

# Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 32:

## **What Works for Underrepresented Groups? Identifying Effective Measures for Enhancing Access to Higher Education in Europe**

By Simona Torotcoi, Delia Gologan and Anastasia Kurysheva

European Universities – Critical Futures

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## Working Papers on University Reform

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This working paper series is published by the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The series presents work in progress in Denmark and among an international network of scholars involved in research on universities and higher education.

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The authors of this paper formed one of the project’s working groups, focused on equal access for under-represented groups of students. They presented the paper at the ‘Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference’ (FOHE-BPRC4) on 29-31 January 2020, at Bucharest and it will form a chapter in the forthcoming book *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a New Decade* edited by Adrian Curaj, Ligia Deca, Remus Pricopie, to be published by Springer International Publishing, Cham, Switzerland in August 2020.

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What Works for Underrepresented Groups?  
Identifying Effective Measures for Enhancing Access to Higher  
Education in Europe

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## What works for Underrepresented Groups? Identifying Effective Measures for Enhancing Access to Higher Education in Europe

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### **Abstract:**

Over the last three decades, policy-makers have developed numerous measures, policies, projects and programmes with the intention to increase the enrolment and participation of underrepresented groups, however, little is known about the ways in which such initiatives shape opportunities for potential students. Knowing which of these initiatives work and whether they are achieving their intended goals is of utmost importance for policy-makers across Europe. This paper aims to collect, document, scrutinize and critically analyze the current research literature which assesses the effectiveness of different public initiatives for higher education institutions to widen access for underrepresented groups. At the same time, the aim is to identify gaps and make recommendations for potential further research. Seventeen studies have been identified in this respect and based on the access measures they analyze, they can be categorized as follows: (1) outreach, counselling and mentoring of prospective students; (2) financial aid measures, and (3) preparatory courses and programmes. The findings show that there is little research or information about the actual outcomes of most measures and whether they increase access to higher education. We found a lack of adequate, reliable and consistently collected data about the policy instruments already put in practice. Since there is no excuse for the lack of effective action towards more equitable educational systems, more evidence-based approaches will be necessary to learn from these specific access measures and move forward towards more efficient equity policies.

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## **1. Equity considerations within the Bologna Process**

The Bologna Process (and the subsequent European Higher Education Area - EHEA) represents the most significant and ambitious higher education agenda in Europe with an equity dimension (also known as the social dimension). The Sorbonne Declaration referred to the fact that ‘students should be able to enter the academic world at any time in their professional life and from diverse backgrounds’ (1998, 2), and this was the beginning of the sequence of moments linked to the Bologna Process when countries reiterated their support for integrating a diverse student body within their programmes and structures. Therefore, in 2001, through the Prague Communiqué (2001), member states were encouraged to create lifelong learning policies, to facilitate a partnership between higher education institutions and students in promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA, as well as develop policies aiming at the social dimension of higher education, including the access of underrepresented groups. The 2003 Berlin Communiqué (2003) acknowledged that ‘the need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the EHEA, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level’. This trend continued in the ministerial conferences after 2003, as it became clear that the social dimension includes measures taken by governments ‘to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects and to provide them with guidance and counselling services with a view to widening access’ (Bergen

Communiqué 2005). As of 2007, participating countries were asked to report on the actions taken at the national-level and especially on the effectiveness of national action plans and measures targeting the social dimension of higher education (i.e., access participation and completion measures for underrepresented students). Some of the actions included providing adequate student support and services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning (Bucharest Communiqué 2012), and implementing the EHEA social dimension strategy (Yerevan Communiqué 2015). However, the social dimension of the Bologna Process remains one policy action with very few concrete results.

Despite increasing access to tertiary education, higher education systems remain highly stratified (Marginson 2016), gender imbalances still exist between different fields of study, and students with an immigrant background or whose parents do not have an academic background, have lower chances to achieve a tertiary education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018).

