



## Missions and Values of Higher Education: Heuristic Potential of the Capability Approach

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mission, widening access/participation, diversity, higher education policy/development

## ***Abstract***

### **Missions and Values of Higher Education: Heuristic Potential of the Capability Approach**

The paper aims to examine the heuristic potential of the capability approach (CA) for conceptualizing and understanding the missions and values of higher education (HE). It presents a theoretical model of HE missions/roles derived from the combination of CA with the approach of HE as an institution, and from consideration of the intrinsic, instrumental and empowering value of HE. The analysis uses data from the European Social Survey (2006-2012), the Eurostudent survey (2015) and Eurostat, to analyse the role of HE in promoting and legitimizing equity as a value, based on the way in which access to HE is realized.

# Missions and Values of Higher Education: Heuristic Potential of the Capability Approach

## 1. Introduction and problem outline

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have gained “firm ground” under diverse social conditions, and, though not unproblematically, have managed to “live through” radical political and social changes and preserve their traditional values and organizational principles. Nowadays, HEIs throughout the world face challenges that interfere not only with their functioning but also with their very identity as institutions. These are challenges stemming from the changed context both in society as a whole and in science and the wider realm of education. Tapper and Palfreyman (2000) define the main problems facing contemporary universities as the three ‘Ms’: marketization, massification, and managerialism. The three ‘Ms’ create a completely new situation in HE because they “attack” the traditional essence and founding principles of the university as the main HEI. Another challenge to the development of higher education (HE) is the increased status hierarchy among universities and among nations, which plays strongly to the self-interest of universities (Marginson 2011a). This hierarchy has been legitimized/maintained by various rankings, which also seem to “reflect the greater differentiation of institutional missions within mass systems – especially with regard to research” (Scott, forthcoming, p. 8). According to some authors, the result of these developments is that HE and its main institution – the university – become fragmented, fall “in ruin” (Readings 1996) and are “losing legitimacy as they move away from their historical character, functions” (Gumport 2000). In such a situation, fresh theoretical frameworks are needed to provide new perspectives for discussing and capturing the essence of HE and its missions and values.

The study focuses on the capability approach (CA) as a framework for discussing roles, missions and values of HE. More concretely, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, to theoretically outline the heuristic potential of the CA in conceptualizing and understanding the influence of HE on individuals and society. Second, to show the capacity of this approach to restore and give new meaning to some values in, and promoted by, HE, such as social justice. The present paper makes two (major) contributions. First, it enriches the literature and discussions on missions and values of HE in the contemporary postmodern world. We do so by developing our own theoretical model, which simultaneously takes into account two perspectives: the institutional, regarding HE as an institution, and the CA. Second, it contributes to the discussions on access to, and social equity in, HE.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss our theoretical framework and present a theoretical model of HE missions/roles derived from the combination of the CA perspective with the approach of HE as an institution, and from consideration of the intrinsic, instrumental and empowering value of HE. This is followed by a discussion of access to HE through the lens of the value of equity. After that, the data and analysis methods are described. The main findings are presented afterwards. In the last section, these findings are discussed in the light of previous research, and the heuristic potential of CA in conceptualizing the roles and values of HE is outlined.

## 2. Theoretical framework and main theses

Human capital theory is the best known and probably the most influential theory conceptualizing education and its personal and social role and outcomes. It was pioneered in the 1960s by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, and some other scholars from the University of Chicago (Becker 1994; Schultz 1963). The main thesis of human capital theory is that education is important both for individuals and societies as it disseminates knowledge and creates skills that serve as an investment in the productivity of human beings

as an economic production factor. Recent reformulations of human capital theory has stressed the significance of education and training as the key to participation in the new global economy. The European Strategy “Europe 2020” defines education as a crucial driver towards building smart growth – an economy based on knowledge and innovation – and to increasing people’s employability (European Commission 2010). Human capital theory remains the most powerful approach to education for OECD countries as well – it is argued that “the overall economic performance of the OECD countries is increasingly more directly based upon their knowledge stock and their learning capabilities” (Foray & Lundvall 1996, p. 21).

Although human capital theory is so powerful, it has also been highly criticized. Two of the lines of this criticism are important for the present analysis. The first one stresses the fact that economy is conceptualized as an analytically separate realm of society that can be understood in terms of its own internal dynamics, although it is well known that economy is influenced by politics and culture. The second line of criticism questions the assumption that individuals always act rationally to maximize utilities (Block 1990; Fitzsimons 1999). If we apply this reasoning concretely to the way human capital theory conceptualizes education, we could argue that it becomes problematic because it is economistic, ahistorical, fragmented and exclusively instrumentalistic (Marginson 1993, p. 25; Robeyns 2006, pp. 72-74). In order to overcome some of the shortcomings of human capital theory in understanding the roles and values of HE, we will rely on two other theoretical perspectives – understanding HE as an institution and CA.

