

MENON Policy Brief

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About the authors



Dr. Fabio Nascimbeni is the Director of the MENON Network. He is active in the field of innovation, ICT and equity in education since 15 years.



Anthony Camilleri, EquNet project coordinator, has been investigating the linkages between higher education, innovation, quality and equity.

Can we build an equitable Europe on an inequitable university system?

Reflecting on the results of the EquNet project

The EquNet project in the context of the debate on higher education equity

Widening participation in higher education is a major component of the educational policy in many member states of the European Union and of the Bologna Process. This should consist of an attempt to increase not only the number of young people entering higher education, but also the proportion of “under-represented groups” (e.g. people from lower socioeconomic strata, ethnic minorities or people with disabilities). Social inclusion is important to higher education as still too many capable students are excluded from the European university system due to their background, insufficient study support systems or other barriers.

In the period 2010-2012, eight leading European stakeholders and research organisations (the MENON Network, Scierter, the Centre for Educational Policy Studies of the University of Ljubljana, the Higher Education Information System, the Centre for Social Innovation, the European Students Union, EURASHE and the European Distance and eLearning Network) have joined forces in the EquNet project, with the support of European Commission funding under the Lifelong Learning Programme. With the aim of enhancing equity in European Higher Education by supporting networking among all interested stakeholders, the EquNet team has been working to gather research on the topic, engage with actors in the field, propose policy solutions to decision makers. The results of the EquNet work can be downloaded at www.equnet.info.

The EquNet findings and their policy implications

During the first year of work of EquNet, which resulted in the report titled “Evolving Equity”, the project researchers found that high-quality data related to equity in conjunction with immigrant status was comparatively hard to find by when compared to other indicators such as socioeconomic status. Considering this, and the fact that a number of indicators suggested that an immigrant condition may play a significant role in discrimination in access across Europe, the EquNet team decided that the project could make a substantial contribution to the current body of knowledge by dedicating an entire report to the topic of equity for students with an



immigrant background. This work brought to the publication of the report “Immigrant participation in European higher education”, which provides a theoretical framework for discussion of the topic, a statistical cross-country analysis of access-figures, as well as detailed country-studies for Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom. Some policy considerations can be extracted from the EquNet report.¹

The first consideration deals with the fact that chance to attain a higher education degree depends on the cultural, social, and material resources of a person on the one hand, and on the institutional setting within and beyond the higher education system on the other hand. As for the cultural (e.g., norms, values, or family), social (e.g., social embeddedness, availability and quality of networks, ethnic capital), and material resources, the EquNet empirical analysis and the review of existing research have hinted to several important differences between the group with an immigrant background and the group without an immigrant background. Moreover, the group with an immigrant background in itself is highly heterogeneous and, again, differs enormously in its resources. Thus, a key challenge to any policy activity is identifying the groups in need of support and their specific requirements.

Among the cultural resources, the research results confirm the crucial role of good command of the language of instruction for educational success. Thus, it seems advisable that programmes in higher education supporting persons with an immigrant background put a strong focus on improving command of the resident language. Moreover, it is important to strengthen language competences at earlier stages of education to not let language problems prevent persons from qualifying for higher education. In parallel, the mastery of a second language – the immigrant’s mother language and culture – should be valued and strengthened, as it constitutes a major potential.

It has been shown that persons with an immigrant background with one native parent have better chances to attain higher education than persons with both parents born abroad. Next to language competences and possibly a higher socioeconomic background, this could also be due to being more strongly embedded in the society of the resident country and the advantageous of a social network comprising persons with and without an immigrant background. Thus, any political actions furthering the segregation between immigrants and natives will presumably also negatively affect the chances of the former to attain higher education. In contrast, easy access to citizenship and a secure resident status are likely to add to the motivation of people to invest in their competences and education.

