

2.3.4. Diversity in student population: some key issues in the universities widening access and participation policy and practice

By Willy Aastrup, Centre Director, Counselling and Support Centre, Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus, Denmark

Introduction

The overall objective of this paper is to examine and discuss some key issues in the process of widening the access to educational opportunities for a diverse student population.

A widening access (increased diversity) to universities represents a major challenge. Firstly, we can observe a general political insistence on productivity (i.e. more candidates in shorter time). The second challenge is based on the commitment that candidates at all levels must also meet the general and specific academic requirements for quality prescribed in the Bologna Process framework for qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. Thirdly, there is also an equally strong political insistence that the diversity in higher education should reflect the diversity in the population. In the European Union context the diversity issue is primarily aimed at integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream higher education and academic life.

How is it possible to meet these challenges: more candidates of higher quality and increased diversity; i.e. in our context here: equal opportunities for disabled students?

The foundation of my paper is based on the firm belief that unless we perform a fundamental critique of the concept of “diversity”, we will not be able to meet the challenge. We cannot have it all. It is not possible to have a very broad concept of “diversity” and at the same time meet the demands for high quality education.

In my paper, I will present how this challenge is met at the University of Aarhus: promoting widening access and increased diversity in the student population but without renouncing the commitment to excellence in education.

In order to clarify the following arguments, I will open with a brief analysis of the concept of “diversity”. Human beings are basically heterogeneous, and they differ from each other in numerous different ways. We do not ourselves choose our place of birth or the circumstances in which we are born. We begin our lives with different endowments; diverse natural environments and a great variety in opportunities due to cultural and social traditions. But in addition, and I want to emphasise this anthropological matter of fact, we also differ in personal characteristics e.g. talents, motivation, intellectual abilities, different preferences and inclinations, etc., etc.

The concept of diversity in the educational structure, and consequently the concept of special needs education, extends back to the time before and during the age of Enlightenment in Europe, where the intention was to create a school for all children. It is commonly known that children have very different prerequisites for learning, and the question of learning differentiation is continuously of central concern. This concern resulted, in the 19th century, in the establishment of special schools and special classes founded on special needs education. Special needs education was defined as special didactic principles and methods directed at different learning difficulties. In the 1960s and 70s, the fundamental ideas of

special needs education that emphasised the special aspect were replaced by principles of integration and normalisation which was later replaced by the concept of “accommodation.”

In practice, it means that special needs education should be organised so as to allow the educational institution to accommodate if not all then most of the learners attending the institution of learning in question.

Hereby, it is revealed that the concepts employed within the traditional paradigm of special needs education cannot be employed within further and higher education which is fundamentally “unaccommodating”. These parts of the educational system presume the fulfilment of specific admission requirements and later the fulfilments of requirements of the course specifications. The overall politically normative values and objectives expressed in “accommodation”, “social dimension”, “education for all” etc. must therefore be related to the individual’s resources and potentialities. This, however, does not mean that the promotion of diversity and inclusion should not be emphasised. The task of special needs education is therefore to develop and explicate academic knowledge regarding processes of learning and to apply this knowledge in special needs educational practice. This practice should focus on the objectives and results of education as well as the organisation of institutions, educational methods, guidance, assistance, and technical aids in order to optimise the individual’s learning.

The purpose of special needs educational assistance for students with special needs, who have been accepted at an institution of further and higher education, must be for the students to be able to complete the education similarly to other students. Special needs educational assistance should not be separated from the educational programme, from the related educational and working methods, from the objective of each programme as a whole, or from the intermediate objectives of the individual disciplines that the programmes are composed of. If the overall objective of completing the education is to be fulfilled, the different types of assistance must aim for the students to be able to acquire the relevant academic skills and methods. The students must be capable of relating to these methods critically, analytically, and comparatively. Furthermore, they should be able to document that they master the required knowledge and skills, for example in connection with exams and other forms of evaluation.

