



8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC8)

Outlook 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe

ARC8 EG4 Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education

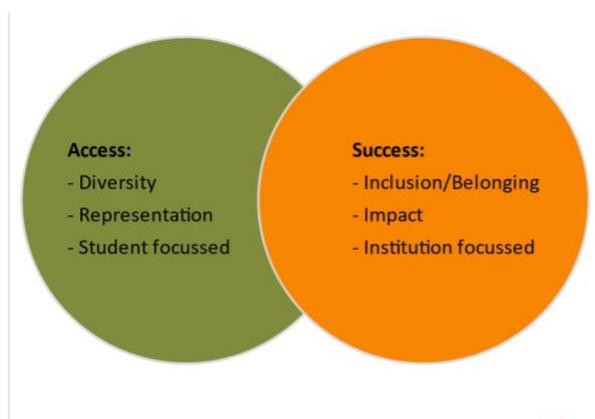
Session 1 | Wednesday, 9 December 2020

Memo

Presentation by Ms Mary TUPAN-WENNO, Executive Director of ECHO, Centre for Diversity Policy, The Netherlands

Mary was asked to make a 10-minute presentation on the following questions to serve as an input to the expert group discussion:

1. What is your take, how inclusive are the national, institutional policies and **practices currently**? Do you have any numbers to show or any story to tell?
2. What **potential risks** do you foresee in the coming years that could jeopardize greater inclusion, access and success efforts?
3. What **leverage points** do you see to promote inclusion?

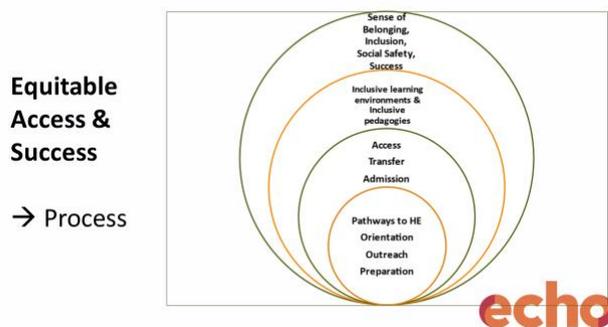


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Mary started her presentation by explaining her definition of access and success in higher education. Access and success are always mentioned in one breath, but there are differences. When we look at access, in fact we are looking at how accessible higher education systems are, how are nations and institutions dealing with the increasing diversity within their context, let it be regional or local. In Europe for instance there are some super diverse cities for example Amsterdam, Rotterdam, London, Paris, where the definition of majority is changing. Higher education systems are still designed according to the “traditional” majority’s

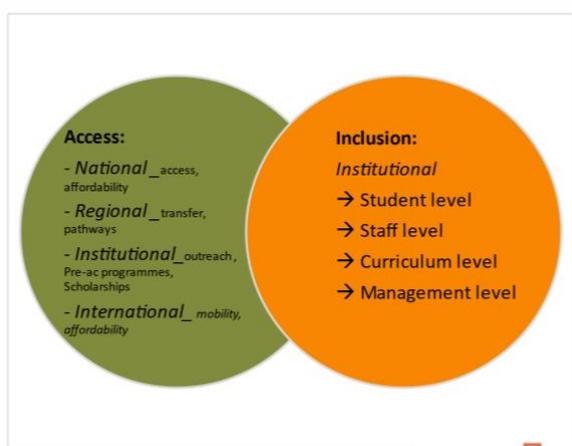
needs, however, nowadays, there are many minority communities existing, that face hurdles to enter these systems. When we talk about access we also often refer to representation and student focused issues e.g. affordability, transferability between different parts of the education system, etc. In terms of success, discussions are focusing on inclusion and belonging. Success is not only about making the system accessible but making the system work for everyone, and thereby making an impact. Inclusion means of course something else in each context, but these are the subtopics discussed under access and success in general.

Mary proceeded with a slide to demonstrate that inclusion policies can only be successful if certain themes are covered. The first small circle is describing actions to create access to higher education, such as ensuring different pathways to entry, orientation advice, outreach from universities to communities, secondary schools, and in general preparing students to enter HE. Once access is ensured to the institutions, different transfer opportunities need to be ensured in-between different types of institutions, e.g. between research and applied sciences universities, between universities and vocational institutions, community colleges, etc. The next level (third circle) is about inclusive learning environments and



inclusive learning environments and inclusive pedagogies. This is extremely important to make sure that students progress and graduate successfully. The highest level is about creating a sense of belonging, and ensuring social safety e.g. eliminating discrimination, racism, harassment, etc. as a precondition for inclusion. This image portrays a hierarchy among these levels, and demonstrates, that access policies alone will never be enough to make a real impact without thinking about creating conditions for success and inclusion eventually.

