

The Paradoxes of Access

The 11th Maggie Woodrow Memorial Lecture

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When you approach Nyenrode University, the institution I am currently in charge of, 'access' is not the first word that springs to mind. On the contrary probably the physical appearance indicates all but 'access': what appears to the visitor is gates, warning signs, substantial defence walls and the image of an old castle, based on medieval foundations, surrounded by deep moats. More Hogwarts in appearance than the open, inviting spaces that modern universities try to convey. This is a private, quite secluded estate, accessible only to those who come with an explicit invitation, with a name pronounceable only by those who speak Dutch and for them it is immediately associated with extreme elitism: an education available to the happy and typically very rich few. Studying at Nyenrode costs roughly ten times more than at a state funded university.

But do not judge by appearances alone.

Quite recently I had a visit from one of our alumni. He lives in Texas nowadays. He made his money – lots of it – in something technical. And he was willing to give some of it to his alma mater. Obviously we hosted the generous donor to a nice lunch in one of the best rooms in the castle. He was well in his sixties and a chain smoker, so though smoking is not allowed we ensured his chair was next to the chimney. He also said he enjoys a good whiskey so despite that it was only noon, we arranged for a fine malt. Still, all these hospitality arrangements and nice speeches seemed a bit light for someone who just offered a seven figure donation (in euro) with a promise of more to come. So we had arranged a nice brass plaque on a wall in the reception hall of the castle. After lunch we went there for a ceremonial unveiling of the plaque. And then an odd thing happened: when he removed the cloth, the tough Texan alumnus could not control his emotions. Tears welled in his eyes. Why? He actually came from quite a modest background and had won a scholarship to enter Nyenrode. It was only because of the grant to cover his fees, he could enter the university, be introduced to the right knowledge, build up his confidence, develop his networks. As he said himself: he would never have reached what he achieved without that life-changing opportunity.

Even today approximately half of those who have passed the selection process and are given the opportunity to live on the Nyenrode estate during their studies do so with some form of scholarship, funded by alumni, by companies and/or the university itself. Yet when we speak of 'access' we often refer to a very different type of widening of participation: low cost or ideally free education for the many. It looks like we are talking about the opposite elements of a higher education system: highly selective, very expensive, exclusive providers of higher

education versus large low fee/quasi free all-inclusive providers. But actually the contradiction is a paradox. I would describe Nyenrode as *Inclusive Exclusive*. Of course there are also fully exclusive institutions like that, where only the ability to pay for a high fee counts and which I would score at the lowest level of the access-ranking. One could put a spectrum together reflecting the inclusiveness of universities and actually quite a few 'exclusive' ones would score quite high on 'inclusiveness' whilst some 'inclusive' institutions would score remarkably low: universities that radiate 'access' by having their gates opened widely for mass education, provide courses paid for by the tax payer, but in fact make no effort to attract underrepresented groups and on the contrary are driven by the aim to filter students out year after year, creating a rat mentality rather than the type of group-focused attitude stimulated in selective institutions and in reality not bothering at all whether those who arrive with a disadvantage will have a successful study. That type of institution might think that their wide open gates represent 'access' but I put them at the lowest of the access-ranking unless those open gates represent a real commitment and noticeable effort to the ideals of giving talented individuals from underrepresented groups in society a real change in life.

When it comes to 'access' to higher education, first appearances can be misleading. Equally confusing can be the motives: why is such 'access' a good thing? Let's go back to the basics for a moment. First of all, 'access' is an ideology: we want a fair society, a harmonious society that cares for the underprivileged. Seen from this point of view, 'access' is a movement. Together we want to make the world a better place to live and work in. Access is an emotion deep down in us. But also: Access is an economic principle. It is a search for talent to support the corporate 'war for talent'. It is an entirely rational self-interest. Our national economy cannot afford to waste talent, just because someone is female, has a specific race, a specific disability, a lower social class, the wrong religion etc. Wasting talent is stupid, as I spelled out already many years ago. And we are smart people so we shall not hesitate to point that out to our politicians and whoever needs to know: we need to invest wisely in our young human resources who are so crucially important to our future prosperity. Hence paradoxically *'access' is both a rational economic principle and an ideological emotion.*

