

# Right to higher education: funding mechanisms and multidimensional segregation

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## **What are the challenges to the right to higher education from your perspective/area of expertise (geographic, legal, normative, societal, educational, etc)?**

In recent decades, in Europe as in North America, the access to higher education has been massified. In some countries this massification occurred without democratization, since students with different economic, gender or racial characteristics cannot access the same institutions, fields or diplomas. The recent dynamics of a renewed globalization of higher education reinforce this hierarchization. The rankings, by their very form, suppose that higher education is a unidimensional and hierarchical space, by opposition to a more qualitative and multidimensional representation in terms of reputation (Hazelkorn, 2015 ; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2015).

Since these rankings orient the students, the best-ranked universities can be more selective and apply higher tuition fees (as well as gather more alumni donations). As such, when public policies are based on rankings and other indicators of excellence, public funding is also concentrated at the top universities (in France for example, 80% of excellence grants go to 20% of the institutions). The simplistic representation of rankings is therefore achieved through these mechanisms and higher education becomes increasingly hierarchized.

A small group of top universities are able to select (through tests and high fees) students applying from all over the world, but with very similar economic backgrounds and scholar records. On the other end, this creaming effect (removing the “best” students) leaves second or third tier institutions with students that failed to be selected, or did not apply to the top universities. This hierarchization of universities, therefore, leads to the segregation of students.

In this context, the right to higher education is qualitatively challenged: all candidates can access higher education, but some can access a more qualitative and better funded education with more research links. Consequently, opportunities to enter the job market are unequally distributed. This, finally, completes the circle, since student loans are granted according to these expected opportunities.

**A future aim is to work towards a series of guiding principles on the right to higher education. These would be global guidelines that would be used in and adaptable to various contexts. They would reflect existing legally binding instruments (not create new standards). They would provide guidance to States and other higher education stakeholders on how to uphold and advance the right to higher education. What would you consider essential for inclusion in these guiding principles?**

To ensure that the right to higher education is not deviated by a strong segregation, the openness of universities can be measured. Segregation indicators can consider several dimensions, such as economic and social background, race, residence, gender, former academic curricula, disability, etc. Indicators can be measured at different scales simultaneously, in order to ensure that openness is homogeneous within the institution, and not the result of the aggregation of differently segregated components. Recent publications in the case of France propose different methodologies to measure openness and segregation (Avouac & Harari-Kermadec, 2022 ; Blanchard *et al.*, 2020) and show a worrying dynamic.

According to national specificities, diverse regulations can be designed to address the segregation of student populations in different universities. In market driven countries, taxes or a tuition fee cap, can be used to disincentivize top universities from selecting homogeneous student populations, while the collected funding can be channeled to the most open universities. In countries with a centralized application platform, like France, quotas of applicants are already in place but are very ineffective. Gradually tightening the constraints could make possible to aim for convergence.

## References:

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