of micro-data from European statistical surveys, and the use of secondary data from various sources including the Eurostudent project, academic literature, Eurostat, OECD, and the European Commission amongst others. Each chapter is authored by a main author, supported by a secondary author who authors small parts and acts as a primary peer-reviewer. In addition, a separate researcher provides case-studies to further illustrate the statistics provided in the report. Recommendations are formed jointly between all project partners, and a preview report is given to cooperating stakeholder organisations for initial feedback before publication.

Based on this research, the project is producing three reports:
- The first report, "Evolving Diversity", has already been published and gives an overall look at access to Higher Education in Europe, with special focus on socioeconomic background, part-time studies and student income & expenditure.
- The second report will deal with access for various 'minority' groups including migrants, disabled students and students from rural areas. It will also focus on lifelong learners
- The third report will consider the core question of measuring equity, analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the various quantitative and qualitative approaches which may be applied, and consequently propose a toolbox of approaches for policymakers to better understand equity issues in their respective jurisdictions

In terms of dissemination and networking, the project relies on the following activities to get its message through:
- An annual EQUNET conference, serves as the main forum to launch our report and get first feedback on it from the public. In addition, an international policy forum is held for invited experts, so as to have a high-level academic discussion on issues surrounding equity
- A website and newsletter are the online home of EQUNET, and provide access to all project activities and products. The website is supported by an online open access repository, providing a unique library of materials on access.
- A virtual community, hosted on the facebook platform, provides a space for discussion amongst members, and linkages with other equity initiatives
- Face to Face meetings with stakeholder organisations are held regularly, so as to agree concrete and specific avenues of cooperation with the various groups
- Project partners speak and present papers at a variety of international conferences and seminars, related to the project's objectives and results. On average, one such event is attended every 2 months

Several levels of Quality Assurance insure the quality of deliverables:

- Each chapter has a secondary author / peer-reviewer to provide a second opinion on authoring
- The entire report goes through a formal peer-review conducted by three internationally renowned experts in the field before, which provide a detailed opinion, which then is incorporated into the final draft of the main report.

Process quality is ensured through a sophisticated monitoring and evaluation system which ensures that every aspect of operations is continually checked, re-evaluated and according to a *kai-zen* quality philosophy.

Dissemination Approach

The dissemination approach is planned using the SUSTAIN methodology. The project uses strategy uses the SUSTAIN dissemination approach, which was developed by SCIENTER within the framework of a Socrates ODL project. The approach consists of four distinct phases namely:

- Awareness of the project identity and its outputs
- Analysis of the surrounding environment
    - o   Including analysis of future scenarios
- Feasibility of Dissemination and Exploitation Actions
- Including assessment of the actions

This approach is best visualised as following:
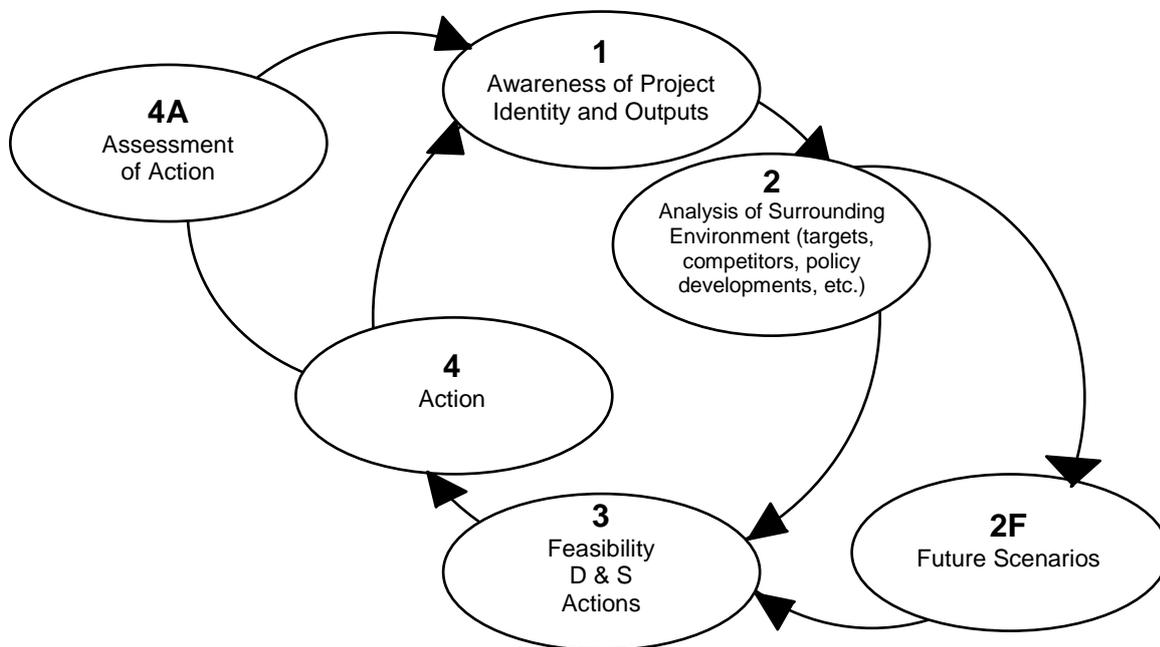
The first step of the approach involves elucidating the nature of the project, its outputs as well as target users and stakeholders. From here, the strengths and weaknesses of each part of the project are analysed, and possible future scenarios are extracted. Following this, the options for

dissemination actions are considered, in line with the resources and priorities of the project. After this preparation phase, the actions themselves are held, also taking into account the opportunities which might be found by embedding them into already existing events.

Using the approach, each partner prepared a schedule for dissemination activities, including the hosting of a dissemination plan in each country. Each activity was pre-targeted for a particular target group, and its effectiveness was assessed after the fact. The schedule included publications in journals, production of gray material, conference presentations, hosting stands in related fairs, presentations in schools and others amongst myriad activities.

Quality Approach

The Consortium's quality principles and the related indicators are:
- Flexibility: Requests to make changes or deviations are notified and explained in written form. The changes or the deviations are approved by all partners before becoming effective. The project is amenable to adapt to emerging needs identify during the project life-cycle.
- Participation: All partners take part in at least 90% of the meetings and events related to the tasks or activities they have to carry out. All decisions taken together with the operational specifications of the activities are presented in written form and the partners are required to approve these documents in written form.
- Documentation: The working documents and operational specifications of the activities are written and stored in accordance with a pre-defined format.
- Efficacy Effectiveness: The processes/phases produce the expected results in terms of planned outputs in the timeframe foreseen and within the remit of working plan. The corrective measures are agreed and approved by all partners. The level of the resources employed for carrying out the activities is coherent with the resource level anticipated in the approved project. All corrective measures are approved by all partners
- Innovation: The value commitment of the partners and stakeholders supports innovation
- Coherence: The processes/phases produce the expected results in terms of planned outputs
- Transparency: The nature and level of resourcing available and all processes are transparent to all members of the partnership
- Relevance: Relevance of the processes and results/outcomes is validated periodically. If necessary corrective measures are put in place.

