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## Higher Education in Spain Framework for Equity

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### Introduction

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Any reflection on equity in the context of higher education in Spain must bear in mind two closely linked, complementary and transversal elements. The first is the process of convergence and globalisation in which the country's universities are immersed, all the while striving to maintain their unique features and the contexts of their local and national environments. Second is their efforts to apply and define the concept "equity" in higher education policies and practices. Spain's universities are attempting to put into practice the meaning behind the concept of "equity", in function of the way it is used.

The twenty-first century university is undergoing profound and rapid transformations. As central institutions in the vertebration of today's societies, universities are permeable to the changes, contradictions and effects derived from global inequality or, put another way, to the inequalities that radiate towards their world (Piketty 2014). Inequality is not something external to them but, rather, something that has penetrated their realm (Burawoy 2015). As part of an asymmetric world, today's universities are not impervious to the social dialectic around them. Neither can they ignore the newly configured rules of the social game. Today's universities not only explain social reality, but as part of it, they contribute to building it as well. This they do from both the theoretical scaffolds they erect and through the

creativity of their actions (Joas 2013). Today's universities find themselves at a crossroads where they must at once become and convey instrumental tools, while at the same time respond to the ever-growing clamour for emancipation.

Today's university is a player that not only *explains* social change, but also promotes and is *committed* to it and, for this reason, is responsible for social change. One of the ideas this chapter will develop is the notion that the twenty-first century university must endeavour to redefine itself by reinterpreting two of its principal functions: it must generate equity while building citizenship (Beltrán 2014; 2015).

The concept of equity in the educational environment was first broached in the OECD conference in Sweden in 1961 (Halsey 1993). At that time, the debate centred on election at secondary schools, yet with the expansion of higher education, interest grew in the principle of equal opportunities.

Later, the OECD examined "Approaches to Equity in Policy for Lifelong Learning" with a study by Ben Levin in 2003. Levin distinguishes two dimensions in his definition of equity in education. The first of these is fairness, which implies making sure an individual's personal and social circumstances – for example, gender, socio-economic status and ethnic origin – do not prevent her from reaching her educational potential. The second embraces inclusion and implies that a minimum basic educational standard must be guaranteed for all (Levin 2003).

The meeting of OECD Ministers of Education in Athens in 2006 focused on higher education to discuss *Higher Education – Quality, Equity and Efficiency*. The ministers agreed that "Higher Education plays a vital role in driving economic growth and social cohesion" (Santiago *et al.* 2008). A year later, in 2007, the OECD published a study called *No more failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*. This study also developed the two dimensions associated with equity that Levin had already identified, fairness and inclusion (Field *et al.* 2007).

Equity and equality (on the latter, see Williams 1983) are the principles that are closely linked, yet distinct. Equity introduces a principle of ethics or fairness to equality. Promoting equity involves the task of setting out the objectives to be achieved in order to advance towards a fairer society. A society that treats its members with absolute equality will be an unfair society, as it will not take into account differences that exist between individuals and groups. Yet, at the same time, a society where people do not recognize each other as equals cannot be fair. Manuel Mendes concurs with Oscar Espinoza that there can be no equity or social cohesion without policies for inclusion and solidarity. Among these strategies, the university is considered one of the tools at hand to promote the common good and democratic citizenship (Mendes 2014:23-39).

Today, the increase in inequalities in the access that countries and individuals have to the use of resources has led to positing that the objectives of equity are vital to development. Without entering here into conceptual disquisitions, the introduction of the notion of "equity" in an analysis of education is not trivial. Putting equity in the

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