



Access & Geopolitics: Next Steps in Tackling the Equity Crisis in Global Higher Education

A WAHEN, CGHE & SKOPE Research Conference

Tuesday 3 June 2025 10am - 5pm (BST)





Background

Across the world, policies promoting equitable access to higher education are facing a populist backlash. Existing inequalities are themselves fuelling suspicion and resentment of equity and diversity policies. At the same time, fewer than 20% of states have specific policies or have set targets for tackling inequalities in participation, progression and success. Fewer still are addressing the needs of the most marginalised, such as people with disabilities. The costs of funding fair access initiatives are often prohibitive, and the rise of private higher education provision presents new challenges.

This one-day hybrid research conference brings together leading scholars, practitioners and policy influencers from around the world to examine the most urgent challenges in equitable access, participation and progression within higher education from across the globe:

- The politics – and geopolitics – of widening participation
- The challenge of financing access
- Private provision and higher education as a public good
- Populism and the equity ‘backlash’
- The challenge of generating meaningful participation data

Featuring 30 research papers from over 20 countries, the conference offers a vital opportunity to engage with one of the most pressing and globally relevant conversations in higher education today.

This conference is organised by the [World Access to Higher Education Network \(WAHEN\)](#), the [Centre for Global Higher Education \(CGHE\)](#) and the [Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance \(SKOPE\)](#). Launched in December 2024, WAHEN is the first global network focused on addressing inequalities in higher education access and success. It is led by a board of world-leading organisations including the World Bank, UNESCO IESALC, Lumina Foundation, The Saville Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, University of California, Berkeley, University of Oxford and more. CGHE researches the inequalities within, and consequences of, the globalisation of higher education, and SKOPE focuses on policy and practice at the intersection of education, skills, and employment.



Tuesday 3 June 2025

10am – 5pm (BST)

Online and 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Time (in BST)	Focus/activity	Venue
9:15am	Guest arrival for registration	
10am – 10.10am	Welcome and Introductions Dr David Mills , <i>Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE)</i>	Seminar Room A Click to join on Teams
10.10am - 10.30am	Opening Plenary Chair: Professor Graeme Atherton , <i>Director of World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Dr Jamil Salmi, <i>Global Tertiary Education Expert</i>	
10.30am - 10.50am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Professor Rachel Brooks, <i>Professor of Higher Education, University of Oxford and President of British Sociological Association</i>Professor Johanna Waters, <i>Professor of Human Geography, UCL</i>	
10.50am – 11.10am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Professor Shamit Saggat, <i>Executive Director of Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success</i>	
11.10am – 11.30am	Questions and Answers	
11.30am - 11.45am	Break	Pring's Café
11:45am – 1:05pm	Paper Session 1A: Financing Equity	Seminar Room A Click to join on Teams
	Paper Session 1E: Lived Experiences, Student Journeys, and Promoting Inclusion Across Systems	Seminar Room E Click to join on Teams
	Paper Session 1G: Politics and Policy: Rethinking Systems and Strategies in Higher Education	Seminar Room G Click to join on Teams
	Paper Session 1K: Geopolitics and Global Mobility	Seminar Room K Click to join on Teams

Time (in BST)	Focus/activity	Venue
1:05pm – 2:05pm	Lunch	Pring's Café
2:05pm – 2:45pm	<p>Panel Discussion: What can the UK learn from global discussions about widening access?</p> <p>Chaired by Dr James Robson, <i>Director of the Centre for Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> John Blake, <i>Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students</i> Dr Samina Khan, <i>Director for Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, University of Oxford</i> Professor Graeme Atherton, <i>Director of World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN)</i> Danielle Watkis, <i>DPhil student, Department of Education, University of Oxford</i> 	Seminar Room A Click to join on Teams
2:45pm – 3:05pm	Questions and Answers	
3:05pm – 3:20pm	Break	Pring's Café
3:20pm – 4:40pm	<p>Paper Session 2A: Private Provision and Equity</p>	Seminar Room A Click to join on Teams
	<p>Paper Session 2E: Pathways and Barriers: Understanding and Supporting Underrepresented Learners in Higher Education</p>	Seminar Room E Click to join on Teams
	<p>Paper Session 2G: Politics and Policy: Rethinking Systems and Strategies in Higher Education</p>	Seminar Room G Click to join on Teams
	<p>Paper Session 2K: Equity without Borders: Global Strategies for Inclusive Higher Education</p>	Seminar Room K Click to join on Teams
4:40pm – 4:50pm	<p>Closing remarks Dr David Mills, <i>Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE)</i></p>	Seminar Room A Click to join on Teams
4:50pm	End of event	

