

## **HIGHER EDUCATION FROM AN INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**NILAY NEYİŞCI**

[nilbasar@hacettepe.edu.tr](mailto:nilbasar@hacettepe.edu.tr)

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nilay Neyişci is a faculty member in the Department of Educational Sciences, at Hacettepe University in Ankara (Turkey), where she has served since 2022. She received her B.A. in Sociology from the Middle East Technical University, and completed her M.A. and Ph.D. in Educational Administration at Hacettepe University. Her academic work focuses on higher education, combining theoretical and practical approaches in areas such as educational policy, leadership, and organizational behavior through an interdisciplinary approach. Her research interests include the sociology of education, leadership, digital transformation and digital leadership, educational governance, family studies, technology addiction, migration and education, and social networks.

### **Abstract**

This study addresses the significance and applicability of an inclusive governance approach in higher education institutions. It emphasizes that higher education is evolving globally toward the goals of democratization, diversity, and inclusion. Inclusive governance encompasses the active participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes, transparency, accountability, and participatory structures. In this context, the study highlights the necessity of involving students, academic and administrative staff, and external stakeholders in university governance processes. The study asserts that inclusivity involves not only representation but also effective participation and decision-making power, which must be supported by institutional culture, leadership practices, and structural arrangements. It also emphasizes that inclusive governance contributes significant value to higher education in areas such as quality assurance, academic success, and social responsibility. In conclusion, higher education institutions are expected to serve not only as knowledge producers but also as environments where social justice, equality, and participation are actively upheld. To achieve this transformation, it is recommended that the core principles and practices of inclusive governance be integrated into the administrative systems of universities.

### **Keywords**

Social Justice, Access To Higher Education, Inclusive Governance, Disadvantaged Groups, Education Policy.

### **Resumo**

O presente estudo examina a relevância e a aplicabilidade de uma abordagem de governação inclusiva no contexto das Instituições de Ensino Superior. Salienta-se que o ensino superior, à escala global, se encontra em transformação, orientando-se progressivamente para os princípios da democratização, da diversidade e da inclusão. A governação inclusiva, neste quadro, é entendida como um modelo que promove a participação ativa das diversas partes



interessadas nos processos de tomada de decisão, sustentado em princípios de transparência, responsabilidade e estruturas participativas. O estudo sublinha a importância de integrar estudantes, pessoal docente e não docente, bem como entidades externas, nos mecanismos de governação universitária, reconhecendo que a inclusão vai além da mera representação simbólica, implicando uma participação efetiva e um poder de decisão real. Este modelo de governação deve ser apoiado por uma cultura institucional propícia, práticas de liderança inclusiva e dispositivos estruturais adequados. O estudo defende que a adoção de práticas inclusivas de governação acrescenta valor significativo ao ensino superior, particularmente em domínios como a garantia da qualidade, o sucesso académico e a responsabilidade social das instituições. Em síntese, considera-se que as instituições de ensino superior devem assumir-se não apenas como centros de produção e disseminação de conhecimento, mas também como espaços que promovem ativamente a justiça social, a igualdade e a participação democrática. Para que esta transformação seja efetiva, recomenda-se a integração dos princípios e práticas fundamentais da governação inclusiva nos sistemas administrativos e na cultura organizacional das universidades.

#### Palavras-chave

Justiça Social, Acesso Ao Ensino Superior, Governança Inclusiva, Grupos Desfavorecidos, Política Educacional.

#### How to cite this article

Neyişci, Nilay (2025). Higher Education from an Inclusive Governance Perspective: Expanding the Boundaries of Social Justice. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier - Internationalization of Higher Education: Experiences and Challenges. VOL. 16, Nº. 1, TD1. June 2025, pp. 85-99. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0325.6>.

**Article submitted on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2025 and accepted for publication on 12<sup>th</sup> may 2025.**





## **HIGHER EDUCATION FROM AN INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**NILAY NEYİŞCI**

### **1. Introduction**

In the 21st century, global education policies shaped by the ideal of the knowledge society have positioned higher education as a cornerstone of both social development and individual competence. However, these global trends have often failed to eliminate socio-economic inequalities in access to and success within higher education; instead, they tend to reproduce such disparities. Access to higher education must be understood not only in terms of university admission but also through indicators such as graduation rates, utilization of institutional support systems, and academic achievement. From this perspective, the concept of social justice offers a critical analytical framework.