### **2.1. Higher education as an institution**

Institutional theory goes beyond both functionalism and conflict theory by explaining the production of social structures not in terms of the functional needs or the interests and power of actors but by emphasizing that the emergence and development of local organizations depends on wider environmental meanings, definitions, rules, and models (Meyer et al. 2007). Applying institutional theory to HE and regarding HE as an institution allows us to outline the following characteristics of HE that are important for the present analysis. *First*, HE is, and has been, the central institution of the modern systems. As Meyer et al. (2007, p. 210) put it “[f]rom its medieval origins to its post-modern incarnation, universities are not mainly local organizations justified by specific economic and political functions or shaped by particular historical legacies or power struggles. A much broader cultural and civilizational mission has always informed higher education. Its legitimacy and development throughout history have been linked to enacting this broader mission, which today includes the idea that universities are sites for developments that lead to social progress”. *Second*, in its central “university” form, HE has a history of almost a millennium, and throughout the whole period, it has nearly monopolized some very central steps in the implementation of the Western and modern world cognitive models of progress and justice, models now echoing and circulating through the themes of excellence (progress) and equity (justice), so prevalent in HE. *Third*, though in terms of cultural content the university is surprisingly homogeneous throughout the world and follows isomorphic trends in its development, its organizational forms (for example, degree of autonomy or status - private or public) vary substantially across countries and even within national states. *Fourth*, as an institution, HE “has an impact on society over and above the immediate socializing experiences it offers the young” (Meyer 1977, p. 55). At the level of the individual, this influence is mainly associated with the effects on identity formation of entering HE and acquiring the status of student/graduate. An individual’s opportunities and expectations are substantially transformed when he/she becomes a college graduate, and this transformation is independent of the particular college or particular student experiences involved (Meyer 1970). At society level, conceiving HE as an institution, and not only as an organization for producing trained individual, allows us to see that “the university serves a highly collective function. It links the role structure of society to universalized cultural knowledge and defines certain types of knowledge as

authoritative in society, and authoritative on the basis of the highest cultural principles (e.g., science, rationality, natural law)" (Meyer 2007). HE – to a much greater extent than the other levels of education – "constructs and alters the network of positions in society in addition to allocating individuals to these positions" and "confers success and failure in society quite apart from any socializing effects" (Meyer 1977, pp. 56, 64).

## **2.2. Capability approach**

Pioneered by the the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, and then further developed by Martha Nussbaum and many others, the CA is a social justice theoretical framework for conceptualizing and evaluating phenomena such as inequalities, well-being and human development. According to the CA, it is not so much the achieved outcomes (functionings) that matter, but the real opportunities (freedoms) that one has for achieving those outcomes. Sen (1992) argues that a person's capability to achieve functionings that he/she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social (including educational) arrangements. For Sen, capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities (Sen 1985, p. 201; 2002: chapter 20). More concretely, capabilities as freedoms refer to the presence of valuable options, in the sense of opportunities that do not exist only formally or legally but are also effectively available to the agent (Robeyns 2013). It should be emphasized that Sen pays special attention not only to negative freedom (Sen 1985, pp. 217-220), but to positive freedoms as well – "(the freedom 'to do this' or 'to be that') that a person has" (Sen 1985, p. 201). Furthermore, the CA is very sensitive to "the importance of the agency aspect", which is related "to the view of persons as responsible agents" (Sen 1985, pp. 203-4). As regards education, this framework recognizes that "having education affects the development and expansion of other capabilities so that an education capability expands other important human freedoms" (Walker 2012, p. 454). By emphasizing important personal and social values, such as freedom, agency and personal (identity) development, justice and well-being, the CA sets a framework for critical evaluation of current developments in HE and the results obtained.

### **2.2.1. From ends/values to resources**

The first question which arises in discussions on roles and missions of HE is whether to start from ends and values or from resources. We find the CA quite relevant in this respect as it argues that our acts and evaluations should start from what has ultimate value, and only in a second step of the analysis ask what means are needed to secure these ends. Moreover, within the CA perspective "we must take a comprehensive or holistic approach", which means to take into account all possible ends (sets of capabilities) and not limit our choice to some of them (Robeyns 2013). We acknowledge that this is a normative approach. Its advantage is that it allows us to define the roles of HE based on our understanding of the specificity of HE as an institution and thus to develop a framework for evaluating social arrangements and policies in HE. In addition, "by starting from ends, we do not a priori assume that there is only one overridingly important means to that ends (such as income), but rather explicitly ask the question which types of means are important" for the achievement of a particular end, as for some ends "the most important means will indeed be financial resources and economic production, but for others it may be particular political practices and institutions" (Robeyns 2013). The other approach – to start from available resources and try to systematize the missions and roles actually performed by HEIs - would leave us without reliable criteria for analysing recent developments in HE and for outlining horizons for its future development.

