

## Article

# Social Justice Profiles: An Exploratory Study towards an Empirically Based Multi-Dimensional Classification of Countries Regarding Fairness of Participation in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to suggest a better—theoretically and empirically grounded—understanding of the complex character of social justice in higher education. Theoretically, this article conceptualises social justice in higher education as mediating participation in, completion of and outcomes from higher education. It introduces the concept of composite capability for achieving higher education that captures capabilities to participate in, complete and gain outcomes from higher education. This study also develops a methodology for building an empirically based classification of countries regarding social justice in participation in higher education, taking into account the assessed inequality in students' pathways to higher education as well as inequality in their social conditions, associated with students' social origin. In so doing, it develops three indices: the index of inequalities in students' pathways, the index of inequalities in students' social conditions and the index of participation in higher education. Using microdata from the EUROSTUDENT VII survey (2019–2021) for 12 European countries, it applies the developed methodology to classify countries, for which data are available, by the degree of fairness in participation in higher education. This study's results demonstrate the social embeddedness of social justice in higher education in different economic and political contexts.

**Keywords:** social justice profiles; fairness; higher education; inequalities; pathways; social origin; European countries



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## 1. Introduction

In his well-known book *The Higher Education System*, Burton R. Clark (1983) defines social justice as one of the three basic values of higher education (together with competence and liberty) that are highly valued by governments, academics and the wider public [1]. Recently, other authors have also claimed that social equity in higher education “is a keystone collective benefit that underpins the production and distribution of many other public and private goods” [2] (p. 42). The humanistic essence of these statements is appealing, as they go beyond an instrumental approach towards higher education and relate it to pre-eminent values of modern and postmodern societies, such as social justice. However, they also raise several important questions, such as the following: What does social justice mean in higher education? How can it be achieved? How can we reconcile social justice in higher education with the other core values of higher education?

The understanding of social justice in higher education has attracted scholars' interest and continues to provoke academic discussions. Studies that focus on social justice in higher education have mainly referred to access. Authors [3–8] have investigated social inequalities in access to higher education, specifically the ways in which individuals' social backgrounds—measured mainly by parents' education—influence their chances to enter

different types of higher education institutions. An example of the few studies on social justice in relation to trajectories in higher education is the recent study of Haas and Hadjar [9], and in relation to education outcomes—the research of Shields and Kameshwara [10].

At the level of policy, social justice in education “refers to a commitment to challenging social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individuals arising from any differential distribution of power, resources, and privileges” [11] (p. 8). It has become a central feature of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The London Communiqué of 2007 defines the highly ambitious aim that the student body that enter, participate in and complete higher education at all levels should resemble the diversity of countries’ populations. The issue of equity in higher education gained greater importance in 2015 with the adoption of the sustainable development goals, especially the one on education, which targets the provision of inclusive and equitable education for all. The new European agenda for higher education also stresses the social dimension and insists on “ensuring that higher education is inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds” [12] (p. 6). The 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué reaffirms that “[s]ocially inclusive higher education will remain at the core of the EHEA” [13] (p. 5). Following this agreement between EHEA policymakers, it is argued that “in order to increase social justice and the equality of opportunity by making HE studies more accessible to different social groups, a continuous need towards increasing the flexibility of pathways both into and within HE exists” [14] (p. 11). In line with these developments, some authors have argued that indicators on equity and empowerment are “necessary for more comprehensively addressing education in a post-2015 agenda” [15] (p. 184). In the same vein, some countries (e.g., Australia) have argued that an “equity participation” measure should be taken into account in decisions on performance-based funding for higher education institutions, and some tertiary rankings have included measurements of equity in their methodologies [16].

Although the above developments are important for the conceptualisation of social justice and its significance in higher education, some problems remain regarding how these issues have been investigated. From a theoretical point of view, the understanding of social justice should be deepened by studying it not only regarding access to higher education but also in relation to the process of higher education and its completion. Methodologically and empirically speaking, we have to enrich the singular measurements at the country level and address individual inequalities with more sophisticated empirical analyses.

Against this background, the aim of the present article is to suggest a better—theoretically and empirically grounded—understanding of the complexity of social justice in higher education. More concretely, we will (1) theorise social justice in higher education as mediating participation in, completion of and outcomes from higher education; (2) develop a methodology for building an empirically based classification of countries regarding social justice in participation in higher education based on the assessed inequality in students’ pathways to higher education as well as inequality in their social conditions; and (3) apply the developed methodology to classify countries, for which data are available, by the degree of fairness regarding participation in higher education.

The article is structured in the following way. First, we present, in brief, some theories and argue in favour of Sen’s comparative approach to social justice and the understanding of the individual capability to achieve higher education as a composite capability referring to participation in, completion of and outcomes from higher education. Then, we will describe the research strategy, data and method used for calculating three indices—an index of inequality in students’ pathways, an index of inequality in students’ social conditions and an overall index of inequality in participation in higher education. We will proceed with a presentation of our findings from the analysis, specifically the emerging empirically based classification of countries regarding fairness of participation in higher education. In the final sections of the article, the results will be discussed, and some conclusions will be drawn.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

### 2.1. Sen's Comparative Approach to Social Justice

The development of the concept of social justice has been marked by myriad views and criticism. According to Friedrich von Hayek, the concept of social justice does not mean anything, or it means too many things [17]. Other authors have stated that “‘social justice’ is one of those politically malleable and essentially contested phrases which can mean all things to all people”. The concept is also criticised as suffering from “vagueness and oversimplification” [18] (p. 549) and “highly political, fluid and slippery” [19] (p. 41).