In addition, each work-package is internally evaluated according to a set of quality criteria, namely:

OBJECT	CRITERIA	SCHEDULE
WP 1 - MANAGEMENT	Perception of the added value of the outputs and results of project: learning among partners, accumulated literature (articles, papers of various types, books), accumulated knowledge sources besides literature, importance, usability, scientific value of the methodologies adopted, usability of indicators developed,	During the life cycle of the project and at the end of project

	correspondence between foreseen objectives and obtained results, relevance of the planned activities and the identified needs and priorities, efficiency and working methods, efficiency of the communication system, systematization of the results, cost-efficiency of project activities.	
Phases / Stages	correspondence between foreseen objectives and expected results, efficiency of the communication system, quality, relevance and timing of the tasks fulfilled, relevance of the activities with reference to the identified needs and priorities	
WP2 – Understanding equitable access	Number and quality of data sets, uploaded knowledge souces map of the relevant actors created equity indicators created and differing from the existing ones, list of methods created, a definition of surveying scope	During the implementation of the project and at the end of wp
WP3 – Snapshot of access	An overview on the field and actors produced, barriers to access identified and mapped, with the emphasis on the innovative element in this (in relation to the existing literature and policies) Connection between the barriers and target groups discovered and described, Recommendations for solutions formulated with the emphasis on innovative elements	During the implementation stages and at the and of the wp
WP4 – Networking for equality	Virtual community established and communicating, debating, using the website (platform) facilities, using the sources of knowledge available on the website platform, cooperating	during the life cycle of the project and at the end of project
WP5- General Dissemination Activities	Website is functioning and regularly updated with the relevant content use (frequency) and relevance of the content on the website, newsletter periodically released with the positive feedback from the network members the state of innovation report published and exposed to the critic at (at least) one external international event related to higher education.	During and at the end of project
WP6- Research & networking for policy development	Meetings on key policy messages organized with the positive partners, stakeholders and research peers feedback, policy messages formulated and published in the report, disseminated to policy makers and freely accessible on the website state of innovation report received a positive feedback on the yearly conference and on the website, especially in terms of innovative character of the outputs/deliverables yearly conferences (3) organized and hosted by a partner with a	Throughout the duration of the project

	considerable attendance by the relevant stakeholders and partners and relevant impact on the evaluation, dissemination and progress of the project/outcomes	
WP7– Quality and Evaluation Management	Status reports delivered, peer reviews performed and the outcomes taken into account, Impact audit by the consortium performed	During the WP development and at the end of project

3.   Project Outcomes & Results

The project published its first report, "Evolving Diversity" at the end of 2010. The title is inspired by The London Communiqué, which sets Europe the task of ensuring that our Higher Education systems reflect the diversity of our populations. Thus, EQUNET's first report gives a comparison of the state of equity in access to Higher Education in the EU27 + EEA countries, and of the evolution of the concept and the actual state of diversity in Europe's Higher Education institutions today. Its indicators tackle:
- entry into Higher Education
- equity as defined by socioeconomic background
- income and expenditure of students in Higher Education
- the effect of work on studies.

The numerical indicators are matched with various examples of practice from around the continent. The report also uses this data to make insights on perceptions of equity from European policymakers, consider the validity of different ways of measuring equity and the validity of current policy-initiatives. The report can be downloaded from the EQUNET website at http://www.equnet.info. The main conclusions are contained with chapter 7 of our report.

The project has also organised two major events in the first half of the year, namely:
- the 1st EQUNET conference, held together with EURASHE's 20th anniversary conference, in October 2010 in Tallinn. The event brought together 120 participants, mainly from professional higher education for a full day to discuss the conclusions of the EQUNET report and the situation of the 'social dimension' agenda in Europe more generally
- an international expert seminar on equity in Higher Education, termed the 'Equnet Symposion' held in collaboration with CEPS in Ljubljana, brought together 40 of Europe's leading experts in Equity in Education for a 2-day intensive seminar where they discussed issues surrounding equity in detail. The material from the seminar was added to EQUNET's knowledgebase, and will also be the subject of a separate publication to be issued by CEPS

In terms of dissemination activities, the project achieved the following impact within its first year:
- EQUNET Results were presented at 9 different conferences and workshops around Europe, including two self-organised conferences. Joint exposure for all events was around 500 pax (of which 170 at self-organised events), mainly made up of policymakers and stakeholders
- 6 press releases were issued related to the project and its results
- The EQUNET website served 15000 pages to 5000 visitors from 126 countries
- The virtual community served 14000 views, and confirmed 90 fans
- The newsletter was sent out to mailing lists with over 1000 persons on
- The main EQUNET report was downloaded 800 times from the project website. In addition, 107 copies (according to google) of the report exist in other areas of the internet. Assuming 50 downloads per instance, this would lead to an additional 5350 downloads of the report
- EQUNET held face-to-face meetings with 7 stakeholder organisations

4.   Partnerships

The consortium constitutes a complimentary group of organisations, suited towards implementing EQUNET's vision of an evidence-based policy advocacy network. It includes:

- research organisations - the research organisations all have a pedigree of European research projects, including projects done for Bologna Process conferences, and for elements of the E&T 2010 work programme. All the organisations have experience in pan-European surveys in the educational field
- stakeholders - between them, the stakeholders represent institutions and students in every field of education, and represent organisations in every member state of the EU, giving them unparalleled ability to collect information, disseminate results and affect policies at European, national and regional levels
- project management experts - between them, the partners have literally managed hundreds of European Projects, and thus bring together a high element of expertise in project management, which will contribute significantly to being able to achieve the objectives in time and on target.

Thanks to this organisation, the project has direct connections both with the latest data being produced regarding equity in Higher Education in Europe as well as to policy discussions around equity happening in various fora.

