Some thoughts on an Inclusive Higher Education system

Notes for a five minute oral presentation at the**:**

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There can be little doubt that over the last decade or so there has been tremendous progress in making universities and colleges a more welcoming environment for disadvantaged and disabled students. But there is still a long way to go if higher education (HE) is to become truly inclusive for all students.

This is simply because to varying degrees universities and colleges of higher education are essentially about the pursuit of educational excellence. This inevitably means competition within and across the academy and the recruitment and selection of students and staff on the basis of assumed academic ability.

But selection by ability inevitably means exclusion on presumptions of inability or 'disability'. So in the present context it is highly contentious whether meaningful inclusion in higher education is possible or indeed desirable?

To illustrate the point I think it helpful to contemplate what I believe an inclusive higher educational environment might look like.

The ethos of inclusive higher education system

Universities and colleges would adopt an ethos that actively encourages **anyone** regardless of age, gender, class, ethnicity, impairment, sexual preference and previous educational experience to study at their **optimum** level.

Higher education therefore would not mean HE at a general level but at an **individual** level. Individuals who wanted it would have the opportunity to study at a higher level than previous experience allowed.

Consequently access to HE would be a human right and therefore would not be available only to those with the ability to pay or with previous academic qualifications.

Teaching and learning

Universities and colleges would give equal weight to both teaching and research. Teaching and research are integrated activities. Teaching and learning within universities would be structured around an avowed commitment to maximise the learning experience of **all** students. This would involve the use of much more flexible and individualised teaching methods and assessment procedures, and the recruitment of staff from **all** sections of the community.

Support services

Appropriate support systems would be in place to overcome any physical, cultural and social barriers that might be encountered by individual students and staff within an HE environment.

Despite the promise of future technological development universal access for *all* is unlikely if not impossible simply because of the heterogeneity of the student and staff population in terms of socio/cultural differences and physical, sensory and cognitive impairments. However, optimum access might only be achieved with the employment of well trained and committed support staff.

Curriculum, knowledge production and dissemination

The HE curriculum in *all* disciplines and subject areas, whether in the physical or social sciences, would generate knowledge and developments that acknowledges the importance of policies and practices that accommodate human diversity – both cultural and biological.

Universities and colleges of HE would be local, national and international resources that produce and disseminate knowledge that would be accessible and available to all. At the same time academic institutions would be a part of rather than apart from the local community.

The socio/cultural environment

The socio/cultural environment within universities and colleges and all the activities therein would seek to accommodate and endorse an overt commitment to and celebration of human diversity and difference in all its forms.

Political will

All of which would be supported by a primary and secondary inclusive education system and politicians and policy makers committed to the development of a truly inclusive society.

Final word

Although at first glance the development of something along the lines of the above may seem impossible and maybe even undesirable, it seems to me that if we're serious about the creation of an inclusive higher education system then something like it is almost inevitable and indeed highly desirable.

Also if this vision seems utopian it may be helpful to remember that human progress is nothing less than a search for utopia. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde in *The Critic as Artist* (1890) a map of the world without utopia is not worth looking at. When you've found one utopia you begin searching for another.

Thank you

References

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