

Editorial¹ by Kalypso Filippou, Valgerður S. Bjarnadóttir & Michael Shaughnessy

Reflections on Inclusivity and Equality in Higher Education

For centuries the role of academia, at least in normative terms, has been to create and disseminate knowledge, foster critical thinking and prepare its students and future scholars for the rigors of intellectual challenges of the world. Many share the hope that universities will strive to contribute to a better world, both for the current and future generations. Yet, societal changes due to technological innovations such as the various forms and developments of artificial intelligence, and the recent global health crisis, have impacted the realm of higher education (e.g., Khan, 2021; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023). In addition, the multiple significant conflicts across the world and the alarming impact of climate change have brought known and unknown uncertainties to battle and respond to such as, political instability, increased migration and displacement.

The opportunities for university students of today are vastly different than the students of past generations. There are more options and alternative routes to access university education, there are more courses offered online and there are more avenues to pick and choose from, in terms of a degree. The higher education sector worldwide has expanded regarding the number of students and programs, often referred to as the massification of higher education. Following this development, access to university education is no longer considered to be granted only to privileged people (Marginson, 2018) even though the debate over access and equality is a constant issue. This is due to the multiple barriers for access and inclusion of underrepresented students to universities that research has highlighted (Isopahkala-Bouret, Börjesson, Beach, Haltia, & Jónasson, 2018; Reay, 2022).

One way to increase access in higher education has been via technical solutions such as, the provision of entire online degree programmes (see Moloney & Oakley, 2010) where face to face discussions, within a physical classroom environment, have in some instances been replaced with discussion boards on

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online learning platforms. While this development initially left many worried about the absence of collaborative learning communities and networks, research has shown that supportive online environment can be achieved (see McDougall, 2019) and thus, create better access to higher education for people around the world. Nevertheless, we need to continue to conduct research on this field, keep addressing and tackling questions around access to higher education, teaching practices, quality and inclusion.

As scholars we need to keep developing and adapting in the changing societal and academic environments in which we live and work. Universities are under pressure to serve the knowledge-economy and are being measured on international indicators, creating a competitive businesslike environment, both in attracting students and in the funding, creation and dissemination of knowledge (e.g. Connell, 2019; Robertson, 2010). As universities are under great influence from this corporatization and commercialization of education, it is even more important that we address these questions and lead discussions around them. Through our journal, we aim to provide thorough analyses of policy practices, frameworks and ethical considerations associated with higher education and offer insights as to what the future will bring about. In this issue, these key topics are discussed from different angles. An interview, four papers and notes from the field provide a critical analysis of university practices, covering topics such as student's experiences and participation, university governance, pedagogical development, equality, and academic capitalism.

The first article, '*Let's play together for entrepreneurship!*' *Engaging actors in academic capitalism within the policy discourse on entrepreneurship*, provides a critical discursive approach to exploring entrepreneurship as goal and practice in a Nordic education system. It analyzes how business actors generate discourse through policy texts. The study illustrates how policy discourses in higher education emphasize economic logics and marketization, with business actors actively involved in defining the purpose of higher education. Furthermore, the study underscores how these policies strive to create an entrepreneurial environment within the university to meet the needs of entrepreneurs and businesses. The authors Päivi Siivonen, Hanna Laalo, and Michael Tomlinson, argue how this development can disrupt the foundations of the Nordic higher education systems, specifically by redefining and tightening the purpose of higher education.

In the second article *Equality in higher education opportunities: Practitioners' perspectives from global, rural post-colonial disability* the authors John C. Hayvon, Victor John Cordeiro, Jane Dunjamm, Susanne Strömberg Jämsvi, Jess Stainbrook and Nidhi Singhal, explore two key realms – MOOCs (Massive Open Online Classes) and the utilization of these to assist PLWD (People living

with disabilities) in the procurement of sustainable employment. The authors, from various countries around the world, with expertise in various realms of disabilities have examined the possibilities of utilizing MOOCs to assist those marginalized individuals in the procurement of employment. The lived experiences of those who have been and are disabled, are salient factors to be taken into consideration in employment. Many issues regarding the employment of the diverse marginalized populations are explored and the issue of MOOCs as being an equality enhancer is reviewed.

In the third article, *Finnish open university education and students' transitions into and within higher education*, Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret and Nina Haltia focusses on open university education and the provision of flexible transitions into and within higher education institutions. They draw on thematic interviews with students in Finland and have conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to examine how institutional policies and practices echo students' experiences and construct conditions for flexible transitions. Their findings reveal institutional features that characterize institutional flexibility and enable student's participation from diverse backgrounds.

The fourth article is by Linda Reneland-Forsman and Anders Forsman, *From taking decisions to receiving information: Changes in board meeting minutes at Swedish universities*. The authors analyse written records from board meetings in 2008 and 2018 at universities in Sweden. As a reform took place in 2011, which aimed to support the universities' autonomy, the authors explore the questions that were addressed in the boardrooms of Swedish universities before and after the reform and investigate the consequences of university governance. An alarming shift is noticed in content and occupational matters and raises multiple concerns and critical questions regarding the future function of university boards (Reneland-Forsman & Forsman, 2024, this issue).

In *An Interview with Gerald Cupchik* the following three concepts are discussed in depth and in perspective, those being: Equity, diversity and inclusion. These three concepts have permeated higher education and education in general, but there is little consensus as to how they are defined and implemented in higher education. The authors Gerald Cupchik and Michael Shaughnessy discuss the issue from the student perspective, the faculty perspective and the administrative perspective questioning as to whether these three words should be implemented from an administrative point of view or allowed to develop in classrooms as students from various cultures, races, ethnicities and so on come together to learn, to network and to grow and develop as human beings and citizens of the world.

The current issue also includes practical *Notes from the field*, in the article: *Testing a model for classroom observation in higher education*. University teachers

from Sweden present a pilot study on collegial exchange for classroom observations. The increasing emphasis on pedagogical skills, evident in courses offered in teaching and learning in higher education, as well as in the merit models within academia, serves as a motivation for the project outlined in the paper. This pilot study focuses on fostering collegial learning and support among university teachers, to solicit critical feedback, encourage reflection, and promote collective growth in relation to their pedagogical skills. The authors Åsa Carlsund and Helen Askund describe the process, reflect on the results and discuss future development, offering readers in different contexts practical ideas for experimenting with collegial exchange for classroom observations.

Before we conclude, we wish to thank our reviewers that provide detailed and constructive feedback to our authors and editors! Their contribution to the journal and to the field of praxis in higher education is greatly appreciated.

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