Nevertheless, some important theories have been developed about the essence of social justice and how it can be achieved. Among the most influential approaches are John Rawls’ theory of “justice as fairness” [20], Amartya Sen’s [21,22] comparative approach to social justice and Nancy Fraser’s [23] conceptualisation of recognition as a matter of justice. Studies have demonstrated that all these approaches offer valuable ideas, which are mutually enriching and provide a reliable basis for understanding and investigating social justice in higher education [6,24,25].

This article is inspired by Amartya Sen’s [21,22] comparative approach to social justice. Sen, who acknowledges an enormous intellectual debt to Rawls and his theory of “justice as fairness”, is nevertheless highly critical of its utopian character. Rawls focuses on identifying perfectly just institutions and correct behaviour. In turn, Sen claims that justice could be achieved on the basis of making comparisons between the different ways in which people’s lives may be led, thereby revealing which are more or less just. He views justice as a “momentous concept” [22] (p. 401) and argues that comparative questions are inescapable for any theory of justice that aims to serve as a guidance for personal behaviour and public policy. Sen’s comparative approach means making realisation-focused comparisons, i.e., not seeking to identify a fully just society but ranking alternative social arrangements. This approach pays particular attention to human behaviour, as it does not accept that people will automatically adhere to their principles simply because institutions are ideally organised, and types of ideal behaviour have been identified. Sen assumes that individuals may suffer from injustices even if just institutions are in place.

Sen’s comparative approach to justice presents a humanistic and more realistic view on how justice can be increased, as far as it highlights the need to identify existing forms of injustice as well as active engagement in overcoming them. Thus, according to Robeyns, Sen has developed a “non-ideal theory on justice, with greater *direct* relevance for pressing issues of injustice” [26] (p. 411).

Human capability, a central concept in Sen’s capability approach, serves as the informational basis of his theory of justice. It refers to “our ability to achieve various combinations of functionings that we can compare and judge against each other in terms of what we have reason to value” [22] (p. 233). Thus, human capability is viewed as a special kind of freedom that captures the alternative combinations that are feasible for a person to achieve. It is important to be emphasised that human capability does not exist in a vacuum—it could be enabled or constrained by so-called conversion factors, which influence people’s capacity to convert the resources they have into actual freedoms and achievements. There are different classifications of these conversion factors (e.g., [27–29]). We accept a classification of conversion factors that is based on the level where they operate—*micro*, *meso* or *macro* (see [24–30]). Examples of conversion factors at the micro level related to higher education are an individual’s social or ethnic background. Factors at the meso level refer to educational institutions, local economy, and employers’ practices. At the macro level, these factors include national institutional and policy arrangements related to higher education, as well as the available economic, political and cultural structures. Taking these conversion factors into account provides the basis for considering the individual level characteristics, on the one hand, and the institutional and macro level features of the contexts when assessing inequalities and social justice in higher education.

## 2.2. Social Justice Perspectives to Higher Education

From the point of view of individuals who are interested in achieving a higher education degree, higher education could be defined as a process with several focal points: entry into it, participation in it, completion of it and outcomes from it. That is why the individual capability to achieve higher education is a composite capability—it includes capability to enter higher education, capability to retain and participate in higher education, capability to complete higher education and capability to gain valuable outcomes from higher education.

As already emphasised in the introduction section, a social justice perspective has been mainly applied in studies on higher education in relation to access, understood as an assessment of the extent to which the student body represents the diversity of the population in terms of social origin, gender, race, and age [31,32]. Thus, Marginson argues that Rawls' and Sen's understandings of justice resonate in two perspectives through which social equity in higher education has already been conceptualised: equity as social inclusion and equity as the equal access of students from all social groups, i.e., fairness [5,6]. The inclusion perspective refers "to the significance of improvement in participation of any particular group, irrespective of how other groups have fared" [4] (p. 146). The fairness perspective "implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances—for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin—should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential" [33] (pp. 13–14). Clancy and Goastellec set an agenda for comparative research on access and equity while discussing some of the difficulties in finding reliable data and instruments for measuring access and equity from a comparative perspective [4].

An important comparative study shows that higher education expansion has generally been accompanied by increasing inclusion and declining inequality of eligibility for higher education [7]. Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova argue that both aspects of social justice in access to higher education—inclusion and fairness—are important because they capture two different dimensions of it [3]. Moreover, they are viewed as irreducible, which means that neither of them can be neglected.

Pitman et al. [16] rank Australian higher education institutions on their "equity performance". In their study, higher education equity refers to the extent to which higher education institutions are accessible for, supportive of and beneficial to students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Higher education equity performance was measured across six distinct domains: aspiration, academic preparation, access and participation, first-year experience, progress during pursuit of higher education and graduate outcomes. The authors' conclusions highlight several problems in using a ranking system for evaluating equity performance in higher education; they emphasise that while it is possible to agree on the dimensions of higher education equity "it is far more difficult to quantify which indicators should be used to measure performance and even further, which indicators should be prioritised over others" [16] (p. 621).

Triventi identifies several institutional characteristics of higher education institutions that might affect student participation and social inequality such as tracking, expenditures, structural differentiation, institutional autonomy and accountability, affordability for students and graduates' occupational returns [34]. Based on an analysis of the institutional profiles of higher education systems in 16 OECD countries, the author suggests a multidimensional empirical classification of higher education systems composed of four clusters, labelled the Continental, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and North American regimes.

All of the above-mentioned studies demonstrate the complex character of social justice in higher education, referring to different aspects—participation in, completion of and outcomes from higher education—and capturing the assessment of inequalities caused by factors at the micro, meso and macro levels. The distinction between these aspects of higher education (participation in, completion of and outcomes from) is very important because the influence of social factors in each one of them could be varied. Thus, it is worth analysing not only the inequalities caused by social origin in relation to students' social conditions but also if and how social origin affects students' drop-out and completion rates

(e.g., [35]). A social justice perspective to completion of higher education means revealing whether the student body that achieves a higher education degree reflects the diversity of our populations. In turn, studies have shown that although students' attained level of education "mediate the direct effect of social origin on their position in the labour market, it is impacted by a socio-economic background equally directly" [36] (p. 1). Such findings revive questions of social justice, e.g., as an outcome of higher education, to what extent is students' employment status influenced by social origin? Could higher education policies and practices mitigate this influence?