The learning environment and the Bologna Process

Education has always – since before the time of Socrates and Plato in Greece - been considered a general good, enriching the individual and consequently the society in which the individual lives. But nevertheless, if we look at the historical period represented in the history of the European universities, it is true that one pillar in the construction of higher education was and is a general understanding of education as a quality in its own right. But it is equally a matter of fact that another important pillar is the student’s acquisition of competences which are relevant for the labour market. In other words, university education is important in terms of the student’s preparation for work. As indicated, this has always been crucial to higher education – emphasised more in some faculties than in others – but in today’s Knowledge Society employability is an important quality issue for all fields of higher education.

This brings us to the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process is first and foremost a systematic instrument for standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area. Many states all over the world have committed themselves to these standards and guidelines. Another point worth

emphasising is that the major stakeholders that the signing ministers refer to are the students and the employers. Employability is crucial - what employers see on the diploma is what they get.

And last but not least: what is important in the Bologna Process is not so much the content of the curriculum; much more essential is the individual's learning outcomes. This is very relevant to the labour market

According to the Bologna Process, academic learning can be described as a process of skill development (acquisition of competences) where the students, over time and at different levels, acquire certain elements of learning through a specifically designed developmental process:

Practical skills: skills aimed specifically at the management of vocational skills.

Academic expertise: Expertise within one discipline as well as interdisciplinary expertise related to the individual education or the individual academic subject.

Intellectual qualifications: General theoretical, and methodic qualifications, communicative skills, and the ability to structure one's own learning beyond the individual education or the individual subject in question.

An important aspect of the descriptions of the learning objectives and the elements in the Bologna Process is the fact that the intention of the academic learning process is determined as something more than just the acquisition of knowledge. Accordingly, the elements of learning involved in a university education can be divided into three forms:

Knowledge and abilities: general knowledge and abilities or knowledge and abilities specific to a certain discipline. Discipline here is to be interpreted as a knowledge field which is applied to arrange knowledge of a certain case or subject.

Qualifications: Practical, intellectual and/or academic ability to employ knowledge in relation to handling problem areas in general within one or more disciplines.

Metaknowledge: the ability to reflect on problem areas in general or within one or more areas of studies in order for the individual in question to become capable of questioning existing knowledge, developing new knowledge, and solving new problems.

The learning objectives for the two overall levels, or cycles as it is usually called, of the general educational structure – the so-called 3+2 model, which stands for 3 years for a bachelor programme and 2 years for master programme - are that the student should demonstrate these skills at a basic level for the bachelor's programme and at an extended and specialised level for the master's programme – the concept of progression through the educational levels.

Practice of diversity and special needs education at Aarhus University

As a result of this thinking, Aarhus University has been, for more than a decade, dedicated to embedding diversity through a co-ordinated educational and counselling effort. The intention is to secure an explicit academic orientation by means of adapting this effort to the individual student's academic difficulties as

well as the student's subject and educational level in order for him/her to meet the general and specific educational requirements for quality as stated in the Bologna Process.

We cannot, given the limited space available in this paper, give a detailed account of the special needs educational support.

The university's vision is summarised in the following statement:

All students at Aarhus University who meet the admission requirements must be secured access to an equal educational environment, which shall ensure students with specific educational difficulties the option of realising their potential to complete a higher education.

It is important to note that students with specific educational difficulties are implicitly expected to live up to the general and specific requirements for quality of the degree programme. Aarhus University guarantees to the students and to the labour market that all graduates have achieved the necessary academic competences and that the exam results and other evaluations present a true picture of the level achieved.

The conceptual framework and the visions for the special needs educational effort are expressed through the overall strategy – as presented earlier - concerning students with specific educational difficulties. This strategy is founded on the primary goal of promoting integration and inclusion of students with specific educational difficulties at institutions of further and higher education through high quality educational assistance and counselling. This goal is to be achieved through the following strategies:

- The counselling and educational effort must be planned as a *co-ordinated* effort with clear, prioritised goals and directions.
- It must be based on the development of inter-disciplinary *knowledge regarding the specific educational difficulties* and those institutional, individual, social and cultural relations within which the difficulties must be understood.
- It must be *focused on results* by adapting the effort to the individual student's specific difficulties and to his or her academic subject and level. The aim is to compensate for the difficulties to the extent that the students can meet the general and specific academic requirements for quality.
- It must rest on research-based knowledge of the *relations between effort and effect* which is sensitive to specific and individual relations and subsequently can support the concrete practice.
- It must be structured around learning, development, and communication of *quality-assured methods* which are adequate according to the students' specific difficulties and needs.

These strategies call for a special educational assistance effort based on a research reflected counselling and educational practice. Hence, the practice must be linked to the production of knowledge which develops through the interaction of knowledge application and practical learning. This interaction involves a close connection between developmental projects and research. The relevant research must consequently comprise theoretical reflections on phenomena related to the actual counselling, educational practice and the personal experiences of the practitioner as well as the need for further knowledge and improvement of the practice. Furthermore, the research must be structured around the application of knowledge, the research principles, and the methods of data collection employed within the general practice. In other words, the efforts within counselling and education toward students with

specific educational difficulties must be linked to a research which is directed toward the development of application-oriented skills and perspectives.

This practice-oriented research is closely associated with the role of an active knowledge-based Centre which gathers, organises, and evaluates existing knowledge and information produced by others. Furthermore, it comprises the mapping of tendencies within the production of knowledge in order to meet the demands for systematic analysis. As regards the Counselling and Support Centre, these assignments include the development of new processes and methods within the practice of counselling and special needs education. According to the defined visions and strategies, these developmental projects should furthermore be shaped according to a goal which ensures a high quality for the practice and should be based on knowledge regarding successful practice. Consequently, the developmental assignments must be closely linked to the field of research. It is essential that they focus primarily on the improvement of the field in relation to the target group. In other words, the assignments must contribute to the advancement of integration and inclusion in the educational system and in society.

Conclusion

In my paper I have tried to examine some of the key issues to be considered prior to development of policies and strategies in the field of “widening access” and “diversity”. I have highlighted the little explored discrepancy between the widespread notions of diversity, education for all, social dimensions etc. and the standards expressed in the Bologna Process. It is my firm belief that if accommodation in the widest sense is not subjected to an (international) quality assurance process, the Bologna process will ultimately lose international recognition and consequently jeopardise first mobility and employability and then the common model for Higher Education.

References

Russell, M., 2008, Leveraging student engagement with assessments: Collecting intelligence to support teaching, student progress and retention in Crosling, G., Thomas, L. and Heagney, M. (eds.) *Improving student retention in higher education: the role of teaching and learning*. (London: Routledge).

Thomas, L., 2002, ‘Student retention in Higher Education: the role of institutional habitus’, *Journal of Educational Policy*, 17(4), pp. 423–32.

Thomas, L. and Hixenbaugh, P. (eds.), 2006, *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*. (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books).

Thomas, L., Quinn, J., Slack, K. and Casey, L., 2002, *Student Services: Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education. Full Research Report*. (Stoke on Trent: Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University).

Tinto, V., 1993, *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*, Second Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Tinto, V., 1998, Learning Communities and the Reconstruction of Remedial Education in Higher Education, *Replacing Remediation in Higher Education Conference*, Stamford University, Jan 26-27.

Tinto, V., 2000, Reconstructing the first year of college, in *Student Support Services Model Retention Strategies for Two-year Colleges*, Washington DC: Council for Opportunity in Education.

van Stolk, C., Tiessen, J., Clift, J. and Levitt, R., 2007, *Student retention in higher education courses. International comparison*. Report prepared for the National Audit Office. (Cambridge: RAND Corporation).

Warren, D., 2002, Curriculum Design in a Context of Widening Participation in Higher Education, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 1(1), pp85-89.

Yorke, M., 1999, *Leaving Early: undergraduate non-completion in higher education*. (London: Falmer).

Yorke, M., 2001, Formative assessment and its relevance to retention, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 20(2), pp. 115-26.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B., 2007, *The first-year experience in higher education in the UK. Report on Phase 1 of a project funded by the Higher Education Academy*. York, The Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B., 2008, *The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK*. (York: Higher Education Academy).

Yorke, M. and Thomas, L., 2003, 'Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25(1), pp. 63-75.

Yorke, M. with Bell, R., Dove, A., Haslam, L., Hughes Jones, H., Longden, B., O'Connell, C., Typuszak, R. and Ward, J., 1997, *Undergraduate non-completion in England, Report No. 1, in: Undergraduate Non-completion in Higher Education in England*. (Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England).