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# Mainstreaming inclusion in higher education

*Fiona Bartels-Ellis*

## Introduction

Higher education is key to building nations and connecting cultures, as well as being widely held to be essential for capacity building, development and the economic success of both individuals and countries. As a result it can play a powerful role in contributing to social change, including social justice. The recognition of this is critical for the British Council, given the significant work it undertakes in promoting international education as part of its core activity of strengthening cultural relations, which is understood as nurturing friendly knowledge and understanding between the UK and other countries. For its Diversity Unit, which sets and drives the organisation's strategic direction in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), it is also crucial, both to the aspiration of mainstreaming EDI into all facets of cultural relations, of which higher education is a key element, and to achieving improved outcomes. It also extends to exerting positive influence in support of societies that aim to work for and deliver benefit to all members, irrespective of background and identity.

However, beyond the broad and indeed worthy statements lies the challenge of implementing approaches that deliver improved outcomes in the area of inclusion. Previously the focus has been on the earlier part of the journey towards this – providing 'opportunity'. This point is confirmed by the continuing emphasis in the surrounding discourse on equal opportunities, rather than on equal access and equal outcomes, and indeed *all* these elements. In this paper the implementation challenge is explored, supported by insight into innovative and changing higher education practices and the application of specific inclusive approaches within different geographical environments, towards the goal of widening participation to achieve inclusion.

The backdrop to this is a sector facing very real pressures to be profitable and arguably, through internationalisation, the resulting risk of commodification of education and perhaps higher education in particular. The resultant danger of undermining inclusion, for example 'that international opportunities will be available only to students with financial

resources' (International Association of Universities, 2014, p.10), is a stark reality. It renders more necessary the focus on approaches that enhance inclusion, drawing on diverse contributors who are active to this end.

All of those whose work is referred to in this paper firmly believe that higher education becomes more powerful and has even greater potential when it is inclusive; when it seeks to draw in those that society sometimes ignores and marginalises, so that everyone's potential can be fully released to benefit communities and wider societies. They are, with one exception, educationalists who contributed to the Mainstreaming Inclusion in Higher Education session at the Going Global Conference 2016. They recognise the strength of marginalised individuals, the creativity borne of difficult circumstances, the experience gained through struggle. They believe that higher education should embrace and reward these and that by doing so higher education itself will in turn benefit from diversity. These benefits will be tangible and intangible and include new and expanded learner cohorts, and alternative voices, narratives, teaching strategies and methodologies. The paper summarises some of their work and contribution to the theme of mainstreaming diversity within higher education. It is a snapshot of a broad, diverse, global tapestry covering access, measurement, research and beyond. The insight provided is into the practical efforts to achieve greater equality, to actively seek more diversity and to embed inclusive practices into the way higher education institutions do things and into the way the sector operates. It is hoped that this will encourage, motivate and inspire stakeholders in the global higher education community.

## **The British Council**

With a presence in over 110 countries and territories and work supporting inclusion through higher education and other avenues, the British Council has its own contribution to make to the inclusion journey. It has a diversity strategy with the overarching objective of mainstreaming, supported by the three objectives of developing capability and leadership, fostering inclusion and measuring performance, impact and legal compliance (British Council Diversity Unit, 2014). Key tools, including a bespoke Diversity Assessment Framework measurement tool and Equality Screening and Impact Assessment at the policy development stage, help make things happen and translate the considerable rhetoric surrounding diversity discourses into reality, change and progress that can be shared across the organisation and beyond. Sharing to motivate and expand ownership has been achieved through a Global Diversity Network (GDN). This comprises staff in each geographical region who contribute views and experiences, engage in dialogue, provide local-level

leadership in partnership with the central Diversity Unit and in doing so nurture and encourage good practice. A subgroup have become accredited as EDI facilitators. Having received specialist training and been given access to centrally developed and maintained learning and development materials they run learning and development activities globally. They work in British Council strategic business units covering the broad range of our work in Arts, Education and Society, English and Exams, and central services. They act as a resource for developing partnerships and influencing the sectors they predominantly engage with.

By taking an applied approach and measuring progress, focusing on similar objectives to the work of institutions reflected in this paper, the British Council has been able to identify the factors that contribute to greater inclusion, reflected in the concluding element of the paper.

## **Practical approaches**

The practical approaches being applied to inclusion in the higher education sector highlighted in this paper fall into three broad areas set out below with reference to specific institutional settings.

## **Tools that contribute to promoting inclusion**

### *Widening access and fostering inclusion*

Inequalities within sub-Saharan Africa significantly stem from but are not limited to those relating to poverty, gender and health, including HIV/AIDS. This plays out in higher education. The University of Zambia recognises the crucial role and contribution of formal, documented policies in addressing inequalities, holding that policies ensure and endorse the well-being of all stakeholders at higher education institutions (staff, students and the university body). This policy response has been particularly relevant and meaningful in the area of HIV/AIDS and sexual harassment.

