WAHEN

Drawing the Global Access Map 2:

Understanding higher education inequality across the world

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Lumina FOUNDATION

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World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN)

Launched in 2024, the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) is the global organisation to support equitable access and success in higher education. Based at Ruskin College, Oxford, WAHEN is led by a board of world-leading organisations, including the World Bank, UNESCO IESALC, the Asia-Europe Foundation, The Saville Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, University of Oxford and University of California, Berkeley.

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1. Background

Throughout the world, the higher education sector is facing a new combination of challenges. Finding the investment to support expansion, along with changes in labour market and how students learn, is combining with new political movements that are questioning the value of higher education to society. Yet despite these challenges, millions of additional students are entering higher education across the world every year. But deep-rooted inequalities in who participates and completes higher education remain. These inequalities if not tackled will only exacerbate the challenges above and fuel those forces that seek to diminish the role that universities can play in the early 21st century. This report brings together the available evidence on what these inequalities look like, highlights where there is progress and outlines what needs to be done if these inequalities are to be reduced.

This report builds on the 2016 report *Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map*, which also attempted to bring together data from across the world on who participates in higher education by background characteristics.

2. Methodology

We have been able to identify more data for this report than was possible in 2016. For gender, there is data for virtually all countries/jurisdictions (referred to as 'countries' throughout this report for simplicity) in the world. For proxy measures of socioeconomic background, we have identified data from approximately 75% of countries in the world. For around 20% of these countries, we identified data from more than one source. Comparison between countries in terms of participation/attainment by socioeconomic background is very difficult and should be approached with caution. Our survey of over 50 countries drawn from every continent in the world shows that while over 90% of these countries collect data themselves, the quality of data is very variable. Moreover, how data is collected via different sources contrasts greatly.

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3. Key Takeaways

1. Data gaps and quality issues make inequality harder to track and tackle.

While more countries are collecting data on higher education participation and attainment by student characteristics than before, data gaps, inconsistencies and political instability continue to undermine global understanding and action.

Finding 1: Our global survey on data collection shows that gender (90% of countries that collect data) and proxy measures of socioeconomic background (67%) remain the characteristics about which data is most frequently collected by individual countries.

Finding 2: In over 80% of the countries participating in our global survey, data is collected at a national level annually.

Finding 3: While in around 90% of countries data is collected from higher education institutions directly, data quality remains a major challenge with inconsistent reporting, voluntary reporting and in some cases social unrest/conflict being disruptive factors.

2. Inequality in higher education participation and attainment remains pervasive.

Available evidence shows that inequalities in higher education attainment and participation are still pervasive across the world, making this a truly global challenge no system has yet solved. Gender gaps persist and they cut both ways, and socioeconomic background remains a major driver of inequality.

Finding 4: Higher education participation data by gender were identified in 202 out of 203 countries. Female students are under-represented in 51 countries (25% of countries with data) and male students are under-represented in 139 countries (69% of countries with data).

Finding 5: Higher education attainment data by gender were identified in 195 out of 203 countries. Female students are under-represented in 93 countries (48% of countries with data) and male students are under-represented in 91 countries (47% of countries with data).

Finding 6: Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment by socioeconomic background exist in all countries where we could find robust data (150 for participation, 130 for attainment).

Finding 7: The percentage of those from higher socioeconomic groups participating in higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups for the majority of countries where we have participation data (132 out of 150 countries).

Finding 8: For higher education attainment, the percentage of those from higher socioeconomic groups attaining higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups for most countries as well (109 out of 130 countries).

3. Inequality isn't just about money – culture and policy matter too.

Both gender and socioeconomic inequalities show only a moderate link with national income, meaning wealth alone does not guarantee fairness.

Finding 9: Participation and attainment in higher education by women is only moderately related to the national income of a country (r = around 0.5), suggesting that cultural as well as economic factors shape inequality.

Finding 10: Inequality in participation and attainment in higher education by socioeconomic background is also only moderately related to the national income of a country (r = around 0.5), suggesting that here as well, cultural as well as economic factors shape inequality.

4. Progress is uneven – gains are real but fragile.

It is encouraging that in most countries gender parity has improved over time, and inequality in higher education participation and attainment has decreased. However, there are also a significant number of countries in the world where gender parity has worsened, and socioeconomic inequalities remain large in the majority of countries.

Finding 11: In terms of higher education participation, out of the 197 countries where data were available for at least two points in time, 92 have seen gender parity improve, in 17 there has been no change and in 88 gender parity has worsened.

Finding 12: With higher education attainment, of the 183 countries where we could find data, again the majority (98) had seen gender parity improved, while 72 had seen a decline and 13 remained constant.

Finding 13: In terms of higher education participation by socioeconomic background, of the 110 countries where we could find comparative data over time, 57 have made progress, 26 saw no change and in 27 countries inequality has worsened.

Finding 14: For higher education attainment by socioeconomic background, of the 96 countries where we could find comparative data over time, 50 have made progress, 18 saw no change and in 28 countries inequality has worsened.

5. Global co-operation is urgently needed.

The case for concerted, systematic action to address gender disparities and to increase participation and attainment of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other characteristics associated with under-representation or under-achievement remains strong.

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4. Recommendations

1 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) should review the wording of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.3, '*By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*', to consider whether it could be widened to include socioeconomic background as well as gender.

2 Utilising the amount of data identified in the report, individual governments should construct targets for access and/or attainment by socioeconomic background.

3 As the European Commission is doing, regional agencies across the world should convene constituent countries to share knowledge/data on inequalities in higher education participation and attainment, improve strategy and action, and push forward the formation of targets at individual country level.

4 Further research should be undertaken to understand why some countries have made progress in reducing inequalities in participation and attainment, identifying what can be learnt and scaled up globally.

5 University representative organisations across the world should increase their focus on addressing inequalities in access and attainment through their advocacy, knowledge sharing, research and work with members.

6 International organisations working on the collection of data on access/participation by background characteristics should share knowledge and explore how to develop in partnership with other organisations a global higher education access data depository.

7 The World Access to Higher Education Network should lead on the development of international exchange of practice on what works in extending access and participation via a set of global communities launching in 2026.

1 Introduction

The number of higher education students across the world is growing rapidly. From 2020 to 2025, it increased by over 20 million[1]. However, inequalities in participation and attainment in higher education remain deep-rooted. This report will bring together the available evidence to examine what these inequalities look like now, where progress is being made and where the greatest challenges remain. It will draw upon a range of secondary data collected by different national and international agencies as well as a survey of over 50 different countries.

This report comes at a critical time for work to extend access and success in higher education for those from all backgrounds. The economic and structural barriers that prevent students from progressing to higher education have been added to by a questioning of the principle of access. An increasing number of governments are acting to limit participation by certain groups, change how or what they learn or reframe policies related to equity and diversity. This reframing poses new challenges for those who believe that extending access to higher education for those from all backgrounds should be a priority for policymakers and universities. This is coupled with university systems across the world grappling with economic pressures, as governments seek to increase participation but do so with limits on what they can invest. In this context, it is vital that we understand the nature of higher education participation and how inequality manifests itself on the global scale. This evidence provides the basis for policy, practice and advocacy that can navigate this new environment for access both within and across countries.

The interconnectedness of politics, economics and higher education makes global collaboration in the face of evolving challenges facing widening access to higher education essential. This report is produced by the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) and supported by The Lumina Foundation in the United States (US).

The World Access to Higher Education Network was launched in 2024. WAHEN is the global organisation to support equitable access and success in higher education. It provides members opportunities to share their practice, to collaborate with each other and to effect change within their own countries. WAHEN prioritises global collaboration and the value it can bring to national work to extend access and participation in higher education. Based at Ruskin College, Oxford, WAHEN is led by a board of world-leading organisations, including the World Bank, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), the Asia-Europe Foundation, The Saville Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, University of Oxford and University of California, Berkeley. Ruskin College, Oxford has been providing routes into higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds since the 19th century, and its long-standing history of championing educational opportunity provides a strong foundation for WAHEN's global work[2].

The Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in the US that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. With an endowment of about US$1.5 billion, Lumina is the largest philanthropy in the US focused solely on increasing the proportion of Americans with learning beyond high school. It is working toward a goal that by 2040, 75% of adults in the US labour force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity. Working with various governmental, nonprofit and private-sector organisations, Lumina relies on communications outreach, meetings and events that engage and mobilise people, state and federal policy outreach, investments in proven and promising practices, and targeted efforts measuring and evaluating progress to bring about change.

1. UNESCO, *Higher education: figures at a glance*, 2025, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394112
2. For more information, please visit https://worldaccesshe.com/.

2 Who goes to higher education and why does it matter?

2.1 Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment are common

This report builds on a wealth of evidence showing the extent of inequalities in access and success in higher education. At the national level, the expansion in higher education over the last two decades has benefitted richer countries. The highest increase in participation rates has been in upper-middle-income countries, while the lowest has been in low-income countries. Between 2000 and 2018, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in upper-middle-income countries increased by more than 200%[3].

This report focuses on how the inequalities manifest themselves in individual countries. In its approach to understanding these inequalities this builds on the *Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map* study produced by Atherton et al. in 2016[4]. The report found that data on access by background characteristics – socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity etc. – is far from uniformly available; data is produced but not disseminated; comparisons between countries come with major caveats; and common approaches across countries are difficult. Accepting these caveats, this report showed that in all countries in the world where evidence could be found (over 90%) there were inequalities in participation in higher education by proxy measure of socioeconomic background and/or gender, ethnicity, religious background or rurality. However, this report highlighted some of the limitations where accumulating data on higher education participation from different countries is concerned.

Since the 2016 *Drawing the Global Access Map* report was published, major research drawing on a range of sources has continued to show the extent of inequality in higher education participation and attainment. Buckner's (2020) examination of 300 surveys from 122 countries showed that those from the lowest wealth quintiles are nearly five times less likely to complete higher education than those from the highest wealth quintiles[5]. The report also goes on to find that inequalities are at their most extreme in lower-income countries and that there has been progress in terms of reduction in inequality in most regions of the world over recent decades. Such inequalities can be seen across continents. As Paz (2017) states looking at data on Latin America, while the poorest 50% of the population (B50) represented only around 16% of higher education students circa 2000, this group comprised approximately 25% of higher education students circa 2012[6]. In identifying progress over time though, Paz echoed the work of Buckner who also stated in her work that inequalities were reducing in participation and attainment by proxy measures of socioeconomic background.

3. UNESCO and UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), *Towards universal access to higher education: international trends*, November 16, 2020, https://globaleducationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DOC-11-Towards-universal-access-to-higher-education-international-trends.pdf
4. Graeme Atherton et al., *Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map*, Pearson, 2016, https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/global/Files/about-pearson/innovation/Charting-Equity_WEB.pdf
5. Elizabeth Buckner, *The non-state tertiary sector and inequalities in tertiary access and completion*, UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020, https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/fellowship
6. Francisco Haimovich Paz, 'Equity, Quality and Variety in Higher Education,' in *At a Crossroads: Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. M.M. Ferreyra, C. Avitabile, J.B. Álvarez, F.H. Paz, and S. Urzúa (The World Bank, 2017), 77.

2.2 Higher education still matters

While it appears clear that higher education is universally unequal, there is the question of how big an issue this is. Part of the questioning of the value of work to address inequality in higher education participation stems from doubts regarding the continued value of tertiary level qualifications. Extending access remains one of the United Nations (UN)'s Global Goals:

The UN's Global Goal Target 4.3 states that '*By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*'[7].

But while the UN may see access for those from all backgrounds as a priority, it is vital that there is evidence to back this proposition up. Before examining in detail the findings from this study, it is important to emphasise the case for extending access to higher education.

Graduate unemployment and under-employment are higher than one would want to see in many countries. In 2024, the average employment rate for recent graduates aged 20-34 in the European Union (UN) was 82.3%. But the employment rate ranged from 69.6% in Italy to 91.6% in the Netherlands[8]. In Asia, where higher education participation has increased significantly in recent years, youth unemployment is a major challenge. India's youth unemployment rate in 2022 was nine times higher for graduates than for those who could not even read or write[9]. In response to the high levels of youth unemployment and its impact on graduates, the Ministry of Education in China launched a nationwide '100-day sprint' campaign to boost graduate employment. The campaign includes employment subsidies, job-seeking allowances and micro-credential programmes[10].

However, while it certainly appears that there is evidence of labour markets not being unable to absorb graduates at the rate the higher education system is producing them, the weight of evidence still shows that the returns to higher education are significant.

Full-time tertiary-educated workers in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries earn on average almost twice as much as those with below upper secondary attainment[11]. Across OECD countries, individuals typically gain more from achieving tertiary education than they invest in it, with the private net financial return for obtaining tertiary education being US$364,200 for men and US$300,900 for women[12]. The Comparable Returns to Education database produced by the World Bank draws from household and labour force surveys from 142 countries. It shows that returns to tertiary education have increased considerably, from 13% in the 1980s to more than 17% in the early part of the 21st century[13].

Technology is driving rapid, revolving changes to employment patterns across the world. The *Future of Jobs Report 2025* brings together the perspective of over 1,000 leading global employers. It shows that there will be a continued demand for those with intermediary skills, but the job categories showing the greatest growth will require knowledge-related skills of the kind associated with higher education participation[14]. Those with higher education experience usually find it easier to reskill, having access to wider learning opportunities. The *Future of Jobs* report also argues that 'if the world's workforce was made up of 100 people, 59 would need training by 2030.' The inequalities in higher education participation described in this report lock whole communities not just out of new higher-earning jobs that are increasing in number, but also from the ability to keep pace with what existing jobs require.

The benefits of extending access to higher education exist at the country-wide as well as individual level. The *Global Future of Work Report, Series 2: Empowering Latin America through technology and talent transformation* report produced by FII Institute draws on survey of more than 1,200 business executives, and a separate survey of about 800 young people in six Latin American countries as well as in Canada and the US. It identifies one of the major drivers of the economic gap between Latin America and North America as the latter's higher level of participation in tertiary education[15].

The returns to higher education are not just to the individual. The OECD has been focusing for some time on the wider benefits of education. It estimates that across its member nations, on average the public net financial returns for attaining tertiary education are about US$127,000 for a man and US$60,600 for a woman[16]. The wider benefits of higher education participation for individuals and society also extend to health. Recent research from Balaj et al. (2024) looking at over 600 studies from 59 countries found that adult mortality went down by 2% for every year spent in full-time education[17].

The case for widening access to higher education and ensuring that those who enter from all backgrounds achieve their potential remains overwhelmingly strong. It implies that the need to understand who is missing out across the world from the benefits of higher education remains equally strong.

7. UN, 'Goal 4,' effective September 1, 2025, https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4#targets_and_indicators
8. Eurostat, 'Employment rates of recent graduates,' effective July 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_rates_of_recent_graduates
9. International Labour Organization, *India Employment Report 2024: Youth employment, education and skills*, March 29, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/publications/india-employment-report-2024-youth-employment-education-and-skills
10. *China Daily*, 'Ministry launches job campaign for 2025 college graduates,' June 6, 2025, https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/ecnszw/hesawyz5555858.shtml
11. OECD, 'Earnings by educational attainment,' effective September 5, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/earnings-by-educational-attainment.html
12. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2025*, September 9, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en.html
13. Claudio E. Montenegro and Harry Anthony Patrinos, 'A data set of comparable estimates of the private rate of return to schooling in the world, 1970–2014', *International Journal of Manpower* 44, no. 6 (2023):1248-68, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-03-2021-0184
14. World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report 2025: Insight Report*, January 7, 2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/
15. FII Institute, *Global Future of World Report Series 2: Empowering Latin America through Technology and Talent Transformation*, February 2025, https://fii-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/MCK252001-LatAm-Future-of-Work-CMYK_V19.pdf
16. OECD, 'Public returns from education,' effective September 5, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/public-returns-from-education.html
17. Mirza Balaj et al., 'Effects of education on adult mortality: a global systematic review and meta-analysis,' *The Lancet* 9, issue: 3 (2024): E155-E165, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00306-7

3 Methodology

The study consisted of two parts: a global survey of experts on higher education data collection around the world and an examination of existing data on higher education participation and attainment. For the purpose of this study, we defined higher education as 'all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities', as per UNESCO's definition[18].

