

Commentary: Access to quality education: the “new elite”?

The recent decades have been characterized as a move from elite to mass higher education. If in 1995, the global population of 5.7 bln had 16% of enrollment in tertiary education (TE); then in 2024, with a population of 8.1 bln, the same figure has grown to 42%. This achievement has been possible due to the exponential growth of TE providers, especially the private sector, with the number of TE institutions growing from ~21,000 in 1995 to ~92,000 in 2024! A spectacular expansion, indeed, yet disparities persist (Salmi, 2023a) and, even more, diversify. As per recent literature and technical reports by international organizations, the concerns over access to TE, inclusion and failure of TE to meet the ever-diversifying needs of learners are persistent (Salmi, 2023b; Salmi, 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). All true since, naturally, with a knowledge-driven economy and information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, requirements for higher intellectual capacity and skills are only going to grow. The tangible point here is still how to ensure TE is well equipped to serve the ever-growing diversification of learner needs and enhance access and inclusion while ensuring *no one is left behind*.

First and foremost, identifying and defining equity groups are paramount to being able to design solutions for each per need. As per Salmi (2022), the list of categories of learners is constantly expanding due to diverse factors – economic, geopolitical, environmental and pandemic, to name but a few. On the other hand, due to the lack of adequate and accurate data, the only categories of population that have been widely researched and served refer to the groups of individuals in the lowest income/wealth groups, women, minorities (ethnic, linguistic, etc.), people with disabilities and students from remote and rural areas. Meanwhile, new categories of equity groups emerge constantly and the challenge of a lack of relevant data to respond to the trends is tangible (Salmi, 2022). A trend in TE that is widely discussed and yet not adequately covered by proper research is the emergence of a new category of students – *the new elite* – who have access not just to education but to “*quality education*,” hence leaving the majority of the student population *behind*.

Three aspects surface when glancing at TE quality assurance from a helicopter view in terms of equity and inclusion: Which education do we refer to when we talk about access and inclusion? What is the success rate of decades of quality revolution and its capacity to ensure inclusion and access to *quality education*? And what is the currency of the quality necessary to achieve *quality education* for all?

First, starting from overarching directives, in 2015, 193 countries committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with Goal Four explicitly calling for inclusion and access to *quality education*. The term has also been cemented in such international directives as UN Regional and Global Recognition Conventions for Tertiary Education Qualifications, the UNESCO Roadmap for HE 2030 – all clearly highlighting the importance of “*quality education*” and access to “*quality education*” for all to ensure *no one is left behind* (UNESCO, 2022). A prominent note to take away: it is not just “education,” it’s “*quality education*” – with all its implications. While noble, the call seems to be way too ambitious.



Let's delve into our reality. As per the UNESCO Roadmap for Higher Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2022), around 56 active conflicts were recorded in 2020, 8 of these being full-scale wars, affecting most acutely Africa, the former Soviet Union countries and nations attacked by the so-called Islamic State. Political crises (including the most recent ones: Israel-Hamas, Russia's invasion of Ukraine), environmental challenges, COVID-19 pandemic have placed great stress on TEIs worldwide, with international realities making these calculations much more complex – all negatively impacting nations' potentials to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals, hence ensuring *no one is left behind*.

Second, on one hand, we have the concept of “*quality education*” the governments committed to UNESCO (2022), and on the other hand, an overview of quality assurance trends for the last couple of decades sends alarming signals in terms of the capacity of QA to ensure balanced global coverage (Karakhanyan, 2022). Throughout more than a century of quality assurance evolution, the noble mission has been to instill trust and credibility in the ability of TE institutions to offer “*quality education*” – the outcomes of which, in turn, could be trusted.

Massive efforts have been invested into it throughout the last decades, but there was always a missing core – sadly, genuine *quality culture* is yet to be experienced by the critical mass of TE providers. In most countries globally, especially with large populations, the systems are built in a way that are hardly able to cover at least 50% of TE provisions. It's clear, given the current situation of QA, talking about access to *quality education* and ensuring *no one is left behind* (UNESCO, 2022) is a bit far-fetched. Of course, some solutions are out there, for example, external stipulations by regulators to include Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), compelling the TEIs to modify admission criteria to meet the external standards. The question that arises is whether TE is merit based or equity driven. By the way, both are not mutually exclusive. Aren't there any creative solutions to maintain the values of merit-based education and yet enable access to “*quality education*” to diverse groups and categories of learners?