Paper sessions 1: 11.45am – 1.05pm (BST)

Paper Session 1A: Financing Equity (click to join on Teams)

Paper 1 (11.45am – 12.05pm BST)	<p>The Failures of Capitalism in Promoting Equitable Access to Higher Education</p> <p><i>Mohamad Taufiq Morshidi, Graduate Student, Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya</i></p> <p>Global initiatives for inclusive higher education are sidetracked by populist backlash, capitalism's inequities, and weakened DEI policies. Marginalised communities remain excluded, and privatisation strengthens inequities. Wider society trends, including reduced DEI initiatives and suppression of dissent (e.g. student arrests over Palestine), illustrate capitalism's priority for profit over equity.</p>
Paper 2 (12.05pm -12.25pm BST)	<p>Breaking Barriers: Enhancing Financial Access for Low-Income Students in Indonesian Higher Education</p> <p><i>Elva Retnawati, PhD student, Huazhong University of Science and Technology</i></p> <p>Access to higher education remains a significant challenge for low-income students in Indonesia, primarily due to financial constraints. Despite government initiatives like the Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP) and the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, many low-income students still struggle to afford tuition, living expenses, and academic resources.</p>
Paper 3 (12.25pm – 12.45pm BST)	<p>Aid to higher education during the SDGs: Donor interests trump recipients' access needs</p> <p><i>Savo Heleta, Research associate, Nelson Mandela University; Logan Cochrane, Associate Professor, College of Public Policy, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar</i></p> <p>We analyse aid flows to higher education to assess whether DAC donors follow their commitment to support countries in need. Findings indicate that geopolitical, strategic and other donor priorities, rather than the needs in recipient countries, have influenced donors' choices of aid recipients during the first seven years of SDG implementation.</p>
Paper 4 (12.45pm - 1.05pm BST)	<p>Perspectives of Elite University Students on the Distribution of Higher Education Opportunities in England</p> <p><i>Paulina Rodriguez and Gonzalo Hidalgo, Postdoctoral Researchers, University of Oxford</i></p> <p>This study explores how undergraduate students at a prestigious UK university perceive the causes and consequences of the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and the policies they support. Through interviews and an interactive task, it examines their views on the current and ideal distribution of opportunities, highlighting how socio-economic backgrounds shape perceptions of fairness in higher education.</p>

Paper Session 1E: Lived Experiences, Student Journeys, and Promoting Inclusion Across Systems (click to join on Teams)