### **1.1. The research question and problems of defining access, equity and effectiveness**

This paper focuses specifically on measures and interventions that higher education institutions take to widen access for equity groups.<sup>4</sup> For this purpose, the paper will collect, document, scrutinize and critically analyze the current research literature (e.g. existing publications and evaluation reports/studies) that assesses the effectiveness of these types of policies, aiming, at the same time, to identify gaps and make recommendations for both potential further research and for policy-makers. The main research question is: what is the relative effectiveness of

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<sup>4</sup> It is part of a larger effort and preoccupation of the authors to address all types of measures and interventions targeting reducing inequities, but this paper only presents the results connected to different types of access measures.

different access measures implemented at the university level, and which characteristics moderate their effectiveness?

Before proceeding to the actual research, it is worth mentioning who are the *underrepresented groups*, what is defined as *access* and *equity*, and how *effectiveness* and *impact* can be measured. As far as the *underrepresented groups* are concerned, the authors chose to refer to a broad category of students, including those with diverse, ethnic, cultural and migration background, sexual identity and orientation, socio-economic background, educational background (alternative pathways, lifelong learners, first-generation students), caring responsibilities, religious background/beliefs, age or students from rural areas (c.f. Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen, and Stöber 2019).

In its narrowest sense, *access* can be defined as entry/admission to higher education (Prodan et al. 2015) while more generally, it can be defined as the ability of people from all backgrounds to access higher education on a reasonably equal basis (Usher and Medow 2010; Wang 2011). This definition is comprehensive in scope and implies that students of all backgrounds must not only be ‘reasonably’ able to take advantage of educational opportunities, but also must be adequately prepared and equipped to do so in order for the system to be considered ‘accessible’. While in both cases, it is merely the starting point, the final goal of access policies is successful participation (Tonks and Farr 2003); for the purpose of this paper, *access* is defined in its narrowest sense.

There is no one single definition of *equity* in higher education policy, but several are prominent both in the literature and among practitioners. Salmi and Bassett (2014) understand it as equality, providing equal opportunities for access to and success in higher education in order to ‘improve the chances of success of under-privileged youths’ and even out the circumstances that are beyond their control (e.g. the financial resources of the family or educational attainment of the parents). Geven (2012) also associates equity with evening out

(previous or existing) inequalities through the special allocation of resources that are translated into higher education policies, and policy instruments. Equity is also sometimes considered to be synonymous with ‘widening participation’ through utilizing tools for ensuring diversity (e.g. affirmative action). Interventions aimed at higher education equity address one or a combination of access, retention and persistence and successful transition to further studies or professional career. Holistic approaches tackle all potential sources of inequity such as socio-economic, ethnic, gender- and disability-based, both at an individual and a system-level, through policy instruments that equalize economic, cultural and social capital within the education system (Geven, 2012).

When it comes to the *effectiveness* of various approaches to increase access to higher education, the authors opted to consider the extent to which a programme has reached the goal(s) that has been set initially, or whether it achieves the set expectations or the goal(s) that were intended or desired by stakeholders. Similarly, Cowan (1985) refers to effectiveness as the ratio of the actual outcome to the possible or the ideal outcome. The three most often used indicators for measuring the *impact* of higher education institutions activities on diversity, equity and inclusion refer to the number/share of students enrolled from less represented/disadvantaged backgrounds, the success stories of the people targeted through the measures, and the graduation rate of students from underrepresented/disadvantaged backgrounds (Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen, and Stöber, 2019). For the purpose of this paper, we will be looking at the first set of indicators but keeping in mind the initial goals and intentions of the measure under consideration.

## **1.2. Literature gap and methodology**

A significant number of countries and higher education institutions have started investing resources and taking on board initiatives aimed at widening access for disadvantaged or

underrepresented groups – that we will refer to from now on as ‘equity groups’. These initiatives include quota systems and preparatory programmes. However, little is known about whether such initiatives actually shape opportunities for potential students. Knowing which of these initiatives work and whether they are achieving the intended goals is of utmost importance for policy-makers. Given the fact that national-level programmes might provide different responses/reactions from higher education institutions (which have a certain level of autonomy in this matter) this paper addresses the relative effectiveness of access initiatives implemented by higher education institutions.

Most research documenting the effectiveness of access policies is based on non-European cases. While in the US there is a considerable amount of research about the effectiveness of access policies on the university level (Pharris-Ciurej, Herting and Hirschman 2012; Perna et al. 2008; Myers et al. 2010), we found very few such studies in the European context. This paper aims to address this gap and map out existing studies.

