

Chapter 7

Inclusive Education in Bolstering Equality and Equity for All

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of Inclusive (IE) in bolstering equality and equity for all in higher education (HE). It begins by defining the concepts of IE, equality, and equity, and their implications for society. Five dimensions of equality in education are discussed and related to equality in HE. The chapter links IE to equality and equity as an integral part of IE in HE. While the intention of IE is widely acknowledged, the unintended consequences of exclusionary mechanisms are highlighted, along with strategies for mitigating them in HE. The chapter also discusses the meaningful, effective curricula and the assessment methods that enhance equality and equity in HE. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the challenges of fostering the operationalisation equality and equity in HE.

INTRODUCTION

While equity and equality have been used somewhat synonymously, they are philosophically different (Espinoza, 2007; Paananen et al., 2019). Equity implies values and codes that enhance justice and fairness, whereas equality refers to the

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state of being equal in rights and opportunities (Metsämuuronen, 2019). International organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization do not always maintain these distinctive differences, often using “equity” to mean “equality” (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2011), even though, in some cases, “equality” may be the more appropriate concept (Metsämuuronen, 2019).

This lack of conceptual clarity minimises the understanding of the challenges in higher education for disabled children in developing countries. When systems ignore the specific historical and social barriers faced by vulnerable populations, they risk reinforcing the very disparities they aim to eliminate. Without a focus on high-level competencies and precise definitions, the promise of education as a social equaliser remains unfulfilled, leaving millions in a cycle of “learning poverty.” Despite the global consensus that education is a basic right and a noble endeavour for sustainable futures, there remain deep-seated queries regarding the actual outcomes of these competing perspectives on equity and inequality.

In higher education, equity is founded on the academic achievements and products of students. It espouses differences in socioeconomic status, race, and ethnic backgrounds of students (Amaral, 2022). In the current decade, these differences are further complicated by digital inequality; students from low-income backgrounds now face an “entry fee” for modern learning that includes the high cost of data, hardware, and stable electricity (Mhlanga, 2024; Mateko et al., 2025). These digital barriers create a “double burden” for students who must navigate both academic rigour and technological deprivation. Equity determines what students achieve (American Association of University Women, 1998).

Thus, true equity embraces an intersectional approach that acknowledges how disability, poverty, and geography overlap to create extraordinary exclusion. For instance, children with disabilities are now 47% more likely to be out of school than their non-disabled peers, even in regions where enrollment is rising (UNICEF, 2025). To address this, universities must shift from a deficit model, which views the student as the problem, to a social model that identifies and removes barriers. Also, equity is not limited to access but includes success elements like the parents' socioeconomic backgrounds that determine learners' achievements and success (Reardon, 2011).

It is no wonder that it is universally recommended that policies promoting the students' success should include access to diverse resources (IAU, 2008). The most recent global data indicate that approximately 273 million children and youth remain out of school, a number that has grown due to economic volatility and regional conflict (UNESCO, 2026). Without the targeted provision of resources, ranging from financial aid to assistive technologies, higher education will remain a privilege of

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