### **2.2.2. Multiple roles of education - CA as a way to go beyond the human capital approach**

The capability approach perspective to education goes beyond the human capital perspective by adopting a broader vision on human development and acknowledging both the intrinsic and the instrumental roles of education. According to Sen, human capital theory looks at human beings mainly as means of production, while they are also “the end of the exercise” (Sen 1997, p. 1960). The human capital theory advocates an entirely instrumental perspective to education: education loses its intrinsic value as knowledge and as a crucial process for individuals’ identity formation. Sen emphasizes that: “[t]he benefits of education thus exceed its role as human capital in commodity production. The broader human capability perspective would record – and value – these additional roles” (ibid., p. 1959). What is more, the instrumental role of education is narrowly perceived as limited only to economic productivity. In fact, investment in education could lead to other personal and social benefits as well. Moreover, human capital theory does not provide satisfactory answers to some important questions related to people’s employability on the contemporary globalized and dynamic labour market, such as: Why different people need different investments to achieve the same outcomes and also why different people with the same level of education may have different income? How to take into account the segregated labour markets where people, irrespective of their level of education, are allocated to particular jobs on the grounds of race, gender, or assumptions about class or caste (Unterhalter 2009, p. 211)?

Having in mind the importance of human capital theory in emphasizing that education is a form of investment in human capital and a key factor for economic growth, and considering the narrowness and inadequacy of its economistic, ahistorical and instrumentalistic approach, we share Sen’s view that “we must go *beyond* the notion of human capital, after acknowledging its relevance and reach. The broadening that is needed is additional and cumulative, rather than being an alternative to the ‘human capital’ perspective” (Sen 1997, pp. 1959–61).

The notion of capability in Sen’s view implies a larger scope of benefits from education than improving economic production, and includes influencing social change and enhancing well-being and freedom of individuals and peoples. The human capability perspective focuses on the impact that education may have on the expanding of human ability to lead a valuable life and to enhance the substantive choices people have (See Sen 1999, pp. 292-297). Nussbaum (1997, 2006) pays special attention to the role of (liberal) education, arguing that it cultivates humanity by developing three capacities crucial for the health of democracy: the capability for critical self-examination and critical thinking about one’s own culture and traditions; the capacity to see oneself as a human being who is bound to all humans with ties of concern and the capacity for narrative imagination; the ability to empathize with others and to put oneself in another’s place. It is also acknowledged that education has a crucial role “for reproducing and transforming social norms and culture and for identity formation (who we take ourselves to be), which identities and abilities count (and which are devalued), and what we see as possible for ourselves”; and that it is “of intrinsic worth in our personal development, and instrumental in opening up economic opportunities”, “is constitutive of other aspects of human well-being” and “potentially enables other capabilities” (Walker 2007, p. 178).

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2002, pp. 38–40) outline five different ways in which education (together with health) can be valuable to the freedom of a person: *intrinsic importance, instrumental personal roles, instrumental social roles, instrumental process roles* and *empowerment and distributive roles*. Ingrid Robeyns (2006, pp. 70-71) develops a modified version of this typology in accordance with two dimensions: economic–non-economic and personal–collective. She distinguishes the following roles of education: 1) *intrinsic* – valuing knowledge for its own sake; 2) *instrumental personal economic role* – the role of education in helping people “to find a job, to be less vulnerable on the labour market, to be informed as a

consumer, to be more able to find information on economic opportunities” (ibid., p. 71); 3) *instrumental collective economic role* – an educated workforce is necessary for economic growth; 4) *non-economic personal instrumental role* – being knowledgeable about different issues, being able to speak with strangers, being open-minded; 5) *non-economic collective instrumental role* – “children learn to live in a society where people have different views of the good life, which is likely to contribute to a more tolerant society” (ibid., p. 71).

The Robeyns’s typology is more systematically developed, but it does not fully recognize two important aspects of the capability approach perspective to education. First, it is important to note that Drèze and Sen emphasize the social dimension not only of education outcomes, but of the process of improving education as well (Drèze & Sen 2002, p. 41). Second, the non-economic personal instrumental role should not be confined to its role as a *transfer* of knowledge that produces non-economic personal benefits, but should also pay attention to the substantial *transformative power* of education as a factor for identity formation and agency empowerment. Unterhalter (2009, p. 214) emphasizes that Sen distinguishes the instrumental role of education from its empowering and distributive role in facilitating the ability of disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded groups to organize politically. We think that this transformative and empowering role of education is very important and should not be defined as a purely instrumental one insofar as it could be fully realized only based on intrinsic knowledge and values.

### **2.3. CA perspective to missions/roles of HE as an institution**

We view the missions and roles of HE as two sides of the definition of the underlying purpose, i.e., the reason for the existence of HE as an institution: missions express this purpose in a more theoretical way, whereas roles define it in a more operational manner.

