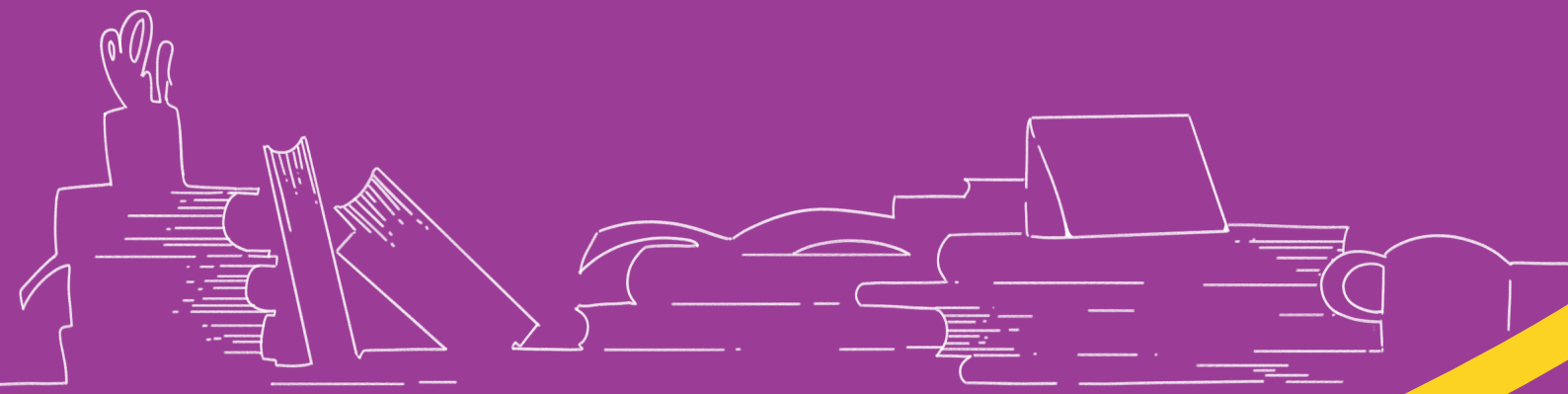
unesco

International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

# Higher education global trends report

## Towards inclusive, equitable and quality higher education in an internationally mobile landscape



Education 2030

**UNESCO – a global leader in education**

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners and responding to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.

**The Global Education 2030 Agenda**

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to **"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."** The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.

unesco
United Nations
Educational, Scientific
and Cultural Organization

Education 2030

Published in 2026 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France, and the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), Edificio Asovincar, 1062-A. Av. Los Chorros con Calle Acueducto, Altos de Sebucán. Caracas, Venezuela.



ISBN: 978-980-7175-78-4

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54674/IN.2026.94



Authors: Vanja Gutović, Mathias Bouckaert, Tiantian Xia, José Antonio Quinteiro Goris, Gonzalo Baroni Boces, Miah Dionne Sears, Madeline Sue Peterson, Elizabeth Osei

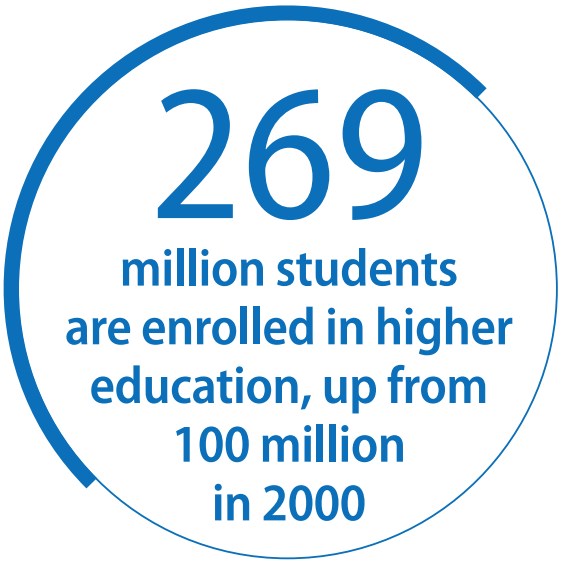
Editor: Shereen Joseph
Graphic design and layout: César Vercher
Cover design: Weiwei Kang

For more information contact:
info-IESALC@unesco.org www.iesalc.unesco.org +58 212 2861020

# Higher education is at a turning point

Technological disruption, demographic change and shifting labour market expectations are reshaping higher education globally. Although global enrolment more than doubled over the last 20 years to reach nearly 269 million students in 2024, major inequalities persist in access, completion, funding and mobility. Fewer than 3% of students participate in international mobility, only 9% of refugees access higher education, and many institutions face mounting financial pressure, growing threats to academic freedom, and the challenge of adapting to digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

Drawing on data from the Higher Education Policy Observatory and an extensive review of key literature, this first UNESCO report on global trends in higher education offers a timely and evidence-based picture of a sector at a crossroads. It maps the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities reshaping higher education today, across areas ranging from participation, equity, governance and quality assurance to financing, teaching personnel, student mobility and the recognition of qualifications.




As the world enters the final stretch to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, the report serves as a practical tool to inform policy, foster dialogue and support more inclusive, equitable, resilient and future-ready higher education systems.

unesco

*"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed"*

unesco
International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

# Higher education global trends report

## Towards inclusive, equitable and quality higher education in an internationally mobile landscape

# Foreword

Today, more than ever, higher education is at an inflection point. Technological disruption, demographic transitions, geopolitical realignments and the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of tertiary education. It is in this context that UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC) presents this inaugural edition of the *Higher education global trends report*.
I believe this comprehensive analysis will become an indispensable reference to inform the actions of policymakers, institutional leaders and higher education stakeholders worldwide.

Where primary and secondary education have benefited from systematic global monitoring through the work of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, higher education has fallen to the wayside and lacks comparable comprehensive analysis. This gap has constrained our collective ability to make evidence-based decisions at a time when higher education is increasingly recognized as a crucial step towards sustainable development, social mobility, international cooperation and inclusive growth. Among the nearly 269 million students enrolled worldwide in higher education, there exist pressing concerns over completion rates, equity gaps and quality that demand urgent attention.

Moving forward without a clear map of the terrain is no longer a viable option at this crucial moment where higher education stands at a crossroads, making the data and analysis presented in this report indispensable. The report is distinctive in its treatment of higher education as a complex, interconnected system rather than a set of isolated components. By integrating data from 146 countries through our Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) with in-depth policy analysis across 10 thematic areas, the report has created an unprecedented evidence base that moves beyond simple statistics to reveal the deeper patterns shaping this sector.

The report's dual structure, examining both systemic dimensions and the specific phenomenon of student mobility this year, reflects our commitment to providing both breadth and depth in our analysis. In essence, this report goes beyond merely compiling data to serve instead as an indispensable strategic tool designed to illuminate pathways toward more inclusive, equitable and better quality higher education systems, acting as a guide to shaping a global higher education landscape with international cooperation and solidarity at its heart.

The *Higher education global trends report* represents the culmination of UNESCO's longstanding commitment to higher education, building upon the foundations laid by the 2022 World Higher Education Conference and its roadmap as well as the global and regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. It operationalizes the principles for which we have long advocated by providing the empirical foundation necessary for their implementation. By establishing the HEPO as a permanent platform for data collection and analysis, we are not just documenting the present state of higher education – we are creating the necessary infrastructure for continuous monitoring and improvement that will serve the global community for years to come.

As you engage with the report, I invite you to see it not as a static document but as a call to action. The trends it identifies – from the crisis of teaching personnel to the promise and peril of digital transformation, from persistent equity gaps to the urgent need for sustainable financing models – demand our immediate attention and commitment

to implement solutions. The data reveal both how far we have come and how far we have left to go to realize the promise of higher education as a human right and public good.

The challenges ahead while immense are not insurmountable. The report highlights persistent inequities in access to and participation in higher education across regions. The global gross enrolment ratio (GER) is at 43%, masking stark regional disparities. While regions such as Europe and North America have enrolment rates around 80%, sub-Saharan Africa has a rate as low as about 9%, far below the world average. International student mobility has grown significantly – with roughly 7.3 million students studying abroad in 2023, a number that has more than tripled since 2000 – yet is also unevenly distributed. Europe and North America host the majority of mobile students (54%), while the other regions absorb differing shares of global outbound mobility.

Furthermore, only 9% of refugees access higher education. Academic freedom has regressed to levels not seen in 50 years. Fewer than 15% of countries prioritize the well-being of their teaching personnel. One-third of the global population remains offline even as we herald an age of digital transformation. These are not merely statistics; the numbers represent millions of unrealized dreams and untapped potential.

Yet, the report also shines a beacon of hope. The emergence of new regional mobility hubs, innovative financing models that strike a balance between access and sustainability, and the growing recognition of foreign qualifications all point toward a more interconnected and inclusive future. The very existence of this report demonstrates our collective commitment to evidence-based transformation.

As we work towards achieving SDG 4 and fulfilling our commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education for all, the report provides both a baseline to measure progress and a roadmap for the journey ahead. I trust it will serve to inform national strategies, inspire institutional innovations and ultimately contribute to a world where quality higher education is not a privilege for the few but an opportunity for all who seek it.

**Borhene Chakroun**

Interim Director

UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
(UNESCO IESALC)

# Acknowledgements

The realization of this ambitious undertaking would not have been possible without the exceptional dedication and expertise of many individuals. Special thanks go to Vanja Gutović and Mathias Bouckaert, who led this monumental effort with remarkable vision and rigor, and to José Antonio Quinteiro, Gonzalo Baroni Boces, Tiantian Xia, Madeline Sue Peterson, Miah Dionne Sears and Elizabeth Osei for their contributions to this work. Their collective ability to synthesize vast amounts of data while maintaining analytical clarity and policy relevance sets a new standard for global higher education reporting.

Contributing authors and researchers enriched each chapter while the team at the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) provided invaluable data contributions, and the dedicated network of national correspondents and partner organizations ensured the accuracy and completeness of our country-level information. Several UNESCO colleagues contributed to and/or reviewed this report – Anna D'Addio, Keith Holmes, Shafika Isaacs, Leila Loupis, Maya Prince, Delphine Santini, Noah Sobe, Peter Wells and Yanhong Zhang. Special thanks to Sara Maneiro and Shereen Joseph for providing editorial support. Finally, acknowledgement extends to external reviewers from partner organizations and recognized experts in higher education – Ana Capilla, José Joaquin Brunner, Roberta Basset, Chiara Finochietti, Susana Karakhanyan, Luca Lantero, Carmen Marquez, David Mills, Elena Ortiz, Francesc Pedró, Jamil Salmi and Manal Stulgaitis.

Special recognition goes also to the technical team at UNESCO IESALC, led by Carlos Vicente, who developed and maintains the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) platform, transforming raw data into actionable insights. We are also grateful to our regional offices, National Commissions and the global network of quality assurance and recognition bodies whose collaboration made this comprehensive analysis possible.

# Table of contents

**Short summary** ..... 3

**Foreword** ..... 6

**Acknowledgements** ..... 8

**List of figures and tables** ..... 10

**Acronyms and abbreviations** ..... 12

**Introduction** ..... 15
1. Snapshot of higher education today ..... 16
2. About the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) ..... 17
3. Purpose and scope of the Report ..... 17
4. Methodology ..... 18

**International data collection and availability by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)** ..... 21

**Part I: The changing face of higher education** ..... 25
**Introduction** ..... 26
Chapter 1. Participation and completion ..... 27
Chapter 2. Equity and inclusion ..... 37
Chapter 3. Governance and legislative frameworks ..... 43
Chapter 4. External quality assurance ..... 49
Chapter 5. Financing of higher education ..... 55
Chapter 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence ..... 63
Chapter 7. Higher education teaching personnel ..... 73

**Part II: Spotlight on student mobility** ..... 81
**Introduction** ..... 82
Chapter 8. Inbound and outbound mobility trends ..... 83
Chapter 9. Recognition of foreign qualifications ..... 91
Chapter 10. The case for refugees and displaced persons ..... 99

**Conclusions and the future outlook** ..... 105

**References** ..... 112

**Appendix** ..... 125
List of indicators used ..... 125

# List of figures and tables

## Figures

### Chapter 1. Participation and completion

**Figure 1.1:** Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of fostering access to higher education and average gross enrollment rate per region ..... 29

**Figure 1.2**: Evolution of the gross enrollment ratio in higher education (ISCED levels 6-8) over the last decade, both sexes and female students..... 31

**Figure 1.3**: Weight of different ISCED levels in higher education enrollment in 2023..... 32

**Figure 1.4**: Share of female students in total higher education enrollment, by ISCED levels, 2023 (2021 for sub-Saharan Africa) ..... 33

**Figure 1.5**: Gross graduation ratio from 1st degree programmes (ISCED levels 6 and 7), both sexes and female populations, 2013-2023..... 34

### Chapter 3. Governance and legislative frameworks

**Figure 3.1**: Highest national government unit with direct responsibility over higher education, 2024-2025..... 45

**Figure 3.2**: Types of legislation adopted at the national level to regulate higher education, 2024-2025..... 46

**Figure 3.3**: Share of countries recognizing institutional autonomy in their legislation, 2024-2025 ..... 46

### Chapter 4. External quality assurance

**Figure 4.1**: Regional distribution of countries mandating the establishment of one or more quality assurance agencies by law, 2024-2025..... 51

**Figure 4.2**: Regional distribution of countries enshrining the autonomy of quality assurance agencies in their legislation, 2024-2025 ..... 52

### Chapter 5. Financing of higher education

**Figure 5.1**. Government expenditure on tertiary education (ISCED 5 - 8) as a percentage of GDP, by region, 2022..... 57

### Chapter 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

**Figure 6.1a**: Countries that include digitalization in their national higher education plans by region, 2024-2025 ..... 65

**Figure 6.1b**: Countries that include digitalization in their national higher education plans by income group, 2024-2025 ..... 65

**Figure 6.2a**: Percentage of individuals using the Internet by region, 2019 and 2024 ..... 66

**Figure 6.2b**: Percentage of individuals using the Internet by income group, 2019 and 2024 ..... 67

### Chapter 7. Higher education teaching personnel

**Figure 7.1**: Share of countries that include objectives on enhancing faculty teaching skills, through initial training or professional development, 2024-2025 ..... 75

**Figure 7.2a**: Representation of women among higher education teaching personnel by region, 2015-2024 ..... 77

**Figure 7.2b**: Representation of women among higher education teaching personnel by income level, 2015-2023 ..... 77

**Figure 7.3**: The proportion of countries with legal recognition of academic freedom, 2024-2025 ..... 80

### Chapter 8. Inbound and outbound mobility trends

**Figure 8.1**: Evolution in the outbound mobility of students by region, 2002-2023 ..... 85

**Figure 8.2**: Top 10 countries for outbound student mobility, 2023 ..... 86

**Figure 8.3**: Evolution in the inbound mobility of students by region, 2002-2023 ..... 87

**Figure 8.4**: Top 7 countries hosting inbound student mobility, 2023 ..... 87

### Chapter 9. Recognition of foreign qualifications

**Figure 9.1**: UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education ..... 93

**Figure 9.2**: Regional distribution of countries having a national policy on the recognition of foreign qualifications and the ratification of a UNESCO recognition convention, 2024-2026 ..... 96

## Tables

### Chapter 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

**Table 6.1**: Application of digital tools in higher education ..... 67

**Table 6.2**: AI applications and effects in teaching and assessment ..... 70

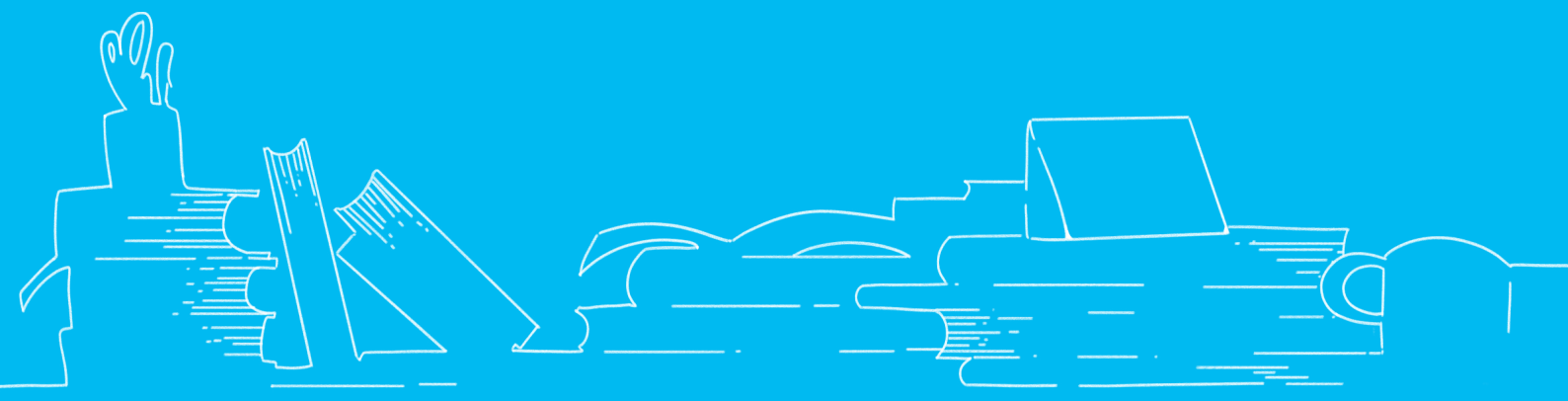
# Acronyms and abbreviations

- **AAU** – Association of African Universities
- **ARCU-SUR** - Regional Accreditation System for University Degrees
- **AI** – Artificial intelligence
- **AHEA** – Arab Higher Education Area
- **AISHE** – All India Survey on Higher Education
- **API** – Application programming interface
- **APNNIC** – Asia-Pacific Network for National Information Centres
- **Addis Convention** – UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the African Region
- **Arab States Convention** – UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States
- **Buenos Aires Convention** – UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
- **CAMES** – African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education
- **CAPRI** – Caribbean Policy Research Institute
- **CEART** – Joint ILO–UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel
- **CINALC** – Network of Information Centres for Latin America and the Caribbean
- **CIMEA** – Academic Equivalence Mobility Information Centre, Italy
- **CPD** – Career and professional development
- **EHEA** – European Higher Education Area
- **EMIS** – Education Management Information System
- **EMIS-PATT** – Education Management Information Systems - Progress Assessment Tool for Transformation
- **ENIC/NARIC** - European Network of Information Centres/ National Academic Recognition Information Centres
- **ENLACES** – Latin American and Caribbean Space in Higher Education
- **ENQA** – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- **EQAR** – European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
- **EQPR** – European Qualifications Passport for Refugees
- **EU** – European Union
- **GEM Report** – Global Education Monitoring Report
- **GER** – Gross enrolment ratio
- **Global Convention** – UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education
- **GPT** – Generative pre-trained transformer
- **HAQAA** – Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation
- **HEIs** – Higher education institutions
- **HEMIS** – Higher education management information system
- **HEPO** – Higher Education Policy Observatory
- **IAU** – International Association of Universities
- **ICT** – Information and communication technology
- **ILO** – International Labour Organization
- **INQAAHE** – International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
- **IPEDS** - Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
- **ISCED** – International Standard Classification of Education

- **ITU** – International Telecommunication Union
- **IUCEA** – Inter-University Council for East Africa
- **Lisbon Convention** – Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region
- **LLMs** – Large language models
- **LMS** – Learning management system
- **MERCOSUR** – Southern Common Market
- **NSFAS** – National Student Financial Aid Scheme (South Africa)
- **NQF** – National qualifications framework
- **OECD** – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- **OER** – Open educational resources
- **PBF** – Performance-based financing
- **PPT** - *Permiso por protección temporal* (Colombia)
- **R&D –** Research and development
- **RAFANAQ** – Réseau Africain Francophone des Agences Nationales d'Assurance Qualité
- **RIACES** – Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- **SADC** – Southern African Development Community
- **SAQA** – South African Qualifications Authority
- **SAQAN** – Southern African Quality Assurance Network
- **SIDS** – Small island developing states
- **SICA** – Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana
- **SDG** – Sustainable Development Goal
- **STEM** – Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
- **Tokyo Convention** – UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education
- **QA** – Quality assurance
- **TNE** – Transnational education
- **UIS** – UNESCO Institute for Statistics
- **UQP** – UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants
- **UNESCO** – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- **UNESCO IESALC** – UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
- **UNESCO IIEP** – UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning
- **UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- **WHEC 2022** – UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (2022)
- **WHO** – World Health Organization

# Introduction

1. Snapshot of higher education today
2. About the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)
3. Purpose and scope of the Report
4. Methodology



# Introduction

## 1. Snapshot of higher education today

In an era of unprecedented global interconnection and technological transformation, higher education stands at a critical juncture. The stakes have never been higher as decisions made today that affect access, quality and international cooperation will shape not only individual futures but the trajectory of entire societies and economies. Higher education as a public good and an integral part of the right to education is not only central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, but also serves as a key enabler across the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet, the right to quality higher education is far from universally realized as persistent structural inequalities continue to throw up roadblocks that hinder progress.

The higher education landscape is a complex tapestry of progress and challenges. The latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) shows that global enrolment from ISCED level 5 (short-cycle degree programmes) to 8 (doctoral degree) has more than doubled, rising from 100 million in 2000 to nearly 269 million in 2024. However, this growth masks stark regional disparities: enrollment rates reached nearly 80% in Europe and North America but remain as low as 9% in sub-Saharan Africa – well below the global average of 43%.

The internationalization of higher education has accelerated dramatically, with student mobility more than tripling since 2000. In 2023, 7.3 million students were studying abroad, reaching unprecedented levels of global academic exchange and cultural understanding. However, this positive trend belies two significant challenges. First, an affordability crisis threatens access as escalating tuition fees, burgeoning student loan debts and rising living costs create formidable barriers, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. Second, growing geopolitical fragmentation threatens the open exchange of knowledge and students that has characterized the past two decades.

The challenge of equity remains acute. Despite some progress, only a third of countries have implemented affirmative action programmes to support vulnerable groups' access to higher education. Among these groups, refugees remain severely underrepresented. Despite a nine-fold increase in enrollment from 1% in 2019 to 9% in 2025 according to UNHCR, their access to higher education still falls far below global averages.

The rapid proliferation of higher education institutions, programmes and delivery modalities has expanded access while intensifying the need for robust quality assurance systems. Ensuring academic standards and relevance across diverse providers and modalities – from traditional universities to online platforms – requires sophisticated regulatory frameworks and international cooperation.

Higher education personnel have been at the forefront of this transformation, facing challenges ranging from employment insecurity and threats to academic freedom to demands for continuous professional development, adoption of new pedagogies and growing digital transformation and AI. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these problems, fundamentally altering teaching practices and highlighting both the potential and limitations of digital education delivery.

To strengthen higher education systems and ensure that they are inclusive, equitable and high quality, evidence-based policymaking is critical. Decision-makers require a comprehensive understanding of how systems are structured and how they perform. This requires access to robust, timely and comparable data to diagnose systemic challenges, identify equity gaps, design effective reforms and monitor progress toward national, regional and global goals.

While substantial progress has been made in monitoring primary and secondary education – owing to consistent efforts by the UIS and the GEM report – data on higher education remains fragmented and inconsistent across many areas. This, in turn, significantly constrains policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. To address this gap, UNESCO's HEPO represents a critical step towards building a better understanding of higher education systems, providing policymakers with systematic, clear and reliable data to inform decision-making.

## 2. About the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

The HEPO, hosted by UNESCO IESALC, is a pioneering global platform for the systematic analysis of higher education systems and policies. It currently integrates data from 146 countries, representing 75% of UNESCO Member States, and concrete efforts are underway to achieve universal coverage.

The platform integrates national profiles with global and regional analytics, enabling users to examine and compare how higher education systems are structured, governed and perform. It contributes to a more robust evidence base to inform policymaking, support reform processes and enable coordinated approaches across and within national higher education systems.

The Observatory was launched in 2023 with 45 foundational indicators related to higher education policies adopted at the national system level. These focus on governance, legislative frameworks, system planning, quality assurance, access to higher education, the cost of public higher education, admission pathways and the recognition of higher education qualifications.

In 2025, it was expanded to include the full range of higher education statistics collected by the UIS on teaching personnel, student enrollment, student graduation, funding and expenditure, and international student mobility. The latest enhancements also include advanced visualizations and a Policy News section that tracks real-time developments in higher education policy globally.

The Observatory aims to develop partnerships with countries and international organizations to propose new indicators that address emerging policy priorities, supporting, where relevant, the work of the SDG 4 Education Data and Statistics Commission. For the next phase of the Observatory, UNESCO IESALC envisions expanded visualizations of statistical indicators at the global level as well as new features that allow users to explore the interplay between key higher education statistics and higher education system policies.

## 3. Purpose and scope of the report

This inaugural edition of *Higher education global trends report* marks the launch of UNESCO IESALC's flagship report series on the state of higher education worldwide. This edition places a special spotlight on student mobility – a topic of growing importance across higher education agendas and one that has witnessed a major surge since the turn of the century.

The report aims to provide policymakers and other higher education stakeholders with a comprehensive evidence base of current trends and developments in higher education and offers insights to guide the development and reform of national higher education systems and policies. By identifying systemic trends and challenges, it aims to enhance awareness and understanding of higher education landscapes worldwide; inform policymaking; foster dialogue among stakeholders; and contribute to building more inclusive, resilient and forward-looking higher education systems.

The report is split into two main parts and concludes with a set of areas requiring further action to drive higher education forward. Part I examines key aspects of higher education, including access, governance, digital transformation and staff in academia. Part II addresses student mobility, focusing on qualification recognition and the inclusion of refugees and displaced persons.

## 4. Methodology

This report draws mainly on data from the HEPO, using over 50 higher education related indicators. The full list of indicators used in each chapter is provided in the **Appendix**.

The indicators used in the report are grouped into two main categories:

- **Policy indicators** are grouped into eight thematic areas: governance, legislative frameworks, system planning, quality assurance, access to higher education, the cost of public higher education, admission pathways and the recognition of higher education qualifications. Data on these indicators are collected by UNESCO IESALC. It is based on official government sources, in particular constitutions, (higher) education policy documents, legislation and websites, as well as databases, such as the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning's (UNESCO IIEP) Planipolis Portal of Education Plans and Policies, Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report's Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER) and country profiles of States Parties to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. In compiling this information, UNESCO IESALC also relies on close cooperation across UNESCO's Education Sector, including its field offices and specialized institutes, National Commissions to UNESCO and the regional networks of national information centres. Data in the country profiles section is regularly updated and shared with Member States for their validation as an essential quality assurance check. The policy indicator data used in this report is from 2024/2025. As data collection began in late 2023 with the launch of the HEPO, these indicators do not yet support longitudinal analyses.

- **Statistical indicators** are sourced from the UIS and are grouped into five categories: teaching personnel, student enrollment, student graduation, funding and expenditure, and international student mobility. These indicators are integrated from the UIS Data Browser, with the support of the UIS, and based on Member States' annual reporting to the institute. A new data availability index featured in the HEPO reveals that, on average, countries report less than 50% of higher education statistics to the UIS. The regional disparities in data reporting are stark, with average reporting rates ranging from 76% in Western Europe and North America to 46% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and a concerning 27% in sub-Saharan Africa. The latest statistical indicators in this report largely refer to 2023, as reported by Member States to the UIS in 2024, and allow for longitudinal analyses due to the UIS' data collection efforts spanning over two decades. The most recent year with available data is used in cases where 2023 data were not reported to the UIS or when 2023 data are insufficient for calculating regional averages.

Unless otherwise indicated, the data presented for the various policy and statistical indicators were retrieved in November 2025.

As the main focus of the report is higher education, analyses were conducted, to the extent possible, for International Standard Classification for Education (ISCED) levels 6-8 (Bachelor's or equivalent level to Doctoral or equivalent level). However, for certain indicators, the finest level of disaggregation available from the UIS covers ISCED levels 5-8, thus also including short-cycle tertiary education, in which case the analyses are based on this broader range. The ISCED coverage applied is specified in each chapter.

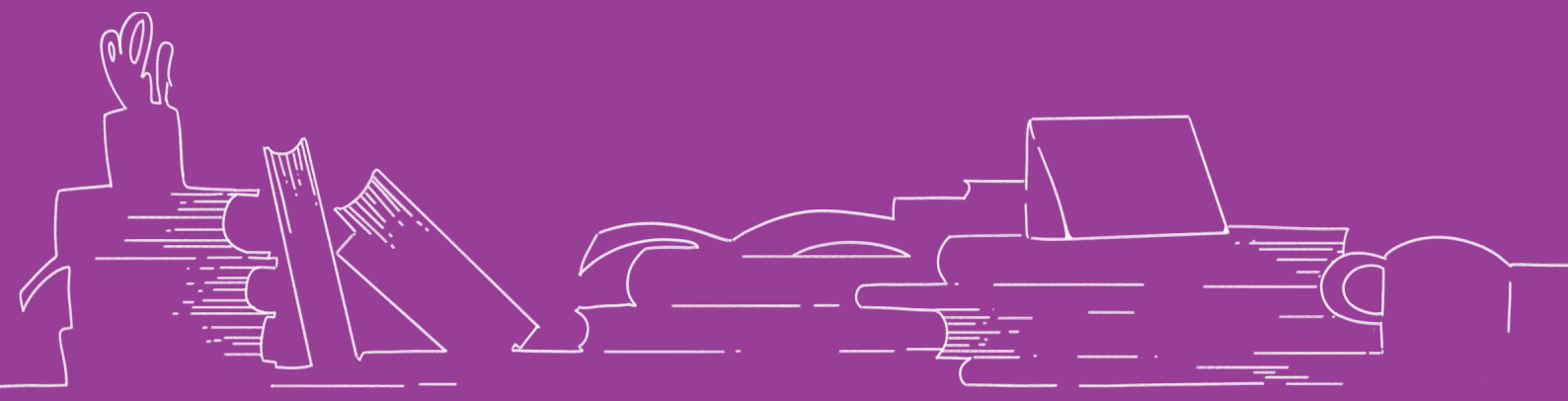
For regional analyses, the report follows the UIS regional classification: Arab States, Central Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, South and West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe and North America.

Analyses in the report are also backed by an extensive literature review of articles, statistical reports and policy publications. It also draws on publications produced within UNESCO, including the GEM report, as well reports from other United Nations Common System organizations, intergovernmental bodies and non-governmental organizations. Insights from reputable media outlets were also occasionally considered to capture current developments and emerging debates.

In some areas – such as digital transformation and AI and the case of refugees and displaced persons – international comparative data is not fully available from the HEPO. However, given the importance of these topics to the growth of global higher education, the report incorporates supplementary evidence from additional sources. Expanding the indicator base to cover these and other emerging areas is planned for the coming years to ensure a more complete and representative picture of higher education within the HEPO.

# International data collection and availability

*by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)*



# Perspectives from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics: International data collection and availability in higher education[1]

Robust and timely data are the foundation of effective higher education policy. Yet, despite growing recognition of the importance of evidence-based decision-making, the availability of higher education data remains uneven across countries, regions and thematic areas. This section presents the findings from a global assessment of data availability as well as its drivers. The analysis is based on two sources of data. The first source is data coverage of ten core higher education indicators tracked by UIS, covering topics such as participation, graduation, field of study, gender parity, staffing, finance, and research and development (R&D). The second source is data on governance, legislative frameworks, system planning, quality assurance, and other dimensions compiled by UNESCO IESALC through the Higher Education Policy Observatory. The current level of higher education data availability is discussed in Sections 1 & 2. Section 3 presents how data availability on the ten core indicators can be explained by institutional factors. Section 4 shares reflections on possible actions to address data gaps.

## 1. Data availability across thematic issues

From the perspective of UIS, international data availability can be assessed using three metrics:

- **Breadth**, which is the number of indicators for which data are available
- **Timeliness**, whether data is available from the most recent five years
- **Continuity**, which can be measured through the total number of years for which an indicator has data.

The analysis showed that participation-related indicators – such as the gross enrolment ratio (GER) and its disaggregation by gender – are the most widely reported indicators. Approximately 90% of countries reported GER at least once during the last 10 years and 80% had a recent data point from 2019 or later. These indicators also show strong continuity: the median country has data for 8 to 9 years over the last 10 years, indicating that enrolment data and their sex disaggregation are routinely produced by countries and can support gender-equality monitoring.

Reporting on the shares of graduates by field-of-study is more widespread than often assumed as about 95% of countries have reported data on these indicators at least once in the last 10 years, with an average of 7 out of 13 fields reported annually. On the other hand, availability of data on the share of female graduates who studied in STEM programmes (i.e. science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is less comprehensive: countries that report on this indicator generally have up-to-date data, but the country coverage remains partial.

Indicators related to finances and funding sources show the largest gaps. Government expenditure on tertiary education is relatively well covered, the median country reported data on this indicator for 7 of the last 10 years, and around 90% of countries have at least reported once on this indicator since it has been collected by the UIS. However, indicators related to the source of funding are scarce. Regarding the indicator on government funding per higher education student, the median country reported data for only three years in the last 10 years. The situation is worse for funding coming from households as the median country did not report any data over the last decade. In the few countries where these indicators are reported, updates are generally recent, so the main constraint here seems to be coverage, not timeliness.

## 2. Regional and income-based disparities

The disparities in data availability are huge across regions and income groups. Countries in Europe and Central Asia consistently achieve high coverage, timeliness and continuity.

1 This section draws on Yang J, Zhang Y & Labe O (forthcoming). *Bridging the gaps: Global patterns and institutional drivers of higher education data availability*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Latin America and the Caribbean also report a considerable share of data, though with greater variability. Some countries, such as Peru and Chile, combine high coverage, timeliness and continuity, while others face challenges in maintaining continuity.

In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa exhibits the widest dispersion in data availability. While a few countries – such as Rwanda – approach global averages in all three metrics, many other countries report fewer than 40% of the indicators and have short or fragmented time series, which limits continuity. Similar patterns are observed in parts of South Asia and among small island developing states (SIDS).

Income level is a strong predictor of data availability as high-income countries consistently outperform lower-income counterparts across all metrics. However, notable exceptions – such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – demonstrate that institutional factors, rather than income alone, can play a decisive role in building strong data systems and reporting capacities.

## 3. Key drivers of gaps in data availability

Several factors drive the gap in international data availability. Within countries, beyond aspects related to human resources and capacities, some key institutional and systemic factors affect higher education data reporting practices.

### a. Legal mandates and regulatory frameworks

Countries with statutory requirements for data reporting tend to have more complete and consistent datasets. For example, in the United States, participation in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is compulsory for institutions receiving federal aid. Similarly, Canada's Statistics Act authorizes compulsory data collection from public institutions. In contrast, India's All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) relies largely on voluntary submissions, which may undermine completeness and timeliness.

### b. National higher education management information systems (HEMIS)

The integration of higher education into the national EMIS – or the establishment of a dedicated HEMIS – with a clearly designated agency to lead this system, is strongly associated with improved data availability. In Africa, initiatives led by the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) programme have emphasized the need for centralized systems and standardized indicators to overcome fragmentation.

### c. Standards, methodologies and metadata

In addition to establishing national information systems, adherence to internationally shared methodologies and transparent metadata practices – such as those promoted by the UNESCO-OECD-Eurostat (UOE) – enhance comparability and reduce incomplete reporting. Countries aligned with these standards are better positioned to produce timely, disaggregated and internationally comparable data.

### d. Financing, interoperability and unique identifiers

Sustained investment in data infrastructure, including interoperable platforms and the use of unique identifiers for students and staff, is critical for improving data quality. Without these, systems struggle with lags, inconsistencies and limited disaggregation.

### e. System structure and private provision

In systems with significant private sector participation, robust reporting mandates and quality assurance mechanisms are essential. Otherwise, data on students, finance and staffing – particularly from private institutions – often remain incomplete or unreliable.

## 4. Implications and a call to action

While progress on participation indicators is evident, significant gaps persist in finance, graduation and disaggregated outcomes. These gaps reflect institutional and policy constraints rather than mere technical limitations.

To address them:

- **Governments** should strengthen legal mandates for data reporting, invest in national HEMIS

platforms, and ensure coverage of both public and private providers.

- **Higher education institutions**, in exercising their autonomy, must commit to timely, transparent and high-quality reporting aligned with national and international standards.
- **Development partners** should invest in infrastructure, capacity-building and interoperability of data systems to strengthen and harmonize data collection approaches and accelerate data use.
- **The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)** can lead efforts to refine global indicator frameworks, prioritize coverage in under-reported areas and continue to provide technical guidance and benchmarking, including through the HEPO.

Reliable and timely higher education data are essential to capturing an accurate picture of the higher education landscape. With coordinated action by governments, institutions and partners, countries can close the gaps and build stronger, evidence-based systems that inform higher education policy.

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## Introduction

## 1. Participation and completion

## 2. Equity and inclusion

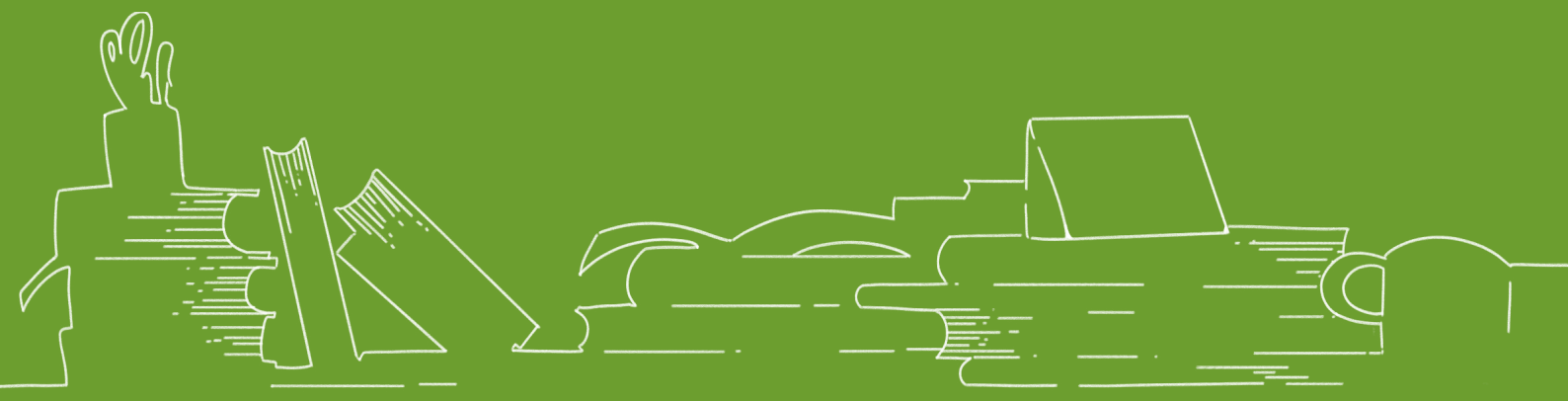
## 3. Governance and legislative frameworks

## 4. External quality assurance

## 5. Financing of higher education

## 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

## 7. Higher education teaching personnel



# Introduction

Higher education is undergoing a profound transformation. As societies adapt to rapid technological change, including AI, demographic shifts, economic uncertainty and global crises, the role of higher education has never been more vital. Higher education institutions are critical drivers of research and innovation, social mobility and individual empowerment. They play a central role in tackling present and future challenges and in shaping the human capital essential to sustainable development.

However, higher education systems worldwide face interconnected and evolving challenges. The expansion of access has been uneven, with persistent disparities in participation, completion and post-graduation benefits across socio-economic groups, geographic regions and demographic segments. The relevance and quality of programmes, financing models, governance structures and academic working conditions are all under pressure to adapt to changing labor market demands and societal expectations. Meanwhile, the massification of higher education – its transformation from an elite to a mass system – combined with rapid digital transformation is fundamentally redefining how education is accessed, delivered, experienced and credentialed.

Part I of this report – The changing face of higher education – offers a comprehensive overview of key trends and developments shaping higher education systems globally. It examines seven critical areas, primarily drawing on data from the HEPO, through these corresponding seven dedicated chapters:

- **Chapter 1 on Participation and completion** explores access trends, completion rates and the factors influencing student progression and success.
- **Chapter 2 on Equity and inclusion** investigates disparities in access and outcomes, with particular attention to gender, socio-economic background, disability and marginalized communities.
- **Chapter 3 on Governance and legislative frameworks** analyzes the evolving governance models, policy and regulatory frameworks that underpin higher education systems, including institutional autonomy.
- **Chapter 4 on External quality assurance** assesses national mechanisms and regional trends to uphold and improve educational standards in an increasingly diverse and competitive landscape.
- **Chapter 5 on Financing of higher education** reviews government funding and various alternative financing models, and the implications for access, equity and system sustainability.
- **Chapter 6 on Digital transformation and artificial intelligence** looks at how technology is reshaping higher education infrastructure, teaching, learning and research, while raising questions about access, quality and ethics.
- **Chapter 7 on Higher education teaching personnel** examines the changing role and conditions of academic staff, their working conditions, development, equity and academic freedom.

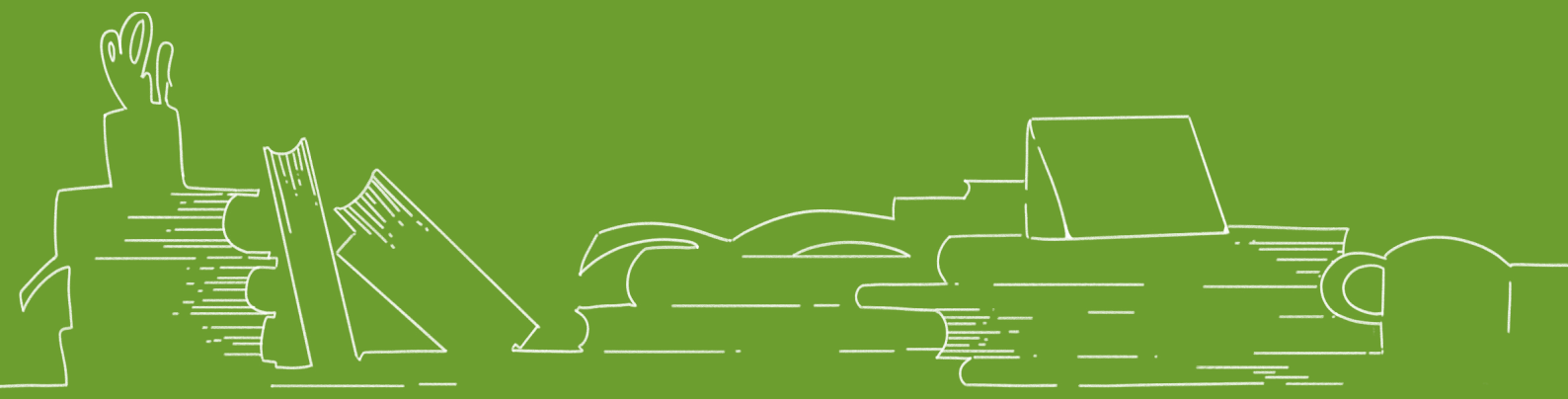
Together, these chapters provide a snapshot of the dynamic forces at play in higher education today, highlighting achievements, gaps and opportunities for policy reform.