<p>Paper 1 (11.45am – 12.05pm BST)</p>	<p>Navigating Whiteness in Education: A Pasifika Perspective</p> <p><i>Vaoiva Natapu-Ponton, Senior Research Fellow, Pathways in Place, Griffith University</i></p> <p>From commencement of studies to completion, supporting students to navigate educative spaces despite limited access or resource support is fundamental. Moreover, traversing these spaces as a Pacific educator in high schools and as an academic in tertiary spaces, has required immersion in understanding a myriad of expectations that have been unfamiliar. Making the unfamiliar, familiar, will be explored.</p>
<p>Paper 2 (12.05pm -12.25pm BST)</p>	<p>Relative privilege: the politics of widening participation at lower-tier higher education institutions in China</p> <p><i>Yushan Xie, PhD researcher, University of Oxford</i></p> <p>This paper examines 37 student narratives from three lower-tier Chinese universities, exploring the paradox of relative privilege: a degree essential in a credential-driven society, yet one signals marginality. The paper offers a counter-narrative to neoliberal and meritocratic frameworks and aims to contribute to scholarship on the politics of widening participation.</p>
<p>Paper 3 (12.25pm – 12.45pm BST)</p>	<p>Strongarmed by Silence: How Inaction Sustains the Exclusion of Students with Vision Impairment from STEM Education?</p> <p><i>Emmanuel Sasu Boakye, MPhil Candidate, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology</i></p> <p>Numerous studies have documented active barriers to inclusion of SVI in STEM education. However, a critical gap remains in understanding the role of passive exclusionary tools such as silence. Hence this study examines how silence operates as an exclusionary tool, rendering educational inequities of SVIs in STEM education invisible.</p>
<p>Paper 4 (12.45pm - 1.05pm BST)</p>	<p>Understanding Rural Youth Journeys to and through Higher Education in Ghana</p> <p><i>Papa Kojo Botsio, Doctoral Researcher (DPhil Candidate), University of Oxford</i></p> <p>This study uses narrative and ethnographic techniques to investigate rural youth's life journeys to and through university in Ghana. It highlights the barriers and support structures that they encounter on their journeys, especially at specific inflection points or 'milestones to access,' and how these may be addressed from their viewpoints.</p>

**Paper Session 1G: Politics and Policy:
Rethinking Systems and Strategies in Higher Education (click to join on Teams)**

<p>Paper 1 (11.45am – 12.05pm BST)</p>	<p>Intersectionality in Higher Educational Institutions: Design and implementation strategies. The University of Malta experience</p> <p><i>JosAnn Cutajar, Head of Department Gender and Sexualities and Chair of the Committee for Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee; Nadia Abdilla, Equity Coordinator and PhD Candidate, University of Malta</i></p> <p>In an era where anti-woke discourse increasingly challenges initiatives promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI), universities must reaffirm their commitment to fostering inclusive environments. This paper underscores the importance of DEI training within higher education and highlights the University of Malta's efforts in this regard.</p>
<p>Paper 2 (12.05pm -12.25pm BST)</p>	<p>Balancing Worlds - Navigating Pacific Wellbeing and Cultural Integrity within Australian Higher Education</p> <p><i>Tofa Amanda Moors-Mailei, Manager, Indigenous Outreach, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology, Sydney; Bronwyn Williams, Senior Project Officer - Future Student Engagement, Western Sydney University; Vaoiva Natapu-Ponton, Senior Research Fellow, Pathways in Place, Griffith University; Paniani Patu, Operations Manager, The Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, University of Sydney</i></p> <p>This paper explores how Pacific educators in Australia's higher education system navigate the tension between Western institutional norms and Pacific worldviews. Grounded in Pacific wellbeing frameworks, it reflects on balancing leadership, cultural responsibilities and relational values, while building respectful, reciprocal relationships that centre collective wellbeing and disrupt dominant individualistic academic structures.</p>
<p>Paper 3 (12.25pm – 12.45pm BST)</p>	<p>Steps Required for Tackling the Equity Crisis in Higher Education in India</p> <p><i>Bipin Kumar Thakur, Professor, S G T B Khalsa College, University of Delhi</i></p> <p>There is requirement of a new constitutional amendment through which the State shall provide free education to all eligible persons up to college/ university level. Among the other steps required to strengthen the access to higher education; the increasing dropout rate of students at secondary schools might be mitigated; vacancies at higher educational institutions must be filled at regular levels.</p>
<p>Paper 4 (12.45pm - 1.05pm BST)</p>	<p>Reforming the 'Right' Way: Market, Hypernationalism, and Curriculum Vigilantism in Indian Higher Education</p> <p><i>Manasi Thapliyal Navani, Assistant Professor, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi</i></p> <p>The paper engages with discourse around reforms in higher education in India and situates it within neoliberal hypernationalist imaginaries that public higher education institutions find themselves subjected to. Through a case study of recent HE reforms the paper explores how the conservative right appropriates the 'democratisation of access' discourse to visualise and promote higher education markets, and at the same time draws on liberal education discourse to champion academic reforms emphasising critical thinking.</p>