Taking into account the above discussions, we develop a model of missions/roles of HE following two lines of reasoning: 1) *level of influence*: individual or societal (which corresponds to the division between private and public), and 2) *character of influence*: intrinsic, instrumental and transformative/empowering (see Table 1). The model clearly demonstrates the complex nature and plurality of roles/missions and values of HE as an institution and the heuristic potential of CA for capturing them. At individual level, we differentiate the missions/roles of HE related to different aspects of personality development, alongside graduates’ employability, and classify them according to their instrumental, intrinsic or transformative/empowering value. At macro (societal) level, in addition to the widely discussed role of HE for economic and cultural development, we identify its role for legitimization in society of different types of knowledge and values as a result of research activities and teaching of new educational programmes. We also acknowledge the role of HE for human development in two different perspectives: an instrumental one, in terms of improvement of the population’s knowledge and skills, and an empowering one, in terms of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.

We define this model as an ideal type in the Weberian sense. This means that it has no ontological reality and is simply a cognitive instrument for capturing and understanding the diversity of missions/roles of HE as an institution.

**Table 1. Model of mission/roles of HE as an institution in a CA perspective**

<b>Level of influence</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Society</b>
<b>Character of influence</b>		
<b>Instrumental</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability (formation of graduates' abilities to find employment by developing relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, identities)</li> <li>• Formation of status identity (being a student or a graduate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human development (viewed as improvement of human capital)</li> <li>• Legitimization and stratification of different types of knowledge/disciplines</li> <li>• (Re)structuring of role structure</li> <li>• Promoting economic growth</li> <li>• Cultural and intellectual center</li> </ul>
<b>Intrinsic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing and acquiring knowledge for its own sake</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge development</li> <li>• Legitimization of values in society: progress, rationality, equity, tolerance, freedom of thought, diversity</li> </ul>
<b>Transformative/Empowering</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personality development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formation of responsible identity</li> <li>- Development of abilities for independent and critical thinking and imagination</li> <li>- Agency development and empowerment of a person to control his/her environment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Promoting the individual's mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human development (understood as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy).</li> <li>• (Re)distributive - facilitating social group mobility and the ability of different groups, disadvantaged included, to organize and express their interests)</li> </ul>

Mission/roles of HE as an institution can be defined at two levels – at the level of each concrete HEI and at supra-institutional level. In turn, the supra-institutional level can refer to a national system of HE, to a European (or other regional) HE system or to HE as a specific global institution existing in different historical periods. Thus, missions/roles of HE are regarded as embedded in different social and organizational contexts.

At this stage, the matrix does not present any specific indicators but instead identifies aspects that could lead to concrete indicators in particular contexts. Thus, it provides a first step that must be followed by a discussion of the most suitable instruments and indicators for assessing how each one of the HE roles is incorporated in missions of concrete HEIs and how it is realized in different social contexts. In order to shed some light on some of the aspects of this model in the second part of the paper, we focus on access to HE through the prism of value of equity.

### **3. Promoting value of equity through access to HE**

The issue of access to HE occupies a central place in every HE system. That is why in the second part of our paper we will focus – both theoretically and empirically – on access to HE viewed from the perspective of equity, which is one of the central values in the CA. More concretely, we will discuss the role of HE in

promoting and legitimizing equity as a value by referring to the way in which access to HE has been recently realized in EU countries.

Sen outlines two distinctive traditions of justice. The first approach, which Sen calls “transcendent institutionalism”, aims to identify what perfectly just social arrangements might be and concentrates primarily on getting the institutions right. The second approach – realization-focused comparison – is concerned with “social realizations” resulting from actual institutions, actual behaviour and other influences (Sen 2009, pp. 5-7). As Marginson (2011b) convincingly argues, these two understandings of justice resonate in the two perspectives/dimensions in which social equity in HE has been recently conceptualized: *fairness* and *inclusion*. 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” and thus “access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals’ innate ability and study effort” (Santiago et al. 2008, pp. 13-14). The inclusion perspective points “to the significance of improvement in participation of any particular group irrespective of how other groups have fared” (Clancy & Goastellec 2007, p. 146). Thus, whereas the first approach focuses on the *proportional distribution of student places* (or graduations) between different social groups, the second one “focuses on growth in the *absolute number* of people from hitherto under-represented socio-economic groups, as defined in terms of income measures or social or occupational status” (Marginson 2011b, pp. 23-24).

Discussing the goals of equity *policy*, Marginson argues that priority should be given to equity as inclusion (Marginson 2011b, p. 26). We claim that for *explorative and explanatory purposes*, both perspectives should be simultaneously taken into account. Thus, our view is in line with Clancy and Goastellec (2007), who state that “it is necessary to take account of changes both in relative and absolute levels of participation”. This means that in order to explore and explain the situation in HE in a given country, we need to answer at least three main questions: “*What growth?*”, “*Access for whom?*” and “*Access to what?*” The answer to the first question will provide a general view of the increase in absolute numbers of students and graduates, and the inclusiveness of the HE system. The second question will reveal the relative chance of representatives of different social groups to enter and graduate in HEIs. The third question refers to the differences in quality and prestige of different HEIs and programmes, and thus its answer will show the existence of additional inequalities, caused by the internal differentiation and stratification of HE systems.

### **3.1. Research methodology**

Our analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey, 2006-2012, Eurostudent survey (2015) and the official statistics (Eurostat).