In Türkiye, the massification of higher education has accelerated notably since the early 2000s, particularly through the expansion of universities and the increase in student quotas (Erçetin, Akbaşlı & Baysülen, 2020). However, for this quantitative growth to translate into a more equitable structure, it is essential to address the structural barriers that impede access for disadvantaged groups—such as low-income individuals, those residing in rural areas, persons with disabilities, and refugees. The participation of these groups in higher education should not merely be framed within the principle of equal opportunity but must also be addressed through a rights-based understanding of social justice (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009).

The concept of social justice necessitates an expansion of education policies beyond the sole dimension of access, encompassing fair representation, participatory governance, equitable distribution of resources, and parity in academic outcomes (Rawls, 1971; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Singh, 2011). In this regard, the notion of “inclusive governance” emphasizes a governance model that prioritizes both the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making processes and the responsiveness of institutional structures to the specific needs of disadvantaged groups. Inclusive governance demands that higher education institutions be assessed not solely based on their educational and research outputs, but also on their capacity to generate social responsibility and justice (Wise, Dickinson, Katan & Gallegos, 2020). Social justice entails not only equal opportunities



but also the systematic empowerment of historically marginalized subgroups. Higher education systems, in this context, may serve as corrective mechanisms that enable the transformation of these groups both individually and collectively. Fraser's principle of "parity of participation" thus compels the establishment of equality mechanisms that extend beyond resource distribution to include representation and recognition (Fraser, 2009).

As emphasized in the reports of international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the European Commission, higher education access policies should not be confined to expanding quotas; rather, they should be integrated with supportive mechanisms such as scholarship schemes, student support services, psychological counseling, and mentoring programs (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Moreover, governance processes should be rendered more transparent and participatory through mechanisms such as student representation, academic advising systems, and social impact assessments (European Commission, 2021).

Accordingly, the primary aim of this study is to examine the extent to which access policies based on social justice are structured in line with the principles of inclusive governance within Turkish higher education system. Drawing on literature and policy documents, this study seeks to explore the alignment between access policies and the objectives of social justice, and to identify the institutional reforms required to enhance such alignment. To this end, the study first outlines a theoretical framework addressing the concepts of social justice, access, and governance; subsequently, it analyzes access policies in the Turkish context, presents findings on inclusive governance practices, and concludes with a set of recommendations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The concepts of social justice and inclusive governance in higher education lie at the intersection of the disciplines of educational sciences, public administration, and political science. In this study, the social justice approach is grounded in Rawls' (1971) theory of "justice as fairness," which goes beyond equal opportunities and incorporates affirmative action measures in favor of disadvantaged groups. Fraser (2009), on the other hand, conceptualizes social justice as a multidimensional structure that includes not only the redistribution of resources but also cultural recognition and political participation. Accordingly, ensuring social justice in higher education policies requires equitable mechanisms of representation and sensitivity to cultural diversity (Sen, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

Access to education is defined by UNESCO as "the right of every individual to receive quality education," and it emphasizes that this right must be guaranteed especially for disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2022). In the context of higher education, access encompasses not only physical admission but also academic preparation, financial aid, institutional guidance, and access to post-graduation opportunities (Erçetin, Akbaşlı & Esen, 2024). Governance, in contrast to traditional hierarchical administration, refers to multi-stakeholder, participatory, transparent, and accountable decision-making



processes (Trow, 2010). Inclusive governance is a variant of this broader understanding that prioritizes social justice, particularly by ensuring the active participation of disadvantaged groups in the delivery of public services (Rhodes, 1997; Fung, 2006).

