



EAN 20th Anniversary Conference, Monday 20th – Wednesday 22nd June 2011
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

*“Student Diversity in Higher Education: Conflicting Realities”
(Tensions affecting policy and action to widen access and participation)*

For higher education institutions the pathway toward greater student diversity can be hazardous and difficult. Those seeking and driving change in institutional policies and practices face pressures from both within and outside the institution that can hinder or stifle progress. Within institutions for instances, progress can be slowed by resistance to change among students and staff, by a need to reconcile competing needs and views and to align diversity efforts with other institutional goals and policies. Competition for funds among the institution’s varying priorities may sap energy as well as restrict budgets.

From outside the institution many of the pressures that can impede progress arise from the views and expectations of governments and communities about the roles and functions of higher education institutions – especially when institutions rely substantially on public funding. In the context of the global financial crisis institutions face even greater scrutiny to operate efficiently and deliver even more ‘value-for-money’.

Higher education institutions in the 21st century are expected to fulfil a variety of social and economic roles as well their educational mission. They must promote (and provide) lifelong learning while ensuring that their courses and programs deliver the skills that are needed in the labour market. They must engage with industry and governments to advance economic growth and development, such as through skills provision, applied research, innovation, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship. They are expected to make connections with local communities that will enrich community life, providing opportunities for continued learning as well as opening their doors to a greater diversity of learners.

Even in the best of times, fulfilling all of these expectations can be difficult. Where achieving greater student diversity is seen as difficult and costly, or of lesser importance than other institutional goals, progress will falter. Both within and outside institutions there remains an unresolved tension between issues of diversity and quality. Some argue that diversity dilutes academic quality and threatens the reputation of the institution, while others believe such fears are unfounded and point to the evidence that diversity enhances social and economic wellbeing. There are also funding tensions – with some arguing that attention to diversity is costly and consumes resources that would better be devoted to improving facilities, services and research – especially when finances are tight.

What can be done to ease such tensions and ensure that progress continues toward the achievement of diversity goals?

Objectives:

1. To identify the internal and external tensions that hinder greater student diversity in higher education and to share and recommend strategies to overcome them
2. To challenge the myth of ‘diversity ≠ quality’ drawing on the evidence base and international examples of good practice to disprove this assumption

3. To explore the relationship between student diversity and the social cohesion and economic progress of the nation
4. To stimulate the pan-European and international dimensions of student diversity in higher education through collaborative and co-ordinated actions
5. To convene a strategic group to take forward the planning of the first EAN World Congress on Access
6. To celebrate the achievements of the EAN and other organisations committed to access, equity, diversity and inclusion