

The Greatest Impact of Universities: Educating the Most Vulnerable

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In 2015, the Yerevan Communiqué reaffirmed The European Higher Education ministers' commitment to inclusive higher education with the understanding that it contributes to inclusive societies. This was one of the most important commitments made by a collective group of higher education officials.

The Yerevan Communiqué was ambitious. It called for making higher education more accessible to students from all disadvantaged backgrounds – including those who are from lower income families, from migrant communities, and young women who choose traditionally male specializations.

Universities are best positioned to assess whether each of their countries and institutions have done all they can to be more inclusive. Yet, there is a need to do much more. If universities work together, universities can turn one of our world's most unconscionable injustices – unequal access to quality education – into one of the greatest hopes for our future.

Addressing the education divide is not only a moral obligation; it is a crisis that can be averted. More than that, it is an opportunity to address some of the biggest challenges we face as a human race.

No university would argue against a more inclusive education. I worry however that too many universities still equate more inclusion with less quality, more students with less research or even more flexibility with less innovation. This perspective would be mostly justified if we only attempted to do better at what we are already doing. The urgency and scale of the challenge we are facing however does not afford us the luxury of time to tinker with existing processes nor does accelerating our existing efforts give us the impact that we need.

Unprecedented challenges require unprecedented solutions. Nothing less than a complete shift in the way universities see their role in society will be enough. Universities need to shift their mission from educating the few to educating all.

Today, more than ever, we are in urgent need for universities to lead the way in educating everyone but especially the most vulnerable people in their communities and around the world.

Europe, like most of the world, is grappling with worsening and persistent challenges resulting from the slow or exclusionary progress for the most vulnerable people. Income inequality remains at an all-time high. In Europe, the average income of the richest 10% is 9 ½ times higher than that of the poorest 10%¹. Climate change threatens to destroy our planet altering the course of humanity. Income inequality, like conflict and climate change, affects the most vulnerable more disproportionately, everywhere. And, recent reports project that it will take more than 108 years for women to achieve gender equality.

Education is both a remedy and at the root of inequality. Data shows that education attainment is directly related to higher levels of income and equality. For example, the World Bank estimates that every year of a women's education increases her income by 10% - 20%.² Yet, girls and women lag behind in access to education at all levels in many parts of the world, including in traditionally male dominated fields such as STEM education in the developed world. And, low-income, rural and first-generation students around the world are much less likely to enter and complete university. And, only 1% of refugees have access to higher education globally.³

It is important to take a moment to recognize that universities face tougher times than ever. They are expected to reform more quickly than the societies they operate in while public funding for universities continues to be reduced. At the same time, they are expected to innovate and produce graduates ready for a changing world.

Yet, despite how challenging it may be for universities at this time, there has never been a more critical time for them to have a greater impact on the world. Universities can and should educate the most vulnerable. All young people deserve an education, the world needs it and advances in and technology help make it possible.

Universities need to adopt two bold strategies to making higher education more inclusive at larger scale and with greater impact.

First, universities must make higher education open for all who need it regardless of status and financial ability.

Common inclusion programs such scholarship programs like those offered by universities, governments and foundations are important and have had a marked impact on the lives of thousands of students in Europe and around the world. But, they cannot be the answer alone. The number of young people who deserve a quality higher education far outweighs what any one entity can offer. Even massive contributions to university endowment funds will only reach a select and lucky few every year.

In the meantime, inequality in access to education continues to grow. Access to higher education has become one of the most divisive socio-economic barriers of recent times.

¹ Keeley, Brian (2015), "What's happening to income inequality?", in *Income Inequality: The Gap between Rich and Poor*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

² Psacharopoulos, G. 1993. "Returns to Investment in Education." World Bank Working Paper 1067. Washington, D.C.

³ UNHCR. (2016). *Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis*. Geneva: UNHCR.

Every life changed by a university scholarship or financial aid is a life worth celebrating but scholarships that target students' merit and financial need often end up supporting some of the brightest students in the world. For every student who does receive a scholarship, there are thousands more who do not get the chance at continuing their education.

For this to change, universities must refocus their efforts from raising funds for a few select students to opening their education to everyone who needs it. With the advancement in technologies and improvement in online learning, arguments such as needing to maintain small class sizes or limited campus spaces no longer hold.

The universities that will have the greatest impact on the world will also be the most inclusive and it cannot be limited to a few universities. In the United States, the University Innovation Alliance is made up of universities as diverse as Georgia State to Purdue. The 11 universities came together with a common goal of innovating within their universities to significantly increase access to education among first generation students from 27% to 30% by 2022.