Inclusive governance in higher education extends beyond achieving diversity in governing bodies; it also involves student participation in the design of academic programs, collaboration with civil society in institutional evaluation processes, and the implementation of community feedback mechanisms (Marginson, 2016). Based on these theoretical foundations, this study proceeds from the premise that social justice must be considered not only in terms of equality but also through the principles of fairness, recognition, and participation, and it focuses on assessing the transformative capacity of higher education systems. Inclusive governance should be viewed not only as an ethical mode of governance but also as a strategic framework for reconstructing institutional legitimacy. In his model of “participatory governance,” Fung (2006) emphasizes that legitimacy is not only linked to the effectiveness of governance outcomes but also to the diversity of actors involved in the process. In this context, governance structures in higher education should not be limited to internal university stakeholders but must also integrate external factors such as civil society organizations, local governments, and students into decision-making processes. Within this framework, three core conceptual areas—social justice, access, and inclusive governance—emerge as key to evaluating policies aimed at adjusting higher education systems and reducing social inequalities. These concepts involve not only the formal recognition of the right to education but also its equitable, fair, and inclusive realization (Açıkalın & Erçetin, 2018).

Social justice is a multi-layered concept at the heart of debates around equality in education. Based on Rawls’ theory of “justice as fairness” (1971), social justice necessitates arrangements that enable individuals—taking into account their inherent or socially constructed disadvantages—to access equal opportunities. Fraser (2009) conceptualizes social justice through three dimensions: redistribution (equitable distribution of economic resources), recognition (visibility and respect for cultural identities), and participation (inclusion in decision-making processes). In this context, social justice in higher education entails a comprehensive approach that goes beyond access to student quotas, encompassing active participation in learning environments, utilization of support services, and success in graduation.

Although access to higher education is often discussed in terms of inequality at the point of university admission, it should be understood as a broader process. According to Brennan and Naidoo (2008), access should be addressed through a “processual equity” approach that includes preparation, admission, retention, success, and graduation. This perspective enables the evaluation of not only selection criteria but also pedagogical practices, financial support systems, and post-graduation opportunities from a justice standpoint (Erçetin, Akbaşı & Esen, 2024). Furthermore, access policies should not be designed solely around individual achievement but also reflect the principles of social responsibility aimed at addressing structural inequalities (Singh, 2011).

The concept of governance refers to multi-stakeholder, participatory, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes, in contrast to traditional hierarchical



management. Inclusive governance in higher education institutions entails operating based on the principles of multi-stakeholder engagement, participation, transparency, and accountability throughout decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes. UNESCO (2015) defines inclusive governance as the establishment of institutional mechanisms that ensure the representation of disadvantaged groups. This approach goes beyond symbolic forms of participation, such as student representation, and requires structural transformations including representation in academic committees, data-driven decision-making processes, social impact evaluations, and horizontal accountability models (Trowler, 2010). Inclusive governance also mandates that higher education institutions be evaluated not only based on their educational outputs but also in terms of their contribution to social equity. The tripartite structure of social justice in higher education—redistribution (scholarships and support services), recognition (visibility of cultural identity and diversity), and participation (access to decision-making processes)—necessitates a holistic approach to institutional policy design (Fraser, 2009; Gewirtz, 2006). For instance, supporting students from rural areas both economically and academically requires not only financial resources but also pedagogical advising and psychosocial support systems. Although the expansion of access to higher education is often presented as an indicator of democratization, its secondary effects that may deepen socio-economic inequalities should not be overlooked. For example, the fact that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to enroll in under-resourced institutions reduces the notion of equal opportunity to a superficial framework (Marginson, 2011). In this sense, massification can become a “quantitative illusion” that masks structural inequalities. At the intersection of these three conceptual domains, higher education policies that prioritize social justice must be holistically structured—not only through quota planning but also in areas such as resource allocation, pedagogical support, academic culture, and governance structures. In the context of Turkey, this theoretical framework provides a functional basis for both the analysis of existing policies and the normative foundation of proposed recommendations.

### **3. Development of Higher Education access policies in Turkey**

The formation of access policies to higher education in Türkiye has been shaped by a centralized structure since the early years of the Republic. The university reform carried out in 1933 laid the foundations of modern higher education, while access to university remained limited under an elitist model for many years. During this period, universities were positioned as institutions catering only to a specific social segment. Following the establishment of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in the post-1980 era, a centrally planned higher education system was constructed. University entrance examinations, enrollment quotas, and standardized program structures rendered access to university both competitive and restrictive. This system particularly hindered participation in higher education for students from low-income and rural areas (Yücel, 2023; İnan & Demir, 2018; Kandemir, 2014).