The existing literature that includes studies within the European context consists of systematic reviews of international evidence on the effectiveness of interventions for widening access, participation and completion rates of equity groups in higher education. For example, Torgerson et al. (2014) and Younger et al. (2019) provide a synthesis of the international evidence, mainly from the US and the UK. Similarly, Herbaut and Geven (2019) selected 71 studies, most of them across the US and a few from Europe, and compared more than 200 causal effects of outreach and financial aid interventions on access and completion. As Perna et al. (2008) claim, efforts to understand why policies and programmes are not working are hampered by the absence of a framework for organizing the myriad efforts designed to reduce participation gaps and, by extension, for demonstrating policy blind spots and redundancies.

In order to generate a systematic analysis, we first made a mapping exercise looking for studies referring to the access policies implemented by higher education institutions and

studies analyzing institutional-level equity policies. This entailed searches of comprehensive education databases such as Web of Science and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) - the world's largest educational database and the most frequently used index for carrying out educational research. The search for the studies was also conducted through the Google Scholar search engine using combinations of search words referring both to the higher education institutions' interventions (e.g. bridging programme) and to underrepresented groups of students (e.g. first-generation students). The selection was first and foremost determined by the availability of studies analyzing institutional-level equity policies. The search was complemented by consulting the bibliography/reference list of related studies, (non-academic) publications of key organizations and structures in the higher education sector in Europe, and by our knowledge of studies on the topic including non-academic studies from different organizations, structures and higher education institutions. In line with similar studies (Younger et al. 2019), we searched publication titles and abstracts in these databases using the keyword 'underrepresented groups' in combination with in/or/and 'higher education', 'tertiary education' or 'universities'. In total, a number of 17 studies written in English have been included in the sample used for this paper, including two that are non-academic (i.e., conducted by organizations with policy-oriented and not research aims).

## **2. Access measures and their effects: What works for underrepresented groups?**

Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen, and Stöber (2019) put forward 12 most frequently used access measures used by universities, among which are: guidance, counselling and mentoring, accessible building and activities, assurance about non-discrimination, part-time study options and flexible courses, financial support, preparatory courses, recognition of prior learning, childcare on campus, positive action, housing support, quotas for students from certain groups/backgrounds, and general positive discrimination measures. Usher (2015) identifies

several categories of measures universities can use to enhance access to higher education, including early intervention strategies designed to eliminate barriers in the educational pipeline prior to tertiary education. Our literature review indicated that access measures can be categorized in three main ways based on the problem they tackle and the phase they intervene in (i.e., during secondary education, during the transition to higher education or after the enrolment in the higher education system).

The first kind of measures is financial aid. It might primarily target students with low socio-economic backgrounds, but other equity groups as well. However, it is widely known that the principal dimensions of inequality overlap in many ways, for example, ethnic minorities are more likely to live in rural areas or peripheral neighbourhoods and, therefore, are more likely to be affected by poverty. Salmi (2018) argues that nowadays financial aid policies are the most commonly used, often in combination with non-monetary aid policies. These measures include tuition-free or partially subsidized higher education, needs-based grants, scholarships and bursaries, student loans, and a variety of funding formulas.

The other two measures are non-financial. The most widespread non-financial policy practices relate to reformed selection procedures, different forms of positive discrimination, and/or preferential admission programmes. Our literature study showed that, among this array of non-financial measures, most studies addressed outreach, counselling and mentoring, and preparatory courses for students to access higher education.

Table 1 summarises the results of the bibliographic search, based on the three main measures identified: blue - outreach, counselling and mentoring; yellow - financial aid; green - preparatory courses and programmes. Table 1 also summarizes the main aim of each study, its data and method, and the main finding with regards to effectiveness ('+' - effective, '-' - negative, or '0' - no effects).