One of the Alliance members – Arizona State University – has ranked as the most innovative university in the US by adopting metrics that measure how many students they take in rather than how many they keep out. One way they achieve this is by creating many pathways to entering and completing a degree such as offering online freshman courses and accrediting online courses towards full degrees. A recent example includes their recent collaboration with MIT, where students who successfully complete MIT's MicroMaster's in Supply Chain Management, can automatically receive credit and enroll in ASU's Masters. These innovative online solutions are encouraging and have the potential to be replicated by universities worldwide, including in Europe and by all the universities represented here today.

Technology is not a panacea. Education solutions that simply transfer courses offered face to face to online platforms, work for too few students to be worth any university's effort let alone have a large impact.

Too many doomed-to-fail initiatives garner a great deal of attention and financial support with a promise to deploy the latest technology to deliver education to the most challenging contexts. These initiatives most often have three strikes against them: they do not understand the needs of the populations they intend to serve; they are too expensive; and they underestimate the commitment required to make their efforts succeed.

By contrast, initiatives that have succeeded are designed around the needs of vulnerable populations. For example, rather than offer courses in the main language of instruction (primarily English), universities that have local partners understand that the most marginalized populations have limited access to English language training. Rather than offer courses online only, they build them around support from local organizations that offer counseling and mentoring. And, rather than end their commitment to students at graduation, they plan from the outset for how their offerings are going to help them transition to sustainable livelihoods.

In summary, if universities are truly committed to the mission of educating the most vulnerable, they redesign their education to meet their needs.

Second, universities must give higher education a higher purpose – the purpose of making learning possible for everyone at all levels of education.

Many universities perceive the business of widening the pipeline to university education to fall well outside of their jurisdiction. After all, K-12 education and adult education are led by other institutions and often regulated by other levels of government.

Universities are especially reluctant to delve into the business of other levels of education, if they view themselves as research institutions only rather than hubs of teaching and learning. But, if universities are committed to helping make education radically more accessible, they will reconsider whom they see as their students.

Studies have shown time and again that preparing students for success in colleges and careers must begin much earlier than the first year of university. To be truly inclusive, universities must partner with schools to ensure that students are prepared from the earliest age possible.

Early counseling and mentoring programs can alter the trajectory of a student by helping them make good choices and develop the skills they need to succeed in university and beyond.

At the adult education level, universities are well positioned to offer up-skilling courses such as MOOCs. Early impact studies of MOOCs show that short online courses and credentials have had the largest take up among adults who are educated and are already in the workplace. They enroll in popular courses like coding and data analytics as a way to get ahead in their careers or in anticipation of career changes. MOOCs need to be rethought if they are to be more relevant to those who have not had access to an education or are unemployed.

MOOCs alone are not a solution for reaching the most vulnerable but they do express an important sentiment and that is university innovation in making education more accessible does not have to be limited to transition to and from university education.

Universities, especially when they work in alliances, have unparalleled resources of talent and tools that could be channeled to solving the world's education challenges.

To date, universities have not been tapped for the enormous potential they could offer in the way of research and experimentation in delivering education for all, especially for the most vulnerable.

Universities must set themselves apart by not accepting the idea that we have to wait more than one hundred years for the world to close the education gap for all children. Universities and their partners can start by questioning why we do not see similar levels of intense research, resourcing and innovation in education as we see in other sectors.

Early childhood education is an area where universities can play a bigger role. Science shows that early childhood education can completely rewire a child's brain, setting them up for a lifetime of successful learning and good mental health. Yet, access to early childhood education is unequal for low-income children everywhere. And, in low-income countries only 1 in 5 children are lucky enough to have access to some form of early childhood education.⁴

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education, UNICEF, New York, April 2019

The scale and magnitude of the early childhood education challenge has never been met with the necessary level of commitment by universities or otherwise. Investment in early childhood research and programming is very low the world over.

Universities can change the future of every child in a reasonable amount of time, if they commit the same level of enthusiasm and resources they have made available to other sectors such as health. After all, it was not long ago when we could not imagine the progress universities have made in stem cell research and 3D printing of organs.

Why should we not imagine that universities could not help every young child access an education or that we could close the 100-year education gap much faster than current projections?

Universities should not stop at seeing themselves as institutions limited to helping more students transition into and out of university successfully but begin to see themselves as the best hope the world has to develop new education solutions.

As institutions that have helped alter the course of society for the better so often in the past, we need universities to lead the way in changing the current course of education. It is time to expand the mission of universities from educating the few to educating everyone, including those who are most vulnerable.

There are university presidents who were refugees, heads of global institutions who were children of economic migrants, and women in political office who were born in countries where girls have no rights.

Every child under 6, every girl child, every refugee youth, every economic migrant, every woman deserves the same chance at success. And, universities can make it possible, if they truly harnessed their power for the purpose of educating vulnerable people.
