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Inclusion in Higher Education

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Abstract

This policy brief aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of inclusion in higher education along with prescribing rigorous research-based policy recommendations to formulate a more inclusive higher education system. While looking at traditional disparities such as gender, income and disabilities, the paper also goes on to discuss various neglected issues such as the integration of refugees, xenophobia and regional disparities. It aims to reach beyond global nation-wide divisions but also spatial differences within countries with respect to urban, suburban and rural areas. A significant focus has been given on reforming the curriculum and making it culturally sensitive and diverse in various ways. The recommendations range from physical, infrastructural suggestions for disabled students and other marginalised communities to soft curriculum-based changes to make it safer and more amenable to the needs of diverse communities. The policy brief aims to increase inclusivity at every level, addressing the need for comprehensive student support throughout all phases of the educational experience.

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Acronyms

BEAP- The Basic Education in Africa Programme

CCD- Career Counselling and Development

COP- Communities of Practise

GEP- Gender Equality Plans

LGBTQIA+- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

Introduction

An individual's socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, disability, geographical location and other factors strongly influence one's educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes, especially during the first cycle of Higher Education. Vulnerabilities often cannot be singled out and are rather interdependent, thus increasing their impact on a person's abilities to enter tertiary education and to successfully complete it.

Higher education continues to play a crucial role in social mobility across the globe, which makes it pivotal that higher education provides for the needs of a very diverse and often vulnerable student population. Unequal funding across educational institutions tends to increase the gap between those that easily advance through the academic path and those that may struggle. Inclusivity in education is mandatory and can be realised in several ways as discussed in this policy brief.

1. Leaving no one behind

1.1 Enabling vulnerable groups to enter, transit and complete higher education.

The understanding of the value of higher education needs to be embedded from an early age to ensure that potential students consider tertiary education. This is especially crucial for potential first-generation students - persons whose parents haven't acquired higher education, whilst their counterparts see that as a natural next step after secondary education. Statistics show that high school graduates with one or both parents who have acquired higher education are more likely to pursue a degree than those whose parents only have secondary education or lower qualifications. First-generation students often feel like they are not cut out for higher education and will not benefit from pursuing a degree, thus, they choose to go straight into the labour market, often depriving themselves of the opportunity of social mobility.

Raising awareness among people in society and more importantly - the higher education institution staff - is crucial to ensuring that every individual is considered in the education process - both leading up to higher education, providing positive experience and association, as well as throughout higher education programs.

There is a lack of comparable data across regions and equity strategies that tackle a very narrow range of accessibility needs and backgrounds which do not assess the needs of students from different backgrounds. Most research concentrates on the withdrawal and noncompletion causes, with focus on individual characteristics, yet very little research is about effective policies and plans in place to counteract and help learners to complete studies. Also not enough data is collected across the education systems on entrance data of students and their individual needs in order to support them to reduce the dropout rate.

Provisions of individual and flexible learning paths that can accommodate the needs and prior qualifications of different students, not only those with vulnerable backgrounds, can lower dropout rates. Regular monitoring of academic advancements and timely observations of patterns that can lead to failing courses and non-completion of study programs should be in place, complemented by student support and free access to counselling facilities in order to enable possibilities for individual learning paths.

2. Education Policies

2.1 Equity policies and equal distribution of opportunities and funding

Wide-scale regional disparities exist in terms of quality of education offered as well as the percentage of students enrolled in higher education. These regional disparities are governed by both international differences between the developed nations and the peripheral ones, as well as the intra-nation disparities between urban centres of power and suburban/rural areas. One other major aspect is the prevalence of conflict since migration and displacement have a heavy bearing on educational outcomes. Within these regions and spaces exist the gulf of opportunities based on various deep-entrenched divisions like gender, income, race, ethnicity, linguistic differences and others. According to the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report, across the 76% where the survey took place, 20% of the richest children aged 25-29 had completed over four years of higher education compared to only 1% of the poorest (“UNESCO GEM Report 2016”).

The devastation caused by conflicts both internal and external has led to a massive refugee population spread across the globe. Refugee settlements abound in various parts of the world but refugee education usually stays underrepresented and underfunded. It is estimated that roughly US\$1.6 billion or two-thirds of the estimated refugee education funding gap remains. (“UNESCO GEM Report 2019”). Even in countries where higher education systems exist for refugees, they are often parallel systems that promote segregation rather than assimilation into the mainstream. Inclusion cannot merely be seen as the absence of exclusion but should be seen in a holistic sense where every student feels their sense of identity, belongingness and protection. It must also occur at a policy level to ensure that governmental programmes as well as civil society prioritise funding towards education.

In order to fill the disparities, we need a multipronged approach to deal with the overlapping gaps.