Over the experience of the first year, we have seen a number of benefits from bringing our organisations together, rather than working solely independently:

- moving towards a mixed methods approach: the project researchers are respectively grounded in qualitative or quantitative research techniques, with focus on macro and/or micro levels. By working together, all researchers have steadily moved towards a more comprehensive mixed methods approach which is of benefit to the project as a whole
- reinforcement of networking activities through project contacts: all of our events so far have been organised in collaboration with a specific partner in the project, thus giving guaranteed access to a constituency and more focused dissemination potential. In addition partners' various e-networks have proved invaluable in disseminating results.
- Access to national data from several countries: the trans-national dimension of the partnership means that aside from the analysis of secondary EU-level data, the partnership has been able to colour this data with examples from their various national or sectoral contexts, leading to a much richer report, and a better understanding of the underlying processes

5.　Plans for the Future

The project is half-way through its lifetime, and as such it will continue to follow its work-plan over the next 18 months. As such, work is currently underway on writing the second and third reports which will be released in March 2012 and September 2012 respectively.

Report 2 will cover lifelong learners, migrants, students with a disability, and students from rural areas. Gender and socioeconomic background are not the prime concerns of report 2 but as they will often be related to inequities of the four target groups they must be taken into account to some extent. Furthermore a critical reflection of the EQUNET's approach as well as the current theories and concepts of inequity and inequality in (higher) education could complement the empirical analysis. In any case, the scope of report 2 must reflect the resources available to the project as regards staff and data. This list rather reflects the maximum scope than the minimum scope.

Report 3 will focus very closely and concretely on the main outcome promised by the project application, that of proposing a set of indicators for measuring equity. In line with the medium reduction approach which has been adopted throughout the project, it is likely that while the project may suggest some leading symptoms of inequity, it may not necessarily propose a single compound indicator which can be applied in all situations.

In addition, a series of EQUNET events is being planned including:

- A conference focused towards students in October 2012

- A final conference focused towards policymakers in September 2012

- A second International Policy Seminar in early 2012

- A set of 6 national workshops organised by stakeholders

- Workshops / plenaries held at c. 8 international conferences

In addition to this, EQUNET will significantly step up its networking activities, targeting its recommendations directly at policymakers, by interacting with them through its events as well as through direct marketing, and through increased coalition-building activities with education & training stakeholders.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Over the past decade, equity has found a place in both policy initiatives from the European Commission as well as those promulgated through the Bologna Process.

Within the Bologna Process, the social dimension was first mentioned in the Prague Communiqué (2001) as an issue raised by students, and was affirmed by ministers as something to be explored. In the Berlin Communiqué (2003), the role of the social dimension became clear: 'The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level.' In the London Communiqué (2007), the role of the social dimension was also linked to the general role of Higher Education: 'raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society.' This communiqué also gives the clearest idea as to the overall aim of the social dimension policies, namely that 'the student body entering, participating in and completing Higher Education at all levels should reflect the diversity of populations'. The importance of 'maximising the talents and capacities of all citizens' through Higher Education is reiterated in the Leuven Communiqué (2009) in particular given 'the challenge of an ageing population'. (Westerheiden et al., 2010).

All member states were to provide a report on progress towards an action plan on the social dimension as part of the 2009 stocktaking of the Bologna Process. Nearly all EU states did do so, however with wide differences in terms of practicality, applicability, and specificity.

In terms of policy initiatives from the European Commission, equity was first given a role in 2006 when the European Council invited member states to ensure equitable education and training systems that are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socioeconomic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage. After a vast number of references to equity in EU policy documents (see box), 2009 and 2010 saw two important policy developments.

In May 2009, the council of the European Union approved a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up until the year 2020 (the so-called ET 2020 strategy), and identified "promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship" as one of 4 key priorities. Within the priority, the concept of equity was phrased in terms of allowing all citizens to acquire and develop skills and competencies needed for their employability. However, amongst the benchmarks set as part of the strategy, none were explicitly related to equity in Higher Education. In addition, the short term action plan from 2009-2011 included no actions in Higher Education related to this priority.

In May 2010, the 3013th Education, youth and culture Council meeting, adopted a set of conclusions relating to the social dimension of education and training. Within the field of Higher Education, it invites member states to:

- Promote widened access, for example by strengthening financial support schemes for students and through flexible and diversified learning paths.

- Develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates of Higher Education, including through strengthening individualised support, guidance and mentoring for students.

- Continue to eliminate barriers to, expand opportunities for, and improve the quality of, learning mobility, including by providing adequate incentives for the mobility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Promote specific programmes for adult students and other non-traditional learners.

EQUNET contributes towards these policies by providing an evidence-base on equity, considering the current state-of-equity in Europe, and analysing the issues which arise around the measurement of equity in Europe. By doing so, it hopes to make it possible for policymakers to design policies which are better-suited to the current situation, and better gauge the effects of the polices on their current activities.

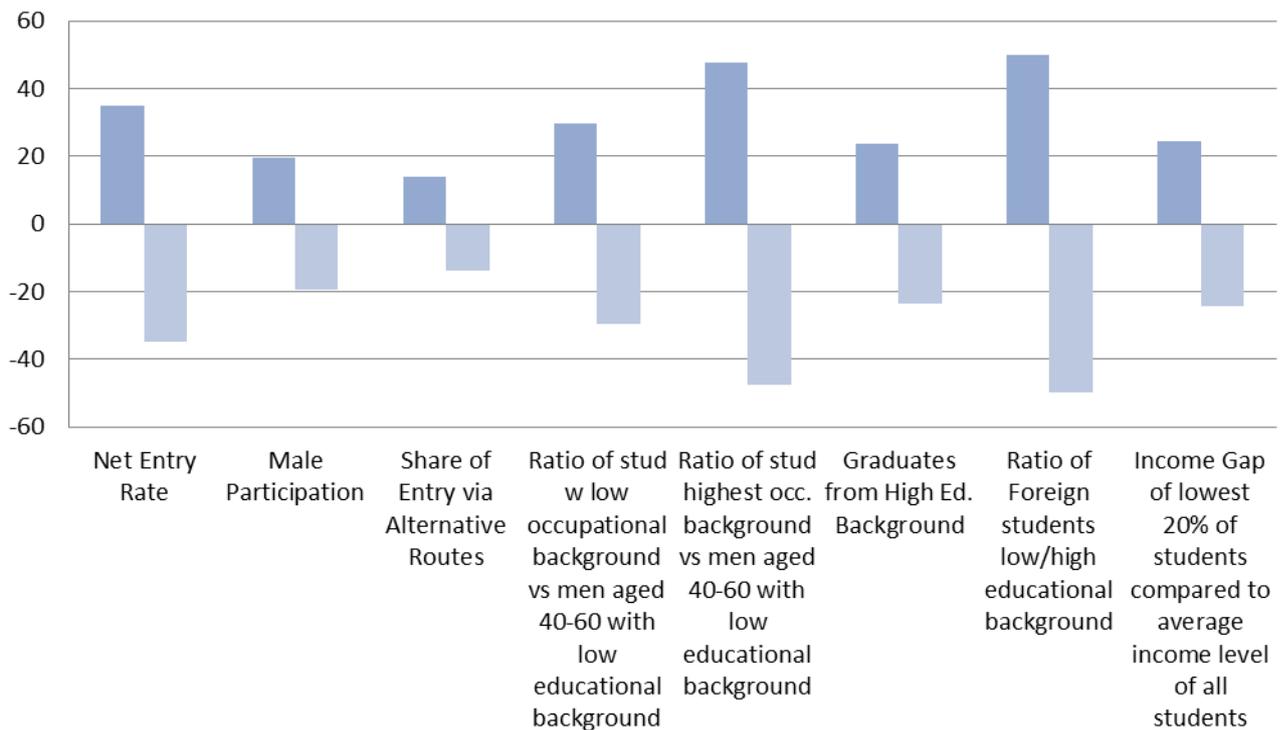# 7. Research Conclusions of the EQUNET project in the first 18 months

