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EQUITABLE ACCESS, SUCCESS AND QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A Policy Statement by the International Association of Universities

Preamble

A well-educated citizenry is the foundation of social equity, cohesion and successful participation in the global knowledge economy. As a result, most countries have set goals to increase the share of the population with higher education and/or broaden access to higher education for individuals that are under-represented because of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, [dis]ability or location.

As a general rule, countries with low rates of participation in higher education seek to expand access by increasing the number of opportunities available while those countries that have already achieved a significant level of participation in higher education tend to focus on broadening access so as to include more individuals from under-represented groups. There are many reasons why some countries may focus on one aspect rather than the other or why some countries feel the need to meet both challenges simultaneously. Over time, however, paying attention to both is becoming important for all.

As a global association of universities and other higher education institutions, the International Association of Universities (IAU) is committed to promoting the twin goals of equitable access to, and successful participation in higher education for all members of society. The IAU believes that equitable access to quality learning contributes significantly to the development of national human resources, promotes social justice and cohesion, enhances personal development, employability and, in general, facilitates sustainable development.

The Association urges higher education institutions and government decision-makers at all levels to adopt the following principles and recommendations on equitable access and successful participation in higher education and to act, with some urgency, on their implementation.

Key Principles

- Access to higher learning should be made possible to all regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, economic or social class, age, language, religion, location or [dis]abilities.
- The goal of access policies should be successful participation in higher education, as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise.
- Equitable access and academic excellence are essential and compatible aspects of a quality higher education.

- To improve access to higher education, admission criteria must move away from a primary focus on each learner's achievements and entry qualifications towards the recognition of his/her potential, without the latter becoming the sole criterion for admission.
- Targeted strategies and policies designed specifically to elicit the students' full potential are required so as to increase access to, and success in higher education by individuals who are traditionally under-represented because of their social background, economic status, gender, ethnic origins, [dis]abilities, low quality of prior schooling or for other reasons.
- National and institutional policies and programmes should be developed through ongoing dialogue among all stakeholder groups and should acknowledge and address the broad array of academic, financial and personal barriers facing potential learners.
- Higher education that responds to the challenges of equitable access and successful participation requires sound policies and adequate public funding for institutions and students. Such policies must be sensitive to local conditions; borrowing policy solutions from other countries that have different problems and priorities may not be the best solution.
- Equitable access to and broader participation in higher education require active linkages between higher education and primary and secondary education and seamless, educational pathways beginning with early childhood and continuing throughout life, and aided by career guidance and counselling services when appropriate.
- Responding to the varied needs of learners and of society requires a differentiated but coherent higher education system reflected in a transparent qualifications framework; a system in which institutions are assessed according to their specific mission and goals.
- To promote access and student success, different institutional models, flexible programmes of study as well as a variety of delivery modes must be available to allow individuals at all stages of life to move through higher education in a manner that suits their needs.
- International mobility, exchanges and cross-border education activities must integrate the twin goals of increased access and equitable participation.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

Based on these principles, the International Association of Universities proposes the following action agenda for adoption and implementation by higher education institutions, while recognising the diversity of economic and financial conditions as well as the particular political, cultural, and historical aspects that define various national contexts.

- Integrate the goals of equitable access and successful participation for all learners into the institutional mission and develop specific objectives and strategies for achieving them.
- Work in partnership with government, representatives of other educational sectors, professional associations and employers in order to address issues of access and successful participation in a holistic manner, taking into consideration the outcomes of secondary level schooling, labour market trends and national development needs.
- Call for and participate in a multi-stakeholder dialogue with government and/or competent bodies to develop policies and secure adequate financial support for the pursuit of the access and success agenda.

- Develop or strengthen admission policies and practices that emphasise the potential of each applicant and address equity of access and successful participation by offering a variety of flexible learning pathways for entry and exit.
- Provide students with a comprehensive academic, financial and social support system paying particular attention to the specific needs of learners from under-represented groups and/or those who experience difficulties.
- Reward quality teaching, curricular innovation and responsiveness to learner diversity in the academic career structure of faculty members.
- Provide faculty with pedagogical training based on a culture of student-centred learning and with a focus on learning outcomes.
- Facilitate access to learning, respond to diverse learning needs and increase outreach by the appropriate and effective use of a variety of delivery modes.
- Mainstream the assessment of prior and experiential learning (e.g. learning through work schemes, accreditation of work placements) as well as blended, distance and e-learning into the admission and credit accumulation processes.
- Interact with the media and the general public to develop an understanding of, and build support for, the need and value of institutional differentiation.
- Ensure that all institutional policies for international mobility, academic exchanges as well as other cross-border educational activities take into consideration the challenges of equitable access and broadening participation at home and abroad.
- Provide reliable and timely information on access, successful retention and graduation rates to students, the general public, employers and governments in a proactive manner.

Recommendations to Governments

Governments at all levels have an essential role in promoting and enabling access to high-quality higher education for all members of society. Based on the principles outlined, and recognising the diversity and significance of context at the local, national, and regional levels, the International Association of Universities proposes the following action agenda for adoption and implementation by governments worldwide. In addition, the IAU encourages governments to discuss these principles in national and international higher education fora.

- In consultation with all stakeholder groups, articulate an integrated educational, social and economic agenda to promote equitable access, broadened participation and success in higher education.
- Demonstrate a commitment to equitable access and success by providing adequate funding using models that are sensitive to, and appropriate for, local conditions and that support higher education institutions and students with financial need.
- Promote the value of, and encourage mission differentiation among higher education institutions within a transparent qualifications framework that is responsive to societal needs and labour market realities.

- Create a policy environment that is conducive to increased public and private sector funding in support of equitable access of potential and enrolled learners with financial need.
- Initiate targeted policies and programmes to eliminate academic and other non financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education.
- Consider the educational system in a holistic manner, developing coherent policies and strategies that build effective links with prior levels of education and allow for flexible and seamless pathways for entry to and exit from higher education for all learners.
- Recognise and reward higher education institutions that successfully serve individuals from under-represented groups.
- Invest in the necessary and appropriate infrastructure to support the effective use of information communication technologies in education, thereby improving opportunities for all learners, especially adults, and expanding outreach activities in higher education institutions.
- Given the growing importance of internationalisation of higher education, provide funding to ensure that opportunities for international mobility are made accessible to all.
- Report on the achievement of access and retention goals and make widely available accurate, timely, user-friendly information that may serve to facilitate access, including information on financial student aid.

Conclusion

Equitable access and broadening participation in higher education are fundamental to “knowledge societies” in all parts of the world. The International Association of Universities calls for all stakeholder groups, especially governments and higher education institutions, to act on the promise and potential of these principles and recommendations. Only robust and collective action, based on ongoing research, data analysis and the systematic monitoring of progress, will help achieve these goals. Access and participation in higher education are essential for the empowerment of all, especially those often excluded.