3.1 Global survey

The global survey of experts was administered to country experts around the world between June and August 2025 online. Respondents included representatives from government ministries, universities and university-related organisations.

3.2 Examination of existing data

A scoping of the data collected on higher education access and success around the world was conducted between July and September 2025. Data has been drawn from cross-national databases of various international organisations, including the World Bank, UNESCO, OECD, the Center of Distributive, Labor and Social Studies (CEDLAS), Eurostat and the Eurostudent project. Data has also been drawn from individual countries' own administrative collection systems. Appendix 1 describes the different cross-national databases and the individual country administrative collection systems.

To show the levels of inequality in higher education access and success worldwide, a consistent, comparable and interpretable measure of relative equity is needed, as absolute higher education participation and attainment rates can be influenced by factors such as differences in population size, data collection methods, the age ranges covered and definitions used by different sources. To address this, we use ratios – such as female-to-male or low-income-to-high-income student ratios – to depict inequality. This approach standardises the comparison across datasets and focuses on disparities between disadvantaged and privileged groups.

3.3 Measuring gender inequality in participation and attainment

The World Bank's data on the Gender Parity Index (GPI) covers most of the countries in our list. For the remaining countries, female and male participation data were obtained from the World Bank, UNESCO or individual country sources, and the GPI was calculated by dividing the female value by the male value. The World Bank does not provide GPI data for higher education attainment. Hence, the research team similarly calculated the GPI for attainment using data on higher education attainment of females and males obtained from the World Bank Open Data hub, UNESCO and individual country sources.

This study follows UNESCO's definition of gender parity, considering a value between 0.97 and 1.03 to indicate parity between genders[19]. A GPI below 0.97 suggests more male students/graduates than females and a GPI above 1.03 suggests more female students/graduates than males.

3.4 Measuring socioeconomic inequality in participation and attainment

No readily available and standardised index such as GPI exists to capture disparities in higher education participation/attainment between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds across countries. This study hence used a Socioeconomic Background (SEB) Equality Index, calculated by dividing the percentages for students from the lowest SEB group by those for students from the highest SEB group. For instance, if 30% of students from the lowest SEB group and 60% of students from the highest SEB group participate in higher education, the SEB Equality Index would be 0.5. A higher value for the SEB Equality Index between 0 and 1 would suggest less inequality for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and a lower value more inequality. We again consider a SEB Equality Index value between 0.97 and 1.03 to indicate parity between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.5 Measuring progress and decline

The report also tries to capture the level of progress over time with regard to inequalities in participation and attainment by background characteristics. To assess progress, we looked to compare data points ten years apart for each country. Where a full ten-year span was not available, we used the closest possible timeframe. Tracking progress, however, remains challenging in many cases, particularly for our socioeconomic status analysis. In some instances, systematic collection of data related to students' socioeconomic background only began in recent years and currently covers just a small number of years. In others, the available data are considerably outdated.

Comparisons therefore have to be made with caution. For within-country comparisons over time, we only relied on data from the same database to ensure consistency. Between-country comparisons should also be interpreted carefully.

18. UNESCO, *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education, adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education: Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century, Vision and Action*, October 9, 1998, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141952
19. UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 'TVETipedia Glossary: Gender parity index (GPI)', effective September 10, 2025, https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary/lang=e/show=term/term=Gender+parity+index

4 What characteristics shape higher education participation?

Inequality is both a global and local phenomenon. It is visible all over the world, inside and outside education, but experienced differently by town, city, country and continent. It is the product of the interplay of past and present; economic and social history combining with the policies of governments today and the economies they manage. The local nature of inequality means that the data related to it is collected differently by country. Where higher education participation is concerned, these differ in nature, combined with contrasting capabilities and resources to collect data systematically. The result is a hugely variable global picture in data collection. It does appear though that data collection is increasing. Research undertaken for the Asia-Europe Foundation in 2021 looking at equity policies in 47 European and Asian countries found that less than a third were collecting data on who participated or completed higher education by equity priority group[20]. Our survey and the global scoping of data attempted in this report suggest that over recent years more data is being collected.

For this study we received responses to our survey looking at what and how data was collected from 55 countries. Appendix 2 shows the countries from which we received survey responses. They are drawn from across all continents in the world, with 45% from the Global South and countries with a range of income levels – from the US at one end to Laos at the other.

4.1 The focus of data collection

Table 1 below shows the frequency of data collection by the characteristics of learners across responding countries.

Table 1: Data collection by individual characteristics

Characteristics	Participation data (No. of countries)	Attainment data (No. of countries)
Gender	47	45
Socioeconomic background	35	29
Disability	34	29
Learners from rural backgrounds	29	25
Older or mature learners	29	23
Parental background	27	21
Ethnicity	26	25
First in family to go on to higher education	23	16
People who speak a particular language	23	14
Other groups under-represented in higher education	19	16
People with refugee status	18	11
Indigenous groups	13	14
Religion	11	7

20. Graeme Atherton, *ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education Study 2021*, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), 2021, https://asef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/211029_ASEM-Equity-Policy-Report-V2.pdf

To an extent, the results in Table 1 echo the findings from the 2016 *Drawing the Global Access Map* study. Gender and socioeconomic backgrounds are the characteristics that are collected most commonly by individual countries. Socioeconomic background features highly in its own right, but parental education and first in the family to go to higher education are also collected quite commonly. The latter two measures have been shown to correlate with socioeconomic background. The prominence of these measures indicates the importance of socioeconomic background either captured specifically or via proxies in understanding higher education inequality. Capturing socioeconomic background is not straightforward though, even in countries where extending access to higher education is a priority.

As the respondent from Croatia states: ***'Most administrative data related to the social and economic background of students and staff in terms of their participation is collected, but not analysed or published publicly. We do not have individual tracking and cannot connect graduation to enrolment data. As the Ministry of Education, we are now building an information system that will provide this data by using HEI (higher education institution) administrative data – it should be complete and data available by the end of 2026.'***

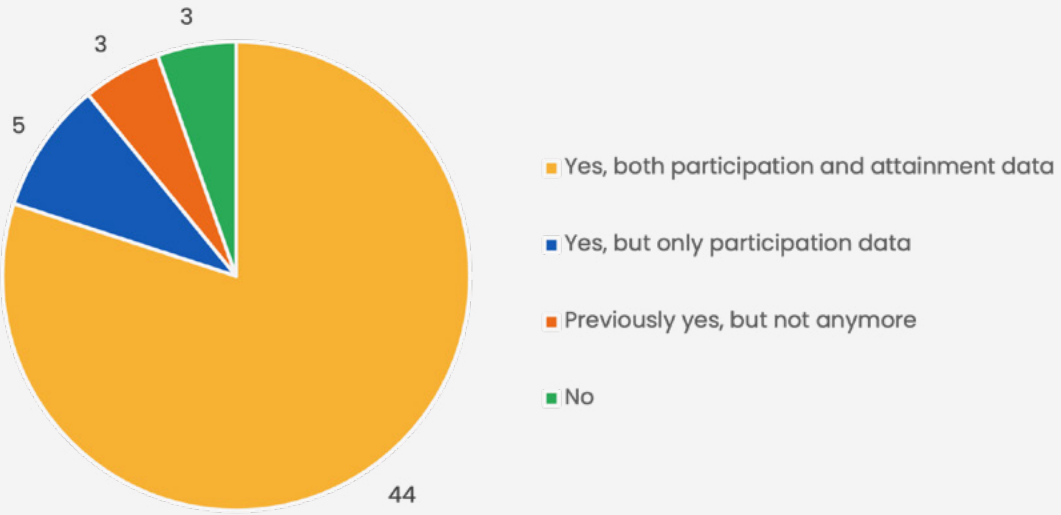
Extending beyond socioeconomic background is also a challenge: ***'It is difficult to capture the full complexity of social background beyond simple measures like income or parental education.'*** *Italy*

A notable feature is the number of countries that state they are collecting information on higher education participation and attainment of refugee students. This is still a minority of countries but hopefully one that will grow. Recent work has been published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) bringing together information on refugee participation in higher education as part of their 15 by 30 campaign[21]. This is a global initiative aiming to increase refugee youth enrolment in higher education by 15% by the year 2030. The initiative supports this target through various means, including scholarships, guidance, fee waivers and educational pathways. The report surveyed nearly 300 higher education institutions across the world, seeking information on policies, enrolments and scholarship opportunities for refugee students. Data collection is an issue though. As the report states: ***'It is crucial for institutions to both collect and report on refugee access to higher education. However, many institutions face considerable challenges in this area. The most commonly cited barriers in collecting data about refugee students included concerns around personally identifiable data or student privacy concerns (47%) and a lack of capacity to incorporate the identification of refugee/asylum seeker students into existing data collection mechanisms (47%).'***

4.2 Collection and dissemination of data

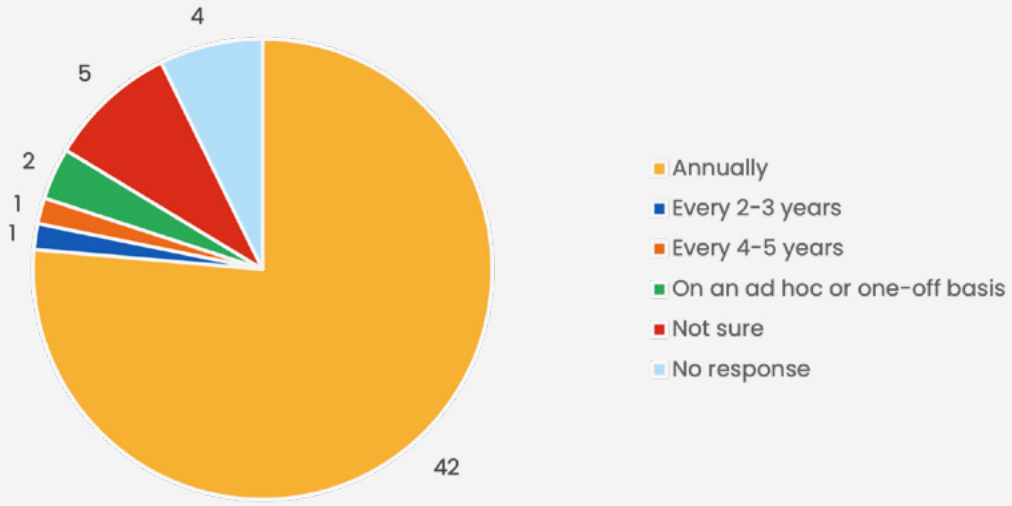
As well as looking at characteristics, the survey examined how and when data is collected. Regular and consistent collection and dissemination of data provides a way of pushing policymakers and institutions to improve performance. As Diagram 1 below shows, 44 of the 55 countries collect data on participation and attainment in higher education. Diagram 2 shows that the vast majority – 42 counties – collect this data annually.

Diagram 1: Is data on participation and attainment in higher education collected at national level?



21. UNHCR, *Understanding Opportunity: Exploring Higher Education Access for Refugees*, July 2025, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/cms-academic/sites/default/files/2025-07/Understanding%20Opportunity%20-%20Exploring%20Higher%20Education%20Access%20for%20Refugees.pdf

Diagram 2: How frequently is data on participation and attainment in higher education collected?



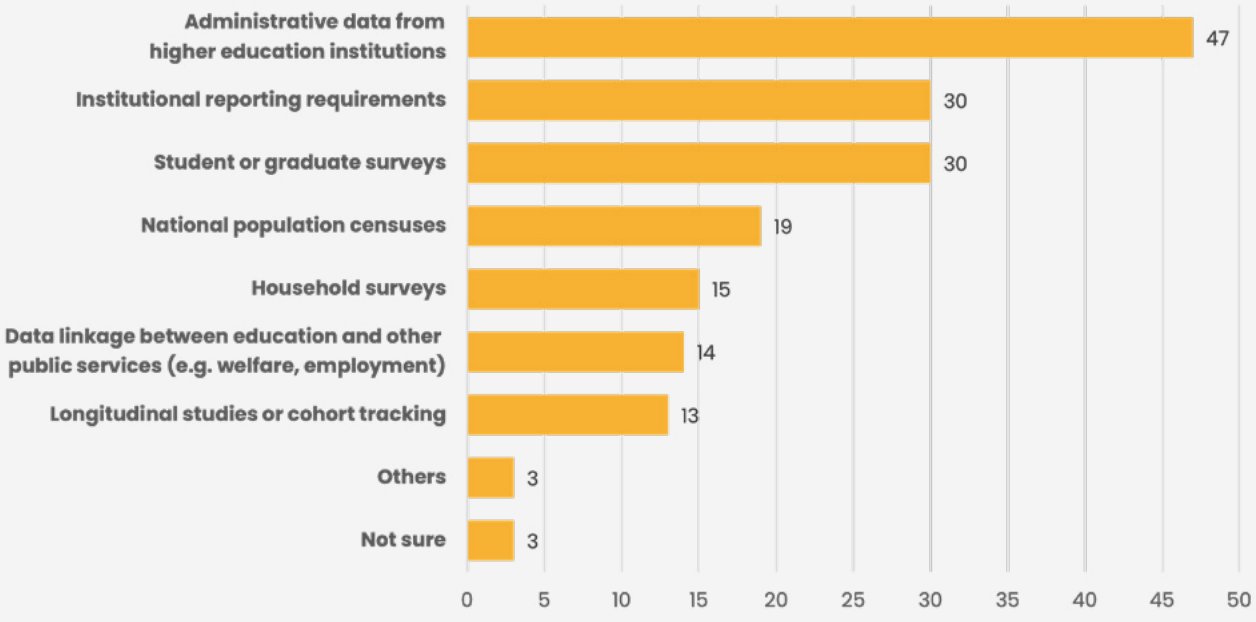
However, while this evidence is encouraging, there are still issues at the individual country level in terms of inconsistencies in the timing of collection, in particular in countries in the Global South. As the respondent from South Africa states: ***'Audited data is only available after 2 years of collection (2-year lag).'***

Uncertainty regarding when data is collected can undermine its effectiveness as a tool to drive change. ***'There is a need for more up-to-date information to facilitate decision making.'*** *Ecuador*

4.3 How is data collected?

As with its frequency, how data is collected is not uniform internationally. For most countries it is collected via administrative channels, for example as part of the higher education application process from students, or in data returns that universities submit to governments or relevant national agencies. Alternatively or additionally, collection via household or student surveys are the other most common collection methods. Diagram 3 below shows how data is collected by countries who participated in our survey.

Diagram 3: What methods are used to collect data on higher education participation and attainment?



The method of collection however can also pose challenges. Several respondents pointed to issues with the mechanisms by which universities and others forward and collect data.

'Gaps in digital infrastructure and trained personnel, as well as limited transparency in publication, hinder effective monitoring of participation and attainment at the national level.' Pakistan

'Data is collected using Excel templates. These templates are completed by the higher education institutions (HEIs) based on administrative data. Some HEIs do not follow coding instructions and quite often there are delays in sending the completed Excel files to the Ministry.' Malta

'There is a lack of standardisation and data integration among institutions, with much data also being self-reported and voluntary'. Brazil

The source of the problems in data collection is most often related to capacity or resource, but also are cultural. As the respondent from the Netherlands points out, there are ***'concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality of personal information and possible stigmatisation of population groups.'***

Finally, there were several countries who pointed to the impact of war and regime change on how data could be collected or not.

