

Developing Disability-Inclusive Higher Education Systems

Stephen Thompson (Winner of the *IHE* #100 Essay Contest)

It has been 25 years since the first issue of *International Higher Education* was published. By coincidence, it is also 25 years since the Salamanca Statement called on the international community to endorse the approach of inclusive education, including at the tertiary level. The past quarter century has witnessed the global massification of postsecondary education, yet this explosion of facilities and enrollment has largely entrenched and exacerbated the exclusion of people with disabilities from the sector. This is particularly the case in low- and middle-income contexts, where university completion rates for students with disabilities are worryingly low compared to those of students without disabilities. Evidence from 35 low- and middle-income countries indicates that for students between 25 and 54 years old, the average university completion rate for students with disabilities is 4.5 percent, compared to 7.9 percent for those without a disability. For students aged 55 and above, evidence from 34 countries found that the completion rate of people with disabilities was 1.8 percent, compared to 3.7 percent for those without disabilities.

Approximately 15 percent of the world's population lives with some form of disability. The higher education sector needs to realize the educational potential of those 15 percent of students. In order to ensure that such a significant proportion of society is not excluded from higher education, and their potential realized, various elements must be in place. These include developing suitable disability-inclusive policies, governance and finance systems, curricula, staff, buildings, and supportive communities (UNESCO, 2018).

Higher education systems must become disability inclusive in order to meet international obligations and global frameworks. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted in 2006 and the majority of countries in the world have signed up to it. Article 24 of the UNCRPD focuses on the right to education and, among other commitments, requires states to ensure equal access to vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a plan to build a better world for people and our planet by 2030. SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Target 4.3 aims to ensure that equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university, is achieved. Target 4.5 aims to ensure equal access to all levels of education for vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities. Developing disability-inclusive tertiary education is also relevant to SDG 1 (poverty); SDG 3 (health); SDG 5 (gender); SDG 8 (economic growth); SDG 12 (responsible production); SDG 13 (climate change); as well as SDG 16 (peace and strong institutions). The SDGs will not be achieved if the needs of people with disabilities are not considered and their rights not recognized. Unless action is taken to make the higher education sector disability-inclusive, we will fail to achieve an environment where no one is left behind.

Higher education has a dual role with regard to knowledge production, involving both research and learning/teaching. Disability-inclusive higher education will be essential to allow an academic environment to develop that can contribute to addressing societal inequalities and finding solutions to global challenges (including the SDGs). If researchers with disabilities are not included in research processes, the voices of people with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from outputs, recommendations, and implications. "Nothing about us without us" is a key philosophy of the disability movement. For higher education to be truly disability-inclusive, this philosophy must be embedded into teaching and research within higher education institutions.

Abstract

It is 25 years since the Salamanca Statement called on the international community to endorse the approach of inclusive education, including at the tertiary level. The past quarter century has witnessed the global massification of postsecondary education, yet this explosion of facilities and enrollment has largely entrenched and exacerbated the exclusion of people with disabilities from the sector. Higher education systems must become disability-inclusive in order to meet international obligations and global frameworks.

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As the first two decades of the twenty-first century come to an end, achieving progress in disability-inclusive higher education is particularly pertinent, given the progress that has been made in improving attendance in both primary and secondary education. While concerns over quality persist, access has largely improved. As this bulge of children with disabilities passes through the education system, higher education institutions need to catch up to ensure that they offer disability-inclusive education by the time children finish their secondary education. If higher education continues to marginalize those with disabilities, finishing secondary education will be the terminus of the educational journey for many youth with disabilities, regardless of their potential and desire to continue to higher education.

Despite this bleak outlook, there are glimmers of hope. Data shows that countries, including the Gambia and Colombia, have managed to buck the trend and are making great strides toward delivering disability inclusive higher education. As we enter the mid-twenty-first century, approaches to disability inclusion present both challenges and possibilities for international higher education. The challenges involve implementing reasonable accommodation within the tertiary education sector to ensure that no one is denied access due to their disability. The possibilities are reflected in the potential that a fairer, more inclusive higher education sector has to offer, if only we can turn it from an aspiration into a reality. ▲

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