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Re-imagining Higher Education through Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability: Policy Report

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Policy Report

‘Re-imagining Higher Education through Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability’

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Abstract

This report gives recommendations to higher education institutions and policymakers to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion within the Higher Education sector. The report draws on discussions and papers in the 2nd international conference on equality, diversity and inclusion of the European University of Technology. The conference (RISE 2022) addressed issues of re-imagining higher education through equity, inclusion and sustainability and was hosted by Technical University of Sofia in Sozopol Bulgaria between 1-3 September 2022.

Key words:

policy report, equality, diversity, inclusion, higher education, European University of Technology, EUt+

Policy Report

‘Re-imagining Higher Education through Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability’

Introduction

This report emerged from papers and round table discussions held in Sozopol Bulgaria in September 2022. The work draws on a wide range of expertise and reflections within partners of the European University of Technology (EUt+), external experts, students, academics and professional staff. From the work and knowledge shared in the conference we identify important themes for re-imagining EDI in higher education such as: data collection connected to needs, the fastracking benefits that can be achieved by looking and reaching outside of HE organisations, interrupting and disrupting whiteness and privilege, positionality and reflexivity as a starting point for change and a tactic, initiatives to drive institutional practice and change on EDI, entrepreneurial learning approach to drive sustainable development goals. We make 5 key recommendations from our findings that could be useful for European University alliances and with policymakers connected to higher education.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish an expert oversight group for EUt+ on EDI data collection and usage. The expert group will have the remit to ensure that data is connected to needs and is in a format that is appropriate to address those needs.

Recommendation 2: Guidelines to be drafted at Steering Committee level on specific actions that EUt+ members must commit to embed equity and inclusion across all work.

Recommendation 3: All EUt+ members (Steering Committee, WP Leads, Task Leads at very least) will complete anti-racism training and ensure good insight on the link to positionality and reflexivity]

Recommendation 4: The emergence and support for communities of practices is necessary (UDL / accessibility tech / others).

Recommendation 5: Commitments of partners needed to review and adopt practices shared in various papers presented at the conference (e.g. inclusive library collection; embedding anti-racism in programmes; accessible technologies; etc..).

Problem Statement

Equality, diversity and inclusion is fundamental to the Vision of EUt+ where we ‘Think Human First’ and we enable all people and places to fulfil their potential. Inclusiveness and universality are at the heart of our Values. Indeed we view diversity as an opportunity and actually one of Europe’s

greatest competitive advantages. We think of it as an incredible added-value to address global challenges. In terms of the work we are doing since EUt+ started in October 2020, we have created EDI data management plans, access and widening participation plans, agreed shared principles and collected good practices. We have held two international conferences across our partners in Spain during the 2021-22 year and Bulgaria for the 2022-23 year. We have a lot of data collected and knowledge shared. We need to focus on actions. The RISE conference enhanced collaboration across EUt+ partners and demonstrated our shared commitment to improvement and change. This policy report will help others in government and in the higher education sector to understand the issues and complexities, and importantly the journey of a European alliance on EDI in terms of how EDI emerges and how European HE partners can collaborate to achieve a shared vision.

Insights from conference participants and papers

Data collection connected to needs

EUt+ has a data management plan and also a requirement that each of the eight partners in the alliance produces and intersectional equity plan that includes data collection. Challenges in EDI data collection emerge across European partners and it is very interesting to understand different legal, cultural and political climates that creates challenges and limitations in the type and format of data that can be collected. The paper of Galligan *et al.* (2022) describes these challenges. Moreover this paper presents analysis of the first collaborative data collection process for EUt+. It is baseline data, but the data management plan does map out other sources that partners will be organised to collect incrementally. In particular to address challenges participants highlighted how data must be connected to needs and not just arbitrarily or because of conveniences. Qualitative approaches must also be used to capture insights on intersectionality and ways are needed to find data that can be used in the absence of official institutional data. It is also recognised that technologies are progressing in such a way that there are other means of collecting data as well as traditional ones that data providers, EDI offices and analysts should be skilled and informed about.

Collaboration and reaching outside for fastracking

One of the real benefits of EUt+ is the opportunities to learn from each other. Committing to produce intersectional equity plans at each partner was highly ambitious and partners needed to advance quickly with systems, structures, skills and knowledge to meet the standards and commitments needed for such a public document. Of course having a plan is merely the first stage of an equality journey. Implementing plans is where much work lies. Given the newness of setting the path towards intersectional equity, participants wondered how to fast forward such plans turning them into routine. The work and insights from Gilland (2022) responded on this highlighting the need to try to influence that people finding their intrinsic motivation to advance. In particular Gilland spoke about external factors creating leverage from the outside such as from governments or the European Commission. It was also observed about the potential to building

connections between EUt+ and EUt+ partner friends. Collaboration and reaching out is an important fastracking tactic.