Further, is the quality assurance, as we know of, designed to ensure “*quality education?*” The QA community is still struggling with the success rate of current quality assurance measures in achieving what is expected of it – trust and credibility in TE provisions and qualitative transformations in the way faculty delivers classes and students learn. The question that is still prominent is: Is QA serving the purpose it is intended to? I doubt. As per Harvey (2024):

Quality assurance has developed a life of its own that fails to match academic expectations, that leads to over-management of higher education resulting in less concern with delivering a good learning experience and more concern with compliance, ratings and funding (p. 1).

A helicopter view on current trends in global quality assurance compels featuring it as reactive in nature, resulting in incremental changes predominantly influencing organizational and managerial layers of HEIs, while leaving the core – teaching, learning and assessment, and research on the mercy of standards that by nature are designed to evaluate quality of TE provisions through proxies rather than the core. This is serious, and, triggered by national-, regional- and international-level politics, QA clearly firmed itself as a compliance tool to external requirements and less so as an enhancement tool.

A glance at the standards used in diverse contexts – most of them are just a result of regional or international standards transfer and diffusion in new contexts – allows generalization that as much as the ambition of QA is to check for “*quality*” of education, the standards currently in place, by nature, fail to do so. This is partially due to the diverse factors involved in methodologies for measuring student learning achievement, especially within the new learning paradigm, which makes measurement of “*value added of the program*” or “*student learning gain*” challenging (Lemaitre and Karakhanyan, 2020). If meaningful changes are to take place as a result of a robust quality assurance, it cannot happen within the current setup by checking up on compliance to bureaucratic regulation. Rather, quality assurance is worth doing, provided it is geared towards investment in future improvement – fundamental improvement of learning and research – hence, becoming truly transformative (Harvey, 2024).

Now, back to *quality education for all* (SDGs, UNESCO Roadmap for HE) and the “*new elite*.” Extensively, we come across quality assurance practices limited in a way that instead of serving its purposes of enhancing access to *quality education*, most of the times, it reverses by contributing to *elitism* rather than *inclusion*. Unfortunately, access to *quality education* – be it at home or across the borders – is the prerogative of only a small percentage of the global student population due to high costs, among other factors. Given the current quality assurance landscape and the limited capacity of the existing solutions to cover the rapid growth in the number and modalities of TE provision, it seems like the term “*quality education*” gives rise to the “*new elite*” TE, which can enjoy ease of access to high-quality education, obtain knowledge, skills, competencies and, of course, credentials/qualifications that are easily recognized, among other academic, economic and social benefits. Hence, by differentiating between access to education and access to “*quality education*,” the job of academia in achieving the set goals is becoming more challenging. Now, what we, as a QA community, should do to make QA more pro-active and *quality education* more inclusive? This takes us to the third point covered in this Editorial.

Third, a question that begs a response: Which are the actual values that tacitly drive quality education? So far, it seems like we are doing quality assurance for the sake of quality assurance. If we claim quality assurance is the solution to *quality education*, should we not be talking about the core that matters – success rate in student learning achievements? If we are to target the core, what is the *quality capital* to drive *quality education*?

Four types of capital are popular nowadays – cultural capital (e.g. dialect, credentials and social signaling of material items), social capital (i.e. the people you know, the network), economic capital (i.e. financial resources and properties) and human capital (i.e. skills, knowledge and experience possessed by an individual viewed in terms of value or cost to an organization). All four decide the future of an individual and the chances to avail diverse benefits of tertiary learning. An overall look at access to “*quality education*,” without even going deep into the data, demonstrates only the groups of individuals who possess *economic* and *social capital* have higher chances of access (Salmi, 2023b).

While putting together this Editorial, the idea that sparked is what we lack is that “*tacit driving force*” in quality assurance, clear definitions of *quality values* many have been thriving for. For quite a long time, “*quality assurance*” has served the purpose of “*quality assurance*” and not the quality values of transformative power we all have been striving for. Apart from the four types of capital above that drive TE access, what we are missing is “*quality capital*” as currency in *quality education*. *Quality capital* could be defined as a form of educational currency made up of the values, experiences, knowledge and behaviors shared by key stakeholders and supported by valid and accurate data, enabling measurement of the core (student learning, contribution to the body of knowledge), hence continuous data-driven enhancement reinforcing qualitative transformation of the core that matters – genuine behavioral changes (of faculty and students). To achieve the mysterious *quality culture* and *enable quality education* for all, quality and quality assurance do need to change (Harvey, 2024). *Quality capital* could be an answer.

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