To a large degree, the complex character of social justice in higher education explains why, as a rule, different studies limit their analyses to only one specific aspect of this problem. In this article, we focus on the individual's capability to participate in higher education. The capability to participate in higher education captures a person's freedom to be involved in higher education processes that they have reason to value and is influenced by factors at different levels—micro, meso and macro. In the following analysis, we will look at the inequalities related to participation in higher education caused by one factor at the micro level: social origin and how its influence is moderated by two macro factors—a country's economic development and level of democracy.

Both OECD and Eurostat data [37,38] show that—as a rule—the percentage of people with tertiary education attainment is higher in high-income countries that adhere to democratic regimes. Years ago, Dewey, one of the greatest theorists of education, stated that "[t]he devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact" [39] (p. 91). Taking this into account we decided to test whether these two macro factors—a country's income and level of democracy—are associated with social justice in participation in higher education. In turn, participation in higher education will be associated with students' pathways to higher education and social conditions.

More concretely, this article presents an empirically based exploratory study that attempts to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How can inequalities in students' pathways that are associated with their social origin be measured?

RQ2: How can inequalities in students' social conditions that are associated with their social origin be measured?

RQ3: Do countries differ regarding social justice in participation in higher education based on assessing inequalities in students' pathways and inequalities in their social conditions?

RQ4: What is the association between the level of social justice in participation in higher education based on assessing inequalities in students' pathways and inequalities in their social conditions in a given country, on the one hand, and the level of that country's indices of logged income and democracy, on the other?

### 3. Research Strategy

#### 3.1. Data and Method

Our study is based on microdata from the EUROSTUDENT Survey VII (2019–2021), which were only available for 16 countries [40]. The survey was carried out in 26 countries among all students who were studying in a higher education institution at the time of observation. This corresponds to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 5–7 [41]. The full methodology of the seventh round of the survey as well as country exceptions from the target group are described in full detail in Cuppen et al. [42] and Hauschildt et al. [43].

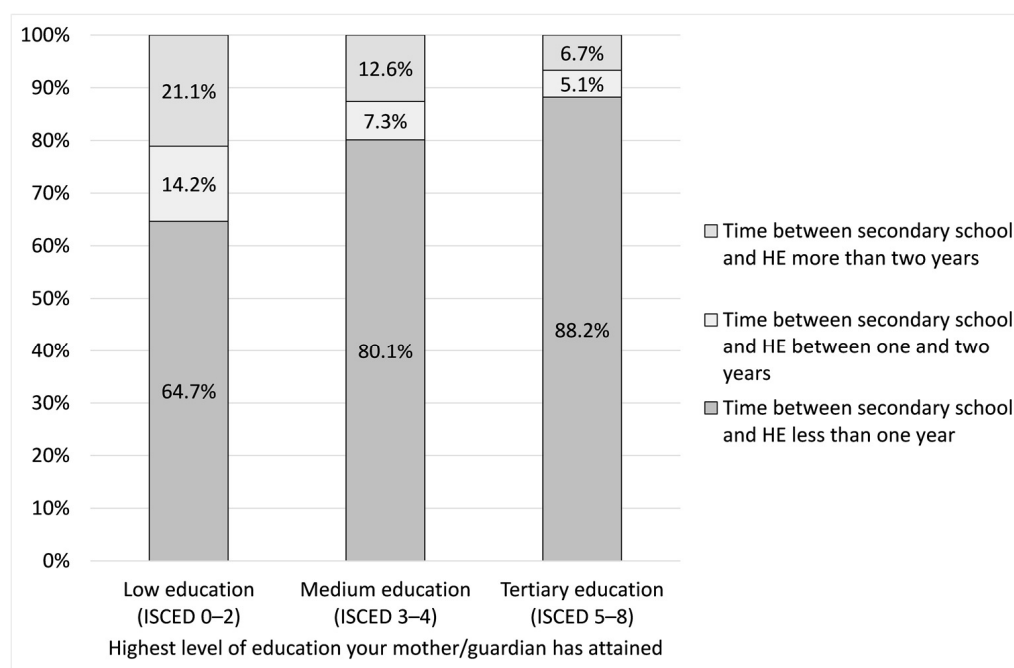
We calculated three indices—an index of inequality in students' pathways, an index of inequality in students' social conditions and an overall index of inequality in participation in higher education. The basis for the construction of these indices of inequality is the difference between the groups formed according to students' social origin. We accept that social origin is a complex phenomenon with different components that refer to both parents [44]. Thus, students' social origin was measured by maternal and paternal education and par-



ents' relative affluence. There are three categories of maternal and paternal education: low (ISCED levels 0–2), medium (ISCED levels 3–4) and tertiary (ISCED levels 5–8). There are five categories of parents' economic situation: not at all well-off, not very well-off, average, somewhat well-off and very well-off. Data on parents' education and financial status are missing for the Czech Republic, Norway and Sweden. That is why these countries were excluded from the analyses.

For Austria, there were no data for five of the twenty-one initially chosen indicators; therefore, it was not possible for the index of inequality in social conditions and the overall index of inequality in participation in higher education to be calculated for this country, and it was also excluded. Thus, 12 countries remain for which all the indices could be calculated. We worked with an analytical sample of 91,972 people. Data are weighted by weight factor.

For example, looking at the difference in the relative frequency of answers to the question “How long after leaving the regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?” concerning maternal education in Croatia, a distribution of answers presented in Figure 1 can be observed.

