



CTEF - IPPTN Special Series on SDG4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education: Part 01

**Flexible learning pathways:
 An international agenda towards social equity and resilient higher education**

Higher education issues

Higher education (HE) has been in a constant process of evolution to cope with global trends and challenges. There are many issues related to HE, but the most current ones are related to the growth of enrolment, diversification in HE, and the Covid-19 crisis.

The global growth of enrolment in HE reportedly reached up to 221 million students in 2017, and is expected to surpass 590 million by 2040. This has resulted in the diversification of HE in terms of numbers, types of HE providers, and study

programmes. It has also led to a wide range of learners from traditional and non-traditional groups (including working adults, part-time students, international students, people returning to HE, and migrants) entering the system.

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted HE globally. The HE community was pushed to reflect on its systems' preparedness and resiliency in responding to the crisis, especially on issues related to flexibility of access, teaching and learning, as well as appropriate infrastructures available at HE institutions.

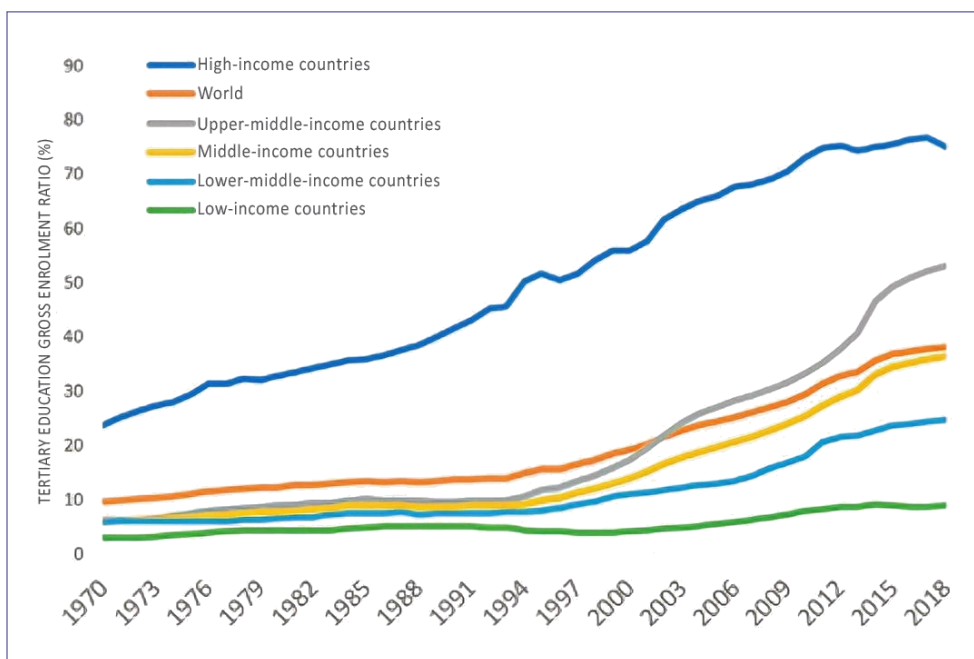


Figure 1: Tertiary education gross enrolment ratio, 1974 – 2018, by country income group (%)

(Source: Martin, M., and Godonoga, A., 2020)

Leaving no one behind

Marginalised and disadvantaged groups in our society often view university education as an unattainable goal. They are also the most affected groups in the Covid-19 pandemic. As the key driver for social, cultural and economic development, HE is called to address and adapt education systems in accordance to **the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (also known as the Education 2030) Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.3.**



The Agenda encourages countries to develop integrated and articulated HE systems that support flexible learning pathways (FLPs), with the goal of strengthening equity and encouraging lifelong learning for all. The good news is that FLPs initiatives have already been implemented in different parts of the world, including Malaysia.

Flexible learning pathways

Definition of FLPs:

'... entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education'
– Education 2030 Agenda

This implies that not only are the pathways flexible, but there are also multiple learning pathways tailored to address the diversity of learners and their learning needs.

Flexible learning systems generate many benefits for individuals and society.

Benefits from flexible learning pathways

- FLPs support equity, which is at the core of SDG4, the Education 2030 Agenda, and national policy across the world;
- FLPs help HE systems to be effective and efficient to accommodate diverse needs; and
- A better result-articulated yet flexible HE systems can result in efficiency gains that help to reduce time and cost to complete a study and open up opportunity to advance to HE levels of learning.

(Source: Martin, M., and Godonoga, A., 2020)

Barriers in developing FLPs exist due to expansion and diversification in HE, which make HE systems become increasingly complex and fragmented. They are reflected in two factors: system-wide and institutional.

Barriers to developing flexible pathways

System-wide factors

- A weak policy environment for flexible learning pathways
- Administrative fragmentation leading to uncoordinated HE systems
- Institutional autonomy limits the capacity of the state to steer change
- Competition between HEIs discourages collaboration

Institutional factors

- Differences between institutions and types of provision, curriculum, pedagogies and assessment
- Institutional culture, hierarchies of prestige and lack of trust between institutions
- Information and guidance missing or ineffective

(Source: Martin, M., and Godonoga, A., 2020)

Reference

Martin, M., and Godonoga, A. (2020). *SDG 4: Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. Taking Stock of Good Practices Internationally. IIEP-UNESCO Working Papers.

Note: The report on the Malaysian case study is available as free electronic version on the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility's (CTEF) website (<https://www.ctef.com.my/our-work/publications>).

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