



UNIVERSITIES NEED TO BE MORE ACCESSIBLE INSTEAD OF A PRIVILEGE

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If we are going to create a better world in the post-pandemic era Higher Education systems need to be more flexible and accessible, and Governments need to be made to understand that funding the public university sector is essential to creating more equitable and socially stable societies. This is the message that came out clearly from the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED)—a day-long virtual conference coordinated from London and held on November 17 titled “Who will go to University in 2030?”.

The higher education sector has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its structure may have been changed forever with the introduction of online learning. But, this creates enormous challenges for access and equity in higher education. Access to quality education is in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, but this is largely seen in terms of primary and secondary schooling rather than higher education. “The idea of WAHED is to bring together those who do believe in the need for access and equity in the higher education system and commit individual universities and organisations to address these issues,” said Prof Graeme Atherton, Director National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), a non-profit organisation based in the UK and the convener of WAHED 2021, in his opening remarks to the conference.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The five-session online event included speakers from Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Asia, with a majority of the speakers female, a statement by itself. Many of the speakers pointed out that higher education is still a privilege in both the Global North and the Global South with children of those who have already got degrees more likely to go to university. With the Governments not giving priority to funding public universities, many families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not even consider a university education.

In Brazil, the current Government has cut funding to public universities, forcing young people to go to private universities, pointed out Prof. Marcelo Knobel of Universidades Estadual de Campinas. “This is a real challenge (for equity) with 75 per cent of students enrolled in private universities set up for-profit” he noted, adding, “to guarantee success in higher education (public universities) need real improvements”.

“Higher education is under attack for its costs, promoting inequality,” noted Dr. Courtney Brown, Vice President of Strategic Impact, Lumina Foundation, USA. Education systems analyst, David Cosier from Eurydice agrees pointing out that data from Europe indicates that 68 per cent of students going to university have parents who have degrees. “Inequality remains a strong feature in Europe,” he said, adding that inequality needs to be addressed in the school system and early childhood.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A report released ahead of the fourth WAHED meeting by the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) warns that focused and consistent policies are needed to respond to a possible worsening of access and equity in higher

education for disadvantaged groups following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing upon a survey of national policies in 47 ASEM member countries, the report says less than a third (30 per cent) have specific higher education equity strategies, and only 34 per cent have specific targets related to access and success in higher education.

“In 84 per cent of countries COVID-19 has had a significant impact on policies related to equitable access and success,” says the report prepared by Professor Atherton in association with Singapore-based Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF).

The report's focus is a change from the traditional arguments based on ethnic or religious minorities. It is on socio-economically disadvantaged families and economically marginalized communities who could be within majority ethnic or religious communities. Thus, this issue also addresses SDG 10 which is ‘Reduced Inequalities’ in society.

A point emphasized by many speakers at WAHED is the need to develop links between students in the final years of high school and universities so that they are aware of the opportunities available and the requirements for entry. This needs to be viewed as a development issue where education ministries would need to develop strategies with other development agencies. “Role of higher education in development is an argument that has not been won,” said Joanna Newman, chief executive and secretary-general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. “Access to higher education is still a privilege,” she said, adding that we need to believe that “people who go to

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universities not only earn more for themselves but, also contribute to societies they live in”.

Newman regrets that universities of today care more about rankings and competition, which has contributed to the view that universities are seen as ivory towers. “As a sector, we haven't made a cohesive argument why we matter in the development (equation),” she noted.

ONLINE LEARNING

The challenge in Uganda, according to Maud Kamatenesi Mugisha, Vice-Chancellor of Bishop Stuart University, is to come up with good curriculum and facilities for online learning. She said that during the COVID pandemic only three or four universities were able to go online. “We need to look at new structures for teaching using ICTs,” argues Mugisha. “E-learning needs to be affordable to people with limited financial resources.”

Mugisha pointed out that Uganda not only needs good ICT networks but also energy to power the system. She recommends using solar power for it. “(During the pandemic) sometimes 15 students sat together at a home that had a laptop to join in their higher education,” she said. “(Yet) some others have not accessed higher education for two years.”

Dr. Hilligje van't Land, Secretary-General, International Association of Universities believes that equitable access to universities is a primary requirement of development. She pointed out that funding a good public school system is essential to a successful higher education system. “A well-educated citizenry is a requirement to build the foundation of social equity (in the society)” and thus who will go to university in 2030 will depend on “the quality of the education available to them (from childhood)”.

Brunei, Bulgaria, and Malaysia offered some ideas to address this problem. The oil-rich sultanate of Brunei in Southeast Asia had both a high level of demand for higher education as well as a high level of dropouts.

To address the latter issue, they developed an “enlightening choice” strategy by introducing a new law to prepare students for higher education at the secondary school level. They also provided more higher education courses with apprenticeships. “We want students to make choices at 15 so that at high school they work on it,” said Anis Faudzulani Dzikiflee, of the Department of Higher Education of Brunei.

In Bulgaria according to Dr. Ivana Radonova of the Ministry of Education and Science, they introduced a contract system between students and employers. “The Company will get a graduate who knows the company's requirements, (while) universities would know what the companies' requirements are,” explained Dr Radonova. The state also guarantees loans to students in need and pays them off if they find difficulty in servicing the debts after graduation.

“Our higher education policy encourages universities to act socially responsible,” she said, explaining how the Government has set up a national map to work out where universities need to be built, “because we need to build universities to help in local development”.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

In Malaysia where a high percentage of young people go for some form of higher education, the Government has a vision 2030 strategy to develop human resources for the sector. “We are introducing lifelong learning for non-traditional learners along with flexible pathways of learning,” explained Prof. Wan Zuhainis binte Saad, Director of Academic Excellence Division, Department of Higher Education.

These strategies, through open and distance learning, are not a temporary measure, she said, and it is part of a strategy to provide “bundled course models” for flexible learning. A system called ‘EXCEL’ is also being designed to offer “flexibility in passion-based learning,” said Dr. Saad.

Brown argued that universities have changed during the pandemic and they have created new opportunities and funding models to reach out to students. “If we are thinking of going back to (what it was in) 2019, I'm not optimistic,” he said. “We need to work on these new models (to increase access to and equity in higher education)”. Even in North America, university funding may need to be considered as a development issue. Brown pointed out that in the US, about 36 million drop out of university each year. “We need to understand our students' needs and design courses to suit them,” he pointed out. This may include evening courses, financial aid, and daycare for children as mature-age students and life-long learning takes shape. He noted that about 90 million working adults in the US have never considered higher education because it is too expensive for them.

Be it in the US, Europe, Africa or across Asia, the new opportunities with online learning created to overcome the pandemic could be utilized to make higher education more accessible and equitable, as it could be a life-long learning process integrated into the development needs of individual countries.

There have been 30 parallel WAHED events across the globe in a bid to establish networks to push for access and equity policies in higher education. “If we are to take these issues forward, we need to think about how to frame it,” argued Prof Atherton.

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