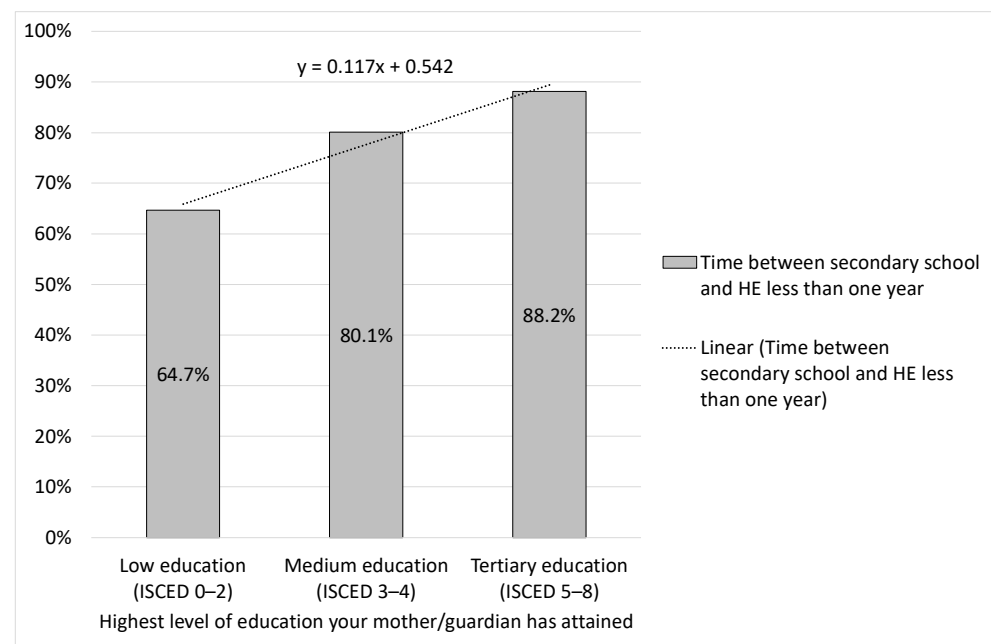


**Figure 1.** Distribution of answers to the question “How long after leaving the regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?” concerning maternal education (Croatia).

Here, one response increased in relative frequency when maternal education also increased. The slope of the linear model can be used as a measure of difference, presented in Figure 2.

In this case, the slope shows that the average difference between any two successive levels of maternal education in Croatia is 11.7 percentage points. Generally speaking, a steeper incline indicates greater inequality, and, conversely, a flatter one indicates less inequality.

When social origin is measured by maternal and paternal education, comprising three categories, the slope is between  $-50\%$  and  $50\%$ . When social origin is measured by parents' affluence, which has five categories, the slope is between  $-30\%$  and  $30\%$  (explanation of the slopes' borders available upon request).



**Figure 2.** Relative frequencies of the answer “Time between secondary school and HE less than one year” to the question “How long after leaving the regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?” concerning maternal education (Croatia).

In both cases, if  $b < 0$ , then there is inequality in a negative direction—higher social origin leads to more difficulty for students to participate in higher education. If  $b = 0$ , then there is no inequality. If  $b > 0$ , then there is inequality in a positive direction—higher social origin leads to easier student participation in higher education.

In order to obtain indices that, on the one hand, are in the interval from 0 to 100, but, on the other hand, to preserve the sign and the direction of the inequality respectively, the slope must be normalized in the range from  $-100$  to  $+100$ . For maternal and paternal education, the normalization equation is as follows:

$$Index = b \times \frac{100}{50} = 2 \times b$$

For example, if the slope is 11.7 percentage points, then the index score is  $2 \times 11.7 = 23.4$ . That is, the index for this particular indicator for Croatia is 23.4.

In the case of parents’ affluence, the normalization equation is as follows:

$$Index = b \times \frac{100}{30} = b \times \frac{10}{3}$$

After calculating the index for each individual indicator, the obtained indices were averaged to obtain the general index.

### 3.2. Calculation of Indices

In the development of the indices, we followed a reflective approach [45], because social justice is a social phenomenon, which cannot be measured directly. At the basis of our analyses is social origin, which, through educational pathways and social conditions, determines participation in higher education. Altogether, we selected 21 items from the EUROSTUDENT questionnaire. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct a special study in accordance with our theoretical framework, and, thus, we were limited in our choice of indicators by the available data.

### 3.2.1. Index of Inequality in Pathways

The calculation of this index began with eight indicators of inequality in pathways to higher education. These indicators were selected from the EUROSTUDENT questionnaire, taking into account the main features of the Bologna process and the EHEA [46]. Thus, for example, in discussing educational pathways, special attention is paid to the delayed transitions to higher education and students' work experience prior to enrolment in higher education [14].

For each indicator, those answers' categories that are positive in relation to inequality were merged, i.e., those categories whose relative frequencies are expected to increase when inequality increases. This means that when parents' education and relative affluence are higher, it is easier for students to participate in higher education. These eight indicators are as follows:

1. How long after leaving the regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time? A—"Time between secondary school and HE less than one year".
2. Students' work experience and recognition—No prior work experience: "Yes".
3. Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time? A—"Yes, I worked, but less than one year" and "No, I did not work prior to entering higher education".
4. Assessment of the study setting and content—I often have the feeling that I do not really belong in higher education: "Don't agree" and "Don't agree at all".
5. Assessment of the study setting and content—It was always clear I would study in higher education one day: "Strongly agree" and "Agree".
6. Assessment of the study setting and content—I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies: "Don't agree" and "Don't agree at all".
7. Temporary enrolment abroad—"Yes".
8. (No) Intentions to study abroad—"Preparation to enrol abroad" and "Intentions to enrol abroad".

