Reunión de seguimiento de la Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior (CRES+5), Brasilia, Brasil, 13 a 15 de marzo 2024

Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES+5) follow-up meeting, Brasilia, Brazil, March 13-15, 2024

Reunião de acompanhamento da Conferência Regional de Educação Superior (CRES+5), Brasília - Brasil, 13 a 15 março 2024

FINAL DRAFT (MARCH 6, 2024)

AXIS 9: INCLUSION, DIVERSITY AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Consultants of Working Group 9 – Axis 9: Inclusion, diversity and the role of women in higher education

- Myriam Moise
- Maribel Enaida Alegre Jara
- Juliana Cabeza
- Sandra Goulart

Table of contents

Introduction 2

1. Key Concepts and Definitions 3

2. Balance of the Previous Achievements in the Theme of Inclusion, Diversity and Women's Role in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean 7

3. Identification of New Challenges and Prioritization of Actions for 2028 8

FINAL DRAFT

Introduction

The Regional Conferences on Higher Education (CRES), under the auspices of UNESCO, have played a pivotal role in fostering international consensus, as manifested in specific guidelines. These guidelines articulate, firstly, the perception of Higher Education as a public and social good; secondly, the recognition of the right to Higher Education as an integral component of the universal right to education; thirdly, the acknowledgment of states as primary actors in ensuring the exercise of this right within a framework of equal opportunities; and finally, the affirmation that universities, given their essential role in research, production, and transmission of scientific knowledge, should be endowed with institutional autonomy within the bounds of academic freedom.

Furthermore, Higher Education institutions are underscored in their significant responsibility to promote inclusion, diversity, and gender equity. A truly equitable and inclusive Higher Education system necessitates the systematic identification and removal of all barriers obstructing equal access to quality education, training, and academic advancement. Characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, health, social origin, socio-economic status, disability, and other identity markers often serve as impediments to access and progression. Consequently, the identification and elimination of these barriers should be undertaken through an intersectional approach, emphasizing the interconnections among these features. This requires the development and implementation of comprehensive strategies for accessibility, reasonable adjustment, universal design and equality of opportunities. Concerning individuals with disabilities, these requirements should align with the principles set forth in the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The pivotal role of Latin American and Caribbean universities and research institutions lies in their capacity for producing and disseminating transversal and contextualized knowledge. This extends to their ability to integrate inclusive training practices and contribute to the development and implementation of public and institutional policies that embrace the diverse characteristics of the region. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America and the Caribbean carry the responsibility of safeguarding the rights of groups frequently subjected to discrimination based on race, ethnicity, social class, migratory status, religion, age, sexual orientation, and disability. Regardless of their public or private nature, these institutions must prioritize inclusiveness, diversity, and equity in all facets of research, teaching, and extracurricular activities to ensure equal opportunities for all members of academic communities. Ultimately, HEIs play a vital role in fostering universal human values, thereby contributing to societal transformation and the establishment of sustainable and equitable futures for upcoming generations.

FINAL DRAFT

Various institutional instruments and official declarations have sought to support the development of more inclusive, culturally diverse, and gender-equal Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The objectives of the Regional Conferences on Higher Education (CRES) exemplify a continuous commitment to reflecting on and improving Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. The final declaration of the 2018 CRES held in Cordoba emphasizes that "public and institutional policies of Higher Education must contribute proactively to dismantle all the mechanisms that generate racism, discrimination, and all forms of intolerance" prevalent in the region. The 2018 Declaration, along with those from Havana in 1996 and Cartagena in 2008, is foundational, providing a guiding methodology, strategic plan of action, and roadmap for HEIs in the region, aligning with the UN Global Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030. This is particularly evident in Sustainable Development Goal 4, focusing on "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all," and sub-objective 4.5, stressing the need to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations." Additionally, SDG5 emphasizes the overarching goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

While the central themes of inclusion, diversity, and the role of women in Higher Education are acknowledged, it is imperative to deepen and strengthen transversal institutional actions, strict policy implementation, and internal regulations within HEIs and academic networks in the Latin American and Caribbean region to effectively attain these goals.

1. Key Concepts and Definitions

- **Inclusion**

Inclusion is a deliberate and proactive effort by universities and research institutions to ensure equal access to and opportunities for Higher Education, irrespective of individuals' socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, or other characteristics. In the context of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), inclusion transcends mere access, striving to establish an environment where multicultural perspectives and diverse experiences are not only welcomed but also integrated into all facets of academic and social life.

Inclusion in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean involves:

- Breaking down barriers to entry, ensuring equal opportunities for enrollment and success for individuals from underrepresented groups.

FINAL DRAFT

- Cultivating a diverse student body, faculty, and staff, acknowledging the enriching impact of varied perspectives on the academic environment.

- Advocating for fairness and equity, addressing systemic inequalities hindering certain groups from fully participating in Higher Education.

