

‘Rethink, reinvent and adapt’, WAHED tells higher education

[Nic Mitchell](#) 19 November 2021

Higher education can lead the way to recovery from the pandemic, but first it has to ‘rethink, reinvent and adapt’ to better serve its citizens, communities and economy, an international conference held to mark the 2021 World Access to Higher Education Day, or WAHED, was told.

The global all-day event on 17 November, hosted by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) in the United Kingdom, brought together speakers from North and South America, Africa, Europe and Asia and was one of many events held around the globe to call for greater equity in access to higher education in the post-COVID world.

The theme for this year’s event, the fourth WAHED, for which *University World News* is the media partner, was ‘Who will be going to university in 2030?’.

Courtney Brown, vice president of strategic impact at the Lumina Foundation, which promotes increased access and attainment to post-secondary education and qualifications with a focus on racial equity in the United States, set the tone.

Higher education under attack

Brown said that even before the pandemic, higher education was under attack “because of its cost, the way it contributes to increasing societal divides and racial inequity and its value”.

She told participants: “These concerns were magnified over the last 18 months of the pandemic as uncertainties and worries over health and money raged.

“In the US alone, millions left higher education or abandoned their plans to learn and train.”

Participation rates had dropped 6.5% in the US since the fall of 2019 and show no sign of rebounding any time soon. “And this is happening across the globe; it is not a US phenomenon” – but in the United States it is groups like the black community and Native Americans that are hit hardest.

Mixed media messages about the price tag of what some claim to be a “sub-standard online teaching” further reinforced those questioning the value of higher education during the campus shutdowns, she warned.

Millions giving up

So, despite clear evidence that higher education is the most powerful force to address income inequality and close equity gaps and drive economic growth and recovery and promote civic engagement, “millions have given up or are being systematically left out of higher education”.

She described the situation as “a wake-up call” and told the conference: “If we don’t act quickly, we risk widening the divide of the haves and have-nots.”

Brown said: “Higher education can lead the way as we recover from the pandemic, but first it has to rethink, reinvent and adapt to better serve our citizens, communities and economy.”

‘Don’t go back to what was not working’

“We must not go back to what we were doing 18 months ago, which clearly was not working,” Brown said.

Higher education needs to take stock of three critical populations: today’s students, those who have never touched tertiary education and what she called “stop-outs” – the growing number of people with some college, but no degree, which has reached 36 million in the United States.

To find out who will be going to university in 2030, higher education must pay more attention to who today’s students are.

“They are no longer 18 year olds, fresh out of secondary school and headed straight to a university.

“In the US, and this is pretty similar across the world, nearly 40% are older than 25; more than 40% are students of colour; half are financially independent of their parents. Nearly two-thirds work, at least part-time, and one in four are raising children.”

System not designed for diverse student population

However, the higher education system was not designed for this increasingly diverse student population which helps to explain why so many “stop-out”, said Brown.

“If we could change just one thing that could make a dramatic difference as we emerge from this pandemic, it would be understanding today’s students and redesigning our system to actually meet their needs,” she said.

More flexible learning, with evening courses, day care for students’ children and tackling “sky-high” tuition costs were among the starting points.

Carmen Romero, a steering committee member of the Global Student Forum, the umbrella body for 198 student organisations and movements in 120 countries, told the conference that WAHED coincided with International Students’ Day and they had produced a statement, “Recovering better, without cutting our future”.

Perpetuating inequalities

The former students’ union leader from Spain said: “If you wonder why or how students in Africa, North and South America, Europe and Asia have the same political aspirations, such as equal and free access to education for everyone, the answer is quite simple. The current system is not working for a substantial part of society.

“It is actually perpetuating and reproducing the inequalities that so many children and youngsters suffer from.”

Romero backed the call from African student unions, saying “education should remain a public responsibility”, but she warned that some governments in Africa appeared to want to invest less in public education and “delegate this very important and critical role to the private sector”.

Proper student representation in decision-making

Romero also said it was essential for proper student representation at the highest levels of decision-making to plot the way forward to “free, inclusive and quality education for all now and for all future generations”.

Echoing some of Courtney Brown’s arguments, Romero said: “We cannot think about who will be accessing university in the future if we don’t think about those who don’t have access to basic education now.”

