

The value of equity – World Access to Higher Education Day

Universities share a range of virtues of which they are rightly proud from being custodians of knowledge over generations, to being the main engine for the generation of ideas and innovation in society. However, a shared characteristic of which they should be less proud is the inequalities which blight participation into higher education (HE). Across countries, institutions and systems access to HE is unequal by social background. Research shows that in the 90% of the countries in the world where we have evidence those from low income and marginalised backgrounds are less likely to progress to HE.

Many of the reasons for these inequalities are related to issues in schooling systems and economic policy outside of the control of universities. However, while the global HE community is not oblivious to the equitable access challenge, it is one that has to compete for attention with other concerns. These challenges make the first World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) on the 28th of this month so timely. The aim of WAHED is to mobilise national and international efforts and act as a catalyst to address inequalities in access and success in HE across the world. More than 30 countries will be delivering events focused around equitable access to HE on the day and over 150 organisations are supporting the initiative. These include major conferences in the UK & Australia, a seminar on how to make HE more equitable for universities in Colombia, while the University of Campinas in Brazil are bringing together participants from the institutional working teams on human rights, Sexual Violence, gender discrimination and those working with refugees, indigenous, and disabled students to examine institutional practice in diversity and inclusion. New research is also being launched to mark WAHED that looks systematically at the event of policy commitment to equitable access to HE in over 70 countries. This research illustrates some of the problems in the commitments to addressing inequalities in access to HE amongst policymakers. It is a very positive thing that the majority of countries in the study describe equitable access to HE as a policy priority. However, beyond this headline commitment concrete measures to make equity a reality are harder to find. Very few countries spell out clear equity promotion strategies, define concrete targets to enroll and support students in from marginalized groups or outline what resources will be devoted to supporting these groups to enter and succeed in HE.

WAHED is and will have an impact. The activities described above will make a small but incremental impact on moving the dial on commitment to equitable access to HE. Having a specific time in the calendar to focus on the issue of HE equity is also important. But the equitable access challenge is a permanent one and requires fundamental, long term commitment to change from universities in how they relate to schools and the wider community, their admissions policies and curriculum. What underpins these areas are the values that universities hold. How these evolve and change will determine in many ways the success of WAHED and efforts by universities to become more equitable and diverse.

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