For the merged categories of these indicators, we first calculated the indices and then Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the internal consistency of indicators, i.e., indicating whether they measure the same phenomenon. As a result, educational pathways by the mother's highest level of education had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.458, which is below 0.5; educational pathways by the father's highest level of education had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.045, which is also below 0.5; and educational pathways by parental affluence had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.775.

Using Cronbach's alpha when an item is deleted shows that the internal consistency improves if two out of the above eight indicators are removed: items numbers 4 and 6. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha became 0.725 for maternal education; it became 0.677 for paternal education and 0.722 for parental affluence. The new Cronbach's alpha value for the entire index is 0.958.

Therefore, the final versions of the indices were calculated only with the six indicators that are consistent with each other. When the index ranges from 0 to 100, this indicates that the higher the index score, the greater the inequality in students' pathways caused by social origin. When it ranges from −100 to 0, then the higher the absolute index score, the greater the inequality in students' pathways caused by social origin.

### 3.2.2. Index of Inequality in Social Conditions

The calculation of this index began with thirteen indicators of inequality in social conditions. As with the previous index, our choice was informed by the key feature of the Bologna process. Thus, we include three indicators that capture obstacles to mobility because "the centrality of student mobility for the EHEA", which "was reaffirmed as 'of utmost importance' (Prague, 2001), as 'the basis to establish EHEA' (Berlin, 2003), as one of the key objectives (Bergen, 2005), . . . as 'the hallmark of EHEA' (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, 2009), as one of three key objectives (Bucharest, 2012)" [46] (p. 125). The other indicators



cover financial situation and difficulties experienced by students, as they have a direct influence on students' engagement with educational process.

Again, we merged the answers' categories that were positive in relation to inequality for each indicator, i.e., those categories whose relative frequencies were expected to increase when inequality increases.

1. Difficulties due to financial difficulties—"No".
2. Difficulties due to obligations of paid job—"No".
3. Do you have (a) paid job(s) during the current lecture period?"—"No, I don't work during the lecture period".
4. I work to cover my living costs—"No" and "Not at all".
5. Without my paid job, I could not afford to be a student—"No" and "Not at all".
6. I work because I have to support others (children, partner, parents, etc.) financially—"No" and "Not at all".
7. I work so I can afford things I otherwise would not buy—"No" and "Not at all".
8. Students' assessment of financial difficulties—"It's not serious" and "Not at all".
9. Students' ability to pay for an unexpected expense—"Yes, I am able to pay this through my own resources" and "No, but someone else (parents, family, partner, etc.) would pay this for me".
10. Insufficient foreign language skills as (no) obstacle to mobility—"No" and "No obstacle".
11. Financial burden as (no) obstacle to mobility—"No" and "No obstacle".
12. Loss of paid job as (no) obstacle to mobility—"No" and "No obstacle".
13. Do you have any children?"—"No".

As a result, Cronbach's alpha was 0.874 for the social conditions of education by the mother's highest level of education. It was 0.846 for the social conditions of education by the father's highest level of education; for the social conditions of education by parental affluence, it was 0.940; and when Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the entire index, it was 0.837.

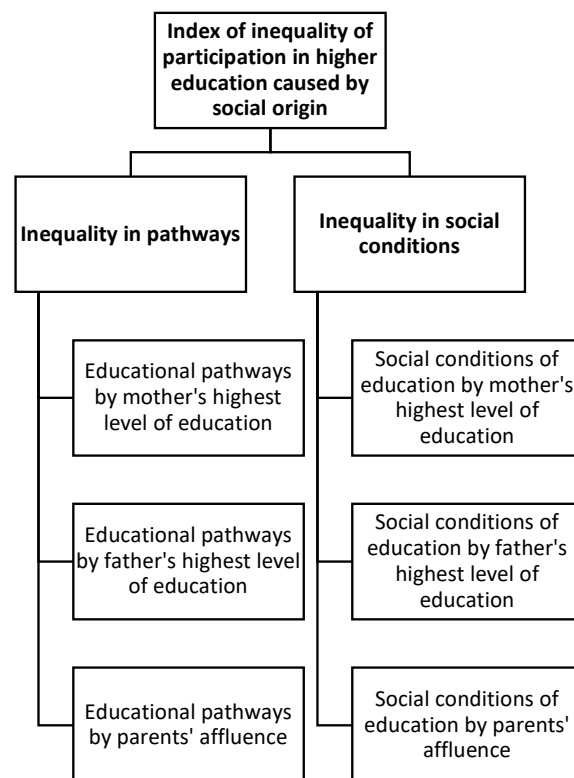
Therefore, the final versions of the indices were calculated with all thirteen indicators. When the index ranges from 0 to 100, this indicates that the higher the index score, the greater the inequality in students' social conditions caused by social origin. When it ranges from −100 to 0, then the higher the absolute index score, the greater the inequality in students' social conditions caused by social origin.

### 3.2.3. Index of Inequality of Participation in Higher Education Caused by Social Origin

We also calculated a general index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin, which combines the two indices (index of inequality in students' pathways and index of inequality in students' social conditions) as the average mean. For the general index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin, Cronbach's alpha was 0.896. Figure 3 below presents the general scheme of the index of inequality of participation in higher education.

### 3.2.4. Social Embeddedness of Inequality of Participation in Higher Education Caused by Social Origin

In order to study the social embeddedness of social justice in participation in higher education—particularly of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin—we selected two country-level macro variables as synthesised indicators of the way the economic and political spheres of a given society function: the index of logged income and the democracy index.