To capture the inclusion aspect of equity, we use data from Eurostat as of 2013 and measure them with the shares of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment.

To capture the fairness aspect of equity, we use data from Eurostudent (2015). This aspect is measured via the so-called “representation index” (for more details, see Hauschildt, Gworć, Netz, & Mishra 2015, p. 48). This index sets the share of students with a certain educational background, for example, a higher education, against the share of 40-59 year-old men<sup>1</sup> with the same respective educational attainment in the population. It measures to what extent this group from the general population is represented within the student body. Value of 1 represents a perfect balance between the shares of students’ fathers who have attended HE and the 40-59 year-old men with HE in the population. Values above 1 indicate

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<sup>1</sup> This group is chosen in this age interval to represent the parent generation of students.

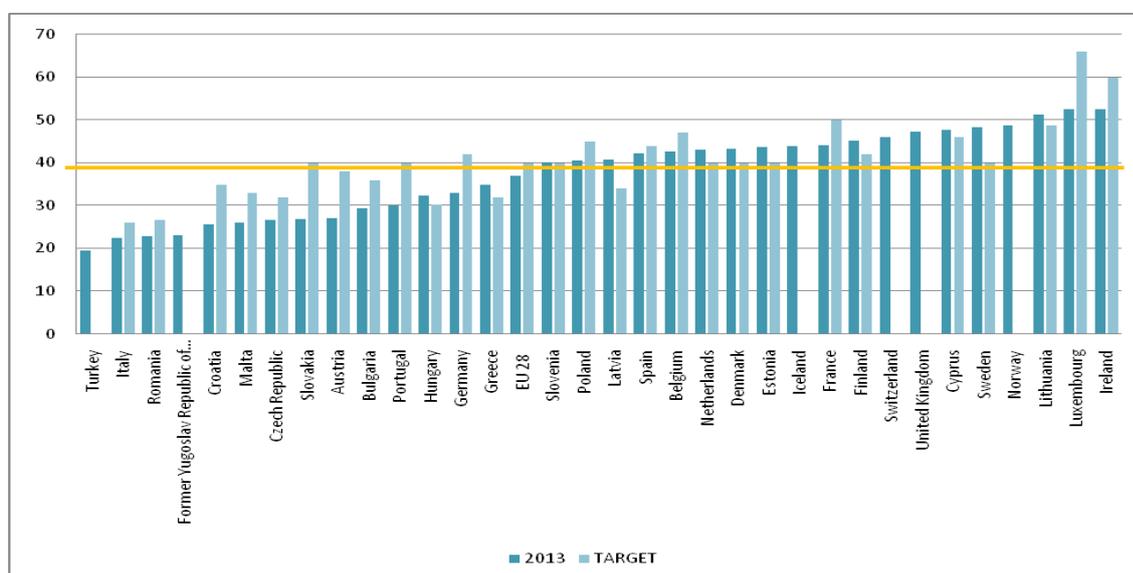
overrepresentation of this group within the student body. Values below 1 indicate that this group is underrepresented. We focus specifically on two groups with different educational background within the student body, measured with fathers' highest level of education – those with a low education background (ISCED 0-2) and those with a high education background (ISCED 5-6).

To capture the quality aspect, we use data from Eurostudent (2015) and the European Social Survey (2006-2012). We use Eurostudent data for the shares of people with HE background in different types of HEIs (university and non-university). Based on the European Social Survey, we also calculate the shares of people with HE background that have attained various tertiary programmes, in terms of field of study and level of the programme.

### 3.2. Results

Figure 1 shows the shares of 30-34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment in the EU 28 and non EU-countries for 2013. It demonstrates that although HE expansion took place in all countries, countries vary in terms of the inclusion aspect of equity. Thus, whereas 16 of the EU 28 countries have reached the ET 2020 benchmark according to which, by 2020, the share of 30-34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40 percent, countries like Italy, Romania, Croatia, Malta, Czech Republic and Slovakia are lagging behind.

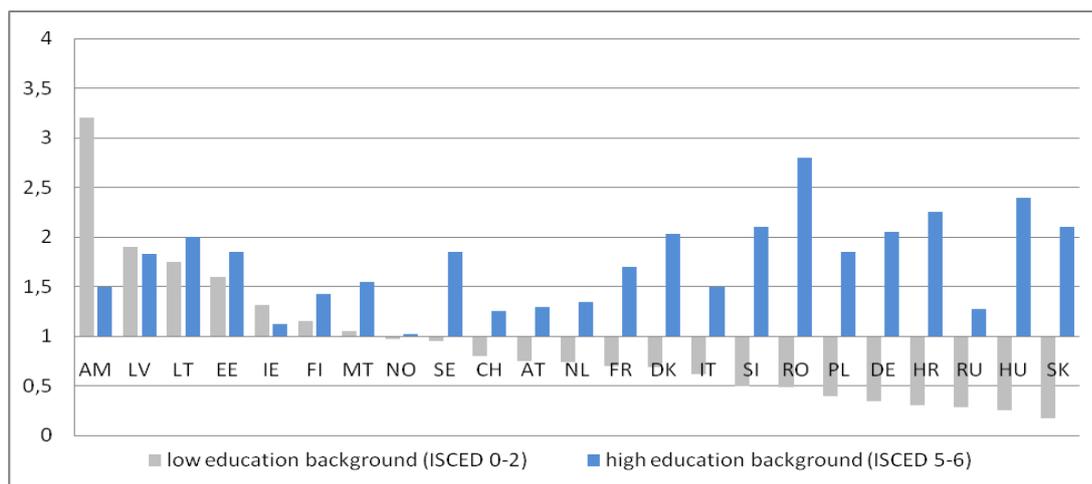
**Figure 1.** Tertiary educational attainment, age group 30-34 in Europe.