Paper Session 1K: Geopolitics and Global Mobility (click to join on Teams)

Paper 1 (11.45am – 12.05pm BST)	<p>The Expansion of Higher Education: Contextual Influences on Outcomes</p> <p><i>Golo Henseke, Associate Professor, UCL</i></p> <p>This analysis explores how context shapes higher education's contributions to economic and social outcomes. Cross-country comparisons reveal education's benefits vary by institutional arrangements, labour markets, and policy frameworks. The research calls for a broader examination of the conditions under which higher education can benefit individuals and society.</p>
Paper 2 (12.05pm -12.25pm BST)	<p>Is It Worthwhile to Study Abroad? The Experiences of Self-Funded Students from a Non-Double First-Class University in the Less-Developed Region of China</p> <p><i>Yan Deng and Aijing Song, Faculty Members, Yunnan Normal University</i></p> <p>One of the critical concerns about the study abroad is the elitism caused by students' social-economic status. The students in top universities are luckier than their peers in ordinary universities for much more chances to be funded. Is it still worthwhile for unlucky ones to fund their own studying abroad?</p>
Paper 3 (12.25pm – 12.45pm BST)	<p>Bridging the Divide: Enhancing Student Success in Accounting Education Through Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) Institutions</p> <p><i>Sedzani Musundwa Musundwa, Senior Lecturer, University of South Africa</i></p> <p>This study examines how ODeL institutions, particularly UNISA, can better support disadvantaged students in accounting education. Using qualitative insights and guided by Transactional Distance Theory, it highlights key barriers—like poor communication, digital disparities, and rigid systems—and offers actionable reforms to enhance access, engagement, and success in distance learning.</p>
Paper 4 (12.45pm - 1.05pm BST)	<p><i>Discussion</i></p>

Paper sessions 2: 3.20pm – 4.40pm (BST)

Paper Session 2A: Private Provision and Equity (click to join on Teams)	
Paper 1 (3.20pm – 3.40pm BST)	<p>Private provision and higher education as a public good in Africa: Implications for equity and quality</p> <p><i>Edward Mboyonga, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of the Free State</i></p> <p>Despite the proliferation of private universities in Africa, questions have arisen as to whether they have delivered on widening access to, increasing participation in, and maintaining quality. Focusing on Malawi and Zambia, I examine the contributions of private universities in the provision of higher education as a public good.</p>
Paper 2 (3.40pm – 4.00pm BST)	<p>The Impact of Private Higher Education Provision on Equity and Access: A Comparative Analysis of East Africa and Europe</p> <p><i>Fredrick Githui, Lecturer, KCA University</i></p> <p>This paper explores how private higher education influences equity and access in East Africa and Europe. It compares policies, affordability, and enrollment trends, highlighting challenges and opportunities in ensuring inclusive education across both regions amidst the growing role of private institutions in higher learning.</p>
Paper 3 (4.00pm – 4.20pm BST)	<p>Elite Private Higher Education in Malaysia and Pakistan: Contributions, Insights, Nuances, and Transformative Possibilities</p> <p><i>Brendan Ch'ng, Lecturer, Taylor's University; Phan Le Ha, Honorary Professor, IOE - Culture, Communication and Media, UCL; Muhammad Adil Iqbal, Department of International Business and Marketing, NUST Business School (NBS), National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan; Mohammad Moninoor Roshid, Department of Language Education, Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh</i></p> <p>This presentation attempts to highlight the overlooked nuances and contested contributions of (elite) private higher education institutions in postcolonial Malaysia and Pakistan, which are often criticised for perpetuating elitism instead of being recognised for their contributions as providers of higher education as a public good in these Global South contexts.</p>
Paper 4 (4.20pm – 4.40pm BST)	<p>Private funding for public good and public funding for private good? Thinking of the democratization of Higher Education in Brazil in terms of access, success and belonging</p> <p><i>Ester Macedo, Leader of Research and Development in the Department of Higher Education Quality Assessment, National Institute of Studies and Research in Education (INEP), Brazilian Ministry of Education</i></p> <p>Using the expansion of the Brazilian Higher Education system as a case study, I present Jane Roland Martin's critique of the educational ideal and Iris Marion Young's politics of difference as frameworks to conceptualise the democratization of HE in ways to foster not only access, but also success and belonging.</p>

