SUBPROJECT 5

A Systems Level Focus on Access to Education for Traditionally Marginalised Groups.

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Context of the research

Consistent with the key underlying goal of promotion of social inclusion, the aim of this research subproject is to analyse the role of education institutions and non-traditional educational contexts in promotion of the access of adults to the education system, particularly those adults from backgrounds of social marginalisation. The focus of this subproject is on the educational institutions and government policy more than on accounts of individual motivation.

The research is based on qualitative research across 12 European countries in relation to access to education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It consists of 196 semi-structured interviews in total with senior management of education institutions and senior government officials. The interviews for the 12 national reports involved senior management from: formal education organizations, including universities in each participating country; prison institutions; non-formal education organisations and postprimary schools. For each national report, detailed interviews were also conducted with senior government department officials with responsibility for State policy in relation to education and related areas of access to education and social inclusion.

In order to help overcome barriers to access for marginalized groups, and to ensure some degree of coherence across EU member states, it is considered essential to develop a list of common benchmarks and targets to measure change over time. In May 2009 the Education Council revised the current set of benchmarks as part of the Council conclusions on the ET 2020 strategic framework. These benchmarks include the areas of early leavers from education and training, as well as higher education attainment and participation in lifelong learning. The Commission Communication (2007) observes that 'good governance' in the area of lifelong learning includes strong evidence-based monitoring and evaluation systems within national frameworks. However, Commission documents (2006, p.5; 2009, p.84) highlight the slow progress made with regard to important access and outcome indicators for education and social exclusion.

Key Issues for the European Commission and Policymakers

Based on this qualitative research across 12 European countries in relation to access to education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, the following are key recommendations for the European Commission and other policymakers to consider on this issue:

1. To establish a framework of structural, process and outcome indicators to assess progress in relation to access to education for traditionally marginalised groups and for prevention of early school leaving;

2. To engage in dialogue with all member states about establishing a central driving committee at government level to promote access to education where no such committee exists; this driving committee would have a cross-departmental remit in each country and would also help stimulate regional level strategies in this area;

3. To establish a regular review process for states in relation to the implementation of and progress made in relation to the structural, process and outcome indicators;

4. To lead a process of establishing transparent criteria to assess socio-economic disadvantage, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, with a view to clarifying target groups experiencing such disadvantage to enable strategies to increase their access to education;

5. To establish a framework to inform national and regional strategies for nonformal education, in States where no such strategies exist;

6. To establish a framework based on structural, process and outcome indicators, to inform national strategies for prison education, also including high security prisons, in States where no such strategies exist;

7. To further develop a funding framework for community based learning centres across States that would include outreach and nonformal education to engage with unemployed people, early school leavers, ethnic minorities experiencing social marginalisation, people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage;

8. To foster European level discussion and agreement about the necessary technological dimensions to be developed to ensure the establishment of distance education in prisons; this technological development would meet the security concerns of the prison regarding prisoner communication with the external world and access to restricted internet sites;

9. To further develop a funding framework to provide incentives to universities to increase access to traditionally marginalised groups, including a focus on differentiated funding based on performance in relation to access, and also a faculty/department specific focus on incentives and access;

10. To further develop a funding framework for arts education to engage with unemployed people, early school leavers, ethnic minorities experiencing social marginalisation, people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and prisoners;

11. To lead the development of an accessibility index internationally, building further on existing indices, to monitor the performance of universities internationally; this index would include a focus on the performance of so-called 'elite' universities in relation to access for marginalized groups.

12. To encourage universities to open their facilities free of charge to community groups in the evening and summer, to liaise more closely with NGOs representing ethnic minorities and traditionally marginalized communities, to engage in preparatory admission courses for underrepresented groups, to provide representation for and institutional mainstreaming of access issues in university strategies, polices, structures and practices;

13. To facilitate the development of different distinctive indicators of quality for nonformal education, consonant with the often different goals of nonformal education; building on existing initial indicators; this would both recognize the need for more connection between the nonformal and formal education sectors while also protecting the nonformal sector from 'colonization' by the formal education sector;

14. To engage with national governments regarding the issue of providing sufficient space (and time) in all prisons to allow for lifelong learning in prisons, to ensure that access to lifelong learning is a core prison feature and not simply peripheral to prison authorities' concerns;

15. To develop a funding framework for emotional support, alternative structures to suspension from school, for the establishment of multidisciplinary teams to provide emotional support and with an outreach dimension to engage with students at risk of early school leaving and their families experiencing social marginalization;

16. To lead an EU level initiative on prevention of school suspension and expulsion and developing alternatives to suspension and expulsion from school;

17. To further lead dialogue on the development of transparent criteria for recognition of prior learning in relation to access to the formal higher education system in order to tackle the obstacles to recognition of prior learning currently experienced in a number of States;

18. To engage with national governments to clarify how the distinct though related lifelong learning goals of social inclusion/cohesion, active citizenship, employment and personal fulfillment are to be given systemic expression strategically through structures at national and regional level.

References

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