

Fostering educational equity through leadership and policy innovations for sustainable development in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores leadership strategies and policy innovations aimed at fostering educational equity in higher education, particularly for underserved and marginalized communities. It emphasizes the crucial role of institutional leadership in aligning strategic goals with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), to ensure inclusivity, access, retention, and long-term success for disadvantaged students. The analysis includes a discussion of key leadership approaches, such as inclusive leadership and mentorship programs, and policy innovations that address financial, academic, and social barriers to equity. The integration of specific SDGs into educational policies is also examined, highlighting the importance of comprehensive support services, diverse curricula, and community partnerships. Recommendations for higher education leaders and policymakers focus on expanding financial aid, promoting inclusive campus environments, and strengthening collaborative efforts with government and community stakeholders. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a proactive and strategic approach to embedding equity within the core functions of higher education institutions, ensuring that they contribute to sustainable development and social justice.

Keywords: Educational equity; Leadership strategies; Policy innovations; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Marginalized communities; Inclusive education

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of Educational Equity

Educational equity is a critical issue in pursuing inclusive and just societies. It refers to ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, gender, or geographic location, have access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed academically (Kuteesa, Akpuokwe, & Udeh, 2024). This focus on equity is particularly vital for underserved communities, where students often face significant barriers to quality education. These barriers may include underfunded schools, limited access to experienced teachers, inadequate learning materials, and other structural challenges disproportionately affecting marginalized populations (Cerna et al., 2021).

In underserved communities, the lack of educational equity translates to lower academic achievement, reduced access to higher education, and diminished long-term economic opportunities for students. These inequities perpetuate cycles of poverty and social exclusion, exacerbating existing disparities (Long, 2023). For this reason, achieving educational equity is a moral and practical necessity for fostering social mobility and sustainable development. In higher education, promoting equity means addressing these disparities by creating systems that provide all students, especially those

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from underserved backgrounds, with the support they need to thrive academically and professionally (Duchesneau, 2020).

Leadership and policy are two pivotal forces in driving the pursuit of educational equity and sustainable development in higher education. Educational leaders, such as university administrators and policymakers, play a central role in shaping institutions' vision and strategies to foster equity (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Leaders who are committed to equity are tasked with setting priorities that focus on closing achievement gaps, providing equitable access to academic resources, and ensuring that all students have opportunities to succeed. These leaders must actively work to create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse student needs while promoting a culture of equity throughout their institutions (Heleta & Bagus, 2021).

In addition to leadership, policy innovations are essential in addressing the structural and systemic challenges that contribute to educational disparities. Public policies prioritizing educational equity can ensure that resources are allocated more fairly across institutions, targeting those serving marginalized and underserved populations (Campbell, 2021). Moreover, policies designed to address issues such as financial aid, student support services, and curriculum reform can help level the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. When implemented effectively, such policies promote equity and contribute to the sustainable development of higher education institutions by fostering environments where all students can succeed (Leithwood, 2021).

Sustainable development in higher education, as aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizes promoting quality education (SDG 4), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and fostering inclusive societies (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Leadership and policy interventions that focus on equity and sustainability are critical for ensuring that institutions address the immediate needs of marginalized students and create long-term strategies for inclusive growth. These strategies are vital for building resilient educational systems that can adapt to the changing needs of diverse student populations, particularly those from underserved communities (Ashida, 2022).

1.2 Statement of the Research Focus

This research focuses on the intersection of leadership, policy innovations, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to foster educational equity in higher education institutions. Specifically, the study examines how institutions can align their leadership strategies and policy frameworks with the SDGs to address marginalized students' needs better. The SDGs, particularly SDG 4, emphasize the importance of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, while the goals set a global agenda, their implementation often requires local adaptation and targeted strategies to meet the specific needs of underserved communities.

Higher education institutions play a critical role in advancing the SDGs, as they are not only centers of learning but also drivers of social change and innovation. By aligning their goals with SDG 4 and related goals, institutions can develop more effective frameworks for promoting educational equity. This includes creating policies that provide greater access to higher education for marginalized groups, developing leadership strategies prioritizing inclusion, and implementing programs supporting student retention and success. Moreover, institutions must address structural barriers such as inadequate funding, limited access to mentorship and career guidance, and the lack of culturally responsive teaching methods that often hinder the success of underserved students (Serafini, de Moura, de Almeida, & de Rezende, 2022).