'Political instability and conflict, especially since 2021, have disrupted data collection systems and reduced institutional capacity. Lack of centralised and updated data systems mean data is often fragmented, outdated, or unavailable at the national level. Gender-based restrictions, particularly under Taliban rule, have made it impossible to collect or publish data on women's participation and attainment.' Afghanistan

'The 2021 military coup and ongoing conflict have severely disrupted the education system, leading to prolonged school closures, mass teacher suspensions, and a significant number of out-of-school children and internally displaced people (IDPs). This makes traditional data collection difficult, especially in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas, necessitating alternative methods like phone surveys.' Myanmar

'Due to the full-scale Russian invasion, millions of people have been internally displaced or have fled abroad, significantly disrupting education pathways and institutional record-keeping. Many universities have relocated or operate in hybrid/remote modes, which further complicates consistent data collection. As a result, comprehensive and reliable data disaggregated by social background, such as income level, parental education, or region of origin, is often incomplete or unavailable.' Ukraine

At the individual country level, efforts are being made across the world to collect data on the characteristics of higher education students. The next section will show the progress made since the first *Drawing the Global Access Map* study in 2016 in terms of survey coverage. However, more detailed understanding of the quality of the data collection landscape at individual country level would be really beneficial. The findings from the survey outlined above illustrate some of the limitations respondent countries faced in collecting data. These limitations will not be easy to overcome, given that they will take additional resources and/or changes to how data is viewed in different systems. But the range of respondents to the survey – majority of whom are collecting some form of data – drawn as they are from all continents and countries at a range of income levels, shows that data collection is possible across system types.

5 Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment by gender

The extent of inequality in access and success in higher education globally is the focus of this chapter. The centrepiece of the 2016 *Drawing the Global Access Map* study was the actual map, which showed that evidence of inequality exists in all countries in the world where we could find data (over 90%). This map differentiated countries in terms of their inequality by proxy measure of socioeconomic background, gender and other data which could include one or more of 11 dimensions of one's background, including rurality and ethnicity etc.

The work for this report has surfaced significantly more data than the report nine years ago. This allows us to produce maps focusing entirely on gender and on socioeconomic background/proxy measures of socioeconomic background separately, as well as to differentiate between participation and attainment. To note, going forward the report will refer just to socioeconomic background, which will encompass proxy measures such as parental education and first in the family to go to higher education as well.

The rest of the report concentrates on gender and socioeconomic background because these are common differences in individual characteristics and where most of the data is available. The data included in this report represent the best available information identified through our scoping processes. There may be more data available particularly with regard to socioeconomic background, and one of the tasks going forward for WAHEN is to develop the frameworks that allow this data to be shared.

In terms of interpretation, the presentation of data, the contrasting interpretations of socioeconomic background, together with the differing dates when the most recent data was produced mean that comparing countries should be done with real caution. The maps and tables produced in the following sections try to show an overall picture. The sections on progress below look at progress in a country's own terms using data available for that country. The aim should not be to compare the progress of an individual country against another country, as comparable measures that would enable this to happen in a robust way remain limited.

5.1 Inequalities in participation by gender - the global access map

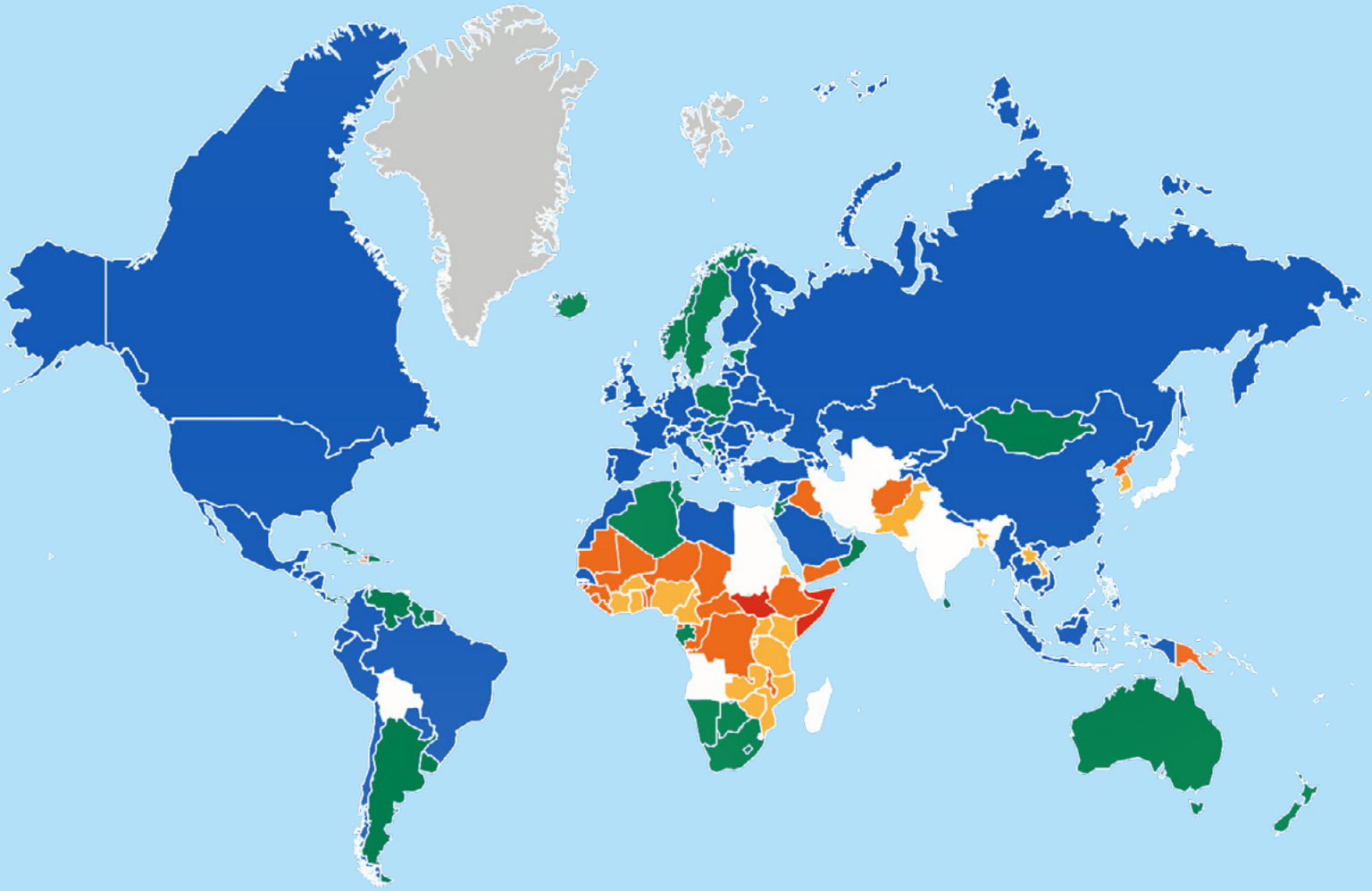
The first map presented below looks at higher education participation by gender. The data is mostly taken from the World Bank Open Data hub. It highlights some distinct differences across the world where higher education participation is concerned. The diagram shows the value of the gender parity index (GPI) for individual countries across the world. As aforementioned, a value of 0.97 to 1.03 shows that the share of female and male students participating in higher education is equal, with a value of less than 0.97 indicating greater male than female participation and a value greater than 1.03 showing more female than male participation.

The first finding that is clear from Map 1 is that in most countries in the world there are more female than male students participating in higher education.

The countries where female students are most under-represented are in the main from Sub-Saharan Africa. Notable exceptions to this trend are Iraq, North Korea and Afghanistan. Data on individual countries is provided in Appendix 3. The spread in differences in higher education participation across the world by gender is also notable here. In only 12 countries is there an equal distribution of female and male students. This is a mixed group of countries with some drawn from the MENA region including Iran and Egypt, but also India as well as Sudan and Angola from Africa.

Countries with the highest proportion of female students are drawn from across the world, including Europe (in particular the United Kingdom) and the Middle East with Qatar and Palestine. Of the 20 countries with the highest proportion of female students half are from South America and the Caribbean. This represents most Caribbean countries.

MAP 1:
Higher education participation by gender



High under-representation of female	0 to 0.36
Moderate under-representation of female	0.37 to 0.66
Slight under-representation of female	0.67 to 0.96
Equal	0.97 to 1.03
Slight under-representation of male	1.04 to 1.32
Moderate under-representation of male	1.33 to 1.52
High under-representation of male	> =1.53
No data	-

Inequality exists in 190 out of 202 countries with data.

Female students are under-represented in 51 countries (25% of countries with data) while male students are under-represented in 139 countries (69% of countries with data).

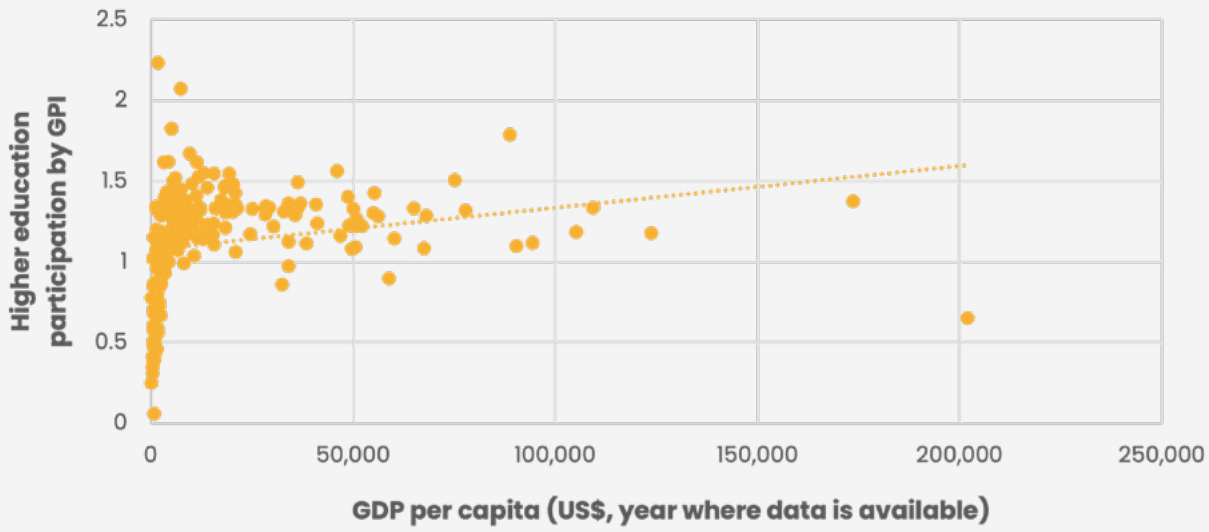
5.2 Participation in higher education by gender and national income

In this section we examine the relationship between higher education participation, gender and national income. As argued in section 4, inequality in higher education is framed by broader inequalities within particular countries. Given this, it seems logical to assess the relationship between different dimensions of inequality in access and participation and national income.

Diagram 4 looks at the relationship between national income, measured via Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita for individual countries[22], and the GPI values for each country. The higher the value of the GPI the greater the relative representation of female students.

Diagram 4 shows a moderate correlation between the GPI and per capita GDP of 0.56891. This suggests that as countries have a higher per capita GDP the representation of female students increases. But it also shows a range of countries with relatively low GDP per capita but quite contrasting values for their GPI. This is consistent with the examples given above, where there is a group of sub-Saharan countries with low GDP per capita where female students are under-represented, but also a group of countries from the Caribbean for instance where GDP per capita is also low but as is the representation of male students. This illustrates that when understanding higher education participation across the world by gender, cultural factors play a large role as well as economic ones.

Diagram 4: Higher education participation by GPI and GDP per capita



5.3 Inequalities in attainment by gender – the global access map

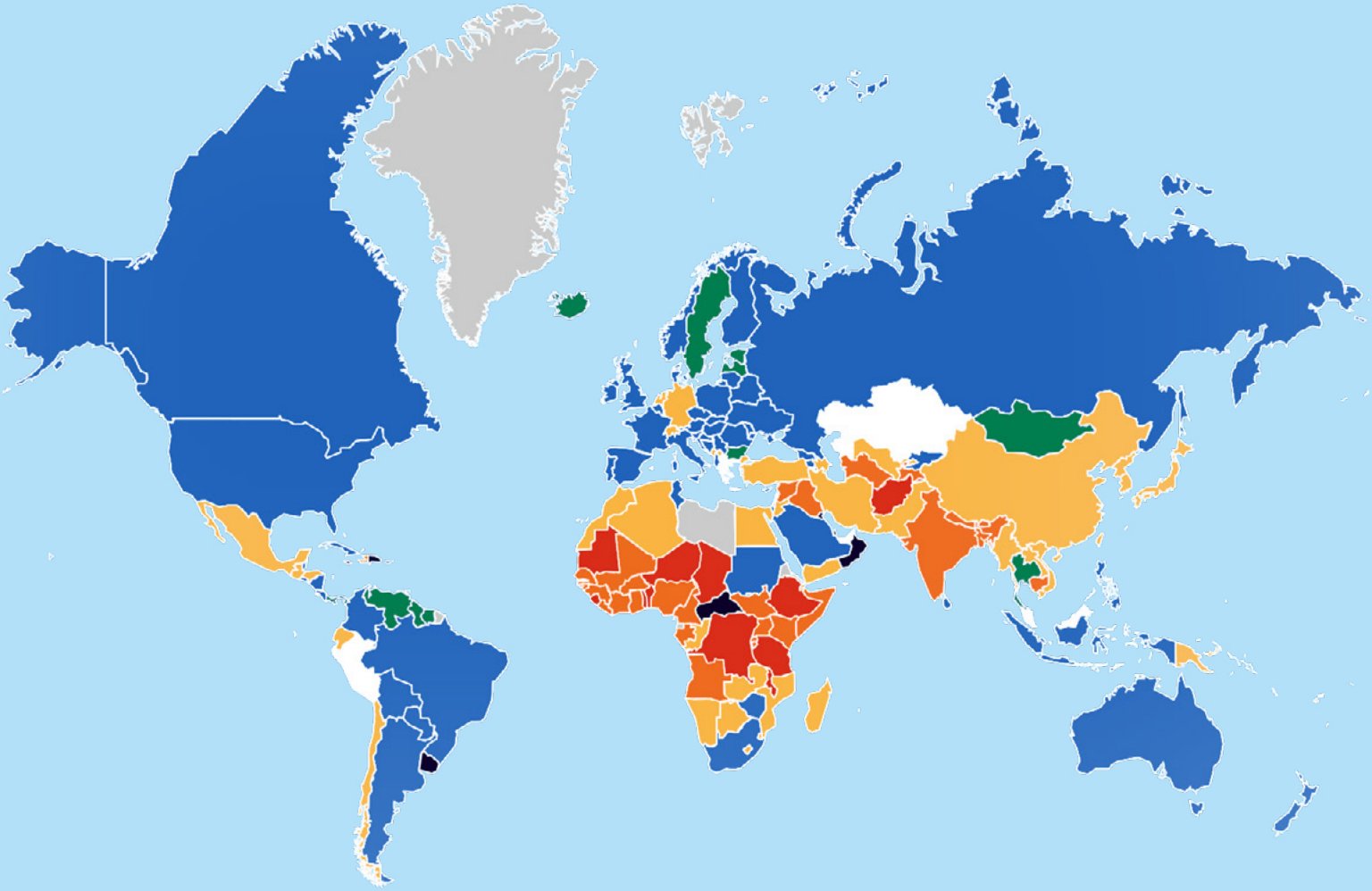
The data above may show that across most countries in the world, more women than men participate in higher education. But that does not mean issues regarding female participation do not exist. Female students remain under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. Data from the mid-2010s shows that only around 30% of female students enrolled in higher education across the world choose STEM-related fields of study[23]. Female students' enrolment is particularly low in Information and Communications Technology (3%), Natural Science, Mathematics and Statistics (5%) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (8%); the highest is in Health and Welfare (15%) studies. There is also considerable variation between countries here.

The concern regarding the relationship between STEM subjects and female participation relates particularly to women and careers in science. The majority of those in science careers are men[24]. These imbalances illustrate the need to look at data not just on participation but also higher education attainment. Higher education attainment refers to the successful completion of programmes classified within the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Levels 5 to 8[25].

Map 2 below shows that when we look at higher education attainment by gender, differences between male and female attainment across countries contrast significantly with the differences in Map 1.

22. Data mostly drawn from the World Bank Open Data hub, via https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD
23. UNESCO, *Cracking the code: Girls' and women's education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)*, 2017, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000253479
24. European Commission, 'Eurostat data on women in science and technology,' June 6, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/rtd/items/713443/en
25. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 2011*, 2012, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219109

MAP 2:
Higher education attainment by gender



High under-representation of female	0 to 0.36
Moderate under-representation of female	0.37 to 0.66
Slight under-representation of female	0.67 to 0.96
Equal	0.97 to 1.03
Slight under-representation of male	1.04 to 1.32
Moderate under-representation of male	1.33 to 1.52
High under-representation of male	> =1.53
No data	-

Inequality exists in 184 out of 195 countries with data.

