Beyond diversity: a broad view of inclusive higher education

January 17, 2020 1 educationanddevelopment

Posted on January 15, 2020 in on ComeniusNetwerk.

Find original blog post on Comenius Netwerk. (In Dutch and English)

By *Marjolein Deunk (RUG), Mieke Lopes Cardozo (UvA), and Chiel van der Veen (VU) on behalf of the Comenius Network*, *Saskia Bonjour (UvA) and Marieke van den Brink (RU)*.

Inclusiveness can mean something different for every student and lecturer. It is important to involve them in removing barriers in this respect. If higher education institutions are to become not only diverse but also truly inclusive, an intersectional approach to diversity is needed.

It's Tuesday morning. A team of lecturers and the programme director are holding consultations. The theme of 'diversity and inclusion' is again on the agenda. Part of the team wants to broaden this theme, they want to create an inclusive learning environment where every staff member and student feels at home and seen. The lecturers have noticed that, in recent years, almost all the focus has been on gender diversity and, as far as they are concerned, that is too narrow a view.

During team meetings, the questions focus on how the curriculum can represent a diversity of perspectives, how education can be made accessible to students with a disability, and how diversity among lecturers and students can be increased. No transparent plan or answer results. Colleague A complains about how complicated 'diversity and inclusiveness' are and that she doesn't know where to start. Colleague B is not looking forward to the lunch break, when no doubt colleague C will say again that we are going too far with all that focus on diversity and inclusion. The director is willing but doesn't have the answer immediately – how do you make the institution truly inclusive?

Making colleges and universities more inclusive and diverse is indeed complex and wide-ranging. Inclusive higher education not only requires equal opportunities for male and female staff and students, but also attention to, for example, selection and recruitment of students and lecturers, representation of non-Western perspectives in education and the physical design and accessibility of buildings.

A rainbow flag is not enough

The diversity policy that many universities and colleges are currently pursuing is not enough. Measures are often restricted to more women or more students with a migrant background. Acknowledge the difference

between diversity and inclusiveness and do not just aim for the former, as is still too often the case today. With diversity, there is only a composite group, with, for example, people from different social or cultural backgrounds. Whereas diversity is only about that *variation in the group*, inclusiveness is about everyone feeling at home in that group and being able to participate as a *full member* .

Inclusiveness is not only about boasting a high percentage of first-generation students, but also taking action if it turns out that this group has the highest drop-out rate. Inclusiveness is not only hanging out the rainbow flag, but also being critical of heteronormativity within the institution when LGBT lecturers and students indicate that they feel excluded. So diversity, no matter how broad it may be, is not enough. It is vital to make higher education inclusive too.

An intersectional view helps higher education institutions to look at inclusiveness in an integral and multidimensional way. 'Intersectionality' – a core concept in scientific research on inequality – refers to the interconnectedness of different forms of exclusion. This is because there are many elements that influence the social position of students and lecturers and the extent to which they perceive the institution as inclusive. This could lead, for example, to lecturers attributing too easily to cultural differences their rigid social dealings with students with autism in combination with a migrant background – while ignoring their needs.

Dialogue makes inclusiveness sustainable

This brings us to the director's question: how? How do we make our higher education institutions more inclusive? The first step is to really listen to students and lecturers with different backgrounds and characteristics. How do they experience education or their workplace? When do they feel fully involved in the college or university? And at which times do they feel, without wanting to, 'different' or excluded? What small, everyday struggles do they experience? And what are the biggest obstacles for them? These questions should be the subject of an ongoing dialogue between all levels of the institution so that they can form the basis of any changes to the curriculum, any restructuring, any new appointments and any new policy measure. In this way, it will be possible to work stepwise towards the sustainable anchoring of inclusiveness in higher education.

About educationanddevelopment

The research group works broadly on the relationship between education and international development. The group is currently involved in a jointly funded five-year project with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Quality Education. Group members have a range of interests including globalisation and the global governance of education systems in low-income countries (e.g. role of the World Bank, WTO in Education, transnational); privatization and decentralization of education, education and conflict, the architecture and delivery of development aid to education, teaching and learning processes, educational reform, multicultural and bilingual education, education and citizenship ; education and teachers/teacher training, the role of advocacy and social movements in promoting quality education; education and religion; non-formal education and popular education; Education and HIV prevention. Group members have expertise in a range of countries including Latin America (Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil). Africa (Uganda, Ivory Coast, South Africa); Asia (India). The groups can also facilitative research placements with Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs Education and International Development Experts located in a range of low-

income countries; Education International (global federation of teachers trade unions), IIEP-UNESCO and a wide range of Dutch NGOs. View all posts by educationanddevelopment →