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 1. Participation and completion

### Main takeaways:

- Access to higher education (focusing on ISCED levels 6 to 8, excluding ISCED 5) has expanded globally, with a 33% increase in enrollment over the past decade, reaching close to 213 million students in 2023.
- Fostering access is a key priority for policymakers, but priorities do not always align with enrollment levels: many countries with high participation rates still emphasize access, while some with lower enrollment do not.
- Women remain underrepresented at the doctoral level (ISCED level 8) even though most students at ISCED levels 6 (Bachelor's) and 7 (Master's) are female.
- The share of higher education enrollment at ISCED level 6 and ISCED level 8 has grown over the last decade. The share of students enrolled at ISCED level 7 declined slightly.
- Nearly one-third of all doctoral students are in North America and Western Europe. Yet, over the last decade, the growth of doctoral students was the highest in South and West Asia (+185%) and sub-Saharan Africa (+125%).
- Completion has lagged, with the global gross graduation ratio rising more modestly from 22% in 2013 to 27% in 2023. The gross graduation ratio of the female population (30%) is higher than that of the general population (27%).
- Student progression between access and completion is a critical but often overlooked dimension of higher education systems. Although limited, available evidence suggests that barriers during studies can lead to delayed completion or early departure for a substantial share of students, highlighting the importance of strengthening support mechanisms and improving data on student trajectories.



# Chapter 1. Participation and completion in higher education

Higher education has become increasingly recognized as a fundamental driver of individual opportunity, societal progress and economic growth. More broadly, participation in and completion of higher education are considered as essential to the sustainable development of countries. They equip individuals with advanced skills and capacities to adapt to evolving job markets, foster innovation and enable companies to remain agile in addressing current and future challenges.

A highly educated population is also pivotal to attracting foreign investments and strengthening public revenues by expanding the taxpayer base (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2018). An estimate among OECD countries highlighted that each dollar invested by governments in tertiary education generates a public benefit in terms of tax revenues and social contributions of 2.9 USD for males and 2 USD for females, with the difference largely reflecting existing gender gaps in earnings and labour market participation (OECD, 2021a). These benefits only apply to governments while private returns on higher education are generally much higher. Notably, the benefits of higher education to societies are not limited to economic gains alone as it is known to foster stronger democratic institutions and civic engagement (Teixeira et al., 2021); improve public health (IHME-CHAIN Collaborators, 2024); promote social cohesion and stability (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2015); and strengthen environmental awareness and stewardship (Hnatyuk et al., 2024).

From a global perspective, access to higher education is embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4 to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" and more specifically target 4.3 aiming to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university." The higher education component of this target is monitored through the gross enrollment ratio, disaggregated by sex.[2] Yet, this indicator does not expand to reporting on other dimensions, including progression in and completion of higher education.

Data from the Higher Education Policy Observatory aids in conducting a more in-depth investigation into these questions. Data show that only a minority of countries recognize the right to higher education in their legislation, particularly in regions where higher education systems are massified. On the other hand, this right is widely referenced in the national legislations of regions where participation in higher education is much lower (e.g. 63% of countries in Central Asia). This apparent contradiction might be explained by a combination of historical legacies and political priorities. Most Central Asian countries previously formed part of the Soviet Union, where the right to higher education was embedded in the constitution, and since the 1990s also adopted expansion-driven policies, evidenced by the fact that in most of the sub-region, the number of higher education institutions has doubled since the 1990s (Stanford University, n.d; Ambasz et. al, 2023).

This chapter examines global trends in participation and completion of higher education over the past decade. Its analysis focuses on ISCED levels 6 (Bachelor's or equivalent), 7 (Master's) and 8 (Doctoral), intentionally excluding ISCED level 5 to allow for greater detail on advanced programmes. While it differs in scope from the 2024 UNESCO *Higher Education: Figures at a Glance* report, which provides a broader statistical overview, it complements that publication by offering a more in-depth perspective on access, progression and graduation patterns.

The first section looks at participation through the evolution of enrolment worldwide and the adoption of policies to foster access to higher education. The second section considers the question of completion

2 The gross enrollment ratio (GER) is a widely used global indicator in higher education. It represents the total number of students enrolled in tertiary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population within the official age group for that education level (typically 18-24 years old).

through trends in graduation. Finally, the third section discusses the question of progress in higher education. Gender disparities are explored as a transversal theme across all sections.

## 1.1 Global trends in higher education enrollment and access

Trends in access to higher education can be analyzed through enrollment data collected internationally by the UIS. The HEPO also contains indicators of national policies adopted to foster access to higher education.

### Access to higher education as a key policy objective

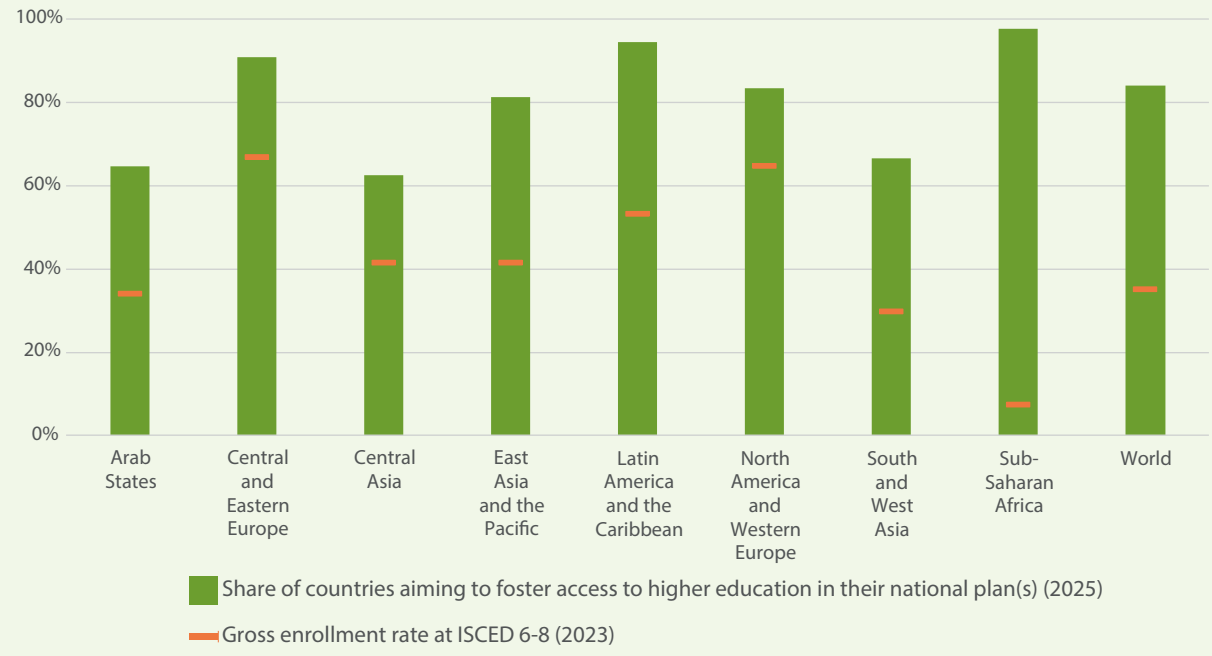
Governments worldwide often place access and participation at the forefront of higher education policy agendas. The HEPO mapped the main objectives of countries which adopted a plan to steer their higher education systems according to a list of 32 pre-defined objectives covering multiple dimensions, such as fostering access and inclusion, supporting internationalization, enhancing instruction quality, improving research production, developing campus infrastructure, reforming governance, and strengthening knowledge transfers and partnership with external stakeholders.

Across the 146 countries included in the Observatory, 9 in 10 adopted a plan or strategy for higher education. As **Figure 1.1** illustrates, 84% of these countries include the objective of fostering access to higher education in their plans. Across the 32 objectives mapped by the HEPO, increasing access emerges as the most frequently adopted objective.

Some differences exist between world regions. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where the objective of fostering access is most often included in higher education plans, while Central Asia and the Arab States are the regions where this objective is the least frequently included.

This contrast partly reflects countries' enrolment levels: sub-Saharan Africa is the region where the gross enrolment ratio is the lowest, while higher education systems in other regions, such as North America and Western Europe, have massified over several decades.

**Figure 1.1: Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of fostering access to higher education and average gross enrollment rate per region**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory and UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

In countries with the lowest enrolment rates, higher education systems have often been limited to a small elite due to scarce public resources (UNESCO IESALC, 2020). In these contexts, governments tend to prioritize expanding access to reduce social inequalities, strengthen human capital, broaden the tax base and ultimately, foster social and economic development. By comparison, countries with higher enrolment rates might aim to increase access to reinforce national capacity in science, technology and innovation, which are key drivers of industrial development and competitiveness. Yet, since a larger share of their population already holds higher education qualifications, these countries are also more likely to focus on the relevance of those qualifications, aligning them with labour market needs and broader socio-economic objectives (Bouckaert et al., 2024a).

Nevertheless, more than 90% of countries in regions with a high average gross enrolment ratio still aim to enhance access to higher education (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean). In contrast, this goal was adopted by a lower share of countries in regions such as the Arab States, Central Asia and South and West Asia, despite lower gross enrollment ratios. Thus, the adoption of formal objectives to foster access to higher education seems to be driven not only by enrollment levels, but also by economic, socio-cultural factors and political priorities.

### Higher education enrollment in the last decade

The gross enrollment ratio at the tertiary education level (ISCED levels 5 to 8) is the indicator most used to display evolution in enrollment around the world. In this chapter, enrollment trends are analyzed focusing on ISCED levels 6 (e.g. Bachelor's), 7 (e.g. Master's) and 8 (e.g. Doctoral). ISCED 5 level (e.g. short-cycle tertiary education programmes) is not considered.

Globally, the number of students enrolled in higher education (ISCED 6 to 8) has increased by a third (33%) over the last decade to reach a total of 213 million students (see **Figure 1.2**). Consequently, the gross enrollment ratio for the total population (both sexes) grew from 27% to 35%.[3]

Two regions – Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific – both had gross enrolment ratios below the world average in 2013. By 2023, however, they had recorded the highest growth worldwide, with ratios surpassing the global average.

The two regions with the highest gross enrollment ratio in 2023 (over 65%) are Central and Eastern Europe, and North America and Western Europe. These are the regions that experienced the lowest growth in higher education enrollment over the last decade, suggesting a slowing down in the massification of higher education.

Latin America and the Caribbean follows with a gross enrollment ratio of 53% in 2023 (from 40% in 2013). The Arab States region stands just below the world average (34% in 2023) and grew in similar proportions to Latin America and the Caribbean over the last decade. It is closely followed by South and West Asia, which experienced a similar growth of its gross enrollment ratio but still stands below the world average in 2023 (30%).

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the lowest gross enrollment ratio at 7% in 2021, which is the most recent year with available data for this region. This ratio corresponds to 7.8 million students and is well below the global average. It is also the region where this indicator grew the least over the last decade (rising slightly from 6% in 2011). However, this limited growth in the gross enrollment ratio is largely due to rapid population growth in the age group eligible for higher education. In absolute terms, because of the rapid population growth and larger access to secondary education, sub-Saharan Africa recorded the largest increase in higher education student enrollment worldwide over the past decade – up 62% compared to a global increase of 33%.

3 These trends differ slightly from those most often highlighted internationally, and which considers tertiary education enrollment across ISCED levels 5 to 8 (UNESCO, 2024a). With the inclusion of ISCED level 5 (short cycle programmes), the gross enrollment ratio at these levels reached 43%, which represents around 269 million students. Over the last decade, the growth of enrollment in higher education (ISCED levels 6 to 8) was slightly higher than that of tertiary education (ISCED levels 5 to 8).

**Figure 1.2: Evolution of the gross enrollment ratio in higher education (ISCED levels 6-8) over the last decade, both sexes and female students**


*Source*: Authors' calculation based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Looking at the evolution of the gross enrollment ratio for the female population, a slightly different picture emerges. Globally, the share of the female population enrolled in higher education is markedly higher compared to the total population. In 2023, the gross enrolment ratio for the female population was much higher than for the total population in most world regions, including the Arab States, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North and Western Europe. This was already the case in 2013 and, over the last decade, the enrollment gap between female and male has only widened. This trend is prevalent in several regions, most notably East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Western Europe, and South and West Asia.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where the gross enrollment ratio for the total population is higher than that for the female population, despite female enrollment having grown more rapidly over the past decade (78% compared to 63% for both sexes combined). A similar pattern was observed in South and West Asia in 2013, when the female gross enrollment ratio stood at about 21% compared with 22% for both sexes combined. Over the last decade, however, the female gross enrollment ratio rose to 30%, slightly surpassing that of the total population (29.6%).

Central and Eastern Europe is the only region where female enrollment in higher education decreased over the last decade by -14%. The number of female students fell from over 9 million in 2013 to 7.8 million in 2023. Despite this decline, the gross

enrollment ratio for women slightly increased, due to a relatively larger decrease in the size of the female population of typical higher education age in the region. In keeping with the global trend, the gross enrollment ratio for female students in this region remains substantially higher than that of the total population.

### Enrollment by levels of higher education

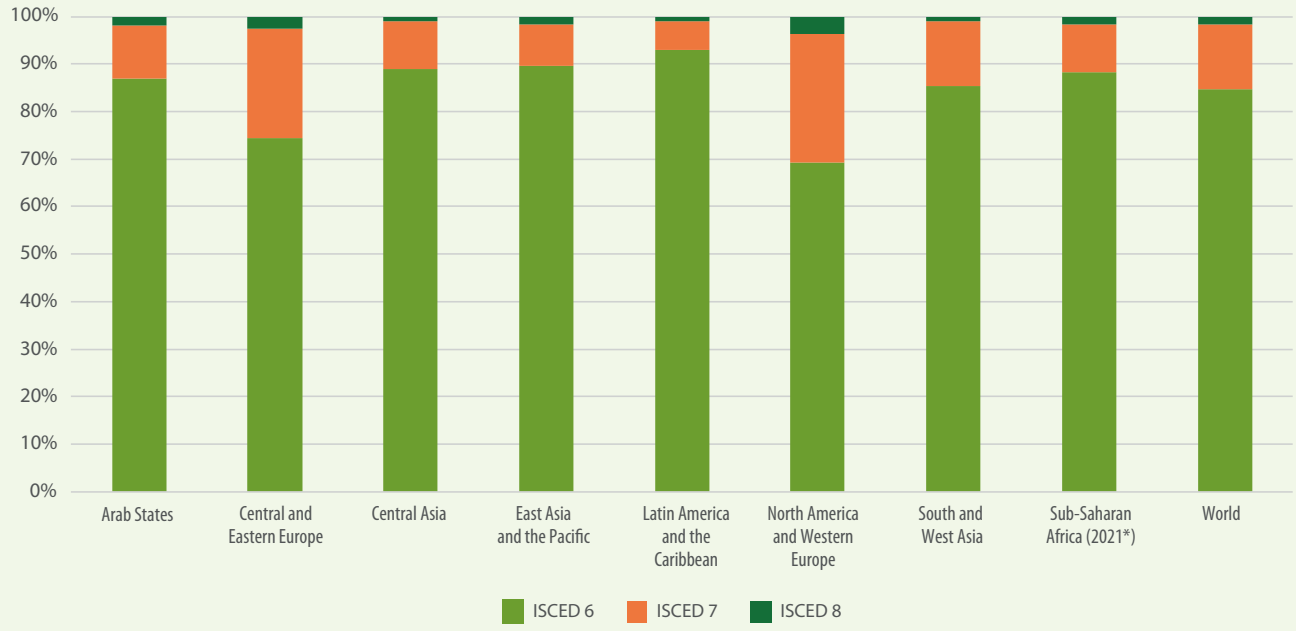
Over the last decade, the growth in higher education enrollment was not spread equally over the different ISCED levels. The number of students enrolling at ISCED 6 grew by 36% and by 15% at ISCED 7 (see **Figure 1.3**). However, it's at ISCED 8 that enrollment increased the most, by 37% between 2013 and 2023. This could indicate a double-sided trend with countries expanding access to entry programmes in higher education combined with the constitution of a highly qualified workforce that can contribute to research and innovation.

The varying evolution of enrollment at different ISCED levels did not have a marked impact on the relative weight each level represents in the global higher education landscape. ISCED 6 remains, by far, the level attracting the highest share of higher education enrolment (85% in 2023). In contrast, the share of students enrolled at ISCED 7 represented 13% of students in 2023. ISCED 8 programmes still account for a small share of students, representing 1.8% of higher education enrollment worldwide in 2023 (i.e. close to 3.8 million students).

World regions show large variations compared to the global trend. Across all regions but one, the number of students at ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8 have been growing over the last decade. The exception being Central and Eastern Europe where enrollment at ISCED levels 7 and 8 has been decreasing by 43% and 9% respectively. The region also experienced the lowest growth of enrolment at ISCED level 6 (6% over the last decade). This resulted in a 12% decrease of the total number of students enrolled in higher education at all levels considered. Interestingly, the gross enrolment ratio increased slightly over that period. The reduction of the number of students is thus essentially due to a reduction of the population at the age of higher education enrolment, rather than a potential loss of attractiveness in opting for higher education studies.

Among the other world regions, the biggest variations in enrollment over the last decade at ISCED level 6 can be found in Central Asia (63% increase)

**Figure 1.3: Weight of different ISCED levels in higher education enrollment in 2023**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

and sub-Saharan Africa (61% increase).[4] The sub-Saharan Africa region also experienced the highest growth of enrollment at ISCED level 7 (59%) and the second-highest growth at ISCED level 8 (125%). The region that experienced the highest growth at ISCED level 8 is South and West Asia, where the number of students almost tripled in one decade (185%).

As a result, the distribution of higher education students across the different ISCED levels varies between regions. North America and Western Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe have the highest share of students enrolled at ISCED levels 7 and 8 compared to the other levels. North America and Western Europe also comprises nearly a third of all students enrolled at ISCED level 8 globally (31%) closely followed by East Asia and the Pacific (28%).

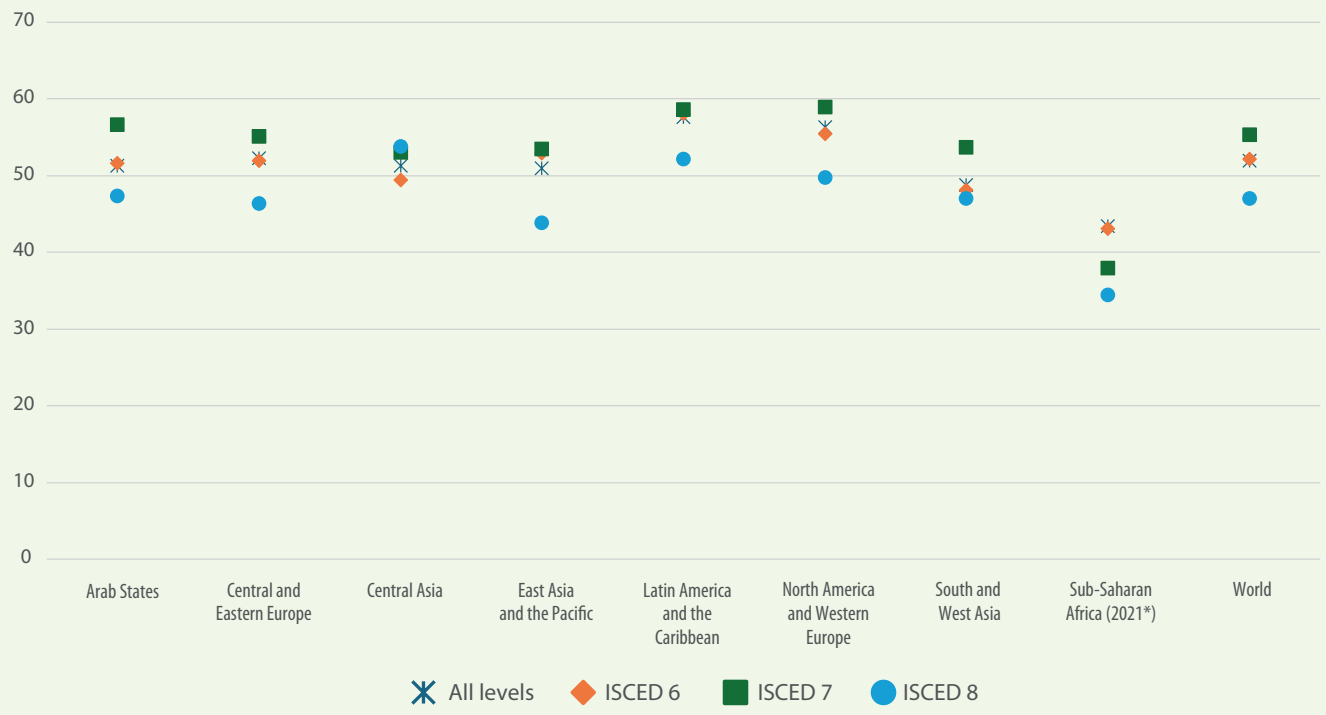
Among the other world regions, a larger share of students is enrolled at ISCED level 6. This proportion is the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (93%). This region is also where the share of students enrolled at ISCED level 8 is the lowest (0.9%).

Looking at the distribution of students by sex, women represent the majority of students worldwide at both ISCED level 6 (52% of enrollment) and 7 (55%), but a minority at ISCED level 8 (47%) (see **Figure 1.4**). These shares have evolved only slightly over the last decade despite a small increase at all levels.

In only two regions do women represent a minority of student enrollment when all levels are considered: South and West Asia (49%) and sub-Saharan Africa (43%). In contrast, the share of female students in higher education enrollment is the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (58%) and North America and Western Europe (56%).

The data also shows that, while there are more female than male students at ISCED level 6 and – to

**Figure 1.4: Share of female students in total higher education enrollment, by ISCED levels, 2023 (2021 for sub-Saharan Africa)**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on aggregated data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

4 The latest data on enrollment in higher education for sub-Saharan Africa is from 2021. The trend over the last decade is thus calculated over the period 2011 to 2021. For the other regions, enrollment trends are analyzed over the 2013 to 2023 period.

an even larger extent – ISCED level 7, their share in student enrolment drops at ISCED level 8 across all world regions except sub-Saharan Africa. Women represented a minority of ISCED level 8 students in all regions but two: Latin America and the Caribbean (52%) and Central Asia (54%). They were also the majority of ISCED level 8 students in Central and Eastern Europe in 2020 and 2021, but this share has dropped in 2022.

## 1.2 Global trends in higher education completion

At the international level, trends in higher education completion are often measured using the gross graduation ratio for first-degree programmes (ISCED levels 6 and 7). This indicator, like the gross enrollment ratio, is a population-based indicator. It should not be interpreted as a completion rate among students who enter higher education. Rather, it represents the number of graduates from these programmes, expressed as a percentage of the population at the typical age of graduation for a first degree.[5]

Globally, the gross graduation ratio from first degree programmes in higher education has increased over the last decade (**Figure 1.5**). The number of graduates represented 22% of the population of graduating age in 2013 and 27% in 2023. While this

**Figure 1.5: Gross graduation ratio from 1st degree programmes (ISCED levels 6 and 7), both sexes and female populations, 2013-2023***


**Note*: Data for Latin America and the Caribbean is for the period 2012-2022 for both the gross graduation ratio of the total population and the female population. Data for sub-Saharan Africa is for the period 2012-2018 for the gross graduation ratio of the total population, and the year 2016 for the female population (only years available).

*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on aggregated data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

5 A higher gross enrollment ratio is thus likely to result in a higher gross graduation ratio, since a greater share of individuals entering higher education increases the potential share of graduates in the population some years later.

growth broadly parallels the increase in the gross enrollment ratio, it was slightly slower.

The gross graduation ratio varies considerably across world regions. In 2023, it was the highest in two regions: Central and Eastern Europe (45%) and North America and Western Europe (44%), followed by East Asia and the Pacific (39%). In other world regions, the gross graduation ratio was comparable to the world average (between 23% and 31%) except for sub-Saharan Africa where it was 4% in 2018 – the last year with available data for that indicator in this region.

The evolution of this ratio also differed between regions. It has increased over the last decade in all world regions but two: Central and Eastern Europe (from 46% to 45%), and South and West Asia (from 26% to 23%). This contrasts with the growth of the gross enrollment ratio in these regions.

The increase of the gross graduation ratio was particularly strong in East Asia and the Pacific – going from 18% in 2013 to 39% in 2023 – and the Arab States – rising from 19% to 27%. As for the other regions, it grew by one percentage point in sub-Saharan Africa (albeit over a shorter period), three to four percentage points in Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, and six percentage points in North America and Western Europe.

From a gender perspective, the female gross graduation ratio measures the share of female graduates as a percentage of the female population at the typical graduation age. Globally, it exceeds that of the total population and rose faster over the last decade, from 23% in 2013 to 30% in 2023.

The ratio is significantly higher for the female population than for the total population in East Asia and the Pacific, North America, Eastern Europe, and the Arab States, where the gap between female and male graduates has widened.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the female ratio remains above the total population's but has declined more sharply over the past decade. In all other regions – except sub-Saharan Africa, where data are insufficient to identify trends over time – it also surpasses the male ratio.

## 1.3 Exploring student progression between access and completion

Beyond access and completion, understanding how students move through higher education is central to assessing the effectiveness, equity and efficiency of systems. Progression shapes whether expanded participation in higher education ultimately translates into successful graduation and meaningful learning outcomes.

A large body of research highlights that students can face different barriers at multiple stages of their higher education journey. These include financial constraints, insufficient academic preparation, weak institutional support, or competing work and family responsibilities (Lassibille, 2011; UNESCO GEM report, 2020; Bersoto et al., 2025). International evidence points to the prevalence of delayed completion, changes of programme and early departure from higher education across a wide range of contexts (IEG, 2017; OECD, 2019b; OECD, 2025; UNESCO GEM Report, 2026).

At the global level in 2023, while higher education students represented 37% of the population in age of attending in higher education (typically 18-24 years, as per the gross enrolment ratio at ISCED level 6 to 8), graduates from first degree higher education programmes (ISCED 6 or 7) represented only 27% of the total population in the theoretical age of graduating from these programmes (gross graduation ratio). Across regions, the magnitude of this contrast can be even larger. In regions where the average gross enrollment ratio at ISCED levels 6-8 was the highest, namely Central and Eastern Europe (67%) and North America and Western Europe (65%), the gross graduation ratio was substantively lower (respectively 45% and 44%). This contrast was the largest in Latin America and the Caribbean where the gross enrollment ratio reached 53% in 2023 compared to 24% for the gross graduation ratio.

While these differences are striking, they are not sufficient to identify trends in drop-out or delayed study completion. Many other factors could lead to such differences, notably higher education expansion with higher share of the population

enrolling in higher education each year that mechanically induces a higher gross enrollment as compared to the gross graduation ratio that concerns earlier student cohorts. Besides, these indicators are not directly comparable as they refer to different ISCED levels and age-group baselines. Developing internationally comparable data that follow students over time – capturing persistence, interruption, transfer across programmes and time to degree – remains critical to better understand how higher education systems support students from entry through to graduation. At the national level, the development and consolidation of higher education management information systems capable of following learners over time will be key to deepen understanding of progression patterns across countries.

Barriers to student progression have important implications for policy design. Expanding access rarely automatically translates into equitable higher education outcomes, and support mechanisms throughout the higher education journey – such as financial aid or academic mentoring – can be necessary to grasp the full benefits of higher education expansion. Without appropriate measures to ensure study progression and completion, the development of human capital through higher education may not be fully realized.

Barriers to progression also raise concerns about the cost-efficiency of higher education systems. Given the substantial public and private resources devoted to higher education, student drop-out and delayed completion of higher education programmes might imply that the expected personal and societal returns on those investments are not fully realized. This is however not always automatic as students may decide to leave higher education for different reasons, including changes in aspirations or early job opportunities (OECD, 2025). Estimating the magnitude of this potential loss would require additional data, particularly on differences in employment outcomes, earnings, civic engagement, health and other long-term benefits between graduates and students dropping out of higher education.

Lastly, measures of enrollment, progression and graduation capture only part of SDG target 4.3 and must be considered alongside the quality and relevance of learning, as well as the extent to which opportunities are inclusive. Understanding who gains access to and progresses in higher education – as well as the social, economic and learning outcomes they achieve after graduation – is essential to gaining a complete picture of progress toward these global commitments.

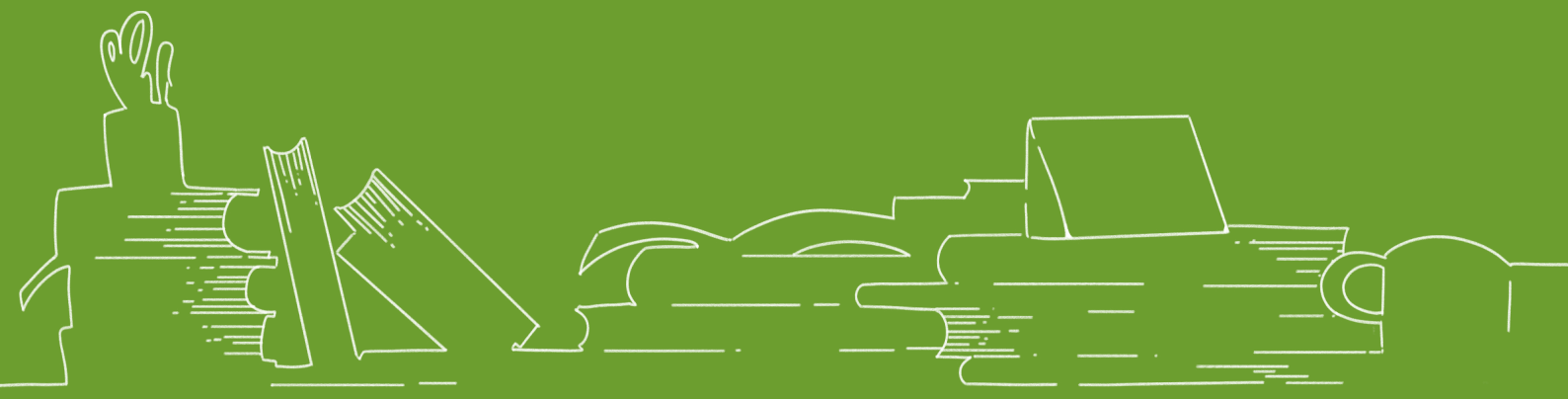
In conclusion, participation and completion in higher education have both increased globally over the past decade, but not at the same pace and not evenly across regions. Enrolment has expanded significantly, reflecting strong policy attention to access in many parts of the world. However, completion remains a challenge, with slower growth in graduation rates and wide variations between regions and, most likely, levels. The differences observed between enrollment and graduation are consistent with the idea that barriers to student progression persist, underlining the need for higher education systems to support learners not only at the point of entry, but throughout their academic journey to graduation. This is critical to advancing toward SDG target 4.3 and realizing the right to higher education.

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 2. Equity and inclusion

### Main takeaways:

- Policies supporting participation, retention and completion are not always consistently documented in national strategies. While data remain limited, available evidence suggests that equity efforts tend to decline after initial access, leaving many students unsupported once inside the system.
- While 84% of countries have access as an objective in their national plans, 79% include inclusion, revealing a gap between general expansion and targeted equity measures. As few as 16% of countries have quota legislations and many use alternative tools (e.g. scholarships, free tuition or mentorship) to address inequity.
- 62% of countries adopted legislation administering publicly funded scholarship programmes. However, these often focus on merit rather than need and rarely address non-tuition costs, which can disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Although 78% of countries with a national plan for higher education include graduate employability objectives, few explicitly apply an equity lens. The lack of disaggregated data by identity (gender, disability, geography, etc.) limits understanding of whether all students benefit equally from post-graduation opportunities.
- Asia and the Pacific has the highest share of countries adopting general inclusion goals in their national higher education plans, while countries in Latin America and the Caribbean show a strong focus on gender and quotas.
- Students with disabilities, Indigenous communities and LGBTQ+ learners remain underrepresented in education policy frameworks. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, it may also signal a broader blind spot for these groups in national planning and reporting.



# Chapter 2. Equity and inclusion

Higher education holds the potential to transform lives and catalyze sustainable national and global development. Yet it remains deeply rooted in structural inequalities that limit access, participation, retention, completion and success for many. Who gets in, who stays and who ultimately benefits are questions too often answered by inherited advantage (Amaral, 2022). While definitions of equity and who deserves support vary across countries and regions, this chapter adopts UNESCO IESALC's framing of equity-deserving groups as "groups of people who have been disproportionately impacted by higher-education policies and structures that discriminate against them in visible and less visible forms, with lasting consequences in their academic, personal and professional lives" (UNESCO IESALC, 2022).

In response to persistent inequalities, many higher education systems have adopted equity and inclusion strategies aimed at making higher education more accessible and supportive throughout the student journey. The journey through higher education does not end at graduation; it extends into the labour market and broader society. True equity requires not just equal access to education, but equal access to the opportunities that education should provide. Yet data on the policy attention given to post-graduation equity remains limited, creating a blind spot in our understanding of whether higher education truly serves as an engine of social mobility or merely reproduces existing inequalities.

This chapter draws primarily on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory to examine how equity and inclusion are reflected in national higher education policy commitments and legislations around the world. The chapter begins with an analysis of common policy mechanisms aimed at expanding access, such as quotas, targeted scholarships and mentorship programmes. Moving beyond access, the chapter broadens its focus to inclusive participation, student retention and post-graduate outcomes. Particular attention is paid to regional disparities, intersecting forms of exclusion and policy silences.

## 2.1 Objectives for inclusion as the first step

Adopting explicit policy goals for inclusion is widely regarded as the first step towards achieving equity in higher education. While expanding access is essential, it does not automatically translate into meaningful participation, retention or student success. According to the Higher Education Policy Observatory, 79% of countries that adopted a national plan for higher education included objectives to increase inclusion in the sector. Yet, these general efforts often fall short, particularly when long-standing structural inequalities continue to exclude many from entering and thriving within higher education systems.

This section examines how countries attempt to increase inclusion in higher education by implementing targeted policy tools designed to support equity-deserving groups. These include, in particular, quotas and affirmative action, scholarships, mentorship programmes and targeted outreach. Tuition-free higher education and other financial support schemes are addressed in Chapter 5 on the financing of higher education. Taken together, these strategies aim to ensure that higher education access better reflect the full diversity of society, cutting across the multitudes of identities, geographies and lived experiences.

### National quota legislation

Many countries aim to foster inclusion through targeted policy mechanisms supporting equity-deserving groups. Quotas, as a form of affirmative action, can represent a strong legal commitment to inclusion and serve as tools to increase representation for specific equity-deserving groups (Wang 2023; UNESCO-IESALC, 2024c). Yet only 16% of countries represented in the Higher Education Policy Observatory have enforceable quota legislation. To put this in perspective, this represents approximately 23 countries globally –

a relatively small number given the widespread recognition of equity challenges. In absolute numbers, Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest prevalence of national access quotas, with five countries in the region having these in place, followed by Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, where four countries have these in place. This can be partly explained by the significant disconnect observed between those who design and those who implement equity and inclusion policies (UNESCO-IESALC, 2025).

Despite being politically sensitive, quotas represent a rights-based approach to inclusion. Quota systems allocate a fixed number of spots in higher education to underrepresented populations. Quota policies can target a range of marginalized groups, for example persons with disabilities who represent an estimated 16% of the world population and therefore constitute a large minority group (WHO, 2022). Yet only 8% of countries refer to students with disabilities in quota-related legislation. Other commonly referenced populations include low-income students, rural or geographically isolated learners, women, racial and ethnic minorities, orphans and refugees (UNESCO-IESALC, 2024a).

Some countries, such as Brazil and India, have long-standing quota systems aimed at dismantling racial or caste-based inclusion in higher education (Zeidan et al., 2023). However, even these established frameworks face significant threats. In India, legal and political efforts have increasingly challenged the country's reservation policies (Garg and Upadhyay, 2024). Similarly, in the United States, the Supreme Court recently struck down race-based affirmative action policies in college admissions (Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023). Middle-income countries are more likely to implement national quota policies than low- and high-income countries (UNESCO-IESALC, 2024a). This may be because middle-income countries, having expanded enrollment, are now shifting focus to inclusion.

Quotas explicitly highlight some inequities that are crucial to address to afford equity to those who need it and address long-standing exclusion. Without such measures in place, broadening access without targets or objectives may instead reinforce advantages.

### Targeted scholarship programmes

Financial barriers play a significant role in shaping decisions to pursue and complete higher education, particularly for students from low-income families who are less likely to have the resources to invest in higher education (Fitzgerald et. al, 2024).

Globally, 62% of countries documented in the Higher Education Policy Observatory were identified as having established a national publicly funded scholarship programme (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Yet financial support programmes often remain narrowly conceived and fail to account for the broader realities faced by marginalized students. Scholarship programmes, primarily focus on covering tuition fees and rarely address non-tuition costs, such as housing, transportation, food and childcare – expenses that often determine whether a student can remain enrolled in higher education (UNESCO GEM report, 2020). As a result, attending university can still represent an opportunity cost burden, particularly for students who must choose between education and income-generating activities to support themselves or their families.

A critical limitation of current scholarship systems is their predominant focus on merit rather than need. Most national scholarship programmes are merit-based, with academic achievement as the primary eligibility criterion. Even need-based scholarships often require students to meet academic standards, making academic performance a key factor in most national scholarship awards (Firoozi, 2022; Hu et al., 2024). This can disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, whose access to quality pre-university education may be more limited (Salmi and D'Addio, 2021). Moreover, there are equity gaps within the design of these programmes. For example, only 30% of countries include students with disabilities as eligible recipients of scholarship support (UNESCO IESALC, 2022), further reinforcing exclusion for one of the most vulnerable and underserved populations.

### Mentoring, outreach and recruitment initiatives

In addition to quotas and scholarships, outreach and mentorship initiatives can be key to promoting the inclusion of equity-deserving groups in higher education. Some countries include academic preparation programmes or bridging programmes, targeted recruitment campaigns for equity-deserving groups and peer mentorship as part of their national strategies. These initiatives can be useful, not only to attract students from marginalized backgrounds and identities, but also to support their transition and sense of belonging within academic environments. Yet, there is a lack of internationally comparable data about these policies.

## 2.2 Participation, retention and completion

Entering higher education is only the beginning of the journey. The true measure of an equitable system lies not in who enters, but in who thrives, persists and ultimately succeeds. At the international level, there is a lack of comparative data on dropout prevention and academic success strategies. This makes it difficult to assess how policies support those most likely to face barriers after admission. Still, available evidence suggests that even when access is granted, students from underrepresented groups tend to have lower completion rates (UNESCO GEM report, 2020).

### Participation: Gender equity

Gender equity remains a frequently adopted inclusion goal in the higher education plans of countries that address equity beyond access. According to Observatory data, 43% of countries aim to support gender equity in higher education in their national plans. There are notable regional differences in how gender inequalities are addressed. For example, some Latin American and South Asian countries have implemented long-standing gender quotas in university admissions and public employment, while others – particularly in parts of Europe – focus more on creating enabling environments and encouraging participation through awareness campaigns. These variations reflect both cultural attitudes and legal frameworks related to gender equality.

Importantly, gender equity must be approached with a critical lens. Efforts to improve the representation of women in high-impact, male-dominated fields such as STEM must be matched by strategies that also support men's participation in areas where they are underrepresented, such as the social sciences, education and healthcare. If the goal of higher education is not solely economic development but also social transformation and knowledge building, then all fields must be valued and made inclusive.

### Retention and completion gaps

Some countries have introduced specific policies aimed at closing participation and completion gaps. In the Philippines, state universities have implemented bridging programmes that offer academic preparation and financial support to low-income students (Dela Cruz and Santos, 2020). In Canada, institutions, such as the University of British Columbia, offer Indigenous student pathways that include academic mentorship and cultural support (University of British Columbia, n.d.). Similarly, Chile has developed comprehensive retention strategies that combine psychosocial and academic support for first-generation students (von Hippel and Hofflinger, 2020).

These country-level examples show that tailored interventions can help level the playing field once students enter higher education. Other countries are using financial mechanisms to improve participation, such as selective fee exemptions. For example, Canadian provinces New Brunswick and Ontario, as well as Chile, Italy, Japan, and South Africa, direct tuition waivers toward the poorest students (Usher and Burroughs, 2018). These policies are further discussed in Chapter 5 on the financing of higher education. These financial strategies, while helpful, must often be paired with wraparound supports to ensure success throughout the academic journey by addressing all types of structural barriers (e.g. poverty, poor academic preparation, lack of a support system, etc.).

### Refugees – a vulnerable blind spot

Refugees remain one of the most underserved groups in higher education, with less than 9%

accessing tertiary education globally (UNHCR, 2025). Despite international commitments, such as the Global Compact on Refugees and the SDGs, national policies often fall short of meaningfully addressing the educational rights of displaced populations. Barriers to access for refugee students go far beyond physical displacement. These include the lack of legal status or residency, challenges in recognizing prior academic qualifications, language obstacles, psychosocial trauma, financial precarity and unfamiliarity with host country admissions processes. Even in countries that commit to refugee inclusion, national policy frameworks tend to lack enforceable measures or specific targets.

Little evidence is currently available on whether national higher education policies explicitly target refugees, let alone detail actionable strategies to support them. UNESCO's system of global and regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education offers an appropriate framework for more inclusive recognition of refugees' qualifications. The recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons is further discussed in Chapter 10.