Joanna Newman, chief executive and secretary general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), which has a membership of over 500 universities in 53 countries spread across five continents, said she was in “violent agreement” with Courtney Brown and Carmen Romero.

Role of higher education in development

Many of the ACU universities are in poorer nation states, including island nations threatened by climate change, and while those attending events like WAHED believe higher education “is essential in the whole ecosystem of education”, she warned that the “role of higher education in development is not an argument that has been won”.

So, on World Access to Higher Education Day, her key message to world leaders was: “You cannot have good primary and secondary education without the contribution of universities, whether that’s in providing really good pedagogy, training teachers, content, or in terms of personal enrichment and a satisfying life and turning the lives of others around.”

While she understood the focus on building up capacity in primary and secondary education in developing nations, ACU was campaigning for the United Nations to recognise that higher education was essential to achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

At present, access to higher education is “totally dependent on wealth and geography”, said Newman, with participation in tertiary education standing at only 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa despite the huge pool of young talent, while it had reached 77% in Europe and North America.

Universities no longer ‘ivory towers’

Newman said it was crucial to challenge old-fashioned views of universities as “ivory towers” and told the conference: “I don’t think we as a sector have made a cohesive argument about why we matter. We quite often care more about the rankings and competition than about the case of higher education in development.”

But developing countries cannot secure prosperity, security and happiness without having a larger percentage of their populations going into good quality higher education, she said.

“And that can’t be exported in a colonial-style MOOC model; it has to be co-created with content that is relevant to situations in those countries,” said Newman, who added that the United Kingdom government had recently started funding universities to be part of development partnerships in other countries.

ACU members were also collaborating with telecommunications companies to facilitate free internet access for students, which was such a big challenge in low- and-middle-income countries, citing the example of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and Ashesi University in Ghana.

Also speaking at the session on the way forward was Dr Lande Ajose, Recovery with Equity Taskforce chair and senior policy advisor for higher education in the Office of the Governor of California, who said that while America’s richest state had been successful in reducing drop-out rates from tertiary education by focusing on equity of opportunity, it also had some of America’s poorest in its population and too few African Americans were graduating successfully into good jobs.

Data privacy paradox

Earlier, in a conference session on evidence and data, the conference heard from David Crosier, education system analyst at Eurydice, a network based in the 37 countries of the Erasmus+ programme which helps to explain how education systems operate in Europe.

He said a major challenge in data collection for higher education was what he described as the “privacy paradox”, with many saying they are concerned about data protection while freely giving up personal data to global media companies and commercial organisations.

“Public authorities claim to have a high interest in tackling inequity but justify not collecting some forms of data because of sensitivity issues and often lack the data which would be useful to initiate and monitor policy.”

Inequity a feature of European education

Crosier said while inequity remains a strong feature of European higher education, only a handful of countries have taken steps to address the situation.

“Unfortunately, the most likely future is that inequity will remain and its impact will increase as putting equity at the centre of education policy risks upsetting those, including politicians, who benefit from an inequitable status quo.

“There is little sign that inequity in early childhood and school education is being addressed and without a holistic approach, higher education can only mitigate the impact of inequity,” he warned.

Dr Graeme Atherton, director of NEON which organised the conference, chaired the conference which packed plenty of punch in almost non-stop sessions from early morning to early evening UK time.

WAHED to become global network

Atherton said: “While we are proud of the work that WAHED has done, if we are to continue to support effective global collaboration and dialogue in this area then WAHED needs to move forward.

“In January 2022, we will be launching a new global network to support equitable access and success and we will be inviting organisations to join and participate.

“This network will enable ongoing thematic exchange of practice in key aspects of the equitable access and success agenda; bring together and share innovative practice; produce the evidence to empower organisations and policy-makers to advocate for equity in access and success; and provide capacity-building support including the World Access to Higher Education Day or WAHED.”

He invited those interested in this new network to give their views on what needs to be done to make higher education more equitable by 2030 as part of a research project on ‘Equitable access and success in higher education across the world: the road to 2030’ and to take part in a survey which can be accessed [here](#).

Nic Mitchell is a UK-based freelance journalist and PR consultant specialising in European and international higher education. He blogs at www.delacourcommunications.com.