Source: Eurostat, Extracted on 21.07.2015, code t2020\_41.

Figure 2 illustrates the fairness aspect of equity in higher education. It shows that the most inclusive HE systems are not necessarily the fairest ones, and vice versa. This is especially visible in the cases of Lithuania, Italy and Malta. At the same time, there are spaces of overlap on the one hand in the cases of Ireland, Norway, Switzerland and Finland and, on the other, of Slovakia, Romania and Croatia. Thus, the last three countries are among the least equitable – both in terms of equity as inclusion and as fairness.

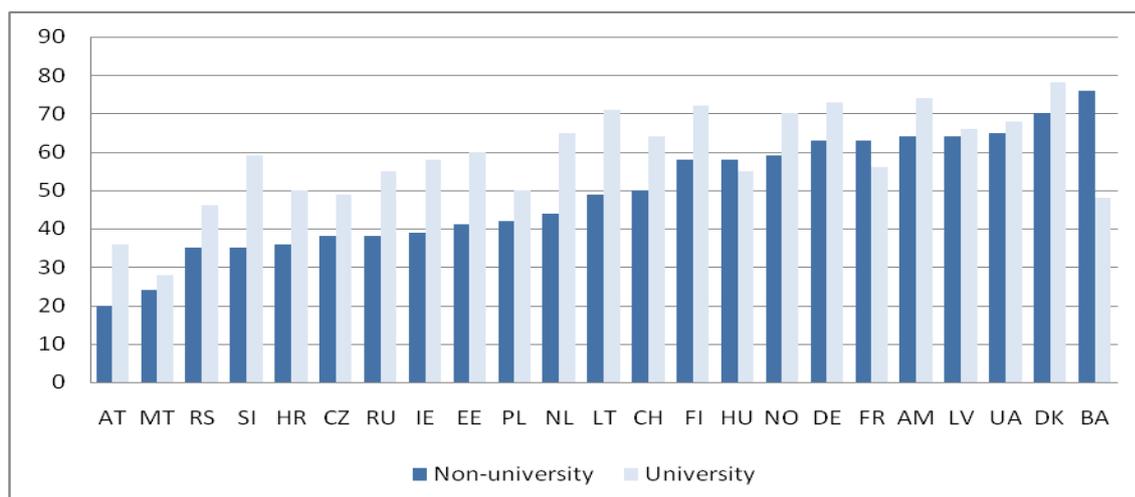
**Figure 2.** Representation of students from high and low educational backgrounds (based on fathers' educational attainment).



Source: Adapted by Eurostudent V - 2015 (Hauschildt, Gworć, Netz, & Mishra 2015, p. 54).

As regards the quality aspect, it is worth noting that not all types of HEIs are inclusive to the same extent. Thus, Figure 3 shows that in the majority of countries in the EHEA, the share of students with HE background in the non-university sector (e.g., Universities of Applied Sciences/Polytechnics) is lower compared to the respective share among students studying in universities. This trend occurs in all countries (for which data are available) amongst the students in different types of HEIs by education background, except Bosnia-Herzegovina, France and Hungary, where the share of students with HE background in the non-university sector prevails over the respective share in the university sector.

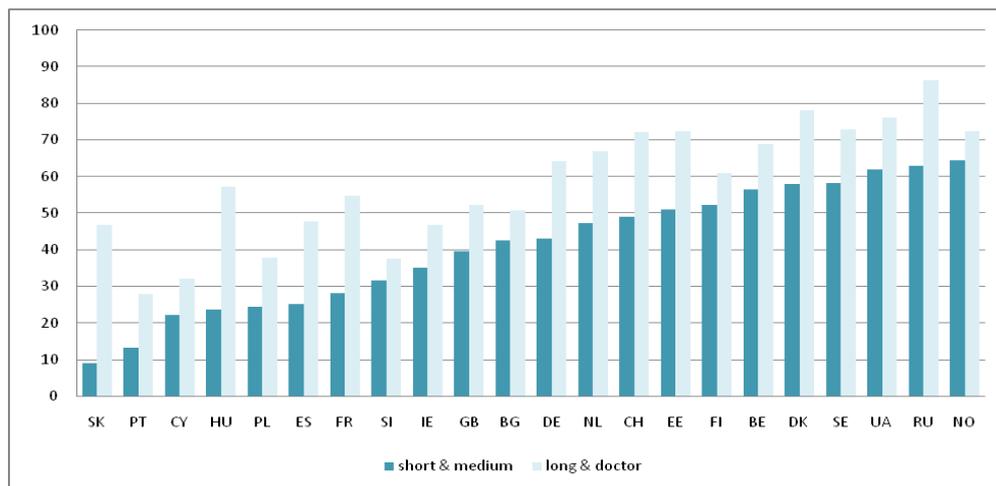
**Figure 3.** Students with high education background by type of HEI, (in %)