To align with the SDGs, institutions need to adopt a multi-faceted approach that integrates leadership, policy, and practical interventions. Leadership must actively promote diversity and inclusion, fostering an institutional culture that values and supports marginalized students. This may include establishing equity-focused leadership roles within the institution, such as diversity officers or equity committees, who are responsible for developing and implementing strategies that promote inclusion. Similarly, policy innovations should focus on creating more equitable pathways to higher education, such as expanding financial aid options, offering flexible learning modalities, and increasing the availability of support services for students from underserved backgrounds (Puente et al., 2021).

Additionally, this research aims to highlight the role of sustainable development in promoting educational equity, with a focus on long-term outcomes for marginalized students. Sustainable development in higher education requires not only addressing immediate disparities but also building systems that are resilient and adaptable to future challenges. Institutions must invest in developing equitable policies and leadership strategies capable of addressing the evolving needs of diverse student populations. This includes creating opportunities for underserved students to succeed in higher education, ensuring that they have access to the resources and support needed for academic and professional growth, and fostering an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

2 Leadership Strategies for Promoting Equity

2.1 Leadership Roles in Fostering Equity

Leadership is fundamental in shaping and promoting educational equity within higher education institutions. Leaders, particularly those in administrative and executive positions, are responsible for creating an inclusive vision supporting all students' success, especially those from underserved communities. Their role in fostering equity involves setting institutional priorities and actively challenging the systemic barriers disproportionately affecting marginalized student populations. This includes addressing inequalities in access to academic resources, ensuring inclusive policies and practices, and promoting a culture that values diversity and inclusion (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2023).

Leaders must engage in intentional and strategic decision-making that prioritizes equity as a central element of institutional success. This requires a deep understanding of the challenges faced by underserved students, including those related to socioeconomic status, race, gender, and geographic location (Banker & Bhal, 2020). By recognizing these challenges, leaders can develop targeted strategies that aim to close achievement gaps and create pathways to higher education for marginalized students. Moreover, fostering equity requires leaders to advocate for the necessary resources and support systems that enable all students to thrive, from academic counseling and mentorship programs to financial assistance and career development opportunities (Poekert, Swaffield, Demir, & Wright, 2022).

Effective leadership in this context also involves collaboration with various stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and external partners. By working collectively, leaders can implement comprehensive strategies that address the multifaceted nature of educational inequality. This collaborative approach ensures that efforts to promote equity are not isolated but embedded within the broader institutional framework, making equity a shared responsibility across all institution levels. Additionally, leaders must be adaptable, constantly reassessing and refining their strategies to meet the evolving needs of diverse student populations (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

2.2 Key Leadership Approaches for Addressing Challenges Faced by Underserved Students

Addressing the challenges faced by underserved students requires a multi-faceted approach from educational leaders. One of the key leadership approaches is developing and implementing equity-focused policies that aim to remove barriers to education. This may include policies that increase financial aid opportunities, provide targeted academic support, and enhance student services that cater specifically to the needs of marginalized groups. For example, offering need-based scholarships and grants can help reduce the financial burden that often prevents students from underserved communities from pursuing higher education (Radd, Generett, Gooden, & Theoharis, 2021).

Another important leadership approach is fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment. This involves creating spaces where students from all backgrounds feel welcomed and valued. Leaders can achieve this by promoting diversity in faculty hiring, ensuring curricula reflect a wide range of perspectives, and supporting student organizations focusing on inclusion and diversity. A sense of belonging is crucial for the retention and success of underserved students, and leaders play a key role in ensuring that the institutional environment is one in which all students feel they can succeed (Poekert et al., 2022).

Leadership also involves engaging in active outreach to underserved communities. Leaders can create pipelines that encourage students from marginalized backgrounds to pursue higher education by partnering with local schools, community organizations, and other external stakeholders. Outreach programs that offer college preparation resources, mentoring, and academic advising can help bridge the gap between underserved students and higher education institutions. These initiatives provide students with the tools they need to succeed and signal the institution's commitment to fostering equity (Ashcroft et al., 2021).

