Inclusive Excellence as a driver for Social Inclusion

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Introduction

Post-secondary education in Europe and beyond is facing a great challenge to increase the empowerment and successful participation of students from underrepresented groups, especially in higher education. The sense of urgency to enrol more students with such backgrounds is widely felt by all (i.e. institutions, government and NGOs), and derives both from growing economic demands (i.e. innovation and excellence –in science– are pillars of knowledge-based economies) and from a social dimension viewpoint (i.e. social inclusion and social mobility). Policy development and implementation with regard to widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education has indeed led to (slight) increases in enrolments among these students. Yet, targets of the social dimension agenda (such as social mobility), a top priority of the European Higher Education Area, are hardly achieved. Growing inclusion in higher education does not necessarily translate to a higher retention and graduation rate among these students. Conversely, the gap between these students and other students has only increased in recent years. How can policy makers address this growing problem?

Locally defined minorities (LDMs)

When developing policies aimed at increasing the successful participation of underrepresented students in higher education of equal quality, it is first crucial to better define who these students are. The term 'underrepresented students' refers to students who belong to social groups in society that are less likely to attend and achieve at higher education. More often than not, these students belong to social groups that are considered minorities (for instance migrants or the urban poor). It is important to note, however, that majority and minority groups in society are not determined by numbers per se, but by power relationships that determine access to resources in society (such as educational opportunities). Accordingly, those who are widely considered to belong to majority or minority groups can shift. Hence, locally defined minorities (LDMs) are situational and not static groups.

From a policy perspective this all means that one has to reflect on who are considered minorities in given localities and time periods.

Also, particular minority groups may already be well represented in higher education and may need less intervention, whereas other minority groups may go unnoticed due to (their lack of or overwhelming) numerical presence in certain localities in society. Frequent evaluations on who students from LDM backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education are, and their unique needs and strengths, are thus key to such policymaking and implementation. The results from such evaluations will provide ample opportunities to develop more effective policies and, accordingly, implement interventions that are more precise, focussed and intentional. Undertaking policy and practices that truly impact LDM inclusion and success on all levels is highly complex. Hence, it requires commitment on many levels, most importantly "staying the course" and making real investments of resources and goodwill to achieve the desired goals.

Multiple LDM positions
Children and youth from LDM backgrounds who are underrepresented in higher education rarely belong to one LDM category, and are therefore often hampered by various minority positions. The intersection of multiple LDM positions (for instance being young, a woman, a migrant and having a marginalised socio-economic background) considerably worsens the situation of individual young people, and is thus another important factor to take into account when developing and implementing policies. These children and young people have to overcome numerous social barriers to access and complete higher education (and subsequently to enter the labour market). These processes of social exclusion can only be addressed by inclusion efforts that challenge their effects. This is where higher education institutions and non-state actors such as NGOs come in.

The limits of social inclusion
Inclusion of LDMs in higher education is high on the agenda of many government organisations, higher education institutions, and NGOs. The University of Liverpool, ECHO and the European Access Network are just some of the myriad organisations and institutions that work towards widening participation of LDM groups in higher education.

Inclusion efforts in higher education are geared towards increasing the number of enrolments among students from LDM backgrounds. Yet, aiming for social inclusion is not enough.

As said, thinking and acting merely from a social inclusion perspective will perhaps increase enrolment, but without further intervention this focus will not result in the widespread retention and graduation of LDM students. Why not? Exclusion mechanisms at play in society are perennially reproduced by higher education institutions, bringing about a deeply felt lack of belonging among most LDM students.[1] This lack of belonging is often described by LDM students as not being able to recognise oneself in course content, staff and communications by the organisation. Such feelings often translate into a profound sense of feeling misplaced, which, in turn, hampers the development of academic self- esteem, aspirations and, accordingly, academic performance. Hence, another step is needed to retain and guide LDM students to successful academic and professional careers.

The next step: Inclusive Excellence
The inclusive excellence framework envisions students with LDM backgrounds as 'having a potential for excellence' rather than 'at risk'. In this vein, excellence alludes to the potential of all students, and to the tasks of educators to help all students in identifying their own potentials and developing them. Theory and practice within the inclusive excellence framework connects the quality of education inherently to the inclusion of students with LDM backgrounds. This framework is based on a strong belief in the talents of all students, and, accordingly, adds new dimensions to the more traditional domains of inclusion efforts geared towards numerical enrolment. Harbouring high expectations of all students, in this vein, starts by recognising the differences in social and academic preparedness without linking these differences in any way to the potential of students. The ambition, framed in this body of knowledge and action, articulates the need to strive for learning spaces within higher education in which all students are able to thrive. This can only be achieved by recognising diversity without stigmatising it.

The guiding question of the inclusive excellence framework from a policy perspective remains: How to make excellence more inclusive in higher education? The answer is institutional (or structural) change. In this regard, the challenge at present is not so much the lack of incentives or ideas, but the urgency to move beyond pockets of investments in domains such as access and campus climate, and create a critical mass of academically successful LDM students.

A very successful example of an institutionalised intervention based on this framework is the Academic Advancement Program at the University Of California Los Angeles (UCLA). This program saw a steep increase in retention rates, nearly closing the gap between students with and without LDM backgrounds, when its pedagogy shifted from a focus on deficiencies to one on excellence. This pedagogical approach was termed the 'Pedagogy of Excellence' by its founder Professor Bermeo[2], and it differentiated between academic skills (and thus academic preparedness) and academic potential. Accordingly, it combined high expectations from all students with high levels of support that matched the specific and, hence, diverse needs and strengths of all students. As a result, all students were able to internalise the high expectations with which they were regarded, and, at the same time, they were able to acquire the skills to realise them. This led to a growing sense of belonging and, subsequently, to increasing academic success among all students, including students with LDM backgrounds.

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[1]Damon A. Williams, (2007), 'Achieving inclusive excellence: Strategies for creating change in quality and diversity', About Campus Vol. 12 Issues 1, p. 8-14. Frank Tuitt (2012) 'Black like me: Graduate students' perceptions of their pedagogical experiences in classes taught by Black faculty in a predominantly White institution', Journal of Black Studies Vol. 43 no. 2, p. 186-206.

[2]See for more information: http://reocities.com/CollegePark/1112/presentation/sld002.htm and www.ean-edu.org/upload_data/.../berlin2008/.../PPP-Adolfo-Bermeo.ppt (websites accessed on: 20th January 2014).