

Equity and Inclusion: Setting the Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific

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Access, quality, and equity represent the fundamental pillars of policy objectives that every higher education system should pursue. Recognizing their interconnected nature, these three policy domains should be regarded as an integrated whole, as their effectiveness is contingent upon each other.

In the realms of access and quality, various metrics, including Gross Enrollment Ratios (GERs), learning outcomes (LOs), employment rates, and more, have already been established to gauge their progress. Furthermore, these metrics can be stratified based on students' diverse backgrounds to capture the equity aspects within these contexts.

With higher education systems expanding globally, GERs have experienced a significant surge in most systems, enhancing learners' access to higher education. Simultaneously, considerable endeavors have been directed toward improving the quality of higher education through both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms.

The present moment demands a more focused consideration of the equity aspect, as the significance of equity and inclusion has escalated in response to various disruptive factors, especially the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, equity and inclusion have emerged as pivotal themes reshaping higher education across Asia and the Pacific.

Categorizing disadvantaged students

Equity and inclusion involve guaranteeing fair representation of students from diverse backgrounds in higher education, spanning different social, economic, ethnic, gender, physical, and mental characteristics. Consequently, it is imperative for each country to devise tailored frameworks for identifying and categorizing disadvantaged students.

Among the various groups of disadvantaged students, those facing physical and mental disabilities are notably prominent. Securing their access to higher education stands as a critical element of promoting equity and inclusion. This objective requires well-defined policies, procedures, incentives, and resource allocations.

Family income serves as another criterion for identifying disadvantaged students, as those from low-income households often face marginalization in accessing higher education. This challenge is particularly pronounced in countries with significant tuition fees but

limited financial assistance, including public-funded scholarships and government-backed student loan schemes.

In countries with diverse ethnicities, it is critical to ensure the right of minority students to access higher education. Similarly, in countries with varying religious affiliations, it is crucial to provide students from minority religious groups with equitable access to higher education opportunities.

Additional disadvantaged student groups may include non-local students, refugees, displaced persons, and persons living in refugee-like situations. National mappings of these diverse student groups are instrumental in identifying target disadvantaged populations, monitoring their status, conducting gap analyses, and implementing effective solutions.

Students recruitment

The journey toward equity and inclusion should begin with the recruitment of college students, if not earlier, given the significant impact of the school system's structure on the composition of college student populations.

It is intriguing to note that the basis for diverse educational paths, originating from the understanding in educational psychology that learners have varying needs and attitudes during the 1950s, transitioned into arguments promoting equity and inclusion through comprehensive school movements grounded in educational sociology in the UK during the 1960s.

Regarding student recruitment, there are primarily two approaches: one is merit-based, involving a broader range of examinations and assessments, which may include high-stakes national college entrance exams and other standardized tests. The second approach is quota-based, where a designated percentage of university placements is reserved for underprivileged students alongside the regular selection procedures.

Sustaining a quota-based admission system is crucial, especially when resources are limited for supporting underprivileged student groups during their years prior to higher education. This highlights the need for affirmative action in many countries to ensure equitable access to higher education.

As educational systems become increasingly equitable for students from various backgrounds, the phase-out of the quota-based admission system can occur gradually. This transition allows the merit-based admission system to take precedence, ensuring the maintenance of equity and inclusion in higher education provisions.

In most countries, higher education institutions typically adopt a hierarchical structure with multiple tiers. It is crucial for these institutions, especially those at the top, to

prioritize the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who have encountered disadvantages, as part of their social responsibilities. To achieve this, policies should be implemented to facilitate the recruitment of students from humble backgrounds, whether through merit-based or quota-based admission processes.

Access to different disciplines and areas of study

Ensuring equal access to higher education goes beyond just counting the total number of students from diverse backgrounds. It involves actively promoting the participation of a diverse student body in a wide range of academic disciplines and fields of study. Performing equity assessments is vital to guarantee that all students have the same opportunities to access the most prestigious and innovative educational programmes.

In the past, male students have largely dominated STEM study programmes, while humanities and social sciences programmes have attracted more female students. Additionally, student representation in both STEM and SHS programmes varies among different demographic groups based on additional criteria.

In cases where merit-based mechanisms fail to uplift the representation of disadvantaged students in highly sought-after study programmes, targeted affirmative actions must be implemented to ensure their participation. Establishing supportive ecosystems at the system, institutional, and faculty levels is crucial to fostering inclusion and enhancing access to relevant study programmes for underprivileged students.