## 2.3 Graduate outcomes and employability

True equity requires not just equal access to higher education, but equal access to the opportunities that it provides. This principle is not only for students to access and complete their studies, but to leave higher education equipped to live full lives including economic, civic and personal fulfillment. While 78% of countries in the Observatory have adopted objectives in national plans to improve graduate employability or transitions into the workforce, very little is known about the extent to which equity-deserving groups are designated as specific beneficiaries. The lack of disaggregated data in national policies, plans and statistics by ethnicity, gender, class, disability or geographic region makes it difficult to assess whether higher education truly delivers equitable post-graduation outcomes.

### Gender gaps in graduate outcomes

Although gender equity is a commonly mentioned axis of inclusion across national policies, it remains inconsistently translated into post-graduation opportunities. For example, less than 1 in every 5 countries explicitly address women's participation in STEM fields, according to the Higher Education Policy Observatory data. This is despite persistent gender disparities in workforce participation and pay, especially in high-growth and high-income STEM sectors. According to UIS data, women remain underrepresented in STEM, accounting for just 31% of the global R&D workforce in 2022. This is a clear economic imbalance and one that continues even for those who have successfully navigated structural barriers to access and completion.

Bridging gender gaps in education alone is insufficient. Without targeted policies that ensure women's inclusion in high-opportunity labour markets, gender equity in higher education remains a hollow promise. This is where SDG 4 (quality education) intersects with SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), positioning graduate outcomes as a critical dimension of education as a human right.

### Intersectionality and employability

Beyond gender, few national higher education policies attend to the compound effects of multiple marginalization factors on post-graduation trajectories. At the international level, little is known about the intersectional disaggregation of employability outcomes (e.g. whether students who are rural, disabled, or LGBTQ+ may face compounded disadvantages in the labour market). While individual countries may collect such data, it is not systematically integrated into international monitoring efforts.

Policies failing to name and track the most marginalized communities risk reinforcing dominant group success while obscuring gaps. In this vacuum, the structural inequities of education systems may simply be replicated in employment, leadership and broader social participation.

## 2.4 Limitations and regional inequalities

While internationally comparable data on equity and inclusion in higher education is still limited, the HEPO makes visible some gaps and blind spots, offering a snapshot of which groups are routinely overlooked in national frameworks. Some of these patterns are clear and concerning. For example:

**Students with disabilities**: Despite progress made through the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is still a significant lack of international data on the representation of persons with disabilities in higher education. Yet evidence from the HEPO shows that while 63% of countries documented on the platform administer national scholarship programmes, only 30% target students with disabilities through these programmes.

**Indigenous students**: Historically excluded from higher education, Indigenous students are not frequently mentioned in policies to foster inclusion. According to the data from the HEPO, a small minority of countries (less than 9%) specifically target this population as part of their national scholarship programmes – most notably in Latin America.

**Students from other minority groups**: While some national policies may exist, there is a significant lack of internationally comparable data on inclusion of students from different minority groups (e.g. LGBTQ+ students, students with intersecting disadvantages, etc.). This makes it difficult to assess their level of inclusion in higher education and whether national policies are responsive to their needs. While the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the lack of visibility itself can be a form of inequity, reinforcing systems of exclusion in both policy and practice.

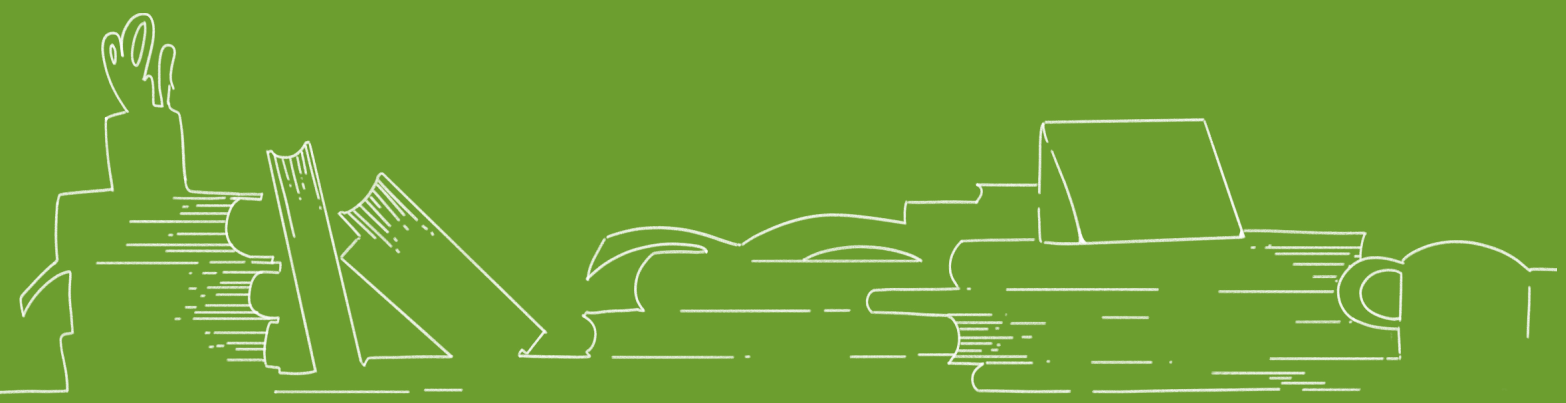
Regional disparities in equity policy commitments also reveal how unevenly inclusion is prioritized across higher education systems. The Arab States report the lowest levels of adoption of inclusion-related objectives in national plans and related policies, with only one country having established a quota policy and three countries offering national scholarships to marginalized groups, such as low-income students, women or students with disabilities. In sub-Saharan Africa, policies targeting students with disabilities remain limited. Countries from Latin America and the Caribbean stand out for their strong focus on gender equality and quota policies. Asia and the Pacific leads in the number of countries with enforceable quota laws and the presence of general inclusion objectives in higher education plans. Europe and North America show high levels of inclusion reporting overall, but this is not always accompanied by identity-specific measures, such as scholarships or quotas. These variations demonstrate that while equity is increasingly acknowledged in global discourse, its operationalization in policy continues to be uneven and shaped by national and regional priorities, capacities and political will.

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 3. Governance and legislative frameworks

### Main takeaways:

- Centralized governance remains dominant globally, with approximately 88% of countries placing higher education under direct national control.
- 50% of countries manage higher education at the ministerial level or equivalent, sometimes linking it with science and technology that in turn links to economic growth. Another 41% place higher education at the vice-ministerial or equivalent level, while only 6% manage it at lower levels.
- As enrollment rates increase, the proportion of countries placing higher education at the ministerial level decreases significantly.
- 92% of countries have adopted higher education laws or acts that establish the legal foundations for higher education, outlining the rights and obligations of higher education institutions and other stakeholders. These laws vary in form – some are dedicated to the higher education sector while others are embedded in broader education laws covering all levels.
- 67% of countries around the world recognize institutional autonomy by law, but legal recognition does not always translate into practice.
- Over 90% of countries have enacted specific legislation permitting private higher education providers. In many cases, however, regulations and licensing requirements for private providers have become more stringent.
- Private providers account for a third of global enrollment – a share that has remained stable in recent years. In countries such as Brazil, Chile, Japan and the Republic of Korea, the vast majority of students attend private higher education institutions.



# Chapter 3. Governance and legislative frameworks

The governance of higher education is broadly understood to include the relationships between institutions and the state; the development of system-level policies and the influence of external stakeholders; and responsibility and accountability as well as institutional decision-making arrangements and structures. It involves both multiple levels of power, agents and actors and is marked by a necessary balance between the fundamental principle of institutional autonomy and governmental oversight. Good governance, clear institutional mandates and robust legislative frameworks are critical to ensure accountability, transparency, quality and equity in light of the expansion of higher education systems, the diversification of provision, the adoption of new delivery modes, and increasing enrollment and internationalization (Shin, 2022; Mwiria 2022; Hénard and Mitterle, 2008).

In the majority of countries tracked by the HEPO, decision-making authority for higher education systems lies primarily with the central government, as opposed to sub-national authorities. As a result, most countries have adopted national legislation to regulate higher education, with provisions varying in content. This chapter examines the models of governance and legislative frameworks of higher education, delving into the different levels of authority assigned within government structures as well as how institutional autonomy and the right of private providers to operate are reflected.

## 3.1 Models of higher education governance

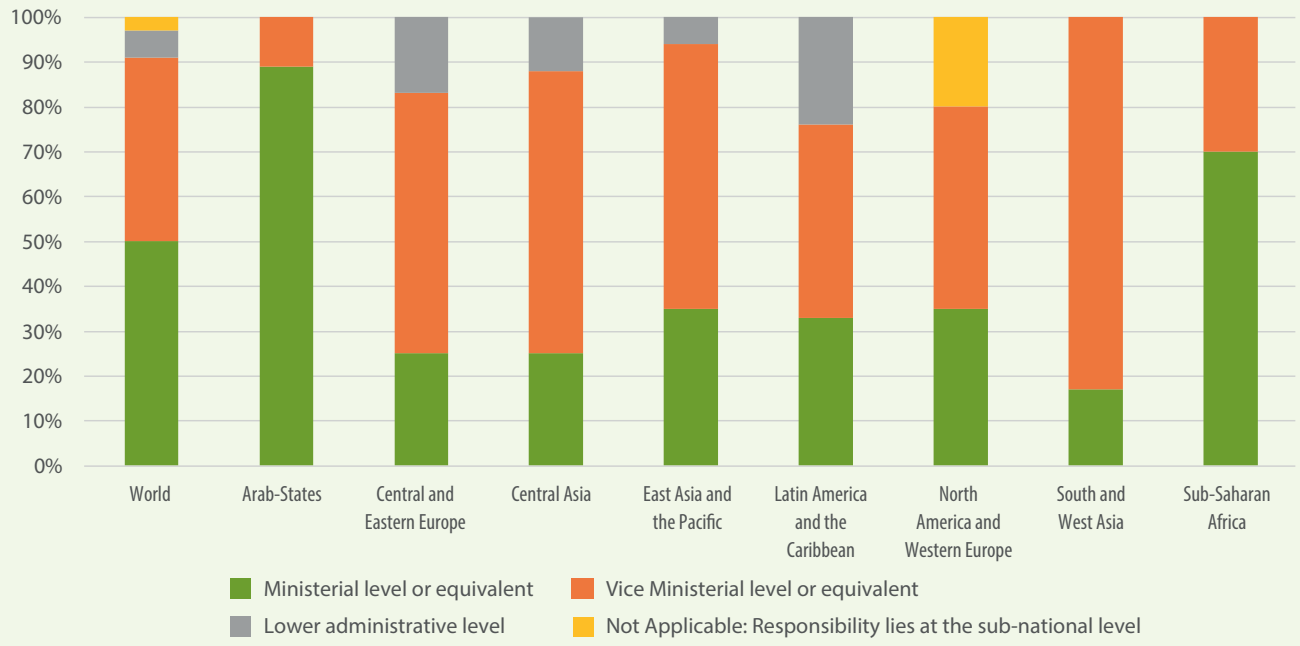
The HEPO provides several indicators related to the models of higher education governance. The first one relates to the jurisdictional level at which higher education systems are governed, distinguishing between countries where higher education is overseen at the national level from those where oversight lies in the hands of, or is shared with, subnational authorities (e.g. states, provinces or regions).

Eighty-eight percent (88%) of cases fall within the first category, with centralized national oversight. This model is universal across the Arab States, Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific, and nearly absolute in sub-Saharan Africa and in Central and Eastern Europe. Shared decision-making models, in which governance responsibilities are distributed between the national government and subnational entities, are more common in South and West Asia (35%), Latin America and the Caribbean (23%) and Western Europe and North America (20%). In a few countries, mainly federal, such as Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom, higher education governance is primarily a sub-national responsibility.

In addition, the HEPO provides a second indicator related to the level of governmental administration bestowed with direct responsibility to govern higher education. It distinguishes between three levels of authority – the ministerial level or equivalent, which is the case in 50% of countries; the vice-ministerial level or equivalent, prevalent in 41% of countries; and lower administrative levels, found in only 6% of countries. The ministerial level is the dominant model in the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa, whereas the vice-ministerial level is more common in other regions, particularly South and West Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (**Figure 3.1**). Interestingly, the prevalence of ministerial-level governance of higher education is only slightly higher in low- and lower-middle-income countries, highlighting that centralization may be influenced less by economic status and more by policy priorities and governance culture.

While this indicator does not provide information on the extent of governmental oversight over higher education, several trends can be observed. Countries that place higher education at the ministerial level may aim to centralize regulation and oversight, while those emphasizing institutional autonomy may delegate authority to lower levels to limit government intervention. At the regional level, a correlation in this regard can particularly be observed in the Arab States and sub-Saharan

**Figure 3.1: Highest national government unit with direct responsibility over higher education, 2024-2025**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

Africa, which have the highest rates of centralization but also the lowest rates of enshrining institutional autonomy in their legislation (**Figure 3.3**). This indicator also signals that as enrollment rates increase, the proportion of countries placing higher education at the ministerial level decreases significantly. This may imply that countries with lower enrollment rates may be more prone to elevate higher education to the ministerial level as strengthening or expanding the sector may be a key policy goal.

Locating higher education below the first level of government administration may also result from practical or financial considerations, such as limited financial resources or a desire to integrate higher education with other educational levels to streamline communication and ensure system alignment. In some countries, higher education is grouped with science, innovation or technology portfolios, within dedicated ministries, such as Portugal's Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, Ecuador's Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, or South Africa's Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation.

## 3.2. Legislative frameworks related to higher education

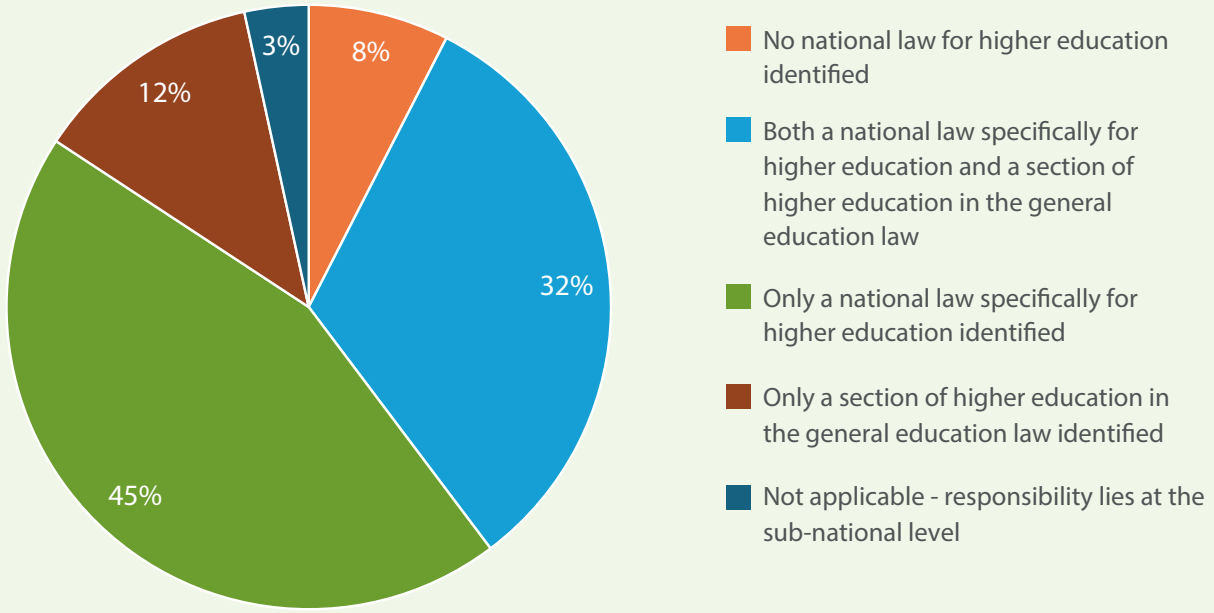
Nearly all countries have adopted legislation to regulate higher education (**Figure 3.2**). Almost half (45%) have a national law dedicated to higher education and one-third (32%) regulate higher education through both a dedicated national law and a section of the broader national education law. A minority of countries (12%) only have a section on higher education in their general education law, while no legislation on higher education could be identified in 8% of cases.

These laws were adopted at different points in history. In 20% of the countries, legislation is more than 25 years old. The age of a law is not necessarily a sign of obsolescence – it can also reflect the maturity and stability of a country's higher education system. However, the timing and frequency of amendments are critical to ensuring that these laws remain relevant to contemporary needs and challenges.

### Institutional autonomy

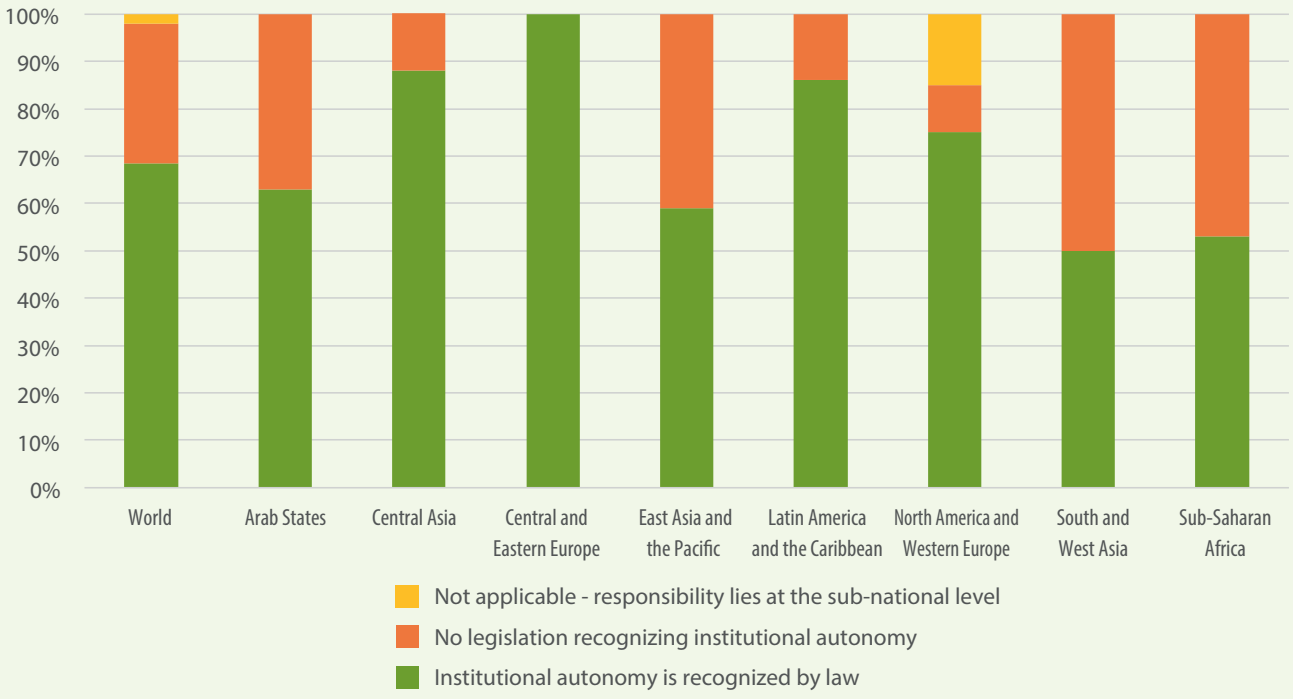
Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are fundamental principles in the governance of higher

**Figure 3.2: Types of legislation adopted at the national level to regulate higher education, 2024-2025**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

**Figure 3.3: Share of countries recognizing institutional autonomy in their legislation, 2024-2025**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

education. The 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel defines institutional autonomy as "that degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the state, and respect for academic freedom and human rights."

At the same time, it recognizes that the nature of institutional autonomy may differ according to the type of establishment involved (UNESCO, 1997).

While not legally binding, the Recommendation places Member States under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source (UNESCO, 1997). This is echoed by the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, where one of the objectives is to respect, uphold and protect the autonomy and diversity of higher education institutions and systems. While autonomy is essential for the free exercise of teaching staff's professional expertise and the free pursuit of knowledge, it exists alongside a responsibility to uphold the public purposes of educational institutions, including the efficient and effective use of public resources (Mwiria, 2022).

At the global level, 67% of states guarantee institutional autonomy by law, with large disparities between regions (**Figure 3.3**). South and West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific and the Arab States far below the world average. This may point to slower adoption of autonomy reforms or a preference for stronger state oversight in higher education governance. Moreover, the Observatory data shows a slight correlation between a country's income level and its likelihood to enshrine institutional autonomy in legislation.

However, this indicator from the HEPO is based on national legislation only, and legal recognition alone does not ensure institutional autonomy in practice. Moreover, a 2021 report from the Joint ILO–UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART) concluded that there is no prescribed way of implementing institutional autonomy and academic freedom and that it is not mandatory to specifically enshrine these in the legal framework, as long as no legislative provision restricts them (CEART, 2021).

Similar trends are observed on academic freedom, which has been under mounting threat, as discussed in Chapter 7 on Higher Education Teaching Personnel. The 2024 report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education underscored that institutional autonomy should be considered as being instrumental to academic freedom. It pointed out that in many countries, different tiers of educational institutions enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and self-governance and that many violations have been reported (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

### Private providers

Many countries around the world introduced private higher education often in the late 20th century or early 21st century. Expansion in Latin America had begun in the 1960s, and the private sector was dominant in several key East Asian nations (Levy, 2013). In the last quarter of the 20th century, private higher education became the fastest-growing segment of higher education worldwide, expanding rapidly in almost all parts of the world, despite public higher education exponentially growing in absolute terms (Usher, 2025). Few countries today, such as Cuba, Eritrea and Turkmenistan, have no private higher education provision (Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba, 2021; GEM report, n.d.b).

Globally, 91% of countries tracked by the HEPO have adopted legislative provisions that allow private higher education providers to operate in the system. Countries form a continuum from those where the government supervises and centrally coordinates providers, assigning them variable roles, to those allowing competition, choice and autonomy for non-state providers, as in Chile, Colombia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea (Ferreyra et al., 2017; Welch, 2021).

Globally, a third of higher education students (ISCED 5 – 8) are enrolled in private institutions, defined by the UIS as those controlled and managed by a non-governmental organization of whose governing board consists mostly of members not selected by a public agency. This proportion has remained stable in recent years. More than one-quarter of countries that reported data to the UIS in 2023 had over 50% of their students enrolled in private institutions. At the regional level, the trend is particularly pronounced in Latin America and the Caribbean,

where nearly half of all students are enrolled in private institutions, with countries like Chile (83.73%) and Brazil (77.25%) reporting particularly high rates. In Asia and the Pacific, more than a third of all students attend private institutions, especially in the Republic of Korea (79.71%) and Japan (79.13%).

Most countries have regulatory frameworks for the establishment, operation and closure of non-state tertiary education institutions, aimed at ensuring minimum quality standards. The regulatory frameworks are diverse, reflecting government views of the sector and of private providers. However, in some countries, the explosive growth in non-state provision has posed a regulatory challenge when resources and capacities to accredit and monitor such institutions are lacking. Equity-promoting regulations are also not common and usually exist only for providers that receive public funding (UNESCO GEM report, 2021/2022).

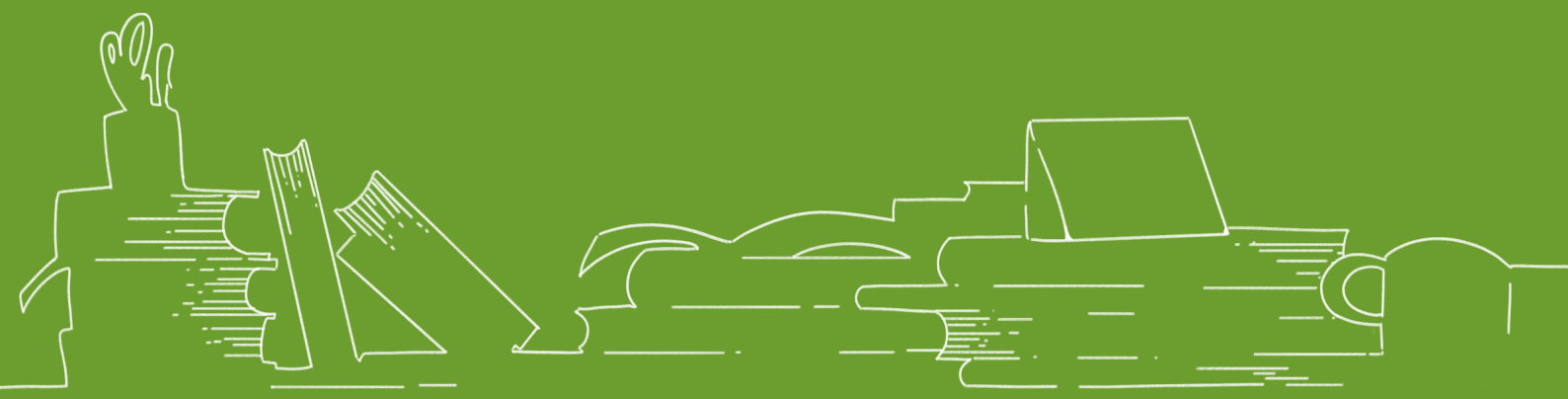
In many cases, regulations and licensing requirements for private providers have become tougher (Usher, 2025). Private providers are sometimes placed under strict regulations, which often favour public institutions. In Argentina, for example, non-state universities need approval from the accreditation agency before being established and the authorization is probationary for up to six years, while Azerbaijan's government controls the types of programmes non-state institutions can offer and even the number of students they can enroll (Altbach et al., 2021; Salmi, 2017).

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 4. External quality assurance

### Main takeaways:

- 88% of countries mandate the establishment of one or more national quality assurance agencies by law. Countries with a large and diverse number of providers or high levels of private enrolment tend to have multiple agencies, while those with moderate enrolment or a predominantly public education sector typically rely on a single agency.
- Although 73% of countries guarantee agencies' institutional autonomy by law, in practice, many agencies operate with limited autonomy. Autonomy can span several dimensions, including operational, financial and decision-making independence, and implementation varies widely.
- For quality assurance agencies to function effectively, autonomy must be accompanied by adequate financial and human resources as well as strong accountability mechanisms to avoid inconsistent or biased assessments.
- While national quality assurance models can vary, agencies around the world generally look to international or regional frameworks to ensure the comparability of programmes and qualifications across countries, while striving to maintain sensitivity to local contexts.
- Broad regional trends on quality assurance can be observed, such as the focus on internationalization and the development of regional networks in Latin America and the Caribbean, regional harmonization, technology and qualification frameworks in Asia and the Pacific, or capacity development and stakeholder engagement in the Arab States.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, the quality assurance movement has been slower than in other regions. Many systems face resource and infrastructural constraints, but regional collaboration is showing promise, particularly in capacity development and standardizing evaluation criteria.
- Quality assurance is the key factor that determines the value of the recognition of qualifications in both domestic and cross-border contexts. It is a key principle of all UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education.



# Chapter 4. External quality assurance

Quality assurance is essential to building trust in higher education and enhancing the quality of systems, institutions and programmes. Since the turn of the century, rising enrolment and mobility, the massification and diversification of provision, and ongoing digital transformation have significantly increased the demand for quality assurance. These developments have amplified the role of quality assurance in upholding academic standards, fostering a culture of accountability and safeguarding the interests of students and society. Quality assurance is also ultimately the key factor that determines the recognition of qualifications in both domestic and cross-border contexts.

While the primary responsibility for ensuring quality lies with higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies play a vital role in fostering a culture of quality by establishing standards and criteria, assessing academic programmes and reviewing institutional quality assurance mechanisms. These come in various forms – from national regulators to private quality assurance bodies and professional accreditors affiliated with professional associations.

The number of countries that mandate the establishment of quality assurance agencies by law rose from around 40% in the early 2010s (Kinser and Lane, 2017) to 88% today, based on Observatory data. At the same time, global and regional networks and standards have expanded to promote trust, comparability and the improvement of higher education across borders. This chapter focuses on external quality assurance, namely trends related to regulatory frameworks; institutional arrangements including quality assurance agencies; global and regional quality assurance frameworks and dynamics; and the role of quality assurance in the recognition of qualifications process.

## 4.1 The establishment of quality assurance agencies

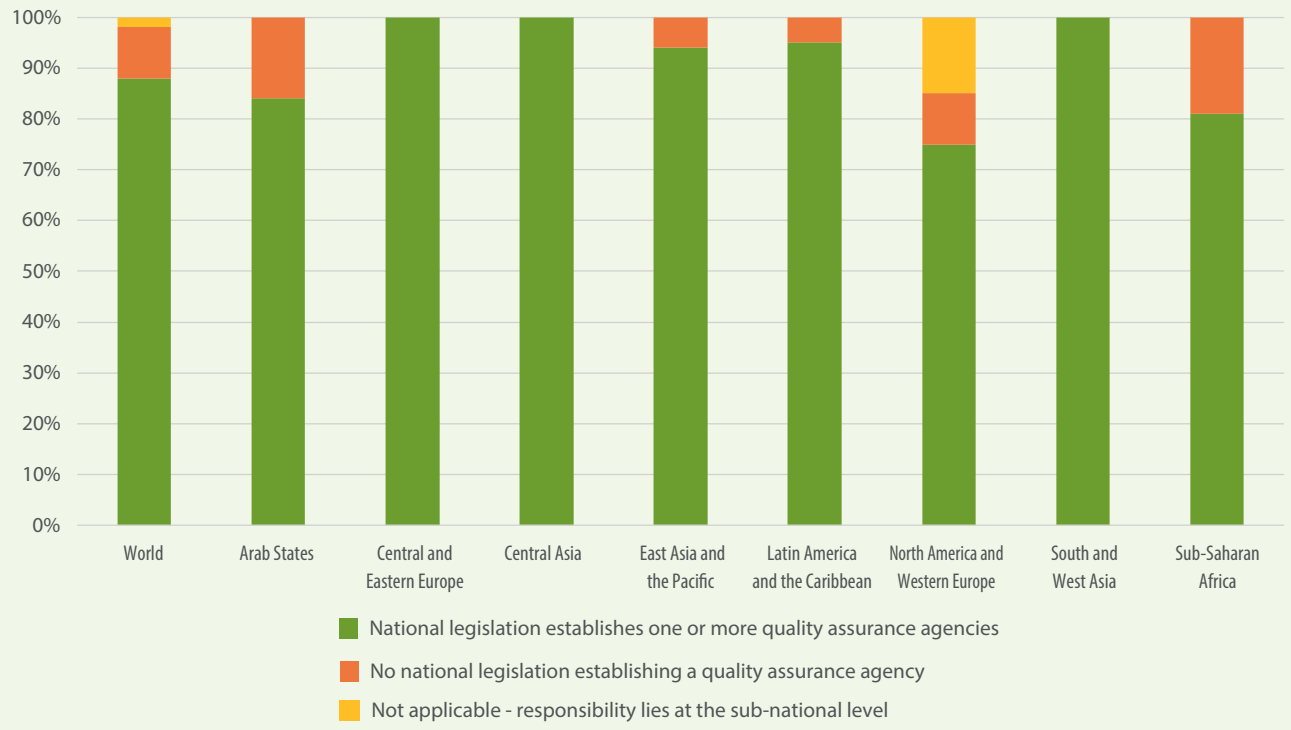
Among the 146 countries included in the Observatory, 128 or 88% mandate the establishment of one of more quality assurance agencies by law (**Figure 4.1**). Such agencies may be commissioned by governments to ensure the accountability of education providers or promote the enhancement of teaching and learning, or a combination of both (OECD, 2025a).

Legislation increasingly assigns quality assurance (QA) responsibilities to multiple agencies. This approach is especially common in countries with a large and diverse number of providers or high levels of private enrolment, where multiple agencies often share responsibility for quality assurance, dividing tasks either by function or institutional sector. This structure allows for both flexibility and specialization within the QA system while maintaining national consistency. In contrast, smaller countries with moderate enrolment or larger countries with a predominantly public education sector typically rely on a single national agency to oversee quality assurance. (UNESCO GEM report, 2018).

Notably, the number and type of quality assurance agencies are shaped by the strategic priorities of each country. National quality assurance regulators are primarily concerned with ensuring compliance, exercising control and upholding accountability. By comparison, professional accreditors – including cross-border quality assurance bodies – are often engaged when there is a need to demonstrate the quality of provision or to show alignment with international standards and the comparability of educational offerings (Karakhanyan, 2025).

Three countries in the Observatory – Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom – regulate quality assurance at the sub-national level. In Canada, for example, education is under the exclusive jurisdiction of the country's ten provinces and three territories. As such, each province or territory

**Figure 4.1: Regional distribution of countries mandating the establishment of one or more quality assurance agencies by law, 2024-2025**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

determines its own policies, where some manage quality assurance within government itself; some utilize external or arm's-length agencies; and some use a combination of oversight bodies based on the specific type of provider (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, n.d.).

In 10% of countries, no legislation on the establishment of a quality assurance agency could be found. This is more pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States, where 19% and 16% of countries tracked by the Observatory lack such legislation. Low-income countries with expanding tertiary education systems often struggle to establish quality assurance agencies due to capacity and resource constraints. Instead, higher education institutions often carry out quality control at the institution level (UNESCO GEM report, 2018).

The mere adoption of legislation, however, does not always equate to the immediate establishment of quality assurance agencies. In some instances, although the creation of a quality assurance agency is mandated by law, its actual implementation has been delayed due to capacity and resource constraints, administrative hurdles, changes in government or shifting policy priorities. In Uruguay, for example, the quality assurance agency was officially established in 2024, five years after the relevant legislation was passed (Centro de Información Oficial - Uruguay, 2019).

In 86% of countries with a quality assurance agency, legislation requires quality assurance agencies to develop standards to evaluate higher education institutions or programmes, highlighting the broad legal support for their evaluative functions. Furthermore, in nearly all cases, national quality assurance agencies are listed as public organizations.

In many cases – particularly in developing systems – although the law mandates external quality assurance, only a small percentage of higher education institutions and programmes are covered due to limited operational capacity. As a result, many institutions and programmes operate outside the established legal framework, even though they

issue qualifications that are formally recognized within the country (Karakhanyan, 2025).

## 4.2 The autonomy of quality assurance agencies

The autonomy of quality assurance agencies in higher education is essential to ensure objective and credible evaluations of institutions and programmes, free from undue political or institutional influence. Among the 128 countries that legally mandate the establishment of a quality assurance agency, 73% also enshrine the autonomy of these agencies in law (**Figure 4.2**).

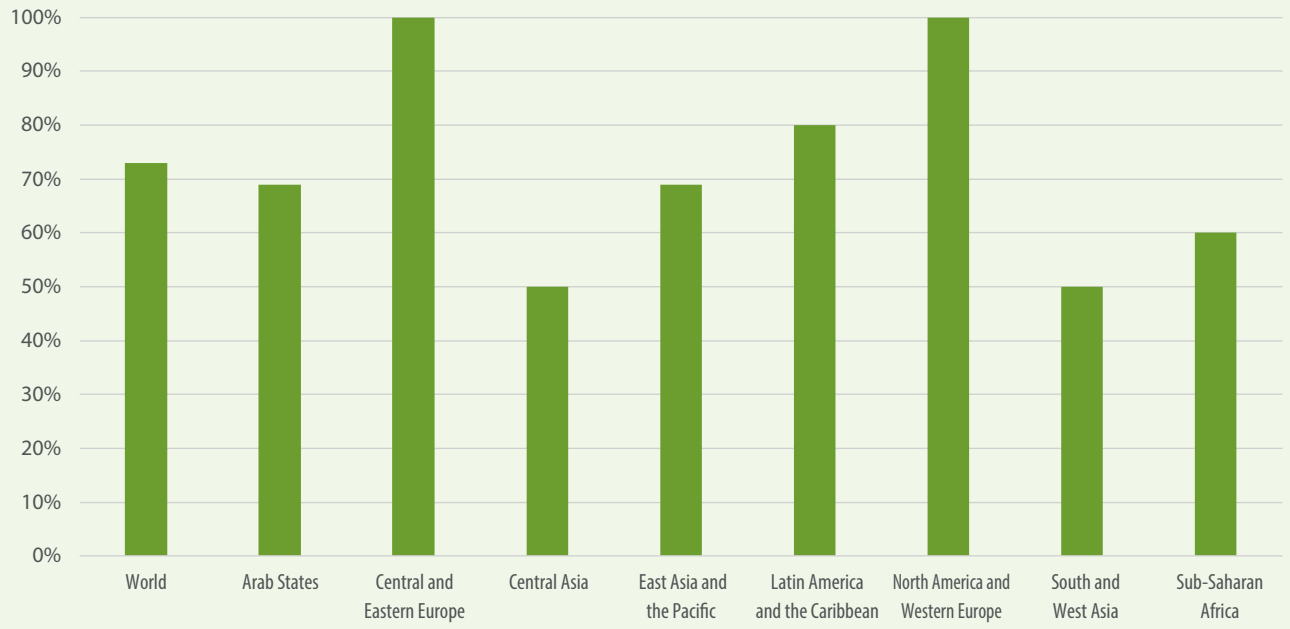
All countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and North America guarantee autonomy to quality assurance agencies in their legislation. High levels of autonomy are also observed in Latin America and the Caribbean (80%), East Asia and the Pacific (69%) and the Arab States (69%). In absolute numbers, the largest share of countries whose legislation mandates the establishment of quality assurance agencies but does not guarantee their autonomy is found in Central Asia and South and West Asia.

Legal autonomy alone, however, is just a starting point and many agencies suffer from the lack of autonomy in practice. The legislation needs to translate into actual autonomy in operation, absent from political interference in the quality assurance process. Furthermore, for quality assurance agencies to function effectively, autonomy must be accompanied by adequate financial and human resources as well as strong accountability mechanisms to avoid inconsistent or biased assessments. This includes establishing clear mandates, transparent procedures and mechanisms for stakeholder oversight. Without such safeguards, the absence of centralized control can result in inconsistent or biased evaluations, inefficiencies or even misconduct (Salmi, 2025; Ricaute et al., 2024).

## 4.3 Global and regional trends on quality assurance

While external quality assurance models are developed within national systems and can vary, quality assurance agencies often follow international or regional frameworks to ensure comparability of programmes and qualifications

**Figure 4.2: Regional distribution of countries enshrining the autonomy of quality assurance agencies in their legislation, 2024-2025**




Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

across countries, while striving to maintain sensitivity to local contexts (Jung, 2022).

It is estimated that by 2020, 75% of quality assurance agencies were members of regional or international quality assurance networks (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; UNESCO, 2022a). The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is the largest one, with over 300 members and a series of networks that operate in all regions.

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which brings together 48 countries, the evolution of quality assurance in higher education has been driven by the Bologna Process and the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA set out principles and accepted practices, regardless of place or of delivery, while catering to national contexts (ENQA). The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) has also played a key role for the region, encouraging agencies to meet common standards and gain recognition within the broader system. However, some countries – particularly in the Balkans and former Soviet Union – grapple with resource constraints and implementation challenges, and many agencies have not yet been accepted as full ENQA members (Pedró, 2025; Salmi, 2023).

In Latin American and the Caribbean, quality assurance frameworks increasingly focus on internationalization and the development of regional networks (Pedró, 2025). The Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) is the largest of these in Latin America. The region demonstrates a strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement, evaluation and the adaptation of quality assurance processes to local contexts while maintaining international compatibility (Pedró, 2025). All countries in the region except Bolivia had established a quality assurance agency at the time this report was drafted.

Asia and the Pacific show a diversity of approaches, with an increasing focus on regional harmonization and qualification frameworks, and a rapid expansion of professional accreditors (Pedró, 2025; Zvezdova & Zhang, 2024). Technological integration is a prominent component, with agencies embracing digital tools to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of quality assurance processes. A 2023 survey of 22 quality assurance agencies in the region revealed an increasing focus of quality assurance processes related to distance learning in particular as well as cross-border or transnational education (Hou et. al, 2024).

In the Arab States, where the first decade of the new century saw the creation of quality assurance systems in several countries, particular attention is given to capacity development and stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes. Cross-border quality assurance accreditors are also popular in the region, with some countries setting key performance indicators for their higher education institutions on the number of international accreditations acquired. The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), established in 2007, has promoted harmonized standards and cross-country cooperation (Pedró, 2025; Salmi, 2023).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the quality assurance movement has been slower. Most agencies in the region were created in the last 25 years, mainly in response to the documented decline in the quality of higher education in Africa during the 1980s and the resulting proliferation of private higher education (Materu, 2007). UNESCO estimates that by 2024, close to 40 countries had established or were advanced in the process of establishing a quality assurance agency.

African quality assurance systems are characterized by growing regional collaboration and clustering. The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) regulates quality in 19 French-speaking countries in West and Central Africa, in addition to the Réseau Africain Francophone des Agences Nationales d'Assurance Qualité (RAFANAQ). Similarly, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) coordinates standards for the countries of the East African Community,

while the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) brings together the countries of the Southern African Cone. In general, resource constraints and infrastructure challenges persist in a number of countries, but innovative approaches to regional cooperation show promise, with particular emphasis on capacity development and the standardization of evaluation criteria (Pedró, 2025).

## 4.4 Quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications across borders

The intricate interplay among national traditions, international standards and innovative educational practices has made quality assurance an increasingly critical tool to ensure the credibility and comparability of qualifications across borders. At the same time, defining and assessing 'quality' has generated different perspectives as it varies by educational model and national standards.

At a global scale, the key principle that has inspired the UNESCO recognition conventions is that if the corresponding national quality assurance body duly accredits a higher education institution, then the receiving country of the qualification holder would have to recognize that qualification based on mutual trust among quality assurance bodies. States Parties to the conventions are asked to provide information on their quality assurance systems.