Table 1. Overview of the identified studies conducted within the European context

Author(s) and measure	Aim of the study	Data and method	Effects
<b>Outreach, counselling and mentoring policies</b>			
Gumaelius et al. (2016) Outreach	To describe and compare outreach initiatives aimed at increasing enrolment in engineering programmes (DE, DK, SE, ES, PT)	Self-reported institutional data; comparative analysis	+
Pekkala-Kerr et al. (2015) Information	To test whether the match between educational choices and the demand for skills in the labour market can be enhanced by providing information (FIN)	Randomized field experiment with graduating high-school students	0
Ehlert et al. (2017) General information	To examine whether correct and detailed information on the costs of and returns to higher education increases the likelihood of higher education applications (DE)	Field experiment with less-privileged high school graduates	+
Abbiati et al. (2018) Personalized information	To assess the role of information barriers for patterns of participation in higher education and the related social inequalities (IT)	Randomized experiment with high school seniors	+
Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland (2018) Counselling	To provide an overview of counselling activities targeting disadvantaged learners (AT, DE, ES, IT, LI, UK, RO, DK, SL)	Survey with national student unions	+
Doyle and Griffin (2012) Mentoring	To review Aimhigher's contribution to widening participation for students with non-traditional backgrounds (UK)	Literature review	+
McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007) Mentoring	To determine the success of Aimhigher as a potential mechanism of social justice (UK)	Literature review	-
<b>Financial aid policies</b>			
Fack and Grenet (2015) Fee-waiver	To provide evidence on the impact of a need-based grant on higher education enrolment for low-income students (FR)	Regression discontinuity design	+
Baumgartner and Steiner (2006) Financial aid	To evaluate the effectiveness of student aid targeting students from low-income families (DE)	Difference-in-difference	+/-
Hatt et al. (2005) Bursaries	To explore how higher education institutions administered a national-level bursary scheme (UK)	Institutional databases and interviews with bursary students	+
Lannert and Garaz (2014) Scholarship	To investigate the degree in which the scholarship contributed to enhance access	Online survey, focus groups and interviews with beneficiaries	+
Roma Education Fund (2015) Scholarship mix	To investigate whether the scholarship contributed to the academic trajectory of its beneficiaries	Programme data, and surveys with mentors and beneficiaries	+
<b>Policies comprising in `preparatory courses and programmes`</b>			
Berg (2018) Language classes	To compare the support and integration programmes at different higher education institutions (DE)	Interviews	+
Rostas (2017) Mixed	To understand the impact of measures supporting Roma's access to higher education	Personal experience	+
Pinheiro-Torres and Davies (2008) Mixed	To evaluate the effectiveness of a programme supporting higher ability students from lower socio-economic backgrounds	Programme data	+
Casey, Smith, and Koshy (2011) Mixed	To identify students' responses to the different components of the programme	Programme data; longitudinal study	+
Walker (2010) Pre-university summer school	To assess the impact on enrolment and retention of non-traditional students attending the summer school	Institutional data	+/-

As Table 1 above shows, with some exceptions (i.e., the studies focusing on Aimhigher), the identified studies look at different measures targeting different equity groups of students, in different countries and higher education institutions. Therefore, the findings do not allow for a cross-comparison of the results. Thus, we abstain from making absolute conclusions and cause-effect inferences. Rather, the following section provides a more detailed analysis of the above studies as follows. The section starts by providing (1) a general description of the type of measures under consideration. It then provides (2) several examples of such measures by specifying the university accommodating the measure, the type of measure and its components, its target group and the intended goals of that specific measure. Last but not least, it offers (3) a synthesis of the evidence collected on the effectiveness and impact of the outreach, financial aid and preparatory programmes covered in these studies.

### **3.1 Outreach, counselling and mentoring of prospective students**

Early interventions for eliminating barriers prior to access to higher education include outreach and bridging programmes or services like personal and professional counselling, mentoring and tutoring systems or general academic support. Counselling is applied in a wide range of areas such as education problems, psychological issues, career guidance, or disability guidance, and it can be used as a tool for reducing dropout (Wulz, Gasteriger and Ruland 2018). Counselling can be provided by universities, private associations, NGOs, etc. and can support the increase in demand to access higher education (Wulz, Gasteriger and Ruland 2018). The counselling of prospective students can serve as a source of social capital for first-generation students (Pham and Keenan 2011) helping them to overcome a lack of social capital, assistance, and advice from their families. Career counselling and personal development programmes can also contribute in improving retention rates and results (outcomes). While in some countries, universities have an obligation to provide counselling, in others – especially those with high

demands to access higher education - many private associations or NGOs provide it. Specific counselling is offered to different equity groups based on their needs. Table 2 below exemplifies the different measures within this category implemented by universities.