Issue 1: The EU-27's Higher Education Area is not equitable

Taken as a whole, the EU-27 shows wide divergences in the level of equity of HE systems, a fact confirmed consistently by every indicator considered in our report. Figure 34 shows the differences between the highest and lowest performing country on a selection of indicators considered in our report. Our report identified inequities in HE based on:

- Socioeconomic background (as defined by parents' educational and occupational background)

- Gender (both in terms of access, and more particularly in terms of qualitative access)

- Age (in terms of participation of adult learners in education)

In addition, the report finds significant differences in the income range of students attending Higher Education between countries. These findings are largely echoed by national governments in their stocktaking reports to the Bologna Process (Rauhvargers et al., 2009), as well as by the independent evaluation of the Bologna Process, which found 39 of 48 systems reporting inequalities in their student body. (Westerheiden et al., 2010)

Using the indicator of parents' educational and occupational background, it is found that the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and Ireland have shown the most progress in bringing about an equitable system, while Bulgaria, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Germany have made least progress. A high correlation exists between overall funding levels of Higher Education and the level of equity/inequity. Thus, all four of the countries with the least inequity are also amongst the highest spenders on education, both in terms of % of GDP as well as on a EUR/capita basis. With the notable exception of Germany, those at the bottom of the list also show some of the lowest investments in Higher Education.

A bar chart with the following x-axis categories: Net Entry Rate, Male Participation, Share of Entry via Alternative Routes, Ratio of stud w low occupational background vs men aged 40-60 with low educational background, Ratio of stud highest occ. background vs men aged 40-60 with low educational background, Graduates from High Ed. Background, Ratio of Foreign students low/high educational background, Income Gap of lowest 20% of students compared to average income level of all students. Y-axis ranges from -60 to 60.

Issue 2: EU Policies have been largely ineffective in addressing equity issues

Two recent studies commissioned by the European Commission found no link between Governance and Funding strategies promoted at EU level by means of the "Modernisation Strategy for Higher Education", and access to HE. (Jongbloed et al., 2010).

In the various policy documents linked to Higher Education issued by the European Commission in recent years, only two concrete proposals are made in relation to equity, namely that of generating higher investment in education through the introduction of tuition fees, and the offering of a more differentiated range of provision (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). The increase in the level of private funding is one of the elements of the modernisation strategy for education examined by the abovementioned studies, and, both when taken individually, as well as a part of the modernisation strategy as a whole, the study also finds no link between such a strategy and increase in access, let alone increases in equity.

Similarly, the "Independent Evaluation of the Bologna Process" finds that despite the fact that the first references to "Providing appropriate studying and living conditions for learners to overcome obstacles related to their social and economic background" ('Bologna' Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2003) appeared in 2003, policy actions have been too late in coming to do any meaningful type of assessment on them. Similarly, it also finds that there is as of yet no evidence of access being widened, or increased inclusion of disadvantaged groups. (Westerheiden et al., 2010).

Current improvements in absolute numbers can be partially explained by the trend towards massification of Higher Education in recent years. With students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds already at higher levels of participation, it is natural for further growth to come from those with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, an increase in absolute numbers does not necessarily correspond with an increase in equity, as has been discussed in depth in Chapter 5 of our

report. Additionally, a recent longitudinal study finds that, according to an equity index based on the educational attainment and occupational status of both parents, equity in Higher Education has plateaued in the last decade (Koucký et al., 2010).

Our findings on the rate of development of equity, together with the above evidence, indicates that, insofar as they exist at all, policy directions at EU level have had little to no effect on equitable access to Higher Education, with developments in the field being exclusively due to the implementation on national policies. This also explains to some extent the regional clustering of trends as well as the large divergences between groups of countries in levels of equity and development of equitable policies.