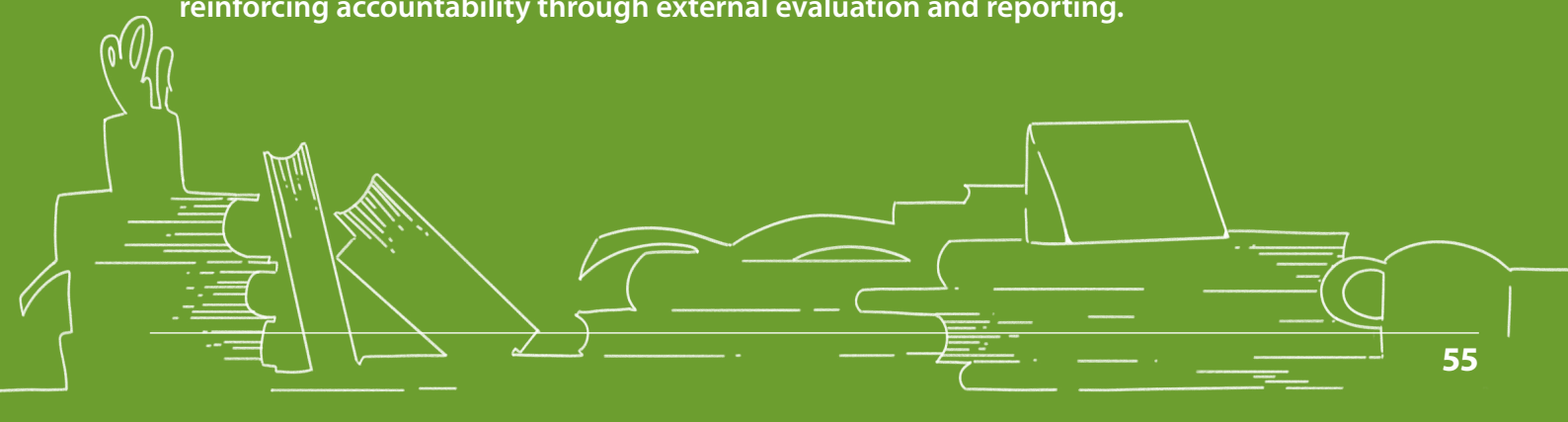
Quality assurance agencies across all regions struggle to develop sufficiently standardized frameworks to ensure consistency while remaining flexible enough to accommodate diverse institutional contexts and emerging educational modalities, such as online learning and micro-credentials. Cross-border or transnational education poses additional challenges as there is an unknown quantity of providers with unclear or absent relationships to the quality assurance models of the home country (Kinser and Lane, 2017). These challenges, interlinking quality assurance and recognition are elaborated in detail in Chapter 9 (The recognition of foreign qualifications).

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 5. The financing of higher education

### Main takeaways:

- Government expenditures on higher education averaged 0.8% of GDP in 2022, ranging from 1.11% in Western Europe and North America to 0.44% in Central Asia. However, year-to-year fluctuations in investments at the national level are common.
- Income level influences government investment, with spending ranging from less than 0.3 % of GDP in low-income countries to more than 1.5 % in high-income systems. Per-student spending gaps persist, particularly in low-income contexts.
- A minority of countries provide data on average tuition fees or attendance costs and their relation to student ability to pay, even among those with a constitutional or legal framework guaranteeing affordability.
- While government expenditure per student remains higher than that of households in most countries, governments are increasingly shifting some of the cost burden through introducing or raising tuition fees and encouraging private providers.
- Tuition-free and subsidy reforms can improve access but face sustainability challenges. Experiences in Chile, South Africa and the Philippines show gains for low-income students, but also the need for strong governance, precise targeting and adequate funding.
- One-third of countries legally mandate tuition-free public higher education, mainly in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. However, what countries consider as tuition-free differs widely, pointing to a much lower rate in practice.
- Cost-sharing models carry equity risks. High tuition and limited aid have led to heavy debt burdens and affordability concerns in countries like the United States and Japan.
- Performance-based funding (PBF) of higher education institutions is growing, particularly in Europe, but remains uneven. Evidence suggests that without safeguards, PBF can disadvantage institutions serving vulnerable or remote populations.
- The effectiveness of higher education financing depends not only on the amount invested but also on the governance systems that determine how funds are allocated and monitored. Recent reforms increasingly emphasize the 'dual track' of expanding institutional autonomy while reinforcing accountability through external evaluation and reporting.



# Chapter 5. The financing of higher education

The financing of higher education is a foundational policy issue that shapes not only institutional viability but also the capacity of higher education systems to deliver inclusive, high-quality learning opportunities. Adequate, equitable and sustainable financing constitutes a foundational requirement to broaden access, enhance completion outcomes, ensure the recruitment and retention of qualified academic staff, foster digital transformation, and sustain research capacity.

Over the past two decades, tertiary enrolments (ISCED levels 5 to 8) have more than doubled globally, rising from approximately 100 million students in 2000 to nearly 269 million by 2024. Much of this growth has occurred in middle-income countries, where public systems were often not designed to absorb learner populations at such scale.

As higher education systems around the world expand in size, diversify in structure and respond to new social and economic demands, financing becomes a strategic determinant of development. The *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap in follow-up to the 2022 World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) points out that higher education is dependent on multiple sources of funding – a combination of public funding and cost sharing in most systems, performance-based funding and 'excellence frameworks' aimed at enhancing institutional prestige (UNESCO, 2026). Even in high-income contexts, discussion over tuition, subsidies and performance-based funding points to tensions between massification and sustainability. Affordability has become a key element in delivering on SDG 4.3 (UNESCO IESALC, 2020; UNESCO GEM report, n.d.).

This chapter examines global and regional investment patterns in higher education, tuition and private financing combined with equity implications and the role of governance structures and institutional oversight.

## 5.1 Global and regional investment patterns in higher education

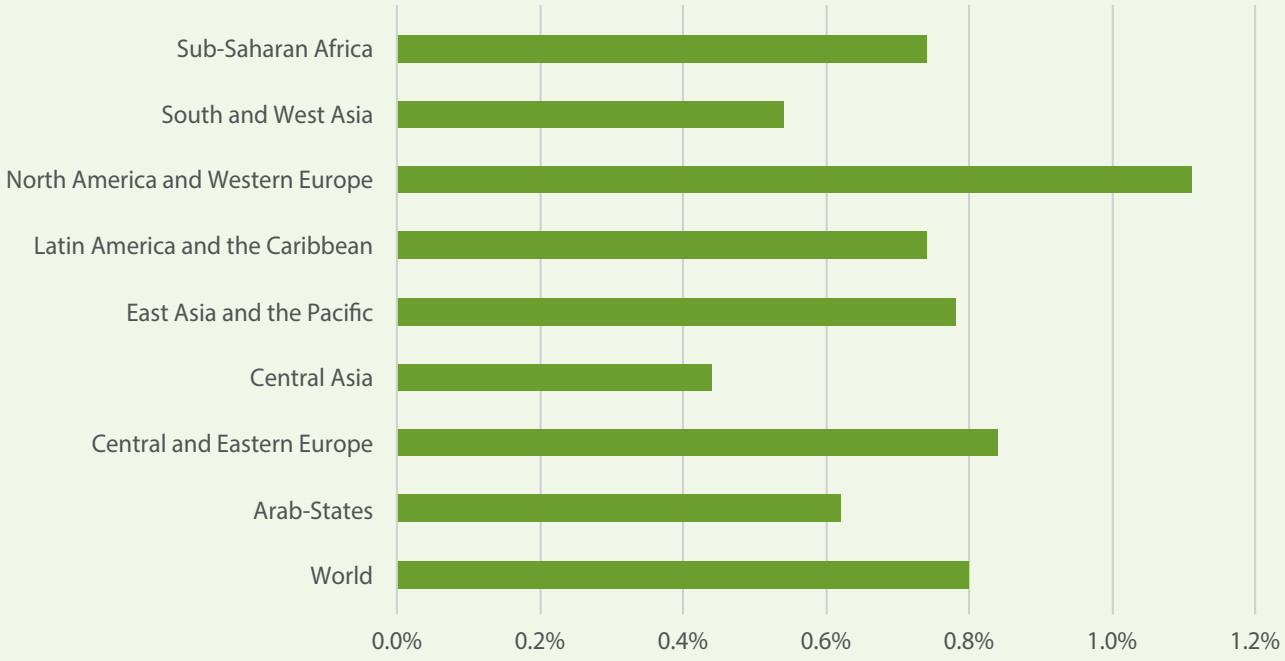
In 2022, the average public expenditure on higher education (ISCED levels 5-8) as a percentage of GDP across countries stood at approximately 0.8% at the global level. This average conceals contrasts across regions, as **Figure 5.1** shows. Moreover, income level also plays a role, with public spending ranging from below 0.3% of GDP in low-income countries to over 1.5% in high-income systems (UNESCO GEM report, 2024).

Governments in countries in Western Europe and North America invest around 1.11% of GDP on average, sustaining robust public systems. Finland and Norway, for example, allocate around 1.5% of their GDP to higher education, combining tuition-free models with broad student support measures (OECD, 2022). Germany maintains a system of tuition-free undergraduate education across its federal states, supported by national and subnational public resources as well as sustained investments in quality assurance and internationalization (UNESCO GEM report, 2024). Performance-based funding is increasingly common in the region, as seen in the Netherlands and Denmark, where graduation and labour market indicators guide part of the funding (European Commission, 2023).

In East Asia and the Pacific, government expenditures on tertiary education average 0.78% of GDP. Countries such as China and the Republic of Korea invest above the global average. China's Double First Class policy, for example, allocates resources to globally competitive universities (MOE, 2022b), whereas the Republic of Korea's 'Brain Korea 21 programme has combined public grants with private engagement to strengthen postgraduate education and innovation capacity (OECD, 2023b).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, government expenditures on tertiary education average 0.74% of GDP. Countries such as Costa Rica, Chile and

**Figure 5.1. Government expenditures on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP, by region, 2022 (ISCED 5 - 8)**




*Source*: Authors' calculation based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

*Notes*:

(1) Because substantially more countries reported on this indicator to the UIS in 2022 (105) than in 2023 (74), the 2022 data were used to calculate regional averages.

(2) Regional averages should be interpreted with caution. In some regions (e.g. Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa), country coverage is limited, reducing representativeness. If reporting is more prevalent among countries with more developed tertiary education systems, regional averages may be biased upward.

(3) Regional averages are simple (unweighted) averages of reporting countries.

Uruguay invest well above the global average, while most countries in the Insular Caribbean and parts of Central America spend below 0.5% of GDP on tertiary education. A report by the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) explains that although governments have historically subsidized tuition extensively to ensure access for nationals, rising costs and constrained fiscal space have driven debates over adopting cost-recovery models and implementing alternative revenue sources, including modest student contributions (CAPRI, 2022).

In sub-Saharan Africa, government expenditures on tertiary education also average 0.74% of GDP. Countries such as Namibia, Senegal and South Africa, invest heavily in their higher education systems, with allocations well above the world average. Studies also point to significant sub-regional variations in expenditure per student across the continent: in 2019, Southern African countries spent USD 3,079 per student, while West African countries spent only USD 648 per student at the same level (Aikins and Cilliers, 2024). In many countries, government funding is complemented by donor support in the form of aid.

In the Arab States, government expenditures on tertiary education average 0.62% of GDP. Expenditure levels vary widely, from 0.25% of GDP in Egypt to 1.58% in Saudi Arabia. By contrast, low-income Arab States struggle with limited budgets and lower enrolment ratios (UNESCO IESALC, 2023). As in all regions, year-to-year fluctuations are also common, reflecting specific capital investments or major programmes. For instance, Mauritania's expenditure rose from 0.35% of GDP in 2022 to 1.2% in 2023, while Oman's fell from 2.1% in 2020 to 1.3% in 2022.

As a region, South and West Asia has a low rate of government expenditures in higher education, averaging 0.54% of GDP. Expenditure levels vary significantly, ranging from 1.28% in India to 0.21% in Nepal. India, for example, has seen a rapid expansion of its higher education system, however, there are concerns over funding levels and equity. While elite central institutions often receive substantial support, many state-level colleges and private providers are operating under budgetary constraints (Ravi, Gupta and Nagaraj, 2019). Overall, Pakistan has witnessed among the largest year-to-year fluctuations in expenditures – from 0.10% in 2022 to 1.07% in 2023.

Among all regions, Central Asia has the lowest rate of government expenditures, with an average of 0.44% of GDP. Based on available data, this share ranges from 0.95% in Kyrgyzstan to 0.48% in Uzbekistan and goes as low as 0.09% in Mongolia. These trends have not changed significantly over the past decade, with expenditures as a percentage of GDP even decreasing over time in some cases. Government funding constitutes only a small portion of university budgets, prompting higher education institutions to seek additional revenue through the commercialization of educational services, with tuition fees making up the majority of university funding (Ambasz et. al., 2023).

## 5.2 Private financing and equity

Private financing, particularly household contributions and tuition fees, has become a central pillar of higher education funding in many countries. As public resources are stretched thin in the face of growing enrollment demands, countries have increasingly turned to cost-sharing mechanisms to sustain operations and improve infrastructure (Teferra et. al, 2022). Only a minority of countries provide data on average tuition fees or attendance costs and their relation to student ability to pay, even among those with a constitutional or legal framework guaranteeing affordability (UNESCO GEM report, 2018).

### Household contributions

While government expenditure per student remains higher than that of households in most countries, governments are increasingly shifting some of the cost burden (Teferra et. al, 2022). The global trend favours reduced public spending and greater privatization and cost-sharing. Tuition fees are introduced or raised, sometimes allowing tuition income to offset government budget allocations to universities. In many cases, private providers are also encouraged to offer degree programmes, expanding options and allowing governments to focus on public institutions (UNESCO GEM report, 2018).

Comparable data on household contributions are scarce, as a minority of countries report on this indicator to the UIS. Findings from the OECD show that in countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea, household spending accounts for over 40% of higher education financing, with high tuition fees even in public universities. While the private university sector in these countries is large and well-established, equity remains a concern due to the limited public subsidies available for low-income students (OECD, 2022).

Systems that rely too heavily on household contributions risk creating exclusionary dynamics by introducing financial barriers to access higher education unless accompanied by robust financial aid or public subsidies targeted toward lower-income population groups. Yet only a minority of countries have implemented equity-sensitive funding formulas or income-contingent loan schemes that address the structural barriers marginalized groups face. For example, Ireland complements core institutional funding with dedicated access allocations and performance compacts that reward institutions for widening participation among under-represented socio-economic groups (OECD, 2022b). In South Africa, formula-driven allocations to institutions are combined with need-based student aid to channel resources toward students from historically disadvantaged communities and low-income households (Mbhalati, 2025). On the student-support side, income-contingent loan systems

such as Australia's HECS-HELP allow students to defer tuition payments until their earnings reach a given threshold, thereby reducing upfront cost barriers (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025).

### Tuition-free higher education

Tuition-free higher education has been another approach to affordability. Around one-third of countries (31%) featured in the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) legally mandate tuition-free public higher education. While these cases are more prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean and North America and Western Europe, they highlight an alternative pathway to reducing household cost-sharing. A handful of countries also combine tuition-free models and regular fees or increased differential fees and regular fees, while the majority rely on full tuition.

Targeted free tuition schemes often aim to balance two objectives: expanding access for low-income or vulnerable students and maintaining fiscal sustainability by requiring wealthier students to contribute, while fully subsidizing those from the lowest income quintiles (Teferra et al., 2022).

However, what countries consider as tuition-free higher education differs widely in practice. A study published by Williams and Usher (2022) looked at a sample of 54 countries around the world and found that public provision can be considered fully free in only six of these. However, tuition-free models alone do not ensure equitable access to quality higher education. In some cases, they may undermine equity, with the wealthiest benefiting most, or compromise on quality due to underfunded public universities (Johnstone and Marucci, 2013; OECD, 2022). To prevent these issues, governments could consider relying on a combination of low tuition fees, adequate institutional funding as well as scholarships and loans based on income (Davis et al., 2023).

International experience suggests that the equity and quality risks of fee abolition are often addressed not by a single instrument but through policy layering. In Chile, free tuition for eligible students coexists with institutional public funding, targeted grants and continuing loan schemes (Ruff et al., 2023). South Africa couples extensive state subsidies with means-tested aid that effectively removes fees for poorer students (Mbhalati, 2024), while Brazil combines tuition-free public institutions with large-scale scholarship and loan programmes for students in the private sector (OECD, 2021b). The Netherlands similarly maintains regulated low tuition while pairing it with substantial core public funding, income-related loan arrangements and means-tested grants (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice Network, 2025).

### Equity-driven reforms

Several countries have implemented equity-driven reforms to expand access to higher education through targeted public subsidies. Countries, such as Chile, Italy, Japan, South Africa, Mauritius, Mexico, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, have reduced or abolished fees for targeted groups, often as a response to growing concerns over affordability and student debt (S. Baker et al., 2021; Motala et al., 2023).

In Chile, the tuition-free policy introduced in 2016 guarantees full tuition subsidies for students from the bottom 60% of the income distribution attending eligible institutions. However, Chile's system remains highly privatized, with private providers accounting for a large share of enrolment and financing, requiring continued cost-sharing from households and students outside the targeted groups (Johnson, 2023).

In the Philippines, the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (2017) made tuition-free education available in all state universities and colleges for eligible students, with additional subsidies for living expenses covered under the Tertiary Education Subsidy programme (Republic of the Philippines, 2017). Recent evaluations conclude that this policy has likely improved affordability and access – 95% of surveyed beneficiaries said the grant made them more likely to continue their studies – although implementation challenges and budget constraints persist (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2024).

South Africa's National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) provides full-cost funding for students from households with an income below a defined threshold, accompanied by a shift from loans to grants for the lowest income groups (Sefoka, 2022). Since 2018, tuition and accommodation costs have been covered for qualifying students. While the policy has significantly expanded participation, scholars also highlight the persistent financial sustainability challenges and administrative hurdles (Ramasu & Kanakana-Katumba, 2024).

Conversely, systems with high cost-sharing levels, such as the United States and Japan, face growing concerns over affordability and long-term student debt burdens. According to the Federal Reserve, student loan debt in the United States surpassed USD 1.8 trillion in 2025 (Fed, 2025a), disproportionately affecting students from low-income and minority backgrounds (Fed, 2025b). Japan's tuition-based system, despite offering low-interest loans, has seen a growing call for greater public support to address demographic decline and equity gaps (Kakuchi, 2025).

The balance between public and private contributions has a direct impact on equity and social mobility. Students from rural, low-income, displaced, or minority backgrounds face structural barriers even in tuition-free systems, including hidden costs. As discussed in Chapter 2, while 62% of countries represented in HEPO administer national publicly funded scholarship programmes, only a minority apply equity-sensitive funding formulas (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Scholarship programmes often do not take into account non-tuition costs and predominantly focus on merit rather than need (UNESCO GEM report, 2020).

## 5.3 Shifting allocation models and performance-based funding

Public financing models for higher education are undergoing significant transformation in many countries. Historically, most institutions operated under line-item or incremental budgeting, where annual allocations were based on historical costs with limited performance incentives (Teferra et. al, 2022). However, a growing number of countries have introduced performance-based funding (PBF) mechanisms aimed at promoting efficiency, quality and responsiveness (Arnhold and Bassett, 2021). These systems link a portion of the financing to institutional outcomes, such as student enrolment, retention, graduation rates, research output or labour market relevance, rather than merely covering fixed operational expenses.

In Europe, 27 higher education systems currently employ some form of PBF to allocate public resources to universities. In Denmark, around 80% of core funding is distributed via the 'taximeter' model, which allocates resources based on completed student credits, degree completions and other weighted indicators aligned with national policy priorities. The Netherlands combines formula funding with performance agreements, linking allocations to degree outputs, graduation rates and strategic objectives agreements between institutions and the government (European Commission, 2023; Kivistö and Suprun, 2024).

In the wider Asia and the Pacific region, several governments have begun integrating performance targets into block grants or formula-based funding, using indicators, such as enrolment in underserved areas, graduate outcomes or institutional accreditation results, to guide resource allocation. Malaysia and Indonesia have, for example, introduced employability and research-based metrics (UNESCO, Teferra et. al, 2022).

In sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, PBF initiatives remain modest but growing. In sub-Saharan Africa in the last decades, governments in countries, such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique and South Africa, introduced funding reforms, supplementing the core allocations to universities with competitive funds to stimulate qualitative improvements, research or partnerships (World Bank, 2010). In Chile in 2018, the government adopted a law linking institutional funding to multiple variables, including

institutional performance, the status and years of accreditation, and accountability mechanisms (Brunner et al., 2025).

Effective PBF requires transparent data, stakeholder consultation and safeguards for institutions serving disadvantaged populations. Hybrid models that combine formula funding with negotiated compacts can strike a balance between accountability and diversity.

## 5.4 Governance structures and institutional oversight

The effectiveness of higher education financing depends not only on the amount invested but also on governance systems that determine how funds are allocated and monitored. Strong frameworks based on clear mandates, autonomy and accountability enable alignment between financing and national goals (Arnhold & Bassett, 2021).

As discussed in Chapter 3, centralized governance remains dominant globally, with 88% of countries having a dedicated higher education authority. When such authorities possess regulatory power and coordinating capacity, they can effectively integrate funding mechanisms with performance monitoring and quality assurance frameworks, resulting in greater policy coherence and more efficient resource utilization (European Commission, 2023).

However, the degree of institutional autonomy varies significantly. In some systems, ministries maintain detailed control over budgets, staffing decisions and even curricula, leaving universities with limited room to innovate or respond to emerging economic and social needs (UNESCO, 2022b; Teferra et. al, 2022). Autonomy must be balanced with accountability. Systems granting universities flexibility in budgeting and staffing while maintaining external oversight tend to perform better (UNESCO GEM report, 2024).

Indonesia has restructured its governance model to enhance the financial and managerial autonomy of universities, accompanied by performance contracts and outcome-based funding. South Africa has strengthened university councils – the statutory governing bodies at each public institution – and introduced more robust performance reporting as part of its block grant system. In Morocco, reforms are underway to grant universities greater budgetary flexibility while expanding the role of the national quality assurance agency to ensure that standards are maintained (UNESCO GEM report, 2024; Teferra et. al, 2022). In Central Asia, a World Bank analysis highlights the need for regional integration and shared quality assurance frameworks to improve governance efficiency (Ambasz et al., 2023).

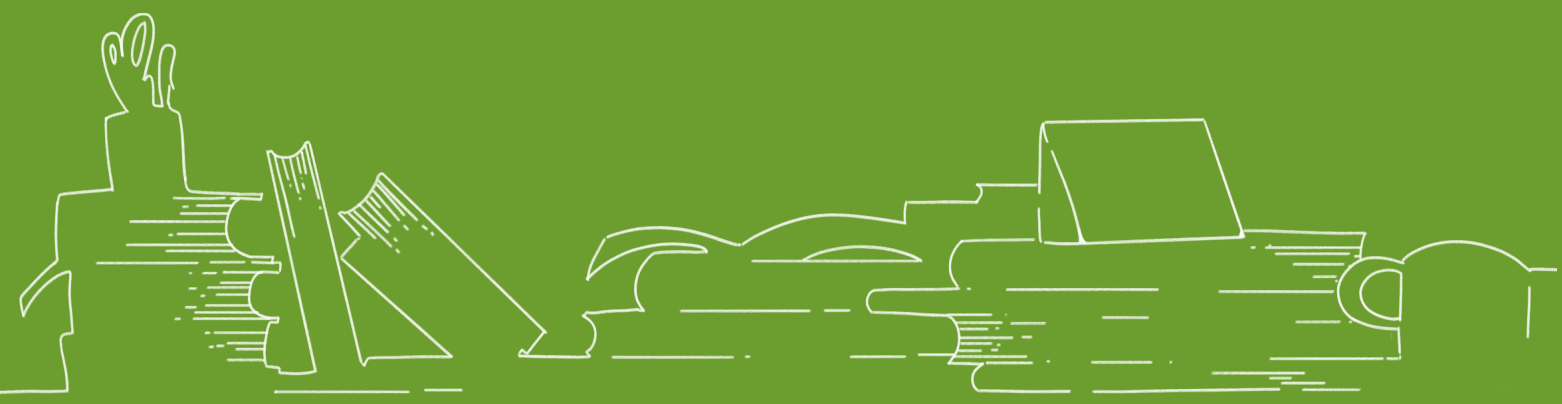
While over-centralization can slow decision making and reduce institutional agility, unchecked decentralization can also cause inefficiencies. The challenge is to design multi-level governance that promotes responsiveness, transparency and accountability. The most effective systems implement a 'dual track' that expands institutional autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing accountability through external evaluation, fiscal oversight and performance agreements.

Part I: The changing face of higher education

# 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

## Main takeaways:

- Digitalization features prominently in countries' higher education plans, with nearly 77% including dimensions related to digital education services, AI, and online and remote learning. These trends are slightly less prevalent among high-income countries.
- As of 2024, 56 countries had adopted national AI strategies, a majority of which underscore the critical role of higher education in AI education, driving research and innovation.
- AI's potential in higher education is substantial, but regulatory frameworks are insufficient. In 2025, 19% of institutions have adopted a formal AI policy, while another 42% were developing guiding frameworks.
- Digital divides persist. Socio-economic background plays an important role in students' access to technology and around a third of the global population remains offline.
- Only a handful of countries possess sufficient capacity to process and analyze the vast amounts of data generated by learning analytics, with a lack of digital literacy among relevant personnel serving as a major limiting factor. The diversity of approaches and technologies to developing digital platforms is making interoperability issues increasingly prominent.
- Flexible learning pathways – such as online and blended instruction, as well as micro-credentials – offer opportunities to expand access to lifelong learning and employment, including for marginalized groups. However, without robust regulatory frameworks and equitable access to digital infrastructure, these flexible pathways risk reinforcing existing inequalities.
- English dominates digital educational content, both on major platforms and within open educational resources (OER), raising concerns over linguistic equity, cultural relevance and systemic dependencies.



# Chapter 6. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

Technology plays a significant role in higher education, transforming how students learn, faculty teach and institutions operate. Higher education is the education sub-sector with the highest rate of digital technology adoption (UNESCO GEM report, 2023). It encompasses multiple dimensions, including connectivity and infrastructure; content and solutions; capacity and culture; and data and evidence, among others (UNESCO, 2024d). With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions rapidly transferred instruction to online platforms, albeit to different capacities, which greatly accelerated this transformation. At the same time, the rapid development of emerging technologies, such as AI in recent years has made it a central issue to explore how higher education can better adopt and leverage new technologies to promote equity, quality and efficiency (OECD, 2023a).

According to the latest data from HEPO, close to 77% of countries worldwide have included digitalization as one of their higher education development goals in national policy frameworks. When it comes to AI in particular, as of 2024, 56 countries around the world have adopted national AI strategies, with an additional 13 in the process of adoption. These strategies often favour the role of higher education in advancing AI research and development. Canada and the United States are global leaders in this area, supported by strong government backing and robust technology sectors. They are followed by European nations, 65% of which have formal AI strategies in place, often accompanied by significant investment in research and development. One of the most influential levers in national AI policy is the strategic engagement of higher education institutions to produce specialized talent, drive cutting-edge research and inform policy decisions (Pedró and Mendigutxia, 2025).

While digitalization has revolutionized higher education, facilitated greater access and spurred innovation, it has also given rise to growing concerns over digital divides and ethical use. This chapter examines digitalization and AI in national plans and strategies; access to digital infrastructure; the growing role of digital tools and software; the rise of flexible learning and opportunities; and the challenges of AI.

## 6.1 Digitalization and AI in national education plans and strategies

Countries around the world began transitioning to digital economies even before the onset of COVID-19. However, the pandemic significantly accelerated this shift, highlighting the essential role of digital technologies in times of crisis (UNESCO, 2022d). Approximately 77% of countries featured in the Observatory that have adopted a national plan for higher education integrate objectives for the digitalization of higher education (**Figure 6.1a**), focusing on areas such as digital education services, AI, and online and remote learning. Although this trend is evident across all regions with the exception of South and West Asia, countries on the upper end of the income scale tend to place slightly less emphasis on digitalization (**Figure 6.1b)** – likely because many already possess well-established digital infrastructures.

In contrast to broader digitalization efforts, the development of dedicated national strategies on AI is more pronounced among upper middle-income and high-income countries. In particular, countries are adopting a range of strategies to address potential workforce skill shortages in the AI era, including promoting interdisciplinary AI training, developing AI-related degree programmes, strengthening AI literacy and expanding basic digital literacy training. Among countries that have adopted national AI strategies, 55% have already launched 'next-generation AI graduate programmes' to cultivate highly skilled professionals in the field of AI (Pedró & Mendigutxia, 2025).

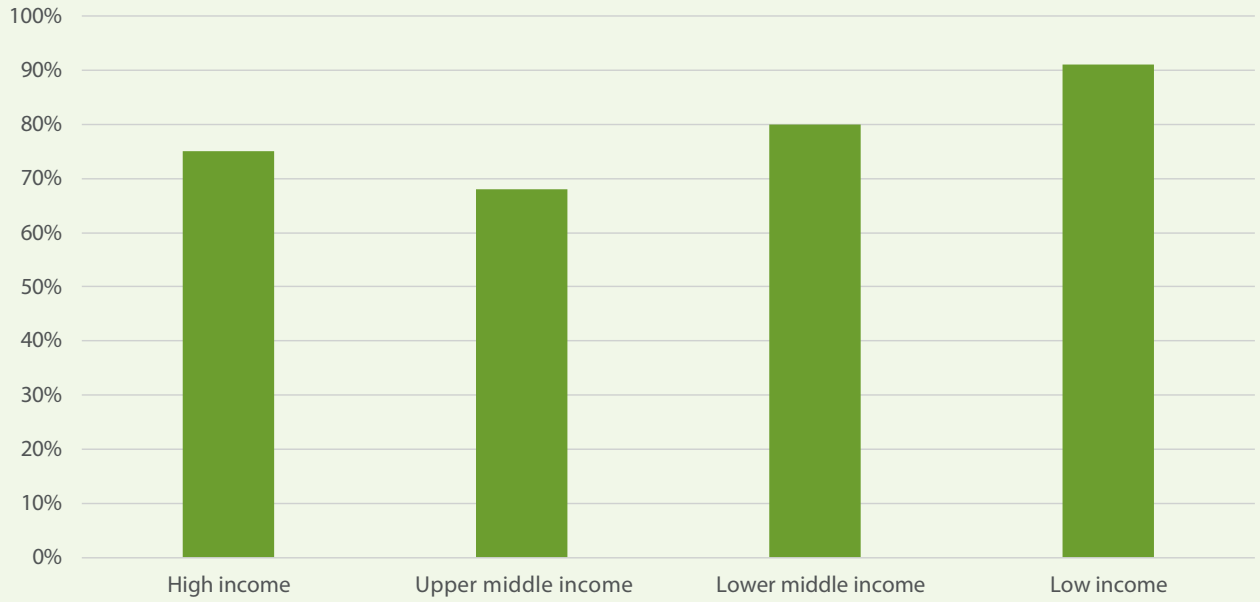
## 6.2 Access to digital infrastructure

Connectivity has greatly improved around the world in the last five years (**Figure 6.2a**). However, significant digital divides persist, particularly among rural and marginalized communities. Despite the

**Figure 6.1a: Countries that include digitalization in their national higher education plans by region, 2024-2025**


*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

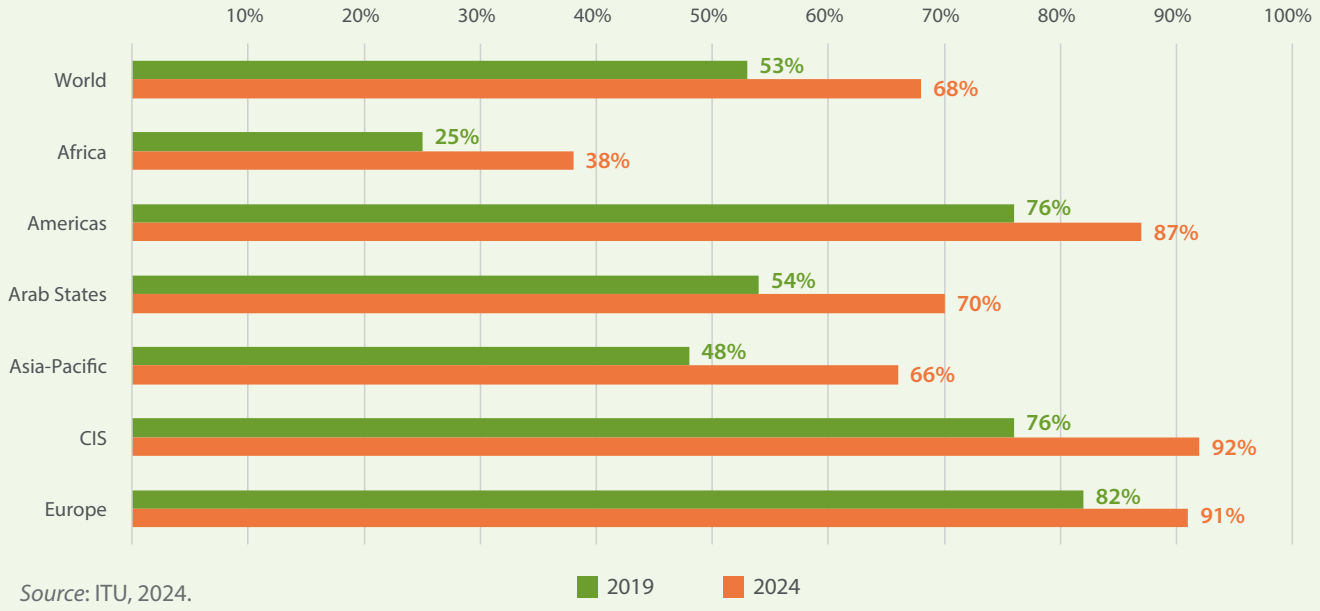
**Figure 6.1b: Countries that include digitalization in their national higher education plans by income group, 2024-2025**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

improvements in internet coverage in recent years, data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) shows that about one-third of the global population remains offline as of 2024. The level of national development greatly affects internet penetration rates – 93% in high-income countries compared to 27% in low-income countries (**Figure 6.2b**). In sub-Saharan Africa alone, internet penetration has grown by an average annual rate of 16.7% since 2005, compared to 8% globally (ITU, 2025a). However, the average mobile download speed in the region is more than three times slower than in the rest of the world (Astou Diouf et al., 2024). Access to devices is also uneven, with the cost burdens weighing disproportionately on low-income populations (ITU, 2025b).

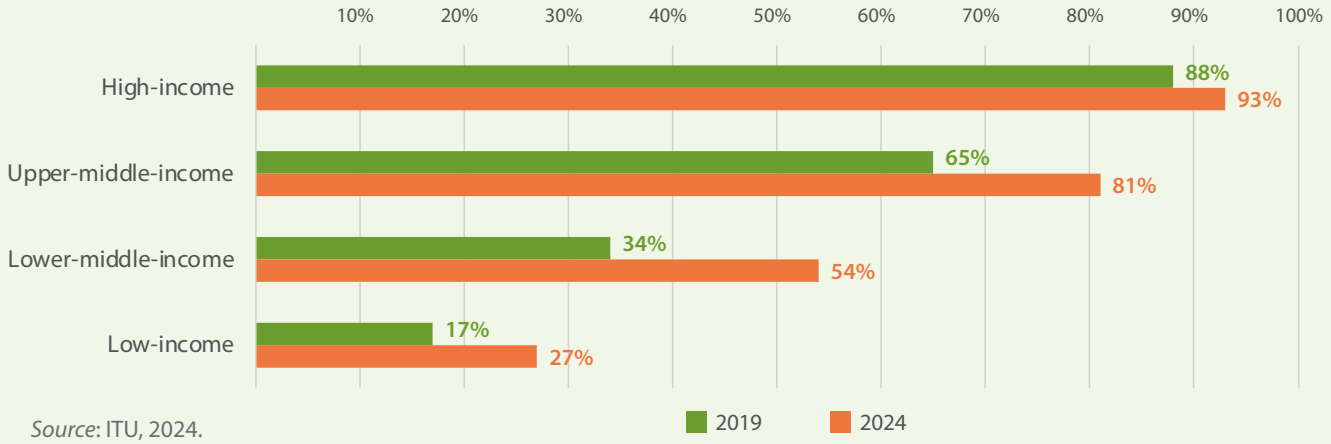
**Figure 6.2a: Percentage of individuals using the internet by region, 2019 and 2024**




*Source*: ITU, 2024.

*Note*: (1) Regional classifications used in this figure follow ITU's grouping.
(2) CIS refers to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

**Figure 6.2b: Percentage of individuals using the internet by income group, 2019 and 2024**




*Source*: ITU, 2024.

There is also a pronounced gap in internet usage between urban and rural areas (83% vs. 48%), with less economically developed regions tending to exhibit even greater disparities. Although gender parity in global internet use is improving, a gap remains (70% males vs. 65% females) (ITU, 2024).

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and universities were forced to transition online, the higher education sector was relatively better prepared than lower levels of education – although it still faced significant challenges in ensuring equitable access and maintaining educational quality. According to the Global Survey carried out by the International Association of Universities (IAU) across 576 higher education institutions in 109 countries, 85% of European higher education institutions were able to transition to online learning, compared to just 29% in Africa. Many faced difficulties in the transition due to infrastructure, but also because many students did not have internet access at home, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (International Association of Universities, 2024).

In response, countries around the world have introduced policies to optimize internet access and connectivity in higher education. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the governments of Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile have undertaken substantial investments in digital infrastructure – Peru, for instance, has invested up to 358 million USD (UNESCO IESALC & ICHEI, 2024). Ethiopia, through its Digital Education Strategy and Implementation Plan (2023–2028), aims to expand the coverage and capacity of the Ethiopian Education and Research Network to connect all higher education institutions nationwide and improve Wi-Fi coverage in student dormitories (Ministry of Education of Ethiopia, 2023).

Uneven digital access could give rise to new forms of inequality in higher education. These persistent disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. However, the lack of comprehensive data on connectivity and internet coverage, particularly at the higher education level, poses additional challenges to design effective solutions.

## 6.3 The growing role of digital tools and software

The digital infrastructure of higher education encompasses a variety of platforms, software, digital tools and system services that collectively support core activities, such as teaching, administration, student interaction and assessment (OECD, 2023a). The development of integrated systems on collecting, accessing and analysing data are also fundamental to evidence-based policymaking in higher education. Learning management systems (LMS) and education management information systems (EMIS) are two of the most notable digital systems.

LMS as a centralized platform enhances the accessibility of course materials and resources, facilitating personalized learning for students. Moreover, the widespread use of these systems generates large amounts of real-time data, enabling higher education institutions (HEIs) to conduct analyses and develop more effective policies based on these (UNESCO, 2025a). LMS has long been a standard component for HEIs (Dahlstrom et al., 2014).

EMIS assigns each student a unique permanent identifier to track their progress throughout the educational system over time, also providing a rich source of data for learning analytics (OECD, 2023a). EMIS can ensure data accessibility through interactive dashboards and APIs that promote transparency and stakeholder participation (Pedró et al, 2025). The integration of higher education into the national EMIS – or the establishment of a dedicated HEMIS – with a clearly designated agency to lead this system, is also strongly associated with improved data availability.

The proliferation of digital tools in higher education has led to a wide range of new applications that can benefit both students and faculty. A few examples are outlined below.

**Table 6.1: Application of digital tools in higher education**

| Purpose | Case Details | Reference |
|---|---|---|
| **Learning management & administration** | Yonsei University and Hanyang University in Korea developed LMS platforms (LearnUs and HY-ON) that automate and synchronize attendance, grade management, and course scheduling, reducing administrative burdens on faculty. | UNESCO, 2025a |
| **University admissions** | Brazil's SISU and France's Parcoursup serve as nationwide online application systems, enabling students to access information and receive admission notifications, improving transparency and efficiency. | OECD, 2023a |
| **Employment data tracking & career guidance** | University of Science and Technology of Masuku in Africa launched the 'Career Path' digital platform in July 2024 as its first platform dedicated to graduate employment tracking and alumni networking. | UNESCO, 2025b |
| | The European Union established the European Graduate Tracking Network to collect graduate data and inform policies on learning outcomes, employability and skills gaps/mismatches. | European Commission, 2021 |

The massive volume of data generated by digital platforms – especially when leveraged by emerging technologies such as AI – holds great potential to inform educational decision-making, personalized learning and quality improvement. However, there are numerous challenges to using these data effectively. At present, only a handful of countries possess sufficient capacity to process and analyse the vast amounts of data generated by learning analytics, with a lack of digital literacy among relevant personnel serving as a major limiting factor (UIS, 2023; UNESCO GEM report, 2023).

In addition, the diversity of digital platform development approaches, technologies and standards means that issues of interoperability are becoming increasingly prominent. In OECD countries, less than half of these systems are interoperable at either the system or institutional level. Furthermore, many institutions rely on large technology firms to provide digital solutions. One study found that 59% of public higher education institution domains in Africa and 76% in Latin America are related to Google or Microsoft, raising concerns about over-reliance on specific technology platforms, as well as privacy and cybersecurity risks for educational institutions (Cruz et al., 2024).

The adoption of emerging technologies requires ethical considerations and a human-centered approach. Rooted in this context, UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI – the first global normative instrument in this field – establishes key principles such as proportionality, fairness and human oversight that are directly applicable to educational contexts. In the field of education, in particular, the recommendations emphasize promoting equity and inclusion; encouraging the sustainable development of AI; strengthening AI literacy and ethics education; and ensuring data security and privacy (UNESCO, 2021a). In tandem, UNESCO's Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research (Miao & Holmes, 2023) supports countries to implement immediate actions, plan long-term policies and develop the necessary human capacity to ensure a human-centred vision of these new technologies.

Moreover, although aimed at primary and secondary school level, UNESCO's AI competency framework for students (UNESCO, 2024b) and the AI competency framework for teachers (UNESCO, 2024a) provide valuable insights on the competencies required in education systems to keep pace with the rapid advances in AI and lay the groundwork for the ongoing development of such competency frameworks at the higher education level. The policy and governance challenge is to ensure that AI and digital technologies promote the sustainable development agenda and are employed to remedy rather than exacerbate existing inequalities and global asymmetries in higher education access and quality (UNESCO, 2026). The governance of digital technologies in higher education raises important questions about data use, accountability and the protection of learners' rights.

## 6.4 The rise of flexible learning

Digitalization has spurred new forms of learning in higher education, such as online and blended education and micro-credentials, and led to a surge in open educational resources (OER). The flexibility and affordability of online education have opened it up to a wider and more diverse group of learners, but this access comes with its share of challenges.

While there were approximately 429 million people using online learning platforms in 2019, this number reached around 783 million worldwide in 2024. Meanwhile, users who accessed university education programmes offered on online platforms increased from 12.9 million to 31.4 million in 2024 (Statista, 2024). Even after the pandemic ended, growth in this sector of online providers has remained relatively stable. According to the Statista Global Consumer Survey (2022–2023) with over 180,000 respondents, the main factor influencing students' choice of online learning is economic (Statista, 2024).

