



POLICIES REGARDING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This paper debates equal opportunities in education trying to suggest some alternative policies in order to ensure the prerequisites for learning in a flexible and open context, within Romanian higher education institutions (HEIs). By adopting sustainable policies (together with mechanisms to promote educational policies) universities may lead to an efficient and effective allocation, distribution and promotion of knowledge. Equality of chance issue is both necessity and opportune in the context of economic crisis. Equality refers to respecting and promoting welfare in and through education for social cohesion, progress and human development. Worldwide there are concerns for promoting equality of chance in order to achieve social cohesion, by promoting the principles of social inclusion, diversity management and intercultural dialogue.*

Key words: *policies to promote equal opportunities, diversity, discrimination, tertiary education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over time, different views were crystallized regarding equality of chance and diversity. Some authors have considered that equality could not exist within a world where economic interests act sometime as constraints for personal development. In our country the majority of the studies concerning these topics are at the beginning. That has been one of the most important limitations of our research; the lack of data and people being quite sceptical had also been limitative factors for our research. Equality is a very complex concept that regards: equality as a condition; equality as a normative prerequisite and as a solution to gender discrimination; equality as an objective of a healthy society. With respect to the meritocratic approach of equality, respecting diversity and providing equal opportunities might be seen as a significant value contributing both to the professional and personal development of each individual. The topics of equal opportunities and diversity can be applied in many areas including education. Equal opportunity in education represents not only a wish towards ensuring the necessary conditions of equality and fairness to individuals but also a prerequisite of ethics and mutual respect. The educational systems have to face today many and complex challenges: schools are no longer traditional institutions; mostly HEI's reflect an educational framework that is supportive for promoting a special system of values in favor of democracy and justice. The main objectives for contemporary educational systems is to teach students in such a manner as to determine them to treat each other as equals and to prepare them to act in the future as equal citizens, breaking the barriers of race, gender, religion and culture (Suciu et al., 2010). The concepts analyzed are complex including many lines of application from business, sociology, education to economics and law. The author's approach had been focus on a qualitative analysis on the basis of which we had tried to identify some critical points regarding effective policies dedicated to support equality & diversity in a diverse educational background.

2. EQUALITY DILEMMA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is no worldwide unique recipe for success on equal opportunities issues in all educational systems.

Little & Green had proposed five sets of policies that seem to offer valuable guidance and relevant lessons to achieve a successful equal opportunities in the context of globalization (Little & Green, 2008). The first policy refers to mass education that helps marginalized people to improve their knowledge. The second one militates for the expansion of education and especially of the tertiary education. The third one is directed such as to contribute to the development of communication abilities both for students and for all staff members, including mostly teachers. Completing the first third, the fourth looks at equitable expansion of educational processes. The fifth one refers to the awareness of educational institutions to promote social cohesion and the principles of an inclusive society. Stereotypes, ethnic discrimination, preconceived opinions and attitudes are unfortunately also present in our country. Some studies addressing the issue of gender equality showed that students (male and female) enrolled in engineering studies perceive an unequal climate of education and they also feel gender discrimination to some extent (Suciu et al., 2009). In line with this orientation the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) published some survey focusing on this topic both in 2009 and 2010. Enquire results reflect the presence of attitudes with high degree of discrimination, especially against some certain groups such as: people with disabilities, Roma people and people with HIV. 62% of respondents in 2010 enquiry identified that discrimination is a common and very common phenomenon in Romania. Interaction with persons belonging to these categories is moderately accepted by the majority, if these interactions occurs in public (at work). It seems that the private space is less open for sharing with Roma people.

The education system is not an exception regarding these attitudes but it seems that this kind of attitudes are manifested at a much smaller scale. To support promoting equal opportunities in education we suggest a series of policies that can lead to improved access to universities in our country. These policies are the result of a qualitative analysis that we had undertaken in universities. Based on this qualitative analysis we identified some critical points such as: the absence of effective and efficient policies dedicated to support equality & diversity; the presence of a declarative attitude; lack of data and information concerning concepts such as equality and diversity. We found that mostly at the institutional level there are no explicit policies or measures designed in order to encourage equal opportunities, diversity and intercultural dialogue. These aspects were not considered to be a specific subject of a focused strategy oriented to attract and keep employees and students belonging to all the categories considered to be discriminated.