Affirmative Action to Promote Enrolment into Higher Education

- Poor households withdraw their students from higher education due to various economic reasons. Governments must ensure affirmative action in the line of targeted benefits and scholarships to these communities. It can also take the conditional cash grants based on minimum attendance or completion of a degree in higher education institutions by marginalised sections or poor communities. The initiative “*Familias en Acción*” in Colombia was able to trigger a staggering 10% increase in school attendance rate in rural areas. Direct-benefit transfer schemes should be explored to ensure a targeted distribution of subsidies in higher education and solve the problem of free-riders. This affirmative action should also take into account other factors such as disabilities, gender, race, ethnicity, and others. When public expenditure on education is insufficient, the pressure falls on household expenditure for education. In such cases, internalised differences such as gender impact the spending and women suffer further. It is thus pertinent to keep marginalised communities at the centre of education policy-making.

Challenging the highly academic nature of higher education

- Most higher education systems worldwide are academically focused rather than skills development oriented. Beyond that, they carry a perceived lack of relevance in real-world issues (“The Basic Education in Africa Programme (BEAP): a policy paper responding to demands for access, quality, relevance and equity;”). This discourages poor segments to enrol in the same. There is a need to remodel higher education and expand it to fields directly related to employment opportunities and entrepreneurship incubation. There is also a need to break the strict walls between traditional and vocational forms of learning. This very broadening of the landscape could lead to democratisation of the higher education landscape and greater enrolment from more diverse student groups.

Indigenisation of Education System and Increasing Relevancy

- Diversity and inclusion needs to happen at the level of both individuals and ideas. Many educational systems across the world are still based on colonial lenses and perspectives. There is a need to indigenise the education systems and to include local sensitivities, traditions, cultures and world-views as part of the curriculum of higher education to make people feel connected with the same (“Y20 2021 - Communiqué”). The current status is highly disconnected from reality in a variety of institutions which acts as a hindrance in the enrolment of marginalised communities who are looking for immediate employment and resources.

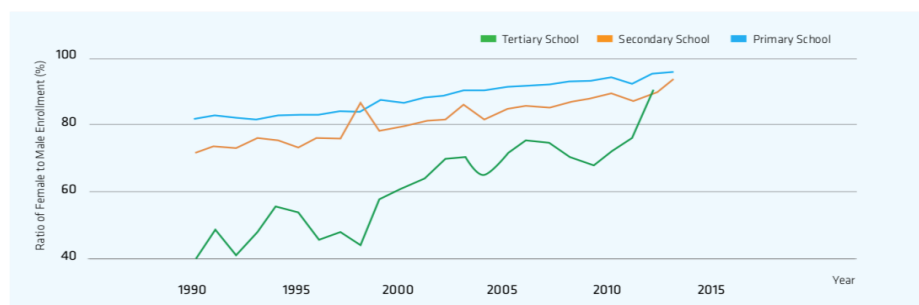
Mainstreaming of Refugees and Migrants

- While various countries have invested some resources in ensuring educational opportunities for refugees, most of these lead to the creation of parallel or alternative education systems within the country. This education system suffers from various issues including underfunding, quality lapses and other problems. At the same time, it pushes for further division within society which makes assimilation more difficult. There is a need to bring refugees into mainstream higher education systems to ensure cultural acceptance between communities. There is also a need to work on bridging the stereotypes that exist about migrated communities. In today’s reality, a wide section of students migrate to different countries but the higher education ecosystems are not that welcome and need to be more culturally sensitive, diverse and multi-culturally acceptable. A lack of such an environment leads to further alienation and affects learning environment and outcomes.

3. Gender Equality

3.1 Enhancing gender equality in higher education

Figure 1- Trends in the ratio of female to male school enrolment in Africa, by education cycle



Source: Author's computation using data from World Development Indicators (WDI), the World Bank

Gender equality has become a key goal in the growing field of international relations and globalisation. A major subject of achieving equality is through the deliverance of equal access to higher education (Subrahmanian 395). Scholars have for years since the Dakar Framework for Action as well as the Millennium Development Summit, highlighted the absence of enhancing the reality of gender equality within education (UNESCO). In outlining this factor, a diagnosis is vital prior to actively constructing solutions and action plans as Covid-19 has exacerbated the lack of gender equality within higher education. In analysing the concept of 'gender equality', scholars, policy-makers and agents must undo the narrative that speaks to performative equality or gender parity as an equal number of boys and girls enrolled in an institute of higher learning in 2022 is not merely enough; a thorough and realistic equality is required not only in terms of access but also within (Subrahmanian 397).

Thus, referring to and not limited to policies, curriculum, opportunity, funding and occupation within student governance and academia. Universities post-colonisation and the rapid increase of globalisation, unfortunately portray gendering and capitalist institutes globally (Milani 215-216). To further diagnose the catalysts of this paralysing inequality, institutes of higher learning especially within lesser economically developed regions facing political instability; do not account for the queer community and their inclusivity within academic spaces (Amin, Kuntchev, Schmidt 2).