Attending higher education causes direct costs (e.g., fees, learning material, housing, and moving) and indirect costs (foregoing an earned income, at least partially). Depending on their socioeconomic background, students differ in their material resources and thus their ability and motivation to deal with these costs. As a consequence, in most countries, persons with a lower socioeconomic background are underrepresented in higher education. Other reasons for the smaller rates of higher educational attainment of persons with a lower socioeconomic background are the

¹ This paragraph is adapted from: Camilleri, A. F. and Mühleck, K. (editors) (2012). *Immigrant participation in European Higher Education - Pre-Release for EQUINET Final Seminar*. MENON Network, Brussels.



above-mentioned cultural resources (e.g., performance in school, knowledge of the educational system, and educational aspirations) and social resources (e.g., knowing people that have attained higher education, participation in active networks). Lower rates of participation of persons with an immigrant background are to a considerable degree caused by a lower socioeconomic background. Political activities supporting higher education participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged persons help to support those groups with an immigrant background specifically in need of support. This refers to programs helping students to afford their living, grant programs, programs financing special activities such as international mobility, or other forms of material help. Generally, such programs should be open to all students with similar needs irrespective of having an immigrant background or not. This would help avoid unfair positive discrimination, exclusion of persons in need, and stigmatisation.

What next? Ideas for future policy in higher education equity.

The results of the EquNet work on equity for students with immigrant background were discussed during an international seminar in Brussels in November 2012, which counted with the participation of important stakeholders such as the European Students Union, the European University Association, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, the Centre for Diversity Policy, and EUROSTUDENT.

During the event, participants converged on the following ideas:

1) *Inequalities are cumulative processes.* There is need for a holistic and sector-wide approach in understanding at what points they are generated and who – which groups - are affected. The question of what a *visible* minority is was brought up several times, both in terms of data and in higher education reality. It is therefore necessary to be aware that equity is also a matter of our understanding of diversity: who are we referring to as disadvantaged and why?

2) *We need to move towards a culture of awareness.* Higher education institutions, but also societies at large need to become more sensitive for diversity. At the same time, policies must strive to avoid stigmatisation. Otherwise we will find ourselves in a classical “Catch 22” situation: equity/diversity policy must be based on data, but data itself should not be stigmatising, i.e. not generate effects of ascription.

3) *There is a gap between equity/diversity policy and institutional practice.* Institutions are often left alone in integrating the principles of equity and diversity in strategies and in practice. Therefore, leadership support and cooperation across all levels is needed.

4) *A number of challenges beyond higher education* will have a strong impact on future policy-making and practice. Foremost, the demographic changes will influence the way education - and access to it - is provided. New tools will be needed for solving new problems. This encompasses thinking creatively on how to address special groups (e.g. third-age learners) and to provide inclusive education; exploring and anticipating new forms of teaching and delivery (digital divide); and rethinking access in terms of recognition of prior learning.

In conclusion, we still know very little on the issue of equity in higher education, and we suffer from the lack of reliable data, especially in terms of micro-level databases: the issue of accessibility to public databases by the research community should be addressed. However, we know enough to conclude that we face a very serious issue in Europe, since inequality is an issue that hits hard at the core of our European values and civilisational grounds. Therefore we need more and better evidence-based public policies in higher education, especially today when the concerns on the viability of matching excellence with equity in a general context of decreasing public funding for education are increasingly framing the European landscape.

EquNet has shown that conducting research with rigour and robustness, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, pays off. We should further focus on migrants and descendants, as a major challenge for Europe, continuing asking ourselves how an effective educational policy for migrants should be shaped.

About the MENON Network

MENON is a European research and innovation network, working since 1999 to foster and smoothen innovation processes in areas related to learning innovation and social capital development in Europe and worldwide. MENON facilitates the understanding of the processes of change happening in society by engaging stakeholders in dialogue processes and by offering evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

The members of the MENON Network are the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (Hungary), the Study Centre on People and Cultures of the Catholic University of Portugal (Portugal), the Institute for Learning Innovation of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany), the Lambrakis Foundation (Greece), SCIENTER (Italy) and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (UK).

More information on MENON at www.menon.org.