The paper takes into consideration the difficulties that students and staff might experience in direct relation with universities.

We identified also some difficulties experienced by people with disabilities that are sometimes overlooked or unnoticed. Unfortunately students also identify a differential treatment present within an institutional context and at the colleague's level. There had been identified cases of discrimination on all levels: gender discrimination, ethnic discrimination, age discrimination and income discrimination. That is why we consider of great importance to support special policy and strategies dedicated to equality & diversity. As compared to some examples of good practices from HEI in other countries in Romania we consider that HEI face a lack of data that makes quite difficult the process of monitoring diversity and equality of opportunities. We consider there is important to assign specific responsibility to persons that might contribute to ensure and monitor the way principles of diversity and equality of chances are respected and promoted in an adequate manner. More than the difficulties identified there is also a lack of any concern for quality analysis and satisfaction at work for employees. Most of these shortcomings are not unique and specific for only one university, but for almost all universities in our country. Most of the laws and measures adopted up to now are in our opinion rather declarative than factual. In our country institutions that have responsibility for implementing equal opportunities generally have little influence, little power and tools to prevent and correct discrimination. It is important to implicate all institutional actors for preventing and combating discrimination but this implies costs and such costs are covered neither by the state budget nor by the institutional budget. So it still remains an open and challenging question: What higher education institution should do in order to prevent and fight against discrimination?

Suggestions we recommend to be taken into account at the institutional level by each university:

- To focus on establishing a greater responsibility regarding equal opportunities and diversity
- To elaborate an *equality of opportunities action plan* as it exists in all the European universities
- To upgrade regularly their websites with information's and to provide brochures that might support an equality climate by informing students staff and managers
- To ensure an appropriate infrastructure for students with disabilities so they feel they are welcome within the university educational environment.

Suggestions we recommend to be taken into account by the managerial staff:

- To include within their meeting's agenda issues such as: equality, equity and diversity
- To encourage the organization of events dedicated to promote equality and diversity
- To incorporate principles of diversity and equal opportunities within the human resource policy (including also the university human resource development plan)
- To assign at least one person to monitor compliance with the principles of equality and to handle cases of discrimination
- To organize seminars, workshops and symposia dedicated to promoting non-discrimination and equal treatment
- To implement some modular training courses on equality and diversity theme that will take into account current legislation and some international best practice examples.

Suggestions for students who have also to contribute by:

- Implicating them self into promoting equal opportunities and diversity
- Participating to all events dedicated to these subjects
- To treat and be treated with dignity and respect.

Taking into account the EU educational context, we consider that Romania needs to amplify the catching-up process in implementing policies dedicated to support equality, diversity and intercultural dialogue. Equal opportunities and diversity

bring together strengths and weaknesses and contribute to the general welfare. We believe that by promoting equality and diversity we can reduce costs and increase benefits. In our country equality and diversity issue have to be considered as a result of a mix of policies. We believe that in Romania in order to enjoy the benefits of equal opportunities and diversity we need to change first some mentalities. These changes attract a growth of expenses, so we have to better consider equality as an investment, not as a cost. For each country, public institutions or organizations benefit of the freedom to choose any measures needed to ensure and to promote the principles of equal treatment and diversity. Examples of good practice can be also helpful and most initiatives are channeled to local, regional or institutional domains.

3. CONCLUSION

As a general conclusion we highlight that the topic chosen for this paper is subject to a constant changeable framework both on the international and national level. Beyond the novelty of this topic authors believe that the decision makers need to become concern about the need to act for ensuring equal opportunities and diversity. This research topic is a complex one. That is why we support the idea of a holistic vision. Research dedicated to this topic has a certain limitation to universities policies and degree of interest on equality issue. Authors believe that research studies dedicated to these topics have to be extended by designing a general methodology for evaluating and monitoring the promotion of equality and diversity in universities. The above mentioned methodology has to take into account the opinions of students, employees and decision makers involved actively in higher education. and results of investigations undertaken so far show the need for more research on a wide range of components. We consider there is a need to develop further research regarding some areas of interest concerning equal opportunities, diversity and management of diversity both at the national, regional and microeconomics level.+

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