Paper Session 2E: Pathways and Barriers: Journeys to Access: Understanding and Supporting Underrepresented Learners in Higher Education (click to join on Teams)

<p>Paper 1 (3.20pm – 3.40pm BST)</p>	<p>Multiple Inequalities at the Beginning of University Life: The Case of Southern Patagonia, Argentina</p> <p><i>Lucrecia Agustina Sotelo, Network Director and Director of the University's School of Education, Red de Estudios Sobre los Inicios a la Vida Universitaria, Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia Austral</i></p> <p>This research analyses inequalities at the beginning of university life in Southern Patagonia, exploring how sociocultural, economic, and territorial factors impact the student experience.</p>
<p>Paper 2 (3.40pm – 4.00pm BST)</p>	<p>Financing Equitable Access to Higher Education in Ghana: Challenges and Opportunities Amid Rising Demand</p> <p><i>Waleed Hijazi and Latasha Wilson, Ed.M Candidates, Harvard Graduate School of Education</i></p> <p>The paper analyses Ghana's higher education financing, highlighting inequities in access due to underfunded loan schemes, rural disparities, and private sector costs. It proposes income-contingent repayments and employer partnerships to improve equity and sustainability amid rising demand.</p>
<p>Paper 3 (4.00pm – 4.20pm BST)</p>	<p>Pathways into and through Higher Education for young people with experience of children's social care</p> <p><i>Leon Feinstein, Professor of Education and Children's Social Care, University of Oxford</i></p> <p>This report provides new data on patterns of entry to higher education (HE) of young people in England with experience of children's social care. The study draws on newly matched national, administrative datasets in relation to a birth year cohort of young people with stable residence in England from the age of 11 onwards, born between 1st September 1998 and 31st August 1999. The report provides basic statistical findings on the general research question: How do these different groups of young people with experience of children's social care tend to differ in their progression to and through HE compared to each other and other young people?</p>
<p>Paper 4 (4.20pm – 4.40pm BST)</p>	<p>Providing meaningful access for success: A case study</p> <p><i>Britta Zawada, Formerly Council on Higher Education, South Africa</i></p> <p>Conceptually, to access further education successfully, a student needs certain student attributes. Based on a composite case study, this paper argues that a school leaving certificate which does not equip students with the relevant attributes to learn successfully at the next level of education, hampers access with success.</p>

**Paper Session 2G: Politics and Policy:
Rethinking Systems and Strategies in Higher Education** (click to join on Teams)