Table 2. Selected examples of outreach, counselling and mentoring of prospective students

Higher Education Institution	Type of measure and components	Target group	Intended goal(s)
University of Barcelona, Spain	Full tuition scholarship, housing, free language course, mentoring, legal advice, psychological support and dental care	Refugees	Widen access and ensure participation
University College Dublin, Ireland	Outreach - Student Access Leader Programme	Students with disabilities, mature and part-time learners, and students from socio-economic disadvantage	Widen access and ensure participation
University of Lille, France	Financial and pedagogical support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds during their first year of study	Supporting students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds	Ease access to graduate and postgraduate studies
University of Strathclyde, UK	Introduce prospective students to the life on campus and deliver tailored learning activities	Prospective students	Increase students' awareness of various higher education aspects (i.e., courses and entry requirements)

The identified studies focusing on this category of measures show that they have a relatively positive effect on access. However, one should consider that *outreach initiatives* aimed at increasing interest in science and technology are evaluated either based on whether participants liked the activities or not, or based on changes in the enrolment of a degree programme (Gumaelius et al. 2016). For example, the Stockholm University summer school and the Praktikum UPV (at Universitat Politècnica de València) provide activities for prospective students closely related to universities' everyday activities, including the opportunity for school students to perform small research projects with PhD students.

Praktikum UPV includes a one-week stay for secondary school students within university research groups for fostering engineering and scientific vocations. Both initiatives measured the number of participants who chose to enrol in a STEM programme at their university after the activities are completed. At Stockholm University, 12–14% of them chose to study a STEM field at Stockholm University, and 70% chose to do so at UPV (however, participants might choose to attend a STEM programme at another university, which is not reflected in the percentage but could be considered a success).

Pekkala-Kerr et al. (2015) examined the impact of an *information intervention* offered by student guidance counsellors to randomly chosen high schools in Finland about the financial returns of higher education. The information included labour market prospects associated with post-secondary programmes. The results show that on average, the information intervention did not affect the likelihood of being enrolled in a post-secondary programme or the type of programmes where students enrolled. Furthermore, the study shows that the application patterns among students graduating from the treatment and control school were indistinguishable from each other, nonetheless a third of the students reported that the intervention led them to update their beliefs regarding their returns to higher education.

In Germany, Ehlert et al. (2017) conducted a field experiment among high-school students from Berlin who had higher education intentions to find out whether *information deficits* lower the likelihood of college-eligible students from less-privileged families pursuing their college intentions. The findings show an increase in the application rates overall, including for students whose parents did not have an academic background or who had one college-educated parent, though there was no significant effect when both parents had an academic degree.

A large-scale clustered randomized experiment (Abbiati et al. 2018) involved over 9,000 high school seniors from 62 Italian schools, and provided students with *personalized*

*information* on the costs, benefits and chances of success in higher education through three meetings. The results showed students enrolled less often in less remunerative fields of study in favour of postsecondary vocational programmes. This was especially the case among children of low-educated parents. The study showed that children of higher education graduates increased their participation in more rewarding university fields.

Looking at existing practices and needs in terms of *guidance* for inclusion in European universities, Cullen (2013) suggests that ‘institutions that adopt peer and mentoring support programmes have lower rates of dropout’ (cited in Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland 2018). More specifically, they are successful in preventing dropouts. Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland (2018) consider that counselling is an effective measure to widen participation in higher education, together with the provision of student facilities (e.g. housing, medical support, childcare). 74% of the beneficiaries of student union counselling perceived it as useful (study referred to by Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland, 2018).

In England, the impact of Aimhigher (2004–2011) on widening participation in higher education for young people from underrepresented groups (pupils aged 12 to 16 including first-generation students) was studied by Doyle and Griffin (2012). They found that pre-entry *mentoring* (information advice and guidance) had positive effects on students’ aspiration-raising and access to higher education when combined with other measures, such as campus visits or guest lectures. However, results of Aimhigher are mixed, with Doyle and Griffin (2012) finding positive effects for mentoring, and McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007) finding no measurable impact but rather direct evidence between Aimhigher and enrolment.