Female students are under-represented in 93 countries (48% of countries with data) while male students are under-represented in 91 countries (47% of countries with data).

In terms of the countries where females are under-represented, this has shifted from the case with higher education participation data where most countries had an under-representation of male students, to a case where a slight majority of countries have more males completing higher education than female. The countries where attainment for female students is the lowest are again in the main sub-Saharan African countries. However, countries where more females than males participated are also now ones where more males than females attain. These countries include more lower-income countries from Asia and Africa but they also include Germany. Only 11 countries have parity in gender attainment and again they are a mixed group. They include Greece and Luxemburg from Europe alongside Peru, the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia. The countries where there is the highest percentage of female students who have completed tertiary education are again drawn from the Caribbean but also include several MENA countries such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.

5.4 Attainment in higher education by gender and national income

As Diagram 5 below shows, the relationship between GDP per capita and attainment amongst women is a slightly stronger one than that between GDP per capita and higher education participation of female students.

Diagram 5: Higher education attainment by GPI and GDP per capita

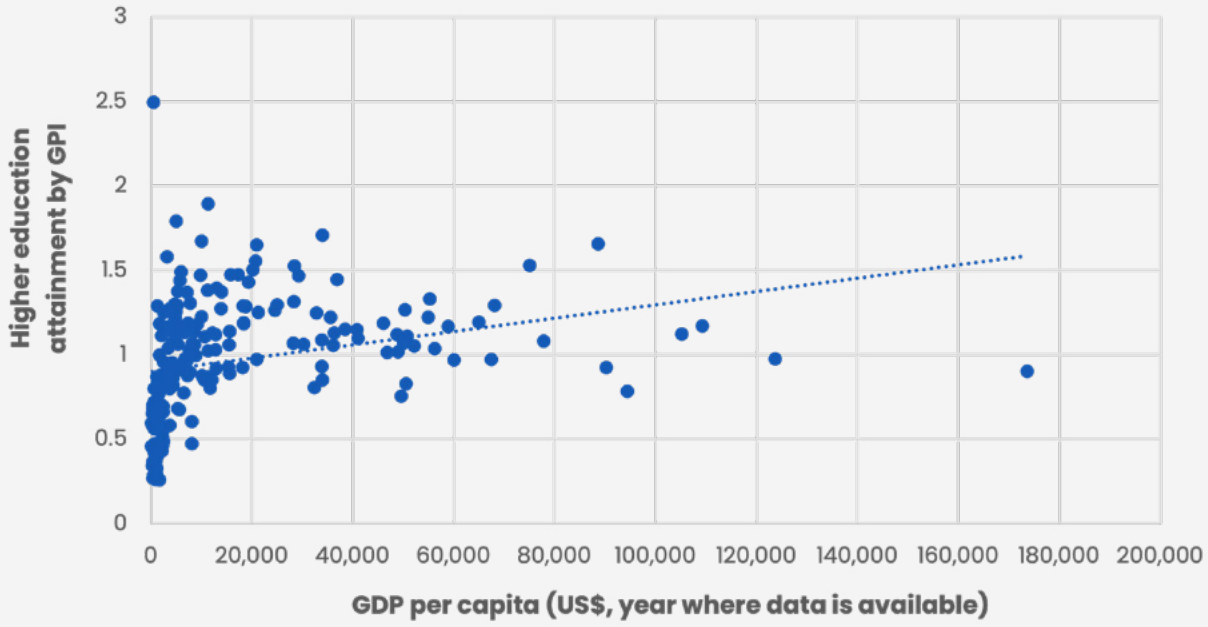
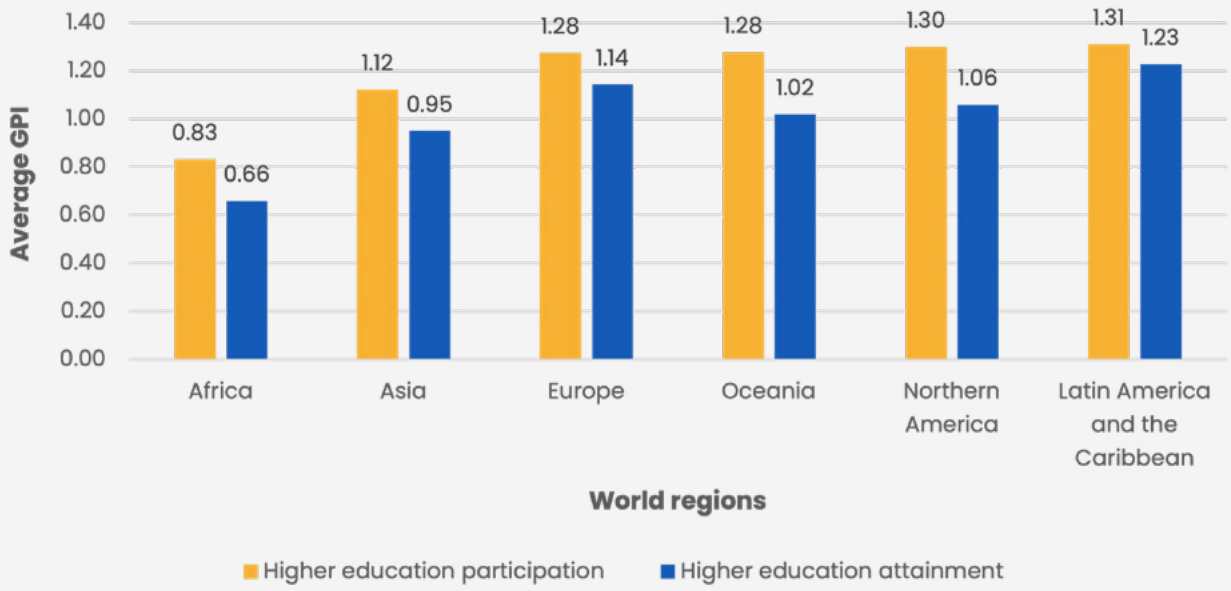


Diagram 5 shows a correlation between GDP per capita and higher education attainment amongst women of 0.59802. However, as with GDP per capita and participation, there are a number of low-income countries with quite contrasting values for gender parity. These include Sudan, Zimbabwe, Kyrgyzstan and Nicaragua. Again, cultural factors have a large role to play.

5.5 Comparing participation and attainment by gender

Overall levels of higher education participation and attainment differ greatly across continents and regions. Diagram 6 compares the average GPI in higher education participation and attainment by regions of the world. It shows that there are more female students participating in higher education across all continents than who have higher education qualifications. The biggest difference between participation and attainment is in African and Oceanic countries.

Diagram 6: Average GPI for higher education participation and attainment by regions of the world



There could be several reasons to explain the differences across world regions in higher education participation and attainment of women. Firstly, it may be a consequence of the data that has been used. Data quality has already been flagged as a concern across this area of work. Secondly, the proportion of female students holding a higher education qualification could be a reflection of generational differences. In countries where there are more female students than graduates, older generations of women may have been less likely to enter higher education than their younger counterparts. Finally, it could illustrate higher levels of student non-completion of higher education amongst female students.

All three of these reasons are plausible and are by no means mutually exclusive. Changing perceptions of gender roles and increasingly strong performance in schooling have underpinned long-term increases over generations in higher education attainment. Data on student non-completion by gender internationally is less prevalent than on participation and attainment.

This is the most concerning of the three reasons presented here. It is well documented that cultural and economic reasons lead to many girls not completing education in Africa and the same pressures may pertain in the case of higher education. However, less detailed research on the retention of higher education students across the region has been done.

Moreover, across every world region the gender parity ratio shifts towards men away from women when attainment is concerned. This includes in areas of the world where higher education systems are older and GDP per capita is higher.

What is driving these differences between participation and attainment and the extent to which they should be of concern merit further investigation.

6 Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment by socioeconomic background

As stressed in section 5 above, there should be caveats and caution around the use of data where socioeconomic background is concerned and the conclusions we can draw from analysis of this data on a global scale. Socioeconomic background and its proxies are understood in different ways across countries and interpreted in different ways by individuals and institutions. In this section, different datasets are used to build the global picture, looking at different measures of socioeconomic background and its proxies. To be included in our analysis, data must be available for both low and high socioeconomic groups. In some countries, such as Australia, while robust data exists for learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds, comparable data for higher socioeconomic groups could not be found. These countries were hence excluded from the analysis. The data outlined shows the data we have been able to source for individual countries and shows progress in terms of that data for that country. It does not mean that the individual country is necessarily doing better or worse than another country, rather how it is performing based on the data we have in its own terms.

6.1 Inequalities in higher education participation by socioeconomic background – the global access map

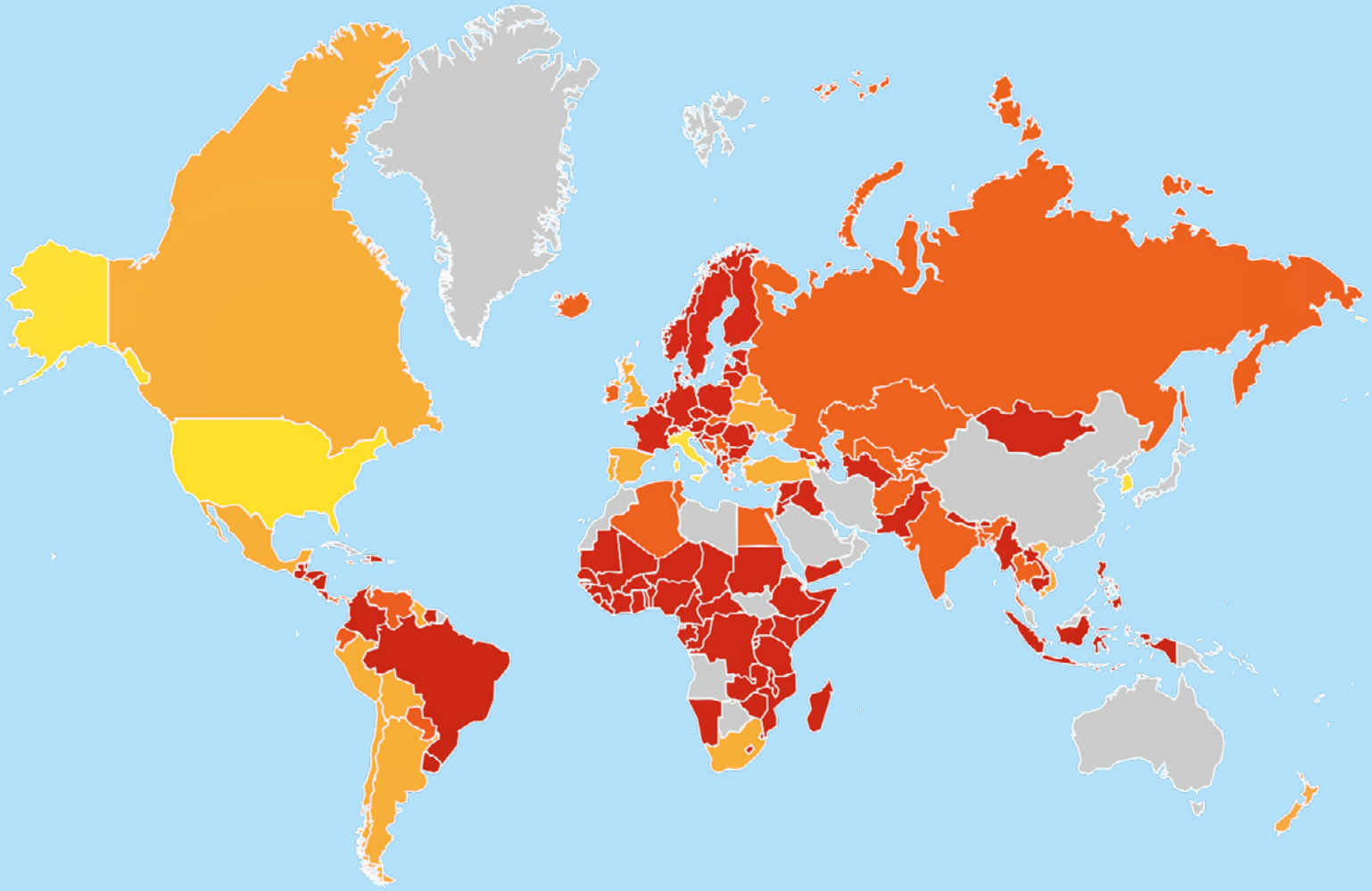
Map 3 below shows inequality in higher education participation by socioeconomic background across the world. Inequality is represented as SEB Equality Index, the ratio of the lowest socioeconomic group to the highest as outlined in the methodology section. Robust data to assess inequalities in higher education participation have been identified in 150 countries (74% of all countries). Data on individual countries is provided in Appendix 4.

Map 3 shows clearly that in all countries where we have relatively robust data there are inequalities in higher education participation by socioeconomic background. The highest levels of inequality are found in sub-Saharan African countries where the percentage of students entering higher education from the lowest wealth quintiles is extremely low. In 35 countries it is less than 1%. These countries under 1% are mainly lower-income ones from across different continents including Asia and the Caribbean.

However, there are also countries where even though participation for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is higher, inequality is also relatively high. Some European countries such as Sweden, France, Denmark and Finland appear in the top half of all countries where we have data in terms of relative inequality in higher education participation.

In terms of the levels of inequality, for 132 out of 150 countries where we have data, the percentage of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was less than half that from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In a small number of countries (7), including South Korea, Italy and Portugal, for every 10 students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds that progressed to higher education, over seven from lower socioeconomic backgrounds progressed to higher education.

MAP 3:
Higher education participation by socioeconomic background



	Very highly unequal	0 to 0.16
	Highly unequal	0.17 to 0.36
	Moderately unequal	0.37 to 0.76
	Slightly unequal	0.77 to 0.96
	Equal	0.97 to 1
	No data	-

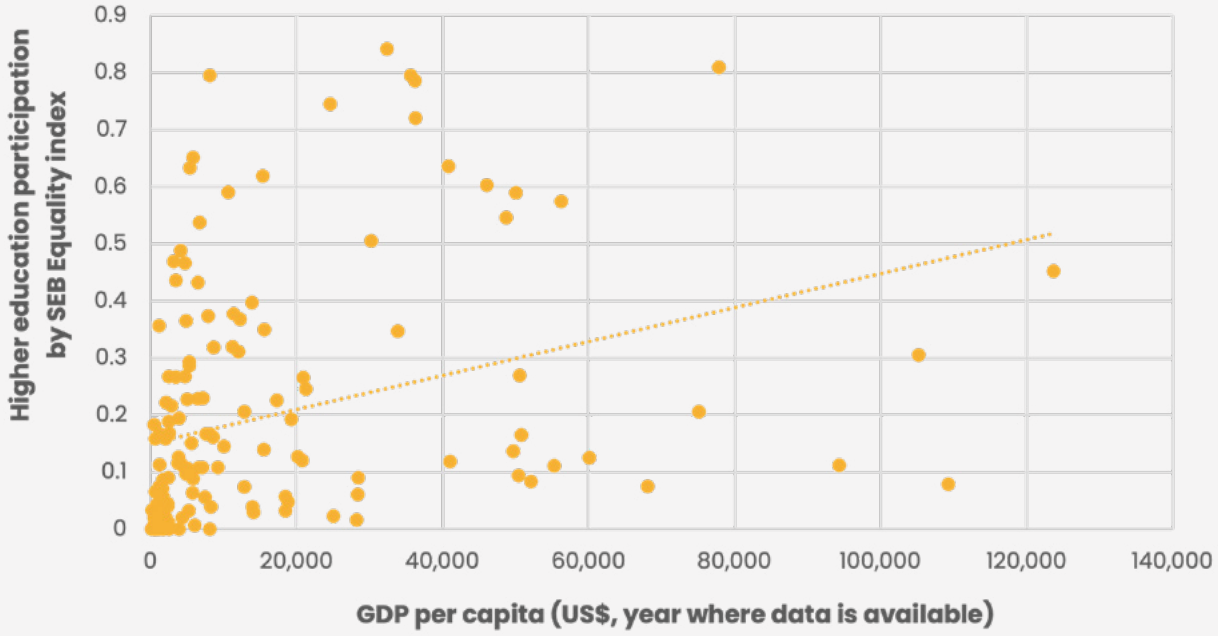
Inequality exists in all countries where we have robust data (150).