An alternative strategy involves identifying the most financially rewarding study programmes based on their initial employment rates and post-graduation salary levels. Undertaking comprehensive evaluations of student demographics from diverse backgrounds within these programmes can enhance the analysis of equity and inclusion.

With higher education institutions aligning their study programmes with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring equal access to these programmes becomes crucial. This enables students to acquire essential sustainability-related skills and competencies, preparing them to contribute effectively towards achieving all the SDG targets.

Equity and inclusion assessments should cover all disciplines and fields of study to prevent certain student groups from dominating high-demand programmes. This is particularly crucial for programmes that leverage advanced technologies and offer promising employment prospects and higher salaries while aligning with the SDGs.

Student support system

As the higher education system expands, governments' increasing costs and diminishing financial capacity to support this growth have prompted an increased adoption of the

cost-sharing concept for higher education in numerous countries. Nevertheless, higher tuition fees challenge equity and inclusion, potentially restricting the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education.

UNESCO recognizes higher education as a public good and an essential part of the right to education. To ease the financial strain on students, increased government investment should be complemented by establishing a comprehensive student financial support system. This system should include different allowances covering living and tuition costs alongside potential student loan schemes.

Besides financial support, higher education institutions need strong student affairs management systems to provide a wide range of assistance to students facing diverse challenges, including academic, social, physical, mental, and logistical support.

Integrating academic support and mental health services to facilitate the holistic development of university students, especially those facing difficult circumstances, is crucial. Creating inclusive campuses, classrooms, and laboratories involves addressing all individual needs, whether they relate to academic requirements or the mental well-being of each student.

Faculty members should be prepared to embrace inclusive teaching methods to accommodate the diverse needs of students in their classes. Actions such as reducing class sizes, providing personalized tutoring, and promoting interactions between teachers and students as well as among students, especially with the assistance of technology, can promote equity and inclusion in the learning and teaching processes, ensuring that no student is left behind.

All student support services strive to help students overcome financial, academic, physical, social, and mental challenges, promoting rewarding learning experiences and a positive campus environment that empowers students to reach their full potential. Attaining this objective requires the professional development of student affairs management staff and equipping faculty members with the essential skills to handle both academic and non-academic aspects proficiently.

Employment destinations

Higher education serves as a crucial pathway for students' social mobility. Comprehensive equity and inclusion assessments should cover not only student recruitment, their learning experiences, and campus life but also their employment destinations after graduation.

Several factors impact students' employment after graduation, such as their institutional choices, personal backgrounds, and networks. Essential empirical research is needed to identify these factors and track the employment trajectories of various student groups.

This research will guide targeted initiatives to eliminate barriers that hinder underprivileged students from pursuing mainstream professions.

While higher education serves broader purposes than just employment, it should prioritize enhancing its study programmes to keep pace with the rapidly evolving job market. This entails proactively building solid relationships with stakeholders such as professional organizations, employers, and other partners to boost the employability of their graduates.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds should receive enhanced support through counseling services, customized recruitment sessions, on and off-campus job fairs, online job portals, and strengthened connections with local job markets.

Efficient alumni relationship management should include long-term tracking of their employment statuses, with a specific focus on equity and inclusion. This approach will subsequently help inform the development and implementation of institutional measures for equity and inclusion based on the lessons learned.

Setting the new agenda

As access and quality in higher education systems worldwide continue to improve, the important policy objectives of equity and inclusion have become a central focus. This calls for fresh perspectives and proactive measures to shape the future transformation of higher education.

The equity and inclusion challenges ingrained in the school system often extend into higher education, where their secondary school backgrounds frequently influence student admission success. However, multiple policy approaches are available to promote equity and inclusion in recruiting students for higher education. Striking a balance between merit-based and quota-based methods is essential to guarantee more significant equity and inclusion.

While the starting point is significant, the processes and outcomes hold equal, if not more significant, importance for equity and inclusion assessments. It is crucial to consistently apply an equity and inclusion perspective to both the teaching and learning processes and the employment destinations of all students.

Looking ahead, we aim for equity and inclusion perspectives to play a more substantial role in discussions and endeavors to achieve the triple policy objectives, along with access and quality, in higher education.