### **3.1 Massification Process After 2000**

Beginning in the 2000s, Turkey adopted massification policies in higher education. A key strategy in this process was the increase in the number of universities, with the aim of establishing at least one public university in each province. Universities established between 2006 and 2012 were a significant component of this goal (YÖK, 2014). The massification process was further supported by increasing enrollment quotas and expanding distance education opportunities. However, these developments brought about several quality-related issues. Notably, deficiencies in academic staff, infrastructural inadequacies, and imbalances in program quality became apparent, especially in newly established universities (Bali, Demirbilek, & Demirtas, 2024; Altunoğlu, 2020).

### **3.2 Policy Initiatives for Disadvantaged Groups**

The situation of disadvantaged groups in accessing higher education constitutes a key agenda item in Turkish education policy. Efforts have been made to develop specific access policies for groups such as individuals with low socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, residents of rural areas, and refugees. Recent strategic documents published by YÖK emphasize the need to increase sensitivity toward these groups (YÖK, 2023). Accessibility units have been established in universities for students with disabilities, physical conditions on campuses have been improved, and special arrangements have been made in examinations. However, systematic data regarding the institutional effectiveness of these practices and their impact on students' academic achievement remains limited. Similarly, economically disadvantaged students are supported through scholarships and loan systems. Yet, factors such as the transparency, adequacy, and sustainability of scholarship distribution criteria limit the effectiveness of these practices (Erçetin & Açıkalın, 2018).

### **3.3 Access and Integration Challenges of Refugees**

In the post-2011 period, as a result of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's higher education system had to accommodate a significant population of refugee students. YÖK and universities implemented measures to facilitate the application processes of Syrian students under temporary protection, including additional quotas, exemption from exams, and scholarship opportunities. Nonetheless, the integration of refugee students into higher education involves multi-layered challenges. Language proficiency, psychosocial support needs, housing, and the sense of belonging are among the primary factors affecting the success and retention of refugee students (UNHCR, 2020). While many of the policies developed in this area, long-term perspectives on social integration and institutional inclusivity have yet to be sufficiently developed (Açıkalın, Erçetin, Potas, Çevik, Neyişçi & Görgülü, 2021; Erçetin & Kubilay, 2019).



### 3.4 The Role of Open and Distance Education

Open and distance education systems are among the most significant tools for expanding access to higher education in Turkey. Universities have enabled millions of students to obtain degrees through open education. This model offers flexible learning opportunities, particularly for working individuals, women, and residents of rural areas. However, factors such as the pedagogical quality of open education systems, the adequacy of student support services, and graduation rates limit the system's effectiveness (Can, 2020). Moreover, student participation in governance processes and institutional belonging among open education students remain notably low. This hinders the system's integration with broader goals of social justice (Erçetin & Açıkalın, 2024).

### 3.5 Policy Documents and the Monitoring

Various strategic policies by YÖK and the Ministry of National Education aim to enhance inclusivity and access in higher education. However, most targets focus on quantitative indicators, while performance monitoring mechanisms remain insufficient. The disconnect between policy objectives and implementation limits sustainable progress in the area of access. Additionally, universities need to develop their own access strategies at the local level and update them through social feedback mechanisms. Centralized policies that disregard local contexts prove ineffective in universities, creating only symbolic access for disadvantaged students (Özdemir, 2018).

### 3.6 Conceptual Model: A Social Justice-Based Multidimensional Access Approach

In line with the discussions presented above, it is evident that access policies to higher education in Türkiye must be restructured based on the principles of social justice. Access based on social justice in higher education requires a holistic approach that goes beyond merely expanding physical access and instead integrates four key dimensions: structural expansion, supportive policies, representation and recognition, and inclusive governance. Structural expansion refers to increasing the number of universities, enhancing infrastructure, and ensuring their equitable geographical distribution to improve physical access. Supportive policies aim to reduce economic and psychosocial barriers through mechanisms such as scholarships, housing, and counseling services. Representation and recognition involve making disadvantaged groups visible, promoting cultural inclusivity, and ensuring institutional acknowledgment of diverse identities to strengthen students' sense of belonging. Inclusive governance emphasizes participatory decision-making, the development of context-specific strategies, and accountability through the monitoring of educational outcomes. When these four dimensions are addressed collectively, social justice can be institutionalized in higher education not merely as a principle of access, but as a foundation for structural and cultural transformation. This model is constructed on four main pillars: structural expansion, supportive policies, representation and recognition, and inclusive governance. Each pillar corresponds to a different dimension of inequality in access to higher education and collectively reflects the principles of equality and equity embedded in social justice (Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Fraser, 2009).