In most countries (132), the percentage of students from higher socioeconomic groups participating in higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups.

6.2 Participation in higher education by socioeconomic background and national income

As with gender, we have examined the relationship between the income of the country using GDP per capita and the SEB Equality Index as shown in Diagram 7 below.

Diagram 7: Inequality in higher education participation by socioeconomic background and the national income of the country



There is a moderate correlation here between equality and income of 0.553, with countries with lower incomes showing greater levels of inequality. This finding is consistent with the analysis presented in the Global Access Map for participation in higher education, which showed countries in Africa and Asia for instance seeing the greatest inequality in participation. However, the correlation is a moderate one. It shows that you cannot estimate the level of inequality in higher education participation based on that country's level of national income – there are more factors at play here.

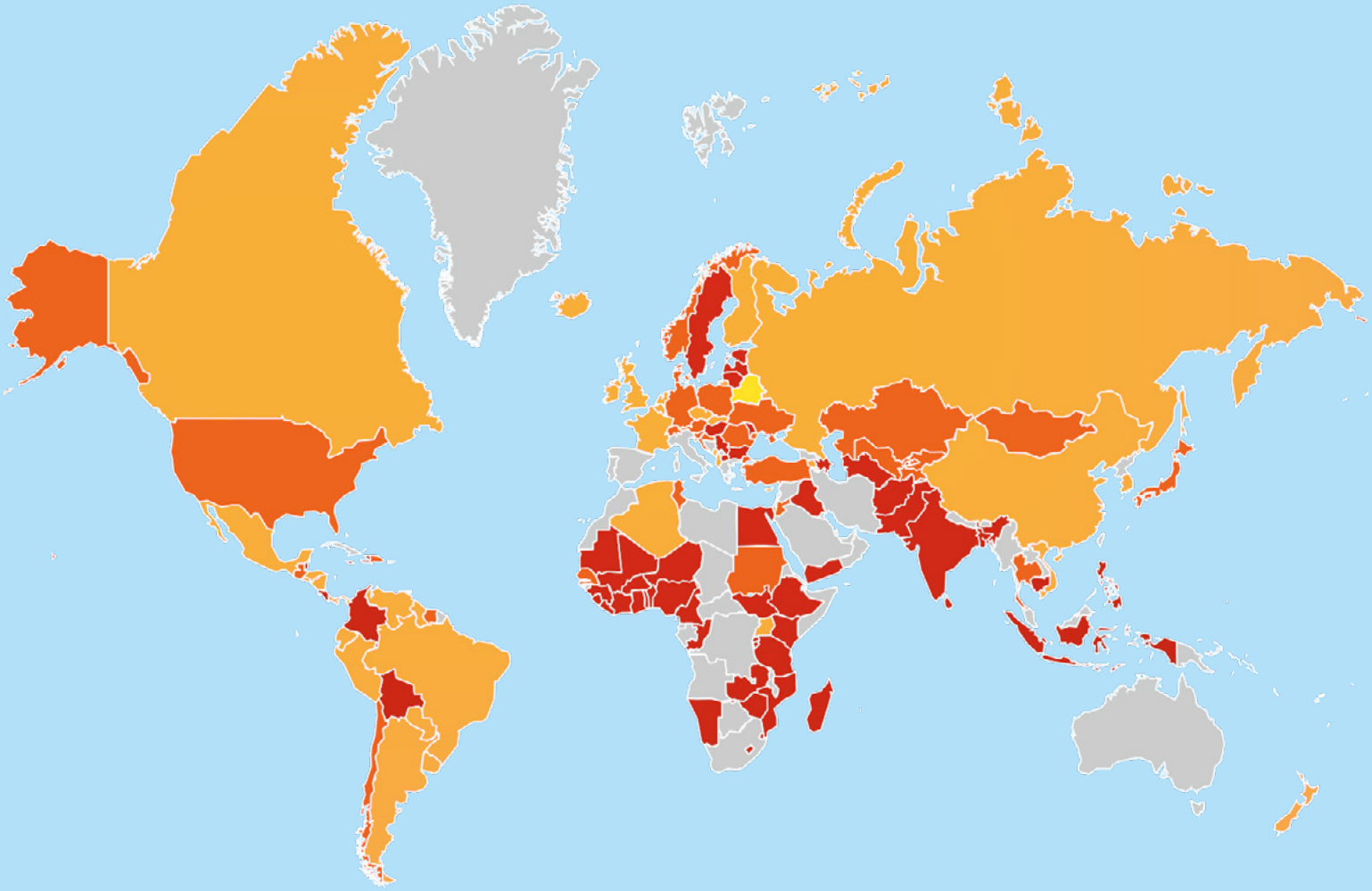
Looking at individual countries really brings the contrasts to the fore here. For example, Armenia and Turkmenistan have very similar GDP per capita of US$8,000 per annum, but Armenia has an SEB Equality Index of 0.80 while Turkmenistan has one of 0.17. Such contrasts also exist for richer countries. Canada and Sweden have similar GDP per capita at circa US$55,000 per annum. However, the SEB Equality Index for Canada is 0.57 and Sweden 0.11. We know that Canada and Sweden are very different countries in terms of size and the nature of their higher education systems, thus we would expect differences between them. As has been emphasised through the report individual country comparisons must be done carefully. There may be reasons associated with how data is collected that mean the differences between these countries are not as stark as they appear. The purpose is to emphasise the need for focused work looking at each individual country and show the nuanced picture where higher education participation is concerned.

6.3 Inequalities in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background – the global access map

Map 4 shows clearly that in all of the 130 countries where we have relatively robust data there are inequalities in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background.

As with participation, inequality in attainment is pervasive and the highest levels of inequality are in African countries, as well as some from Asia and the Caribbean. On the basis of the data available for those individual countries, inequality is the lowest in South American countries, such as Argentina, Peru and Mexico. European countries also feature here but mainly toward the middle of the distribution. However, while these countries appear to fare better, it does not mean that they tend toward equality. For the majority of countries (109) the percentage of those from higher socioeconomic groups participating in higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups. Only seven countries have data that show there could be a scenario where for every 10 students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who completed higher education, over six from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also did so.

MAP 4:
Higher education attainment by socioeconomic background



	Very highly unequal	0 to 0.16
	Highly unequal	0.17 to 0.36
	Moderately unequal	0.37 to 0.76
	Slightly unequal	0.77 to 0.96
	Equal	0.97 to 1
	No data	-

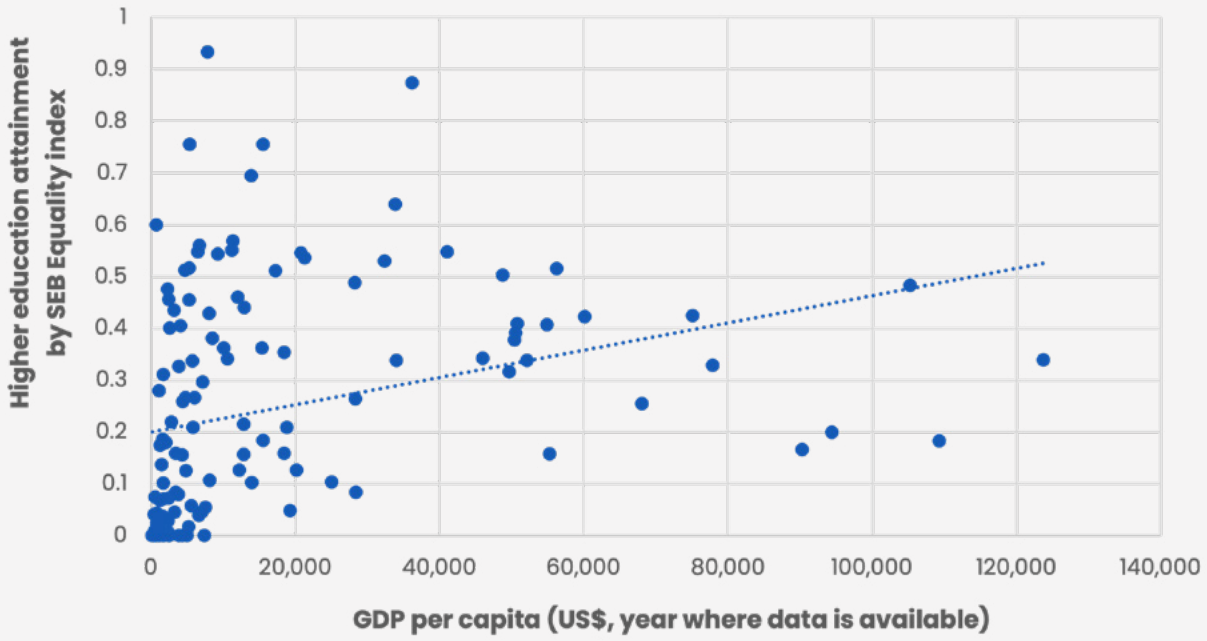
Inequality exists in all countries where we have robust data (130).

In most countries (109), the percentage of students from higher socioeconomic groups attaining higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups.

6.4 Attainment in higher education by socioeconomic background and national income

Diagram 8 below shows a slightly stronger correlation between national income and higher education attainment by socioeconomic background than participation and socioeconomic background.

Diagram 8: Inequality in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background and the national income of the country



The correlation here is 0.593. It is the case that lower-income countries have overall a higher level of inequality in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background. However, there is a clustering of countries whose GDP per capita is under US$20,000 per year which display quite contrasting levels of inequality in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background, as in the case where higher education participation and socioeconomic background is concerned.

6.5 Comparing participation and attainment by socioeconomic background

As with gender in section 5.5, Diagram 9 below compares the average level of inequality in participation with the average level for attainment for each region in the world. Except for North America and to a slight extent Asia, inequality is higher where participation is concerned than attainment.

Diagram 9: Average SEB Equality Index for higher education participation and attainment by regions of the world

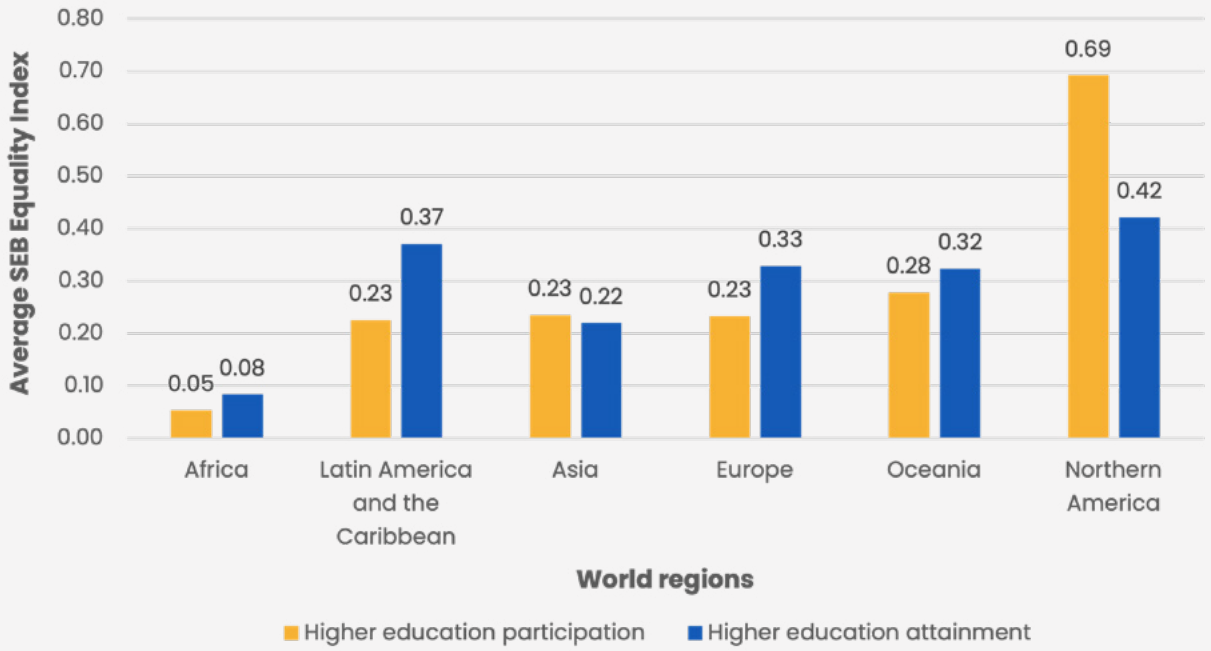


Diagram 9 shows a variable picture in terms of the relationship between socioeconomic background, higher education participation and attainment. In Africa, Europe, Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean, inequality is lower in attainment than participation. It is not clear why this would be the case. It may be a function of data quality. The difference is small across participation and attainment in Africa and Oceania. In the European case, the use of different data sources for participation and attainment may be a factor. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the difference is the largest here and this would certainly merit further investigation. In the two remaining other areas, the difference is only small in Asia where inequality is higher in attainment than participation. The Northern American case is consistent with evidence from the US in particular that has pointed to higher levels of student non-completion amongst those from lower socioeconomic groups[26].

26. For example, at highly selective colleges, 58% of Pell students earn a bachelor's degree in six years, compared to 83% of non-Pell students. See Margaret W. Cahalan et al., *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States 2024: 50-Year Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania, 2024, https://www.pellinstitute.org/the-indicators-of-higher-education-equity-in-the-united-states-2024-50-year-historical-trend-report/

7 What does progress look like?

In this section of the report, we will examine progress in participation and attainment in higher education by gender and socioeconomic background.

7.1 Inequalities, progress and gender

To establish progress in gender parity by gender, we examined changes in GPI to assess whether countries have moved closer to the parity range of 0.97 to 1.03. In some cases, the pattern of inequality has reversed, with under-representation shifting from one gender to the other. Improvement is therefore defined as a reduction in the gap between a country's GPI and the parity range, indicating a decrease in gender disparities in higher education participation or attainment over time. For instance, if a country's most recent GPI is 2.5 (males are under-represented) and its base year's GPI is 0.5 (females are under-represented), its gap from gender parity will have increased from 0.47 (0.97 minus 0.5) to 1.47 (2.5 minus 1.03), signifying an increase in gender disparity. Changes ranging from -0.01 to 0.01 were treated as indicating no progress over time.

