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The Good of Good Practices

How to close achievement gaps

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In a time of increasing diversity in education, disparities in academic performance and growing gaps in employment between groups of students become more prevalent. New policies and programs to enhance an inclusive learning environment are developed to close these gaps. Interestingly enough diversity and inclusion policy is too often perceived as doing 'the right thing' driven by ideology and moral values only. It is equally important to make *smart* choices driven by economic imperatives and based on evidence of good practices. Looking at good practices of colleagues or institutions on a national or international level provide inspiration and hands-on experience to learn from. The most important part is *how* to replicate and implement good practices of others within the context of the institution and the learning environment.

This paper synthesizes the findings and analysis of the IDEAS consortium¹ and can therefore not be seen separately from the analysis of 57 cases in the IDEAS database². IDEAS (Identifying effective approaches to enhancing the social dimension in Higher Education) has been executed with EU funding from 2013-2016. The cases in IDEAS are a mirror of how equity is perceived in different parts of Europe and in other parts of the world. They represent the sense of intentionality and determination of national and local governments, (higher) education institutions, programme coordinators, student unions, faculties, local businesses, foundations, ngo's and many students. Most of the cases in IDEAS were and still are successful because of a collective effort with a collective impact of proven success. These cases started with a vision and intention, and

developed themselves through determination, ownership, accountability, collaboration, negotiation, representation and innovation within a culture of evidence – to the success that they have become.

Not that easy

The IDEAS database presents a palette of practices that have proven to be successful, for reasons of effectiveness and efficiency. There are more reasons though why initiatives, programmes, interventions are seen as good practices. Why are good practices qualified as good? What makes them successful and what have good practices achieved in the first place and impacted in the second place?

Proven success cannot be seen separately from impact. Especially when initiatives were developed with the purpose to

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improve and create change. Proving what enables access and educational outcomes in diverse societies is not that easy. There is not a one size fits all measure or programme to improve social and educational inequities. The IDEAS database is a reflection of the variety of interventions to create opportunities in education. There are many reasons why the cases in the database can be labelled as good practice.

It is fair to say that all cases are promising practices and some of them are good practices for a variety of reasons:

- Good practices that have proven their success in terms of time, in fact survived policy and political changes and are part of the mainstream services and programmes of institutions and regions. These examples can be seen as good practices because of the impact they created. These practices often have intended and unintended outcomes and impact on a student and an institutional level;
- Good practices that have proven their success in terms of having measurable results and have successful qualitative outcomes;
- Good practices that are efficient apart from being effective because they can be replicated in a fairly short amount of time with a limited amount of resources;
- Good practices that have proven their success in a rather short timespan but have the potential to **grow** to a long term sustainable success;
- Good practices, which are innovative in their aims and way of implementation. Innovative because of content, political and regional context, funding mechanisms and innovative in terms of mission and vision. Practices that dare to challenge organisations by touching upon sensitive issues.
- Good practices that support the visibility of and success of groups who have not only been underrepresented but were invisible or neglected in many ways because of a lack of (political) acknowledgement, for instance indigenous groups in different parts of the globe.

Proven success

Proven success implies that programmes have made an impact and will therefore be further disseminated, replicated and mainstreamed. This means programmes become part of the structure, system and policy of an institution, region, country et cetera. Paul Thayer, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Retention at Colorado State University, makes the distinction between student impact versus institutional impact. It is important to look at the impact of interventions on the academic success of students as well as the impact of interventions on the organization: *Thinking Systemically about Teaching, Learning, and Student Success*.

Thayer stresses that interventions focusing only on the 'change of students' will have little or no impact if the institute doesn't simultaneously change as well. Both types

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of impact are complementary to each other.

Figure 1 illustrates how some 'single' actions, for instance sending a letter of warning to students requires little of the organization itself and usually has little impact on the behaviour of students who receive these letters.

The impact of an intervention like tutoring is slightly larger, but it still requires little change of the organization itself. Substantial impact on an institutional level asks for a more systemic and holistic approach of an institution. Colorado State University has achieved great success over the years with their retention strategy aimed at inclusive 'teaching and learning'. Students, faculty and staff are actively involved and work together in a comprehensive teaching and learning center. In this center faculty members are challenged to teach differently taking the diversity of the student population into account as well as being more engaging with the diverse student population and provide high levels of support. By engaging with students more intensively, personally and directly, faculty members also get a better understanding of who students are and the 'world' they come from. This centre also aims to develop educational innovation where faculty, teaching staff, undergraduate and graduate students are involved.