To conclude, the seven identified studies show that these types of outreach, counselling and mentoring do not have a strong potential by themselves but work best when combined with others. Personal and professional pre-entry counselling, mentoring tutoring systems, and academic support reach maximum results when complemented by a ‘school culture that values

and promotes going into tertiary education, that sets high expectations for participation in higher education and offers a curriculum that attracts and supports students in their postsecondary and career development’ (Salmi and Bassett 2014).

### **3.2 Financial aid measures**

Financial aid measures aim at easing the financial pressure for students already considered eligible for higher education. Generally speaking, they are either reimbursable or non-reimbursable. Reimbursable financial aid schemes (i.e., student loans) are sustainable forms of financial support requiring a lean administration setup, low subsidies, and an effective recovery system. They differ in terms of the source of capital, the type of expenses they cover, the eligibility rules, the guarantees they require, and the repayment scheme (e.g. direct loans; loans guaranteed by the Government that are shared-risk loans; income-contingent loans). Non-reimbursable schemes take the form of needs-based grants and scholarships that target students coming from families with lower income, certain ethnic minority groups or rural areas, women or students with disabilities. The alternative is often tuition fee waivers or subsidies for the traditionally underrepresented groups. All of them aim at eliminating the possibility that the low family income acts as a deterrent to access and success in higher education. Table 3 provides several examples of the shape and dimensions of financial aid measures embraced by several universities.

*Table 3. Selected examples of financial aid measures*

<b>Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Type of measure and components</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>Intended goal(s)</b>
Open University of Catalonia, Spain	Scholarships and online learning	Professionals, refugees and asylum-seekers, people with functional diversity	Providing flexible distance learning degree programmes
Universities of Glasgow, York,	Scholarships	Refugees	Widen access and ensure participation

Barcelona, Edinburgh, Sussex, Warwick	(i.e., waiving fees, providing tuition scholarships, and offering free courses)		
University of Vincennes in Saint-Denis, France	Scholarships for refugees with little knowledge of French –Diploma University (DU)	Refugees	Preparation for additional academic courses

Existing studies focusing on Europe show that the *amount of aid* had a direct effect on higher education enrolment and access. Fack and Grenet (2015) show that a fee-waiver (which amounted to 174 euros) in France had small positive effects on enrolment in the first year of undergraduate programmes, whereas the provision of 1,500 euros cash allowances to prospective undergraduate or graduate students increases their college enrolment rates by 5 to 7%.

Baumgartner and Steiner (2006) evaluated the effectiveness of a student aid reform in Germany that substantially increased *the amount received* by eligible students to raise enrolment rates into tertiary education. The study found that the reform had a small positive, but statistically insignificant effect on enrolment rates, despite the 10% increase in the federal students' financial assistance scheme.

Hatt et al. (2005) evaluated the Opportunity Bursary scheme (introduced in 2001), for students from low-income backgrounds. Here, higher education institutions were granted considerable discretion over the allocation of these awards. The research reports differences in the way two institutions - in the South-west of England - administered their bursary schemes, and the generated effects: bursary students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to continue beyond the year of entry than those students from low-income backgrounds who did not access the award. Moreover, it also revealed that the award of a *bursary* strengthened students' motivation to succeed, and it played an active role in underpinning student persistence and success. Hatt et al. (2005) argue that there are two possible explanations for this effect

upon higher education continuation: the money might be useful and might strengthen the student's commitment to study.

Lannert and Garaz (2014) traced beneficiaries of the Roma Education Fund's (REF) Law and Humanities Programme. These *scholarships* are awarded as yearly amounts of between 500 and 2300 EUR depending on the existence of a tuition fee and living expenses in Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. Between 2004 and 2014, a total of 413 students benefited from the scholarship scheme. The results of their evaluation show that among these, 200 (48%) students obtained at least a tertiary level degree with complete or partial LHP support, while 144 have not yet graduated but are still in the programme. Also, 35 beneficiaries (8%) dropped out of their university studies before graduation or postponed graduation for later.