Interrupting and disrupting whiteness and privilege

The channels and forums where diverse voices are heard is small and a common critique from work on inclusion and diversity is reflected in the gender imbalance and the lack of visible diversity among participants. The leads to the obviously question of how are diverse voices being heard and acted upon? Interrupting whiteness for example was the theme of a keynote speech in RISE by Prof Victoria Showumni of London City University. Implicitly this means opportunity for diverse voices to participate and be present to create interruption or disruption. The EUt+ partners want to recognise intersectionality that exists at the crossroads of gender and diversity. Forums for awareness raising need opportunities to emerge from this and be participated in. If diversity is opportunity in EUt+ then what questions can be asked to understand the dynamics of intersectional advantage and disadvantage. Do EUt+ members accept historical structural power imbalances and privilege that have ensured overwhelming dominance of western white male participation in EUt+ that does not reflect the societies from where many partners emerge.

Positionality and reflexivity

No participants in the RISE conference want to create a forum such as the conference where likeminded individuals can reflect on important issues of equality, diversity and inclusion and then return back to the status quo in their day jobs. They wanted solutions to complex problems and it is important to work out on a personal and institutional level where can change begin and how can change begin. In particular all partners are in different countries with diversity across population as well as a lot of similarities. Yoana Pavlova in her keynote speech shares the Bulgarian context for example. Belonging is a rich concept and laden within the EDI context. How can students and staff feel that they belong? For researchers ethics of research may be considered with care not to impose western ideologies and ways of thinking that creates bias. There is a need to reflect that kind of ethical thinking in our practices of engaging with one another in our institution, classrooms and practices as well – not only about researchers. Time again, positionality and reflexivity is referred to as a tactic for where to start and where to begin on equality and inclusion. On a personal level asking the question of who am I? how do I show up? How do I live these values in practice. Importantly though participants recognise the importance of context reflecting on the need to ask the question Who am I in that situation that is important when working collaboratively across 8 countries.

Driving institutional practice and change on EDI

Not inconsistent with the interest in application and the applied nature of research within technology and technological universities, there was a lot of reflection and interest on how to drive institutional change on EDI in practice. How do EUt+ partners find ways and activities that they can work together. Communities of practice is one way that may exist in one partner or in different forms and structures in multiple partners but can span EUt+. Deegan describes a community of practice on accessible and inclusive technologies. Chadamoyo shares a good practice here of

developing inclusive libraries. Partners are working towards sharing ideas and practices, putting plans in place such as EDI data management plans and access and widening participation plans that creates levels of convergence. Evidence here exists from Henry et al talking about partner commitments to host monthly seminar that connect to inclusion and diversity. The needs for system wide approach was recognised embedding EDI directly or indirectly within systems and processes, but also mainstreaming or integrating lots of separate projects so that it becomes part of the daily work - day to day automatic work of our institutions, seamless and not forced. This of course requires ownership and sponsorship from senior leadership. But it also requires participatory methods – who are we planning for? Asking the people we are trying to include – going back to community. We are serious about the purpose to the plans, not just delivery for the commission. Elements and challenges of change were also highlighted noting that researchers can be agents of transition in helping to change attitudes. Researchers are studying change all the time exploring and examining cultural and behavioural contexts. Yet it is recognised that there must be a transformation from theory and discussion back to practice. Acting on change and most importantly sustaining change takes leadership, resourcing and effort.

Entrepreneurial learning to drive SDG ambitions

Important themes coming out of the European Commission in recognition of the climate crisis and the sustainable development goals more broadly were central to the theme of the conference recognising how issues of equity, diversity and inclusion are connected to climate and other SDGs. Education, and in particular higher education, is an important driver to achieve ambitions set out in the SDGs. Incorporating creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship into education enhances individual capacities to turn ideas into actions, stimulates creativity and risk-taking, and the ability to plan and manage projects. Both staff and students need to be creative and entrepreneurial to generate and put into action ideas that influence sustainable development goals. McQuillan *et al.*'s paper delves into this challenge.

About the European University of Technology

The European University of Technology (EUt+) is a European University alliance funded under the Erasmus+ European Universities initiative of the EU. The eight partners of EUt+ are University of Technology of Troyes (UTT, France); Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences (h_da, Germany); Riga Technical University (RTU, Latvia); Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin, Ireland); Technical University of Sofia (TUS, Bulgaria); Cyprus University of Technology (CUT, Cyprus); Technical University of Cartagena (UPCT, Spain); Technological University of Cluj-Napoca (UTCN, Romania). EUt+ was formed in October 2020 and is working towards preparing the future of Europe by building a pioneering institutional model for developing a radically human-centred model of technology. Inclusion and diversity are core values of EUt+ that has a vision to become an inclusive university where diversity is opportunity.

Authorship and contributions

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