2.3 Examples of Inclusive Leadership Practices that Improve Access and Retention

Inclusive leadership practices are essential for improving access to higher education and retaining underserved students. One effective practice is the creation of equity-focused leadership positions within the institution, such as Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) or Vice Presidents for Diversity and Inclusion. These leaders are tasked with developing and overseeing strategies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion across all aspects of the institution. Their role includes monitoring progress toward equity goals, addressing any disparities in student outcomes, and ensuring that the institution meets marginalized students' needs (Washington, 2020).

Another inclusive practice is the implementation of mentorship and peer support programs. Leaders can facilitate the creation of mentorship networks that pair underserved students with faculty, staff, or alumni who can provide guidance

and support throughout their academic journey (Mullen, Boyles, Witcher, & Klimaitis, 2020). These programs are particularly beneficial for first-generation college students who may lack the familial support systems that are often critical to academic success. Peer support programs, where students can connect with others who share similar backgrounds or experiences, also contribute to a sense of community and belonging, which is vital for student retention (Garza, 2020).

Flexible learning options like online courses and part-time study programs are another example of inclusive leadership practices that improve access. Many students from underserved communities may face challenges related to work, family responsibilities, or transportation, which can make attending traditional, in-person classes difficult. By offering flexible learning modalities, leaders can ensure that higher education is accessible to a wider range of students, enabling them to balance their academic commitments with other responsibilities (Menon & Motala, 2021).

2.4 Alignment of Leadership Goals with the SDGs

Leadership strategies to promote educational equity must align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. The SDGs provide a global framework emphasizing the importance of education access for marginalized and underserved populations. For higher education leaders, aligning institutional goals with the SDGs means embedding these principles into the core mission and values of the institution (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022).

One way that leadership can align with the SDGs is by integrating sustainability and equity into the institution's strategic planning. This involves setting clear, measurable goals related to increasing access for underserved students, improving retention rates, and closing achievement gaps. Leaders must also ensure that these goals are regularly assessed and that progress is reported transparently to all stakeholders. By doing so, institutions can demonstrate their commitment to both global sustainability efforts and local equity initiatives (Odell, Molthan-Hill, Martin, & Sterling, 2020).

Moreover, aligning leadership goals with the SDGs requires leaders to engage with the broader community and contribute to social change beyond the confines of the institution. This can involve partnerships with governmental organizations, non-profits, and other educational institutions to address systemic issues related to inequality and access to education. Leaders who are committed to the SDGs will advocate for policies and practices that promote not only the success of their students but also the well-being of the broader society (Wulff, 2020).

3 Policy Innovations for Sustainable Educational Development

3.1 Analysis of Policy Initiatives that Promote Equity in Higher Education

Policies that promote educational equity play a fundamental role in ensuring that higher education is accessible and inclusive for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. These policies are designed to address systemic barriers to education by creating more equitable pathways for access, retention, and success in higher education. One of the key policy initiatives in this regard is financial aid reform. Many underserved students face financial challenges that prevent them from pursuing higher education. By expanding need-based financial aid programs, offering scholarships targeted at marginalized groups, and reducing the overall cost of tuition, policymakers can help level the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

Another policy initiative to promote equity is expanding student support services. Many students from underserved communities require additional academic, social, and emotional support to succeed in higher education (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Policies that increase funding for tutoring programs, mental health services, and mentorship opportunities help these students have the resources they need to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. Additionally, policies that promote diversity in hiring and admissions practices ensure that higher education institutions are inclusive and reflective of the broader society. These policies work to break down barriers to entry and create a more diverse academic environment that benefits all students (Cerna et al., 2021).

In recent years, governments and institutions have also implemented policies to address digital equity, recognizing the growing importance of technology in education. Digital inequities—such as lack of access to reliable internet or learning technologies—can disproportionately affect underserved students. Policies that provide access to digital tools, such as laptops or tablets, and ensure affordable or free internet access are critical in creating a more equitable educational landscape. These initiatives have gained even greater significance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the digital divide in education (Aguilar, 2020).

3.2 Role of Government, Educational Institutions, and Stakeholders in Policy Formation

Creating policies promoting equity in higher education is a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations. The role of the government in policy formation is crucial, as it provides the legal and regulatory framework that guides the development and implementation of educational policies. Government agencies can mandate inclusive education policies through legislation, such as affirmative action in admissions, financial aid programs for low-income students, and the allocation of funding for underserved institutions. By setting national or regional education priorities, governments play a direct role in shaping the direction of equity initiatives in higher education (Culver, Harper, & Kezar, 2021).

Educational institutions, particularly universities and colleges, also play a key role in policy formation. Administrators and faculty members are often at the forefront of identifying the specific needs of their student populations and developing policies that address these needs (Kohl et al., 2022). For example, many institutions have introduced policies offering more flexible learning options, such as online courses or hybrid models, to accommodate non-traditional students with work or family commitments. Institutional leadership must work in partnership with government agencies and other stakeholders to ensure that policies are effectively implemented and address the real-world challenges marginalized students face (Ruben et al., 2023).

Stakeholders, such as non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and community leaders, are important in the policy formation process. These groups often advocate for the needs of underserved students, ensuring that their voices are heard in policy discussions. They can provide valuable insights and recommendations based on their direct experience with the communities they serve. In many cases, these stakeholders are instrumental in driving policy innovation by highlighting areas where current policies fall short and advocating for reforms that promote greater equity. Their involvement ensures that policies are not developed in isolation but responsive to the communities' needs (Penuel et al., 2020).

3.3 How Policies Can Be Designed to Support Marginalized Students

Effective policies for supporting marginalized students must be designed with a clear understanding of the barriers these students face and the specific needs that must be addressed. One of the key elements of policy design is ensuring that policies are student-centered, meaning that they prioritize the needs and experiences of underserved students. This involves conducting thorough needs assessments to identify resources and support services gaps and developing policies that directly address these gaps (Animashaun, Familoni, & Onyebuchi, 2024b; Atobatele, Kpodo, & Eke, 2024; Latilo, Uzougbo, MC, & Oduro, 2024). For example, policies that provide wraparound services—such as academic advising, career counseling, and mental health support—can help ensure that marginalized students receive the comprehensive support they need to succeed. These services are especially important for first-generation college students, who may not have the same level of familial or community support as their peers. Additionally, policies that promote financial literacy and provide guidance on navigating financial aid systems can help alleviate some of the financial burdens that disproportionately affect underserved students (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

Another important consideration in policy design is the need for flexibility. Marginalized students often face challenges that require greater flexibility in accessing and engaging with higher education. Policies that offer flexible learning schedules, part-time enrollment options, or remote learning opportunities can help accommodate students who may need to balance their studies with work, family, or other responsibilities (Culver et al., 2021). Additionally, policies that provide clear pathways from community colleges to four-year institutions and support for transfer students can help improve access to higher education for marginalized students who may begin their academic careers at less expensive or more accessible institutions (Kimble-Hill et al., 2020).

3.4 Integration of SDGs into Educational Policy Frameworks

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which focuses on quality education, provide a global framework for promoting equity and inclusion in education. Integrating the SDGs into educational policy frameworks is essential for creating a more equitable and sustainable higher education system. The SDGs emphasize the importance of ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education. This global agenda encourages institutions and governments to prioritize policies that address the needs of marginalized populations, reduce inequalities, and promote lifelong learning opportunities (Tyagi, Vishwakarma, Rishi, & Rajiah, 2021).

To effectively integrate the SDGs into educational policy, institutions must adopt a holistic approach that aligns their policies with the broader goals of sustainability and social justice. This involves creating policies that address immediate

barriers to education and focus on long-term systemic change. For example, policies that promote environmental sustainability on campus—such as reducing waste, improving energy efficiency, and incorporating sustainability into the curriculum—can be aligned with SDG 4 and SDG 13 (Climate Action). These initiatives not only contribute to the global sustainability agenda but also create learning environments that are socially and environmentally responsible (Pareek, 2024).

Furthermore, integrating the SDGs into educational policy frameworks involves promoting global citizenship education, encouraging students to actively address the world's most pressing challenges, including poverty, inequality, and climate change. Policies incorporating the principles of global citizenship education can help students from marginalized communities develop the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to sustainable development in their communities. By aligning policies with the SDGs, institutions can ensure that their efforts to promote educational equity are part of a broader global movement toward social justice and sustainability (Salvia & Brandli).

4 Institutional Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

4.1 Strategies for Implementing SDGs within Higher Education Institutions

The successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within higher education institutions requires a strategic and systematic approach. These institutions are critical in driving social change and advancing the SDGs by embedding sustainability and equity into their curricula, policies, and operational frameworks. One effective strategy for implementing SDGs is through institutional leadership, where university presidents, deans, and senior administrators commit to aligning the institution's mission with the SDG agenda. By prioritizing sustainability and educational equity at the leadership level, institutions can foster a culture of accountability and ensure that resources are allocated toward initiatives that support these goals (Akintayo, Eden, Ayeni, & Onyebuchi, 2024a; Ewim, 2023).

Another strategy is incorporating SDGs into academic programs and research. By integrating SDGs into the curriculum, institutions can educate students about sustainability, global challenges, and the importance of equity. For example, courses across various disciplines can be designed to address topics related to poverty reduction, quality education, and environmental sustainability, ensuring that students are not only aware of these issues but also equipped with the skills to tackle them. Faculty can also play a key role by embedding SDG-related research within their academic work, contributing to innovative solutions and practical knowledge that advance the SDG agenda (Akintayo, Eden, Ayeni, & Onyebuchi, 2024b).

Partnerships and collaborations are also vital for implementing SDGs. Higher education institutions can form strategic alliances with government bodies, non-governmental organizations, private sector companies, and other academic institutions to work on initiatives that promote sustainability and equity collectively. Such partnerships can expand the scope and impact of SDG-related activities by pooling resources, expertise, and networks. This collaborative approach allows institutions to engage in community outreach, promoting equity and sustainable development beyond the confines of the campus and making meaningful contributions to marginalized communities.

4.2 Specific SDGs Relevant to Educational Equity

While all 17 SDGs are interrelated and important, certain goals are particularly relevant to advancing educational equity. SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, is central to this effort. SDG 4 aims to eliminate disparities in education by ensuring that marginalized groups—such as low-income students, students with disabilities, and students from minority ethnic groups—have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers. For higher education institutions, this goal can be addressed through policies and programs that support the inclusion of all students, regardless of their background (Olanike, Asogwa, Njideka, Daniel, & Temiloluwa, 2023).

In addition to SDG 4, other SDGs also have a direct impact on educational equity. SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality, calls for equal opportunities for women and girls in all sectors, including education. Higher education institutions can promote gender equality by increasing female representation in academic programs, particularly in STEM fields where women have been historically underrepresented, and by addressing gender-based discrimination or violence on campuses. SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries, is also highly relevant to higher education, as institutions can serve as agents of social mobility by providing marginalized students with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

Finally, SDG 16, which focuses on promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions, supports the creation of inclusive educational environments where all students feel safe and valued. For higher education institutions, this means

implementing policies that prevent discrimination, support conflict resolution, and promote diverse, inclusive communities on campus. By aligning with these SDGs, institutions can advance educational equity while contributing to broader social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Animashaun, Familoni, & Onyebuchi, 2024a).

4.3 Institutional Practices that Improve Student Retention and Long-term Success

To achieve the goals of SDG 4, higher education institutions must focus on improving student retention and ensuring long-term success, particularly for marginalized and underserved populations. One effective practice is establishing comprehensive support services designed to meet students' academic, social, and financial needs. Academic support centers, tutoring programs, and personalized advising services help ensure that students from diverse backgrounds receive the assistance they need to succeed in their courses. These services are particularly important for first-generation college students, who may lack the academic preparation and familial support that other students enjoy.

Financial support is also crucial in improving student retention. Many students from marginalized communities face significant financial barriers to higher education, which can lead to high dropout rates. By providing need-based scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities, institutions can alleviate the financial burden on these students and reduce the likelihood that they will leave school due to financial hardship. Financial literacy programs can help students better manage their finances and plan for the future, contributing to long-term success.

