

The ‚Social Dimension‘ in Higher Education

Conclusions based on experiences from the project:

Developing the Adult Learning Sector, Lot 3: „Opening higher education to adults“ (HEAD)

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my task is

to present a definition of the social dimension
out of the experience from HEAD
and
considerations on
how it might be measured

(thus offering an impulse for a thorough discussion)

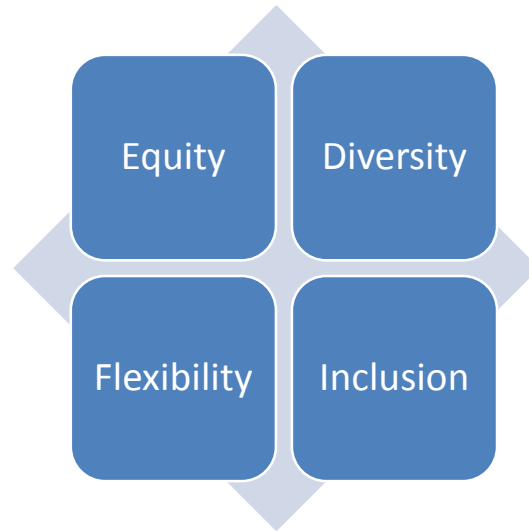
why HEAD ?

the study has validity, thus provides a helpful background to draw conclusions on defining and measuring the social dimension

what is HEAD ?

- one of three studies launched by the EC, DG EAC, to extend and to improve the knowledge on current developments in the adult learning sector → topics are: quality (lot 1), financing (lot 2) and opening higher education to adults (HEAD) (lot 3)
- the HEAD study was conducted by the German Institute for Adult Education, the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, and by the help of 19 expert practitioners / researchers from 15 countries
- the main data basis for analysis was built by 20 case studies of specific programmes for adult students / non-traditional learners from 15 European and 5 non-European countries

dimensions of the social dimension



equity

a first conclusion is that equity as guiding principle to increase access and completion rates of higher education is a relative term, depending on

- underlying concepts of 'disadvantaged groups' in higher education
- institutional policies/strategies to respond to the needs of learners from 'disadvantaged groups'

institutional strategies to promote equity may focus on learners

- without the regular formal entrance qualification
- with a low income (e.g. single parents, unemployed)
- lacking time (e.g. being engaged in work, family and community life)
- specific socio-demographic characters (age, gender, race)
- living in remote places (e.g. rural areas, prison)
- speaking native languages other than the national language

diversity

a second conclusion is that the diversity of the student population can be promoted by

- institutional diversification
- programme specialisation
- organisational differentiation

institutional strategies to increase diversity may lead to

- specific types of higher education institutions explicitly targeting learners from traditionally 'under-represented groups' in higher education
- study programmes and learning opportunities designed to attract learners from abroad (e.g. from the continental region, neighbour countries)
- university lifelong learning centres providing programmes and provision for non-traditional learners apart from the 'regular' teaching programme

flexibility

a third conclusion is that flexibility is ridden with political, legislative, technological, and organisational preconditions and that it is linked to different referential areas, such as

- access arrangements
- modes of delivery
- programme flexibility

institutional strategies to increase flexibility

may focus on

- access arrangements (e.g. RPL, validation of non-formal and informal learning)
- modes of delivery (e.g. distance learning, e-learning, evening courses)
- programme flexibility, e.g. in terms of
 - endurance and 'timing' of study process
 - study level and intensity
 - curricular variety and options to choose study modules
 - variety of learning environments (onsite campus, online, in firms, in the community)

inclusion

a fourth conclusion is that social inclusion in higher education is a most challenging concept which eventually affects all levels of agency in higher education institutions, including

- architecture and equipment,
- student services and support
- approaches to teaching and learning
- institutional policies/strategies

institutional strategies to promote social inclusion may include

- changes in architecture and equipment to accommodate learners with disabilities
- student services, guidance and personalised support (e.g. targeting students with learning difficulties)
- approaches to collaborative and personalised learning (e.g. online-learning groups or partnerships)
- integration of 'social inclusion' into mission statements and recognising inclusion as part of institutional development strategies

measurement

can be very **useful** for management
at operational and at strategic levels

but

needs further **research**, collaborative development

and

practitioners' **experience** when it comes to
interpreting data

measurement

there are still more questions
than answers

measurement

what is the overall purpose of measuring the social
dimension?

who should benefit from measurement and how?

what is defined as 'desirable' outcome of strengthening
the social dimension and by whom?

what are the decisive factors at institutional and at
programme levels to strengthen the social dimension?

recommendation

ensuring acceptance and effectiveness of measurement of social dimension requires

- the development of a **use inspired**, relational and dynamic theoretical framework
- **trust** enhancing activities, i.e. the **involvement** of relevant actors, such as

representatives of student body, members of teaching staff, heads of university lifelong learning units, heads of faculties, representatives of other stakeholders (e.g. social and migrant institutions, local authorities), institutional executives (e.g. vice presidents of universities), policy/ministerial representatives

thank you
for your
kind attention

questions?

DiE