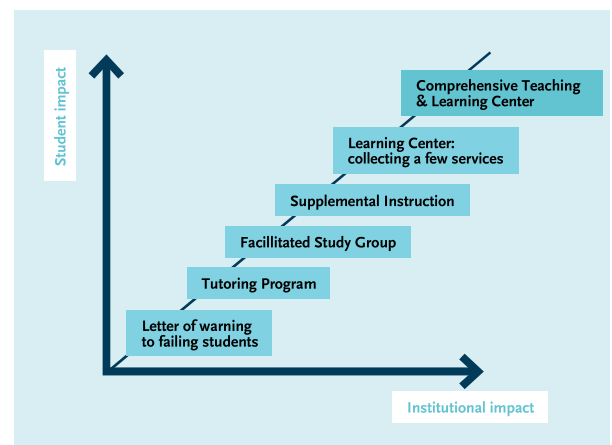


Figure 1 *Student Impact and Institutional Impact of proven practices* (Source: Paul Thayer Colorado State University)

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Thayer has been the architect and developer of a long-term retention strategy and after many years is still involved in improving and innovating programmes to increase quantitative and qualitative results. Part of the process is also to constantly find new angles with research to support the process of continuous improvement of current activities to achieve the projected aims and objectives.

Measuring success

When we collected these data we were keen to know how success is being measured. The cases that have sophisticated monitoring processes (over time) are more successful than cases that do not have a data analytics infrastructure in place. The cases that can show proven success over time are more successful. In these cases longitudinal data is used with the aim to learn and improve programmes and activities. Longitudinal data also provided the opportunity to develop interventions to solve new issues, since society has its own dynamics. A solution that was needed yesterday can be less effective after a few years. An example of this is the many support programmes that have been developed to serve a certain aim or target group and have been tailor made or innovated for this reason. The focus in support programs for example expanded and intensified from support focussed on outreach and access activities to support focussed on retention and attainment in higher education. New developments require support programs to make a successful transition to the labour market.

Developing indicators of success and measuring success in general is an important, but also a challenging task. Apart from the changing context, measuring developments in general is a vital part of the process, whether done sophisticatedly or not. Monitoring performances are a key condition and requirement for initiatives that aim to have impact. In the past too often initiatives have been developed to avoid difficult discussions or because governments provided funding based on policy or legislative decisions. Another often heard argument why monitoring is not developed is because of the sensitivity of data and information on students. There are nations that collect a lot of information but not always use the data sufficiently and efficiently. Measuring results is meant for purposes of learning, becoming aware whether aims have been achieved and if not, to raise questions why aims have not been achieved in order to find better solutions. Too often data collection and measuring success is confused with accountability connected to funding.

'Cultural' barriers

A number of good practice cases addresses some of the 'cultural' barriers underrepresented groups are facing once they are at university.

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- The **POP-corner** at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Leiden provides academic support for all students, with a special focus on underrepresented students with migrant backgrounds during their first year and beyond. It is both a physical space in a central area of the department (thus easy to locate for students) and an infrastructure of multiple service provision. It helps students find their way through the maze of buildings, navigate courses and curricula and find the right places and methods to further develop relevant skill sets to improve attainment, or increase academic challenges. One of the services includes ad hoc mentoring of freshmen by older peers. The intervention is embedded in a larger infrastructure of available student support systems and aims to improve attainment. POP-corner emerged from the needs expressed by (underrepresented) students and the desire from the institution to develop a service that was tailor made by and for students. Leiden University is committed to respond to demographic changes and therefore develop an inclusive learning environment for all students. Leiden University joined forces with Erasmus University Rotterdam and VU University Amsterdam by collaborating in the Taskforce The Future is Diversity, aiming to improve academic success and the transition to the labour market of 'bi-cultural' students.
- **Opportunities for underrepresented scholars (OURS)** is a leadership programme at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology in Washington DC, designed to prepare women of colour in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects for academic leadership roles, whether within their disciplines or within institutional administrations. Using an action-learning model, the programme creatively integrates the professional education of women in STEM with authentic leadership experiences to help participants respond effectively to the pedagogical issues and academic leadership challenges of the 21st century. This one-year certificated postgraduate programme is

Allerhande diversiteit

delivered online with face-to-face residencies and mandatory 'capstone' practical experiences in between taught modules, which include personal coaching. The first cohort of twenty women successfully finalized the programme. The second cohort has started with fifteen women. The alumni of the programme and future alumni will positively impact the self-identification of young women from underrepresented groups at universities to continue after their undergraduate programmes. These future leaders will be role models for future students and scholars. Although this outcome cannot be proved with hard evidence yet, the qualitative evidence is there already given the fact that the participants of the different universities are celebrated and acknowledged within their institutions. The start of the programme and the substantial grant of the National Science Foundation of \$1.8 million is in fact a success itself because it acknowledges the need for more leadership of underrepresented groups in the STEM areas and is a national recognition of the quality of the programme. The fact that additional money has already been given to the programme proves the success of the first cohort.