India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, for example, uses a variety of multimedia tools to provide access to higher education for marginalized students. Rural students account for close to 50% of enrollments, and the university also actively

enrolls people with disabilities, those in detention and individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (IGNOU, 2023). The University of the People in the United States is also a fully online higher education institution that charges only minimal examination fees and does not require traditional tuition. This model makes it accessible globally, especially for disadvantaged and low-income groups (Rajasekaran et. al, 2024).

Micro-credentials have emerged as a vital innovation, offering flexible and accessible pathways for learners to acquire targeted skills and knowledge swiftly. These come in various formats – they complement degree programmes, act as standalone units of learning or are structured in a sequence of courses that can eventually be embedded within or accumulated into a larger credential or degree. Micro-credentials have the potential to increase participation from under-represented groups. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, short courses such as micro-credentials tend to enroll older students, women, non-urban residents, employed individuals and those from low- to middle-income backgrounds (Ferreyra et al., 2021).

Higher education institutions and digital learning platforms dominate micro-credential offerings, often in cooperation. According to a 2024 Coursera survey of more than 1,000 higher education leaders representing over 850 institutions across 89 countries, 51% of higher education institutions offer micro-credentials and among those that do not, 68% plan to do so within the next five years (Baker Stein, 2024). As more providers enter the field, the micro-credential landscape becomes increasingly diversified and complex, creating challenges for employers and learners in assessing credibility and value. Further muddying the waters is the frequent lack of clarity on the varying qualification levels of micro-credentials or their positioning on national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) where these exist, which can range from post-secondary and vocational training to undergraduate and postgraduate education. Without strong standards as well as regulatory and quality assurance frameworks, the quality and credibility of these credentials can vary widely (Gutović & Xia, 2025).

Despite their potential for inclusivity, flexible learning modes still harbour significant structural inequalities. Digital divides continue to undermine social inclusion and learning outcomes, especially for marginalized populations. Hidden costs (e.g. access to devices, internet and digital literacy) continue to disproportionately affect low-income learners, threatening to undermine the very equity goals flexible learning pathways are meant to advance (Drees-Gross and Zhang, 2021).

Cultural relevance and systemic dependencies pose additional hurdles. For instance, some 90% of OERs are produced in Europe and North America and mainly in the English language (UNESCO GEM report, 2023). Similarly, while global digital platforms feature providers from around the world, English is often the primary language of instruction. As such, learners from other regions with different linguistic needs may find that their access to relevant educational resources is limited and that the knowledge acquired from such platforms may not always fully align with cultural and local contexts. Studies suggest that localized platforms can achieve higher completion rates among local students compared to global platforms (Reich et al., 2019).

## 6.5 Artificial intelligence: Emerging practices and challenges

Since OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022, AI use has generated significant impacts across multiple sectors. Most employers consider AI to be a useful transformative technology, fundamentally changing their business operations (World Economic Forum, 2025). As of 2025, ChatGPT ranks as the fifth most visited website globally (Semrush, 2024).

In the field of higher education, AI is increasingly regarded as a key driver of digital transformation, with the potential to enhance administrative management, teaching and academic research as well as to improve inclusivity, accessibility, quality and efficiency (Liu et al., 2023). At the same time, AI use also generates numerous challenges, such as concerns over academic integrity, data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the need for upskilling both faculty and students.

Currently, various AI-enabled practices have already emerged in the field of higher education. In teaching and assessment, AI is believed to enhance personalized learning, improve learning outcomes, reduce teaching burdens, increase inclusivity and accessibility, and help prevent student dropout (**Table 6.2**).

AI is also regarded as a potential tool to improve institutional management efficiency and service quality through virtual assistants; the optimization of admissions and academic assessments; enhancing financial management; and promoting research innovation, while also serving as an important academic tool in scholarly research (UNESCO-ICHEI, 2024). However, there are few reports of the widespread use of AI technologies at the system or institutional level. In OECD countries, the actual application of AI in higher education remains in its early stages, and its technological potential has yet to be fully realized (OECD, 2023a).

Despite its profound potential, AI as an emerging technology faces multiple challenges. There are frequent cases of students excessively relying on large language models (LLMs) such as generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs) to complete entire assignments or even to cheat (Cotton et al., 2024). AI tools also involve large amounts of student data, raising ongoing concerns regarding privacy breaches and cybersecurity, which require further regulatory exploration. At the same time, as products of human society's algorithms and training data, they can easily reinforce or even worsen existing social biases if fairness is not considered from the start. Furthermore, training teachers and instructing students to develop AI-related digital skills to avoid widening the digital divide is also of critical importance (UNESCO-ICHEI, 2024).

Against this backdrop, higher education institutions are accelerating efforts to develop AI-related policies, though much remains to be done. A 2023

**Table 6.2: AI applications and effects in teaching and assessment**

| Purpose | Application Method | Effect |
|---|---|---|
| **Learning support** | Intelligent tutoring systems using AI | Automatically adjust learning content and difficulty level according to each student's progress and characteristics, creating **personalized learning** paths. Best results in data-rich and specialized fields, such as mathematics and computer science. |
| | Chatbots to support learning | Respond to students' inquiries and direct them to the appropriate content and resources, reducing repetitive administrative work and supporting students. |
| | Chatbots to support teaching | Act as virtual mentors or teaching assistants, reducing the administrative workload of professors and, in some studies, improving student performance. |
| | Virtual and augmented reality | Provide more personalized, practical, interactive and immersive learning experiences; potential to improve remote learning and learning outcomes. *Not yet widely adopted due to equipment investment requirements. |
| **Improving inclusion and equity of access** | Accessibility features | Provide real-time subtitles or speech recognition and narration, enhancing inclusivity for students with hearing, visual or speech impairments. |
| | Multilingual translation | Provide local language translation, enhancing linguistic inclusivity. |
| | Chatbots to offer emotional support | Identify or track users' emotional states and refer them to professional help, offering emotional and practical support. |
| **Learning analytics and assessment** | Learning analytics tools | Predict students' academic development and identify patterns of stagnation using standard digital tools, allowing for personalized support and even dropout prevention. |
| | Assessment analytics tools | Automated or assisted grading platforms, record student data and help personalize learning. |

*Source*: Liu et al., 2023.

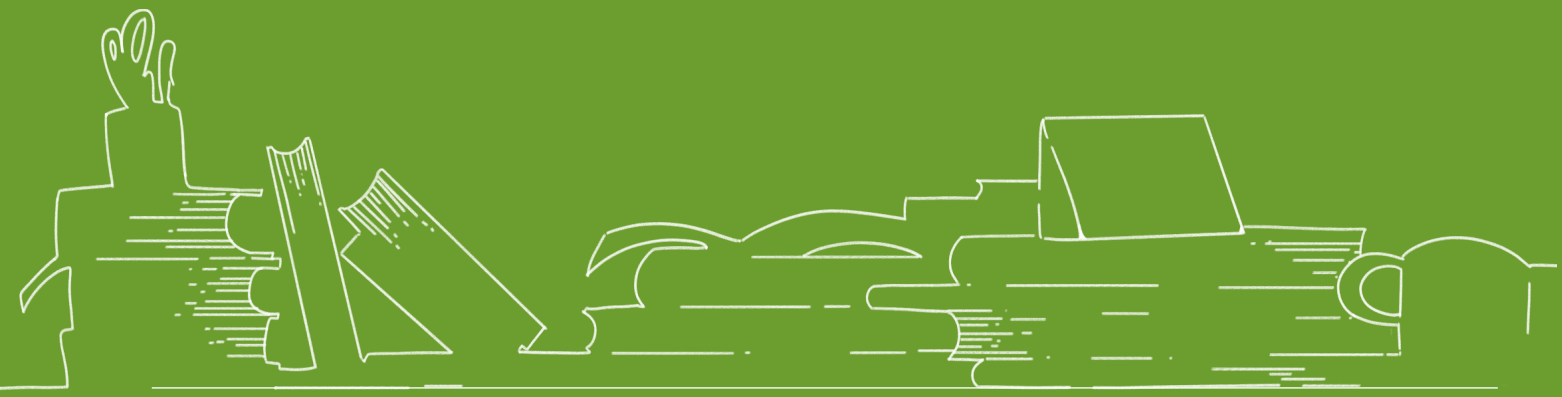
UNESCO survey showed that less than 10% of schools and universities had developed institutional policies and/or formal guidelines regarding the use of generative AI. By 2025, progress was evident. A UNESCO survey of 400 responses from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks in 90 countries found that 19% of institutions had adopted a formal AI policy, while another 42% were developing guiding frameworks. However, significant regional gaps persist, with about 70% of institutions in Europe and North America already having or in the process of developing guidance, compared to 45% in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 2025c). It is critical for higher education systems and institutions to develop policies that adequately balance innovation with academic integrity. Without such frameworks, higher education sectors risk either stifling innovation through ad hoc restrictions or enabling practices that undermine educational quality and equity.

# Part I: The changing face of higher education

## 7. Higher education teaching personnel

### Main takeaways:

- Employment insecurity – from low salaries to precarious contracts and working conditions – continues to be a major source of job dissatisfaction among higher education teaching personnel. Enhancing teaching personnel's well-being is not yet widely integrated as a specific objective in national higher education plans.
- 69% of countries include objectives on increasing faculty teaching skills, through initial training or professional development, in their national higher education plans. South and West Asia, North America and Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa exhibit the highest rates.
- Diversity within the workforce remains insufficient. Minority groups, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and refugees are underrepresented in academic positions.
- Women account for 44% of higher education teaching personnel worldwide but hold only about one-fourth of senior leadership positions. Representation is strongly correlated with income level: a much higher share of women in academia can be found in high- and upper-middle-income countries.
- Gender disparities persist in STEM fields, with women comprising just one-third of researchers. The underrepresentation of women among higher education teaching personnel may partly be traced back to the low share of female STEM graduates, which has remained stagnant at 35% globally for the past decade.
- A recent survey highlights that more than 60% of faculty report using AI in their professional practice, but 80% consider that their institution lacked adequate AI guidance. This regulatory gap raises several ethical concerns, such as transparency, academic fraud, privacy, cybersecurity and social bias.
- Globally, the portion of countries with legal guarantees for academic freedom rests at 65%. The Arab States, South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa fare below the world average. However, legal protections are not always fully implemented in practice and academic freedom continues to face mounting threat in several countries.



# Chapter 7. Higher education teaching personnel

Teaching personnel are a key determinant of the quality of higher education, shaping not only individuals but also institutions and societies at large. The capacity of higher education institutions to deliver teaching, research and innovation is closely tied to how well teaching personnel are supported in their professional development and to the conditions that underpin their motivation and commitment. Nearly two-thirds of countries tracked by the HEPO prioritize the career and professional development (CPD) of higher education teaching personnel in their national higher education plans, while a minority explicitly refer to their well-being. While data on teaching personnel at the higher education level remains limited, especially in comparison to primary and secondary education, several important trends can be observed.

The massification of higher education, rising enrollment and mobility, digital transformation, austerity measures, and shifting political dynamics have all increased pressure on the profession. There is a growing need to ensure adequate working conditions and fair remuneration for personnel; promote equity and inclusion both within the workforce and teaching models; and adapt to the rapid pace of digitalization and AI. Academic freedom – a cornerstone of the profession – is also facing a mounting threat, compromising the ability of higher education teaching personnel to exercise their function without undue interference. These developments have contributed to a growing momentum to revise the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (UNESCO, 2024g).

This chapter looks at global developments related to higher education teaching personnel – in particular their working conditions and well-being; equity and inclusion in the profession; gender considerations; and the impact of digital transformation and AI.

## 7.1 Working conditions and well-being

An inclusive higher education system should secure decent working conditions for teaching staff across diverse employment types (UNESCO, 2020b). Salaries remain a significant challenge, particularly in the Global South. Unpaid or poorly paid academic positions are still widespread, creating substantial barriers for those who join the profession without additional financial resources. In addition, this contributes to a negative feedback loop, leading to higher attrition rates and exacerbating brain drain (Sagintayeva et al., 2023; Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024) When vacancies go unfilled, the workload and mental pressure on remaining staff intensify, further discouraging talent retention and weakening a country's ability to build its human capital (Bolaji, 2024; Sagintayeva et al., 2023).

Precarious employment in academia is a global phenomenon, with higher education institutions increasingly relying on temporary staff to boost flexibility and reduce costs (OECD, 2024; Roser-Chinchilla et al., 2024). In the United States, over two-thirds (68%) of faculty members in colleges and universities held non-permanent or non-tenure-track positions in the fall of 2022, and nearly half (48%) were employed part-time (Colby, 2023). The 'DocEnhance' survey of doctorate holders in Europe showed that while 87% of doctorate holders were employed on permanent full-time contracts in industry and about 70% in government, the figure dropped to 56% in academia and 57% in research organizations (Boman et al., 2021).

According to the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey – a comparative survey across 19 countries in the world – the intention of faculty to leave their institutions was often related to job satisfaction, which in turn was mediated by job stability, as well as the existence of adequate working conditions (Padilla-González et al., 2015). Similar findings emerge from a survey of academic researchers working in large international research organizations. Relatively younger academic staff

members and individuals experiencing high levels of job insecurity and lack of recognition were significantly more likely to consider leaving academia (Janssens & Ueda, 2023).

Enhancing the overall well-being of teaching staff is critical to retaining high-quality talent; however, this objective is not yet widely integrated into national higher education plans, according to data in the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO). More frequently, countries include objectives on increasing faculty teaching skills, through initial training or professional development, in their national higher education plans. This is the case for 69% of countries tracked by the Observatory that adopted a higher education plan with South and West Asia, North America and Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, exhibiting the highest rates (**Figure 7.1**).

## 7.2 Equity and inclusion in the profession

Equity and inclusion stand as core issues impacting higher education teaching personnel. A diverse academic workforce enriches research and teaching by integrating a wide range of perspectives, knowledge and languages, thus fostering greater openness (Wilson et al., 2022). The question of inclusion in academia is inherently complex, as it encompasses a wide range of groups facing distinct barriers shaped by historical, structural and sociocultural factors. In addition, the available data to assess their representation and experiences remain limited in most contexts. This subsection examines equity and inclusion across three types of population groups: ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and refugees. Gender inequality is addressed separately in the next dedicated subsection.

Several researchers have shown that ethnic minorities, for example Indigenous communities and other disadvantaged populations, are generally underrepresented among higher education teaching personnel (Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Countries have been taking steps to address these challenges. In India, for example, reserved quotas for marginalized groups aim to address historical inequities, yet the 2023 University Grants Commission report found that nearly 30% of these reserved positions at central universities and premier institutions remain vacant, particularly

**Figure 7.1. Share of countries that include objectives on enhancing faculty teaching skills, through initial training or professional development, 2024-2025**


*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

at senior levels (Wankhede, 2025). In Australia, the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy has led to an increase in the representation of Indigenous positions among staff in higher education, though mainly in professional rather than academic roles. Additionally, based on the 2023 summary report of 36 Australian universities, more than a fifth of responding institutions still had no Indigenous people occupying a Pro-Vice Chancellor or senior Indigenous leadership position despite the Strategy's explicit commitment that every university should have one (Universities Australia, 2024).

A review synthesizing findings from 33 studies found that academic staff with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in higher education as compared to the size of this group in the population (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022). In the United Kingdom, only around 7.2% of university staff have disclosed a health condition, compared with 24% of the working-age adult population (Advance HE, 2024; Powell, 2024). Similarly, in Australia, it is estimated that only 1–6% of academics report having a disability, whereas the figure stands at approximately 18% in the general population (Mellifont et al., 2019). Ultimately, evidence on the representation of people with disabilities remains limited as in many contexts, academic staff might refrain from disclosing their condition due to concerns over job insecurity and potential discrimination (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022).

The case of refugee populations is singular as, in several contexts, governments and higher education institutions might not have traditionally considered them in the design of higher education policies. More specifically, refugees often face difficulties in having their qualifications recognized in host communities (Roser-Chinchilla et al., 2024). Several international initiatives have emerged to address the specific situation of displaced and threatened academics. For example, since 2002, the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), a global programme that arranges and funds fellowships for threatened and displaced scholars, has supported 1,185 scholars from 62 countries at 529 host institutions in 60 countries (IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, n.d.). The situation of refugees and displaced populations in higher education is discussed further in Chapter 10.

## 7.3 Gender considerations in higher education personnel

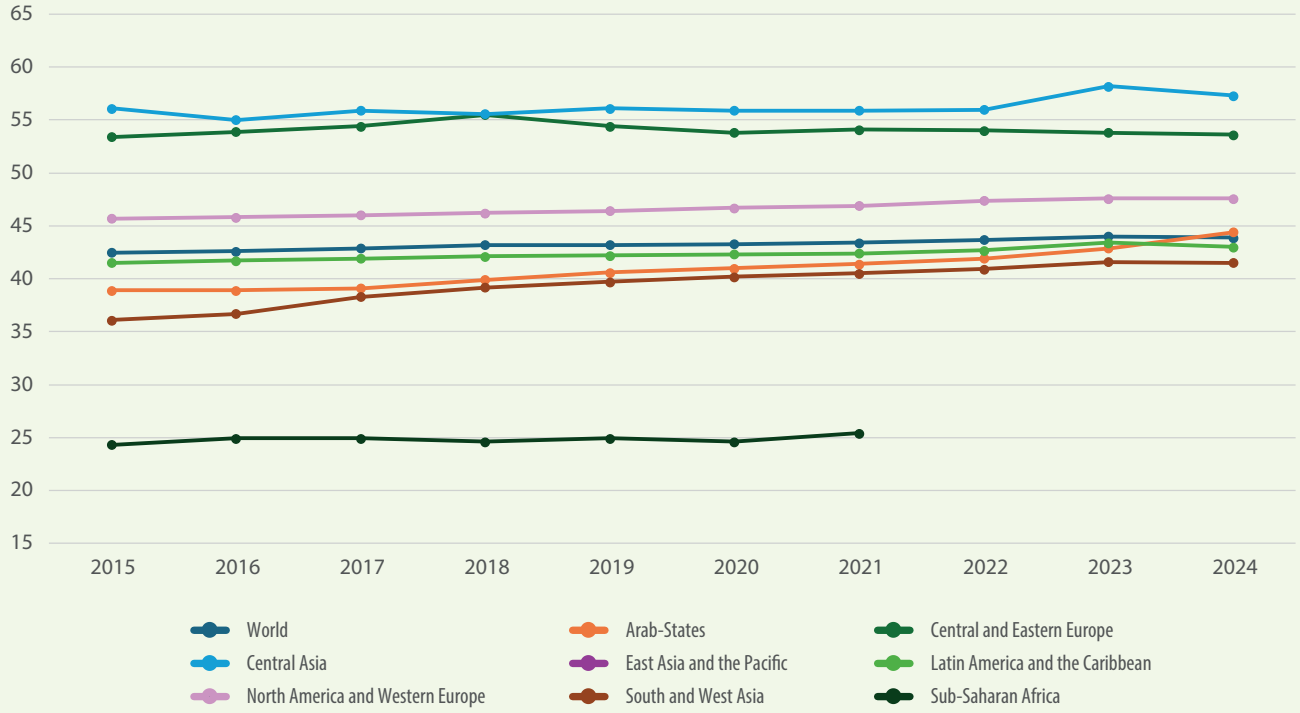
Although the representation of women in academic positions has increased over the last decade, they are still a minority. In 2023, the global average of women among higher education teaching personnel was 44% (**Figure 7.2a)**. Except for Central Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe – where the proportion of women exceeded 50% – all other regions still lag behind. The disparity is the largest in sub-Saharan Africa, where the latest data available from 2021 indicate that women accounted for merely 25% of teaching staff at the higher education level.

This trend also seems to correlate with income levels despite a lack of recent data from low-income countries. High and upper-middle-income countries have a significantly higher share of female higher education teaching personnel than low and lower-middle-income countries **(Figure 7.2b)**. Among the 146 countries documented in the HEPO, only a minority set explicit objectives to improve gender equality among higher education personnel in their national higher education plans.

Another striking concern is the gender imbalance at higher and leadership positions – the higher the academic position, the lower the representation of women (HolonIQ, 2024; Galán-Muros et al., 2023). In 2023, only 48 women served as presidents among the top 200 universities ranked by *Times Higher Education* globally, accounting for one-fourth of these leadership positions (Times Higher Education, 2024). In Africa, fewer than three female presidents were elected among around 100 universities (Wauru, 2023). In Latin America and the Caribbean, less than a quarter of universities are led by female presidents (UNESCO GEM report, 2024).

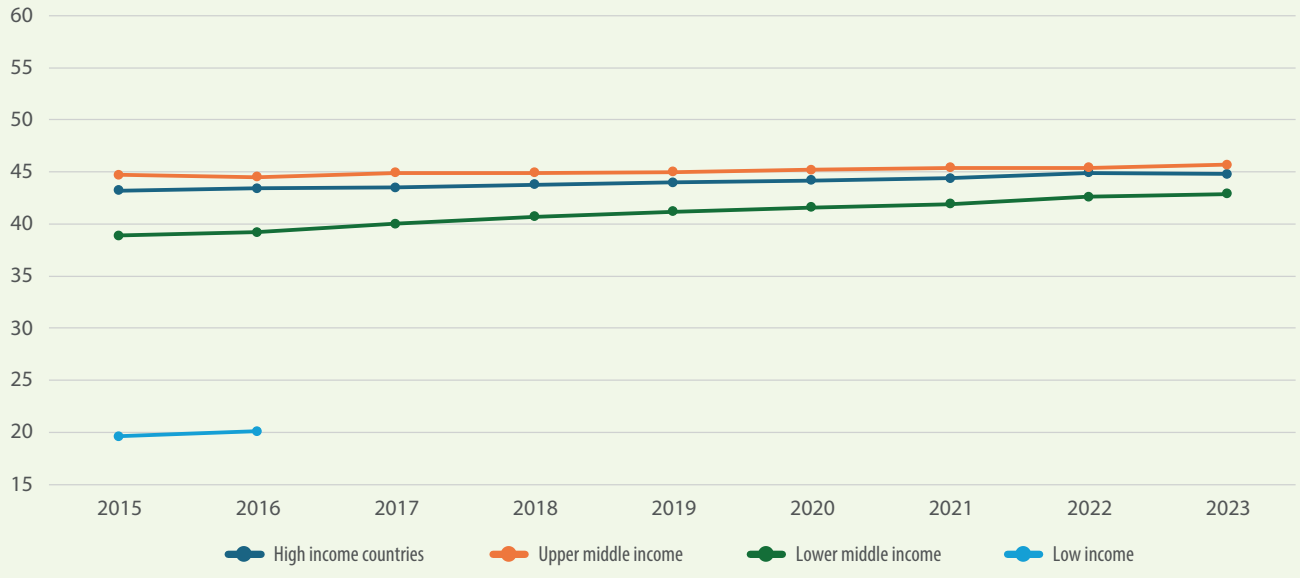
The gender pay gap among higher education teaching personnel also remains significant. In Canada, female professors earn on average 10% less than men for the same work (Penner and Smith-Carrier, 2022). In the United Kingdom, the

**Figure 7.2a: Representation of women among higher education teaching personnel by region, 2015 – 2024**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

**Figure 7.2b: Representation of women among higher education teaching personnel by income level, 2015-2023**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

median gender pay gap for all staff in higher education was 9% in the 2022/23 academic year (Advance HE, 2024). According to the American Association of University Professors, in 2023, full-time female professors earned 82% of the salary of their male counterparts (HolonIQ, 2024).

Compared to men, women more often face systemic barriers, such as workplace discrimination; lack of mentorship and networking opportunities; gender stereotypes; sociocultural expectations; and unequal access to career advancement and professional development – all of which contribute to persistent

gender pay gaps (Education Sub-Saharan Africa, 2021; Spoon et al., 2023).

Moreover, gender disparities persist in scientific fields. In 2022, women accounted for just 31% of researchers globally. In higher education, the proportion of female researchers in 74 countries fall below the gender parity standard (UNESCO, 2025d). In Ireland, only 27% of university professors in STEM fields were women in 2020 (Walshe, 2023). The underrepresentation of women in academic staff can partly be traced back to the low share of female STEM graduates, which has remained stagnant at 35% globally for the past decade (UNESCO GEM report, 2024).

While important policy efforts are needed to improve representation or women in academia, some countries have introduced more systematic gender mainstreaming frameworks to address these challenges. For example, in Sweden, higher education institutions have been formally required since 2016 to integrate gender equality into all areas of their activities. At Stockholm University, gender mainstreaming is overseen by the Vice-Chancellor's Interdisciplinary Council, which covers teaching, research, admissions, recruitment and resource allocation, with a focus on equal career opportunities (Stockholm University, 2024). Another example comes from India where, since 2002, the Women Scientist Scheme (WoS) provides fellowships to women scientists who have taken a break in their career due to family responsibilities and are seeking to re-enter the scientific profession. Over 2,200 women benefited from this scheme over two decades (Baruah, 2022).

## 7.4 Adopting inclusive teaching approaches

Amid growing enrollments and mobility, higher education teaching personnel are increasingly called on to continuously develop more inclusive and equitable pedagogical approaches to meet the diverse needs of student populations. The learner population has become more diverse, encompassing students from different countries, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, socio-economic backgrounds, abilities and ethnicities.

According to 2020 data from the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring report, out of 168 countries, 61% reported offering inclusive teacher training (across all education levels), with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean being the most likely to provide such training, followed by Europe and North America (UNESCO GEM report, 2020). However, there remains a lack of data specifically focused on higher education, highlighting the urgent need for more efforts in this area.

Around 80% of students with disabilities are dissatisfied with the inclusive measures at their higher education institutions and despite some improvements in infrastructure, these students often report a lack of genuine inclusion from both peers and teachers (UNESCO, 2024e). Globally, only 9% of refugees have access to higher education and those who are enrolled in higher education continue to face prejudice from both students and staff (Abamosa, 2021; UNHCR, 2025). Within the European Union, just 33% of LGBTQ+ individuals aged 18-24 feel that their rights are always or frequently supported, protected or respected in higher education settings (UNESCO, 2021b).

Some countries are striving to rectify this imbalance by integrating new models of inclusive teaching. For example, Ireland's Programme for Access to Higher Education specifically aims to develop the higher education sector's capacity for inclusive teaching and learning, enabling greater participation by all students, including those with intellectual disabilities and autism (Higher Education Authority Ireland, n.d.). In Mexico, the federal government created a subsystem of Intercultural Universities to address longstanding inequities in access to higher education for Indigenous and marginalized groups, promoting culturally relevant curricula and closer links between universities and local communities (Tapia, 2016).

## 7.5 Digital transformation and AI

The digitalization of teaching and learning has also demanded that academic staff acquire new skills and competencies.

According to the Digital Education Council Global AI Faculty Survey, in which faculty members from 52 higher education institutions in 28 countries participated, 65% of faculty agree on AI's large potential for their activities, and 61% are already using this technology in their professional practice (Digital Education Council, 2025). However, up to 80% report that the AI-related guidance provided by their institutions remains insufficient. As noted in Chapter 6, higher education institutions worldwide are accelerating the development of relevant policies, but less than 1 in 5 had already done so in 2025. The absence of appropriate and up-to-date institutional guidelines in many institutions creates an environment of uncertainty and risk that points to the urgent need for higher education institutions to develop comprehensive AI policies to address issues, such as assessment authenticity, data privacy, algorithmic bias and the digital divide.

The implementation of new pedagogical approaches, such as blended learning, online interactive teaching, flipped classrooms and personalized learning are also gaining pace. Research indicates that these new pedagogical models can support improvements in learning outcomes and student motivation, provided that they are underpinned by thoughtful design, sufficient guidance for learners and alignment with assessment practices. (UNESCO GEM report, 2023).

The effectiveness and sustainability of innovative teaching methods largely depend on the digital competence of teachers. At present, the digital literacy level of higher education teaching personnel remains generally low to moderate in many countries (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2021). According to UNESCO's ICT Competency Framework for Teachers at all levels of education, digital competence covers six main areas: 1) understanding policies related to the application of ICT in education; 2) curriculum and assessment; 3) pedagogical methods; 4) application of digital skills; 5) organization and management; and 6) professional learning for teachers (UNESCO, 2018). The main challenges reported by teachers include lack of training (the most commonly cited barrier) as well as lack of motivation, insufficient planning and evaluation, technophobia, the generational gap, lack of relevant knowledge and infrastructure, and limited time and energy (Althubyani, 2024; Mercader and Gairín, 2020).

Several countries are taking measures to upgrade the skills of their higher education teaching personnel. Most OECD countries report that they have set national (or central) regulations or guidelines to strengthen teachers' digital competencies through pre-service or in-service training (or both) – only five countries lack such provisions. Most of these requirements, however, focus on initial training (OECD, 2023a).

## 7.6 The threat facing academic freedom

In her 2025 report on academic freedom, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education reaffirmed that academic freedom includes four interdependent pillars: (a) the right to teach; (b) the right to engage in discussions and debates with persons and groups inside (including in classrooms) and outside the academic community; (c) the right to conduct research; and (d) the right to disseminate opinions and results of research both intramurally and extramurally. However, the constitutional protections and domestic regulations of academic freedom worldwide show significant differences in approach, with notable gaps in protection (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

Although legal protections are not always fully implemented in practice, they remain a crucial foundation. Globally, the share of countries that adopted legal guarantees for academic freedom is at 65%, according to data from the HEPO, with large disparities across regions (**Figure 7.3**). Embedding academic freedom in legislation is only a first step and does not in itself guarantee its support or protection in practice.

The Arab States as well as South and West Asia report the lowest levels of legal recognition of academic freedom. Sub-Saharan Africa also falls below the world average, with just 53% of countries having

**Figure 7.3: The proportion of countries with legal recognition of academic freedom, 2024-2025**


*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

legally recognized this right. On the other hand, Central and Eastern Europe report a high level of legal recognition of academic freedom, followed by Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Western Europe and East Asia and the Pacific. This legal recognition can also be correlated to income level: academic freedom is slightly more often recognized in legislation among high income and upper-middle income countries than low income and lower-middle income countries.

Restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression in academic settings are on the rise. In some countries, the situation is described in the most serious terms, with civil society groups denouncing a "systematic persecution of educators," "an unfavorable and threatening school atmosphere for educators" and the targeting of teachers as part of "hate campaigns," including on social media (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

According to the *2025 Academic Freedom report*, there has been a significant decline in academic freedom in 34 countries and territories over the past decade, while only eight countries have seen improvement (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Overall, the level of academic freedom has regressed back to that of 50 years ago. The global rollback of academic freedom means that scholars and higher education institutions are now facing unprecedented pressures and constraints on independent thinking, critical research and knowledge dissemination.

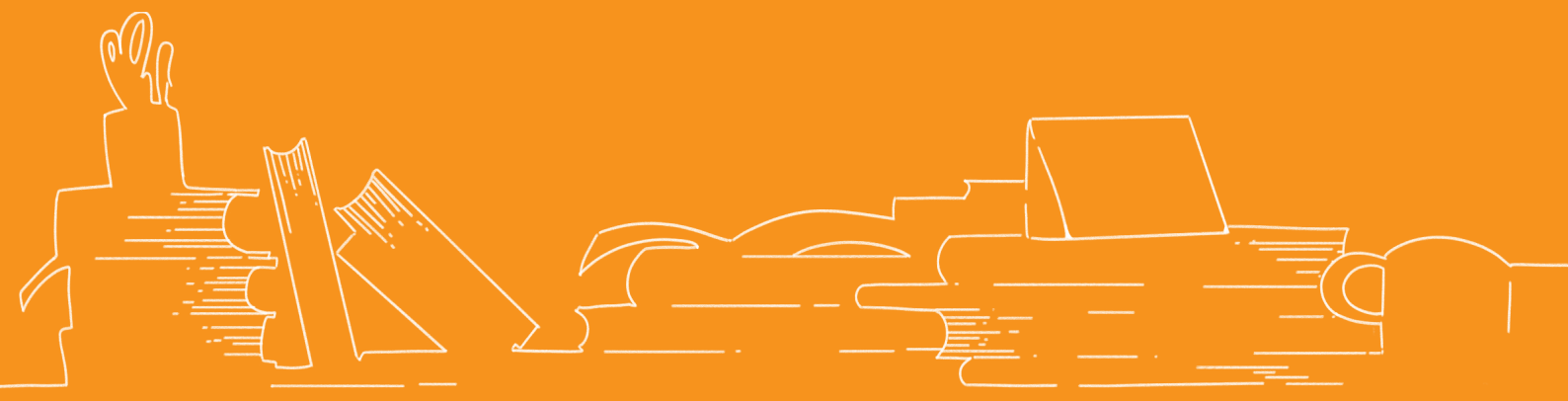
# Part II: Spotlight on student mobility

## Introduction

## 8. Inbound and outbound mobility trends

## 9. The recognition of foreign qualifications

## 10. The case for refugees and displaced persons



# Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, student mobility has emerged as one of the most visible manifestations of globalization in higher education. Every year, millions of students cross borders in pursuit of knowledge, carrying with them not just personal aspirations but the potential for transformative cultural exchange, research collaboration and societal bridge-building. The cross-border movement of students enriches academic communities, fosters intercultural understanding, advances collaborative research and builds lasting connections between societies.

The number of internationally mobile students has tripled since the turn of the century to reach 7.3 million in 2023 – a figure expected to climb to 9 million by 2030. However, large regional disparities exist and often mask differences between countries. Governments are increasingly developing internationalization strategies and policies to facilitate mobility flows and the recognition of qualifications across borders. Notably, this trend is expanding beyond traditional Global North destinations, with several other countries emerging as both senders and receivers of international students.

Despite its promise, student mobility remains marked by deep inequities. Opportunities to study abroad are not evenly distributed and access is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, political, institutional and personal factors. Barriers related to visa policies, tuition costs, recognition of qualifications and geopolitical trends continue to limit mobility for many – especially students from low-income countries and those displaced by conflict and crisis.

Part II of this report – Spotlight on student mobility – examines the latest developments and challenges shaping the global mobility landscape. Drawing primarily on data from the HEPO, it provides a multidimensional view of how student mobility is evolving and how countries and institutions are responding. This segment is divided into three chapters:

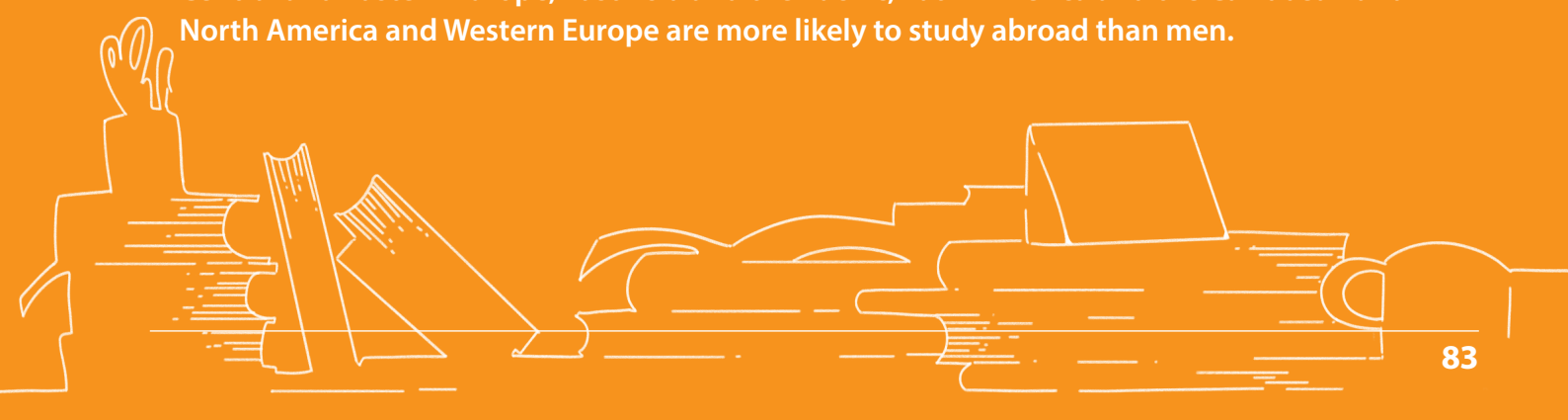
- **Chapter 8 on Inbound and outbound mobility trends** outlines long-term trends and shifting patterns in the distribution of internationally mobile students, highlighting emerging destinations and sending regions as well as changing bilateral and regional dynamics.
- **Chapter 9 on the Recognition of foreign qualifications** reviews how countries are recognizing foreign qualifications, looking at national policies, international recognition conventions and other arrangements, and emerging challenges in the field.
- **Chapter 10 on The case for refugees and displaced persons** examines trends and best practices in as well as barriers to developing recognition policies and tailored support for refugee and displaced students whose access to higher education remains limited.

# Part II: Spotlight on student mobility

## 8. Inbound and outbound mobility trends

### Main takeaways:

- International student mobility is expanding rapidly. Approximately 7.3 million students worldwide are now studying abroad – close to triple the 2.5 million recorded in 2002. This number is projected to reach 9 million by 2030.
- Not all are benefitting equally. Internationally mobile students comprise just under 3% of global higher education enrolment, with significant regional disparities.
- The top sending regions are East Asia and the Pacific (26%), particularly China and India, followed by South and West Asia (21%) and Western Europe and North America (14%). South and West Asia experienced a seven-fold increase in the number of students going abroad in the last two decades.
- While accounting for only 6% of the total number of inbound students worldwide, Central Asia had the highest outbound mobility rate in 2023 (14.9%). Conversely, in sub-Saharan Africa, the rate declined from 7% in 2003 to 4.8% in 2021 as domestic higher education enrolment grew even faster, reducing the share of outbound students in relative terms.
- Many of the top host countries have remained unchanged over the past two decades – the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Canada, the Russian Federation and France.
- Several countries – such as Argentina, China, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates – are gaining popularity as destinations. Türkiye witnessed a sixfold increase and the United Arab Emirates a fivefold increase in student mobility in the last decade.
- Intra-regional mobility in East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Arab States is on the rise. South-South mobility is also gaining momentum, owing partly to concerted internationalization strategies.
- Nearly one in every five countries sets explicit objectives in their national higher education plans on increasing student mobility. A higher share (35%) of countries include explicit objectives on outbound mobility than on inbound mobility (25%).
- Women represent nearly 49% of the internationally mobile student population. Women from Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and North America and Western Europe are more likely to study abroad than men.



# Chapter 8. Inbound and outbound mobility trends

International student mobility has become a topic of growing importance in the field of higher education, with mobility flows increasing around the world, leading to unprecedented levels of global exchange. Although not a new phenomenon, such changing trends and dynamic evolution make it essential for policymakers, governments and institutions alike to provide the foresight and planning needed by their higher education systems, institutions and research. Despite a dip during 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, student mobility has continued to grow. The number of internationally mobile students has nearly tripled in the last two decades, from 2.5 million in 2002 to 7.3 million in 2023 (ISCED 5 – 8) according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). This figure is projected to reach up to 9 million by 2030 (UNESCO IESALC, 2024b).

Despite growth expectations, the proportion of higher education students benefiting from academic mobility remains low, just under 3%, underscoring the elitist nature of mobility as still only a privileged few individuals gain access to higher education opportunities abroad (UNESCO IESALC, 2024b). Global mobility trends also reveal stark disparities between regions and countries. While the volume of incoming internationally mobile students has increased across all regions, the largest share remains hosted in Europe and North America. At the same time, South and West Asia and East Asia and the Pacific remain the main regions that send students abroad. Nevertheless, recent data reveal nuances in these trends as well as the emergence of several new countries that have joined the dialogue when it comes to mobility flows.

Governments around the world actively promote the mobility of higher education students. Thirty-five percent (35%) of countries featured in the Observatory set explicit objectives to increase outbound student mobility and 25% do so for inbound mobility. This chapter examines where international students are coming from, where they are going, the growth in higher educational mobility, policies to foster mobility, the drivers of student mobility and trends based on academic level, subject area and gender.

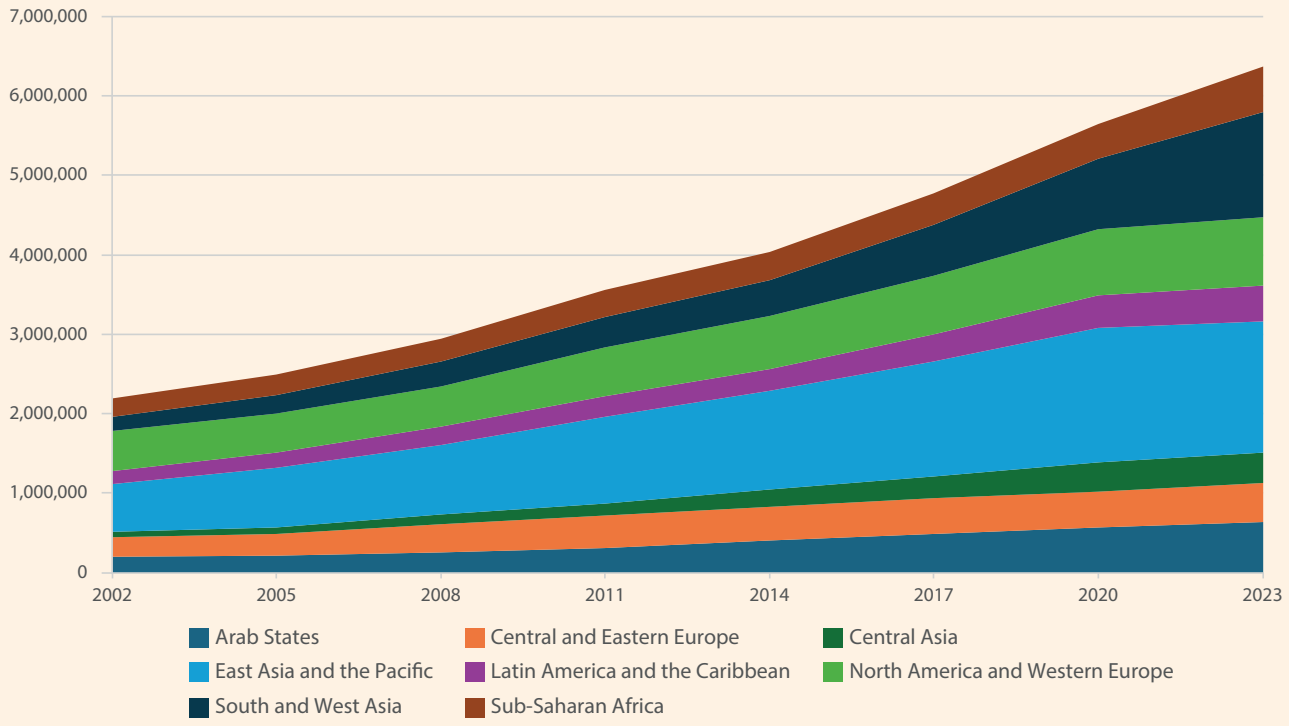
## 8.1 Outbound student mobility – Where do international students come from?