Since it was launched, in 2008, and until the summer of 2015, REF's Roma Health Scholarship Programme (RHSP) provided support to 527 Roma medical students from Romania, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria. The support can be operationalized as financial, academic and professional (i.e., scholarships - between 375 EUR and 5,360 EUR per academic year, preparatory courses, mentorship, advocacy camps and additional funding for courses, conferences and small community development projects). Out of the 527 beneficiaries, 146 (28%) were still in the programme at the time of the study, 187 people graduated successfully with at least one degree and exited the programme, 45 people interrupted their studies or dropped out, and 57 people continued their studies without RHSP support. Eighty-six people exited the programme, but their academic progress and graduation status could not be tracked (Roma Education Fund 2015).

The evaluated evidence shows that financial aid can have positive effects on enrolment, but, depending on the target groups and the field of study, financial aid measures need to be complemented by other measures in order to foster enrolment.

### 2.3. Preparatory courses and programmes

Preparatory courses and programmes aim to even out previous or existing inequalities with regards to prospective students' previous education. This can refer the quality of previous education, a switch of the field of study, the language of instruction, or academic ability. Preparatory courses target first-generation and non-traditional students, disadvantaged people and students who do not have any experience of academia and higher education. The general purpose of these measures is to enable the students to prepare efficiently to continue their studies towards higher education. The format for these courses and programmes differs from university to university (see Table 4). They range from intensive academic courses in areas students would like to pursue higher education studies to general academic preparation (academic writing, critical thinking and study skills), auditing courses, introductory semesters, language courses enabling students to pursue studies in English (or other) language, and general application process support and information. Completing the programme enables students to apply for university studies in various fields of study but also to gain first-hand experience and insights into a higher education programme. Finally, such measures could also contribute to enhancing students' familiarity with a higher education environment and help them overcome (academic and social) integration barriers while in universities.

*Table 4. Selected examples of preparatory courses and programmes*

<b>Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Type of measure and components</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>Intended goal(s)</b>
Leuphana University, Germany	A first semester as an induction period	Mainstream students	Familiarity with academic life and reduce drop-out
Technical University of Munich, University of Tuebingen and Bielefeld, Germany	Free German language courses	Refugees	Prepares students for higher education studies at German universities
Central European University, Budapest	Preparatory, non-degree language and academic courses, tutoring – OLIVE, Roma Graduate Preparation	Roma, Refugees and asylum-seekers	Prepares students for higher education studies at international universities

Brunel University, UK	Preparatory monthly sessions in key subjects, guest speakers and role models - The Urban Scholars Programme	Prospective talented students from deprived areas	To increase achievement and higher education aspirations
University of Vienna, Austria	Free academic courses - Open Learning Initiative	Individuals with refugee or asylum-seeking status	Preparation for the Austrian academic higher education system pursuing
Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Germany	Intensive language course, attending modules over two semesters - Welcome Year for Refugees	Refugees	Offering the opportunity to take on or continue a degree course
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences	Training courses, application processes support	Persons with an immigrant background	Increase the ability of immigrant people to enter higher education

In Germany, prospective refugee students are treated like all international students, but during their application and enrolment, they receive special support in order to deal with their specific situation. Since the entrance criteria for the preparatory colleges include advanced knowledge of the German *language*, special classes prepare them for the entrance test in order to enrol in the preparatory courses. According to Berg (2018), these preparatory colleges and courses are important institutions for the internationalization of German higher education and the support of prospective refugee students.

The Roma Graduate Preparation Programme (formerly known as the Roma Access Programmes) at Central European University (CEU) is an initiative providing preparatory courses for Roma students. The programme aims to prepare Roma university graduates across Europe – through academic English, academic writing and tutoring in a field of choice - to compete for master’s programmes either at CEU or abroad. Since 2004, when it was founded, the programme has enrolled 218 Roma students from all over Europe. Out of them, 215 graduated, and 141 (nearly 65%) were accepted into a master’s programme at the end of their studies (Rostas 2017).