- The **Academic Advancement Program (AAP)** of the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) has evolved for over forty years. The programme improves the academic achievement of historically underrepresented groups, which originally targeted particularly African Americans and Latinos but now extends to students from disadvantaged backgrounds of all races. AAP is holistic, targets students and staff and provides an array of services and programmes related to curriculum- and policy development, community- and parents engagement and professional development. One of the elements of success is the early outreach part of the programme through the Center of Community College Partnerships (CCCCP) to prepare students for successful admission to selective universities like UCLA. Through CCCC, UCLA works with 21 community colleges from the LA area. Most of the colleges have a large share of underrepresented

students. Another important part of the success is the holistic approach and vision on making excellence inclusive by, having high expectations of all students, creating a campus climate where students feel they belong as well as a high level of support. The most impressive outcome seen from a European perspective is the major increase in retention and attainment rates that has been achieved over the years. The six-year graduation rate of the programme in 1985 was about 45%. This number increased to 87% in 2005 and increased even more in the past years. The gap in performance of the AAP student population in comparison with the mainstream UCLA student population is a few percentage points.

- The focus of **School Within A College (SWAC)** at George Brown College Toronto is on motivating secondary students who are facing challenges in graduating or have left high school before graduating. The SWAC programme is intended to provide a model for the delivery of secondary credit courses by secondary school teachers and college dual credit courses taught by college professors within a collaborative learning community on a college campus. The SWAC's primary focus is on students facing challenges in graduating: students who are disengaged and underachieving, but who have the potential to succeed in college. The rationale behind the action was that nearly a third of students were not completing their high school education in 2003-04. The SWAC research and evaluation explored effective ways to improve long-term student outcomes, both academically and personally. This included a survey of student's perceptions and attitudes about the factors that participating students perceived as a major influence of their success (credit achievement) at school. The programme's impact is seen on different levels. Better linkages between the college system and the secondary school system. Expanded and improved transitions of students in secondary- to post-secondary education. Enhance confidence in academic abilities in pursuit of post-secondary education. In providing greater access to post-secondary education for marginalized and first-generation students. With continued funding of School/College/Work/Initiative (a collaboration of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and the Committee of College Presidents), George Brown College has been able to deliver the program since 2010. The SWAC program is offered across the province of Ontario in different iterations. George Brown College's model is unique in the number of credits being offered in one semester, the success rates of the program and is considered a best practice site.

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The different needs

There is no 'silver bullet' nor 'one size fits all' solution to the many issues in the IDEAS database that were presented as

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challenges for institutions who are determined to improving equity and inclusion for a diversity of students in their higher education institutions, schools, communities et cetera. All cases started with the intention to make a change for certain groups of students that are either underrepresented or for many reasons deal with barriers that are related to a specific political, institutional, national, regional, local and personal context. The more the specific context is taken into account, and the more targeted an intervention is implemented and replicated, the more successful the intervention will be. There are examples of policy where different groups who face barriers in accessing or in being successful in higher education are mentioned as one target group without differentiating in interventions based on their specific needs. The fear for stigmatizing students is an often-mentioned reason, which can have deep rooted historical connotations. By not taking the different needs into account there is a risk that policy is too general and at the end of the day not reaching the target groups to whom the policy was meant to make a change. That's why monitoring, evaluation and measuring impact are important parts of a strategy of introducing policy to improve equity and inclusion.

The challenge for institutions is to create an inclusive educational environment that responds to the academic motivation and the perseverance of all students. A learning environment is effective when it responds to both cognitive and non-cognitive learning and professionals are aware of the fact that culture, social background and images influence how young people think, feel and do. Identifying and capitalizing the intrinsic motivation requires more than just believing in the talent and aspirations of students. The diversity of social background and educational level of parents bring differences in orientation and knowledge of higher education and the difference in social and cultural capital. Research by Peter Sacks shows that intrinsic motivation of young first generation students alone is insufficient to succeed in higher education. Students are aware of the differences between students and how faculty perceives these. Being intrinsically motivated does not mean that students are less confident. Because academic self-confidence is an important principle of academic achievement, the role of professionals in dealing with diversity and inclusion is probably one of the most important factors in increasing academic achievement.

It's not just about what you do, but how and by whom it is done.

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Noten

- 1 Tavistock Institute in London, ECHO, Center for Diversity Policy in The Hague, European Student Union in Brussels, EURASHE in Brussels and Knowledge Innovation Centre in Malta.
- 2 IDEAS website and database <http://www.equityideas.eu/>