### Issue 3: Equitable access is increasing, but slowly

Our report finds that the proportion of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds accessing Higher Education has increased in absolute terms over the past decades. This said, this proportion has been increasing slowly, and assuming the current rate of progression continues, it would take c. 100 years for such students to reach the same participation rates as those from high socioeconomic backgrounds. This echoes the numbers found by other recent studies in the field (Koucký et al., 2010).
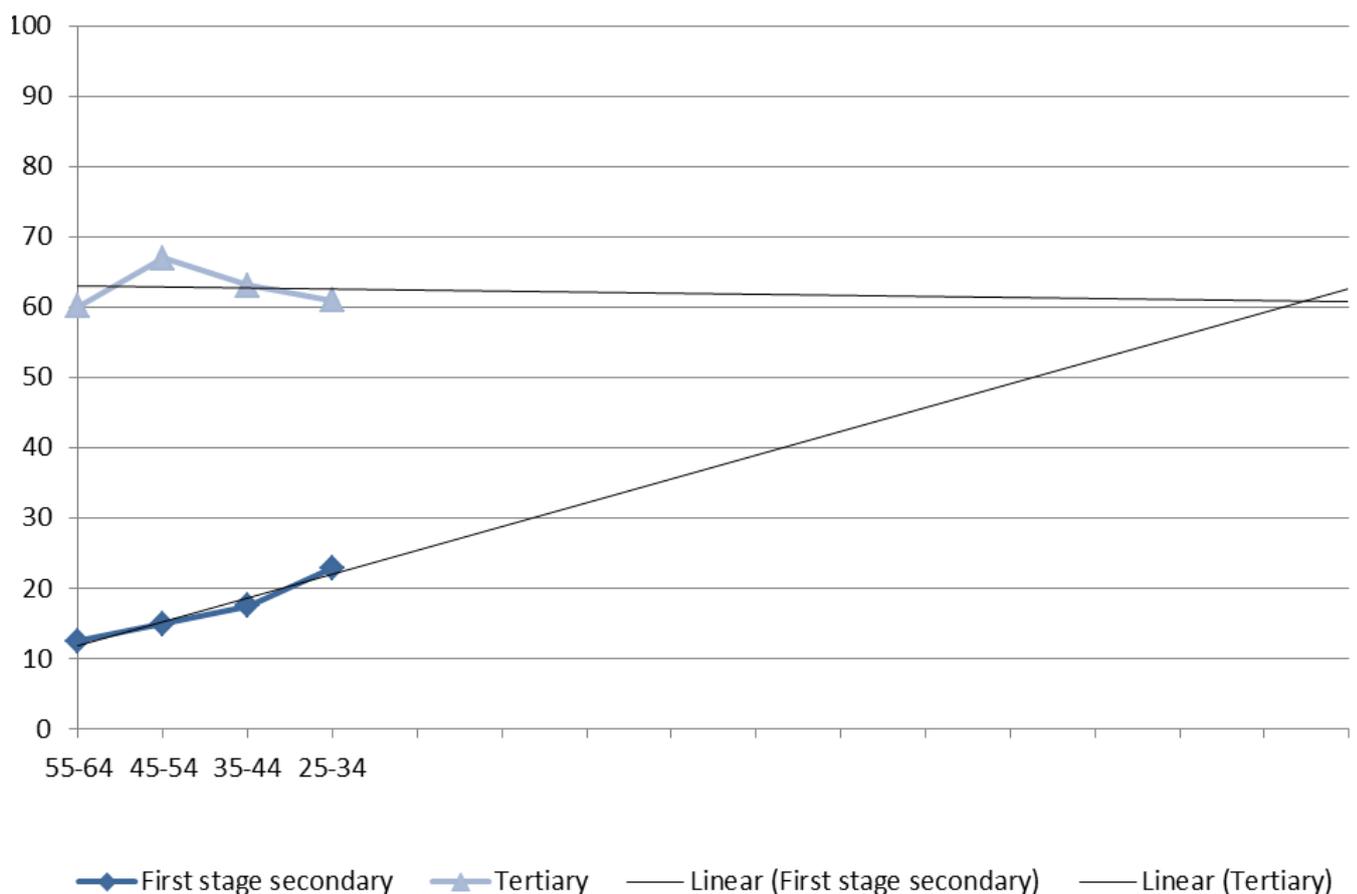
Issue 4: Elites within Higher Education are a barrier to knowledge-economy growth

Skill-forecasts for the EU-27 show that the number of management-level in Europe until 2020 will more or less remain constant, with the main engine for growth will be for the jobs of 'Professionals'

and 'Technicians and Associate Professionals', both of which are mainly composed of university-degree level jobs.
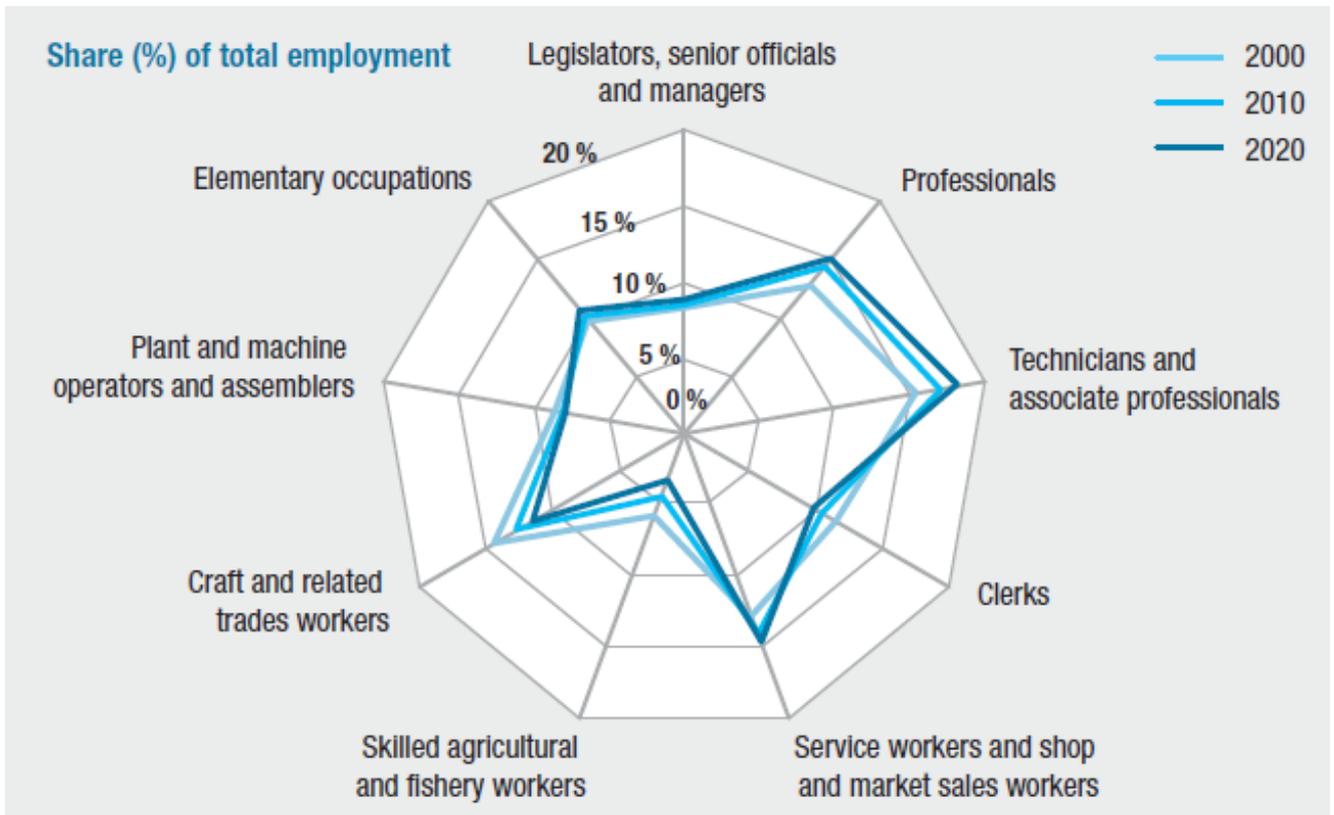
Through the findings of our study, we note the following issues which are of importance in relation to these trends:

- The highest growth areas in terms of labour market participation, is in the field of 'technicians and associate professionals', which is ranked third out of nine in terms of occupational statuses. Since, the highest stratum (i.e. legislators, senior officials & managers) will experience next to no growth, and the second (i.e. technicians and associate professionals) only mild growth, equality of opportunities will require that the current attitudes towards subject and profession choice, especially amongst students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, be changed. Without such reform, a barrier to entry to the highest level of professional status risks being created.