'Access' is a very awkward term. It is a historical term referring to the transition of secondary to tertiary education. But we know very well that 'access' is much more. It is also about being successful in tertiary education. In fact, even that is only a tiny part of the full 'access' story. The real 'access success story' is about a large number of such transitions. The most important part of that access story starts just after birth, when much of the educational future already is and becomes determined. It is about the transition and the success of each level of education: from nursery and kindergarten to primary to secondary to tertiary to graduation. And then we are only halfway! Because the real access success story should then continue – what happens in their careers: How does the university support their career progress? Returning once more to the Nyenrode example, this institution has the ambition

to stay with its graduates throughout their entire career. Whenever they are ready to make a career jump and need new knowledge and personal development, they can return to their alma mater – from middle manager through to board room and non-executive director – or if they make a career move. Or when they want to network with other alumni in their field, whether real estate, finance, interim managers, owner managed companies etc. It is indeed very much like Hogwarts: students enter the university but never leave again. They stay with us; we stay with them – quite a different approach from most traditional universities. Even some that put ‘Success in Access’ central in their mission might show little to no interest in the ‘access pipeline’ before the student actually arrives at the front door. And worse, they lose all interest in their graduates once they reach the point of commencement: graduation is the final milestone as far as most universities are concerned. But let me add here my own definition of Success in Access: *the smoother the different points of transition in that life-long pipeline are, the more successful I would rate ‘access’*. So as an access movement and as access-dedicated universities, we should be much more concerned about the entire pipeline, not just the tiny tertiary bit.

Will the work in access ever be completed? The answer is simple: no, we will never finish. It is almost impossible to reach that stage of perfection because access for underrepresented groups is a relative term. The groups are not defined as such, only their underrepresentation is and this will change over time. It is unlikely that we can reach a perfect balance in society and even if we were to do so, that state of perfection is likely to be short lived. There will always be shifts. *Access harmony* meaning the stage where there are no underrepresented groups, is an aim, a point on the horizon we should go towards but which we shall never reach. But of course we have good reason never to stop striving to get there and to measure our progress towards ‘access harmony’.

So far I have spoken about the inclusive-exclusive and about ideological-utilitarian paradoxes, whilst in between we also defined Access Success as a smooth pipeline and finally Access Harmony as an unachievable goal. My last point is about the fact that access is typically a local, at most national, challenge. It requires local insight and local action and is highly dependent on local circumstances. EAN might be a worldwide movement, but in practice access is a local theme. Or at least, it used to be. But things have been changing and we should also be introducing an international to the local focus. We see students now move from one part of the world to another, to enrich their development. Higher education is not immune to globalization. The war for talent is not just a local one. Ambitious universities want to be at the heart of the global village not just in one of the outlying districts just serving a local population. Top level higher universities are global in their very nature and so are and will be even more the new leading elites in the world. But besides academic ambition and self-interest, if universities really want to remain relevant, they should be a force for the good in this process of globalization. They should be leading a positive globalization rather than represent a mosaic of national systems in denial of global realities, driven by defensive protectionism with marginal engagement through what is undeniably a

highly elitist mobility of students seeking top schools. For this reason I established at my previous university, the University of Westminster in London, a large international scholarship scheme. Westminster used to have the idea that its historic 'access' mission was primarily a London story and the international operations which represented a very substantial part of its operations were mainly about revenue. So I put great effort in ensuring that also in international operations 'access' was well present: giving that life-changing opportunity to talent from across the globe.

In my view 'access' requires action at both local and global levels, to introduce local hi-potentials to the global elites of the future and for both ideological and economic reasons. Scholarships are one way of supporting this. Delivering education elsewhere is another manner, such as the Westminster University Tashkent – another initiative of my previous institution, to ensure access to high quality corrupt-free education to those who cannot travel. Or a project I am working on currently and which is still in very early stages of development: to start creating an Access Success pipeline for street children in India, a Global Citizenship project that involves staff of the university, students, alumni and companies.

The simple, old-fashioned word 'access' has accumulated over the decades many layers, facets, paradoxes. It is a movement, an ideology, an economic principle, a pipeline, an impossible dream, a '*glocal*' challenge ... For me, 'access' is most of all the chain smoking alumnus with his glass of whiskey, as well as chanceless children in rags in the streets of Delhi. Above all, disregarding paradoxes and definitions, let us always remember that 'access' is a person and that we have the ability to do magic by giving an opportunity to those who deserve it, to achieve dreams. And I am sure my dear friend and source of inspiration, the late Maggie Woodrow, would have fully agreed with me.

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