If we look at access we often see a lot of national policies focusing on systematic accessibility and affordability by establishing grants and scholarships. Also, quality insurance systems are regulated at national level, e.g. in the Netherlands quality is part of the DNA of the system, each university in the country has to provide the same quality education. We often think that open access and good



quality insurance is enough to be inclusive, however, this is not the case and there are still many structural gaps when it comes to ethnic groups, etc. On a regional level there are more policies aiming at increase transfer opportunities between different parts of the system. There are also a lot of institutional policies and practice around access, for instance outreach programmes, free academic programmes, scholarships, etc. At the international level the focus is on mobility and affordability that is definitely being debated today. In the European context mobility seems accessible for all students, but in reality many student groups e.g. first generation

students, students with a migrant background, don't take the opportunity for mobility. We also see that our system is not very inclusive towards international students.

If we look at inclusion there are a lot of institutional policies on the student level, ideally at staff level, curriculum level, and the management level. There have been many policies and interventions developed on a student level, and the staff level programmes are gaining traction now, e.g. programmes to increase awareness of staff, increase intercultural competencies for staff, how to deal with growing diversity in the classroom, etc. The curriculum in many in many fields is really not reflecting the different heritage and histories of communities. On the management level there always have been a lot of attention, as change management needs institutional commitment.

Mary proceeded with **taking stocks of potential risks and challenges, that could jeopardize inclusion efforts in the next 10 years.**

- **Context matters –no one size fits all policy and practice**
There's no one size fits all, it is difficult to develop national level policy and practice on inclusion. ECHO has been part of two European projects which were looking at different interventions from primary to higher education level. In the first project they have examined 54 practices, while in the second project 74 practices. In both cases one of the main conclusions has been that context matters the most, you always have to translate all practices to your own context, given the differences in legislation etc.
- **Too much focus on access (admission & funding) less on inclusion**
There's a lot of focus on access and less on inclusion. The reason might be that access is the first element to get into a system, and it is a relatively mechanical kind of intervention. Focusing on inclusion takes much more effort, having dialogues and changing mindsets. It is a different kind of change management. The majority of current funding, scholarships and grants are very much access focused, and it would be better to inclusion and success instead of access only.
- **Staff is not a representation of student population**
This issue was less relevant 20 years ago when diversity wasn't a big reality of societies, but in some countries and in some societies the diversity became the fabric of society, and not having a strong focus of what it means for instance to the curriculum, to the staff requirements, to education in general is really a missed opportunity. Changing mindsets would be required.
- **Color-blind instead of Color-brave**
A “color-blind instead of a color-brave” way of looking at students is a potential risk. The global social movements that we saw in the past few months are in fact relevant here. It is focused on black lives matters but it resonated to the work within higher education institutions. Students are standing up and hold their institutions accountable, not only protest but start a conversation or dialogue with leadership to have a say in issues around diversity and inclusion.
- **Curriculum does not reflect diversity of heritage, history and perspectives**

In terms of opportunities and leverage points that could take inclusion to the next level in the upcoming decade, Mary shared the following points:

- **Co-creation and collaboration with students**
One of the opportunities is definitely in co-creation and collaboration with students. In the Netherlands ECHO has been doing a big campaign on behalf of the government since 2017, it's called “Students for students”. The idea is to promote collaboration with student organisations on the issues around access and inclusion and thereby have a more realistic plan on how to make higher education inclusive. In Europe, national student unions and the European Students’ Union (ESU) have been part of the discussions and always had a seat at the table. In case of the Netherlands there is even funding available for students to engage in policy discussions and develop different elements of sustainability initiatives. But this is not the case in all parts of the world.
- **Outreach and collaboration with informal and non-formal education providers**

If we want to make higher education more inclusive it is important to involve stakeholders outside of the walls of academia. If we look at increasing access from a pathway approach there is a whole range of informal and non-formal education provider providers that in fact support the formal system to make it more accessible.

- **More focus on benefits of diversity and inclusion to the quality, productivity and innovation in science**

Another interesting opportunity is to put more focus on the benefits of diversity and inclusion to the quality, productivity and innovation in science. There is not so much research available on what benefits diversity brings to the for-profit sector. McKinsey has done studies on this topic, and they even quantified the financial benefits of gender diversity, ethnic diversity, etc. These conversations benefit quality of education and innovation in science education.

- **Public– Private collaboration**

Creating access to higher education is just the start, a means to an end. Students have to be prepared during their higher education studies for transition to the labour market. Everything that students gain from their HE studies has to prepare them properly to enter the labour market.

The most important in terms of thinking about the future is our approach to inclusive strategies.

The first one is a **“pathway approach”**, which is most interesting on a regional level because it is focusing on making sure that students have a clear picture on what they would like to aim for with their studies, what they want to achieve throughout primary education to higher education. The pathways approach should ensure that they are aware of their possibilities, of the different ways to their end goal, and what is the criteria for success. It also entails a system level collaboration between the different education sectors and at a regional level. The second one is the **“holistic approach”** that involves a systemic thinking ranging from education to healthcare, living conditions, etc. The third approach is the **“colour-brave approach”** which is most important in countries with a lot of ethnic diversity. In Europe, maybe with the exception of the UK most countries have a “colour-blind approach” even though they have a very ethnically diverse society.