There is an importance in all international organisations, stakeholders and education advocates identifying that tertiary institutes are microcosms of society and that these areas affect and shape the behaviour that society perpetuates in their lived, daily experiences. This can be supported by the large outcry of in institutes of higher learning when the #AmINext? movement grew globally and signified the demands of women to have equal access to higher

education in terms of being free from sexual harassment and gender-based violence within their learning spaces (Rosa, Clavero 5-7).

To ensure this is a realisation, universities, colleges and technikons need to take a top-down approach for change and not place the responsibility on vulnerable student bodies themselves. This can be conducted by encouraging and increasing the number of women and queer people in the academic teaching space in order to create more gender equality at a management level which may ultimately uphold gender policies and create a comfortable, mirror of young female or queer students who can identify with their educators and not feel pressured to conform to a male dominated space and attempt to blend in, in order to succeed. Recent statistics according to the European Union display that only 23,6% of the Heads of Higher Education Institutes were women in 2019 which had numerated a slight increase since 2017, however this was hindered by the pandemic as more women were forced to complete their unpaid work at home and exit the academic space. Therefore, reducing the number of publications by women in these institutes (Rosa, Clavero 3-6).

This requires rapid and thorough Gender Equality Plans (GEP's) that will disrupt patriarchal components in tertiary institutes. At a policy level, universities must account for x number of women and queer bodies within their staff structure to ensure equal representation. Secondly, institutions must be firm and disruptive in their policies for sexual harassment and gender-based violence to provide the quality and safety for women and the LGBTQIA+ community. These GEP's can be carried out through Communities of Practice (COP) which will serve as a cohort that will educate, create accountability and sustain gender equality at various levels.

It is vital for all agents to ensure that more girls are enrolled in school and tertiary institutes and supported in the process of completing their tertiary studies by governments creating stricter forced-child marriage policies and universities creating the necessary policies to support and assist girls facing pregnancy or heading households. These policies can speak to Career Counselling and Development (CCD) support, food stipends, maternity leave for exams and submissions. This will combat the high levels of dropouts due to the pressure and lack of support (Milani 471-472). This needs to be consistent as a once off action is merely not enough as displayed by figure 1 which indicates the dropouts of girls in Africa. Furthermore, with reference to the LGBTQIA+ community, tertiary institutes must recognise the specific and harsh challenges that queer students face. According to the Britain University Report of 2018, "Three in five trans students (60 per cent) and more than one in five lesbian, gay and bi students who aren't trans (22 per cent) have been the target of negative comments or conduct from other students" (McLaren).

Thus, institutes of higher learning should create policies that speak exclusively to the discrimination and harassment of queer bodies or gender identity oppression. Finally, tertiary institutes need to disrupt societal prescribed norms such as binary bathrooms and normalise gender neutral bathrooms to physically display the importance of the queer community and recognise them as equal members in the institute (Milani 481). Gender equality is of utmost importance in these institutes and can be realised through effective efforts to transform the space.

4. Multiculturality in Education

4.1 The value of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism in higher education

With an increasing number of students choosing to study abroad and most countries being made up of a plethora of individuals coming from diverse ethnicities and cultures, emphasising cultural diversity has become of utmost importance in higher education institutions. Ever since the end of WW2, there have been greater attempts to promote inclusivity in higher education with regard to ethnic diversity and multiculturalism. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 opened greater doors for African Americans to attend college, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 further removed barriers that prevented students from accessing higher education institutes. However, there are still calls from faculty and student members to promote diversity of perspectives in the curriculum. There have been arguments that a singular Eurocentric perspective can harm individual students because they often do not develop the diverse perspectives needed to succeed in a multicultural democracy.

Hence it can be said that there are two primary types of diversity in higher education: Representation of different ethnic groups in the academic community and the creation of an inclusive curriculum that values ethnic diversity.

In considering what the outcomes of diversity are for individuals, it is helpful to understand what is meant by outcomes. Patricia Gurin (1999) suggests a helpful method for describing diversity-related outcomes. Gurin proposes three major types of outcomes that are influenced by campus diversity. Learning outcomes refer to active learning processes in which students become involved while in college, the engagement and motivation that students exhibit, the learning and refinement of intellectual and academic skills, and the value that students place on these skills after they leave college. Democracy outcomes refer to the ways in which higher education prepares students to become involved as active participants in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and complex. The last category of outcomes discussed by Gurin is related to the ability of students to live and work effectively in a diverse society. Specifically, this refers to the extent to which college has prepared students to be successful in their lives after college and the extent to which the college experience is successful in breaking a pattern of continuing segregation in society.