While a documented policy has undoubted value and provides a necessary framework, there is a risk that this is then treated as evidence of the policy being implemented. In exploring documents on diversity and race equality, Ahmed cautions that ‘having a “good” race equality policy got quickly translated into being good at race equality’ (Ahmed, 2007: 597) and this must be avoided. The full effectiveness of a documented policy in successfully contributing to inclusion is determined by its application. The importance of formal documented policies, carefully implemented and providing control over the environment, is stressed by Dr Anitha Menon, a prominent health psychologist who pioneered the formulation of the University of Zambia’s HIV/AIDS policy and led innovative research on

sexual harassment at the same institution. She contends that while developing policies can seem like a daunting task, they can help keep everyone safe, involved and included. She states that the university's HIV/AIDS policy and Sexual Harassment policy result in the university being able to take control over these two important and challenging issues.

Addressing a similar issue, focusing on equitable access and success for young people who would otherwise have no access to higher education, is the objective of the Programa Especial de Admision y Movilidad Academica (PEAMA) programme in Colombia. This initiative, with its focus on admission and academic mobility, has led to tangible benefits that can be seen across Colombia and also beyond. PEAMA gives access to undergraduate courses offered by the Universidad Nacional de Colombia to young people from the poorest regions of the country. Despite the young people's limited educational background (they live in areas with the highest rate of unsatisfied basic needs, including access to water and energy amongst other things) the programme has shown that these students can achieve success, with support such as academic welfare programmes and academic support and opportunities to go abroad to get international academic and research experience. PEAMA demonstrates the importance of striving for inclusion in higher education as key to building capacity and releasing untapped potential in a way that benefits both individuals and whole societies. Professor Catalina Ferro, director of external affairs at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, points to the importance of bringing access to higher education in the border zones of Colombia and to ensuring this is of high quality. In this programme also, the importance of access for students to international academic and research experience is stressed, encouraging new opportunities and collaborations for inclusion.

A similar model, focused on fostering inclusion, with a different cohort at its core in another part of the world, further reinforces the importance and effectiveness of these principles. False Bay College in South Africa has developed a model of inclusive education aligned to the country's Education White Paper 6, supporting students with a wide range of disabilities, providing supported learning and the skills needed to access employment and higher education. Karen Hendricks, deputy principal of False Bay College, notes that the approach taken by the changes suggested by White Paper 6 are a radical deviation from the conventional special education model. Working with both students and prospective employers, False Bay College has been able to show the benefits to individuals and society of promoting an inclusive approach to education. Through a structured programme of changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods,

curricula and environments, the aim is to meet the needs of all learners and maximise their participation in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions, thus uncovering and minimising barriers to learning.

### *Partnerships*

The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) has similarly shown that developing innovative international instruments can accelerate engagement and help mainstream inclusion within higher education. The potential gaps between rich and poor countries require practical initiatives to enable international collaboration that meaningfully draws on the best minds, regardless of geographical location. Universities as global research, teaching and learning communities need to be able to work collaboratively and practical tools have helped break down barriers and allow equal participation, as professor John Hearn, executive director of Worldwide Universities Network, articulates. He refers to instruments that can accelerate international engagement and build local engagement and local education, research capacity and sustainability. The instruments are numerous. These include university partnerships, equal partnerships, national and, preferably, international exchange programmes, scholarships and fellowships, and sustained engagement, in Africa and elsewhere. Such engagement can rapidly strengthen research, for example in food and environment security, public health in non-communicable diseases and higher education reform, to match national and international demand and opportunity. He also stresses the importance of quality supervision for research students and early career researchers. Within this, he emphasises the importance of engaging women in scholarship and in academic leadership.

The theme of partnership is continued in the work undertaken by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) as Dr Graeme Atherton, chair of the Global Access to Post-Secondary Education initiative (GAPS), explains. When higher education institutions work internationally and collaboratively they can positively impact global inequality and poverty by opening their doors to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. To endorse this, a systematic attempt is being made to collate data on participation in higher education by social background around the world. This resulted in ‘Drawing the Global Access Map’, completed in 2016 (see Chapter 1.7, on page 50, for more on this project). The argument was made that a global higher education equity index to compare progress across countries in participation by social background should be introduced, with institutions incentivised to develop creative ways of making access more equitable.

### *Measurement and incentivisation*

Tools that drive good practice by rewarding institutions that achieve inclusive cultures are important in encouraging positive social change.

Gender inequality is an issue that transcends borders, so focusing on eradicating this can significantly contribute to greater inclusion in society as well as promoting social justice in education. There continue to be concerns about the participation of women at the highest levels of education and research, specifically relating to the loss of talent, as women face both systemic and cultural barriers to full participation. The UK's Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) is contributing to a project with 13 partners (across Europe, America, Canada and Israel), GENDER-NET, sharing its own experience of developing and managing the Athena SWAN charter (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014), an awards scheme that promotes and showcases gender equality in all disciplines of higher education. This was initially a scheme in the UK higher education sector but is now international. David Ruebain, chief executive of the ECU, comments further that the Athena SWAN charter is growing in reach; principally because it is not a tick-box exercise. It requires thorough self-assessment and the areas where data and evidence are asked for are those that pose barriers to everyone's career progression. This is what makes it transferable, as found in Australia, where Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) is running a pilot of Athena Swan that began in 2015 when 32 higher institutions joined, and in Ireland, where a three-year pilot of the charter is underway supported by Ireland's Higher Education Authority. It is essentially a progressive instrument, requiring constant review, and it now also considers the intersection with other identities, such as ethnicity. Building on the knowledge and experience gained through the Athena SWAN Charter, the ECU has now developed a race equality charter that uses the same methodology of three elements – self-assessment; peer review; and three levels of awards.