**Figure 3.** General scheme of the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin.

- *Index of logged income.* This index is a component of the Human Development Index. It measures “a decent standard of living” [47] (p. 1) and is based on gross national income per capita measured by purchase power parity in constant US dollars. “[F]or income, the natural logarithm of the actual, minimum and maximum values is used” [47] (p. 2). The reason for using logarithms is that the income distribution is usually right-skewed. Logarithms make the distribution more symmetrical and approaches the normal (Gaussian) distribution.
- *Democracy index.* This index is composed of 60 indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. This index ranges from 0 to 10 [48]. As of 2019 among the 12 studied countries, the highest score on this index is 9.25 (for Finland), and the lowest is 5.42 (for Georgia).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Social Justice Regarding Students' Pathways

Table 1 presents the values from the index of inequality in pathways, the scores for each of the three dimensions of the index and the respective countries' rankings. The countries have been ranked based on their overall index results.

Table 1 shows that higher social origin leads to students' easier participation in higher education and highlights the significant differences between countries in terms of the inequality in students' pathways. Accordingly, when it comes to maternal and parental affluence, the most just countries are Luxembourg and Denmark. In terms of inequalities in educational pathways related to paternal education, the most just countries are Luxembourg and Georgia. Luxembourg appears to be an outlier, as higher social origin leads to more difficult educational pathways there. Luxembourg and Denmark scored the lowest on the overall index of inequality in educational pathways, which means that they are the most just countries regarding students' pathways (i.e., the effects of higher social origin on students' pathways are less prominent there).

**Table 1.** Index of inequality in pathways and its subindices.

Country Surveyed	Educational Pathways by Mother's Highest Level of Education		Educational Pathways by Father's Highest Level of Education		Educational Pathways by Parental Affluence		Inequality in Pathways	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Luxembourg	3.3	2	2.0	1	−3.6	1	0.5	1
Denmark	2.3	1	4.1	3	2.1	2	2.8	2
Georgia	6.4	3	3.2	2	4.0	3	4.5	3
Netherlands	8.4	4	7.8	4	9.4	4	8.5	4
Estonia	10.8	5	8.6	5	11.0	7	10.1	5
Slovenia	13.9	8	10.8	6	9.9	6	11.5	6
Finland	12.9	7	13.2	9	9.7	5	11.9	7
Lithuania	15.0	10	11.0	7	11.2	9	12.4	8
Poland	12.1	6	13.4	10	11.9	10	12.4	9
Ireland	14.2	9	11.2	8	12.9	12	12.8	10
Hungary	17.0	11	15.2	12	11.1	8	14.4	11
Croatia	17.5	12	15.0	11	12.4	11	15.0	12

#### 4.2. Social Justice Regarding Students' Social Conditions

Table 2 presents the values from the index of inequality in students' social conditions, the scores for each of the three dimensions of the index and the respective countries' rankings.

**Table 2.** Index of inequality in social conditions and its subindices.

Country Surveyed	Social Conditions of Education by Mother's Highest Level of Education		Social Conditions of Education by Father's Highest Level of Education		Social Conditions of Education by Parental Affluence		Inequality in Social Conditions	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Luxembourg	−2.0	1	2.4	1	−14.9	1	−4.9	1
Denmark	6.2	3	5.7	2	12.1	2	8.0	2
Georgia	5.0	2	9.1	4	13.1	3	9.1	3
Finland	9.9	6	6.9	3	13.7	4	10.1	4
Estonia	9.6	4	9.6	6	20.0	6	13.1	5
Netherlands	9.8	5	9.4	5	20.9	7	13.4	6
Lithuania	11.6	7	12.0	7	17.4	5	13.7	7
Ireland	11.7	8	12.3	8	24.9	11	16.3	8
Hungary	15.0	11	12.9	9	21.0	8	16.3	9
Slovenia	12.7	9	13.7	10	24.0	9	16.8	10
Poland	14.4	10	15.1	11	24.1	10	17.9	11
Croatia	15.8	12	17.2	12	36.2	12	23.1	12

Table 2 demonstrates that the higher the social origin, the better the social conditions for students in higher education in almost all countries. There are significant differences between countries in terms of the inequality in students' social conditions. Accordingly, when it comes to paternal education and parental affluence, the most just countries are Luxembourg and Denmark. In terms of inequalities in students' social conditions related

to maternal education, the most just countries are Luxembourg and Georgia. Luxembourg once more seems to be an exception; having better-off parents results in more difficult social conditions for students. On the overall index of inequality in students' social conditions, Luxembourg scored below 0, which means that higher social origin among students is associated with poorer social conditions. Denmark, Georgia and Finland scored 8.0, 9.1 and 10.1, respectively, revealing that they are the most just countries regarding students' social conditions due to the influence of higher social origin on students' social conditions being less pronounced there.

#### 4.3. Social Justice Regarding Participation in Higher Education

Table 3 shows the overall index scores from the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin and its subindices, that of inequality of students' pathways and that of inequality of students' social conditions. Luxembourg and Denmark scored the lowest, which means that they are the most just countries in terms of student participation in higher education and thus are ranked highest. There, social origin has a lower differentiating effect on students' pathways and social conditions.