Source: Adapted by Eurostudent V - 2015 (Hauschildt, Gworć, Netz, & Mishra 2015, p. 57).

Figure 4 reveals a common pattern in all countries studied: the share of graduates who have at least one parent with HE is higher within more prestigious (Master and PhD) types of degrees and is significantly lower for less prestigious (short & medium) ones, such as Bachelor and Professional Bachelor. This difference is especially salient in the cases of Slovakia and Hungary. It shows that, most likely, the children from low socioeconomic background have lower chances to access the same type of HEIs as that accessed by children with highly qualified parents.

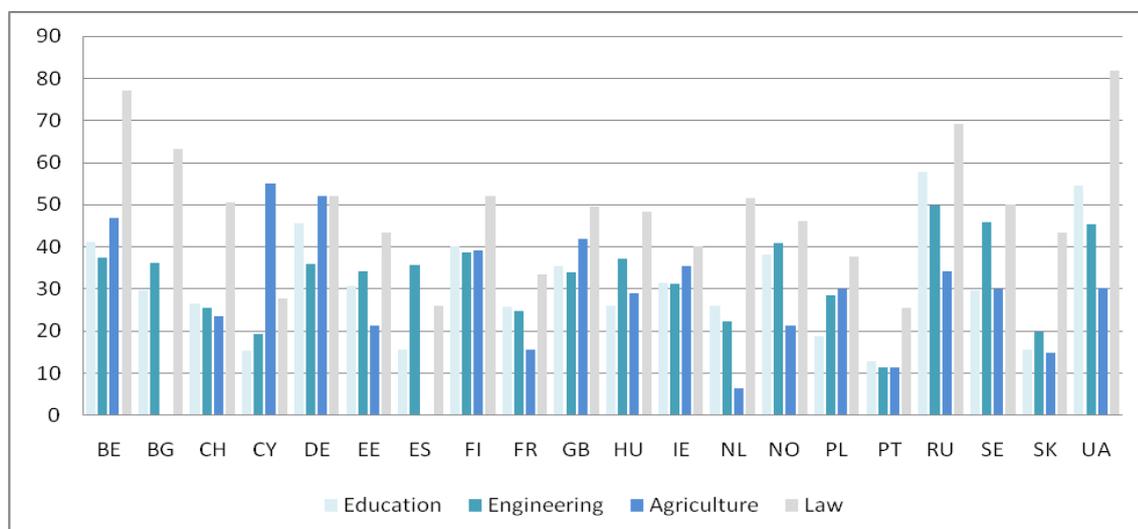
**Figure 4.** Graduates, aged 25-34, with different types of degrees, with a high educational background (who have at least one parent with HE), in %.



Source: ESS 2010-2012 (own calculations), weighted (dweight), no. 5,513.

The analysis of the distributions of the graduates from different socioeconomic backgrounds within different fields of study shows that the (cap)ability of people of a high educational background to attain a degree differs by countries. The data presented in Figure 5 suggest that the children of a low educational background can hardly have a real opportunity to matriculate at a law programme, given that this field is chosen by people with high educational background. On the opposite site, it seems that education is one of the most inclusive fields when it comes to people with lower educational background. Thus, some specialties are not really accessible/inclusive to children of low and medium socioeconomic background, which means that there is a qualitative difference in the possibility that certain fields of studies will include/admit people of lower socioeconomic background.

**Figure 5.** Graduates, 25-64 years old, from different fields of study, with at least one parent having HE (in %).



Source: ESS 2006-2008 (own calculations), weighted (dweight).

To sum up, although it was not possible to find exhaustive data for all countries in all of the aspects of equity on which we focus, Slovakia definitely stands out as a country where the HE system experiences the

most severe problems in achieving equity in HE, whereas Norway seems to be the most equitable in all dimensions – inclusion, fairness and quality. However, a more accurate answer could be obtained by employing models that take into consideration the variety of degrees (in terms of either field of study, type of degree, or HEIs), e.g., multinomial logistic regression; this is an approach worth following up in further research.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The paper demonstrates the heuristic potential of the CA to shed new light on, and to critically assess, the complexity of roles played by HE in the contemporary post-modern world, characterized by growing inequalities and the outburst of new social conflicts. Our findings suggest that:

- The CA has a heuristic potential for conceptualizing and critical evaluation of the mainstream missions and values in HE in the contemporary market-driven knowledge economy.
- The CA has the capacity to restore and give new meaning to certain values – for example, social justice – to which human capital theory has not paid due attention.
- There are considerable differences in access to HE across European countries. The results show that the inclusion and fairness aspects of equity may not necessarily go hand in hand. This is why we claim that both of them should be taken into account in evaluating the extent to which equity is achieved and legitimized as a result of the functioning of HE in diverse country contexts. In addition, the qualitative aspect of access also does matter.

