

ESU Policy Paper

Social dimension in higher education

Introduction

This policy paper aims at providing clear guidance on making higher education a social inclusive activity.

The social dimension is important to ESU as still too many capable students are excluded from the higher education system due to their background, insufficient study support systems or other barriers. Five steps will be proposed to reach one final goal: creating a higher education community that is based on fairness and quality.

Definitions

Widening access: An umbrella term for the efforts of higher education institutions, governments and others to increase the participation in higher education, especially for underrepresented groups. This includes internal and curricular reform, affirmative action, promoting, the use of qualifications frameworks, etc.

Equity of access: The ultimate goal of attempts to widen access or to utilise affirmative action tools. Equity of access represents the idea that all have a right to higher education, and that all barriers (whether formal or informal, visible or invisible, theoretical or practical, legal or local) must be progressively eliminated.

Affirmative action: Official policies that attempt to achieve a more equitable representation of underrepresented groups; in the case of higher education, typically through amendments to admissions practices, scholarships, and in relation to employment decisions to counter discrimination against those groups.

Step 1: Filling the data gap

The lack of data on the socio-economic conditions of students is often used as a rationale for not starting to improve the social dimension of studying. ESU regards research on this issue as essential, but also has the opinion that action can be taken without extensive surveys. Studies in various countries and also the Eurostudent survey suggest that there is a strong correlation between the socio-economic background of students and the paths they will choose in their educational career.(1) This background includes educational background of the parents. At the European level (with the exception of some initial information from only a couple of countries in the Eurostudent survey), no real comparable data exists for all the Bologna countries and this makes the policy making extremely difficult. A recent study commissioned by the European Commission already came to the conclusion that insufficient comparable data about the socio-economic and ethnic background of students is available.(2)

ESU therefore calls for a major effort to collect comparable data, not only on the social living conditions of students, but also on their background. This survey should be coordinated at the European level, so that the data are comparable. A non-exclusive list of indicators should include: parental educational, ethnic and cultural

background, language spoken at home, marital status of parents or guardians including their contribution to student finances, available budget for students (including grants and loans), the effect of the financial situation on stress levels and mental health, estimated expenses, time spent working, amount of persons dependent of the student (children) and available social services. We need to get a clear picture, if we want to change anything in the educational structures of Europe. For those countries that have data already available, it becomes clear that more efforts need to be undertaken to include and support under-represented groups in higher education.

Step 2: Widening access policy

From a social justice perspective, it becomes clear that no group in society should be left outside of higher education. If we really want higher education to be democratic, it does not suffice to have democratic (legal) structures in place. For example, when we know that the percentage of new-citizens in country A is 20% and the participation rate of this group in higher education is 2%, this is a clear indication that there is a problem with participation. From an economic and social perspective equity of access is beneficial as well. Having a well-educated workforce keeps productivity high and unemployment figures low and enhances society as a whole.

A diversified student body provides a more stimulating learning environment to the student. With different backgrounds different perspectives on a topic emerge and a better academic standard is obtained.⁽³⁾ The question is, how to transform our higher education institutions into pluralistic learning environments based on equity and quality? The favourite excuse for not changing anything is that diversity threatens participation will provide better quality for all. Therefore we should define excellence in a broad way, measured by the quality of outcomes and not as a buzzword as is done so often.

A first step is to recognise that diversity goes further than just the student body. True diversity does not only take into account the students, but also those who teach, the administrative and technical staff. The whole education community should be a mirror of society and should act as a catalyst for social change by leading the inclusion agenda. The fact that this is not the case at the moment draws attention to flaws with the system. Barriers need to be tackled and glass ceilings broken down.

Higher education is about making social mobility possible. Through education people get the chance to build a better life for them and their future family. For a society it is unacceptable not to provide means of social mobility, as it is unfair and also just a short-term policy. There should be no waste of potential talent. Educational systems that do not take measures to increase the participation of underrepresented groups will become less competitive in every sense of the word. ESU urges governments, higher education institutions and all other relevant stakeholders, to come up with an effective widening access strategy.