- It is widely recognised that prior job experience is particularly useful in the field of 'Technicians and Associate Professionals', whose studies often contain a strong vocational orientation (whether pursued at ISCED 5A or B). Currently, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds chose to gain labour market experience during their studies much less frequently than their counterparts.

- The demand for high-level qualifications (defined as ICSED 5 and above) will increase significantly in the next 10 years. This will require an increased participation in Higher Education across the board, but cannot be achieved without significantly increasing the participation of under-represented groups

Issue 5: The STEM skill-gap is largely an issue of gender equity
Our report shows an over-representation of females in teacher training, healthcare and the humanities while an underrepresentation of females in science, math and computing as well as in engineering. Europe's skill gap is largely made up of a lack of graduates in the latter two fields. Thus, within this context, it emerges that the overall issue of skill mismatches is actually a matter of gender-related skill mismatch.

For example, an industry study shows that between 1999 and 2003, the EU-15 fell short in producing 200,000 graduates with e-skills per year, meaning an increase in the skill gap of over 800,000 graduates in 4 years (ICT Skills Monitoring Group, 2003). This figure is nearly equal to the over-supply of female graduates in the field of education & training.

Issue 6: Young persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged
A student from a low socioeconomic background, in Europe is, when compared with his or her peers:

- Less likely to attend Higher Education

- Likely to choose different courses of study

- More likely to work during studies

- Far less likely to have a mobility experience

Consequently, they are more likely to become unemployed, more likely to earn less, and, assuming equity continues to increase at the historical pace, more likely to have children who also underperform.
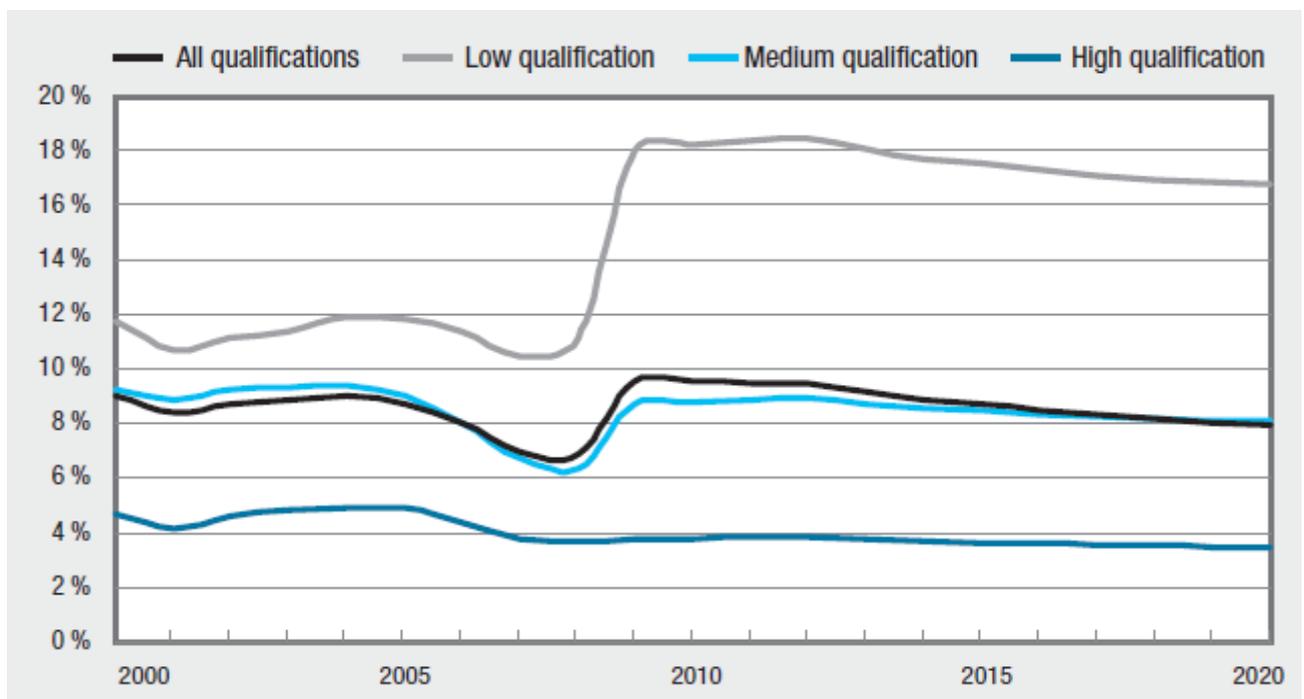
Issue 7: Public funding decreases income disparities between students
Our report shows that the income disparities between students are lowest in Sweden, Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, France and England/Wales. The countries which provide the

largest levels of student support as share of student income are Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, England/Wales the Netherlands, Austria and Finland. Statistically speaking, based on the entire Eurostudent dataset, these two variables show a correlation of -0,67 which is statistically significant.

While no empirical data can be uncovered as to the consequences of such a relation, it can be surmised that improved income equity amongst the student population also results in equity in a host of 'learning environment' factors related to student life, such as lodging, social life (including civic participation), access to educational tools/materials (such as computers), mobility opportunities, etc, and thus presumably improving equity of opportunity amongst students.

Issue 8: Age-related inequity remains a barrier to workforce re-skilling

Despite the on-going roll out of systems for Recognition of Prior Learning and Informal Learning, this study shows that overall participation of adults, either as a first Higher Education experience, or as a return to education, while increasing, remains low. Taken against a backdrop of overall up-skilling of the workforce, together with violent drops in employment and predictions of sustained economic weakness in the short to medium term, this is of special concern.