In general, access policies to higher education in Türkiye have been shaped by physical expansion and quantitative growth, whereas participatory and inclusive governance models grounded in the principles of social justice have not yet been sufficiently institutionalized. Access policies must be assessed not only in quantitative terms but also through a holistic lens encompassing qualitative aspects, representational equity, and support systems. In this context, it is vital to restructure access policies to higher education based on the principles of equality, equity, recognition, and representation, as required by social justice. Integrating the perspective of inclusive governance into policy-making processes at local, institutional, and national levels will enable the higher education system to become more just and sustainable.

#### 4. Findings

The concept of social justice in higher education encompasses not only equal access but also the fair distribution of opportunities for active participation in academic processes and achievement. The literature reveals a limited number of policy analyses concerning the integration of socially disadvantaged groups into higher education systems (Marginson, 2016). This gap highlights the need to evaluate social justice in higher education not only at the point of entry but also throughout students' persistence and graduation phases. Inequities in access often stem from multi-layered and interrelated socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural factors. Individuals living in rural areas are disadvantaged in accessing higher education institutions in central urban locations due to deficiencies in both physical and digital infrastructure. Similarly, students from low-income families face additional burdens arising from both direct educational expenses and indirect living costs (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, cultural factors such as ethnic background, language differences, and migratory history increase the risk of exclusion and discrimination within the education system.

Targeted policy interventions in some countries have shown potential to reduce these inequalities. For instance, in Australia, universities are required to conduct detailed reporting and performance monitoring for social groups defined under the category of "equity groups" (Gale & Parker, 2013). These mechanisms track not only application and admission rates but also students' academic achievements, graduation rates, and career outcomes.

Efforts to broaden access to higher education in Türkiye have primarily focused on enrollment planning, financial support mechanisms, and open and distance learning practices. The quota regulations implemented by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) aim to reduce regional disparities through additional quotas allocated to universities in specific geographical areas. These advantages offered to universities in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia help make youth from these regions more visible within the system (YÖK, 2023).

Scholarship and loan systems are critically important for enabling students from low-income backgrounds to continue their education. The loans and non-repayable grants provided by the Credit and Dormitories Institution (KYK) function as support mechanisms



that help students endure economic pressures during their academic journeys (YÖK, 2023). However, the scope and adequacy of this support often fall short of fostering equality among different social groups. A lack of transparency regarding the application process, evaluation criteria, and distribution mechanisms can undermine the system's credibility. Although open and distance learning practices have the potential to reduce spatial disadvantages, the pedagogical quality and the impact on student success remain contested. Institutions have extended access to large populations; however, inequalities in benefiting from these models persist due to inadequate digital infrastructure and insufficient individual learning support. In addition, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face limitations in accessing digital tools, further exacerbating digital divides (Erçetin & Açıkalın, 2024).

## 5. Discussion

In Türkiye, higher education policies have long prioritized expanding quantitative access. This orientation has manifested in the expansion of physical capacities of universities, the increase in student quotas, and the dissemination of higher education institutions across various regions. However, this expansion has not been sufficiently supported by qualitative transformations necessary to ensure equity in student success. It is critically important not only to enable access for socioeconomically disadvantaged students but also to provide the structural support necessary for them to succeed throughout their educational journey. In line with Fraser's (2009) framework of justice, which encompasses redistribution, recognition, and representation, current practices in Türkiye appear to have made partial progress primarily in the domain of redistribution, while structural deficiencies persist in the realms of recognition and representation.