- Actively engaging all members of the university community to foster a sense of belonging for everyone.

- Creating conditions, both material and social, to ensure the continued presence of students in higher education and guaranteeing their ability to complete their courses.

- Planning and implementing accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and universal design strategies to enable students with disabilities to enter, remain, and successfully complete their studies, while preventing discrimination based on disability.

Inclusion practices vary across institutions, with some in Latin America and the Caribbean implementing affirmative action policies, diversity programs, and accessibility initiatives. However, sustained and comprehensive efforts are necessary to genuinely establish inclusive spaces. LAC Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must prioritize equity by addressing systemic barriers, applying accessibility and universal design strategies to make physical and digital spaces, teaching-learning processes, and technology accessible to people with disabilities. Affirmative action policies and practices designed to increase opportunities for underrepresented and vulnerable groups are essential for creating truly inclusive environments.

- **Diversity**

Diversity signifies the presence of a variety of identities, perspectives, and experiences. In the context of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, diversity pertains to the inclusion and representation of individuals from various backgrounds, including differences in race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and cultural experiences. It involves fostering an environment that values and celebrates these differences, creating a pluralistic and inclusive atmosphere within educational institutions.

Diversity in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean implies:

- Ensuring individuals from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to access and succeed in Higher Education.

FINAL DRAFT

- Contributing to a richer learning environment by exposing students to a variety of perspectives, ideas, and experiences.

- Promoting intercultural competence and preparing students to become global citizens through engagement in a diverse global society.

- Providing economic support to those in need to guarantee a sense of belonging and ensure students remain in higher education and complete their studies properly.

- Planning and implementing accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and universal design strategies to guarantee students with disabilities can enter, remain, and complete their studies without facing discrimination based on disability.

While progress has been made, challenges persist regarding diversity in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some universities have taken steps forward, but the level of diversity varies among institutions. Fostering diversity in Higher Education in LAC is crucial for creating inclusive learning environments. Universities play a vital role in implementing policies, programs, and initiatives that promote diversity and ensure equal opportunities for all members of the academic community. Ongoing efforts are required to address existing challenges and enhance diversity across the educational landscape.

To create diverse environments, HEIs must ensure inclusion through active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity, promoting equity through mechanisms that ensure fair treatment, access, economic support, opportunity, and advancement for all students, faculty, and staff, irrespective of their background. Acknowledging, recognizing, and appreciating cultural diversity within educational settings is vital for fostering multiculturalism. The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006, article 2) emphasizes the importance of addressing discrimination on the basis of disability and highlights the need for continuous improvement in inclusion and attention to diversity within university settings. This involves incorporating the disability and accessibility perspective in the design, planning, and evaluation processes, as well as promoting intersectoral and interinstitutional collaboration to ensure access, persistence, and graduation in university education for people with disabilities and other groups facing inequality.

- **The Role of Women in Higher Education Institutions**

The engagement of women in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America and the Caribbean represents a dynamic and intricate issue encompassing considerations of diversity, inclusion, gender equity, and

FINAL DRAFT

intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes the interconnected nature of social identities, including gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Addressing the role of women in Higher Education in LAC involves an acknowledgment of the diverse experiences within the category of "woman" and the persistent intersectional oppressions faced by women of African descent, indigenous women, women with disabilities, those residing in rural or marginalized areas, and the LGBTQI+ community.

Women contribute varied perspectives, experiences, and approaches to academia, enriching the educational environment. Gender diversity is essential for fostering a broader range of ideas and innovations, tackling issues related to equal representation, and addressing concerns regarding equal pay, opportunities, and leadership positions in research, teaching, administration, and other facets of academia. Women in leadership roles can wield influence over institutional policies that promote gender equity and inclusivity. Inclusive leadership styles may cultivate collaborative and supportive work environments. Empowering women in academia necessitates the provision of mentorship, networking opportunities, affirmative action, and resources for professional development. Establishing mentorship programs can assist women in navigating the challenges of academia and advancing their careers.

The creation of an agenda to foster gender equity in Latin American and Caribbean HEI involves:

- Implementation of training programs focused on skill development and capacity-building to enhance women's proficiency in areas such as leadership, grant writing, and research methodologies.
- Cultivation of a culture of continuous learning to adapt to evolving academic landscapes, allowing women of diverse ages and backgrounds to pursue ongoing educational paths.
- Provision of global networking opportunities through the establishment of platforms that enable women to connect and sustain communication with peers, mentors, and industry professionals at regional and international levels.
- Encouragement of participation in conferences, workshops, and collaborative projects to build connections and provide support.
- Development of policies supporting work-life balance, including family-friendly policies, flexible work hours, and parental leave, as addressing these aspects contributes to the retention and progression of women in academia.

