



Higher Education in Diverse Communities: Global Perspectives; Local Initiatives

Edited by Fran Ferrier and Margaret Heagney

Foreword:

Jamie Merisotis, President, Lumina Foundation for Education, U.S.A.

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the European Access Network (EAN), we are pleased to present this volume of papers that focuses on the success of student from under-represented populations. Many of the papers included here were presented at the annual conferences of the European Access Network at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece in 2006 and the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2007. The EAN has been a leading voice for widening access to higher education for nearly two decades. The mission of the EAN, which is to eliminate barriers to higher education—whether for reasons of gender, ethnic origin, nationality, age, disability, family background, vocational training, geographic location, or earlier educational disadvantage—has come sharply into focus in recent years in many European nations. As the only European-wide, non-governmental organisation for widening participation in higher education, the EAN has seen a sharp uptake in the focus that is being applied by higher education leaders, ministers, and others on the concept of making access to higher education a key component of national qualifications frameworks and economic and social development goals.

This encouraging development sets the context for the papers contained in this book. We see an increasing international dimension to the idea that access to success is not just a pleasant social goal but is in fact an increasingly necessary component of nation building and individual advancement. The book covers issues ranging from the quality of the student experience, to the perception of “success”, to the role of careers services, and offers detailed analysis from both practice and research perspectives on issues of equality in employment, the role of employers, the impact of policies on diversity, and educational factors that affect employment.

Special thanks to the Higher Education Authority, Ireland for sponsorship of this publication. Thanks also to our editors Fran Ferrier and Margaret Heagney for their outstanding stewardship in bringing this book from concept to actual publication. The EAN Executive Committee intends to continue this important work of publishing important papers on topics that impact on higher education access across Europe, with the goal of informing practitioners, researchers, and policymakers about the increasingly crucial themes that drive higher education across the continent.

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Introduction

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Traditional views of higher education institutions as somewhat remote from the communities in which they are situated have broken down over recent decades in the face of significant social, economic and political changes that have given rise to broader visions of their roles and purposes.

While they continue to play a primary role in the creation and diffusion of knowledge and as repositories of knowledge, higher education institutions of the 21st century are also expected to make a substantial contribution to the achievement of social and economic goals, such as in meeting the needs of labour markets and promoting social mobility. They are expected to be active agents and partners in economic success and social change.

In many parts of the world, governments, higher education systems and institutions are now engaged in developing and implementing policies, strategies and other initiatives with the aim of strengthening the contributions of higher education to economic and social advancement. This challenging and difficult work entails encouraging and supporting greater and more successful participation in higher education by people from all social groups. It is also being undertaken in the context of increased global movement of people and populations that is producing a greater diversity in local and national communities.

The expansion of higher education that began in the second half of the 20th century and that continues in many places today brought into institutions for the first time many individuals from social and economic groups who were previously excluded. Fair access to higher education 'for all' became a catchcry in many different parts of the world. As a result of this 'democratisation' of higher education, universities are no longer seen as the preserve of social elites, supporters of the status quo and reproducers of privilege. However, as time has passed it has become clearer that expansion has been insufficient to ensure that all groups in society have fair access to higher education. Considerable research identifies that many social groups remain under-represented. In addition, research shows that for some individuals from these groups who do manage to negotiate difficult paths and enter higher education, the higher education experience can be unwelcoming, unsupportive and even occasionally hostile. The work of encouraging and supporting greater and more successful participation in higher education by people from all social groups is thus yet to achieve the level of success hoped for. Nevertheless, many lessons are being learned and more recent initiatives are building on insights and knowledge gained from previous experience.

This volume, *Higher Education in Diverse Communities - Global Perspectives, Local Initiatives* describes, analyses and celebrates some of this ongoing work, with the aim of sharing some of the considerable knowledge and 'good ideas' that now exist, and of furthering good practice. In particular the book has a focus on three aspects of this work: embracing diversity; connecting with communities; and enhancing the student experience. Contributions from Europe, including Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Norway and different parts of the United Kingdom, as well as from the U.S.A., Canada and Australia, provide diverse perspectives and experiences from many different national settings, higher education systems and individual institutions.