**Table 3.** Index of inequality of participation in higher education (HE) caused by social origin and its subindices.

Country Surveyed	Inequality in Pathways		Inequality in Social Conditions		Inequality of Participation in HE Caused by Social Origin	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Luxembourg	0.5	1	−4.9	1	−2.2	1
Denmark	2.8	2	8.0	2	5.4	2
Georgia	4.5	3	9.1	3	6.8	3
Netherlands	8.5	4	13.4	6	11.0	4
Finland	11.9	7	10.1	4	11.0	5
Estonia	10.1	5	13.1	5	11.6	6
Lithuania	12.4	8	13.7	7	13.0	7
Slovenia	11.5	6	16.8	10	14.2	8
Ireland	12.8	10	16.3	8	14.5	9
Poland	12.4	9	17.9	11	15.1	10
Hungary	14.4	11	16.3	9	15.4	11
Croatia	15.0	12	23.1	12	19.0	12

#### 4.4. Social Embeddedness of Social Justice Regarding Participation in Higher Education

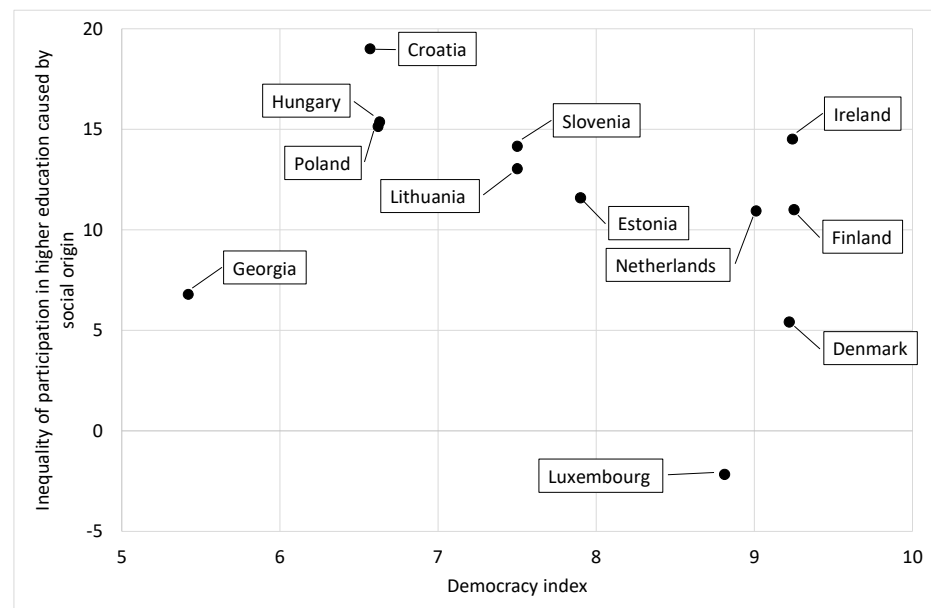
Table 4 presents the correlations between the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin and its dimensions with the index of logged income and the democracy index.

**Table 4.** Correlations between the index of inequality of participation in higher education (HE) caused by social origin and its dimensions (index of inequality in pathways and index of inequality in social conditions) with the index of logged income and the democracy index for 12 countries.

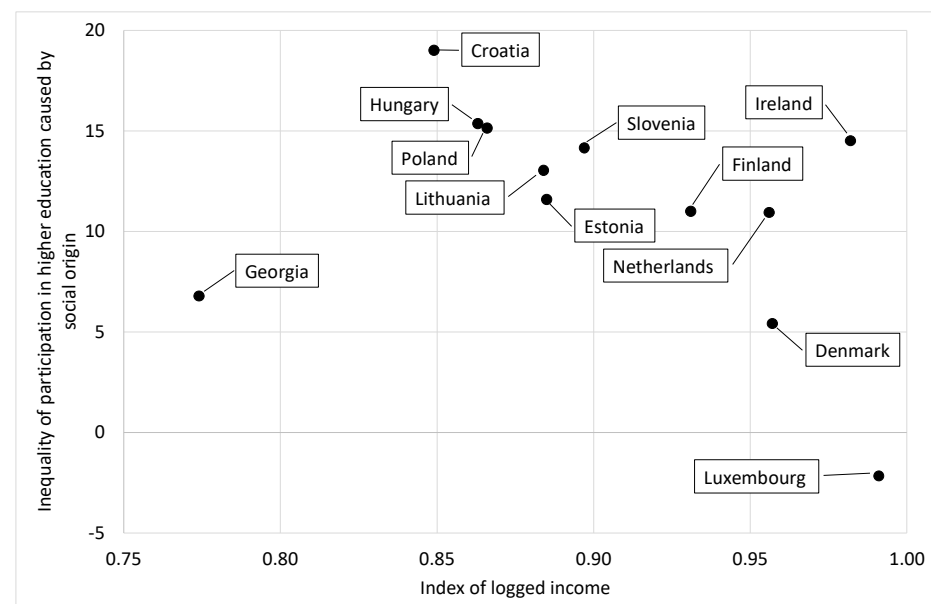
	Inequality in Pathways	Inequality in Social Conditions	Inequality of Participation in HE Caused by Social Origin
Index of logged income	−0.707 *	−0.701 *	−0.724 *
Democracy index	−0.593	−0.592	−0.610 *

Significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ . Note: Georgia was excluded from the correlations, as it stands as an outlier with low levels of democracy and income but simultaneously low levels of inequality.

The estimates in Table 4 reveal the existence of four statistically significant correlation coefficients. The index of logged income correlates negatively with the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin and its two subindices. There is also a significant negative correlation between the democracy index and the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin. This means that the higher the democracy index and the index of logged income values, the lower the values for the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin. Figures 4 and 5 below graph these relationships.



**Figure 4.** Relationship between the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin and the democracy index for 12 countries.



**Figure 5.** Relationship between the index of inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin and the index of logged income for 12 countries.



## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present article argues that the conceptualisation of social justice in higher education should be further deepened in order to take into account the process, completion and outcomes thereof. More concretely, we argue that (1) a social justice perspective is indispensable as a framework for analysing the development of higher education in contemporary societies, one that should not be used in a simplistic manner but should refer to all stages and aspects of higher education; and (2) higher education is embedded in and dependent on the wider social environment, and the way social justice is implemented in a given higher education system not only affects its characteristics but is also a feature of its broader social environment. This argument is in line with studies revealing that countries may differ in their general understanding of social justice [2,49]. This is reflected in differences in the conceptualisation of social justice in higher education.

