Discussion Paper

Factors conditioning accessibility differences of the disadvantaged groups to higher education in various countries

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Proposal Information

Accessibility to higher education (HE) is the necessary condition while striving not only for the knowledge economy, but also for the knowledge society (Drucker, 2001). It is emphasized in the documents of the international organizations as well (OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 1960, 2015), and is primarily underlined by the European Commission (Eurodyce, 2015).

UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) was the essential world level document, which specified all human rights to education, while seeking to ensure "full and equal opportunities for education for all" [Article 1(a)]. The decision of the EU to create the common European HE area (1999) through the Bologna process provided necessary opportunities for underrepresented groups to have an access to HE.

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The scholars who have researched accessibility to HE (Peters, 2007; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011, etc.) have detected that although the more general understanding of this question exists at the international level, specific countries implement accessibility to HE in rather different ways. It has been agreed that this uneven aspect first of all depends on the different contexts of the countries (Seale, 2013). It is especially visible when analyzing the accessibility of the disadvantaged groups (people with disabilities, women, and ethnic minorities).

Thus far, the researchers have not responded to the question: what factors condition differences of the accessibility to HE situation in various countries? This problem requires the attention of researchers. First of all, it relates to the disadvantaged groups, which is the priority of the EU.

Therefore, this presentation for the ECER2018 seeks to solve the aforementioned problem, while responding to the highly important research question: what factors condition accessibility differences of the disadvantaged groups to HE in various countries?

The aim of this presentation is to detect factors conditioning accessibility differences of the disadvantaged groups to HE in various countries.

Objectives

- To substantiate the factors conditioning the accessibility to HE of the disadvantaged groups.
- To reveal the factors, which are the reason for the differences of the accessibility to HE of the disadvantaged groups among countries.

Since the initiative of countries for the accessibility to HE is impacted by the position of the international organizations, in this presentation, the meaning of accessibility, and its relative terms are primarily seen from the positions of the policies of international structures, which are officially supported by many countries. First of all, it is the EU and the institutions representing it. Attention should be given to the report by the European Commission displayed in Eurodyce (2015). Here, the access is defined as "widening participation in higher education by ensuring equal opportunities to all sections of society, irrespective of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage" (Eurodyce, 2015, p. 4). It is quite broad and abstract description. Thus, we agree with those researchers (De Anna, 2016; Jaeger, Wentz, & Bertot, 2015), who use this meaning together with the "inclusion" concept, despite some differences.

It has been detected that human factors have a significant impact on the institutional decisions (Staniskienė, 2005). Due to this, the factors are analyzed as on different levels of the social environment. We apply Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) and its derivative bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Factors conditioning accessibility to HE were analyzed based on several aspects: (a) the people with disabilities (Brandt, 2011; Liasidou, 2014), (b) women (Sifuna, 2006; Tavares, Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2008; Viefers, Christie, & Ferdos, 2006), and (c) ethnic minorities (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012; Smith, 2007). We also used sources (Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011; Wallis, 2005) that allow detecting factors conditioning sustainability of the accessibility from the perspective of inclusion.

Methods

First of all, based on literature analysis, the factors conditioning the accessibility to HE of the disadvantaged groups are grounded. Three disadvantaged groups are emphasized: (a) people with disabilities, (b) women, and (c) ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the empirical research is applied to detect factors conditioning differences of the accessibility to HE of the disadvantaged groups in various countries. Case-study strategy based on the qualitative research is chosen. It happens when an important behavior of people or organizations needs to be analyzed and which cannot be manipulated (Yin, 2013). The data are produced using the triangulation based on the methods: document analysis, focus group, and expert interview.

The participation of the authors of this presentation in the ERASMUS+ project "Developing programs for Access of Disadvantaged groups of people and Regions to Higher Education" (DARE) provided this research with exceptional opportunities. This project was implemented by the EU countries (Spain, the Great Britain, Romania, Czech Republic, and Lithuania), Israel (University of Haifa was DARE project's coordinator), Georgia, as well as the European Access Network.

DARE project aimed at promoting inclusive and responsive education in Georgia and Israel by widening access to HE for potential and existing students from three vulnerable groups: women, ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities (http://www.erasmusplus.org.il/dare).

Five countries and their HE institutions, of very different contexts, that are seeking to increase the accessibility to HE are analyzed. They were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) all of them are either an associated country with EU (Israel and Georgia), either EU member states (Lithuania, Czech Republic, and Romania); (b) all of them are involved into DARE project; (c) all of them officially accept the accessibility to HE goal as it has been defined by the EU and UNESCO; and (d) have different economic development levels and sociocultural context.

The unit of the case study is the concrete HE institution striving for the accessibility for target groups. The chosen four HE institutions from the DARE project countries

beneficiaries (two institutions from Israel and two from Georgia) and four HE institutions from this project countries, which shared their experiences with beneficiaries (two from Lithuania, one from Romania, and one HE institution of Czech Republic).

The experts for interviewing were chosen from each country participating in the case study, in total – five experts who have research, practical, and international project experiences on the subject.

Conclusions

The factors of the accessibility to HE are substantiated and discussed in the presentation: (a) of the country level and (b) of HE level, including institutional, study process, and personal factors. The empirical research and cross-sectional analysis of the cases allowed to detect a list of the factors, which are the reasons of the differences of the accessibility to HE of the disadvantaged groups between the analyzed countries and their HE institutions. The largest impact is detected from human factors, among which are the people who make decisions based on the institutional level, as well as the teachers, particularly, their competence, and the positive attitude to the matter. An important place among the sociocultural factors is taken by understanding dominant in the society about the accessibility to HE, tolerance to disadvantaged people, and possibility to receive advanced experience, when it is shared by the persons or institutions that are more competent in this area. Networking becomes highly important in this aspect. The data revealing specificity of the mentioned factors in the researched countries are also provided in this presentation.

However, our research is limited in the context of researched countries. To generalize the received data in the European or even worldwide area, broader research should be conducted.

Our research results might be useful for the researchers analyzing how to increase accessibility to HE, while stepping into countries having different contexts. The results are also useful for the HE practitioners while striving to increase accessibility to HE.

Keywords: higher education, accessibility, disadvantaged groups, factors conditioning accessibility, inclusion

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