The idea of incentivisation, like NEON's focus on rewarding good practice (referred to above), is an appropriate one as a myriad of examples within the field of diversity research confirm that 'what gets measured gets done' (a quote often attributed to Peter Drucker, management consultant and author). The British Council, like many organisations, has seen this in practice internally, through its Diversity Assessment Framework (DAF). This tool to measure EDI progress against defined indicators generates healthy competition between countries and business areas, and rewards

and incentivises. As a consequence, engagement and effort to mainstream diversity and inclusion across the organisation has dramatically increased. The argument for something similar across international higher education is a powerful one.

## **Making a critical difference**

So what is it that makes the critical difference in mainstreaming inclusion in higher education? Where should investment and priorities lie?

The international evidence provided above seems to demonstrate that rather than a single solution, a multi-pronged approach that includes **well formulated policies** that are applied consistently; **innovative tools** that encourage creative ways to promote inclusion and **reward and incentivise** those that seek progress in this area; and a **deliberate and sustained focus on identifying barriers** and seeking to specifically dismantle them and foster inclusion to particularly under-represented groups would support the change that is needed.

International collaboration is crucial to this: true collaboration, where innovation and new thinking is accepted and trialled wherever it comes from, moving beyond traditional sources of knowledge and embracing ideas from other parts of the world – from educators and thinkers with hugely different life experiences. And of course there is a need for platforms to share and encourage debate, such as Going Global and others similarly provide.

The 2016 conference Mainstreaming Inclusion in Higher Education session, which included questions and reflections from informed participants, along with the further ideas explored above, helped identify essential components to making a critical difference. This is set out in Box 1 as including policy and leadership, funding and resources, inclusion and incentivising and measuring success.

### **Box 1**

#### **Policy and leadership**

- Social and educational policies, supported by legal requirements and leadership, can drive organisational engagement to deliver innovative and ambitious approaches to inclusion.
- Inclusion policies, alongside practical initiatives, help keep people safe, involved and included.

### **Funding and resources**

- Inclusion-themed interventions need resources.
- Investment in staff training helps improve the preparation of learners for participation in increasingly diverse workforces.
- Diversity networks/facilitators can gather and disseminate good practice organisation- and sector-wide.
- ICT is a potent tool in mainstreaming diversity in support of inclusion but limitations include high costs and infrastructure gaps especially in some economies.

### **Inclusion**

- Early-career academics, especially from under-represented groups, need targeted development opportunities to support career progression to senior academic or leadership roles.
- National and international exchange programmes, scholarships and fellowships help nurture, inform, accelerate and sustain university partnerships and research capacity and expand international experience.
- Students with additional needs, no access to higher education and from under-represented groups require support interventions that may include specific academic welfare programmes and employment-focused skills development.
- Organisations should employ staff from diverse backgrounds and with disabilities.
- Equality screening can support policy and practice development.

### **Incentivising and measuring success**

- Clear matrices can drive change and reveal trends.
- Award schemes can promote and showcase good practice across HE disciplines.

## **Conclusions**

Greater inclusion in higher education is a relevant and appropriate goal to aspire to. Broadening access delivers a number of advantages including increased social mobility and labour market benefits of more skilled workforces, wider career choices and greater earning potential for individuals. Indeed the significant social benefits of greater inclusion are

well documented (ECU, 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). On this basis, principles of fostering inclusion, developing leadership capability within higher education, and creating and trialling innovative tools, initiatives and measures to assess effectiveness are essential. Despite this the journey towards inclusion is not an easy one and will not progress at the rate it could, or indeed should, without harnessing the innovation and proactivity of committed parties, including those referred to in this paper. Learning from them and intervening at different levels and in different ways, in partnership or independently, creates the shift from the considerable rhetoric, espousal and avowal that surrounds diversity and inclusion to the applied and practical reality that is needed and is increasingly asked for.

When the desire to promote inclusion in international higher education is given due regard and attention through a mainstreamed and therefore sustainable approach we will see the green shoots of success take root and flourish. The research identified here shows there is much to draw on and learn from with innovative change agents making significant contributions to help nurture and shape a sector that works for many more citizens, communities and societies than is currently the case.

Quoting both Nelson Mandela and archbishop Desmond Tutu seems indulgent, but both recognized more than most the potential of inclusive education:

*Education is the most powerful tool you can use to change the world* (Mandela).

*Inclusive, good quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies* (Tutu).

We are in good company as we seek to mainstream inclusion in higher education.

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