Paper 1 (3.20pm – 3.40pm BST)	<p>The current right-wing government’s reaction to free access to Argentine public universities</p> <p><i>Mario Villarreal, Teacher and researcher, Universidad Nacional de Villa María</i></p> <p>The paper presents the main measures implemented by President Javier Milei’s administration regarding public universities. Data on the impact on university education and Argentina’s science and technology system will be presented.</p>
Paper 2 (3.40pm – 4.00pm BST)	<p>Progress in the implementation of the National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Austria. What promotes and what challenges the process?</p> <p><i>Maria Keplinger, Policy officer and Head of department on HE development; Helga Posset, Policy officer and Deputy Head of department, BMFWF - Federal Ministry of Women, Science, and Research Austria</i></p> <p>The article reflects on success factors and challenging developments concerning the National strategy on the social dimension of higher education in Austria.</p>
Paper 3 (4.00pm – 4.20pm BST)	<p>Equity at a Crossroads: Rethinking Private Provision in Ghana’s Higher Education</p> <p><i>Naomi Alabi, Lecturer and Director Legal and International Affairs, Accra Metropolitan University</i></p> <p>This paper interrogates Ghana’s declining private higher education enrolment against the backdrop of growing public sector constraints. Grounded in literature and institutional experience, it critically explores systemic barriers including regulatory isomorphism and equity deficits while advancing a timely case for policy reforms to reposition private provision within a diversified, inclusive tertiary landscape</p>
Paper 4 (4.20pm – 4.40pm BST)	<p>Reexamining the Quota System in Bangladesh’s Higher Education: Trends, Gaps, and Policy Implications</p> <p><i>Nowreen Yasmin, Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania</i></p> <p>The session examines how the quota system during admission has shaped the status of equitable access to higher education in Bangladesh. It concentrates on enrollment patterns, challenges in data use, and the broader policy landscape, particularly in the light of the 2024 Quota Reform protest and the resulting political changes.</p>

Paper Session 2K: Equity without Borders: Global Strategies for Inclusive Higher Education (click to join on Teams)

<p>Paper 1 (3.20pm – 3.40pm BST)</p>	<p>Financing Equity: Racialised Financial Burdens and Global Pathways for African American and Latino Students in U.S. Higher Education</p> <p><i>Karla Fraser, Higher Education Consultant and Founder, Roseapple Global, LLC; Craig DeLarge, Change Leadership Trainer and Educator, WiseWorking LLC</i></p> <p>The paper examines racialised financial barriers in U.S. higher education affecting African American and Latino students. Using empirical data and global comparisons, it explores debt-free models and international degree pathways as potential equity strategies. The session calls for reimagining affordability and access through a culturally responsive lens.</p>
<p>Paper 2 (3.40pm – 4.00pm BST)</p>	<p>Experience of the UNESCO Chair of Inclusion in Higher Education in Chile</p> <p><i>Karla Moreno Matus, International Programmes Officer, Universidad de O'higgins</i></p> <p>The UNESCO Chair of Inclusion in Higher Education in Chile has led key initiatives to address equity gaps in university admissions for over 30 years. Since the 1990s, researchers at Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH), under Francisco Javier Gil's leadership, have developed evidence-based programs that challenge structural inequalities. These efforts include the 5% Bonification Program (1991), the UNESCO Propedeutic Program (2007), and the Ranking Point Program (2012), all of which paved the way for PACE (2014), a national policy for equitable access.</p>
<p>Paper 3 (4.00pm – 4.20pm BST)</p>	<p>From Limitations to Deprivations: Examining Challenges, Global Policies, and Geopolitical Factors Affecting Afghan Refugee Women's Access to Fair Higher Education in Host Countries (Pakistan and Iran)</p> <p><i>Ayeda Sediqi, Graduate Student, formerly University of Oxford and currently University of Benaloud, Iran; Baseer Ullah Quraishi, Institute of Management Science Peshawar Pakistan</i></p> <p>This paper explores the multifaceted challenges Afghan refugee women face in accessing fair higher education in Pakistan and Iran. It examines systemic limitations, international policies, and geopolitical dynamics, offering critical insights into how these factors collectively shape and often restrict educational opportunities for this marginalized population.</p>
<p>Paper 4 (4.20pm – 4.40pm BST)</p>	<p>Universitas 21 - A Global Perspective on Collecting Data to Support Staff and Students from Marginalised Communities</p> <p><i>Amber Bartlett, U21 Global Education – Project Manager, Universitas 21</i></p> <p>U21 will share approaches to working with an international audience and addressing cultural differences to generate accurate and representative data on diverse programme participants. This session will discuss the challenges encountered in confidently collecting, reporting, and acting on equity data, and overcoming these obstacles for the benefit of underrepresented participants.</p>



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