For *RQ1*, we developed an index of inequality in students' educational pathways associated with their social origin, which was measured by three indicators: the mother's highest level of education, the father's highest level of education and parental affluence.

Regarding *RQ2*, we elaborated an index of inequality in students' social conditions associated with their social origin, which was measured with the same three indicators.

In response to *RQ3*, the results show that there are significant differences among countries regarding inequality related to students' pathways and social conditions; they also demonstrate that social justice in participation in higher education is a complex phenomenon that has varied manifestations in different countries. Luxembourg and Denmark appear as the most just countries in terms of students' participation in higher education, i.e., countries in which students with low social origins experience the lowest disadvantages regarding their educational pathways and social conditions. This could be explained by the specificity of both their general socio-economic conditions and higher education systems and policies. Thus, for example, Denmark is among the countries in which a variety of measures are implemented in order to support the retention and completion of students from under-represented groups, including a universal grant scheme [46] (pp. 120, 153).

The results for Luxembourg on the index of inequality in social conditions and the overall index of inequality in participation in higher education deserve particular focus. There, unlike in the other surveyed countries, more well-off parents do not guarantee better educational pathways or social conditions for students. Our tentative explanation of this finding is that the available social and educational policies in Luxembourg are able to compensate for disadvantages among students coming from less affluent families. It should also be taken into account that Luxembourg is a country with large shares of students with a migration background, and more than two-thirds of the tertiary student population study abroad (therefore, these students are not reflected in the national enrolment statistics) [46] (pp. 21, 140).

In answering *RQ4*, our analysis has revealed significant negative correlations between the level of social justice in participation in higher education related to inequality of participation in higher education, caused by social origin, on the one hand, and the level of that country's indices of logged income and democracy, on the other. This means that the higher the values for logged income and democracy are, the lower the inequality of participation in higher education caused by social origin. In other words, wealthier and more democratic countries are also fairer in terms of participation in higher education among students with different social origins. A tentative explanation of this result could be that wealthier and more democratic countries have developed higher education policies, which could compensate for inequalities in students' pathways and social conditions caused by social origin.

The article has demonstrated that social justice in higher education is such a complex phenomenon that it should be defined as a special field of study. More concretely, this article contributes to the existing literature in a number of ways. First, it introduces the concept of composite capability for achieving higher education that captures capabilities to participate in, complete and gain outcomes from higher education. Second, it develops

three indices: the index of inequalities in students' pathways, the index of inequalities in students' social conditions and the index of participation in higher education. Third, an empirically based classification of countries regarding social justice in participation in higher education associated with students' origin has been developed. Fourth, the analysis demonstrates the social embeddedness of social justice in higher education in different economic and political contexts.

In his study, Triventi develops a classification of higher education systems based on their institutional configurations, which are likely to affect inequalities in student participation: tracking, expenditures, structural differentiation, institutional autonomy and accountability, affordability for students and graduates' occupational returns [34]. We followed another approach; we are interested not in institutional factors that are likely to affect inequalities in access to higher education but in the dimensions of real inequalities related to participation in higher education. Thus, we present an empirical classification of countries regarding fairness of participation in higher education, insofar as it reflects inequalities caused by students' social origin and does not take into account the inequalities associated with institutional characteristics in higher education systems.

Taking into account our conceptualisations and empirical analysis, we can outline several directions for future research. First, it is worth deepening the theoretical understanding of social justice in higher education and of the composite capability to achieve higher education. Second, further attempts are needed in order to ensure reliable data and indicators for measuring social justice in higher education that can capture the multi-dimensional character of social justice related to different stages in the higher education process (access, participation, completion, outcomes) and to inequalities based not only on social background but also on other factors at the micro, meso and macro levels, i.e., gender, age, type of higher education institution, etc. Having in mind the importance of social justice in higher education from a policy perspective within the EHEA [11], we suggest that the EUROSTUDENT survey be further extended in order to be able to measure social justice in relation to all aspects of higher education—access, participation, completion and outcomes. Third, given the stratification trends in higher education, it will be important to further differentiate the analysis according to fields of study and programmes (bachelor's, master's, doctoral) without neglecting the transition from one level to another. Fourth, special focus should be given to building an empirically based classification of countries that refers simultaneously to access to, participation in, completion of and outcomes from higher education and considers factors at the micro, meso and macro levels, as well as the stratified character of contemporary higher education systems.

Due to the complex character of social justice in higher education, the lack of reliable data and limited scope of the article, we were not able to fully follow our theoretical understanding of the capability to participate in higher education. Our empirical analysis has some limitations in this regard: (a) we focus on one aspect of social justice—the individual's capability to participate in higher education, and (b) we look at the inequalities in participation in higher education caused by one factor at the micro level: social origin and how its influence is moderated by two macro factors—a country's economic development and level of democracy. Our study is also limited to a small number of countries. This has not allowed us to cluster countries with similar profiles or suggest more plausible explanations of the obtained results by revealing the association between our classification and well-established groupings of countries, such the ones based on welfare regimes or types of capitalism. In order to increase the internal consistency of the index of educational pathways, we removed two items. As both of them referred to subjective assessments and not to the real higher education process, we think that this decision was adequate and better than to keep them and jeopardize the reliability of the index.

Social justice perspectives provide a framework for assessing inequalities in higher education and their legitimacy. They affirm that we should continue to protect human dignity and to promote equal opportunities for everyone. Social justice in higher education "is a keystone collective benefit that underpins the production and distribution of many

other public and private goods” [2] (p. 42). Discussing higher education from a social justice perspective has clear implications for policy making. From a policy standpoint, it is important to not only develop adequate and effective measures for promoting social justice in higher education but also reveal and implement the instruments that could reconcile it with the other core values of higher education—above all, with quality and competence.

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