Comments on the Status Quo from members of the group:

- There is a fundamental underlying assumption when we discuss any access and success policies and initiatives is that going into higher education is good and beneficial to every individual. That benefit may have different connotation in different contexts, different societies, cultures and mindsets. We need to be mindful of this assumption and examine how it applies in different contexts.
- The university that we are talking about today is fundamentally a Europe centric concept. In the Asian context this concept may be challenged and the whole notion of a university is slightly different. It is also true for TVET institutions, and pushing people going into TVET pathways may be much easier in Europe compared to the more Confucius-driven societies in Asia, where the emphasis is still on social status that can be achieved through high level of education. This concept is very much engrained in the society and we need to be mindful to challenge this status quo.
- The assumption is that higher education is a dream for everybody, but where does it leave learning? Higher education should not be considered as the ultimate aspiration and the source of happiness.
- A lot of access policy is very much focused on making sure that underrepresented groups are able to participate. They are very much instrumental, and not so much about ensuring an opportunity to everyone to develop themselves as a full person. They are focusing only

on getting into a system, or getting into an institution, and that is in fact the main problem with access policies.

- Even if you have a fully functioning quality assurance system, it still does not provide inclusive entrance to higher education for many groups in society. This is because many of these policies are developed from silos and by certain groups in society.
- In Indonesia there are two systems of higher education: a secular and an Islamic education system. Both range from primary to higher education, and the one thing that they share in common is that they both have been used as instruments in nation building. Islamic higher education in Indonesia was established in the 1960s by the state for example, in order to promote a uniform understanding of religion and limit diversity in ways of interpreting the religion and promote shared thinking about it everywhere in the country and assist nation building.
- In the context of Indonesia, university has always played a role in nation building. In a country with such diverse population in terms of ethnicity, religion and languages, universities have been a place where all these differences could be melted into one pot and nationalism could be promoted.
- In certain policy systems universities are fairly autonomous and inclusion policies often become the responsibility of the institutions overall, and they're harder to identify. While in more centralised systems where universities are much more under the control of the state, it is easier to introduce broader sets of policies.

Comments on the Risks from members of the group:

- One of the main risks coming through was that there's too much focus on access and funding is also linked to access initiatives. It is globally the case, in many conversations about diversity and inclusion the first focus is always on access. This is understandable because this is the first stage of inclusion, but it is not a way of making higher education more inclusive. Providing access is too often seen as an effort and as a success, but this should not be the end goal. The investment in access initiatives is in fact a disinvestment, if students are failing and dropping out.
- Another risk is that universities are not really geared up to cope with certain groups of students. This is not really an issue of Europe or Asia-centric notion of universities, because it is fundamentally a class-based issue. If you look institutions across Europe, they have not geared up to take on students from different social backgrounds both culturally and structurally.
- You can possibly identify groups of students who need support for greater access, by some metric of social economic backgrounds, of ethnicity, or of rurality for instance, which is a major issue as for accessing certain parts of the world. However, when students enter their institution those identities tend to be lost somewhat. So when it comes to supporting their progression and their success, it becomes somewhat more difficult.
- Preventing dropouts and ensuring success is a headline issue, but it hides a lot of other subtopics. For example even if your students graduate, it does not mean they are fully successful, did not have any sub-optimal experiences during their studies, reached their full academic potential, built their networks? There are all sorts of ways in which you do not fully succeed. Is there a way to validate different experiences in higher education that are not related to just earning a degree?
- Completion rate is an important element from a national policy and accountability point of view but being able to enter higher education or education in general and being able to develop as a person to grow is equally important.

- We live in a society where rankings are important, but the system is in fact keeping us in hostage.
- The Minister of Education in the Netherlands presented her recent strategic agenda last December, and has replaced the notion of student success being the most important to personal development being the most important deliverable in higher education. The emphasis is on personal development instead of just getting a degree. This is an interesting way of looking at the meaning of education.
- In contrast, in the UK measuring success is very data metric based e.g. employment outcome, earnings, etc. not by personal development.
- The conversation with employers is an interesting topic too. Employers are looking for skills of course, but also for people who have done much more in life than just focusing on studying and graduating. In a journey towards the labour market it is equally important to have a lot of other competencies than just being a top student.
- From a student perspective, many students do not really know their peers, are not often on campus, and at the end they are getting their degree which is the planned outcome, and they count successful in statistics, but they end up feeling like a stranger at their own university. That's when the inclusion part comes in.
- Language is another major challenge in access to higher education. Students who do not speak the local language have very little opportunities to enter the system. Or even staff, e.g. of an Italian postdoctoral colleague who could not influence decision making processes in a Czech University, because the language of administration was exclusively in Czech.

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