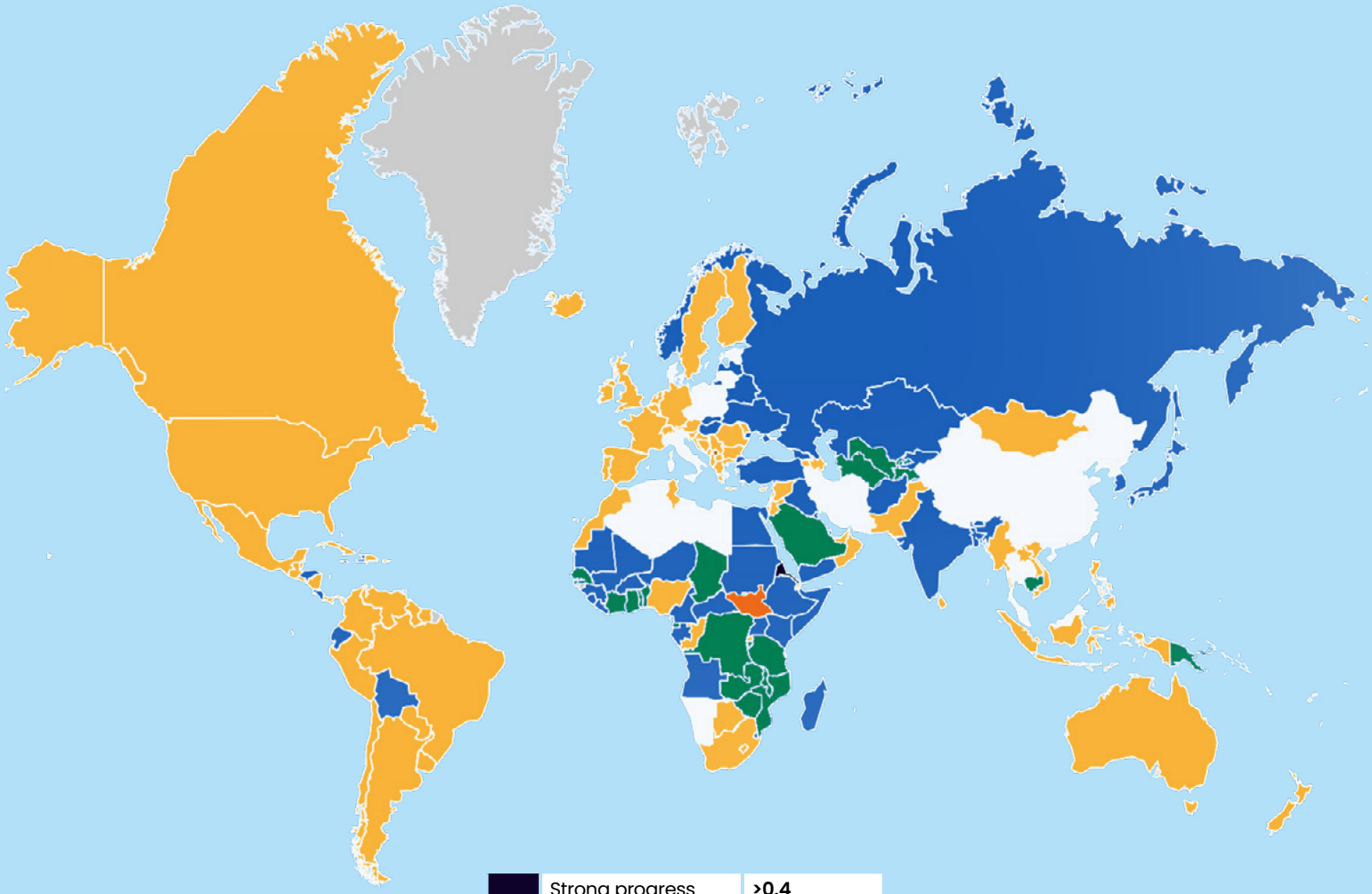
Looking firstly at inequalities in participation by gender, Map 5 on the next page shows the global picture.

In 17 countries there has been no change. This mixed group include European countries such as Poland and Italy alongside Thailand, Iran and China. There are 88 countries that have moved further away from gender parity. Most European countries are in this category. Those countries that have moved away from gender parity are again a mixed group, also including countries from Africa and the MENA region. In 92 countries gender parity has increased, with these countries mainly from Africa and Asia. Overall, the progress in gender parity is happening in countries broadly in the Global South, whereas for richer countries we are moving away from gender parity.

Map 6 one page further down looks at changes in gender parity in higher education attainment over time.

Across the world Map 6 shows that more countries have seen an improvement in gender parity in higher education attainment than a move away from gender parity. There has been an improvement in 98 countries. These countries are drawn from across the world. Many are from Africa but also include for example Cambodia and Laos from Asia as well as Japan, Ecuador, China and Switzerland. Countries where gender parity in attainment has worsened number 72 and include those from across continents including Argentina, Italy and South Africa to name but three. There were 13 countries where gender parity had remained constant over time.

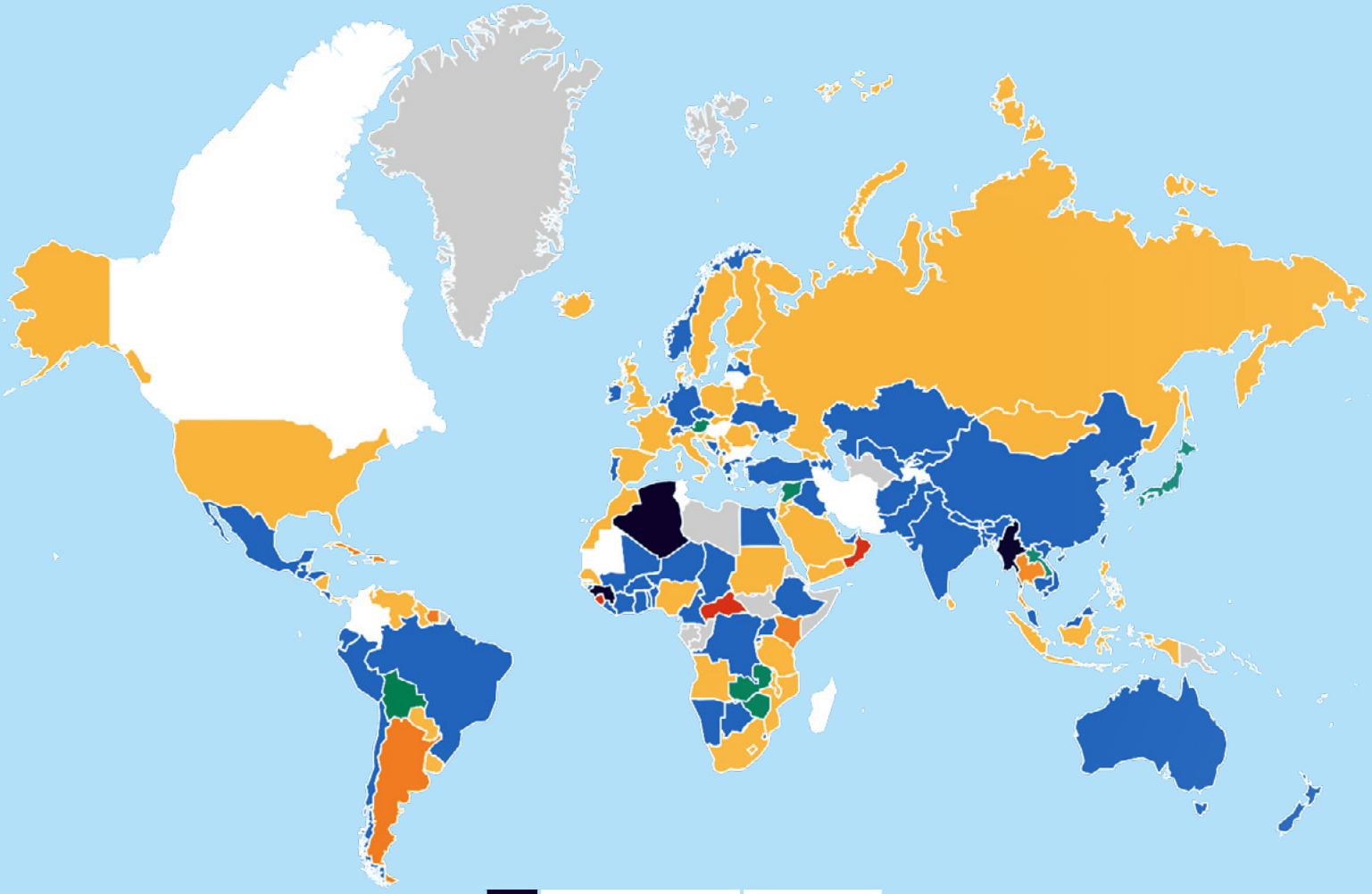
MAP 5:
Progress in achieving gender parity in higher education participation



	Strong progress	>0.4
	Moderate progress	0.21 to 0.4
	Slight progress	0.02 to 0.2
	No progress	-0.01 to 0.01
	Slight decline	-0.2 to -0.02
	Moderate decline	-0.5 to -0.21
	Severe decline	<-0.5
	No data	-

Out of the 197 countries where data were available, 92 have seen gender parity improve, 17 saw no change and in 88 gender parity has worsened.

MAP 6:
Progress in achieving gender parity in higher education attainment



	Strong progress	>0.4
	Moderate progress	0.21 to 0.4
	Slight progress	0.02 to 0.2
	No progress	-0.01 to 0.01
	Slight decline	-0.2 to -0.02
	Moderate decline	-0.5 to -0.21
	Severe decline	<-0.5
	No data	-

Of the 183 countries where we could find data, the majority (98) had seen gender parity improved, while 72 had seen a decline and 13 remained constant.

7.2 Inequalities, progress and socioeconomic background

For socioeconomic background, progress was measured by changes in the SEB Equality Index. An increase in the index over time indicates greater participation or attainment among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, if a country's SEB Equality Index ratio has increased from 0.5 to 0.9, that would be considered as progress. Changes ranging from -0.01 to 0.01 were again treated as indicating no progress over time.

It should be noted that in terms of progress, data for at least two points in time is only available for 110 countries when it comes to higher education participation by socioeconomic background, and 96 for higher education attainment – which is considerably fewer than the number of countries we have data for when we only look at data from the most recent year. This inability to find data that can compare progress over time shows some of the issues with data availability here.

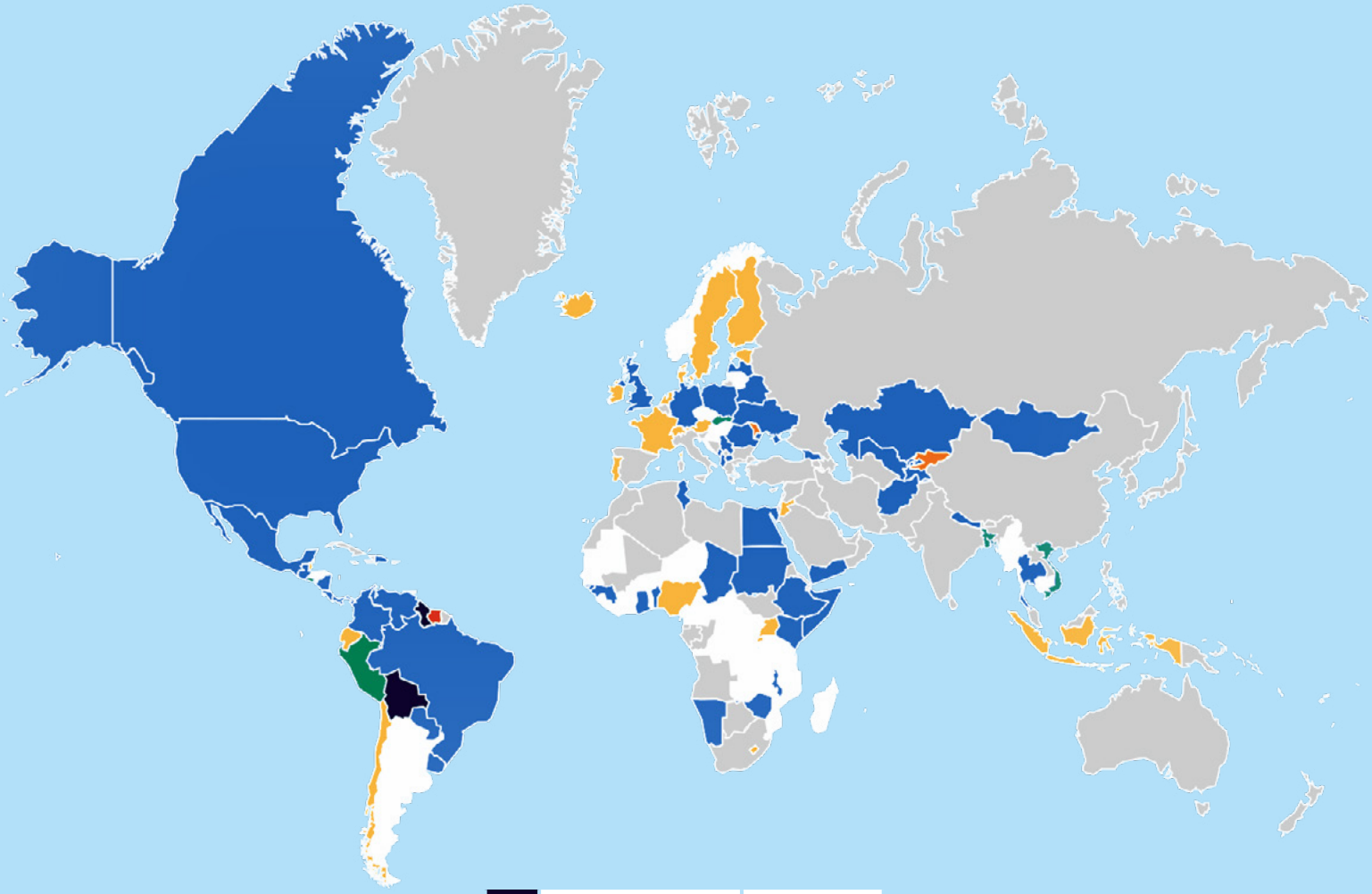
Map 7 below shows that of the countries where participation data over time is available, 57 have made progress, 26 saw no progress and in 27 countries inequality has worsened.

The countries that have shown the most improvement are drawn from across the world. They include from Asia, Thailand and Vietnam; from South America, Bolivia, Peru and Mexico and from Europe, Serbia and Germany. Countries which have not made progress include most of those from Africa for whom we have data for. In terms of those where inequality has worsened, these include countries from across the world but several from Europe such as Sweden, Portugal and Malta.

As for higher education attainment, Map 8 on the following page shows that of the countries where we could find comparative data over time, 50 have made progress, 18 saw no change and in 28 countries inequality has worsened.

Again, the countries that have shown the most improvement are drawn from across the world. The majority of countries with no progress are in Sub-Saharan Africa. When it comes to countries with worsening inequality, European countries dominate the list.

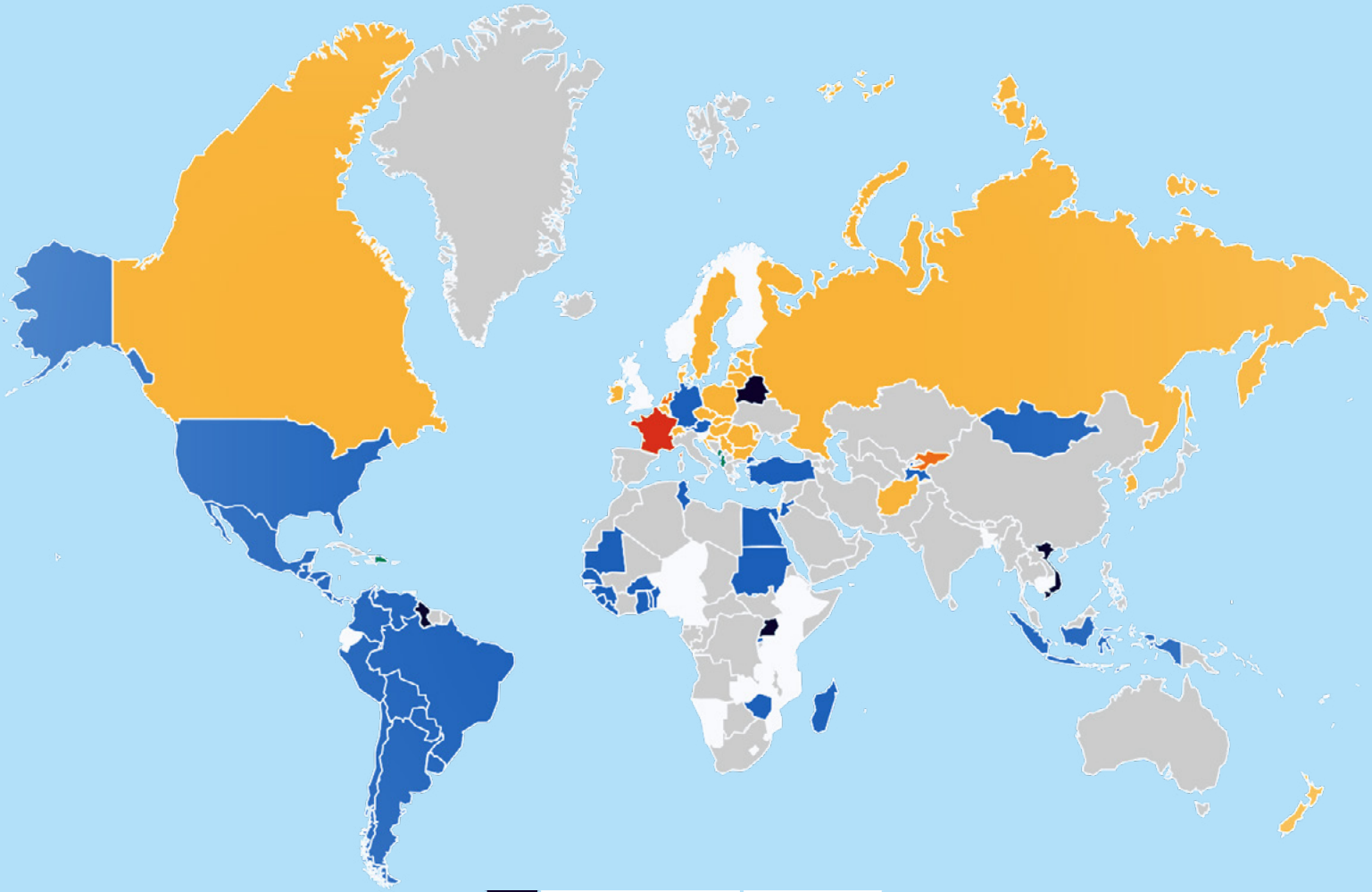
MAP 7:
Progress in reducing inequality in higher education participation by socioeconomic background



	Strong progress	>0.4
	Moderate progress	0.21 to 0.4
	Slight progress	0.02 to 0.2
	No progress	-0.01 to 0.01
	Slight decline	-0.2 to -0.02
	Moderate decline	-0.5 to -0.21
	Severe decline	<-0.5
	No data	-

Out of the 110 countries where we could find comparative data over time, 57 have made progress, 26 saw no change and in 27 countries inequality has worsened.

