

MAGNA CHARTA OBSERVATORY

2024 Student's Essay Competition

“What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?”

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Inclusive Higher Education for All: Targeting the most vulnerable among us

The right to quality education is as basic and vital as the right to life, water, clean air, food, or shelter. Besides, education is a human right, a public good, and should be available to all (MCO 2020). An inclusive higher education system will therefore strive to address systemic inequalities based on gender, colour, disability, income status, or geographical location which threatens the full benefits of higher education for all students.

Meanwhile, students are not a homogenous group. There are first-generation students, students with disabilities, those in rural or remote areas, older/adult learners, from communities affected by climate change, students at risk or living in poverty, and some from oppressed minority groups. We also have students from historically marginalised backgrounds, students from unstable families, out-of-school young people, students with different sexual/gender orientations, pregnant or nursing young women and girls.

These groups have unique needs requiring adequate satisfaction before they can reap the fruits of higher education, including meaningful labour market participation and progressive contributions to human development. If given an opportunity to address the existing challenges in my country's higher education system, to make it truly inclusive and supportive for the most vulnerable among us, I would focus on some key issues, including eliminating entry-point barriers, redesigning learning environments, bridging the digital divide, and preparing students for bold transitions.

Eliminating entry-point barriers

I envision a world where quality higher education is easily accessible to all students, while making the most of their educational experience. However, this demands attitudinal change

among higher education institutions and stakeholders, including policymakers, decision-makers, and funders. We need to address systemic discriminatory admission processes where students are solely assessed on academic performance without fair regard to learners with proven non-academic abilities; thus denying prospective students a life chance in mainstream higher education.

Interestingly, we can draw insights from what the Finnish universities are doing by reforming entrance examinations and ensuring easier access to multiple fields of study while allowing applicants to take a single exam. It was reported that the Rectors' Council of Finnish Universities (UNIFI) had earlier proposed reducing the number of entrance exams from 120 to just nine national exams starting in 2025, simplifying the process for promising students [1]. Moreover, higher education institutions are expected to commit themselves to advance equity and fairness in all aspects of academic life including admissions, hiring and promotion (MCO 2020).

Unfortunately, many young people in my country are excluded from higher education due to poverty, disability, and unhealthy cultural practices such as child marriage or child labour. And this is unacceptable!

Redesigning learning environments

In June 2023, I led some local students on a community project named Inclusive Mobility for Students with Disabilities at my University. The project's aim was to advocate for universal design for all academic buildings, hostels, roads, offices, and other physical infrastructures for students with visible disabilities— an effort towards promoting an inclusive learning environment for all.

Meanwhile, universities are non-discriminatory spaces (MCO 2020), and must be free from practices that deny promising yet differently-abled persons the right to higher education. In the words of Dr. Sara Clarke-Habibi, we need to, *"Foster a campus environment that values diversity, equity and inclusion, recognising the importance of promoting social cohesion and addressing structural inequalities"*[2]. If higher education will be helpful to all students, an inclusion-centric architectural and infrastructural design remains the urgent need of the hour. This is very important to ensure all students are able to fully realise their learning potential.

For example, the physical, social, and digital environment can be redesigned to accommodate the peculiar needs of the visually impaired, physically challenged, and other students with special needs.

Bridging the digital divide

The future of education will be driven by new technologies, demanding digital inclusion for all students in terms of access to digital devices, skills, platforms, and high-speed internet connection— a luxury for millions of students in developing countries like Nigeria. As the 21st-century education continues to experience a digital revolution, lots of students are simply left behind due to digital poverty— the inability to access digital technologies and skills, leading to exclusion in learning and meaningful engagement in society. And due to geographical area or income status, technology often reaches some students last.

We must also address the new face of digital inequality identified as the 'AI divide' among developed and developing nations. Hence, closing the digital divide between resourced and under-resourced learners is inevitable to ensure higher education is useful to all.

Preparing students for transitions

The promise of higher education including upward social mobility may seem out of reach for many students and their families. Oftentimes, too many students experience a transition crisis— unable to progress academically or professionally. I observed this among school leavers and unemployed graduates leading to a situation commonly referred to as 'NEET' population— young people not in employment, education or training. So consequential to individuals and societies resulting in loss of earnings, increased dependency, public nuisance, low productivity, and socio-economic instabilities.

Recently, I learned about the European Pillar of Social Rights (Principle 4) on 'Active support to employment' seeking to ensure *'young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education'*[3]. This can also be considered in my country and region where lots of young people are graduating into a less secure unknown future— making higher education only beneficial to a few people.

However, by realigning policies and resources to current realities for sustainable development, we can envision a higher education system that is inclusive and equitable by design. We must start eliminating barriers to higher education among vulnerable groups, make the learning environment more accommodating, address digital inequalities, and adequately prepare students for successful transitions to the world of work.

All persons with the will and attitude to learn should fully and meaningfully participate in education, employment, and society— leaving no student behind.

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