Students from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, first-generation university attendees, and ethnic minorities face multiple barriers from entry to graduation within the higher education system. In order to sustain academic success, these students require multidimensional support mechanisms that go beyond financial assistance, encompassing access to learning materials, psychosocial support, and digital literacy (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). While Türkiye's scholarship and loan systems generally address these needs, systematic deficiencies remain in areas such as academic advising, cultural adaptation, and social integration. Nonetheless, mentoring programs and student support centers recently introduced in some universities can be regarded as promising initiatives aimed at promoting equity in success.

Institutional limitations also play a decisive role in the failure to achieve equity in academic success. Structural disparities between public and foundation (private) universities in Türkiye further deepen inequalities. Foundation universities, often endowed with greater financial resources, modern infrastructure, and international connections, are able to offer a broader range of opportunities to students. However, the high tuition fees associated with these institutions constitute a significant barrier, particularly for low-income students. Public universities, on the other hand, offer more affordable education but often suffer from infrastructure deficiencies, large student-to-instructor ratios, and insufficient academic counseling, all of which negatively impact



student success. Moreover, the scholarship and support programs in foundation universities are typically tied to strict performance criteria, rendering them unsustainable as long-term support mechanisms for disadvantaged students (Özdemir, 2018). Therefore, in promoting social justice in higher education, it is essential to consider not only quantitative expansion across institutions but also qualitative equity in opportunities among them. The lack of early intervention systems to identify students at risk of failure can lead to declines in academic performance. Student retention models in the United Kingdom have demonstrated that student success depends not only on individual effort but also on institutional responsibility (Singh, 2011). Early warning systems and counseling networks implemented in some Turkish universities offer positive examples in this regard, though they still fall short in terms of widespread adoption and sustainability.

Inclusive governance principles are crucial for integrating social justice into institutional operations. However, despite being included in policy documents, these principles have not been systematically implemented in practice in Türkiye. The participation of disadvantaged groups in decision-making processes is a mechanism that not only enhances representation but also strengthens policy effectiveness. Democratic governance must go beyond mere representation to ensure that such representation is meaningfully reflected in decision-making processes. In this context, the strengthening of student councils, increased student participation in advisory boards, and the promotion of multi-stakeholder decision-making processes in some universities can be cited as positive developments (Wise, Dickinson, Katan, & Gallegos, 2020).

Currently, student representation systems and structural supports would enable students to contribute to decision-making processes in an informed and constructive manner. Students approaching the issue from a social justice perspective face difficulties in articulating their needs or influencing policies. However, recent projects carried out by student communities in collaboration with civil society organizations and academic units indicate encouraging progress in participatory governance. Institutional support for these projects can help create an environment conducive to meaningful student participation in governance processes.

Disability support units must be considered an integral component of inclusive governance in higher education. There is significant variation among Turkish universities in terms of the structure, service capacity, and expertise levels of these units. While some universities have made commendable efforts to improve physical accessibility, deficiencies remain in areas such as adapting digital materials, training academic staff, and raising awareness of the academic rights of students with disabilities. In this regard, the "Barrier-Free University" award program recently initiated by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) can be considered an important incentive mechanism to promote awareness and disseminate best practices. Strategic plans of higher education institutions in Türkiye tend to frame inclusivity goals through quantitative indicators, often neglecting qualitative dimensions such as experiential justice, sense of belonging, and academic atmosphere. For instance, objectives like "increasing the proportion of disadvantaged students" provide no insight into the quality of these students' experiences, nor do they include metrics concerning the functionality of support systems or levels of student satisfaction.



In conclusion, while the Turkish higher education system has achieved significant progress in terms of access, systemic transformation is still needed in areas such as equity in success, inclusive governance, and experiential justice. Inclusive governance must go beyond representation to institutionalize effective, sustainable, and accountable participation in decision-making processes. In this regard, social justice should not be treated merely as a strategic goal but must be embraced as a normative value at the core of all academic, administrative, and cultural practices within higher education institutions.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ensuring social justice in higher education should not be confined to expanding physical access alone; rather, it must also include the systematic strengthening of support mechanisms and inclusive governance structures that prioritize equity in student success. In Türkiye, the recent increase in the number of universities and their geographic distribution across different regions can be seen as a significant development in terms of access. Spatial equity must be considered in conjunction with socioeconomic, cultural, and digital inequalities. Higher education institutions should broaden the scope of institutional support structures and ensure their systematic functionality in alignment with the goal of realizing social justice. Services such as academic advising, psychosocial support, career counseling, and learning centers are fundamental to enhancing student success.

The digitalization process has introduced new dimensions to social justice. Particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, the proliferation of remote education practices has rendered digital inequalities more visible. In this context, it is imperative for higher education institutions to strengthen their digital infrastructures and develop policies concerning internet access, device provision, and the production of accessible digital content. The Council of Higher Education's efforts in open access resources, digital library systems, and the institutionalization of distance education are positive steps in this direction. However, these practices must be disseminated sustainably and inclusively across all universities. Social assistance policies must be restructured through a social justice lens. Economic support should go beyond scholarships and encompass comprehensive policies addressing basic needs such as housing, nutrition, transportation, and healthcare. Multi-dimensional support models implemented at some universities—such as integrated student cards providing access to meals, transportation, and stationery—aim to relieve students from economic pressure and demonstrate that social assistance functions not merely as financial aid, but also as a mechanism for leveling academic achievement.

Performance monitoring mechanisms are essential for evaluating and improving the effectiveness of social justice policies. These systems should not be limited to quantitative data but must also incorporate qualitative analyses and student experiences. Qualitative data collection tools include student surveys, focus group discussions, case studies, and ethnographic observations. Tracking access policies with measurable and assessable indicators is necessary not only for performance management but also for accountability and strategic planning. The Higher Education Quality Council of Turkey offers a



framework in this regard; its quality assurance systems encourage the consideration of social indicators such as inclusiveness, access, and student experience in institutional performance evaluations. This system allows social justice to be embedded in institutional structures not just as a vision but as a measurable performance criterion.

In conclusion, achieving social justice in higher education requires not only the expansion of access opportunities but also the institutional internalization of structural mechanisms that support student success and inclusive governance practices. The transformative and lasting impact of this approach can only be realized to the extent that it is reflected in daily practices, academic culture, and a sense of societal responsibility. Embedding social justice as the normative foundation of the higher education system produces a public good that supports not only disadvantaged groups but also the welfare and democratization process of society as a whole.

## References

- Açıkalın, Ş.N. and Erçetin, Ş.Ş. (2018). Staff Experiences Regarding Student Engagement in Active Learning and Social Environments in New Generation Universities. In Ş.Ş. Erçetin (Ed.) *Chaos, Complexity and Leadership 2016*. Springer Proceedings in Complexity, Ch 6, pp. 67-82, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, DOI [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64554-4\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64554-4_6)
- Açıkalın, Ş.N., Erçetin, Ş. Ş., Potas, N., Çevik, M. S., Neyişci, N., Görgülü, D. (2021). Measurement of social integration: Syrian women in Turkey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(3), 2960-2983., Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez120>
- Altunoğlu, A. (2020). Yükseköğretimde kapsayıcılığın uygulanabilirliği üzerine bir tartışma. *OPUS–Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 16(27), 672-699. DOI: 10.26466/opus.755015
- Bali, O., Demirbilek, N., & Demirtas, H. (2024). Üniversitelerde sosyal adalet algısı ölçeğinin geliştirilmesi: geçerlik ve güvenirlik çalışması. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 44, 793-815. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SJ.2024.44.2.0076>
- Brennan, J., & Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice. *Higher education*, 56, 287-302.
- Can, E. (2020). Coronavirüs (Covid-19) pandemisi ve pedagojik yansımaları: Türkiye’de açık ve uzaktan eğitim uygulamaları. *Açıköğretim Uygulamaları ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(2),11-53.
- Erçetin, Ş. Ş., Akbaşlı, S. & Baysülen, E., (2020). Expectations of administrators and teachers from students and how students perceive these expectations. *OPUS–International Journal of Society Researches*, 16(28), 1183-1199. DOI: 10.26466/opus.680225
- Erçetin, Ş. Ş., Akbaşlı, S., & Esen, S. (2024). A Theoretical Examination of Financial Models of Higher Education and Proposal for Higher Education in Türkiye. *International Online Journal of Education & Teaching*, 11(1).



