

Introduction to the joint research project 2011/12

Understanding and overcoming educational disadvantage: How schools of education contribute to improving equity

Educational disadvantage takes many different forms, but globally it is a major barrier to the well-being of individuals, communities and the prosperity of nations. These forms include low socio-economic status, indigenous communities, new arrivals and children with special needs. What represents 'disadvantage' will differ from system to system, and institutions will differ in the ways they contribute to reducing disadvantage. In both developed and developing countries, there is wide acceptance that marked and persistent disadvantage can and should be ended. The OECD, which has led international policy research on equity, has summarised the goal as 'No More Failures' (OECD, 2007).

The focus of the IALEI research project is on the role of teacher training institutions in reducing disadvantage. School systems are committed to improving quality and equity – how do teacher training institutions help systems and schools achieve quality outcomes for children who experience disadvantage?

IALEI aims at contributing to the work of the OECD and UNICEF by targeting their research project on the following.

University schools of education are uniquely placed to contribute to the twin tasks of understanding and overcoming educational disadvantage. Broadly there are three means by which this could be performed:

- I. Research into the origins of disadvantage**
 - II. The education of teachers to work in disadvantaged settings**
 - III. Policy development through independent and critical studies and through government-commissioned research.**
- I. Research into the origins of disadvantage belongs to the fundamental business of university schools of education. Without the growth of knowledge in this field, neither the education of teachers nor service to community and government can be guided by what needs to change in educational policy and practice, institutional arrangements, or the social contexts that underlie disadvantage. How are schools of education contributing to the growth of knowledge about the roots of disadvantage?
 - II. The complexity of the causes of educational disadvantage poses a major challenge to the content and organisation of teacher education programmes. Different perspectives favour different emphases, e.g. more discipline knowledge, greater clinical orientation and training, more school-based experience, greater diversity of professional backgrounds. But to what extent do university schools of education

seek to adapt teacher education programmes specifically to educational disadvantage (and to what forms of disadvantage)?

- III. Shaping policy through critical studies and commissioned research is the third major means by which university schools of education help tackle disadvantage. Academics are both critics and servants of government. They live out an uneasy tension between public questioning of how well things work and trying to shape policy through expert advice, often given on a privileged basis.

An integrated approach to the theme of disadvantage would be to make fundamental research on educational disadvantage the primary focus, but also to examine how this is translated into adaptive teacher education programmes and how this would influence policy. Therefore, the theme for 2012 is entitled '**Understanding and overcoming educational disadvantage: How schools of education contribute to improving equity**'.

The goal of this activity is to stimulate reflection on how teacher training institutions are responding to the challenge of readdressing disadvantage in education. What are we trying to do and how good are we at it? Sharing and questioning our experience among colleagues should help us improve our contribution. It will also assist us in building the case with government and within institutions themselves for ongoing support and commitment.

For further information, please contact the Chair of the IALEI research team 2011/12:

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References

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UNICEF (2007) *All Children Everywhere* (New York)