**Figure 8.1** shows that the number of students enrolled in higher education who move outside their home country to pursue higher education opportunities has increased across all regions over the last two decades, albeit at varying rates. In most cases, this has also been matched by growing enrolment rates as discussed in Chapter 1. Even in regions where participation rates remained stable or decreased, international mobility may still have increased, driven by individual goals or improved access to mobility opportunities.

The top 3 sending regions in 2023 included East Asia and the Pacific, accounting for 26% of the total number of outbound students, followed by South and West Asia with 21%. and Western Europe and North America with 14%. South and West Asia, in particular, experienced more than a seven-fold increase over the past two decades in the absolute number of students enrolled in higher education who move outside their home countries to access a higher education opportunity abroad, rising from 176,495 students in 2002 to 1,322,221 in 2023.

While accounting for only 6% of the total number of outbound students worldwide, Central Asia experienced the highest outbound mobility rate in 2023 (14.9%), with nearly 1 in every 6 students in the region participating in international mobility. The number of outbound students in the region also rose sharply between 2002 and 2023, more than five-fold. Demand for study abroad is being driven by a combination of factors: in several Central Asian countries, domestic higher education systems cannot keep pace with rising demand and concerns persist about programme quality; a growing middle class has greater capacity to finance overseas study; the prospects of

**Figure 8.1: Evolution in the outbound mobility of students by region, 2002-2023**




*Note*: At the global level, outbound and inbound mobility numbers should be the same. Yet, as fewer countries report data on outbound mobility, the total number of outbound students worldwide was estimated around 6.4 million in 2023, compared to 7.3 million inbound students.

*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2002-2023).

employment opportunities abroad increase the perceived returns to obtaining an international degree after studying; and in some cases, government policies actively encourage outbound mobility – such as in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Alimukhamedov, 2020; UNESCO Office in Almaty, 2021; Ambasz et al., 2023). Turkmenistan has one of the highest outbound mobility rates globally, with close to 65% of students studying abroad. The Russian Federation remains the primary destination for Central Asian students, which can be attributed to historical and linguistic ties as well as the prestige of higher education institutions (Alimukhamedov, 2020).

The growth in the Arab States, Latin America and the Caribbean and Central and Eastern Europe largely followed global trends over the past two decades – more than tripling in the Arab States and almost tripling in the other two regions. By comparison, Western Europe and North America experienced a more modest growth during this period. However, the region already had the second largest number of outbound mobile students in 2002.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the outbound mobility rate declined sharply, from 7% in 2003 to 4.8% in 2021 (the last year of data availability for the region) – despite a doubling of the absolute number of students studying abroad over this period. The decline occurred because domestic higher education enrolment grew even faster, reducing the share of outbound students in relative terms. This trend reflects a complex interplay of factors, such as improved domestic capacity in some countries, economic constraints limiting a given family's ability to fund an overseas education and visa restrictions in traditional destination countries. Understanding mobility thus requires looking beyond simple growth metrics to examine structural barriers and changing opportunity structures.

Looking at countries more specifically, **Figure 8.2** shows that nearly half of all internationally mobile students in 2023 came from ten countries. China and India represent the highest share of outbound students internationally, a trend projected to persist at least until 2030 (British Council, 2024b).

A complex interplay of factors influences the patterns and volume of outbound mobility from any given country. These typically include macroeconomic conditions, the institutional capacity and prestige of domestic higher education systems, governmental policies on internationalization, visa regulations in destination countries, and work opportunities following graduation. These elements create shifting trends that are profoundly influenced by geopolitical developments and evolving economic climates (UNESCO IESALC, 2022b).

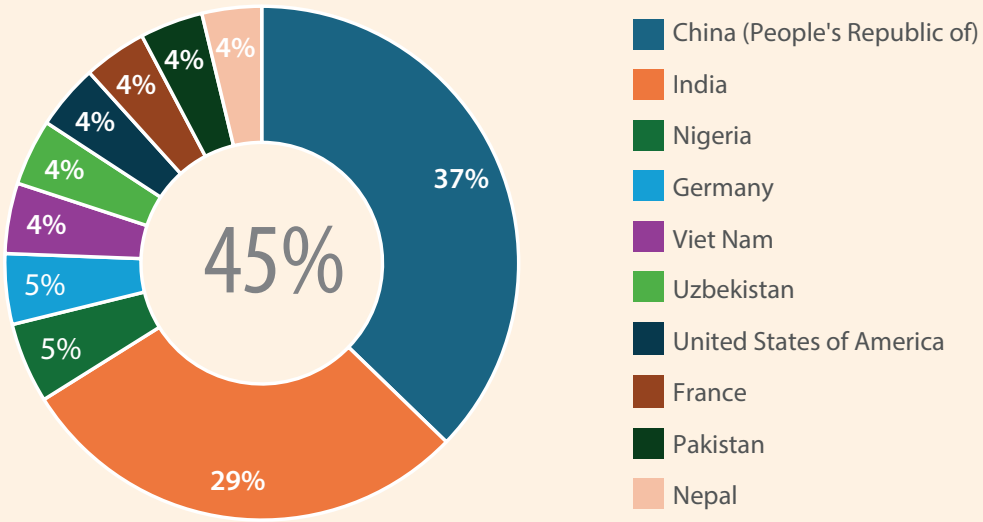
## 8.2 Inbound mobility – Where are international students going?

Over the past two decades, all regions have experienced a growth in inbound student mobility, albeit at different rates as **Figure 8.3** shows. Western Europe and North America continued to host the largest share of internationally mobile students, accounting for 49% of the world's 7.3 million in 2023. This is followed by East Asia and the Pacific, accounting for 19%, and Central and Eastern Europe with 14%.

The Arab States host approximately 8% of all internationally mobile students, around half of whom study in the United Arab Emirates. Other regions show slow lower rates relative to the overall rate of internationally mobile students at the global level – 4% in Latin America and the Caribbean, primarily concentrated in Argentina, Mexico and Cuba; 3% in sub-Saharan Africa and 2% in Central Asia. South and West Asia, which was highlighted above as the second largest region in terms of outbound student mobility, hosts only 1% of the world's internationally mobile students.

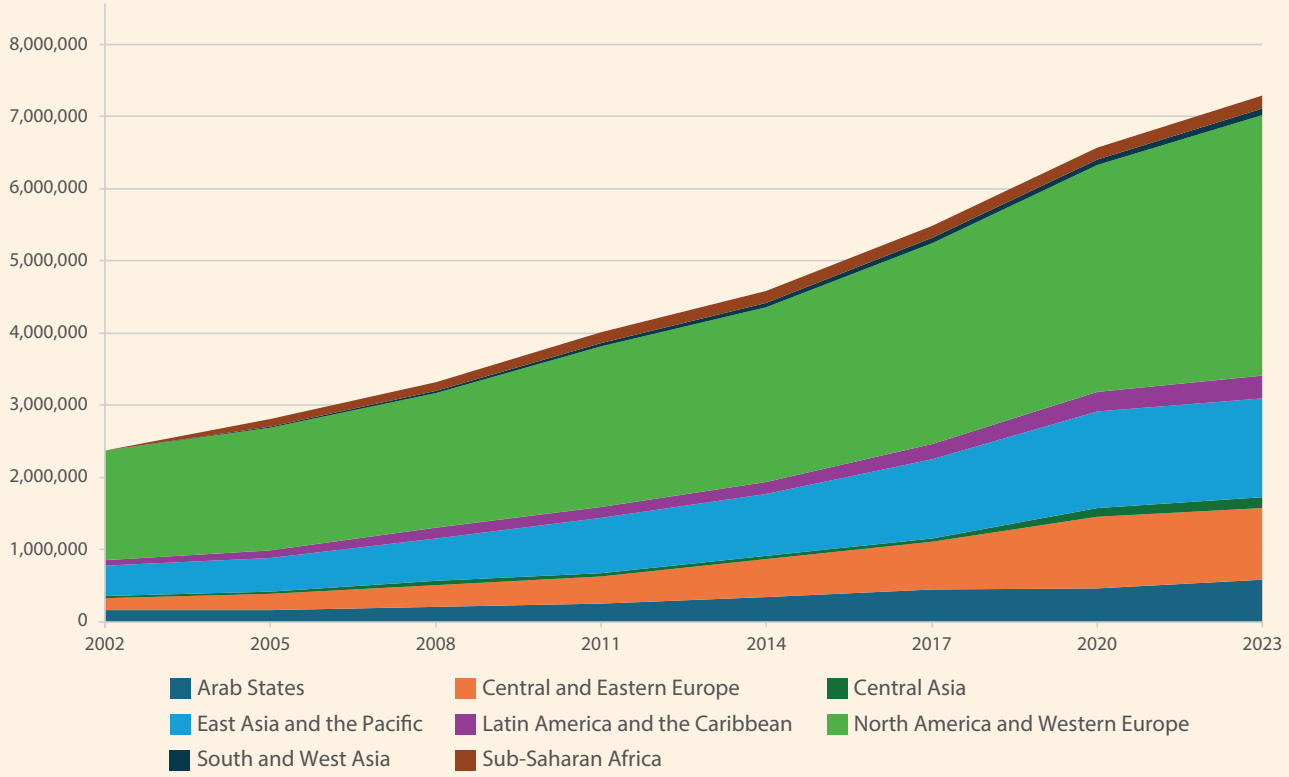
Despite a recent trend towards the diversification of regions and countries as destinations for international students, many of the top host countries for international students have remained unchanged over the past two decades. As of 2023, the leading host countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Canada, the Russian Federation, and France. Together, they host around half of the world's 7.3 million internationally mobile students, as shown in **Figure 8.4**.

**Figure 8.2: Top 10 countries for outbound student mobility, 2023**



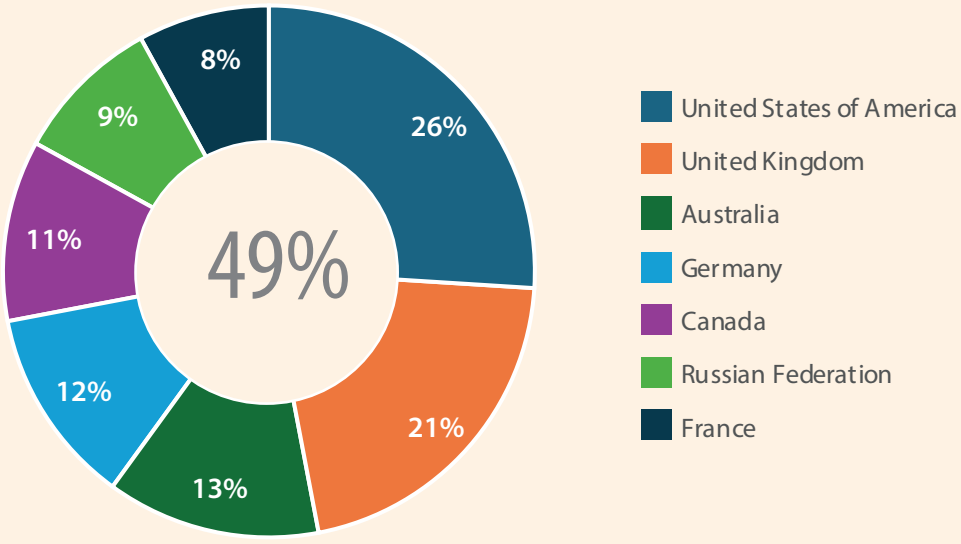

*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

**Figure 8.3: Evolution in the inbound mobility of students by region, 2002-2023**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

**Figure 8.4: Top 7 countries hosting inbound student mobility, 2023**




*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Beyond the traditional destinations, several other countries have grown in popularity, such as Argentina, China, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates. In Türkiye alone, the number of students surged within 10 years by more than six-fold, from 38,590 in 2012 to 244,027 in 2022 (the last year of data availability). Similar trends are observed in the

United Arab Emirates, where the figure grew five-fold to reach 237,034 in 2023, compared to 54,162 in 2012 (no data is available from 2013 to 2016). To put the numbers in context, both Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates now closely trail France in student mobility numbers. France hosted 276,217 international students in 2023 but recorded a significantly lower growth rate over the past decade – just 20% over the ten-year period.

## 8.3 Intra-regional mobility

Intraregional mobility is also on the rise. Within Europe, it is already well-established. Of the 1.76 million students studying in the European Union in 2023, more than 43% were from Europe, with Germany, France and the Netherlands being the leading host countries (Eurostat, 2023). Similar tendencies are occurring in other parts of the world, particularly in East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Arab States, where intraregional mobility is gaining momentum.

In East Asia, the number of international students travelling to study within the region is growing at a faster rate than those travelling outside the region. China plays a dual and dominant role in this trend. Not only is it the world's primary source of outbound international students, but it also serves as the main host country within East Asia and the Pacific. China attracts a growing number of students, predominantly from neighbouring countries, as well as from other parts of the world (British Council, 2024a). Other countries, such as Japan, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea, also welcome an increasing share of intra-regional student mobility.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the proportion of students choosing to study in other countries within the region nearly doubled between 2000 and 2022, climbing from 24% to 43% (UNESCO IESALC, 2024b). Argentina emerged as the leading recipient in 2023, welcoming 126,566 international students in total, which represents close to 5% of the country's total enrolment in higher education. Most of these students originate from within the region, in particular from Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia and Paraguay (Ministerio de Capital Humano de la República Argentina, 2024).

In the Arab States, despite that only half of the countries report data on inbound mobility to UIS, the available evidence highlights a clear pattern: intra-regional mobility is the dominant trend. In most reporting countries, the majority of international students come from within the Arab States region. This is particularly pronounced in Jordan (82% of inbound students), Bahrain (76%), Oman (67%), Qatar (65%), Saudi Arabia (57%), Mauritania (54%) and Algeria (52%).

In addition to intraregional mobility, there is also a growing phenomenon of South-South mobility, wherein students travel between Global South countries. Emergent examples include Egypt, whose scholarship programmes and package of initiatives under the Study in Egypt programme make it a top choice for students from Africa and the Arab States, and Malaysia, where low costs and expanding degree options attract students from East Asia and the Pacific (Kondakci et al., 2018). In India, students from sub-Saharan Africa are the second largest population group behind those from South and West Asia, which may be explained by the English-language programmes offered and cultural initiatives on the part of the Indian government, such as the Study in India programme which seeks to motivate students primarily from the Global South to undertake higher education in the country (Ministry of Education of India, 2023).

## 8.4 Policies on student mobility

Governments around the world actively promote the international mobility of students. Nearly one in every five countries (19%) tracked by the HEPO sets objectives in its national higher education plan to increase both inbound and outbound student mobility. When looking at outbound and inbound mobility separately, a higher share of countries (35%) set explicit objectives to increase outbound mobility than inbound mobility (25%).

The highest proportion of countries that include inbound mobility objectives is found in Western

Europe and North America – the main destination region for international students – followed by the Arab States and Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, the largest number of countries incorporating outbound mobility objectives appears in Western Europe and North America – currently the third most active region for outbound mobility – and in Latin America and the Caribbean, which has experienced growing inter-regional mobility. Several other regions follow closely behind.

At the same time, in many leading host country destinations, governments are taking actions to restrict internationalization. Examples of this include recent proposed changes to the student visa policy in the United Kingdom that would limit graduate visa duration and imposes stricter language requirements, among other changes (House of Commons Library, 2025). Similarly, the Higher Education Enrollment Cap in Canada restricts the number of foreign students admitted into the country's education system while a series of visa restriction policies for international students was introduced in the United States in 2025 (Government of Canada, 2025; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2025)

Beyond mobility, nearly one-third of countries (27%) aim to enhance the international visibility and reputation of their higher education systems, and nearly one-fifth (16%) seek to use higher education as a driver of intercultural dialogue. These trends are particularly strong in Western Europe and North America as well as the Arab States.

Bilateral and multilateral agreements also promote internationalization through mobility schemes, such as the Fulbright and Erasmus+ programmes. The Fulbright Program operates through bilateral postgraduate exchanges with partner countries worldwide, supporting inbound mobility to the United States. Erasmus+, administered by the EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, is best known for mobility within the European Union, but initiatives such as the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's also foster mobility beyond the European Union by offering scholarships to students globally.

## 8.5 Drivers of mobility

Trends in international student mobility are influenced by what is commonly referred to as 'push and pull factors,' related to both the national characteristics of the country of origin that motivate students to study abroad and the destination country characteristics that lend appeal and justify the investment (McMahon, 1992). The most frequently cited 'push and pull factors' are economic: students are driven to study internationally as they expect it would lead to higher earnings and better job opportunities, either in their country of origin or destination country. These factors can provide some explanation for the historical dominance of Western destinations, as these countries host most of the highest-ranked universities in the world, and often have visa policies in place that allow students to remain in their destination country and work for some time after graduation.

However, as the market expands and becomes more complex, the pull factors that influence trends also evolve. Students are influenced not only by expected economic rewards but also by language accessibility, geographic proximity to their home country and scholarship availability. Colonial history and political relations can also act as a motivation, explaining the flow of students from West Africa to France, or from former-Soviet countries to the Russian Federation.

Push factors generally refer to unfavourable conditions within a home country, such as high competition or a dearth of opportunities, that motivate students to study abroad. It is worth mentioning that push factors are not always negative as countries may encourage their students to study overseas to gain i intercultural skills.

## 8.6 Trends by gender

In most regions of the world, females comprise the majority of higher education students. However, this advantage does not translate to international mobility, where females comprise just under 49%

of internationally mobile students. The pattern also varies by region. For example, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and North America and Western Europe send more women than men abroad.

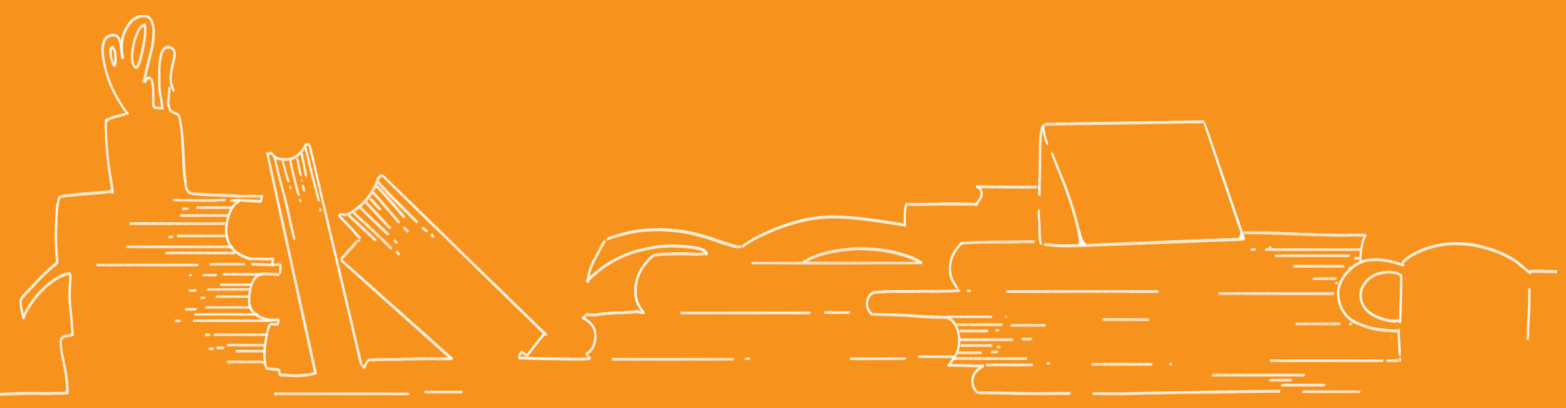
In other regions, however, male student mobility is still the dominant trend. This is particularly pronounced in Central Asia, which exhibits a gender parity index of 0.31 and where men are three times more likely to study abroad than women. Among the leading destination countries, the United States, Canada, Australia and Germany have historically shown a slight majority of male international students. This gender disparity could be explained in part by the social conditions in the students' origin countries or by the field of study as many students come to these countries to undertake studies in STEM, which often feature an overrepresentation of male students (UNESCO, 2025e).

# Part II: Spotlight on student mobility

## 9. Recognition of foreign qualifications

### Main takeaways:

- 75% of countries monitored by the Higher Education Policy Observatory have adopted policies to recognize foreign qualifications, opening the gateway for the mobility of students, graduates, teachers and other highly skilled workers across borders, and higher education cooperation overall.
- A correlation can be observed between a country's participation in a (sub-) regional higher education cooperation area and its likelihood of having a recognition policy in place.
- As of March 2026, 93 countries have ratified one or more UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. Notably, two-thirds of these are European nations. This figure likely reflects the early adoption and near-universal ratification of the Council of Europe and UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, which predates all other UNESCO conventions by at least 14 years.
- In South Asia or West Asia, while 67% of countries have policies to recognize foreign qualification, none have ratified a UNESCO recognition convention to date, signaling a need for greater outreach, capacity development and cooperation.
- The regional conventions, while tailored to their specific regions, share common objectives to promote academic mobility and higher education cooperation within their respective regions. The Global Convention complements these by promoting the same at the global level.
- Networks of information centres, established as operational arms of the regional conventions, exist in four UNESCO regions to date, serving as mechanisms for promoting mutual exchange, trust and capacity development among recognition authorities.
- Implementation of recognition processes remains uneven. Recognition authorities and quality assurance agencies face mounting challenges related to online, hybrid and micro-credential programmes, the use of digital tools, transnational education, and the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons.



# Chapter 9. The recognition of foreign qualifications

The recognition of qualifications is a vital process that allows individuals to have their academic credentials validated and accepted across borders, thereby facilitating equitable access to further study and employment. Its significance has grown considerably in recent years due to the rapid expansion of student mobility, the rise in cross-border partnerships in higher education and evolving international labour market demands, underscoring the need for reliable and consistent mechanisms to evaluate and validate academic credentials earned within diverse national educational systems (Pedró, 2025). Student mobility alone has surged since the turn of the century, reaching 7.3 million in 2023 – a trend that is expected to continue.

The majority of countries featured in the Observatory have dedicated national policies or sub-national regulations governing the recognition of foreign qualifications. At the global and regional levels, UNESCO's system of recognition conventions provide international frameworks designed to promote fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications for both academic and professional purposes. As of March 2026, 93 different countries have ratified these conventions – some adhering to multiple.

Many countries also participate in other, sometimes complementary, recognition mechanisms, such as mutual recognition agreements or schemes for automatic recognition. As the demand for the recognition of qualifications across borders continues to evolve, several emerging and persistent challenges face both recognition authorities and quality assurance agencies. These particularly relate to the integration of digital tools, non-traditional learning modes, transnational education, and the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons.

## 9.1 UNESCO's global and regional recognition conventions

Rising rates of academic mobility, coupled with varying recognition practices across countries, has created a growing demand for the establishment of international frameworks that can promote cooperation in higher education and facilitate the movement of students, researchers and professionals across borders. To this end, UNESCO Member States adopted a series of updated recognition conventions at the regional level, known as "second-generation conventions" and the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (**Figure 9.1**). These instruments facilitate the recognition of qualifications among States Parties, subject to national legislation.

The original, "first-generation", regional conventions were mainly adopted in the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently revised between the late 1990s and early 2020s to reflect evolving higher education landscapes. These conventions, while tailored to their specific regions, share common objectives to promote academic mobility and cooperation, and reduce barriers to the mobility of students, graduates, teachers and other highly skilled workers.

The first of the revised, or 'second-generation,' regional recognition conventions was the Council of Europe-UNESCO Lisbon Convention for Europe, adopted in 1997. Inspired by its principles, four more UNESCO 'second-generation' regional conventions emerged in subsequent decades. These include the Tokyo Convention for the Asia-Pacific region, adopted in 2011, the Addis Convention for Africa, adopted in 2014, the Buenos Aires Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean, adopted in 2019, and the Convention for the Arab States, adopted in 2022. All of these conventions have come into effect, except for the latter, making their provisions legally binding for their States Parties.

The Global Convention, adopted in 2019, is the first United Nations treaty in higher education on a

**Figure 9.1: UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education**


*Source*: UNESCO.

global scale. It shares common principles with the regional conventions – namely, promoting the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications, emphasizing quality assurance and information provision while introducing the concept of substantial difference and supporting the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons. Designed to complement regional conventions, the Global Convention aims to strengthen global mobility and higher education cooperation.

The principle of precedence is also introduced in the Global Convention. In other words, in cases where there is a discrepancy between a provision in the Global Convention and a regional convention, the provision that is more favourable to the applicant should take precedence. Importantly, ratifying a regional convention is not a prerequisite for ratifying the Global Convention, nor is ratifying the Global Convention a prerequisite for ratifying a regional convention. Additionally, the Global Convention does not modify the rights and obligations of States Parties concerning a regional convention. To define the relationship between the Global Convention and regional conventions, a recommendation is being developed under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties to the Global Convention.

Furthermore, the establishment of national information centres or national implementation structures is a key feature of all regional recognition conventions. These also form part of regional networks, which serve as operational arms of the conventions, building trust between education systems, facilitating information exchange and fostering regional communities of practice in the recognition of qualifications. Most regional networks are open to all countries in their respective regions – beyond just States Parties. The European Network of Information Centres/ National Academic Recognition Information Centres (ENIC-NARIC) is the oldest, bringing together national information centers from 56 countries. The Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC) and Network of Information Centres for Latin America and the Caribbean (CINALC) have also become

well-established in recent years, while the African Network of National Implementation Structures is currently undergoing its structuring. The Global Convention also aims to strengthen the cooperation among networks to support implementation at the global level.

To keep pace with evolving challenges and support effective implementation, several conventions have moved in the direction of subsidiary texts. The Global Convention and Lisbon Convention have operational guidelines or explanatory texts, respectively, offering a broader interpretation of their provisions. Several other subsidiary texts have also been adopted under the Lisbon Convention, such as on joint degrees, the recognition of qualifications for refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation, the Diploma Supplement, and national information systems. The Buenos Aires Convention, though more recent, has also introduced guidelines, including those on the recognition of Venezuelan qualifications, and the feasibility of the Diploma Supplement for Latin America and the Caribbean.

## 9.2 How countries are recognizing qualifications

Of the 146 countries featured in the Observatory, 75% have a national policy in place for the recognition of foreign qualifications. In contrast, less than 1% have regulations at the sub-national level (Australia, Belgium, Canada, United States). Some general trends can be observed across regions and income groups, with countries in the Global North being more likely to have such policies in place, especially in regions that have a long tradition of higher education cooperation or serve as major sources of inbound and/or outbound mobility. The likelihood of having dedicated policies is also more common among countries that have ratified one or more UNESCO recognition conventions and vice versa.

### Regional trends on recognition policies

All countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe and North America have dedicated policies on the recognition of foreign qualifications or regulations at the sub-national level. This may be partly attributed to three factors. The first concerns the early adoption of the Lisbon Convention in 1997, which all have ratified but the United States. Second, the launch of the Bologna Process and establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 1999 advanced the harmonization of higher education systems across Europe. Third, many countries, particularly in Western Europe and North America, are major sources of outbound and inbound mobility, making such policies and procedures key to attracting international students and professionals.

Similar patterns are observed in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Arab States. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 19 of the 22 countries (90%) featured in the Observatory adopted recognition policies. This trend likely reflects the region's long-standing cooperation in higher education. For example, the countries of the Mercosur established the Education Sector (SEM) in 1991, which includes initiatives such as the Regional Accreditation System for University Degrees (ARCU-SUR). Meanwhile, Central American countries participate in the SICA/CECC-SE accreditation system, which promotes recognition and academic mobility within the sub-region. Regional platforms such as the Latin American and Caribbean Space in Higher Education (ENLACES) and Iberoamerican Network for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education (RIACES) have also contributed to higher education harmonization in the region.

In the Arab States, 16 of the 19 countries (79%) included in the Observatory have policies on the recognition of foreign qualifications. The Arabian Higher Education Area (AHEA) initiative was unveiled in March 2024, and welcomed by Arab League States (Sawahel, 2024). This initiative aims to harmonize higher education systems and create mechanisms for mutual recognition of credits and degrees, drawing inspiration from the EHEA model while adapting to Arab cultural contexts. As in Latin America and the Caribbean, while the majority of Arab States have dedicated policies in place for the

recognition of foreign qualifications, only a handful have ratified UNESCO's recognition conventions.

Among the countries in the Observatory, just over half of those in East Asia and the Pacific have established policies to recognize foreign qualifications. This is the case for countries, such as Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia, which have high rates of mobility. All the aforementioned countries, except Malaysia, have also joined at least one UNESCO recognition convention.

In contrast, the proportion of countries with recognition policies is lower in South and West Asia (4 out of 6 or 67%) and sub-Saharan Africa (23 out of 42 or 56%). This may be attributed to a combination of socio-economic constraints, challenges at the institutional level and differing policy priorities. Many countries in these regions also record lower levels of academic mobility. However, significant intraregional variations exist. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, countries in Southern and Eastern Africa are more likely to have recognition policies in place. The South African Development Community (SADC) has been engaged in mechanisms to facilitate the recognition of qualifications and in 2011, adopted a regional qualifications framework to which all member countries should align their national frameworks, thereby also facilitating the recognition of qualifications among them.

## Ratification of UNESCO conventions and other mutual recognition mechanisms

As of March 2026, 93 different countries have ratified a UNESCO recognition convention, with several being States Parties to multiple conventions. Among the 40 States Parties to the Global Convention, 36 are also States Parties to one or more regional recognition conventions, with the exceptions of Côte d'Ivoire, Nicaragua, Tunisia and Uzbekistan. Countries such as Armenia, Australia, the Russian Federation and Türkiye, for example, have also ratified both the Lisbon Convention and Tokyo Convention, while the Holy See is a State Party to all UNESCO recognition conventions except for the Arab States Convention.

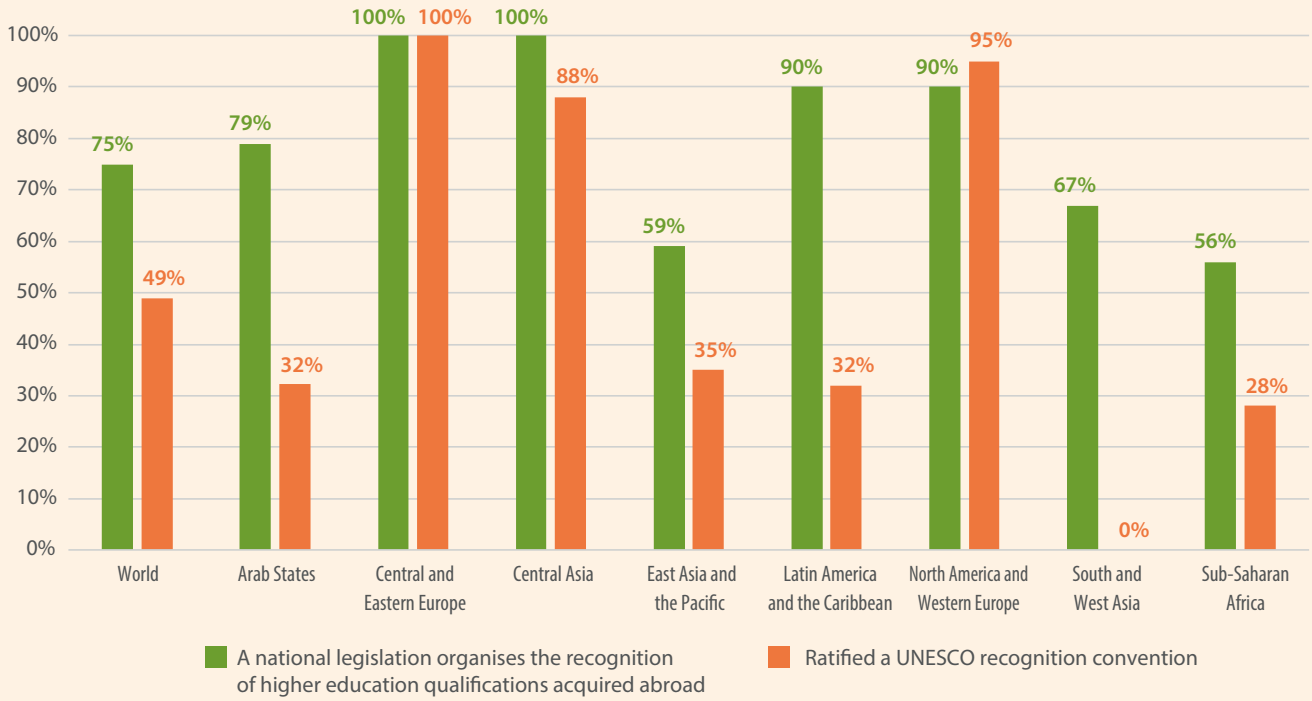
It is important to note that the regional groupings of the recognition conventions are based on a resolution adopted by the UNESCO General Conference on the "definition of regions with a view to the execution by the Organization of regional activities" (UNESCO, 2025f). According to this classification, some countries fall into more than one region, such as Armenia, the Russian Federation and Türkiye, which belong to both Europe and Asia-Pacific, or North African states that are included in both the Africa and Arab States regions.

The Observatory includes data on 72 out of 93 countries that have ratified at least one UNESCO convention, whether at the regional or global level (**Figure 9.2**). Among these 72 countries, 91% have dedicated policies on the recognition of foreign qualifications or regulate this at the sub-national level (Australia, Belgium, Canada, the United States). The remaining 9% largely comprise countries from sub-Saharan Africa who have joined a UNESCO convention over the past five years and may still be in the early stages of implementation.

Trends from the Observatory suggest a correlation between higher ratification rates among countries in the Global North, which may be better resourced to meet the administrative, financial and institutional requirements of UNESCO conventions (Bouckaert et al., 2024b). However, this may also be shaped by other factors, such as the age of the convention and the extent of regional higher education integration. For instance, the Lisbon Convention, adopted in 1997, predates all other 'second-generation' regional conventions by over a decade, and has garnered significantly more ratifications. Nevertheless, 54 of its 57 Member States are classified as high-income or upper-middle-income economies.

The rate of ratifications for other, newer regional recognition conventions has been lower. The 2011 Tokyo Convention counts 12 States Parties, while the 2014 Addis Convention for Africa has 14. Both conventions have witnessed a plateau in ratification in recent years. Meanwhile, seven countries have ratified the 2019 Buenos Aires Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean, with Colombia being the latest to join in 2026. The 2022 Arab States Convention

**Figure 9.2: Regional distribution of countries having a national policy on the recognition of foreign qualifications and the ratification of a UNESCO recognition convention, 2024-2026**




*Note*: Out of the 93 countries that ratified at least one UNESCO recognition convention, 72 are currently included in the Observatory.
*Source*: Authors' elaboration based on data from the UNESCO Higher Education Policy Observatory.

entered into force with the 2026 ratifications by Egypt and Lebanon, comprising five States Parties. Importantly, no countries in South and West Asia have ratified any of the UNESCO recognition conventions to date, signaling a need for greater outreach, capacity development and cooperation.

Along with competing priorities, misconceptions exist in many countries regarding the implications of ratifying or implementing the UNESCO recognition conventions. Ratification processes often vary significantly across national contexts. They may involve multiple ministries, parliamentary approval or inter-agency coordination, which can be delayed or disrupted by government changes and shifting political landscapes. Some countries, particularly in Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean, have also voiced concerns that ratifying a recognition convention could lead to an influx of skilled workers, potentially contributing to labour market saturation. Additionally, some express political or socio-economic reservations regarding provisions related to the recognition of qualifications held by refugees and displaced persons. One recurring misconception is that the conventions require or promote automatic recognition of foreign qualifications. In reality, the conventions emphasize the principle of recognition unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated, placing the burden of proof on recognition authorities rather than requiring automatic acceptance (UNESCO Internal Oversight Service, 2016).

Many countries also pursue mutual recognition agreements – regardless of whether they are States Parties to a recognition convention – as a means to streamline the recognition process based on reciprocity and mutual trust. China, for example, a State Party to the 2011 Tokyo Convention, concluded 58 bilateral agreements between 2012 and 2022, according to a press release from its Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022a).

In parallel, automatic recognition has gained increasing traction in recent years, enabling an

applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be automatically considered for entry into further study or employment. This trend is particularly pronounced in Europe, with schemes such as the 2021 Benelux-Baltic Treaty on Automatic Recognition, the recent recommendation on automatic recognition issued by the Council of the European Union, and the launch by the Council of Europe of the drafting of a new Convention on the conditions of transparency and quality assurance for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications. However, such mechanisms also exist in other regions, with one of the earliest examples being a bilateral agreement between Chile and Uruguay in 1916.

## 9.3 Emerging challenges for recognition

The growing demand for higher education and mobility, coupled with evolving technological and geopolitical landscapes, presents significant challenges for recognition authorities and quality assurance agencies in assessing foreign qualifications. These challenges are especially evident with qualifications earned through non-traditional learning modes, such as online, hybrid or micro-credential programmes; the use of digital tools to support recognition; the growth of transnational education; and the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons. Although the Higher Education Policy Observatory currently lacks specific data on how countries address these issues in their recognition policies, they are a prominent topic of discussion among the recognition community and on the agenda of several UNESCO recognition conventions.

### Online, hybrid and micro-credential programmes

The emergence of new forms of non-traditional learning modes in higher education, such as online and blended learning or micro-credentials, challenges traditional notions of recognition and quality assurance, resulting in an increasing complexity in evaluating such qualifications.

The Global Convention, for example, stipulates that States Parties should treat qualifications obtained through traditional or non-traditional learning modes or the validation of prior or partial learning equally, provided that they have been subject to quality assurance mechanisms comparable to those acquired through traditional learning modes. This opens the door to the recognition of qualifications obtained through digital or hybrid means. However, when it comes to such credentials, provision can vary greatly in quality from one provider to another (UNESCO, 2020a).

The case of micro-credentials is particularly complex, as discussed in Chapter 6. While micro-credentials offer flexible, accessible and often more affordable lifelong learning pathways, confidence in their value, by learners, employers and institutions alike, is frequently impacted by the lack of regulations, standards and common definitions. Many countries around the world still lack the necessary policy and regulatory frameworks to make decisions about recognition that would convert small volumes of competencies into certified micro-credentials (Martin, 2023). Nevertheless, some have made notable progress in this regard, such as Australia, Canada, Italy, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand and South Africa. The Council of the European Union also issued a Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability in 2022, intending to establish a common framework across EU Member States (Council of the European Union, 2022).

### Digital tools

Recognition authorities and institutions worldwide are increasingly turning to digital solutions to verify academic qualifications and enhance the efficiency and transparency of the recognition process. This includes digital verification systems, virtual evaluation procedures and automated documentation processes, and these can all serve to expedite recognition and combat fraud (Pedró, 2025).

Conventional credential verification methods, which often depend on physical documents,

manual verification and intermediary institutions, are frequently inefficient and prone to error. Persistent issues, such as credential fraud, administrative delays and a lack of transparency in international recognition processes can pose significant barriers for both students and professionals. Digital credentials, such as blockchain-verified diplomas, may offer a more secure, efficient and transparent alternative to traditional paper-based systems.

However, disparities in technological capacity and resources, both across countries and institutions, raise equity concerns. In the Asia-Pacific region, virtual audits and online evaluations have become standard practice following the COVID-19 pandemic (Pedró, 2025). Digital solutions are also prevalent in Europe and North America. According to the 2022 monitoring report on the Lisbon Convention, for example, 79% of national information centres in the region implemented different types of digital solutions for recognition and assessment services (Lantero et al., 2022).

## Transnational education

Transnational education (TNE), often known as cross-border education, has become a central component of internationalization. It enables students to pursue their studies at foreign institutions at home, without the need for physical relocation abroad. While the exact number of TNE providers is often unknown, the number of international branch campuses alone has grown from less than 50 in 2000 to over 300 in 2023 (C-BERT, 2023). Major TNE exporting countries include the United States, United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, France and Australia, with the top receiving countries being China, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Malaysia and Qatar (Cirlean et al., 2025; C-BERT, 2023).

A key challenge to recognizing qualifications earned through TNE is the comparability of standards – particularly as not all TNE providers are subject to the same quality assurance standards as institutions in the host country. As such, it can be challenging to determine the 'home country' of the awarding institution and the competent authority responsible for quality assurance of the institution and/or the programme (UNESCO, 2020a), which can undermine the value of the qualification earned and also lead to fraudulent practices like diploma mills.

Several tools on TNE exist at the international level, such as the 2005 OECD-UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education or the Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education toolkit between Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Gulf States. A recommendation on quality assurance, including that of TNE, is foreseen as a subsidiary text to the Global Convention by 2027, while the Committee of the Lisbon Convention adopted a revised Code of Good Practice on TNE in 2025. However, critics argue that the challenge does not appear to be in the lack of tools but rather in the lack of transparent implementation by most 'sending countries' to protect the interests of students (Gover and Blackstock, 2023).

## Recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons

The significant rise in the number of refugees and displaced persons moving across and within countries underscores the growing need for transparent and inclusive recognition practices. According to UNHCR, only 9% of refugees had access to higher education in 2025, compared to 43% globally (UNHCR, 2025).