In demonstrating the heuristic potential of the CA as a framework for discussing roles, missions and values of HE, our findings are in line with Walker and Boni (2013), who claim that the CA offers an opportunity to “re-imagine a different vision of the universities” in the new century as well as to reconsider the role of universities for human development, which is often understood only as human capital formation and the preparation of people to be part of the workforce. More specifically, the two authors argue that the human development and capabilities perspective (Haq 2003; Nussbaum 2011; Sen 1999, 2009) “foregrounds *both* economy *and* society”, whereas its aims are “human well-being, equality, justice (local and global) and the sustainability of democratic societies” (Walker & Boni 2013, p. 22).

This paper shows that at least five main ways can be outlined in which the CA could help in discussing the roles, missions and values of HE. *First*, it broadens our understanding as to how HE may be understood beyond the narrow human capital agenda, in which human lives are viewed exclusively as means to economic gain. By looking at people and their well-being as ends, the CA provides grounds to conceptualize the different meanings of HE and to take into account the plurality of its outcomes. *Second*, it is sensitive to human diversity, and diversity of groups and settings. It suggests the importance of contexts and therefore the possibility of the existence of a plurality of roles and missions in different contexts. *Third*, it suggests how equity in access to HE could be measured, namely, by focusing on the opportunity aspect of the freedom that people have to achieve what they have reason to value in terms of comprehensive outcomes. Thus, it allows capturing the qualitative aspect of access to HE. *Fourth*, it also shows that employability of HE graduates, which is high on policy agenda for HE, is very important but not the sole and all-embracing mission of HEIs. In addition, applying the CA to studies of graduates’ employability requires paying special attention to the qualitative side of graduate employability (employability as related not simply to graduates’ abilities to find employment but also to graduates’ abilities to find employment of a specific quality in terms of payment, required level of education and career opportunities) and to its subjective side (as connected not only with graduates’ knowledge and skills, but with their attitudes, identities and values). *Fifth*, it

provides a framework for assessment of social arrangements and policies and how they contribute to achievement of HE missions and goals. For example, the CA allows us “to ask how higher education contributes to the formation of a society which is free, fair and equal in the way it provides for each individual to realize his or her fullest potential reflectively to choose and lead a good life” (Walker 2008, p. 269). In this regard, Walker argues that widening participation in HE in these terms can be achieved only as a matter of “widening capability” and not just through increase of the number of people who can gain access to HE.

Equity is an indispensable dimension of the widening of access to HE. That is why inequalities in access to HE, especially those due to socioeconomic factors, are important characteristics of HE systems and how they fulfil their missions. Our findings are in line with other studies that show the diversity of students in HE cannot by itself be taken as an indicator of greater “equality” within the system because “the unevenness persists as regards to who studies what and where” (Archer 2007, p. 637). That is why the qualitative side of access to HE, i.e., to the chances of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to access different types of HEIs, fields of study and degrees, gains special importance.

In the context of the Bologna process, improving social justice and graduate employability has been defined as priorities of HE (Berlin Communiqué 2003; London Communiqué 2007; Bucharest Communiqué 2012). On the one hand, HEIs have not only been urged to ensure that they train “employable” graduates, but some governments have introduced a performance indicator based on graduates’ employment-related outcomes, in order to measure HEIs’ performance (Smith et al. 2000; Moreau & Leathwood 2006). However, according to some authors, with its emphasis on employability and the professional relevance of programmes, the Bologna process is an instrument of destruction of the traditional values of HE (Teichler 2011, p. 32). On the other hand, social justice has become a constituent part of the European Higher Education Area through the social dimension in HE. Despite the efforts made within the Bologna Process, there are concerns that widening access to, and participation in, HE is only one step towards guaranteeing equity in HE and equal opportunities to all (Elias & Brennan 2012; Ilieva-Trichkova & Boyadjieva 2014).

Within this context, further and ongoing discussions on the missions and values in HE are indispensable. The CA could be very beneficial in this regard, especially in generating new insights about equity in access to HE and new ideas about how the missions of HEIs can be diversified and further developed by incorporating a bottom-up approach that acknowledges not only the instrumental but also the intrinsic and transformative/empowering value of HE.

### **Database**

Available at: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

ESS Round 6: European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012). Data file edition 2.1.

ESS Round 5: European Social Survey Round 5 Data (2010). Data file edition 3.2.

ESS Round 4: European Social Survey Round 4 Data (2008). Data file edition 4.3.

ESS Round 3: European Social Survey Round 3 Data (2006). Data file edition 3.5.

Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.

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