Pinheiro-Torres and Davies (2008) evaluate Brunel University's Urban Scholars Programme, a 3-4-year intervention aimed at increasing achievement and higher education aspirations among talented students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and disadvantaged areas, aged 12-16. The paper discusses the emerging findings after the first 2 years of the programme and suggests the biggest change occurs within scholars' confidence. Updated, self-reported data shows that programme leavers had a higher education orientation of 88% after 3-years attendance, and almost half of them received offers of places in universities, and 83% of them started higher education studies. Looking at the same programme, Casey, Smith, and Koshy (2011) found that it 'had some success in steering students toward greater ambition and an awareness of the rewards of higher education' (p. 43). They showed that 90% of the students who participated and completed the programme either met or exceeded the school targets compared with 22%, of the rest, of the gifted and talented group who met or exceeded their school targets.

Walker (2010) investigates the academic performance of adults who entered the University of Glasgow via the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) between 1988–1993, including a *pre-university summer school* where non-traditional students (i.e., adults, with a socio-economic disadvantage) received preparation and independent advice about opportunities to access higher education. The findings show that there were few differences between the students who attended the summer school and those who did not, however, both dropped-out at largely the same rate. Recent self-reported data shows that, since the first pilot of SWAP in 1987, more than 32,000 adults have taken the SWAP route to return to study. The programme helped many adults realize their potential and gave them the confidence to succeed in college or university. In general, preparatory courses and programmes prove promising in terms of efficiency, however, this depends on their specific components.

### **3. Conclusions**

Overall, this research found few publicly available studies and little information about the actual outcomes of most measures. First of all, the identified studies cover a limited number of access measures available in Europe (i.e., none of the studies we identified looked at the effectiveness of the widespread online platforms – most of them targeting refugees). Secondly, the existing studies do not provide a comprehensive geographical overview across Europe. With few exceptions, most of the identified research explores the context of the UK, Germany, France, Italy or Finland. This suggests that more evidence-based approaches will be necessary to effectively learn from these specific access measures.

The measurement of impact is hampered by the impossibility of isolating the effects of such policies in order to attribute cause and effect, as well as by the difficulty of generalizing particular results. The current promising but limited amount of research in the European context shows that the most effective way to tackle unequal access to higher education is through measures that combine financial assistance with help to overcome non-financial obstacles. As highlighted in the previous sections, many of the described policies benefit from governmental support, and success is also greater if there is cooperation between governments, higher education institutions or other education providers, NGOs, public authorities (in fields like health or welfare that complement the interventions in education), families and/or private companies. Programmes with a positive track record in terms of improving equity seem to be those combining financial support with non-financial aid offered to students (Salmi and Basset 2014) as well as those empowering students, setting high academic expectations and helping students and parents believe in themselves and in their educational success (Usher 2015). These latter ones tend to be more intrusive and require frequent contact with the targeted individuals – e.g. academic support, mentoring programmes.

Usher (2015) contends that making definitive statements about ‘what works’ is hindered by the impossibility to generalize particular results (i.e., issues of transferability in different institutional settings) and the tendency to re-define the term ‘equity’ when results become inconvenient (i.e., politically unwelcomed results). Similarly, Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen and Stöber (2019) argue that the collection and use of data on equity are often subject to controversial discussions, and perspectives vary according to cultural, political and legal contexts across Europe.

Lack of adequate, reliable and consistently collected data is often used as an excuse for the lack of action towards more equitable systems, but it also hinders the option of evidence-based policy-making or of measuring the impact of the initiatives already put into practice. Referring to specific measures targeting refugees, Streitwieser et al. (2019) argue that while sponsors described their plans for supporting refugees, they often did not share information on the amount of funding, the number of beneficiaries impacted, and other key data.

To conclude, this paper addressed a question about the relative effectiveness of various university-level access measures for underrepresented groups. The inference that can be made from this literature review is that all measures have a limited effect when implemented solely. More profound effects can be achieved when the access measures are implemented in combination with each other, accounting also for the field of study and underrepresented group in focus.

The recommendations to policy-makers include ensuring prospective students have access to a combination of financial aid and non-financial measures. The measures that have already been developed and validated at other, but similar contexts could be put in practice first. Development of new measures, their constant evaluation and extensive research on their effectiveness should be encouraged both by the higher education institutions themselves and national governments.

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