FINAL DRAFT

- Promotion of diversity through inclusive hiring practices, development of a diverse curriculum, and equitable resource allocation.

- Cultivation of a campus culture that celebrates and values differences.

2. Balance of the Previous Achievements in the Theme of Inclusion, Diversity and Women's Role in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

Considering Inclusion and Diversity, recent and ongoing research suggests that while there have been significant advances and positive strides in the issue of inclusion in the entrance to higher education, challenges persist in terms of the retention and successful graduation of students. The perspective on disability, approached from a rights standpoint, involves viewing it as a social construct that evolves over time. UNESCO has played a crucial role in establishing an international consensus, as evidenced in the Regional Conferences on Higher Education (UNESCO IESALC, 2018) and the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These initiatives advocate for perceiving higher education as a pivotal tool for the development of the human rights of persons with disabilities.

However, persistent difficulties in dealing with inclusion, diversity, and disability in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) include inadequate teacher training in addressing diversity, forms of academic violence based on gender or social and cultural status, and resistance in professional practice spaces that seem to resist focusing on inclusion and diversity. Significant resistance exists in accepting populations with disabilities, diverse abilities, indigenous or Afro-descendant backgrounds, and the LGBTQI+ community. Even when incorporated, individuals from these groups are often assigned trivial tasks or activities unrelated to professional practice, leading to failures and significant obstacles.

To address these challenges, there is a need for policies and strategies for communicating scientific and technological knowledge from LAC universities, enhancing the social appropriation of people with disabilities, and creating an awareness among political and bureaucratic leaders for the development of a science that considers the impacts and reparations of human actions. The analysis of disability should adopt a transversal, transdisciplinary, and intersectional approach, integrating with teaching, research, extension, management, and intersectoral articulation within the university community.

Considering the role of women in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), gender equity remains a pressing global issue, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), given the region's diversity and cultural specificities.

FINAL DRAFT

Despite progress, female academic and administrative staff in LAC face numerous challenges in achieving equal representation and access to equal pay, opportunities, and senior roles in administration and research. A notable glass ceiling impedes women's access to top managerial positions within universities, further compounded by intersectional oppressions affecting women of African descent, indigenous women, women with disabilities, and those in rural or marginalized areas.

Women in academia encounter challenges such as wage gaps, scarcity of female leadership, gender-based violence, and harassment, work/life balance issues, and the under-recognition of their achievements in research, teaching, and leadership roles. Efforts to achieve gender equity in Higher Education in Latin American and the Caribbean are gaining momentum, with governments and universities recognizing the importance of implementing policies that support equal opportunities for men and women. Noteworthy progress has been made in increasing the number of women graduates, yet disparities persist across disciplines, particularly in Science and Technology fields. The main challenge is to remove barriers hindering women's participation in higher education, promote their representation, leadership, and success, and eliminate stereotypes and prejudices that negatively affect university women in various ways. Despite disparities across the region, collective solution-based projects are emerging to break gender barriers and foster an inclusive environment promoting gender diversity in leadership roles and academia overall.

3. Identification of New Challenges and Prioritization of Actions for 2028

The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region is called upon to unify efforts by sharing experiences, achievements, and challenges in higher education. These efforts should align with the regulations, policies, reforms, and laws of each country while being endorsed by international organizations. The primary focus is to prioritize access to higher education and technical careers, with special attention to the inclusion of individuals from all walks of life, considering factors such as gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and other identity markers.

The first priority is to ensure that inclusion and accessibility are integral concepts in higher education policies. Inclusive educational and employment trajectories require guaranteed access to the physical environment, information, communication, and attitudes towards diversity. This necessitates extending human rights-based training to teaching and management staff of public universities. Secondly, accessible and inclusive universities should actively contribute to knowledge generation in these thematic fields to bring about transformative changes in the education system and public policy. Thirdly, it is essential to continue building spaces for collaboration and relationships between universities to capitalize on lessons learned and address pending issues. Within the

FINAL DRAFT

framework of CRES +5, exploring the establishment of shared distance learning initiatives among universities for faculty and civil servants on inclusive education and accessibility in higher education is a potential avenue. Additionally, shared repositories of materials and methodologies could enhance efforts to transform practices and guarantee the right to higher education.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America and the Caribbean should concentrate on identifying and reinforcing existing policies promoting gender equity, inclusion, and diversity. Addressing any gaps in current policies hindering women's advancement in HEIs is crucial. Furthermore, advocating for the development and implementation of policies explicitly addressing gender disparities in academia is vital. Collaborative efforts between universities, policymakers, and the broader community are required to implement these actions. It demands a commitment to challenging existing norms, fostering inclusivity, and creating an environment that values the contributions of all individuals in higher education in the region.

Despite progress in inclusion and diversity in Higher Education, there is a need to move forward in several aspects, including:

Scholarship Programs and Financial Support:

- Develop programs targeting historically marginalized populations.
- Identify funding and allocate resources to support initiatives fostering inclusion, such as scholarship programs for underrepresented groups.