MAP 8:
Progress in reducing inequality in higher education attainment by socioeconomic background



	Strong progress	>0.4
	Moderate progress	0.21 to 0.4
	Slight progress	0.02 to 0.2
	No progress	-0.01 to 0.01
	Slight decline	-0.2 to -0.02
	Moderate decline	-0.5 to -0.21
	Severe decline	<-0.5
	No data	-

Of the 96 countries where we could find data, 50 have made progress, 18 saw no change and in 28 countries inequality has worsened.

8 Key findings

The availability of data on who participates in higher education across the world by background characteristics has increased since the mid-2010s. However, there is some distance to travel before comparisons between countries can be done in a robust, systematic way. It is also not clear how common the collection of administrative data within systems is and how available this information is. Reliance on broader surveys means that sample sizes and other factors are always an issue. Nevertheless, this report has brought together a significant amount of data to present a comprehensive picture of inequalities in higher education participation and attainment globally. The key takeaways are presented below.

1. Data gaps and quality issues make inequality harder to track and tackle.

While more countries are collecting data on higher education participation and attainment by student characteristics than before, data gaps, inconsistencies and political instability continue to undermine global understanding and action.

Finding 1: Our global survey on data collection shows that gender (90% of countries that collect data) and proxy measures of socioeconomic background (67%) remain the characteristics about which data is most frequently collected by individual countries.

Finding 2: In over 80% of the countries participating in our global survey, data is collected at a national level annually.

Finding 3: While in around 90% of countries data is collected from higher education institutions directly, data quality remains a major challenge with inconsistent reporting, voluntary reporting and in some cases social unrest/conflict being disruptive factors.

2. Inequality in higher education participation and attainment remains pervasive.

Available evidence shows that inequalities in higher education attainment and participation are still pervasive across the world, making this a truly global challenge no system has yet solved. Gender gaps persist and they cut both ways, and socioeconomic background remains a major driver of inequality.

Finding 4: Higher education participation data by gender were identified in 202 out of 203 countries. Female students are under-represented in 51 countries (25% of countries with data) and male students are under-represented in 139 countries (69% of countries with data).

Finding 5: Higher education attainment data by gender were identified in 195 out of 203 countries. Female students are under-represented in 93 countries (48% of countries with data) and male students are under-represented in 91 countries (47% of countries with data).

Finding 6: Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment by socioeconomic background exist in all countries where we could find robust data (150 for participation, 130 for attainment).

Finding 7: The percentage of those from higher socioeconomic groups participating in higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups for the majority of countries where we have participation data (132 out of 150 countries).

Finding 8: For higher education attainment, the percentage of those from higher socioeconomic groups attaining higher education is at least double that from lower socioeconomic groups for most countries as well (109 out of 130 countries).

3. Inequality isn't just about money – culture and policy matter too.

Both gender and socioeconomic inequalities show only a moderate link with national income, meaning wealth alone does not guarantee fairness.

Finding 9: Participation and attainment in higher education by women is only moderately related to the national income of a country (r = around 0.5), suggesting that cultural as well as economic factors shape inequality.

Finding 10: Inequality in participation and attainment in higher education by socioeconomic background is also only moderately related to the national income of a country (r = around 0.5), suggesting that here as well, cultural as well as economic factors shape inequality.

5. Global co-operation is urgently needed.

The case for concerted, systematic action to address gender disparities and to increase participation and attainment of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other characteristics associated with under-representation or under-achievement remains strong.

4. Progress is uneven – gains are real but fragile.

It is encouraging that in most countries gender parity has improved over time, and inequality in higher education participation and attainment has decreased. However, there are also a significant number of countries in the world where gender parity has worsened, and socioeconomic inequalities remain large in the majority of countries.

Finding 11: In terms of higher education participation, out of the 197 countries where data were available for at least two points in time, 92 have seen gender parity improve, in 17 there has been no change and in 88 gender parity has worsened.

Finding 12: With higher education attainment, of the 183 countries where we could find data, again the majority (98) had seen gender parity improved, while 72 had seen a decline and 13 remained constant.

Finding 13: In terms of higher education participation by socioeconomic background, of the 110 countries where we could find comparative data over time, 57 have made progress, 26 saw no change and in 27 countries inequality has worsened.

Finding 14: For higher education attainment by socioeconomic background, of the 96 countries where we could find comparative data over time, 50 have made progress, 18 saw no change and in 28 countries inequality has worsened.

9 Data, inequality and action – what could be done?

Inequalities in higher education participation and attainment are still pervasive across the world. Few countries have gender balance in participation and with the exception of a small number of outliers where we have not been able to verify the data, socioeconomic inequalities in participation and attainment can be identified in 150 countries around the world where we have found data. In terms of progress, it is encouraging that in most countries, gender parity has improved over time, and inequality in higher education and attainment has decreased. However, there are also a significant number of countries in the world, around 80, where gender parity has worsened. In the vast majority of countries where we have data, the percentage of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds progressing to higher education is less than half of that from higher socioeconomic groups and in many countries the gap is far bigger.

Understanding the global picture where inequalities in higher education participation and attainment exist is very much a work in progress and will continue to be so. We would welcome discussions with other researchers in the field to increase the range and quality of data used to understand these inequalities together. In particular, greater access to and collation of individual country administrative data sets would strengthen this understanding.

Accepting the limitations on the data available though, the case for concerted, systematic action to address gender disparities and to increase participation and attainment of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other characteristics associated with under-representation or under-achievement remains undiminished. On the individual, community and societal level, higher education, as argued in section 2.2, provides significant benefits. From the perspective of the higher education sector, opening up opportunities to those from all backgrounds is an essential aspect of establishing what it is for and why it matters in the 21st century. The origins of the inequalities that are illustrated in this report are rooted in broader societal inequalities and in particular schooling systems which from primary/kindergarten level embed class-based inequality. But universities can and must do far more to open up access, help ameliorate inequalities in systems/schools and re-orientate learning, pastoral and financial support to enable learners with ability from all backgrounds. This ramping up of energy and commitment needs to happen quickly and be reflected in the work of individual universities, but also representative organisations and global/regional governmental bodies which have a vital role to play. Some such bodies are engaged, but this engagement needs to be universal. The data we have available here, while not exhaustive, provides the foundations for this greater engagement, including the setting of targets and enhancement of existing goals to incorporate more detailed measures.

The consequence of not doing this for universities is to reaffirm the view held by some politicians found across the world that they are elitist and not acting in the public interest. Resisting the perceived attacks on higher education will not be effective until they shift the dial on access and success, reducing the inequalities so evident in this report.

10 Recommendations

The recommendations below relate to how data can be used to drive reductions in inequality, how this inequality could be reduced and what needs to be done on a global scale via international collaboration.

1 UNESCO should review the wording of SDG 4.3, '*By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*', to consider whether it could be widened to include socioeconomic background as well as gender.

2 Utilising the amount of data identified in the report, individual governments should construct targets for access and/or attainment by socioeconomic background.

3 As the European Commission is doing, regional agencies across the world should convene constituent countries to share knowledge/data on inequalities in higher education participation and attainment, improve strategy and action, and push forward the formation of targets at individual country level.

4 Further research should be undertaken to understand why some countries have made progress in reducing inequalities in participation and attainment, identifying what can be learnt and scaled up globally.

5 University representative organisations across the world should increase their focus on addressing inequalities in access and attainment through their advocacy, knowledge sharing, research and work with members.

6 International organisations working on the collection of data on access/participation by background characteristics should share knowledge and explore how to develop in partnership with other organisations a global higher education access data depository.

7 The World Access to Higher Education Network should lead on the development of international exchange of practice on what works in extending access and participation via a set of global communities launching in 2026.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology note

Data sources

Tables 2 and 3 below describe the different cross-national databases from which this study drew data.

Table 2: Data sources for gender analysis

Data sources	Description	Participation	Attainment
World Bank Open Data hub[27]	The World Bank's Open Data hub provides data on access and participation in higher education by gender.	✓	✓
UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) [28]	UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) brings together data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), other national household surveys and learning assessments from over 160 countries. A key strength of this database lies in its provision of education outcome data disaggregated by key factors associated with inequality, such as gender, household wealth and parental education.	✓	✓
The Center of Distributive, Labor and Social Studies (CEDLAS)'s Socioeconomic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean (SEDLAC) [29]	SEDLAC collates information from national surveys in all Latin American and some Caribbean countries. It categorises students' socioeconomic background based on income quintiles.		✓

27. For more, please visit https://data.worldbank.org/.
28. You can access WIDE here: https://www.education-inequalities.org/.
29. The database is available here: https://www.cedlas.econo.unlp.edu.ar/wp/en/estadisticas/sedlac/.

Table 3: Data sources for socioeconomic background analysis

Data sources	Description	Participation	Attainment
UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) [30]	UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) brings together data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), other national household surveys and learning assessments from over 160 countries. A key strength of this database lies in its provision of education outcome data disaggregated by key factors associated with inequality, such as gender, household wealth and parental education.	✓	✓
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	The OECD's two most recent *Education at a Glance* reports [31] [32] offer data on the share of adults with tertiary education and their parents' educational attainment for a number of OECD member and accession countries, with statistics drawn from Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), EU Adult Education Survey (EU-AES) and other national surveys. Its *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility* report in 2018[33] also highlights the likelihood of attaining tertiary education by parents' education in different countries.		✓
The Center of Distributive, Labor and Social Studies (CEDLAS)'s Socioeconomic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean (SEDLAC) [34]	SEDLAC collates information from national surveys in all Latin American and some Caribbean countries. It categorises students' socioeconomic background based on income quintiles.	✓	✓
Eurostat	Eurostat – the statistical office of the European Union – provides data on how early-life socioeconomic conditions, such as parental education level, influence educational attainment and other outcomes in adulthood[35]. The data is collected via the harmonised EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) survey, with countries sending data about individuals and households to Eurostat by following legal deadlines and agreed guidelines and procedures. Other reports like the European Higher Education Area Bologna Process Implementation Reports [36] [37] also draw on Eurostat data to illustrate the relationship between students' educational background and the educational attainment of their parents.		✓
Eurostudent Project [38]	The Eurostudent project, which has been running since 1997, brings together national student survey data from over 25 European countries. It provides data using parental educational attainment and financial status as markers of socioeconomic background.	✓	

30. Again, the WIDE database can be accessed here: https://www.education-inequalities.org/.
31. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2025*.
32. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2024*, September 10, 2024, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html
33. OECD, *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*, October 23, 2018, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/equity-in-education_9789264073234-en/full-report.html
34. Again, the SEDLAC database can be accessed here: https://www.cedlas.econo.unlp.edu.ar/wp/en/estadisticas/sedlac/.
35. Eurostat, 'Intergenerational transmission of disadvantages – statistics,' effective August 15, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Intergenerational_transmission_of_disadvantages_-_statistics
36. European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, May 3, 2018, https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report
37. European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, May 27, 2024, https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-higher-education-area-2024-bologna-process-implementation-report
38. To access the database, visit https://database.eurostudent.eu/drm/.

Countries where there were multiple sources of data

During our data scoping exercise for our socioeconomic background analysis, we often only found one international agency data source for most countries. However, there were instances where multiple sources could be drawn upon (32 countries for participation by socioeconomic background, and 48 countries for attainment by socioeconomic background). In these cases, the choice of dataset followed a clear set of principles. Priority was given to sources whose data collection methods and definitions most accurately captured each country's context. Government-provided statistics were preferred over self-reported survey data due to their greater reliability and national representativeness. When multiple proxy measures were available from the same source, preference was given to the measure covering the largest number of countries to maximise comparability. The selection of datasets was also influenced by the availability of data for both the disadvantaged and privileged groups, which is necessary to calculate parity ratios, and by the presence of data across multiple years to allow for the analysis of progress over time.

Countries not included in the socioeconomic background analysis

During our socioeconomic background analysis, several outlier countries were not included because their data showed higher participation or attainment rates among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds than those from more advantaged groups. In these cases, the findings either contradicted results when alternative data sources were used or were inconsistent with existing research evidence. As such discrepancies could not be resolved at this stage through the verification of data reliability or triangulation, these countries were omitted from the analysis in this report to preserve the overall validity of the study. The countries not included are listed below:

Participation by socioeconomic background:

- China
- Cuba
- South Sudan

Attainment by socioeconomic background:

- Central African Republic
- Chad
- Cuba
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Fiji
- Greece
- Guinea-Bissau
- Italy
- Malawi
- Nepal
- Portugal
- Spain
- Tuvalu

Appendix 2: Individual countries that participated in the Drawing the Global Access Map 2 survey

Afghanistan	Colombia	India	Malaysia	San Marino
Albania	Costa Rica	Indonesia	Malta	Saudia Arabia
Argentina	Croatia	Ireland	Mexico	Slovakia
Armenia	Cyprus	Italy	Myanmar	South Africa
Australia	Ecuador	Jamaica	Netherlands	Spain
Austria	Estonia	Japan	Nigeria	Switzerland
Bangladesh	Faroe Islands, Denmark	Kazakhstan	Pakistan	Turkey
Belgium	Germany	Kosovo	Peru	Ukraine
Brazil	Ghana	Laos	Philippines	United Kingdom – England
Canada	Greece	Latvia	Poland	United Kingdom – Scotland
China	Hungary	Lithuania	Portugal	United States

Appendix 3: Data on higher education participation and attainment by gender

Table 4 below includes the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for individual countries, drawn/calculated from sources listed under Appendix 1: Methodology note unless otherwise noted. X indicates that data is not available.

A GPI between 0.97 and 1.03 indicates parity between genders. A GPI below 0.97 suggests more male students/graduates than females and a GPI above 1.03 suggests more female students/graduates than males.