While even within the context of lifelong learning, it is expected that the 18-25 age group would have by far the highest participation rate in Higher Education, we can deduce the presence of age-related inequity from the numbers of older persons who would stand to benefit from Higher Education and have the theoretical opportunity to do so, but do not choose to participate.

Issue 9: Cultural Attitudes significantly affect participation

Statistics for EU OECD members, show that for a person over a lifetime, the net gain of participation in Higher Education (after taxes, school fees etc.) is c. 90,000 EUR[1] (OECD, 2010). While it is clear that multiple entry barriers may exist for students with a lower socioeconomic status, including funding limitations, quality of primary and secondary schooling, at-home learning resources available etc., rational choice theory would seem to dictate that a higher percentage of students would overcome these barriers, than those which our report shows actually do, considering the significant and incontestable monetary benefits of Higher Education (not to mention the numerous other non-monetary benefits).

The uncontrolled-for variable here is that of 'cultural capital', which, judging by participation rates, seem to show very significantly affects access to Higher Education, as evidenced by variations in PISA scores based on elements of cultural capital. Within this context, cultural capital has been described as including patterns of communication between parents and children, family support for their children's learning, home resources related to educational activities, family wealth, 'cultural' possessions and activities, reading habits and more (Finnie & Mueller, 2010).

Closely related to this theory is that of 'social costs', whereby social background in and of itself can act as a barrier to Higher Education. This can manifest itself in phenomena such as peer pressure actively discouraging pursuit of education, the most extreme example of which might be within the street-gang subcultures present in most Western cities to varying degrees.

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[1] Calculated from dollar rate at Exchange of 1USD = 0.71 EUR

Issue 10: A High Net Entry rate does not necessarily indicate an equitable HE system

When comparing the best- and worst- performing countries, defined as a compound indicator of parents' occupational and educational status, (see Fig. 13 & 14) with the overall net entry rates, one finds little to no correlation, indicating that policies to increase overall participation, do not necessarily benefit the most disadvantaged groups. Fig. 38 below shows net entry entry rates across Europe, while the countries highlighted in green and red are a selection of the best-performing (green) and worst- performing (red) countries in terms of equity as above defined respectively (see Chapter 5 for how the country groups were formed).
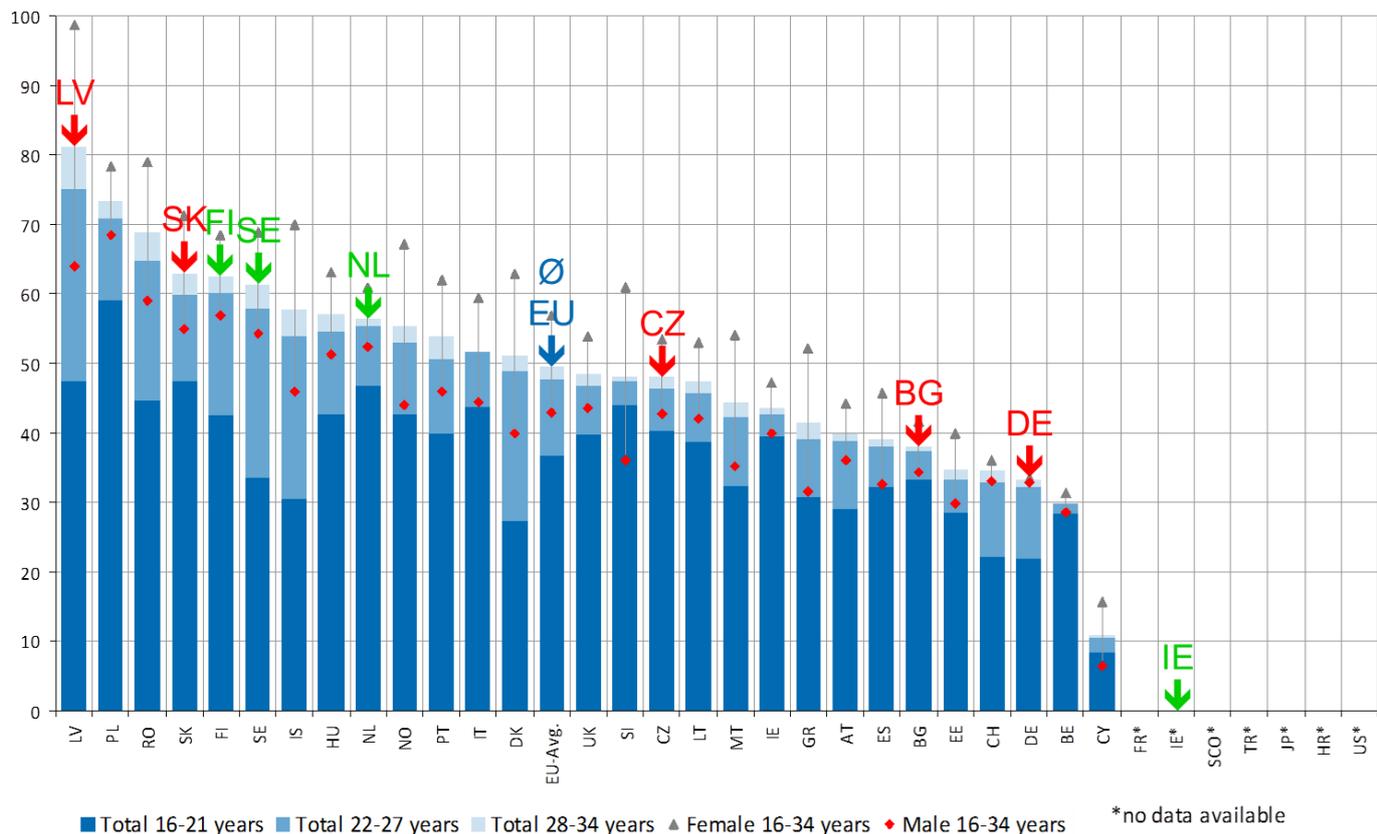
Issue 11: Validation of Prior Learning Seems to Improve Equity in Higher Education Systems

Our data leads us to hypothesise a link between recognition of prior learning (RPL) and equity. Five of the worst-performing countries on our occupational/educational status equity indicator (Germany, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia) show practically no entries to Higher Education through this type of alternative route. Consequently, countries with developed RPL systems also perform better on the equity indicator. Data on RPL is not extensive enough to definitively confirm this hypothesis; however the data available does indicate a strong probability of its accuracy.