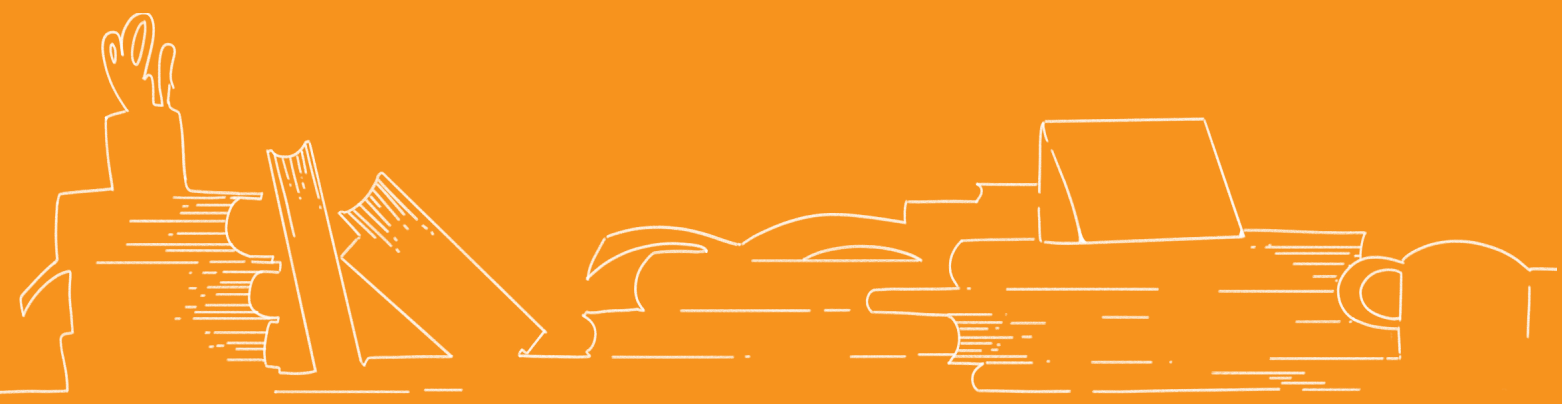
All UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education include articles specifically addressing the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons, even in cases where documentary evidence may be lacking – however, implementation is uneven. Key barriers to recognition include the absence of established procedures to assess undocumented or incomplete qualifications, limited transparency regarding recognition processes and legal frameworks, financial and language-related obstacles, and the capacity and resources of countries. These issues are further discussed in Chapter 10.

# Part II: Spotlight on student mobility

## 10. The case for refugees and displaced persons

### Main takeaways:

- Refugees remain severely underrepresented in higher education: despite a nine-fold increase in enrollment from 1% in 2019 to 9% in 2025, their access to higher education still falls far behind the global average of 43%.
- Recognition of qualifications remains one of the biggest barriers to re-entry into higher education and the labour market. Many refugees and displaced persons lack complete or verifiable documentation, and face complex administrative procedures, limited information, and fragmented institutional systems.
- UNESCO's recognition conventions call for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition, including cases where documents are missing. However, implementation remains uneven — typically stronger in the Global North and weaker in countries hosting the largest refugee populations.
- Alternative and adaptive mechanisms – such as background documents, competency assessments, self-declarations and temporary certificates – are among the key mechanisms for assessing missing or incomplete documentation. Tools like the European Qualifications Passport (EQPR) and UNESCO Qualifications Passport (UQP) are also used to provide standardized documentation summarizing a refugee's likely qualifications based on available evidence.
- Several major refugee-hosting countries have adopted innovative and flexible approaches. In Türkiye, university commissions assess candidates' backgrounds and knowledge through written or oral exams. In Colombia, the Permiso por Protección Temporal (PPT) streamlines qualification recognition for Venezuelan migrants.
- Effective recognition systems are inclusive, coordinated and embedded within national frameworks, enabling refugees to rebuild their lives, contribute to host communities, and access sustainable education and employment opportunities.



# Chapter 10. The case for refugees and displaced persons

Forced displacement has reached historically unprecedented levels, reshaping education systems around the world. By the end of 2024, more than 123 million people were displaced worldwide, including 42.7 million refugees, 73.5 million internally displaced persons and 8.4 million asylum-seekers (UNHCR, n.d.). Yet, while global participation in higher education stands at 43%, only 9% of refugee youth are enrolled in higher education; a striking disparity that underscores the urgency of inclusive policies (UNHCR, 2025). The 15by30 Roadmap, championed by UNHCR, sets an ambitious target to ensure that 15% of refugees gain access to higher education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2023). Meeting this goal requires removing systemic barriers.

The recognition of qualifications, particularly in cases of lacking documentary evidence, is one of the biggest barriers preventing refugees and displaced persons from re-entering higher education and the labour market. The 2019 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report highlights that the lack of recognition mechanisms, combined with legal restrictions and bureaucratic inertia, often "squanders a great deal of human potential" (UNESCO GEM report, 2019). For refugee and displaced youth, a single missing document can mean the loss of years of prior learning. The recognition of qualifications is, therefore, not only a technical issue but a question of dignity, social cohesion and economic recovery.

Few countries featured in the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) make explicit provisions regarding refugees and displaced persons in their higher education policies and legislation. While HEPO currently does not include specific indicators on the recognition of qualifications for these groups, several trends, developments and challenges can be observed in practice. This chapter looks at normative frameworks, barriers to recognition as well as global patterns and promising practices with regard to the recognition of these qualifications.

## 10.1 Normative frameworks and global commitments

The right to education for all is firmly anchored in various international treaties, starting with the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees explicitly calls on States Parties to accord refugees treatment as favourable as possible with respect to higher education and the recognition of foreign qualifications. Other international instruments, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (2018), call upon states to ensure the right to education for displaced persons generally, while the Global Compact on Refugees refers to facilitating access to tertiary education and mentions the recognition of qualifications and skills explicitly (UNESCO, 2022c; UNHCR, 2018).

The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, adopted in 2019, is the first legally binding instrument at the global level to explicitly mandate that States Parties develop assessment procedures for the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons, even in the absence of documentary evidence. UNESCO's five regional recognition conventions, also discussed in Chapter 9, reinforce these commitments, calling for the same within their respective regions.

This principle, sometimes enshrined in Article VII of the different recognition conventions, represents a turning point for inclusive higher education. It aims to facilitate the recognition process without affecting the sovereign right of States Parties to determine the status of refugees or displaced persons. Nonetheless, it has sometimes been cited as obstacles to ratification by certain countries (UNESCO Internal Oversight Service, 2016).

Despite formal commitments, not all States Parties to the different UNESCO recognition conventions have implemented the necessary legislation or established operational pathways to process refugees and displaced persons with partial or no documentation. Even when such systems or practices exist, a lack of visibility, transparency or coordination across institutions can hamper their effectiveness.

## 10.2 Barriers to recognition

In practice, the recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons remains fraught with obstacles that cut across legal, institutional, linguistic and socio-economic dimensions. These barriers are rarely isolated but instead intersect to create what scholars and policy advocates have termed a 'super-disadvantage' (Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022), especially acute in the Global South and in protracted displacement contexts.

Documentation and verification remain the most pervasive challenges. Many refugee and displaced learners are unable to provide complete documentation of their academic history, including transcripts, diplomas and course descriptions. This is particularly acute in situations of armed conflict or state collapse, where educational institutions have ceased to function or have been severely damaged or destroyed. Moreover, even when documents are available, they are often not recognized due to a lack of standardization, non-alignment with national qualifications frameworks or the inability of host country evaluators to verify them with the issuing institutions (UNESCO GEM report, 2019).

Legal and institutional fragmentation further exacerbates the problem. Recognition responsibilities are often scattered across ministries of education, immigration services, professional licensing boards and higher education institutions, which often operate without adequate coordination (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024). Many national legal frameworks do not yet include exceptional recognition procedures for refugees and asylum seekers, especially for those with pending or irregular status. Legislation may even explicitly require authenticated original documentation, effectively excluding displaced individuals who lack access to such materials (UNESCO GEM report, 2019). This regulatory rigidity also fails to accommodate alternative mechanisms, such as interview-based assessments or recognition of prior learning.

Language and procedural barriers pose especially significant challenges. Many refugees are unfamiliar with the host country's administrative systems, not proficient in the local language and may lack digital literacy, particularly when it comes to online-only recognition platforms. Host systems often require form submissions, translations, notarizations and other bureaucratic procedures that are both costly and linguistically complex. As McAuliffe and Oucho (2024) observe, linguistic distance and unfamiliarity with digital interfaces disproportionately exclude those with limited formal education or from rural displacement settings. Furthermore, information about recognition procedures is often unavailable or inaccessible, particularly to individuals without access to legal counsel or community-based guidance.

Socio-economic and geographic barriers are also evident. Refugees in low-income countries often reside in remote areas or camps far from recognition agencies, testing centers or higher education institutions. Digital exclusion, due to a lack of devices, internet connectivity, or digital skills, further isolates them from online credential evaluation systems. Even in higher-income countries, discretionary decisions by autonomous institutions may act as gatekeeping mechanisms that produce inconsistent outcomes or reinforce exclusion. In some cases, there is evidence of implicit bias or mistrust of foreign credentials, particularly when issued by institutions in countries affected by conflict or political instability (Baroni Boces, 2025).

Lastly, psychosocial barriers often go unacknowledged. Displacement is a profoundly traumatic experience, often accompanied by poverty, legal insecurity and exposure to violence or discrimination. These experiences can result in diminished self-confidence, reluctance to approach authorities or withdrawal from education altogether.

In recognition contexts, this may manifest as failure to apply, incomplete applications or dropping out of recognition pathways due to discouragement (Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022).

In summary, while global and regional frameworks emphasize flexibility and equity in the recognition of qualifications, their implementation is hindered by structural constraints and systemic inertia. Addressing these barriers requires not only legislative reform and inter-agency coordination but also the design of tailored, trauma-sensitive and linguistically inclusive procedures that account for the realities of displacement.

## 10.3 Global patterns of recognition

The global landscape of qualification recognition for refugees and displaced persons is characterized by pronounced regional disparities and significant gaps in institutional readiness across different country and income levels. National implementation remains highly uneven and heavily influenced by historical migration patterns, administrative capacity and political will. Despite the many barriers, a growing number of countries and institutions have developed innovative and inclusive mechanisms. These initiatives span a wide range of socio-economic and regional contexts, showing that meaningful solutions are possible even in complex governance environments.

A 2022 consultation with UNESCO Member States revealed that only 23 (or 37%) of the 63 participating countries had national recognition procedures in place for refugees and displaced persons, and just 16 (or 25%) had developed specific processes through competent recognition authorities (UNESCO, 2024f). These countries are disproportionately located in the Global North, which may suggest that countries that host some of the largest displaced populations display lower levels of such procedures or processes.

For instance, while countries such as Kenya and Uganda host hundreds of thousands of refugees, the presence of formal recognition bodies remains limited and access to credential evaluation often relies on ad hoc university-level discretion (Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022). Both have, however, begun to pilot the UNESCO Qualifications Passport (UQP) which serves as universal tool to facilitate recognition for these groups, drawing on the methodology of the European Qualifications Passport (EQPR) (UNESCO, 2024h).

The influence of the UNESCO recognition conventions also contributes to shaping patterns of recognition. The Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary text (Recommendation on the Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation) have spurred a more standardized approach to recognizing qualifications, including through the EQPR. According to the 2019 monitoring report on implementation of the convention, 41% of its States Parties had national procedures for the recognition of undocumented qualifications held by refugees and displaced persons. The report also noted that countries without regulations may have practical arrangements serving the same purpose (Council of Europe and UNESCO, 2019).

Norway, which piloted the methodology applied in the EQPR and UQP, offers an interview-based procedure targeted at refugees with insufficient documentation and individuals in a refugee-like situation who are unable to meet the documentation requirements for the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills' regular procedure for recognition (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and skills). Similarly, Italy's Academic Equivalence Mobility Information Center (CIMEA) evaluates alternative documents such as affidavits or partial records, ensuring flexible yet rigorous assessments (Guèye et al., 2024).

In 2022, South Africa's Qualifications Authority (SAQA) piloted an initiative on recognizing qualifications for refugees and asylum seekers with incomplete documentation, as part of its commitments under the Addis Recognition Convention for Africa (SAQA, n.d.). This builds on the *Policy and Criteria for Evaluating Foreign Qualifications within the South African National Qualifications Framework*, including the 2019 addendum on the

recognition of qualifications for refugees and asylum seekers (SAQA, 2019).

The direction of refugee flows also impacts recognition priorities. In regions like Latin America, governments have been compelled to adapt procedures rapidly, often urging higher education institutions to apply a flexible approach. Colombia's use of the *Permiso por Protección Temporal (PPT)* aims to facilitate access to qualification recognition procedures for Venezuelan migrants illustrates a proactive model driven by policy necessity (República de Colombia, 2021). Brazil has also recognized that refugees and asylum seekers have the right to differentiated evaluation procedures, including the acceptance of partial or alternative documentation, and empowered public universities through various frameworks to autonomously recognize these. One such framework is the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Chair, a UNHCR-supported initiative that fosters university-led support for displaced populations (Baroni Boces, 2025).

Similarly, Türkiye's approach has been evolving since 2012, particularly in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. In 2017, a policy was adopted on the recognition of qualifications for those from countries affected by "war, annexation or invasion", facilitating recognition in cases of missing documentary evidence. For each field of study, commissions are established at selected universities to assess candidates' background, degree and level of knowledge through written or verbal exam (Gardi, 2021). In Jordan, national recognition bodies issue temporary certificates renewable annually, based on proactive communication with institutions in countries of origin, even when official records are missing or difficult to obtain (UNESCO, 2024e). Meanwhile, countries that serve more as transit corridors than final destinations often lack comprehensive systems and processes.

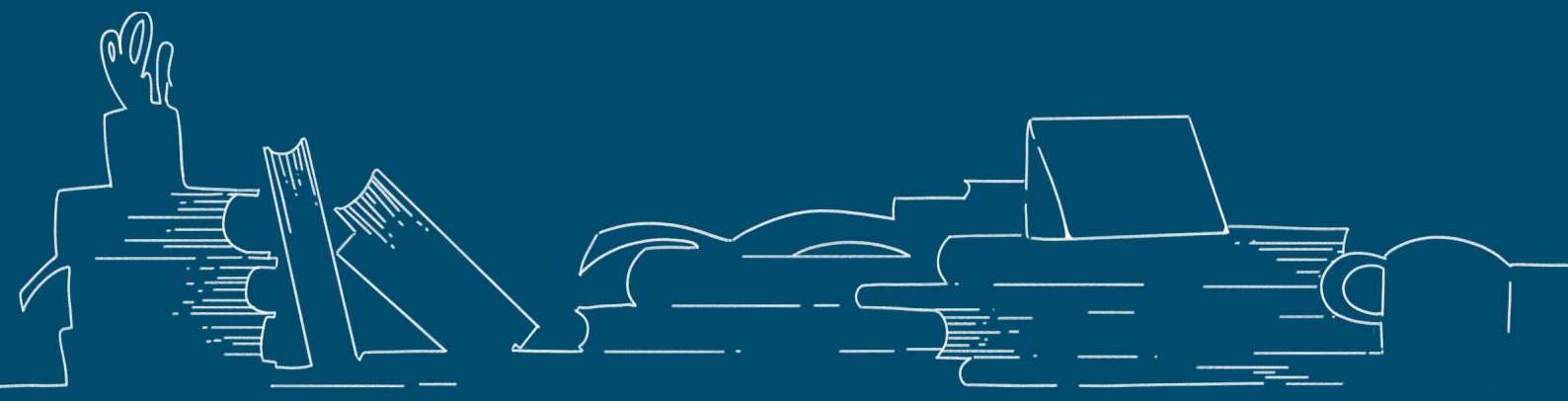
In Asia and the Pacific, countries like Japan stand out in terms of flexible procedures. For refugees who do not hold a graduation certificate and are unable to obtain it, the competent recognition authority substitutes their application (a self-declaration of one's educational background) for such a certificate, unless there is evidence to the contrary, in light of the purpose of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNESCO, 2024f).

Beyond geographic variation and the volume of migratory flows, the economic capacity of countries plays a central role in shaping recognition systems. High-income countries are more likely to have centralized agencies, national qualifications frameworks, and established appeal processes. They also demonstrate greater adoption of digital tools, such as automated verification systems or blockchain-supported credential storage. Conversely, low-income and lower-middle-income countries struggle to develop consistent recognition frameworks due to a lack of funding, limited digitization, and institutional fragmentation.

However, higher income does not always guarantee inclusive outcomes. Some high-income countries display restrictive practices due to highly autonomous higher education systems or rigid legal frameworks that exclude non-standard applicants. In such systems, discretionary power is often vested in universities or professional associations, resulting in variations in recognition outcomes depending on the institution or region. Some countries continue to treat refugees as "exceptional cases," thereby reinforcing marginalization rather than mainstreaming inclusion (UNESCO GEM report, 2019).

In summary, global patterns in refugee qualification recognition are shaped by intersecting factors, including geography, income, governance models, migration flows, and legal commitments. While there is evidence of innovation and progress, particularly in high-capacity states and regions with strong legal frameworks, significant disparities persist. Bridging these gaps will require not only technical cooperation and digital innovation but also renewed political attention to equitable access and human rights in higher education.

# Conclusions and the future outlook



# Conclusions and the future outlook

Higher education stands at a crossroads. As the world enters the final five years to achieve SDG 4, the sector faces converging challenges: meeting an unprecedented demand despite constrained resources, technological disruption reshaping traditional models and persistent inequities on the cusp of widening rather than narrowing. The data presented in this report reveal both remarkable progress and sobering gaps. With close to 269 million students enrolled in higher education globally (ISCED levels 5-8) and yet only a sobering 9% of refugees accessing higher education, the promise of inclusive, quality tertiary education remains unfulfilled for millions.

Most countries have adopted national plans to steer higher education and generally prioritize access and quality in higher education. Meanwhile, areas, such as relevance, internationalization, research and innovation, receive varying degrees of attention despite their crucial role in achieving sustainable development.

As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve in response to demographic shifts, increased demand, technological advancements and changing labour market needs, policymakers must remain proactive and adaptive. Strategic investment, informed by reliable data and guided by the principles of inclusion and quality, will be essential to ensuring that systems are accessible, sustainable and aligned with the needs of the 21st century.

The trends outlined in this report highlight both challenges and opportunities that the future holds for higher education. Drawing on these findings, this final section highlights areas where policy attention is most urgently required as the world enters the final five years to achieve SDG 4 and fulfil the commitment to deliver inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

While derived from an empirical analysis of policies and trends noted here in the *Higher education global trends report*, the priorities summarized below also closely resonate with the directions for change articulated in the recent UNESCO's *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, which was based on the outcomes of and subsequent consultations for the 2022 World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) (UNESCO, 2026). Read together, both publications reveal a strong convergence between observed challenges and the ambitions emerging from global dialogue on the future of higher education.

### 1) While expanding access to higher education should remain a priority, progression and completion should garner closer attention.

The analysis of global trends suggests that widening participation in higher education has been, and remains, a top priority in national public policies. Sustained commitment to expansion is essential to ensure the right to higher education and quality lifelong learning for all. Yet expansion alone does not guarantee progression. Persistent barriers to student advancement in many systems point to the need for stronger support to learners throughout their academic journey. Closing completion gaps is crucial to ensuring that individuals are able to realize the benefits of higher education, while reducing dropouts and improving systems efficiency.

Addressing this challenge will require policies that extend beyond admission and place greater emphasis on flexible pathways; academic and social support; recognition of diverse learner profiles; as well as quality assurance and funding approaches that encourage successful completion.

These priorities align closely with the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap's call under Guiding Principle 1 to frame equity not only in terms of opportunities for entry, but also in relation to outcomes. Student retention and programme completion must be treated as core responsibilities of higher education systems. At the same time, the right to higher education can only be fulfilled when programmes are meaningful and responsive to evolving global and local realities, underscoring the need to strengthen the quality, relevance and value of qualifications.

### 2) Despite a strong commitment to foster inclusion in higher education, further measures are needed to make this a reality for disadvantaged groups.

The trends identified in this report indicate that, despite the widespread recognition of inclusion as a policy objective, many higher education systems continue to struggle to translate commitments into realities for learners from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds. Structural barriers linked to income, geography, gender, disability, displacement and other factors continue to shape who can enter, progress and succeed in higher education. Policies fostering expansion without addressing entry barriers for different population groups risk reproducing inequalities within systems – even when these policies are intended to advance social mobility, cohesion and sustainable development. Ensuring fairness therefore requires moving beyond formal commitments toward sustained efforts to capture and address the conditions that prevent equal participation and success for all.

Surmounting this challenge hinges on embedding inclusion across governance, financing, admissions, student support and institutional cultures. Financial aid must consider the full cost of study, while complementary bridging programmes, academic support and psychosocial measures are also often necessary to create environments in which diverse learners can thrive.

These implications strongly resonate with the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap's Guiding Principle 1, which calls on higher education systems to eliminate discrimination in all their operations and to remove barriers that marginalize individuals and communities. Inclusion cannot be attained without adequate public commitment and resources, and equity policies must be twinned with concrete investments to ensure that disadvantaged learners truly go the distance.

### 3) As higher education systems expand and diversify, effective coordination and steering become increasingly important.

In recent decades, higher education landscapes have evolved rapidly, marked by massification, institutional diversification, new delivery modalities and a growing range of public and private actors. While many countries have developed planning instruments and strengthened legislative frameworks, maintaining coherence across expanding systems remains a persistent challenge. Responsibilities are frequently spread across multiple authorities and regulatory arrangements do not always adapt at the same pace as new forms of provision.

In this environment, steering increasingly depends on the ability of public authorities to clarify mandates, align incentives and ensure that institutions operate within transparent and commonly understood frameworks. External quality assurance has become a central mechanism to help translate national objectives into institutional practice, strengthening accountability and building confidence among learners, employers and international partners. Building governance capacity therefore involves reinforcing coordination across levels of government, improving links between higher education and related policy areas, such as labour markets and social development, and creating favourable conditions that encourage cooperation among institutions while respecting their different roles and missions.

These orientations are clearly expressed in the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, notably in Guiding Principle 5, which calls for greater collaboration and solidarity as well as promotes more flexible and harmonized forms of system integration to ease the transfer of learners, knowledge and qualifications across institutions and contexts.

### 4) Institutional autonomy and academic freedom underpin higher education, yet their recognition and implementation remains uneven.

Across higher education systems, autonomy and academic freedom are broadly acknowledged as foundational conditions for teaching, learning and research. Yet formal recognition does not always translate into lived reality. Legal guarantees frequently coexist with administrative, political and economic pressures that can restrict the ability of institutions and individuals to make independent decisions, pursue inquiry and contribute freely to public debate. Evidence from multiple regions points to the intensification of these pressures.

As higher education systems expand, diversify and assume greater societal responsibilities, safeguarding autonomy and academic freedom becomes ever more critical to maintain credibility, foster innovation and sustain international cooperation. Without such protections, the integrity of knowledge creation and dissemination is placed at risk. Advancing the effective realization of these key tenets therefore entails clear and reliable legal protections, transparent decision-making procedures and safeguards against undue political or administrative interference. It also calls for accountability arrangements developed in dialogue with the higher education community to ensure that oversight strengthens public trust while preserving the conditions necessary for independent teaching, learning and research.

These considerations are in step with the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, notably Guiding Principle 2, which reaffirms the centrality of the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally, and underscores the responsibility of states and institutions to create environments in which critical inquiry and open exchange can flourish.

### 5) Securing sustainable and equitable financing is essential to meet the growing demand for higher education.

The expansion and diversification of higher education have profound implications for how systems are resourced. In many contexts, available funding remains insufficient to meet rising enrolment rates, infrastructure needs and expectations regarding quality and student support. Persistent disparities in per-student investment, particularly in lower-income settings, continue to create unequal learning conditions. At the same time, increasing reliance on tuition fees and indirect costs can create new barriers for those the system seeks to include.

Ensuring that higher education can fulfil its public mission thus depends both on mobilizing adequate levels of funding and on distributing resources in ways that uphold fairness and advance effectiveness. Strengthening fiscal capacity, improving the efficiency and transparency of spending, and ensuring that learners can meet the full costs of study through appropriate and well-targeted support are central dimensions of this effort. Many systems are also exploring innovative approaches to complement public budgets. Cost-sharing arrangements, targeted aid, partnerships and performance-oriented mechanisms may expand possibilities, but their impact depends on careful design, broad consultation and sensitivity to national circumstances. The *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, particularly Guiding Principle 1, likewise emphasizes that commitments to equity and inclusion must be matched by adequate public investment and that financial considerations should not prevent learners from accessing and benefiting from higher education.

### 6) Digital transformation and AI offer unprecedented opportunities but also risk exacerbating existing inequalities.

Digital technologies are profoundly reshaping higher education across teaching, research, governance and engagement with society. They open new possibilities for teaching and learning, flexible provision, innovation and expanded participation. Yet unequal access to connectivity, infrastructure, digital skills and culturally relevant resources means that these advances can reproduce or intensify disparities among learners, institutions and countries.

The rapid integration of AI further amplifies both promises and risks. While it can enhance learning, research capacity and system management, its development and deployment influence whose knowledge is represented, which languages and contexts are prioritized, and how educational choices are made. Without vigilant commitment to uphold inclusion, fairness, ethical considerations and a human-centered approach, digital transformation may deepen asymmetries rather than help overcome them. Maximizing benefits therefore rests on sustained investments in access and capacity, strengthened digital literacy and governance frameworks that ensure ethical use, transparency and accountability, while keeping educational purposes at the forefront.

These imperatives are also clearly reflected in the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, notably Guiding Principle 4, which emphasizes that digital technologies and AI must be harnessed within a human-centred vision of higher education to advance human development and help reduce, rather than exacerbate, existing inequalities, while safeguarding the fundamental values of higher education.

### 7) Teaching personnel are at the forefront of quality and inclusive higher education, yet growing challenges threaten the profession's growth and retention capacity.

The capacity of higher education systems to provide quality learning, advance research and serve society ultimately rests on the shoulders of the people who work within them. Yet the teaching profession faces mounting challenges related to employment insecurity, uncertain career prospects, excessive workloads, evolving skill requirements and the need to respond to increasingly diverse student populations. In many contexts, these pressures affect morale, attractiveness of the profession and long-term retention of staff. At the same time, expectations placed on teaching personnel continue to expand. Digital innovation, new pedagogical approaches, research demands and broader social engagement require continuous opportunities for professional growth, adequate resources and supportive working environments. Improving well-being, equity and recognition in the profession is therefore essential to maintaining institutional capacity and educational quality in the long run.

Strengthening the academic profession thus involves reinforcing employment stability, providing clearer career pathways, expanding opportunities for continuous professional development and ensuring that working environments support well-being and inclusion. It also requires enabling teaching personnel to engage meaningfully in institutional governance and providing clear pathways to adapt to evolving pedagogical, technological and societal demands. These responsibilities are strongly reflected in Guiding Principle 2 of the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap, which underscores the central role of the academic community and the need to ensure good working conditions – including the provision of professional support, opportunities for development, recognition for contributions and ways to participate in institutional life – that enable those who teach and research to contribute fully to society. In parallel, UNESCO has initiated a

revision of the 1997 Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel to provide policymakers worldwide with updated guidance to address the evolving realities of the profession.

### 8) Ensuring the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications is essential to making mobility more equitable.

Studying across borders offers learners opportunities to broaden their knowledge, develop intercultural competencies, enhance their employability and build lasting academic and professional networks. More broadly, mobility supports knowledge circulation, international cooperation and mutual understanding among societies. Over the last decade, the international movement of students and scholars has become an increasingly prominent feature of higher education across regions. Yet participation remains limited for the majority worldwide. Access to mobility is strongly influenced by financial capacity, regulatory frameworks and the availability of support measures, while choices of destination are shaped by factors, such as institutional reputation, historical ties and geographical proximity.

Broadening the benefits of internationalization will require multiple and coordinated actions, including enacting inclusive funding policies, diversifying partnerships and providing more flexible learning pathways. However, these measures are often mired by administrative procedures, migration regulations and limited funding capacity. In addition, the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications is a key enabling condition for mobility. Many countries have demonstrated commitment by adhering to UNESCO's regional and global conventions on the recognition of qualifications, and by establishing national procedures. However, implementation remains uneven. Persistent obstacles particularly plague refugees and displaced persons who often lack complete documentation as well as holders of qualifications from digital or other non-traditional forms of provision. Rectifying these situations requires not only political will but also administrative capacity, clear and transparent procedures and sustained cooperation among competent authorities. Strong and credible quality assurance arrangements are also fundamental to solving the problem as they underpin quality, comparability and enable mutual recognition across systems.

Guiding Principle 5 elaborated in the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap emphasizes that studying, teaching and researching across borders contributes to dialogue and peace, and that such cooperation depends on the smooth and effective functioning of recognition processes. Lending continued support to the development of national and regional capacities to implement these commitments is critical to ensuring that mobility opportunities can be realized more widely.

### 9) Strengthening higher education ultimately depends on more robust data systems and international cooperation to inform policy and practice.

The capacity of governments and institutions to expand access, promote inclusion, safeguard quality, finance expansion, manage digital transformation and support mobility relies fundamentally on the availability of reliable and comparable information. Yet significant gaps persist in many contexts, limiting the ability to monitor progress, identify disparities and assess the effects of higher education reforms. Rapidly evolving areas, such as new learning pathways, cross-border provision and emerging technologies, places further strain on existing statistical and administrative arrangements.

Addressing these limitations calls for sustained investment in higher education management information systems (HEMIS), clearer institutional responsibilities and stronger analytical capacities at both institutional and system levels. At the same time, improving comparability and mutual learning requires enhanced collaboration across countries and regions, so that experience gained in one context can inform progress in others.

Strong data systems and knowledge sharing within and across higher education systems will prove essential to achieving target 4.3 of SDG 4 and moving the *Transforming Higher Education* roadmap from concept to reality. To this end, UNESCO supports Member States in strengthening their information ecosystems through initiatives that foster capacity development, policy dialogue and nationally owned solutions. These include the Education Management Information Systems – Progress Assessment Tool for Transformation (EMIS-PATT) and its dedicated higher education module, which provide a practical and participatory framework to help countries assess the state of their data systems, set priorities and design sequenced, costed pathways for improvement.

# References


Abamosa, J. Y. (2021). Social inclusion of refugees into higher education: Policies and practices of universities in Norway. *Educational Review, 75*(6), 1181–1201. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.2009443

Advance HE. (2024). *Equality in higher education: Staff statistical report 2024*. Advance HE. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/equality-higher-education-staff-statistical-report-2024?utm

Aikins, E.R. & Cilliers, J. (2024). *Education Thematic Futures*. ASS African Futures. https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/06-education/

Aksnes, D. W. & Sivertsen, G. (2023). Global trends in international research collaboration, 1980-2021. *Journal of Data and Information Science, 8(2),* 26-42. https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.2478/jdis-2023-0015/html

Alimukhamedov, F. (2020). Central Asia: Crossing the threshold at different speeds. *International Higher Education*, *(103)*. https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14639

Altbach, P. G., De Wit, H. & Woldegiyorgis, Y. A. (2021). *Public vs. private participation in higher education: Realities and debates*. (Background paper for Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2) https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380071

Althubyani, A. R. (2024). Digital Competence of Teachers and the Factors Affecting Their Competence Level: A Nationwide Mixed-Methods Study. *Sustainability, 16(7), 2796*. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072796

Amaral, A. (2022). Equity in higher education: Evidences, policies and practices. Setting the scene. In O. Tavares, C. Sá, C. Sin. & A. Amaral (Eds.), *Equity policies in global higher education: Reducing inequality and increasing participation and attainment* (23–46). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7_2

Ambasz, D., Nikolaev, D., Malinovskiy, S. Olszak-Olszewski, A., Zavalina, P. & Botero Álvarez, J. (2023). *Towards Higher Education Excellence in Central Asia: A Roadmap for Improving the Quality of Education and Research through Regional Integration*. World Bank Group. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101023140578441/pdf/P1790811f-2f765ea101eb142301abf0100a90db82451.pdf

Arnhold, N. & Bassett, R.M. (2021). *Steering Tertiary Education: Toward resilient systems that deliver for all*. World Bank Group. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394931632506279551/pdf/Steering-Tertiary-Education-Toward-Resilient-Systems-that-Deliver-for-All.pdf

ASEAN. (2025). *The Future of Higher Education Student Mobility in Southeast Asia: Possibilities for an Intra-ASEAN Scholarship Programme, Jakarta*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/IASP_Synthesis-Report_FA_DIGITAL.pdf

Ashour, S. (2021). Access for Syrian refugees into higher education in Germany: A systematic literature review. *European Journal of Higher Education, 12(1),* 98–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1871392

Astou Diouf, M., Pio Perez, L., Simione, F.F., Viseth, A. & Jiaxiong, Y. (2024). A Conceptual Policy Framework for Leveraging Digitalization to Support Diversification in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Monetary Fund, Volume 2024, Issue 123*. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400279638.001

Australian Government Department of Education. (2025). *HECS-HELP*. Study Assist. https://www.studyassist.gov.au/financial-and-study-support/hecs-help

Baker, S., Field, R., Burke, R., Hartley, L., & Fleay, C. (2021). Discursive constructions of equity in Australian higher education: Imagined worlds and the case of people seeking asylum. *British Educational Research Journal, 47(4),* 836-854. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3691

Baker Stein, M. (2024). *New Coursera Survey Shows Growing Micro-Credential Adoption Among Higher Education Leaders.* Coursera Blog. https://blog.coursera.org/micro-credential-impact-report-2024-shows-growing-adoption-among-university-leaders/

Baroni Boces, G. (2025). *Recognition of Qualifications of Refugees and Displaced Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean*. UNESCO IESALC Working Paper 13. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395616

Baruah, D. (2022). *STEMming gender divide in India*. British Council Insights Blog. https://insights.britishcouncil.org/blog/stemming-gender-divide-india. https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/analysis/stemming-gender-divide-india

Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos, V., Matarranz, M., Casado-Aranda, L. A., & Otto, A. (2022). Teachers' digital competencies in higher education: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 19(1), 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-021-00312-8

Bayudan-Dacuycuy, C., Orbeta, A., Vargas, A. & Ortiz, M. (2024). *An evaluation of the tertiary education subsidy program: Context, input, process, and product.* Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS): Quezon City. https://doi.org/10.62986/dp2024.22

Bolaji, A. (2024). *Academics fear mental breakdown as work keeps piling up.* University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240211153320147

Boman, J. et al. (2021). *What comes after a PhD? Findings from the DocEnhance survey of doctorate holders on their employment situation, skills match, and the value of the doctorate*. European Science Foundation, Strasbourg, https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.7188085.

Borrella, I., Caballero-Caballero, S., & Ponce-Cueto, E. (2022). *Taking action to reduce dropout in MOOCs: Tested interventions*. *Computers & Education, 179*, 104412. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104412

Bouckaert, M., Ricaurte, K., Galán-Muros, V. (2024a). Do countries recognize foreign higher education qualifications? UNESCO IESALC Policy Insight Series, (17) https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390941

Bouckaert, M., Galán-Muros, V., Ricaurte, K. (2024b). Do countries aim to increase access to higher education? UNESCO IESALC Policy Insight Series, (18) https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391661

Boyadjieva, P. A., & Ilieva-Trichkova, P. I. (2015). Higher education and social trust: A European comparative perspective. In A. W. Wiseman & N. Popov (Eds.), *Comparative sciences: Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 153–187). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-367920140000026007

British Council (2024a). *Intra-regional mobility in East Asia*. https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/short-articles/reports/intra-regional-mobility-east-asia

British Council (2024b). *The outlook for international student mobility: Amidst a changing global macroeconomic landscape*. https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/sites/siem/files/field/file/news/Outlook%20for%20international%20student%20mobility%20-%20amidst%20a%20changing%20global%20macroeconomic%20landscape_Jan%202024.pdf

Brunner, J. J., Rodriguez-Ponce, E., & Alarcón, M. (2025). Políticas de financiamiento y su rol en la intensificación de la competencia universitaria en Chile. *Pensamiento Educativo, Revista De Investigación Educacional Latinoamericana*, 62(3). https://doi.org/10.7764/PEL.62.3.2025.4

Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials. (n.d.). *Canada: An overview*. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. https://www.cicic.ca/1264/an_overview.canada

CAPRI. (2022). *Footing the bill: The hard choices of financing university education in the Caribbean region.* Caribbean Policy Research Institute. https://www.capricaribbean.org/sites/default/files/documents/footingthebillthehardchoices-forfinancinguniversityeducation.pdf

Centro de Informacion Oficial, Uruguay. (2019). *Creacion del Instituto Nacional de Acreditacion y Evaluacion de la Educacion Terciaria (INAEET), Ley Nº 19.924*. https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19852-2019

Cirlean, E., Tsiligkiris, V., Skjerven, S., Vila, F., Lantero, L., Dologa Dreyer, C. (2025). *In addressing TNE governance challenges, students are key*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250617155942227

Colby, G. (2023). *Data snapshot: Tenure and contingency in US higher education*. American Association of University Professors (AAUP). https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/spring-2023/data-snapshot-tenure-and-contingency-us-higher-education

Colus, Flavia. (2024). *Feasibility study for the implementation of a diploma supplement in Latin America and the Caribbean*. UNESCO IESALC Working Paper 6. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388395

Cotton, D. R. E., Cotton, P. A., & Shipway, J. R. (2023). Chatting and cheating: Ensuring academic integrity in the era of ChatGPT. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 61(2),* 228–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2190148

Council of Europe and UNESCO (2019). *Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention*. https://book.coe.int/en/higher-education-and-research/7897-monitoring-the-implementation-of-the-lisbon-recognition-convention-council-of-europe-higher-educations-series-no-23.html#

CBERT (2023). Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) International Campus Listing. http://cbert.org/resources-data/intl-campus/

Cruz, L., Diniz, J., Amiel, T., Gonsales, P., & Saraiva, F. (2024). *Mapeamento da plataformização da educação pública superior: América Latina e África*. Observatório Educação Vigiada, Curitiba. https://zenodo.org/records/11243189

Dahlstrom, E., Brooks, D. C., & Bichsel, J. (2014). *The current ecosystem of learning management systems in higher education: Student, faculty, and IT perspectives*. ECUCAUSE https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED564447

Davis, K., Bouckaert, M. & Galán-Muros, V. (2023). Policy Insight 1: Which countries guarantee free public higher education by law? UNESCO IESALC Policy Insight Series. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387673

Dela Cruz, J. B., & Santos, R. A. (2020). Evaluating the effectiveness of the Tulong Dunong Program: Perspectives from beneficiaries and administrators. *Journal of Philippine Education Policy and Research, 12(3),* 45–58.

Digital Education Council. (2025). *Digital Education Council Global AI Faculty Survey 2025*. https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/digital-education-council-global-ai-faculty-survey

Drees-Gross, F., Zhang, P. (2021). *El escaso acceso digital frena a América Latina y el Caribe ¿Cómo solucionar este problema?* World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/es/latinamerica/el-escaso-acceso-digital-frena-america-latina-y-el-caribe-como-solucionar-este

ENIC-NARIC. (n.d.). ENIC-NARIC reference documents: Documents adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. https://www.enic-naric.net/page-enic-naric_reference_documents

Education Sub-Saharan Africa. (2021). The State of Women Leading Report: Unlocking the potential of female leadership in tertiary education, Education Sub Saharan Africa. https://essaafrica.org/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/ESSA%20Women%20Leading%20Report_July%202021_1.pdf

European Commission. (2021). *Towards a European graduate tracking mechanism: Recommendations of the expert group (October 2018–October 2020)*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/970793

European Commission (2023). *Final report of the study on the state and effectiveness of national funding systems of higher education to support the European universities initiative. Volume I*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/885757

European Commission. (2025). *The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area*. European Education Area. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice Network. (2025). *National student fee and support systems in European higher education*. https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/data-and-visuals/national-student-fees

Eurostat. (2023). *Distribution of mobile students from abroad with EU and non-EU country of origin by education level and sex*. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uoe_mobs06/default/table

Fed. (2025a). *Consumer Credit Outstanding (Levels)*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/HIST/cc_hist_memo_levels.html

Fed. (2025b). *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2024: Higher Education and Student Loans*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2025-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2024-higher-education-and-student-loans.htm

Ferreyra, M., Avitabile, C., Botero Álvarez, J., Haimovich Paz, F. & Urzúa, S. (2017). *At a crossroads: Higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/fd526574-0e5e-5dbf-824e-1c6fdb95d83d

Ferreyra, M., Dinarte, L., Urzúa, S. & Bassi, M. (2021). *The Fast Track to New Skills: Short-Cycle Higher Education Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/373a484e-33b7-5e16-8895-a10c5220a332/content

Firoozi, D. (2022). The impact of post-admission merit scholarships on enrollment decisions and degree attainment: Evidence from randomization. *Economics of Education Review, 86, 102221*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2021.102221

Fitzgerald, A., Avirmed, T. & Battulga, N. (2024). Exploring the factors informing educational inequality in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 1–11*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2024.2381121

Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba. (2021). *Gaceta Oficial No. 48 Extraordinaria (GOC-2021-481-ES2)* https://www.gacetaoficial.gob.cu/sites/default/files/goc-2021-es2.pdf

Galán-Muros, V., Bouckaert, M., & Roser-Chinchilla, J. (2023). *The representation of women in academia and higher education management positions: Policy brief*. UNESCO IESALC. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386876

Garg, S., & Upadhyay, V. K. (2024). Equality, affirmative action, and economically weaker sections in India. *Lentera Hukum, 11(1), 124–156*. https://heinonline.org/hol-cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/lenth11&section=8&casa_token=qFucKKVNA3gAAAAA:3yLah6T4AJyuYzbrAKXyjH4c3CsOH-brOC8Qkys4uPsoNRuykBdh74OfhilddJpNqbXrucHl

Garrett, R. (2017). International branch campuses - Curiosity or important trend? *International Higher Education, (90), 7–8*. https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/10417

Gover, A., Blackstock, D. (2023). *Protecting the interests of students on transnational education programmes: the role of transparent quality assurance*. ENQA. https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Gover_Blackstock-TNE-paper.pdf

Government of Canada. (2025). *2025 provincial and territorial allocations under the international student cap*. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/2025-provincial-territorial-allocations-under-international-student-cap.html

Gutović, V. & Xia, T. (2025). *Mapping Micro-Credentials in Latin America and the Caribbean: Towards a Common Framework*. UNESCO IESALC Working Paper 11. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393794_eng

Guèye, L., Seow-Ganesan, D., Lantero, L. & Baroni Boces, G. (2024). *AI in higher education: Pilot projects in Europe explore automated document checks and equivalency suggestions*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250109122353833

Hénard, F., & Mitterle, A. (2010). *Governance and quality guidelines in higher education: A review of governance arrangements and quality assurance guidelines*. OECD Publishing. https://etico.iiep.unesco.org/en/governance-and-quality-guidelines-higher-education-review-governance-arrangements-and-quality

Higher Education Authority Ireland. (n.d.). *Programme for access to higher education (PATH)*. https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/

Hnatyuk, V., Pshenychna, N., Kara, S., Kolodii, V., & Yaroshchuk, L. (2024). Education's role in fostering environmental awareness and advancing sustainable development within a holistic framework. *Multidisciplinary Reviews*, *7*(2024spe012). https://doi.org/10.31893/multirev.2024spe012

HolonIQ (2024). *The 2024 Global State of Women's Leadership*. https://www.holoniq.com/notes/the-2024-global-state-of-womens-leadership

Hou, A. Y. C., Tao, C. H.-Y., Zhou, K. Z.-W., Lin, A. F.-Y., Su, E. H. C. & Chen, Y. (2024). *Evolution of quality assurance in higher education from INQAAHE GGP to ISGs: Are quality assurance agencies in Asia ready to the emerging modules?* Journal of International Cooperation in Education, 26(1), 85–100. https://doi.org/10.1108/JICE-09-2023-0022

House of Commons Library. (2025). *Changes to UK visa and settlement rules after the 2025 immigration white paper* (Research briefing No. CBP-10267). UK Parliament. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10267/

Hu, X., Fernandez, F., Qiu, Y., & Capaldi, M. (2024). The good, the bad, and the balanced: A typology of state merit-aid programs for community college students. *Community College Review*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521241238753

IGNOU (2023). *Annual report 2022–2023*. https://www.ignou.ac.in/viewFile/pdd/annual-report/Annual-Report-2022-23-Eng.pdf

IHME-CHAIN Collaborators. (2024). Effects of education on adult mortality: a global systematic review and meta-analysis, *The Lancet Public Health*, 9(3), 155-165. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00306-7

IIE Scholar Rescue Fund. (n.d.). *Fellowships for Threatened Scholars around the World*. https://www.scholarrescuefund.org/

Ilieva J. (2021). *Transnational Education Will Resist the Post-Pandemic Recruitment Crunch*. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/author/janet-ilieva

International Association of Universities (2024). *Internationalization of Higher Education: current trends and future scenarios (IAU 6th Global Survey)*. https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/2024_internationalization_survey_report_digital.pdf

ITU (n.d.). SDG ICT indicators. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/SDGs-ITU-ICT-indicators.aspx

ITU (2024). *Measuring digital development – Facts and figures 2024*. ITU. https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2024-4/

ITU. (2025a). *State of digital development and trends in the Africa region 2025*. ITU. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2025/04/2500037E_SDDT_2025_Africa_FINAL.pdf

ITU (2025b). *Manual for measuring ICT access and use by households and individuals*, 2020 Edition: 2025 ICT skills revision (HH9/HH15). https://new.cisstat.org/documents/20143/285701/Manual+for+measuring+ICT+access+and+use++by+households+and+individuals%2C+2020+Edition.pdf/3b1fb21a-47a6-1a56-e221-6a0a48005e55?version=1.1&t=1750660915006

Janssens, K. & Ueda, M. (2023). P*robing depressive symptoms and the desire to leave academia among scientists in large, international collaborations in STEM* (arXiv:2308.05107). arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2308.05107.