Teacher Training for Inclusion:

- Implement programs promoting sensitivity to diversity and inclusion.
- Integrate inclusive pedagogical practices into training programs.

Accessibility and Reasonable Accommodation:

- Develop strategies for physical and digital accessibility.
- Promote universal design to ensure facilities and materials are accessible.

FINAL DRAFT

Diversity in Learning Styles:

- Adopt pedagogical approaches recognizing diverse learning styles.
- Encourage research and implementation of inclusive teaching methods.

Intersection of Inequalities:

- Analyze and address intersecting inequalities affecting access to higher education.
- Develop specific policies for marginalized groups.

Valuing Diversity in the University Mission:

- Encourage institutions to reduce enrollment-graduation gaps, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- Integrate cultural and linguistic diversity as a fundamental value.

Promoting Gender Equality:

- Address the negative impact of sexism and gender-based violence.
- Promote equal opportunities for women in academic and leadership areas.
- Accommodate paths for capacity-building to the specific attention of women
- Provide HEIs with legal assistance for the write-up or update of a gender equity chart

Inclusive Dynamics in Research:

- Encourage and recognize research integrating inclusive perspectives in sustainable development projects.
- Promote transversal and multidisciplinary collaborative projects

FINAL DRAFT

Key Strategic Actions for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) play a pivotal role in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion through the following strategic initiatives:

1. **Program Development and Training Components:**
    - Integrate diverse perspectives into the curriculum through innovative training components.
    - Actively seek and hire individuals from underrepresented groups to reflect diversity in faculty and staff.
2. **Cultural Competency Training:**
    - Provide faculty, staff, and students with cultural competency training to enhance their understanding of diverse cultures.
    - Assess and value newly acquired transcultural skills through cultural certificates or other international assessment tools promoting cultural diversity
3. **Affirmative Action Programs:**
    - Implement affirmative action programs promoting the inclusion of underrepresented groups in admissions and hiring processes.
    - Reserve a percentage of admissions or positions for underrepresented groups and offer scholarships for students from marginalized backgrounds.
4. **Cultural Events and Community Engagement:**
    - Organize cultural events and celebrations to foster understanding and appreciation of various cultural backgrounds.
    - Establish connections with local communities to promote inclusivity and address societal challenges.
    - Strengthen partnerships with local communities to understand and address unique challenges faced by different groups

FINAL DRAFT

5. **Support Services**

- Implement support services such as mentoring programs dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion.
- Implement dedicated spaces to allow students' exchanges across different cultural communities
- Provide counseling, mentoring, and tutoring to help students from diverse backgrounds succeed.

6. **Policy Development and Educational Programs:**

- Develop and implement policies promoting inclusion at all levels, from admissions to curriculum design.
- Incorporate diversity into academic programs and curricula to expose students to a wide range of perspectives.

7. **Awareness and Sensitization:**

- Conduct awareness programs to foster understanding and sensitivity among the university community.
- Diversify faculty and staff to contribute to a more inclusive learning environment.
- Implement mandatory diversity and inclusion training for faculty, staff, and students.

8. **Inclusive and Diverse Curriculum and Teaching Practices**

- Implement teaching methods that accommodate diverse learning styles and backgrounds.
- Mainstream the inclusion of people with disabilities at all educational levels, ensuring accessible and relevant study programs.

9. **Methodology, Teacher Training and Use of Technology**

- Review and improve teaching methodologies to effectively address the needs of students with disabilities.

FINAL DRAFT

- Optimize educators' training on inclusion issues to prepare them for a diverse student population.
- Expand the use of technology to assist students and teachers with disabilities.

10. Inclusive Admission Policies:

- Adopt policies considering a broader range of criteria beyond traditional academic metrics.
- Strengthen partnerships with local communities to understand and address unique challenges faced by different groups
- Regularly evaluate and update policies and practices to ensure effectiveness and responsiveness to changing needs.

For Gender Equality in HEIs in LAC:

Establish Clear Policies:

- Develop policies against gender discrimination and harassment.
- Address gender from an intersectional perspective, acknowledging disparities among women based on various factors.

Gender Neutrality:

- Encourage gender neutrality in academia through inclusive language and practices.
- Challenge stereotypes and biases related to gendered disciplines
- Recognize the limitations of the gender category and address the specificities of the LGBTQI+ community.

Resource Provision, Increased Representation in STEM:

- Provide resources for reporting and addressing gender-based discrimination.
- Promote initiatives supporting the participation of girls and women in science and technology fields.

FINAL DRAFT

While progress has been made, creating truly inclusive spaces in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean requires ongoing commitment, systemic changes, and the adoption of inclusive policies and practices at all levels of educational institutions.

FINAL DRAFT