It seems appropriate to take affirmative action, when other means have not proven to be efficient. However, the debate to what extent affirmative action can be taken is being blurred by using affirmative action as a synonym for positive discrimination. Affirmative action can have a soft and a hard side, outreach programs belong to the soft side, and quotas or positive discrimination belong to the hard side.

Soft affirmative action is a very positive tool to increase participation. Outreach programs might help certain groups to understand the value of higher education and to show them that it is not an impossible goal to achieve. These programs can include visits to schools, summer programs, ...

For quota's ESU proposes a pragmatic approach: they can be effective as a short-term policy.

Step 3: Tackling barriers

ESU considers that everyone regardless of his or her socio-economic background should have the possibility to follow the education he or she wants to. This right is often deterred by institutional access policies that only focus on the "best" students.

ESU opposes access limitations for the reason that these barriers are discriminatory according to socioeconomic background. When they do exist, the tests should be as neutral as possible regarding the social background of the applicant. Assessment based on previous academic results alone has the potential to embed the inequalities of pre-university education so deeply into the higher education system that equity of access is virtually impossible. Under-representation already starts before tertiary education and good school results might not measure intelligence or merit, but just social background. Valuing extra-curricular activities might seem like a harmless thing to do, but it does not take into account that some applicants might not have had the chance to do such kind of activities. Applications should therefore always be contextualised, thus taking into account the context of the applicant. The goal is that institutions eliminate the privilege bias from their admission systems.

Physical barriers might keep students from studying at a higher education institution. Facilities should be provided so that everyone has equal chances to pursue studies.

Hidden disabilities, such as mental illness or dyslexia, increase the inequality of chances between students. Therefore measures should be taken that all students can study on an equal basis, by taking into account these circumstances when planning a curriculum, providing support and allocating resources when needed.

Pre-conditioned perceptions and expectations also keep students from entering higher education. A lack of parents' support for pursuing higher education can play a crucial role. Outreach programs targeted at parents and students can overcome this burden, but also a parent independent study financing mechanism, as discussed below is important. Ensuring that both students and parents get sufficient information about the university, the study program, and possibilities within the program is essential to promote higher aspirations among non-traditional audiences.

Staff diversity plays a crucial role in widening access, not only because staff from underrepresented groups can be seen as positive role models. The absence of genuine diversity means simply that something is wrong at a system-wide level. The amount of female professors is only a fraction of those who graduate with a doctoral degree and the amount of female doctoral students is only a fraction of the female second cycle students. The same holds true for other underrepresented groups.

Discrimination may not be explicit, formalised, but this is no assurance that it is not present. Many subtle remarks, sexual harassment to less encouragement or no assistance in finding PhD funding make the road very bumpy. It is no secret that the

amount of dropouts from higher education is much higher among underrepresented groups.

Higher education should be an inclusive community. This means that students should not be feeling like they are standing outside in front of a window looking in, not being able to communicate with those in the house. This issue is closely linked to the way that a subject is taught. When a professor only uses examples that refer to the referential framework of certain groups, this excludes students not belonging to this specific group. Making higher education inclusive also means that there should be a culture of democracy in place, where everyone is heard. Significant work has been done in the United States on what is summarised as 'textbook bias', but is in fact broader than what is simply on the page in front of students. The issue here is one of positive representation. In many countries, the expectations, traditions and reference points of minority ethnic and religious communities or the views of lesbian, gay, bi- and transsexual students are simply not reflected in the academic literature. Even on issues that are seemingly superficial, like photography and language, the problems run deep. And while it is of course not a good idea to create a false history or record where none exists - this would be replacing one bad system with a worse one - the fact that within very many disciplines, the academic canon remains inaccessible and exclusive, is an obstacle that has not been dealt with.

Under-representation and inequality does not stop after graduation. Women still get a lower wage or people with names from a foreign background do not get invited to job interviews and these are just two examples of barriers.(4) Measures should also be taken to give equal chances to graduates from different backgrounds. Work selection procedure should be made anonymous and companies given financial incentives to diversify their staff. It takes generations to change attitudes, and striving for equality should always be the focus.