In studies of the impact of college on racial attitudes and views of white men and women, Milem (1992, 1994) found that students who had participated in more frequent discussions of social and political issues, who had talked more frequently about racial/ethnic issues, who had socialised with someone from another racial/ethnic group, who had attended a racial awareness workshop, and/or who had enrolled in ethnic studies courses were more likely to report increased levels of racial and cultural awareness, greater commitment to the goal of promoting racial understanding, and more liberal racial attitudes.

Hence attempts must be made to promote ethnic diversity both inside the curriculum as well in the classroom while emphasising multiculturalism and the practice of giving equal attention to many different backgrounds in a particular setting.

Recommendations

- Conduct sensitisation training programs that sensitise teachers and other university staff on various cultural norms, holidays, and customs that can be introduced and talked about in class to acknowledge different perspectives and cultures and foster understanding of them even if one does not belong to them

Implement policies at all levels of education that commit to providing all students regardless of ethnicity and race equal opportunity to receive a high-quality education.

1. Fostering wellbeing and harmony by implementing programs and practices which counter racism and discrimination.
2. Providing comprehensive EAL and ESL programs that ensure that no student is missing out on opportunities due to lack of English language instruction.
3. Provides targeted learning that teaches students about various backgrounds and promotes diverse perspectives and worldviews.
4. Providing the equal opportunity of school involvement of parents and students from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds promotes respect and understanding of all.

Providing teachers training on multicultural education, assuming that the ways in which students learn and think are deeply influenced by their cultural identity and heritage, and that to teach culturally diverse students effectively requires educational approaches that value and recognize their cultural backgrounds.

5. Inclusion of students with disabilities

5.1 Universal service and design to ensure inclusion of individuals living with disabilities.

Students with disabilities struggle to overcome many hindrances that their able-bodied peers do not have set before them. These hindrances present themselves in a wide variety of ways: through limited access to campus buildings, difficulties navigating campuses, inadequate support in their studies, social isolation, lack of information regarding their rights, insufficient access to university education.

This results in students with disabilities often not feeling included in their universities and falling behind academically and socially. In Iceland, students with impairments of any kind comprise 31% of the student population, more than anywhere else in Europe (EUROSTUDENT 2021). Issues affecting students with disabilities are necessary to address if we are to live in a society in which everyone is given equal opportunities to succeed. Improvements in this realm are in-line with multiple SDGs (namely #10: Reduced Inequalities) and as such, strengthening inclusion of students with disabilities is something that UNESCO must work towards.

To tackle the issues listed above, as well as other systematic problems that students with disabilities must grapple with, we must work toward the following goals.

Informing students of their rights

A massive part of including students with disabilities is informing them of the rights that they may have due to their disability. It is imperative to develop programs that enable students with disabilities to access information regarding what they are allowed and entitled to within the university realm. An example of such a resource is Réttinda-Ronja (2021), a database informing students of their rights within each Icelandic university. Launched last year, it is designed to be a place where students with all kinds of disabilities can seek information in a way that is accessible to them. The website's text can be read aloud and also makes use of the Dyslexie font, making the website more accessible to users with dyslexia. More resources of this kind must be made widely available to all students with disabilities all across the world. In order to do this, funds must be allocated to motivated individuals so as to enable them to provide students with disabilities the information that they are entitled to.

Making campuses and education accessible

Another essential component of including students with disabilities is making campuses and education physically and otherwise accessible to them. In a world that is built by able-bodied people for able-bodied people, it can prove challenging for students with disabilities to navigate through certain spaces. As such, it is necessary to remove these hurdles that stand before these students. This can be done by:

- Building ramps and other structures that ease access to buildings
- Building elevators and other structure that ease transport within buildings
- Signage in Braille
- Course materials that can be read aloud
- Sign language interpreters in classes

The above list is not exhaustive, but it provides a decent overview of the many challenges that students with disabilities face when in the university environment. The removal of these hindrances must be prioritised. Furthermore, students with disabilities must not be encumbered in any way, such as by placing limitations on how many students with disabilities are admitted to certain universities or programs.

Recognizing that not all disabilities are visible

It bears mentioning that disabilities are incredibly vast and diverse, so it is important that all students with disabilities are seen in the exact same light. Yet another part of helping students with disabilities to reach their full potential, it's important to understand that not all disabilities are visible. Invisible disabilities, including mental illnesses, plague students at alarming rates. Around 34% of university students in Iceland struggle with depression and almost 20% struggle with anxiety (Jónsdóttir 2021). Service for students with invisible disabilities must be increased and strengthened. This could take the form of more mental health services for students, sensitivity training in which staff is made aware of invisible disabilities as well as campaigns meant to raise awareness of the diversity of disabilities.

The need to address these unique hurdles is ever-increasing and as such, concerted efforts must be made to tackle them. There must be sufficient resources provided in order to assist students with disabilities. In addition, it is of extreme importance to destigmatize all disabilities, thereby making it easier for students with disabilities to seek help that they might need.

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