Issue 12: Economic recovery is to a large part an issue of educational equity

In the past few pages, using data from our report, we have shown that:

- Gender Equity issues are exacerbating skill mismatches by profession/subject in Europe

- Age-related Equity issues are preventing reskilling of the workforce

- Socioeconomic Background Equity issues, are choking the pipeline for graduates with high qualifications in Europe

While an element of Europe's much vaunted 'growth and jobs' policies for the last several years, the demand for a shift in Europe's skill base has grown sharper, due to the tectonic shifts in the global economy thanks to the financial crisis, and especially due to a drastically changed employment landscape owing to the mass lay-offs that ensued from the crisis. Taken in this light, it becomes clear that Europe's skill challenge and the aim of reaching an equitable Higher Education system are intrinsically linked, and need to be dealt with in concert.

Issue 13: Data Collection – Lack of Data

In preparing our report, we have been struck by the surprising lack of data about students in general throughout the European Higher Education Area. This lack of data has been echoed by the Bologna Process Stocktaking Report, where it deals with Stocktaking of National Strategies for the Social Dimension (Rauhvargers, Deane, & Pauwels, 2009). At the current time, we identified four main international data sources for measuring equitable access to higher education, namely Eurostat, Eurostudent, OECD and the National Stocktaking Reports on the Social Dimension (as part of the Bologna Process). Of these, the last two are of little use in comparative research, since the OECD report on equity was only issued in 2007, while the National Stocktaking Reports are so general as to be impossible to compare empirically in any useful manner.

Reflecting the definition of equity as "the student body entering, participating in and completing Higher Education should reflect the diversity of our populations" ('Bologna' Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2007) seems to indicate that a successful measuring strategy for access would at very least at its base contain qualitative data as to the nature of the student body entering Higher Education.

Unfortunately, the main international data providers only provide aggregate data as to students' sex and age related to parents' occupational and social status, and to some extent, origin. Thus, interpretations of diversity which include ethnicity, race, colour, disability, family conditions, family income etc. are all impossible due to a lack of data in the main sources. On the other hand, micro-level data does exist for outcomes of education, in terms of professions, subjects studied, as well as detailed information as to participation in the labour force.

Thus, while current statistics cover the 'majority' disadvantaged groups, i.e. by gender and by socioeconomic status, we can glean no information on the state of minority access and participation to Higher Education, except through select studies involving primary research by individual researchers or Non-Governmental Organisations (which were outside the scope of our report).

Issue 14: Data Collection - Lack of definition as to the concept of a higher education qualification

Practically all statistical systems use the ISCED system for classification of education to define educational levels statistically. However, the rise of 'advanced' vocational education, and the increased blurring of the difference between 'vocational' and 'higher' programmes within the education system is leading to distortions in the statistics. The problem, lies at a number of levels:

<u>ISCED 3A and 4A</u>

ISCED 3A is broadly defined as 'secondary programmes designed to give access to level 5A (with level 5 being tertiary studies), while ISCED 4A is broadly defined as 'post-secondary, non-tertiary programmes designed to give access to level 5A'. However, the streaming system into vocational and upper secondary schooling has in recent years evolved with the creation of several alternative routes

to Higher Education across most of Europe. Thus, statistics looking at entry into 5A as a percentage of 3A and 4A (see Figure 7) find that 12 countries (RO, SI, LV, CH, PT, IS, NO, MT, DK, ES, AT, NL) have entry rates higher than 100%, thus limiting the use of this statistic.

ISCED 5

The ISCED 5 (tertiary) level, shows many of the same problems. Higher Education is generally equated with 5A, while VET is equated with 5B. The Table below shows the differences between the two:

ISCED 5A	ICSCED 5B
- It involves a minimum cumulative theoretical duration (at tertiary) of three years' full-time equivalent, although typically it is of 4 or more years. If a degree has 3 years' full-time equivalent duration, it is usually preceded by at least 13 years of previous schooling (see paragraph 35). For systems in which degrees are awarded by credit accumulation, a comparable amount of time and intensity would be required; - it typically requires that the faculty have advanced research credentials; - it may involve completion of a research project or thesis; - it provides the level of education required for entry into a profession with high skills requirements (see paragraph 84) or an advanced research programme	- it is more practically oriented and occupationally specific than programmes at ISCED 5A, and does not provide direct access to advanced research programmes; - it has a minimum of two years' full-time equivalent duration but generally is of 2 or 3 years. For systems in which qualifications are awarded by credit accumulation, a comparable amount of time and intensity would be required; - the entry requirement may require the mastery of specific subject areas at ISCED 3B or 4A; and - it provides access to an occupation.

Table 1: Comparison of ISCED 5A vs. ISCED 5B

In practice, it is unclear how to classify a number of qualifications, such as advanced computing courses offered within vocational institutions, or short cycle degrees offered within Higher Education Institutions. The confusion has led some organisations, such as CEDEFOP to do away with 5A and 5B entirely, and just term 'higher qualifications' as ISCED 5 and 6 together, which while more accurate, decreases the specificity significantly. The two clearest examples of such deviations in our data are in the numbers for Cyprus and for Germany. In the former case, overall participation seems to be lower than it is due to advanced degrees being offered within VET institutions, while in the latter case, the qualifications by fathers' occupational and educational backgrounds are likely to be off, due to the advanced degrees being offered by VET institutions.

Mis-collection of data

While data on the exact collection method isn't available by country, many countries still term their institutions in terms of Vocational and Higher Institutions. For statistical purposes, all students following degrees within the first type of institution are termed 5B and all students within the latter are termed 5B. Alternatively, any qualification called a degree is classed 5A, while all other qualifications are termed 5B if awarded at tertiary level. ISCED was designed to be applied on a programme not on an institution or qualification level, however interpretation of statistics indicate that this is often not the case.

Issue 15 - Evidence of good practice is limited

While some correlations, such as e.g. between overall level of funding and equity can be made, generally speaking the EU-wide statistics offer few direct examples of good practice in increasing equity. Division of statistics by region or by type of educational system can be helpful in increasing specificity, however even these categorisations offer significant exceptions and deviations, due to the sheer variety of educational systems within the EU. Due to this, qualitative data is needed on the effects of particular policies on access at national or regional levels, which can then be compared with similar initiatives from different countries and tested in pilots. At the moment, most of this data is available in individual publications from academic authors, or from the 10 country studies (of which 6 are in Europe) done as part of OECD's thematic review into equity in education. The best potential source in the long run will be the stocktaking reports of the Bologna Process, which as of the last edition, asked for information about practices in the countries, but which received answers which were too abbreviated and general to be of any analytical use.