



EU Insight – Increasing Access to Higher Education in Europe

Simply put, more must be done to increase access to higher education in the European Union. This statement succinctly summarises the results of a recently published report by the European Commission—[*Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, retention and employability 2014*](#)—the second in a series focused on higher education in Europe. Why this is so has much to do with the role that knowledge, and subsequently education, plays in fulfilling the long-term developmental objectives the European Union has set for itself.

The report

Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, retention and employability 2014 is based on a study conducted by the Eurydice Network, which looked at 36 different education systems within the Europe (including all 28 EU Member States). The aim of the study was to evaluate the extent to which the European Commission’s modernisation agenda, which “supports higher education systems in Europe in responding to the needs of our increasingly knowledge-based economy and societies”, is being implemented across Europe. The full report plus report brief can be downloaded free of charge at the Eurydice website.

Why access to higher education is important

According to the European Commission, “knowledge [is] at the heart of the Union’s efforts for achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth...and higher education in particular and its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal development, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and the articulate citizens Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth and prosperity”. Yet even with this lofty goal in mind, the majority of governments within the EU have so far failed to institute proper measures to support access to higher education.

What is behind this outcome?

The report names three distinct factors—an overly narrow focus on quantification, insufficient retainment and transition to labour market—as contributing to the slow pace widening participation in higher education in the European Union has taken so far.

The first of these factors concerns governments’ placing too much emphasis on just increasing numbers, a practice which unfortunately limits access to many social groups and contributes to a lack of diversity. For example, one group not yet addressed by participation widening efforts are young people from disadvantaged families. Additionally, those with disabilities tend not to be included in widening efforts.

The second factor is the lack of sufficient retainment strategies for individuals once they gain access to higher education. Specifically, this refers to the lack of measures to help prevent students from dropping out, in particular those from underserved and underrepresented groups. Currently, not enough support is offered in terms of the mode of study (part vs full-time), timeframe (how long should it take to complete programme/degree), and information and guidance to those most at risk.



The third, and last, factor is employability. Because employability is a complex concept with more than one definition, this also means that more than one approach exists to how it might be measured (i.e. employment-based vs. competence-based). This lack of clarity in turn blurs understanding of the type of training students actually need in order to obtain jobs following completion of their degree programmes; all too often measures and policies (if they exist at all) confuse or conflate employment for the things (skills, previous work experience, mode of study) which actually account for one's ability to be employed.

However, beyond these factors, perhaps the most crucial reason underlying the problems associated with the widening of participation in higher education is a general lack of *systematic* monitoring processes. According to the report, all EU countries plus the eight additional European countries included in the study do have some type of policy measure in place to support higher education. The problem, unfortunately, is that at the current moment such measures are uneven and “insufficiently developed to provide an evidence-based picture across Europe”.

To date, only one EU member state has truly stepped up to address this challenge—Ireland

Sources and further information:

1 Eurydice Network, Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, retention and employability 2014
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/165_EN.pdf [accessed 15 April 2015]

2 European Commission(2011), “Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems”.

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0567>

[accessed 15 April 2015]

3 O'Malley, Brendan. “Governments must do more to widen access—Eurydice.” University World News Global Edition, 9 April 2015, Issue 362. [accessed 14 April 2015]