



22<sup>nd</sup> EAN annual conference  
in collaboration with the Council of Europe  
Strasbourg, France

**The Evolution of Access: Adapt to Survive?**

**New Challenges and Opportunities in Widening Participation in Higher Education**

Globally, participation in higher education has risen substantially. According to the OECD (*Education at a Glance 2012*) entry rates to university level programmes in OECD countries grew on average by nearly 25 percentage points between 1995 and 2010. Consequently, more than a third of today's young people have higher level qualifications than their parents and around 62% of young adults are expected to enter university-level programmes over their lifetimes.

This is good news, but fireworks would be premature. Despite expanding opportunities, participation and success in higher education remain skewed. For instance, In OECD countries, on average 66% of individuals with at least one highly educated parent attain a tertiary degree, but only 20% of those whose parents have low levels of education.

Europe has adopted the goal of achieving at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds completing third level education by 2020. Some member states have already exceeded this target and have set themselves higher goals (e.g. Luxembourg 66%, Ireland 60%, France 50%), but many others will have to work hard to achieve it. Meeting targets at all levels will require attention to disadvantage, e.g.: to recruiting and supporting students from a broader range of backgrounds; to reducing drop-out rates; and to strengthening pathways to higher education.

Higher education in Europe entered a new era in 2010 when the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) came into being. Meeting in 2012 against the backdrop of the European financial crisis, the European Ministers responsible for higher education affirmed it was 'an important part of the solution to our current difficulties':

*Strong and accountable higher education systems provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies. Higher education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis – now more than ever.*

The Ministers noted that the Bologna reforms of preceding years had 'changed the face of higher education across Europe', creating more 'compatible and comparable' higher education structures, improving quality assurance systems and building the trust' enabling the recognition qualifications across borders. They had provided students with a 'wider variety of educational opportunities' – including for mobility – and participation in education had widened. While the 'vision' of the EHEA was 'within reach' further efforts were needed 'to consolidate and build on progress' including to achieve 'more coherence between our policies'.

The Ministers asserted a central role for 'widening access to higher education' as a 'precondition for societal progress and economic development'. Thus they agreed 'to adopt national measures for



widening overall access to quality higher education’ and to ‘work to raise completion rates and ensure timely progression in higher education’.

Progress towards equitable and inclusive higher education in Europe has previously moved slowly. The resolve of the Ministers is clear, but can real progress be achieved? Will the lack of a common definition of widening participation across the member states create difficulties? Will progress be hindered by the shrinking of public investments in higher education as a result of the financial crisis? How will institutions face up to new challenges and react to different opportunities? Will greater co-ordination across member states assist in accelerating progress? What role will practitioners undertake? And what lessons will be useful for other regions? Will students and potential students benefit?

**Objectives:**

- To reach an understanding of the different uses and meanings of the terminology ‘access and widening participation’ to enable discussion, co-operation and collaboration to achieve greater diversity and inclusion in higher education
- To assess the linkages between widening participation and quality measures in higher education and the resources needed to support and sustain the dual values of equity and excellence
- To share with and learn from one another useful lessons in responding to stakeholders’ and students’ needs and demands in time of financial constraints
- To forge alliances with the international community to build on progress made in widening access for greater impact globally

In addition to keynotes and panel discussions, paper presentations from international participants will focus on the following themes:

**Theme 1**

Can an integrated approach across sectors, institutions, state or national boundaries transform higher education and accelerate progress?

**Theme 2**

Achieving national and regional participation goals: what are the implications for policy and practice in higher education systems?

**Theme 3**

Tightening public investment in higher education; can 'access work' survive?