Erçetin, Ş.Ş. and Açıkalın, Ş.N. (2018). Student Engagement in Active Learning and Social Environments in New Generation Universities: Experiences of Students. In Ş.Ş. Erçetin (Ed.) *Chaos, Complexity and Leadership 2016*. Springer Proceedings in Complexity, Ch 10, pp. 125-145, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, DOI [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64554-4\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64554-4_10)

Erçetin, Ş.Ş. and Kubilay, S. (2019). Beeeing a Refugee University Student in Turkey from the Perspective of Syrian Female Students. In Ş.Ş. Erçetin, N. Potas (Eds.) *Chaos, Complexity and Leadership 2017*. Springer Proceedings in Complexity, Ch 43.

Ercetin, S.S., & Acikalın, S.N. (Eds.). (2024). *New Perspectives for Leadership after the COVID-19 Pandemic* (1st ed.). Apple Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781032720913>

European Commission. (2021). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*. URL: <https://erasmusplus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-programme-guide-2021>.

Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world* (Vol. 31). Columbia university press.

Fraser, N. & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition? A politico-philosophical exchange*, London: Verso.

Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of participation in complex governance. *Public administration review*, 66, 66-75.

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2009). *Higher Education and Social Justice*. McGraw-Hill Education, United Kingdom.

Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2013). *Widening participation in Australian higher education*. Report to the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), England. Leicester, UK: CFE (Research and Consulting).

Gewirtz, S. (2006). Towards a contextualized analysis of social justice in education. *Educational philosophy and theory*, 38(1), 69-81.

İnan, M., & Demir, M. (2018). Eğitimde fırsat eşitliği ve kamu politikaları: Türkiye üzerine bir değerlendirme, *Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 20(2), 337-359.

Kandemir, O. (2014). Türkiye'de yükseköğretim düzeyinde uzaktan eğitim uygulamaları: Eğitimde fırsat eşitliği ve ekonomik kalkınma. *Electronic Turkish Studies*, 9(5), 1155-1176.

Marginson, S. (2016). *The Dream is Over: The Crisis of Clark Kerr's California Idea of Higher Education*. Oakland: University of California Press. doi: <http://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.17>

OECD. (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*.

Özdemir, C. (2018). Türkiye'de Yükseköğretimin Yaygınlaşmasının Toplumsal Tabakalaşmaya Etkisi. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi* (3), 542-551.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press.





Rhodes, R.A.W. (1997) *Understanding governance: policy networks, governance, reflexivity and accountability* (Public Policy & Management), Philadelphia, US. Open University

Sen, A. (2010). *The idea of justice*, London: Penguin Books.

Singh, M. (2011). The place of social justice in higher education and social change discourses. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 41(4), 481–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2011.581515>

Trow, M. (2010). *Twentieth-century higher education: Elite to mass to universal*. JHU Press.

Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The higher education academy*, 11(1), 1-15.

UNESCO. (2015). *Incheon declaration: Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNHCR. (2020). Syria regional refugee response. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

UNICEF. (2022). *From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation Insights and Reflections from the 4th Survey of National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures*. United Nations Children's Fund. <https://books.google.com.tr/books?id=43nmEAAQBAJ>

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2011). University access for social justice: a capabilities perspective. *South African Journal of Education*, 31(3), 407-418.

Wise, G., Dickinson, C., Katan, T., & Gallegos, M. C. (2020). Inclusive higher education governance: managing stakeholders, strategy, structure and function. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(2), 339-352.

YÖK. (2023). Higher Education Council 2024–2028 strategic plan. [https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Kurumsal/strateji\\_dairesi/stratejik-plan/2024-2028-yok-stratejik-plani.pdf](https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Kurumsal/strateji_dairesi/stratejik-plan/2024-2028-yok-stratejik-plani.pdf)

Yücel, F. H. (2023). Yükseköğretimde kapsayıcılık, çeşitlilik, eşitlik, erişim ve uluslararasılaşmaya yönelik yenilikçi politikalar ile uygulamalar. *Uluslararası Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 10 (36), 343-364.

Yükseköğretim Kurulu. (2014). *Yükseköğretim politikalarında yeni YÖK- 2014'ten sonrası*. Ankara: Yükseköğretim Kurulu.