THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract. The article analyzes the necessity and world experience of implementing the principles of inclusive education in higher education. Inclusive education was initially developed for primary school children, even before its application in higher education. However, as more students with disabilities successfully complete their school education, there is an increasing need to move towards inclusive practices in higher education.

Keywords: inclusive education, higher education, professional competence, educational process, mentoring, university, teaching staff.

Education and work are the main conditions of human independence and substantially contribute to the fulfillment of life. Therefore, it is essential to create an environment that does not restrict an access of persons with disabilities to education and work. To improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities into society, it is necessary to strengthen the inclusive education and create favorable conditions for this type of education. The aim of inclusion is not to eliminate differences among people, but to enable every person with different abilities and capabilities to be accepted by the community on the basis of human rights [p.15, 1].

The development of inclusive education on an international scale was evident mostly in the 1990s, particularly with the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO’s activities aim to eliminate any discrimination in access to education. In 1990, the Education for All movement was launched, which adopted the World Declaration on Education for All in the same year.
(UNESCO, 2009). Since then, several international documents on inclusive education have been issued to support its implementation in the country’s education policies in order to create and ensure inclusive society development. Many activities were focused mainly on inclusive education at primary and secondary level, not tertiary education. Improvement started after the United Nations (UN) approved the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, which is very important document focused on various aspects of social inclusion, covering also inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning [p.16, 1].

Throughout this inclusive process, university teaching staff play a decisive role given that, apart from the services and support that universities have to respond to the needs this type of student presents, it is the teacher that must adapt their teaching process to the student’s characteristics, interests, and difficulties. On numerous occasions, according to Fernandez, the teaching staff present a real obstacle for these students. For attention to special needs, the preparation of future teachers is considered relevant; training in which teachers acquire a series of teaching strategies to guarantee successful inclusion is essential. The professional competencies teachers need in any educational process must be related, mainly to the assessment and monitoring of educational needs, the organization of systems, resources and support mechanisms in all forms, and the design and development of curricular adaptations.

These competencies are essential for providing support and advisory functions that tend to facilitate access and progress in student’s learning throughout the schooling period; competencies that should be present in all attention to special needs students units [p.2, 2].

Singapore currently spends close to USD $8 billion on education, accounting for more than 20% of total government expenditure. Starting with a focus on providing basic literacy for the masses in 1960’s and 1970’s, the socio-economic revolution in 1980’s led to a focus on efficiency-driven education in which students attended schools based on their perceived aptitudes and abilities. The priority placed on education has helped Singapore become one of the world’s best performing educational systems. Singapore is now recognized as a world leader in education as Singaporean students continually achieve high scores in mathematics, science and language in international comparisons such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Despite these rankings, Singapore continues to practice a dual education system in which students with special needs are educated in separate environments [p.30, 3].

The most significant challenge currently facing stakeholders in Australian higher education is uncertainty. The sector is on the threshold of some of the most important structural and policy transformations since the 1980s. There is shared concern that, rather than reflecting the quintessential Australian value of a fair go, the reforms proposed to deregulate higher education have the potential to discourage people from equity groups from pursuing their higher education aspirations. While commentators speculate about potential costs of degrees and increased repayment periods for student loans, many people with disabilities wonder instead whether they can afford a university degree and if their
«investment» can be realized given the disadvantage they experience in the employment market.

Inclusion in higher education is experienced on a personal level. It is facilitated by the removal of barriers to access and participation, enabled by high quality, inclusive learning environments and enhanced by effective student support. Disability practitioners play an important role interpreting legislation, translating equity policy into practice, and coordinating support. Future higher education equity policy must result in people with disabilities having access to the «full spectrum of opportunity» including «the opportunity to excel», enabling those participating in higher education to say, as Student B did, «University has allowed me to develop myself professionally and personally in the most phenomenal and life-changing way» [p.416, 4].

References