Table 4: Gender Parity Index for individual countries

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Afghanistan	0.38	0.27
Albania	1.32	1.14
Algeria	1.35	0.68
Andorra	1.16	1.01
Angola	0.98	0.43
Antigua and Barbuda	1.55	0.89
Argentina	1.46	1.27
Armenia	1.27	1.06
Australia	1.33	1.19
Austria	1.22	1.05
Azerbaijan	1.19	0.96
Bahamas	1.62	1.89
Bahrain	1.34	1.47
Bangladesh	0.86	0.48
Barbados	1.55	1.43
Belarus	1.12	1.30
Belgium	1.27	1.11
Belize	1.45	1.19
Benin	0.59	0.33
Bhutan	0.99	0.58
Bolivia	1.03	1.04
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.38	1.06
Botswana	1.39	0.89

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Brazil	1.32	1.18
Brunei	1.31	1.25
Bulgaria	1.23	1.37
Burkina Faso	0.68	0.43
Burundi	0.78	0.46
Cabo Verde	1.32	1.16
Cambodia	1.14	0.54
Cameroon	0.83	0.48
Canada	1.28	1.04
Central African Republic	0.37	2.49
Chad	0.39	0.26
Chile	1.17	0.93
China	1.14	0.92
Colombia	1.15	1.13
Comoros	0.80	0.65
Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)	0.67	0.69
Costa Rica	1.19	1.12
Côte d'Ivoire	0.88	0.49
Croatia	1.31	1.19
Cuba	1.47	1.29
Cyprus	1.32	1.09
Czech Republic (Czechia)	1.29	1.07
Democratic Republic of the Congo	0.59	0.37
Denmark	1.28	1.29
Djibouti	0.67	0.40
Dominica	0.93	X
Dominican Republic	1.48	1.67
Ecuador	1.20	0.77
Egypt	1.00	0.86
El Salvador	1.26	1.06

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Equatorial Guinea	0.46	X
Eritrea	0.70	X
Estonia	1.35	1.52
Eswatini	0.99	0.93
Ethiopia	0.49	0.29
Fiji	1.30	0.93
Finland	1.22	1.27
France	1.24	1.10
Gabon	1.38	0.47
Gambia	0.70	0.57
Georgia	1.16	1.07
Germany	1.08	0.76
Ghana	0.96	0.51
Greece	1.06	0.97
Grenada	1.21	1.22
Guatemala	1.21	0.67
Guinea	0.46	0.62
Guinea-Bissau	0.06	0.47
Guyana	1.50	1.37
Haiti	0.35	0.58
Honduras	1.28	0.96
Hong Kong	1.09	0.83
Hungary	1.21	1.18
Iceland	1.51	1.53
India	0.98	0.66
Indonesia	1.20	1.11
Iran	1.00	0.86
Iraq	0.58	0.59
Ireland	1.18	1.12

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Israel	1.30	1.22
Italy	1.29	1.22
Jamaica	1.42	1.79
Japan	0.97	0.85
Jordan	1.34	0.82
Kazakhstan	1.18	1.03
Kenya	0.72	0.63
Kiribati	2.23	1.00
Korea, North	0.51	0.80
Korea, South	0.86	0.80
Kosovo	2.07[39]	0.88
Kuwait	1.36	1.71
Kyrgyzstan	1.18	1.11
Laos	0.75	0.70
Latvia	1.31	1.50
Lebanon	1.24	1.00
Lesotho	1.34	0.87
Liberia	0.61	0.42
Libya	1.09	X
Liechtenstein	0.65	X
Lithuania	1.33	1.29
Luxembourg	1.18	0.97
Macau	1.08	0.97
Madagascar	1.02	0.70
Malawi	0.57	0.37
Malaysia	1.26	1.02
Maldives	1.53	0.80
Mali	0.51	0.37

39. For more information, please visit https://masht.rks-gov.net/en/statistics-of-education-in-kosovo-2024-2025/.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Malta	1.32	1.06
Marshall Islands	1.23	0.91
Mauritania	0.57	0.26
Mauritius	1.26	0.88
Mexico	1.15	0.87
Micronesia	0.87	0.80
Moldova	1.28	1.29
Monaco	1.38	0.90
Mongolia	1.39	1.44
Montenegro	1.34	0.85
Morocco	1.15	0.80
Mozambique	0.85	0.68
Myanmar	1.32	0.84
Namibia	1.40	0.95
Nauru	1.33[40]	1.11
Nepal	1.20	0.40
Netherlands	1.15	0.97
New Zealand	1.40	1.12
Nicaragua	1.29	1.25
Niger	0.48	0.37
Nigeria	0.73	0.54
North Macedonia	1.31	1.03
Norway	1.34	1.17
Oman	1.35	1.65
Pakistan	0.96	0.70
Palau	1.33	1.47
Palestine	1.62	1.58
Panama	1.38	1.47
Papua New Guinea	0.59	0.72

40. For more, visit Education and Economic Activity in Nauru – NET.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Paraguay	1.29	1.30
Peru	1.07	0.98
Philippines	1.30	1.27
Poland	1.35	1.29
Portugal	1.17	1.26
Puerto Rico	1.36	1.44
Qatar	1.79	1.66
Romania	1.24	1.06
Russia	1.11	1.14
Rwanda	0.77	0.66
Saint Kitts and Nevis	1.48	X
Saint Lucia	1.55	1.39
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1.67	X
Samoa	1.62	1.07
San Marino	0.90	1.17
Sao Tome and Principe	1.19	0.46
Saudi Arabia	1.11	1.15
Senegal	1.04	0.44
Serbia	1.32	1.13
Seychelles	1.46	0.92
Sierra Leone	0.41	0.34
Singapore	1.10	0.92
Slovakia	1.33	1.25
Slovenia	1.34	1.31
Solomon Islands	0.88[41]	0.83
Somalia	0.25	0.60[42]
South Africa	1.41	1.17
South Sudan	0.31	0.65

41. For more details, please visit https://solomons.gov.sb/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Solomon-Islands-2019-Population-and-Housing-Census_National-Report-Vol-1.pdf.
42. More information can be found here: https://nbs.gov.so/surveys/.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
Spain	1.22	1.06
Sri Lanka	1.40	1.16
Sudan	1.01	1.29
Suriname	1.52	1.49
Sweden	1.42	1.33
Switzerland	1.12	0.78
Syria	1.15	0.56
Taiwan	1.12[43]	0.93[44]
Tajikistan	1.08	0.45
Tanzania	0.82	0.29
Thailand	1.26	1.37
Timor-Leste	1.08	0.77
Togo	0.57	0.30
Tonga	1.40	1.22
Trinidad and Tobago	1.22	1.47
Tunisia	1.43	1.17
Turkey	1.04	0.85
Turkmenistan	0.99	0.60
Tuvalu	1.82	1.26
Uganda	0.78	0.61
Ukraine	1.11	1.21
United Arab Emirates	1.23	1.02
United Kingdom - England	1.33[45]	1.07[46]
United Kingdom - Northern Ireland	1.36[47]	1.15[48]
United Kingdom - Scotland	1.56[49]	1.19[50]

43. More details can be found here: https://depart.moe.edu.tw/ed4500/cp.aspx?n=DCD2BE18CFAF30D0.
44. Visit https://www.moi.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=9&sms=9009&s=326827 for more.
45. To access the data, visit https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2023-24.
46. For more, visit https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/RM055/editions/2021/versions/1.
47. To view the data, visit https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-ni-heis-equality-categories-201819-202223.
48. To view the data, visit https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-force-survey-annual-tables-2024.
49. For more, please see https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/20-03-2025/sb271-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers.
50. More details can be found here: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/2022-reports/scotland-s-census-2022-education-labour-market-and-travel-to-work/.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – Gender Parity Index	Higher Education Attainment – Gender Parity Index
United Kingdom - Wales	1.49[51]	1.13[52]
United States of America	1.32	1.08
Uruguay	1.43	1.55
Uzbekistan	1.03	0.89
Vanuatu	0.56	0.65
Vatican City (Holy See)	X	X
Venezuela	1.41	1.38
Vietnam	1.06	0.95
Yemen	0.44	0.68
Zambia	0.75	0.78
Zimbabwe	0.96	1.18

51. More information can be found here: https://www.medr.cymru/en/News/sta-medr-05-2025-welsh-higher-education-initial-participation-measure-2016-17-to-2022-23/.
52. For more, visit https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/RM055/editions/2021/versions/1.

Appendix 4: Data on higher education participation and attainment by socioeconomic background

Table 5 below includes the Socioeconomic Background (SEB) Equality Index, calculated from sources listed under Appendix 1: Methodology note unless otherwise noted. X indicates that data is not available. O indicates that data is omitted from the analysis to preserve the study's overall validity.

The lower the SEB Equality Index value, the more unequal the situation is for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A SEB Equality Index value between 0.97 and 1.03 indicates parity between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 5: SEB Equality Index for individual countries

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Afghanistan	0.18	0.00
Albania	0.16	0.38
Algeria	0.29	0.45
Andorra	X	X
Angola	X	X
Antigua and Barbuda	X	X
Argentina	0.40	0.69
Armenia	0.80	0.43
Australia	X	X
Austria	0.08	0.34
Azerbaijan	0.11	0.05
Bahamas	X	X
Bahrain	X	X
Bangladesh	0.27	0.00
Barbados	0.19	0.05
Belarus	0.37	0.93
Belgium	0.17	0.41
Belize	0.06	0.00
Benin	0.17	0.07
Bhutan	0.13	X
Bolivia	0.44	0.16

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.32	X
Botswana	X	X
Brazil	0.11	0.54
Brunei	X	X
Bulgaria	0.04	0.10
Burkina Faso	0.00	0.04
Burundi	0.00	0.00
Cabo Verde	X	X
Cambodia	0.01	0.01
Cameroon	0.01	0.00
Canada	0.57[53]	0.51
Central African Republic	0.00	O
Chad	0.04	O
Chile	0.62	0.36
China	O	0.44
Colombia	0.11	0.04
Comoros	0.02	0.04
Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)	0.09	0.00
Costa Rica	0.07	0.16
Côte d'Ivoire	0.00	0.00
Croatia	0.06	0.35
Cuba	O	O
Cyprus	0.35	0.64
Czech Republic (Czechia)	0.02	0.49
Democratic Republic of the Congo	0.01	O
Denmark	0.07	0.26
Djibouti	X	X
Dominica	X	X
Dominican Republic	0.15	0.36

53. For more, please visit https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2025004/article/00002-eng.htm.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Ecuador	0.23	0.55
Egypt	0.27	0.08
El Salvador	0.29	0.52
Equatorial Guinea	X	X
Eritrea	X	X
Estonia	0.09	0.08
Eswatini	0.00	0.00
Ethiopia	0.02	0.01
Fiji	0.65	O
Finland	0.09	0.38
France	0.12	0.55
Gabon	0.00	X
Gambia	0.07	0.00
Georgia	0.04	X
Germany	0.14	0.32
Ghana	0.04	0.03
Greece	0.27	O
Grenada	X	X
Guatemala	0.06	0.34
Guinea	0.02	0.03
Guinea-Bissau	0.03	O
Guyana	0.63	0.76
Haiti	0.01	0.01
Honduras	0.00	0.46
Hong Kong	0.27[54]	0.39[55]
Hungary	0.03	0.16
Iceland	0.21	0.42
India	0.19	0.07
Indonesia	0.10	0.13

54. For more, visit https://www.eduhk.hk/ssps/zh-hant/news-events/news/hkied-study-disparity-higher-education-attainment-widening-between-rich-and-poor.
55. For details, please see https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/web_table.html?id=110-06812#.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Iran	X	X
Iraq	0.15	0.06
Ireland	0.31	0.48
Israel	X	0.41
Italy	0.80	O
Jamaica	0.23	0.00
Japan	X	0.34
Jordan	0.11	0.26
Kazakhstan	0.21	0.21
Kenya	0.07	0.04
Kiribati	0.09	0.31
Korea, North	X	X
Korea, South	0.84[56]	0.53
Kosovo	X	X
Kuwait	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	0.22	0.18
Laos	0.16	X
Latvia	0.13	0.13
Lebanon	X	X
Lesotho	0.00	0.02
Liberia	0.00	0.07
Libya	X	X
Liechtenstein	X	X
Lithuania	0.02	0.10
Luxembourg	0.45	0.34
Macau	X	X
Madagascar	0.00	0.04
Malawi	0.03	O
Malaysia	X	X

56. For more details, please visit https://www.kedi.re.kr/eng/kedi/cmmn/file/fileDown.do?menuNo=200014&atchFileId=FILE_000000000005403&fileSn=1&bbsId=.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Maldives	X	X
Mali	0.00	0.00
Malta	0.79	0.87
Marshall Islands	X	X
Mauritania	0.00	0.07
Mauritius	X	X
Mexico	0.38	0.57
Micronesia	X	X
Moldova	0.03	0.02
Monaco	X	X
Mongolia	0.09	0.21
Montenegro	0.31	0.46
Morocco	X	X
Mozambique	0.00	0.00
Myanmar	0.04[57]	X
Namibia	0.02	0.00
Nauru	X	X
Nepal	0.05	O
Netherlands	0.13	0.42
New Zealand	0.55[58]	0.50
Nicaragua	0.17	0.40
Niger	0.00	0.00
Nigeria	0.02	0.01
North Macedonia	0.17	0.05
Norway	0.08	0.18
Oman	X	X
Pakistan	0.07	0.03
Palau	X	X
Palestine	0.47	0.43

57. Further details can be found here: https://cerj.educ.cam.ac.uk/archive/v11_2024/pdf/CERJ_Vol11_310-331.pdf.
58. For more, please see https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/going-on-to,-and-achieving-in,-higher-level-tertiary-education.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
Panama	0.23	0.51
Papua New Guinea	X	X
Paraguay	0.27	0.51
Peru	0.54	0.56
Philippines	0.12	0.08
Poland	0.05	0.21
Portugal	0.74	O
Puerto Rico	X	X
Qatar	X	X
Romania	0.14	0.18
Russia	0.35[59]	0.76
Rwanda	0.02	0.02
Saint Kitts and Nevis	X	X
Saint Lucia	X	X
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	X	X
Samoa	0.11	0.16
San Marino	X	X
Sao Tome and Principe	0.04	0.48
Saudi Arabia	X	X
Senegal	0.04	0.19
Serbia	0.37	0.13
Seychelles	X	X
Sierra Leone	0.00	0.02
Singapore	X	0.17
Slovakia	0.25	0.54
Slovenia	0.06	0.26
Solomon Islands	X	X
Somalia	0.03	X
South Africa	0.43[60]	X

59. More information can be found here: https://populationandeconomics.pensoft.net/article/149154/.
60. For more details, see http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/92-01-06/92-01-062018.pdf.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
South Sudan	O	0.00
Spain	0.51	O
Sri Lanka	X	0.04[61]
Sudan	0.11	0.17
Suriname	0.01	0.27
Sweden	0.11	0.16
Switzerland	0.11	0.20
Syria	0.16	X
Taiwan	X	X
Tajikistan	0.36	0.28
Tanzania	0.00	0.00
Thailand	0.23	0.30
Timor-Leste	0.07	0.14
Togo	0.00	0.03
Tonga	0.36	X
Trinidad and Tobago	0.03	X
Tunisia	0.19	0.33
Turkey	0.59[62]	0.34[63]
Turkmenistan	0.17	0.11
Tuvalu	0.11	O
Uganda	0.01	0.60
Ukraine	0.47	0.27
United Arab Emirates	X	X
United Kingdom	X	0.39[64]
United Kingdom - England	0.59[65]	X
United Kingdom - Northern Ireland	0.64[66]	X

61. For more information, please see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388041945_Free_University_Education_in_Sri_Lanka_Is_It_Ben-_efited_for_Poor_Households.
62. More details can be found here: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272775713000502#tbl0015.
63. For details, please see the 'Distribution of individuals' educational attainment level by the parents' educational attainment level' dataset here: https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=egitim-kultur-spor-ve-turizm-105&dil=2.
64. For more please visit https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/routes_into_work_(16_to_29_years)/highest_qualification/latest.
65. Detailed statistics can be found here: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2023-24
66. For more information, please visit https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#widening_participation.
67. More details can be found here: https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/report-on-widening-access-2023-24/.
68. For more details, please visit https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#widening_participation.

Country/Jurisdiction	Higher Education Participation – SEB Equality Index	Higher Education Attainment – SEB Equality Index
United Kingdom - Scotland	0.60[67]	X
United Kingdom - Wales	0.72[68]	X
United States of America	0.81[69]	0.33
Uruguay	0.12	0.55
Uzbekistan	0.22	0.22
Vanuatu	X	X
Vatican City (Holy See)	X	X
Venezuela	0.32	0.55
Vietnam	0.49	0.40
Yemen	0.07	0.03
Zambia	0.00	0.00
Zimbabwe	0.06	0.10

69. More details can be found here: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_302.30.asp.

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