Johnson, E. (2023). *Supply responses to targeted government aid: Evidence from free college in Chile.* University of Chicago. https://socialsciences.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2023-11/JMP_Johnson_2.pdf

Johnstone, B.D. & Marucci, P.N. (2010). *Financing Higher Education Worldwide: Who Pays? Who Should Pay?* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801894572

CEART – Joint ILO–UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel. (2021). *Final Report: Fourteenth Session (CEART/14/2021/10)*. ILO and UNESCO. https://www.ilo.org/media/248301/download

Jung, I. (2022). *Quality Assurance in Online, Open, and Distance Education*. In: Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9_39-1

Kakuchi, S. (2025). *New government relief schemes for disadvantaged students.* University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250415164449653

Karakhanyan, S. (personnal communication, August/September 2025).

Karakhanyan, S. & Stensaker. B. (eds. 2020). Global Trends in Higher Education Quality Assurance: challenges and opportunities in internal and external quality assurance. *Global Perspectives on Higher Education*, Volume 48. Boston: Brill.

Kinser, K., Lane, J.E. (2017). *An overview of authorization and quality assurance of higher education institutions (*Background paper prepared for the 2017/8 GEM Report). Right to Education Initiative. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259561.

Kinzelbach, K., Lindberg, S. I., Lott, L. & Panaro, A.V. (2025). *Academic Freedom Index – 2025 Update*. doi: 10.25593/open-fau-1637

Kivistö, J., & Suprun, K. (2024). Performance-Based Funding of Universities: Past and Present European Developments. *International Higher Education*, 118. https://ihe.bc.edu/pub/tdinwfhq

Gardi, R. (2021). *Access to higher education for forcibly displaced persons: challenges, good practices, and suggestions for the future*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/rez-gardi-access-to-higher-education-for-forcibly-displaced-persons-challenges-good-practices-and-suggestions-for-the-future.pdf

Kondakci, Y., Bedenlier, S., & Zawacki-Richter, O. (2018). Social network analysis of international student mobility: Uncovering the rise of regional hubs. *Higher Education*, *75(3)*, 517–535. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26449092

Lantero, L., Pedersen, A.B., Ramina, B., Bai Yun, C. (2022). *Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention: Monitoring Report*. Council of Europe and UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383465.locale=en

Levy, D. C. (2024). *A world of private higher education*. Oxford University Press.

Levy, D. C. (2013). The *Decline* of Private Higher Education. *Higher Education Policy* 26, 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2012.26

Lindsay, S. & Fuentes, K. (2022). It Is Time to Address Ableism in Academia: A Systematic Review of the Experiences and Impact of Ableism among Faculty and Staff. *Disabilities*, 2(2), 178-203. https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities2020014

Liu, B. L., Morales, D., Roser-Chinchilla, J., Sabzalieva, E., Valentini, A., Vieira do Nascimento, D., & Yerovi, C. (2023). *Harnessing the era of artificial intelligence in higher education: A primer for higher education stakeholders*. UNESCO IESALC. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386670

Martin, M. (2023). *Short courses, micro-credentials, and flexible learning pathways: a blueprint for policy development and action: policy paper*. UNESCO IIEP. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384326_eng

Martin, M. & Stulgaitis, M. (2022). *Refugees' access to higher education in their host countries: Overcoming the "super-disadvantage"* (Policy paper). UNESCO IIEP & UNHCR. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381505

Materu, P. (2007). *Higher Education Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa: Status, Challenges, Opportunities, and Promising Practices*. World Bank Working Paper, No. 124. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/e9904501-5711-52ae-86b7-b860bb730adb/content

Mbhalati, O. J. (2024). Access, equity and redress: Towards a sustainable funding framework for public universities in South Africa. *Review of Education, 12(1)*. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3449

Mbhalati, O.J. (2025). A South African University Funding Model and Its Contribution to Transformation Agenda. *International Journal of Higher Education,* 14(3). https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v14n3p1

McAuliffe, M., & Oucho, L. A. (Eds.). (2024). *Informe sobre las migraciones en el mundo 2024*. International Organization for Migration (IOM). https://publications.iom.int/books/informe-sobre-las-migraciones-en-el-mundo-2024

McMahon, M. (1992). Higher education in a world market: An historical look at the global context of international study. *Higher Education*, *24,* 465–482. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00137243

Mellifont, D., Smith-Merry, J., Dickinson, H., Llewellyn, G., Clifton, S., Ragen, J. & Williamson, P. (2019). The ableism elephant in the academy: A study examining academia as informed by Australian scholars with lived experience. *Disability & Society, 34(7-8), 1180-1199*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687599.2019.1602510

Mercader, C., & Gairín, J. (2020). University teachers' perception of barriers to the use of digital technologies: The importance of the academic discipline. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1), 4. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-0182-x

Miao, F. & Holmes, W. (2023a). *Guidance for generative AI in education and research*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/EWZM9535

MIDA – Malaysian Investment Development Authority (2025). *Education services: Access to financing for public and private higher education institutions.* https://www.mida.gov.my/industries/services/education-services/

Ministerio de Capital Humano de la República Argentina. Departamento de Información Universitaria (2024). *Síntesis de Información. Estadísticas universitarias 2023-2024*. https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/sintesis_anuario_2023-2024.pdf

Ministry of Education of Ethiopia. (2023). *Digital Education Strategy and Implementation Plan for Ethiopia (2023–2028)*. https://www.dpgethiopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Digital-Education-Strategy-and-Implementation-Plan-for-Ethiopia-.pdf

Ministry of Education of India. (2023). *Study in India*. https://www.studyinindia.gov.in/

Moshtari, M. & Safarpour, A. (2024). Challenges and strategies for the internationalization of higher education in low-income East African countries. *Higher Education, 87*, 89–109. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-00994-1

Motala, S., Oketch, M., Wangenge-Ouma, G., & Masutha, M. (2023). Higher Education Funding, Justice and Equity – Critical Perspectives. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *37(6)*. https://doi.org/10.20853/37-6-6199

Mwiria, K. (2022). *Governance in higher education* (WHEC2022 background document). UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389884

Nuffic. (2023). *The Global Recognition Convention going local?* https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/2.%20The%20Global%20Recognition%20Convention%20going%20local.pdf

OECD (2019). *OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2019 Issue 2*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/9b89401b-en

OECD (2021a). *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en

OECD (2021b). *Education in Brazil: An International Perspective.* OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/60a667f7-en.

OECD (2022a). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en

OECD (2022b). Resourcing higher education in Ireland: Funding higher education institutions. *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, *No. 51*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/67dd76e0-en

OECD (2023a). *OECD Digital Education Outlook 2023: Towards an Effective Digital Education Ecosystem*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c74f03de-en.

OECD (2023b). *OECD Reviews of Innovation Policy: Korea 2023*. OECD Reviews of Innovation Policy, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/bdcf9685-en.

OECD (2023c). Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability: Uses and possibilities. *OECD Education Policy Perspectives No. 66.* OECD Publishing, Paris: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/03/micro-credentials-for-lifelong-learning-and-employability_13dd81a9/9c4b7b68-en.pdf

OECD (2024), The state of academic careers in OECD countries: An evidence review. *OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 91.* OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en

OECD (2025), *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en.

Pedró, F. (2025). The Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications: The Role of Quality Assurance Systems. How Quality Assurance Systems Can Promote, And Benefit From, The Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in Kakhayan, S., Kinser, K. and Pedró, F. (eds). *Global Trends in Higher Education Quality Assurance*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 65-86

Pedró, F., & Mendigutxia, A. (2025). *The role of higher education in national artificial intelligence strategies: A comparative policy review.* UNESCO IESALC Working Paper 10. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392047_eng

Pedró, F., Bouckaert, M. & Gutović, V. (2025). *Bridging the Data Gap in Higher Education Policy Making*. World Education Blog. https://world-education-blog.org/2025/06/23/bridging-the-data-gap-in-higher-education-policymaking-challenges-and-opportunities-for-evidence-based-governance/

Penner, M. & Smith-Carrier, T. (2022). *Gender pay gap: it's roughly half-a-million dollars for women professors across a lifetime.* University Affairs. https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/gender-pay-gap-its-roughly-half-a-million-dollars-for-women-professors-across-a-lifetime/

Powell, A. (2024). *Disabled people in employment* (Research Briefing CBP-7540). House of Commons Library. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7540/CBP-7540.pdf

Rajasekaran, S., Adams, T., & Tilmes, K. (2024). *Digital pathways for education: Enabling greater impact for all*. World Bank Group. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/publication/digital-pathways-education-enabling-learning-impact

Ramasu, T. & Kanakana-Katumba, G. (2024). Exploring the potential for tuition-free higher education in South Africa: A scoping review. *Journal of Quality in Education*. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.150265.2

Ravi, S., Gupta, N. & Nagaraj, P. (2019). *Reviving Higher Education in India.* Brookings India. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Reviving-Higher-Education-in-India-email-1.pdf

Reich, J., & Ruipérez-Valiente, J. A. (2019). The MOOC pivot. *Science*, *363 (6423)*, 130–131. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aav7958

Republic of the Philippines. (2017). *Republic Act No. 10931: Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act*. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2017/ra_10931_2017.html

República de Colombia (2021). *Decreto 216 de 2021: Por medio del cual se adopta el Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos bajo Régimen de Protección Temporal*. https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma_pdf.php?i=159606

Ricaute, K., Bouckaert, M. & Galan-Muros, V. (2024). *Are quality assurance agencies for higher education autonomous by law?* UNESCO IESALC Policy Insight 6. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388876

Roser-Chinchilla, J., Galán-Muros, V., & de Ita Valera, E. (2024). *Higher education institutions as employers: ensuring decent working conditions.* UNESCO IESALC. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391205

Ruff, C., Matheu, A., Ruiz, M., Juica, P., & Gómez Marcos, M. T. (2023). Cost-free education as a new variable of mixed financing policies in Chilean higher education and its impact on student trajectory and social mobility. *Heliyon, 9(7), e17415*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17415

Saeed, S. (2021). Higher Education and Quality Assurance in Egypt: Pre and Post COVID-19. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*. 8. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v8i2p96

Sagintayeva, A., Williams, J. & Cowan, S. (2023). *We need more qualified faculty, but attracting them is hard.* University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231117062851118

almi, J. (2017). *The tertiary education imperative: Knowledge, skills and values for development* (Global Perspectives on Higher Education, Vol. 38). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6351-086-6.

Salmi, J. & D'Addio, A. (2021). Policies for achieving inclusion in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 47-72. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23322969.2020.1835529

Salmi, J. (2023). Is Big Brother watching you? In P. A. Okebukola & S. Uvalić-Trumbić (Eds.), *Quality assurance in higher education across the world*. Sense Publishers.

Salmi, J. (personnal communication, August/September 2025).

Sawahel, W. (2024). *Arab states HE area to boost collaboration, sustainability*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240312113748 12

Sefoka, I. (2022). Realizing Fee-Free Higher Education in South Africa: Dreams and Nightmares. *The Journal of Quality in Education, 12*, pg.. https://doi.org/10.37870/joqie.v12i19.291

Semrush. (2024). Top websites. https://www.semrush.com/website/top/

South African Qualifications Authority (n.d). *UNSEEN – Recognition of qualifications of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa.* https://www.saqa.org.za/unseen-recognition-of-qualifications-of-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-south-africa/

South African Qualifications Authority (2019). *Addendum on the Recognition of Qualifications of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*. https://www.saqa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Addendum-on-the-Recognition-of-Qualifications-of-Refugees-and-Asylum-Seekers_March-2019.pdf

Spoon, K., LaBerge, N., Wapman, K. H., Zhang, S., Morgan, A. C., Galesic, M., Fosdick, B. K., Larremore, D. B., & Clauset, A. (2023). Gender and retention patterns among U.S. faculty. *Science Advances, 9(43), eadi2205*. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adi2205

Stanford University (n.d.). *1936 Constitution of the USSR: Chapter X (1936)*. http://large.stanford.edu/history/kaist/references/marx/beard/c10/

Statista. (2024). *E-learning: A Statista overview report on the global market for online education*. https://www.statista.com/study/163500/e-learning/

Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 600 U.S. (2023). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf

Tapia, L. (2016). El subsistema de universidades interculturales en México: Entre la política social y la política educativa. *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos, 46(1), 7–50*. https://doi.org/10.48102/rlee.2016.46.1.186

Teferra, D., Chacón, E., Escribens, M., Johnstone, B., Malee Bassett, R., Pedró, F., Roser, J. & Varghese, N. V. (2022). *Financing higher education* (WHEC2022 background document). UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389891

Teixeira, P., Sá, C., Cerejeira, J., Figueiredo, H., Portela, M. (2021). Mass Higher Education and its Civic Impacts in Portugal and Spain, *Journal of Education Finance*, 46(4), 496-518. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jef.2021.a796978

Times Higher Education. (2024). *International Women's Day: Top universities led by women*. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/top-10-universities-led-women

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2025). *Trump administration proposes new rule to end foreign student visa abuse*. https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/08/27/trump-administration-proposes-new-rule-end-foreign-student-visa-abuse

UIS (2023). *Data for education: A guide for policymakers to leverage education data*. https://doi.org/10.54675/VMCP8621

UIS (2025). Data Browser. https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/

UNESCO (1997). *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*. UNESCO, Paris. https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel

UNESCO (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*. UNESCO, Paris. https://doi.org/10.54675/CGBA9153

UNESCO (2018). *UNESCO ICT competency framework for teachers* (version 3). UNESCO, Paris https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265721

UNESCO (2019). *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*. https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention

UNESCO (2020a). *A Practical Guide on Recognition: Implementing the Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374905

UNESCO. (2020b). *Making higher education more inclusive. SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee*. https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/knowledge-hub/making-higher-education-more-inclusive

UNESCO (2021a). *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI in 2022*. UNESCO, Paris. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence

UNESCO (2021b). *Don't look away: No place for exclusion of LGBTI students* (GEM Report Policy Paper, 45). UNESCO, Paris https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377361

UNESCO Office in Almaty (2021). *Policy Brief: Higher Education in Central Asia*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377911#:~:text=programme%20and%20meeting%20document&text=programme%20and%20meeting%20document&text=Corporate%20author&text=UNESCO%20Office%20in%20Almaty

UNESCO (2022a). *Academic mobility in higher education*. (WHEC2022 background document). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389878

UNESCO (2022b). *Beyond limits: New ways to reinvent higher education*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389912

UNESCO (2022c). *Right to higher education : Unpacking the international normative framework in light of current trends and challenges*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382335

UNESCO (2022d). *Higher Education Global Data Report*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389859

UNESCO (2024a). *AI competency framework for teachers*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/ZJTE2084

UNESCO (2024b). *AI competency framework for students*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/JKJB9835

UNESCO (2024c). *Higher education: figures at a glance*. UNESCO, Paris. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389069

UNESCO (2024d). *Six pillars for the digital transformation of education: a common framework. UNESCO*. UNESCO: Paris https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391299

UNESCO (2024e). Breaking barriers in higher education for and with students with disabilities. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/breaking-barriers-higher-education-and-students-disabilities

UNESCO (2024f). Internationalizing higher education: findings from the fifth consultation the implementation of the Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389060.

UNESCO (2024g). Preliminary study on the technical and legal aspects relating to the desirability of revising the 1966 ILO-UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers and 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel. UNESCO: Paris https://www.teachertaskforce.org/knowledge-hub/preliminary-study-technical-and-legal-aspects-relating-desirability-revising-1966-ilo

UNESCO (2024h). *UNESCO Qualifications Passport gives hope to Zambian students who fled conflict in Sudan*. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-qualifications-passport-gives-hope-zambian-students-who-fled-conflict-sudan

UNESCO (2025a). *Digital leap in East Asia: A regional synthesis on higher education transformation*. UNESCO Regional Office for East Asia. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393828

UNESCO (2025b). *How students' innovation bridged higher education and employment in Gabon*. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-students-innovation-bridged-higher-education-and-employment-gabon

UNESCO (2025c). UNESCO survey: Two-thirds of higher education institutions have or are developing guidance on AI use. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-survey-two-thirds-higher-education-institutions-have-or-are-developing-guidance-ai-use

UNESCO (2025d). S*tatus and trends of women in science: New insights and sectoral perspectives*. UNESCO: Paris https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393768

UNESCO (2025e). *Higher Education. Figures at a Glance*. UNESCO: Paris https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394112

UNESCO. (2025f). Basic texts, 2025 edition: including texts and amendments adopted by the General Conference at its 42nd session (Paris, 7-22 November 2023). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393725

UNESCO. (2026). *Transforming Higher Education: Global collaboration on visioning and action*.

UNESCO GEM Report (2018). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2018: Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259338

UNESCO GEM Report (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, displacement and education: building bridges, not walls*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265866

UNESCO GEM Report (2020). Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all (3rd ed.). UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/JJNK6989

UNESCO GEM Report (2021/2022*). Global education monitoring report, 2021/2: non-state actors in education: who chooses? who loses?* UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/XJFS2343

UNESCO GEM Report (2023). *Global education monitoring report 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/UZQV8501

UNESCO GEM Report (2024). *Gender report 2024: Technology on her terms*. UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/WVCF2762

UNESCO GEM Report (2024). *Global education monitoring report, 2024/5: Leadership in education – Lead for learning.* UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/EFLH5184

UNESCO GEM Report (2026). Global education monitoring report 2026: access and equity, countdown to 2030. UNESCO: Paris https://doi.org/10.54676/JLKL3223

UNESCO GEM Report (n.d.). *Education Profiles: Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER)*. Retrieved February 15, 2026

UNESCO-ICHEI (2024). *Higher education in the era of artificial intelligence*. https://es.ichei.org/Uploads/Download/2024-01-05/659775cab981e.pdf

UNESCO IESALC (2022a). The right to higher education: A social justice perspective. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381750

UNESCO IESALC (2022b). Moving minds: opportunities and challenges for virtual student mobility in a post-pandemic world. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380988

UNESCO IESALC (2023). The right to higher education in the Arab States: briefing note compendium. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387585

UNESCO IESALC (2024a). Which countries establish access quotas for higher education at the national level? https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390937

UNESCO IESALC (2024b). Two decades of student mobility (2000–2020): Global and regional dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388552_eng

UNESCO IESALC (2025). Políticas de equidad e inclusión en la educación superior de América Latina y el Caribe. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394342

UNESCO IESALC (n.d.). Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/pc/page/home/

UNESCO Internal Oversight Service (2016). Evaluation of UNESCO's Regional Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245223

University of British Columbia. (n.d.). *Indigenous students / Indigenous programs & services*. UBC. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from https://students.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-students/

UNHCR (2018). Global compact on refugees. United Nations. https://www.unhcr.org/global-compact-refugees

UNHCR. (2023). 15by30 Roadmap: Expanding higher education, skills and self-reliance for refugees. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/15by30-roadmap.pdf

UNHCR (2025). *UNHCR Education Report 2025*. https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-education-report-2025

UNHCR. (n.d.). Figures at a Glance. https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2024). *Academic freedom: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education (A/HRC/56/58)*. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/58

Universities Australia. (2024). *2023 Indigenous Strategy Annual Report*. https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/UA-Indigenous-Strategy-Report-2024.pdf

Usher, A. & Burroughs, R. (2018) Targeted Free Tuition: A Global Analysis. Toronto, Canada, Higher Education Strategy Associates. https://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/HESA-Targeted-Free-Tuition-A-Global-Analysis-FINAL-Embargo-Sept-20-2018-1.pdf

Usher, A. (Host). (2025, November 13). *Inside the global private higher education sector with Dan Levy* (Season 4, Episode 10) [Audio podcast episode]. In *The World of Higher Education*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. https://worlded.transistor.fm/episodes/inside-the-global-private-higher-education-sector-with-dan-levy

von Hippel, P. T., & Hofflinger, A. (2020). The Data Revolution Comes to Higher Education: Identifying Students at Risk of Dropout in Chile. EdWorkingPaper No. 20-249. *Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED671254

Walshe, J. (2023). *Women in university leadership – A lot done, but more to do*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230310140746346

Wankhede, H. S. (2025). *Reserved faculty posts are still vacant and out of reach*. The Hindu. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/reserved-faculty-posts-are-still-vacant-and-out-of-reach/article69760789.ece

Wauru, M. (2023). *Women still 'grossly' under-represented as academic leaders*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230809081939167

Wang, L. (2023). *Equity, inclusion and the transformation of higher education*. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/equity-inclusion-and-transformation-higher-education

Welch, A. (2021). *Private higher education in East and Southeast Asia: Growth, challenges, implications* (Background paper prepared for the 2021/2 GEM Report). UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380093

WHO (2022). *Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities.* Geneva. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600

Williams, J., & Usher, A. (2022). *2022 world higher education: Institutions, students and funding*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. https://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HESA_World-Higher-Education-2022_Main-Report-2.pdf

Wilson, K., Neylon, C., Montgomery, L., Huang, C., Handcock, R. N., Roelofs, A., Hosking, R., & Ozaygen, A. (2022). Global diversity in higher education workforces: Towards openness. *Open Library of Humanities, 8(1).* https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.4809

World Bank (2010). *Financing Higher Education in Africa*. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, Washington, DC. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8334-6

World Bank (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank: Washington, DC. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1

World Economic Forum. (2025). The Future of Jobs Report 2025. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

Yang J., Zhang Y. & Labe, O. (2026). *Bridging the Gaps: Global Patterns and Institutional Drivers of Higher Education Data Availability.* Forthcoming.

Zeidan, R., de Almeida, S. L., Bó, I., & Lewis, N., Jr. (2023). Racial and income-based affirmative action in higher education admissions: Lessons from the Brazilian experience. *Journal of Economic Surveys, 38 (3*), pg. 956-972. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joes.12564

Zhang, C., Wu, Q., Wang, H., Luo, X., Wei, N., Pan, B., & Tong, J. (2021). Factors Affecting Campus Loans in Western China. SAGE Open, 11(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211023111

Zhao, Y., Pinto Llorente, A. M., & Sánchez Gómez, M. C. (2021). Digital competence in higher education research: A systematic literature review. *Computers & Education*, *168, 104212*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104212

Zvezdova, A., & Zhang, J. (Eds.). (2024). *Quality assurance and global tertiary education: Navigating challenges and embracing innovation* (APQN Conference anthology; St. Petersburg, Russia, September 26–29, 2024). Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) & Certification Association "Russian Register". https://apqn.org/images/news/2024_APQN_Anthology.pdf

# Appendix

## List of indicators

The list includes the main indicators used in this report – the policy indicators from the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO) and the statistical indicators integrated from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

All policy indicators from HEPO are based on a systematic review of national constitutional provisions, legislation and policy documents using predefined classification criteria. The statistical indicators come from the UIS Data Browser.

Regional and income group averages presented in this report are derived either directly from the UIS Data Browser (for statistical indicators) or calculated by the authors as simple (unweighted) averages. Author-calculated averages are based on country-level data from the UIS Data Browser (for statistical indicators where aggregate values were not available) and from the Higher Education Policy Observatory (for policy indicators). The source of each indicator and the method of calculation are specified in the report and indicated again in the lists below.

Calculated averages rely on the regional and income group classifications of Higher Education Policy Observatory, following the classifications of UIS. These are available at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/pc/static/countrydocs/cp/zz_Disclaimers/Country%20classifications%20by%20regions%20and%20income%20groups_06-2025.pdf.

For calculated statistical averages, country coverage in some regions may be limited and affect representativeness. Where applicable, limitations are indicated in the notes accompanying the figures, as well as in the following lists.

## Chapter 1: Participation and completion

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| **Share of countries whose national legal framework for higher education explicitly recognizes the right to higher education** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries that explicitly mention the right to higher education in either the national constitution, the education law or the higher education law, where applicable. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing student access to higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives for the general increase of enrollment (without targeting specific population groups). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

### From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Gross enrollment ratio at ISCED 6-8, both sexes and disaggregated by sex (%)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Total enrolment in higher education at ISCED levels 6 to 8, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education. Indicator computed for the total population (both sexes) and the female population. Calculations made by authors. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Enrolment in tertiary education, ISCED 6-8 programmes, both sexes and female (number)<br>· School age population, tertiary education, both sexes and female (number) | *Year*: 2013-2023 (2011-2021 for Sub-Saharan Africa) |
| **Distribution of higher education enrollment by ISCED level (6, 7 and 8), both sexes (%)** | | |
| *Description*: Total enrolment in higher education at each ISCED level (6, 7 and 8), regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of total enrolment at ISCED levels 6 to 8 combined. Indicator computed for the total population (both sexes). Calculations made by authors. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Enrolment in tertiary education, ISCED 6, 7 and 8 programmes, both sexes (number) | *Year*: 2013-2023 (2011-2021 for Sub-Saharan Africa) |
| **Percentage of female enrolment in higher education, by ISCED level (6, 7 and 8) (%)** | | |
| *Description*: Female enrolment in higher education at each ISCED level (6, 7 and 8), regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of total enrolment at the corresponding ISCED level. Indicator computed separately for ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8. Calculations made by authors. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Enrolment in tertiary education, ISCED 6-8 programmes, both sexes and female (number) | *Year*: 2013-2023 (2011-2021 for Sub-Saharan Africa) |
| **Gross graduation ratio from 1st degree programs (ISCED 6 and 7), both sexes and disaggregated by sex (%)** | | |
| *Description*: Number of graduates from first degree tertiary programmes (at ISCED level 6 and 7) expressed as a percentage of the population of the theoretical graduation age of the most common first degree programme. Indicator for the total population (both sexes) and the female population. Aggregated data provided by UIS. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Gross graduation ratio from first degrees programme (ISCED 6 and 7) in tertiary education | *Year*: 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2022, 2023 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 2: Equity and inclusion

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of improving the employability of higher education graduates** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives for the improvement of graduate employability (e.g. increased programme relevance, skills for the job market, career services). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing student access to higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives for the general increase of enrollment (without targeting specific population groups). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing student inclusion to higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to increase enrollment for specific population group(s). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, GEM report PEER) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with national minimum admission quotas for specific population groups in higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries that have established nationally defined minimum admission quotas for specific population groups in higher education, globally and by region. Quotas refer to legally or administratively defined minimum admission shares for designated groups. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. GEM report PEER, ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Population groups covered by national minimum admission quotas in higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Population groups explicitly covered by nationally established minimum admission quotas for entry into higher education institutions. Quotas refer to legally or administratively defined reserved places or minimum shares of available seats allocated to specified groups. Classification based on national legislation and official policy documents. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. GEM report PEER, ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing gender equality among students** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – (N=132) that include explicit objectives to increase gender equality among students (e.g. reducing gender disparities in access participation or completion; addressing gender-based discrimination or violence; promoting equal representation across fields of study). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, GEM report PEER) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing gender equality for students in STEM fields** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to increase gender equality and/or support the representation of women among students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose national legal framework for higher education explicitly includes equity and inclusion among its stated purposes** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national constitution, education law and/or higher education law, where applicable, explicitly includes equity, inclusion or related principles (e.g. equal opportunity, non-discrimination, social justice) among the stated purposes of higher education. Based on a structured review of national legislation identifying mission statements and coding their main dimensions according to a predefined classification of higher education purposes. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Population groups targeted by national scholarship programmes in higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Population groups explicitly identified in national legislation or policy as eligible or prioritized beneficiaries of government-administered scholarship or grant programmes to study in national higher education institutions. Targeting may involve exclusive support for specific groups or priority allocation. Based on a structured review of national legislation and policies using a predefined set of beneficiary categories to classify targeted population groups. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. GEM Report PEE, ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

## From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Percentage of female researchers (in headcounts - HC)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Female researchers as a percentage of total researchers (measured in headcounts). The headcount (HC) of R&D personnel is defined as the total number of individuals contributing to intramural R&D, at the level of a statistical unit or at an aggregate level, during a specific reference period (usually a calendar year). That means headcount data reflect the total number of persons who are mainly or partially employed in R&D. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>• Researchers (HC) - % Female | *Year*: 2022 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 3: Governance and legislative frameworks

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| **Jurisdictional level of legislative authority over higher education systems** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Jurisdictional level at which legislative authority over higher education systems is exercised. Classified into three categories: (i) national level; (ii) sub-national level (e.g. federal states or provinces); or (iii) shared legislative authority between national and sub-national levels. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Administrative level of government with direct responsibility for higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Level of the governmental administrative unit with direct responsibility for higher education. Classified into three categories: (i) ministerial level or equivalent (Level 1); (ii) vice-ministerial level or equivalent (Level 2); or (iii) lower administrative levels (Level 3 or below). Identification based on the highest governmental unit whose official title explicitly includes higher education, tertiary education, universities or equivalent terminology. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose legislation recognizes the autonomy of higher education institutions** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation explicitly recognizes the autonomy of higher education institutions. Recognition refers to formal legal provisions affirming institutional autonomy in one or more domains (e.g. academic, administrative, financial or organizational matters).<br>This indicator captures legal recognition and does not assess the extent to which autonomy is implemented in practice. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with legislation to regulate higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries with an overarching legislative framework regulating the higher education sector. Countries are classified into three categories: (i) existence of a dedicated national higher education law; (ii) regulation of higher education within a general education law; or (iii) no identifiable overarching legislative framework regulating the higher education sector. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose legislation allows private higher education providers to operate in the system** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation permits the establishment and operation of private higher education institutions within the higher education system. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO GEM PEER, ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

### From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Percentage of enrollment in tertiary education in private institutions, both sexes (%)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Enrollment in private educational institutions at the tertiary education level (ISCED 5-8), expressed as a percentage of total enrollment (public and private) at the same level. Regional averages calculated by authors based on available data. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>• Percentage of enrollment in tertiary education in private institutions, both sexes (%).<br>Note: Regional averages are simple (unweighted) average based on available data and should be interpreted with caution as country coverage can be limited in some regions. | *Year*: 2022 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 4: External quality assurance

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| **Share of countries whose legislation mandates the establishment of one or more higher education quality assurance agencies** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation mandates the establishment of one or more agencies with responsibility for quality assurance in higher education. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc., UNESCO country profiles of States Parties to the Global Convention) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose legislation requires quality assurance agencies to establish standards for evaluating higher education institutions and/or programmes** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation requires quality assurance agencies to establish standards for the evaluation or accreditation of higher education institutions and/or programmes. This refers to legal provisions assigning to quality assurance bodies the responsibility to define evaluation or accreditation criteria, as opposed to standards determined directly by government authorities. Based on identified national legislation regulating higher education quality assurance. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose legislation recognizes the autonomy of the quality assurance agency** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation explicitly recognizes the autonomy of the higher education quality assurance agency higher education. Autonomy refers to formal legal provisions granting the agency independence in one or more domains (e.g. governance, decision-making, administrative or financial matters). Based on identified national legislation regulating higher education quality assurance. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

# Chapter 5: Financing of higher education

## From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| **Share of countries whose national legal framework for higher education requires public higher education to be tuition-free** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries whose constitution, education law and/or higher education law, where applicable, establishes that public higher education is tuition-free. Tuition-free refers to the absence of tuition or mandatory instructional fees as stipulated in the identified legislation and does not necessarily exclude registration, administrative or other non-instructional fees. This indicator captures formal legal provisions and does not assess implementation in practice | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Jurisdictional level of legislative authority over higher education systems** | | |
| *Description*: Jurisdictional level at which legislative authority over higher education systems is exercised. Classified into three categories: (i) national level; (ii) sub-national level (e.g. federal states or provinces); or (iii) shared legislative authority between national and sub-national levels. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, Eurydice, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

## From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Enrolment in tertiary education, ISCED 5-8 programmes, both sexes (number)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Number of Individuals officially registered in a tertiary education programme (ISCED 5-8), regardless of age. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Enrolment in tertiary education, all programmes, both sexes (number) | *Year*: 2023 |
| **Government expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP** | | |
| *Description*: Government expenditure on tertiary education (current and capital) expressed as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a given financial year (2022). Country data provided by UIS, regional averages calculated by authors based on available data (N=105). | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Government expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP (%).<br>Note: Regional averages are simple (unweighted) averages based on available data and should be interpreted with caution as country coverage can be limited in some regions. | *Year*: 2022 |
| **Initial government funding per tertiary student, constant PPP$** | | |
| *Description*: Total initial funding from government (central, regional, local) for tertiary education per student enrolled at that level in a given year. The results are expressed in PPP$ (constant). This indicator considers funding for public and private institutions together. Initial funding is estimated including transfers paid but excluding transfers received. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Initial government funding per tertiary student, constant PPP$ | *Year*: 2022, 2023 |
| **Initial household funding per tertiary student, constant PPP$** | | |
| *Description*: Total initial funding from households/students for tertiary education per student enrolled at that level in a given year. The results are expressed in PPP$ (constant). This indicator considers funding for public and private institutions together. Initial funding is estimated including transfers paid but excluding transfers received. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>· Initial household funding per tertiary student, constant PPP$ | *Year*: 2022, 2023 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 6: Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO):

| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing the digitalization of education** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan –that include explicit objectives to increase the digitalization of education (e.g. development of digital learning, expansion of online or remote education, integration of digital technologies in teaching and learning). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/ or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

## Chapter 7: Higher education teaching personnel

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO):

| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of strengthening faculty teaching skills** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to enhance faculty teaching skills (e.g., through initial teacher training or continuous professional development). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of improving the well-being of staff in higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to improve the well-being of staff in higher education (e.g. working conditions, mental health, work-life balance). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of improving gender equality among staff in higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to improve gender equality among staff in higher education (e.g. reducing gender disparities in recruitment, career progression or leadership; addressing gender-based discrimination or harassment). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries whose national legal framework for higher education explicitly recognizes academic freedom** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation explicitly recognizes academic freedom. Recognition refers to formal legal provisions affirming academic freedom or equivalent principles (e.g. freedom of teaching and research, academic independence). This indicator captures legal recognition and does not assess the extent to which academic freedom is implemented in practice. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

### From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Representation of women among higher education teaching personnel** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: The number of female teachers in tertiary education expressed as a percentage of the total number of teachers (male and female) at the same level in a given academic year. Aggregated averages provided by UIS. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser. - Percentage of teachers in tertiary education (ISCED 5 to 8) who are female (%) | *Year*: 2015-2024 (2015-2022 for sub-Saharan Africa; no available data for East Asia and the Pacific; 2015-2023 for income groups, 2017–2023 for low-income countries). |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 8: Inbound and outbound mobility trends

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory (HEPO)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing outbound student mobility** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to increase outbound student mobility (i.e. students from the country studying abroad). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of increasing inbound student mobility** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to increase inbound student mobility (i.e. international students coming to the country to study). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of enhancing the international visibility and reputation of higher education** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to enhance the international visibility and reputation of their higher education system and/or institutions (e.g. improving positions in international rankings, increasing attractiveness to international students and researchers). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries with a national higher education plan that includes the objective of enhancing intercultural dialogue** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries which adopted a national plan for higher education – either a sector-specific plan or a section on higher education in a multi-sectoral plan – that include explicit objectives to enhance intercultural dialogue (e.g. promoting cross-cultural exchange, international collaboration, or diversity in learning environments). | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. UNESCO IIEP Planipolis, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

## From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, both sexes (number)** | | |
| *Description*: Total number of outbound internationally mobile students from a given country enrolled in tertiary education abroad, regardless of age and sex. Internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border to study in a country different from their country of origin. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, all countries, both sexes (UIS estimate) (number) | *Year*: 2002-2023 |
| **Outbound mobility ratio, both sexes (%)** | | |
| *Description*: Number of students from a given country studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country. Aggregated averages provided by UIS. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Outbound mobility ratio, all regions, both sexes (UIS estimate) (%) | *Year*: 2003-2023 (2003-2021 for Sub-Saharan Africa) |
| **Total inbound internationally mobile students, both sexes (number)** | | |
| *Description*: Total number of inbound internationally mobile students enrolled in tertiary education in a given country, regardless of age and sex. Internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border to study in a country different from their country of origin. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total inbound internationally mobile students, both sexes (number) | *Year*: 2002-2023 |
| **Share of females among outbound internationally mobile students (%)** | | |
| *Description*: Number of female outbound internationally mobile students expressed as a percentage of the total number of outbound internationally mobile students from a given country, regardless of age. Calculated by authors based on estimated regional aggregates provided by UIS. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, all countries, female (UIS estimate) (number)<br>- Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, all countries, both sexes (UIS estimate) (number) | *Year*: 2023 |
| **Adjusted Gender Parity Index (GPIA) for outbound internationally mobile tertiary students** | | |
| *Description*: Ratio of female to male outbound internationally mobile tertiary students, adjusted to account for gender imbalances in the overall tertiary enrolment population. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, all countries, adjusted gender parity index (GPIA) | *Year*: 2023 |
| **Share of females among inbound internationally mobile students** | | |
| *Description*: Number of female inbound internationally mobile students expressed as a percentage of the total number of inbound internationally mobile students in a given country, regardless of age. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total inbound internationally mobile students, female (number)<br>- Total inbound internationally mobile students, both sexes (number) | *Year*: 2023 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 9: Recognition of foreign qualifications

### From the Higher Education Policy Observatory:

| **Share of countries that have adopted a legislation or policy to recognize foreign qualification related to higher education** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Share of countries whose national legislation or policy provides for the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications (including degrees, diplomas or other credentials obtained abroad), regardless of the foreign education system or type of programme covered. | *Data sources*: Official government websites and/or international organization repositories (e.g. ILO, etc.) | *Year*: 2024-2025 |
| **Share of countries that have ratified at least one UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications** | | |
| *Description*: Share of countries that have ratified at least one UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, including both regional conventions and the Global Convention. Among the 93 countries that have ratified at least one UNESCO recognition convention (as of March 2026), 72 are currently covered in the Observatory. | *Data sources*: UNESCO, official ratification status of the Global and regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. | *Year*: 2024-2026 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://hepo.iesalc.unesco.org/

### From the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

| **Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, both sexes (number)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Description*: Total number of outbound internationally mobile students from a given country enrolled in tertiary education abroad, regardless of age and sex. Internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border to study in a country different from their country of origin. | *Data sources*: UIS Data Browser.<br>- Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, all countries, both sexes (UIS estimate) (number) | *Year*: 2003, 2023 |

More information on indicators can be found at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org

## Chapter 10: The case for refugees and displaced person

The Higher Education Policy Observatory and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) currently do not have indicators related to refugees and displaced persons.

unesco

International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

# Higher education global trends report

## Towards inclusive, equitable and quality higher education in an internationally mobile landscape

The report draws on the data of the Higher Education Policy Observatory—which includes over 40 policy indicators and the full range of higher education statistics compiled by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)—and complementary literature. By integrating data from 146 countries through the Higher Education Policy Observatory, with in-depth policy analysis across 10 thematic areas, the report has created an evidence base that moves beyond simple statistics to reveal the deeper patterns shaping this sector. It examines the changing face of higher education, mapping policies and trends related to participation and completion, equity and inclusion, governance and legislative frameworks, external quality assurance, financing, digital transformation and AI, and higher education teaching personnel. Through a special spotlight on student mobility, it also looks at inbound and outbound mobility flows, the recognition of foreign qualifications and the case of refugees and displaced persons. The report aims to enhance awareness and understanding of higher education landscapes worldwide, inform policymaking, foster dialogue among stakeholders, and contribute to building more inclusive, resilient and forward-looking higher education systems.


info-IESALC@unesco.org

iesalc.unesco.org

@unesco_iesalc

UNESCO IESALC

@unesco_iesalc

@unesco.iesalc


4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals