
Towards inclusion and equity: some reflections on the European Higher Education system

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Keywords: Inclusion, Equity, Higher Education, Europe.

General description on research questions and objectives

Achieving inclusion and equity constitutes two of the main aspirations in European higher education systems, becoming a societal imperative (European Commission, 2010a, Red Eurydice, 2011).

Overall, it is possible to affirm that a democratic society is based on the principle that the right for education should be ensured for all the students, especially for those who are in a disadvantaged situation (Ainscow et al., 2013). Therefore, personal and social circumstances, as socioeconomic status, gender, race or ethnicity, age or disabilities, among others, should not affect active participation in the opportunities that higher

education provides. Furthermore, the social dimension has become progressively important as the need to reflect the social diversity at university, ensuring that all students, regardless of their social and economic conditions, have the opportunity to access, participate and, ultimately, succeed at college (Red Eurydice, 2011). Since the beginning of the Bologna Process in 1999 and through its development, the social dimension has been recognized as a key component in relation to equity and social justice in higher education (Dovigo, 2016).

Many initiatives and programs implemented in higher education by the European Commission (Bohonnek et al., 2010) and member states, were guided towards achieving these goals and developing a wide range of measures and policies. Achieving an increasing participation is as well one of the main goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy: 40% of population aged 30-34 should have a higher education qualification (or equivalent) by year 2020 (European Commission, 2010, p. 9). At the same time, the ALFA III Programme (2007–2013) and the EUROSTUDENT Project can be mentioned as examples of initiatives that aim to combine efforts to produce relevant and comparable updated information about the social dimension in higher education. These initiatives also show how the international collaboration of stakeholders works in creating networks and synergies between universities around the world. However, the debate remains in how to increase equity and inclusion for students from under-represented or disadvantaged groups while improving the quality and relevance of higher education (Acedo, Ferrer & Pàmies, 2009). The advent of a knowledge-based society, internationalization and globaliza-

tion, and the requirements from a more and more diverse society shapes the debate. Therefore, the challenge is to overcome all forms of exclusion in higher education not only showing improvements in indicators and figures, from a statistical point of view, but also with furthering efforts to convey students to be prepared for participating in diverse social and work contexts.

Assuming that the quality of education includes both citizenship condition, meaning critical-thinking students who participate in decisions concerning society, as well as the development of inclusive universities, the main question is *How higher education systems can ensure inclusion and equity while achieving the purpose of quality education?*

In this regard, this paper presents and critically analyses two selected assumptions among many other possible theoretical analysis and/or practical approaches. To begin with, at the macro level the need to combine local and global actions when addressing inclusion and equity is examined. Subsequently, at the meso level the need to develop and strengthen institutional structures supporting college experience for all students, with special focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is considered. It is understood that both of them influence the micro level, meaning person level trajectories in higher education. However, in this opportunity we focused on the macro and meso level intentionally to highlight the central role of policies and institutions in achieving inclusive higher education systems.

For this reason, as a closing thought it is emphasized that the principles of inclusion and equity are not incompatible with

achieving educational quality, but critical for their accomplishment. In this regard, this paper is based upon a significant selection and analysis of theoretical contributions. From the authors' point of view, those previous research illustrate the main arguments related to equity and inclusion mentioned in the assumptions. The ultimate goal is far from giving closing answers, by contrast, is to stimulate discussion between academics and practitioners in the subject matter.

Theoretical framework

According to the UNESCO *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education* (2009), inclusion is seen “as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education (pp. 8-9). Thus, in this document a central proposition in relation to inclusive education is developed: inclusion and quality are reciprocal. This means that the access to the education and quality are linked and mutually reinforcing and, at the same time, quality and equity are central to ensuring inclusive education (p. 10).

Based on this principle, in this section two assumptions that critically analyze the possibilities of inclusion and equity in achieving educational quality and the remaining challenges are presented.

Assumption n^o1. Combining local and global actions to achieve inclusion and equity

Ensure citizen status in higher education from the inclusion and equity approach involves training students with skills and abilities to perform and fully participate in an increasingly global and international society (Whiteford, Shah & Nair, 2013). As other regions across the world, Europe is characterized by its diversity and currently goes through certain demographic changes that enormously impacts on educational systems (Prats & Raventós, 2005). This situation shows the need to define new criteria for defining “disadvantaged students” in higher education, taking into account this is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that affects different social groups. Classic inequality indicators (gender, socioeconomic status and area of residence) are still important, but current contextual conditions and social factors have changed families and students’ situation in the region. In this regard, economic crisis, armed conflict and displacement of refugees, as well as the effects of an increased academic mobility, are creating new circumstances in our universities.

Moreover, diversity is not limited to students but also affects faculty and the institution, as well as the relationship between higher education systems and society as a whole (Sebastian & Scharager, 2007). It is a fact that more and more diverse students are reaching higher education, however, it seems higher education systems and universities are not totally prepared for this: “while many countries acknowledge that there are different challenges regarding disadvantaged student groups, few have developed concrete policy priorities, strategies, tar-

gets and measures” (Eurydice, 2014, p. 21) that are a priority to eliminate discrimination.

As a consequence, a combination of a policy approach, reflected in legislation, and specific measures, according to the needs of groups identified as vulnerable, seems to be the priority when it comes to combining local and global actions.

Assumption n^o2. Provide supporting structures for all the students, as an essential requirement of inclusive universities development

Promoting inclusive universities involves not only overcoming institutional barriers, that have been widely identified in the scientific literature, but also creating structures in order to support all the students through their academic pathways in college.

In their study Biewer et al. (2015), for example, have shown that in some European countries institutional structures did not always provide adequate resources for young adults with disabilities in relation to their inclusion and educational success. They also pointed out that, even though there is a clear policy towards inclusion in compulsory education, institutional measures in the school system did not guide the individual trajectories towards inclusion. By contrast, students relied on strong social resources in the cases analyzed (p. 288).

The development of university students support structures that are not only limited to financial or academic support, but also consider the whole college student experience is essential.

For this purpose, it seems critical to have a rigorous and appropriate methodology that considers several and complex strategies. At the same time, those strategies based on an organizational perspective are mainly significant.

On this assumption, several international studies show that the same universities have begun to introduce changes and modifications in order to promote inclusion and equity related especially to the achievement and educational outcomes. Although these strategies are related to the social, political, cultural and economic context in which they are, they must also be connected with internal institutional forces and relate to both curriculum development and institutional organizational frameworks. Thus, the support structures organized to promote inclusion could involve a wide range of different service professionals, approaches and working methods in order to impact upon inclusive education (EADSNE, 2009). The creation, or modernization, of student services as counselling, guidance, information about the programs and universities, alternative access paths and new teaching methods, could be mentioned as examples in this regard.

Conclusions

The brief analysis presented in this paper suggests that a commitment with inclusion and equity in higher education requires furthering efforts, networks and active participation from several stakeholders.

First, there is a need to develop both global and local policies in preparing students for the diversity and for a demanding global workforce. At the same time, universities need to plan for institutional support for all the students promoting an environment that allows them realize their potential.

Recent international studies have suggested that students who are excluded from higher education opportunities are more likely to be exposed to certain levels of vulnerability. Thus, inclusion and equity constitute fundamental guarantees for the full exercise of the right to education and are essential for achieving quality universities.

Inclusion is understood as a process and a project, one which requires the active participation of individuals and society as a whole, but also have practical implications such as new public policies, social networks and multi-agency cooperation among stakeholders. As mentioned, the role of governments in shaping public policy is essential, as well as designing, implementing and assessing institutional strategies to ensure widening opportunities to access, persist and success to higher education.

Inclusion as a strategy to reduce inequality is linked to equity of access, participation, success, progress and educational achievement in higher education. It aims to reflect within the university a similar racial, cultural and sexual diversity that is expressed in society. Therefore, inclusion involves realize real possibilities of access, retention and educational achievement for all students and especially for those who are in a disadvantaged situation.

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