Step 4: Support the student as a learner

ESU regards higher education as a fundamental right of all people. It is furthermore an investment in personal development and societal growth. Students coming from a certain socio-economic background might have been provided with these values. Coming from a different background, achieving a higher education degree might seem an impossible task.

In order for all students to have a real possibility to enter and complete a higher education programme or course, economic barriers must diminish. Economic barriers affect not only the demographics of the student population, but are also interlinked with student health issues, the quality of studies and student mobility. ESU believes that economic security is essential if the goals of involvement and mobility are to be reached. All countries should have a generous, accessible and parent-independent system of grants that allows the student to survive and supports the student as learner, in order to ensure and promote equal access to higher education.

The abolition of tuition fees, in line with ESU's policy on financing of higher education would counteract in part the problems of students being deterred from considering, applying to, entering, progressing and completing higher education.(5) The perceived costs of higher education and the loss of possible income (while not studying), should not only be perceived as economical barriers. If it is not

communicated that higher education is affordable for all, many students (disproportionately those from disadvantaged backgrounds) will not enter.

In the case that tuition fees are present, measures should be taken that everyone can still study and not be deterred by the high costs of education. Means to compensate the burden of tuition fees include grants, sliding scales of repayment, bursaries etc.

Combining work, studying and having a family should be possible in higher education. The higher education institutions and the authorities share the responsibility to offer flexible learning paths.

In general students should not be forced to work because of financial constraints. Social services should make studying more accessible. Student housing, counselling, and other services should be widely available. These services should always take into consideration students with additional needs, including students with disabilities, linguistic minorities and people with parental responsibilities (e.g. daytime child care should be provided). The same is true for academic services like computer facilities and libraries. Having social services tailored to the needs of all students will benefit everyone.

Education should be provided in such a way that there are no dead ends. This means that someone who for example drops out of secondary school and goes to work, but then decides to try to get a degree at a later stage should have the means to do so. Systems of recognition of prior learning, a national qualifications framework (where every possible qualification has a place) should provide the learner with the possibilities to be socially mobile. ESU would like to stress that it is the states' responsibility to limit the amount of dropouts in education.

Learning outcomes play a central role here. Not only do they provide the learner with transparency on the kind of knowledge he/she needs to know to pass a module, they also make mobility possible. When a course in bookkeeping in adult education is based on the same principles of learning outcomes and workload measurement, the learner has more possibilities to continue education after the course in adult education, without having to repeat the course module. Having to repeat modules similar to the ones already done can be discouraging and thus an access barrier to education. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) plays an essential role here.(6)

ESU once again would call for more investments in higher education, as all the proposed measures are necessary, but also cost money.

Step 5: Providing high quality education

The social dimension has a strong link to the quality of education. Through appropriate teaching methods, dropout can be reduced. It is not enough to widen access and participation to higher education, if no measures are in place to guarantee that the focus is also on "throughput" and "output." Dropout should be minimised and the groups graduating should be in the same proportion as those who started with higher education. Students with foreign backgrounds have a much higher chance of dropping-out, than domestic students from a higher educated background, for instance.

A way to reduce dropout is increasing the quality of education. Using average workload as a benchmark and designing modules according to this is a good starting

point. Further, eliminating certain cultural barriers, like unnecessary academic language and discriminating reference points play an important role.

New teaching methods should be implemented, with more contact between student and teacher. This should not lead to making higher education more kindergarten like, but rather stimulate creativity. Creativity is the motor of our higher education and will lead to better research.

Smaller classes and in general a student-centred approach will also increase the quality of higher education.

Finally counselling services for students ensure that students are following the right track in their educational career.

Conclusion

These 5 steps suggest an approach that may ensure that social justice finally finds its way into higher education. For all the reasons mentioned above, it is both necessary and feasible. The 5 steps should not be misunderstood as hierarchical: implementing all steps simultaneously is possible and even recommended. Work on a social dimension to higher education starts today. ESU continues to fight for the rights of students in higher education and this includes those currently excluded or under-represented, with a higher education system based on fairness and quality as goal.