Mentorship programs are another powerful tool for promoting retention and success. These programs pair students with faculty, alumni, or industry professionals who can offer guidance, support, and networking opportunities. Mentorship is especially valuable for marginalized students, as it can help them navigate the complexities of higher education and identify pathways to career success. Furthermore, peer mentorship programs, where older students mentor incoming freshmen, create a supportive community that fosters a sense of belonging and helps new students adjust to university life (Atobatele et al., 2024).

4.4 Addressing Barriers and Creating Pathways for Marginalized Communities

Despite progress in higher education, significant barriers still prevent marginalized students from accessing and succeeding in higher education. Addressing these barriers requires institutions to adopt a proactive and inclusive approach that removes obstacles and creates pathways for underrepresented groups. One of the most common barriers is the lack of access to preparatory education. Many students from underserved communities attend underfunded primary and secondary schools, which can leave them ill-prepared for the rigors of college-level work. Higher education institutions can help bridge this gap by offering bridge programs or remedial courses that give students the foundational skills they need to succeed (Animashaun et al., 2024b).

Another critical barrier is the lack of representation and cultural inclusivity on campuses. Students from marginalized communities may feel isolated or excluded if they do not see themselves reflected in the student body, faculty, or curriculum. Institutions can address this by promoting diversity in admissions and hiring practices and by developing curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences. Creating an inclusive campus culture where all students feel valued and respected fosters equity and ensures that marginalized students thrive.

Additionally, mental health challenges are a significant barrier to success for many students, particularly those from underserved communities who may face additional stressors related to discrimination, financial strain, or family responsibilities. Institutions must prioritize mental health by providing accessible counseling services, mental health awareness programs, and crisis intervention resources. By addressing mental health issues early and providing ongoing support, institutions can help students stay on track academically and avoid dropout (Latilo et al., 2024).

Creating pathways for marginalized communities also involves developing partnerships with community organizations, local schools, and government agencies. These partnerships can help institutions reach underserved students before they apply to college, providing them with information about higher education opportunities and resources for navigating the application process. Outreach programs, such as college fairs, summer programs, and campus tours, can help demystify higher education for students who may not have family members or mentors with college experience.

5 Conclusion

The role of leadership and policy in fostering educational equity is fundamental in addressing the disparities faced by marginalized students in higher education. Leadership strategies that prioritize inclusivity, mentorship, and the alignment of institutional goals with the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), have proven effective in promoting equity. Leaders who adopt an inclusive approach can create supportive environments that improve access,

retention, and success for underserved students. Similarly, policies that directly address financial barriers, provide academic support, and foster a culturally inclusive environment are critical for ensuring that higher education institutions serve as engines of social mobility for all students, regardless of their background.

Policy innovations play a significant role in supporting the institutional goals of educational equity. Initiatives such as need-based scholarships, targeted recruitment of marginalized groups, and the establishment of equity-focused offices and departments within universities profoundly impact student outcomes. By designing policies that integrate the SDGs, especially those aimed at reducing inequality and promoting gender equality (SDG 5), institutions can create systems that better serve the needs of marginalized populations. Policies supporting faculty diversity, inclusive curricula, and mental health services are also essential to creating a truly equitable academic environment.

Recommendations

To further advance educational equity in higher education, a series of recommendations can guide both institutional leaders and policymakers. First, university leaders should prioritize equity by integrating SDGs into their strategic planning and decision-making processes. This involves creating leadership roles and committees that are specifically tasked with overseeing equity initiatives, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officers or SDG-focused academic units. These leadership structures should ensure that equity remains a central institutional priority and that progress is regularly measured and reported.

Second, financial barriers must continue to be addressed. Higher education leaders should work with policymakers to expand access to scholarships, grants, and affordable education options for marginalized students. This includes advocating for increased government funding for higher education, particularly for low-income and underserved communities. Additionally, creating flexible financial aid programs that accommodate students' individual needs—such as part-time study, work-study options, or emergency financial support—will enable more students to complete their education.

Third, institutional policies must support marginalized students' academic and social integration. Universities should expand access to academic support services, such as tutoring, advising, and mentorship programs. Special attention should be paid to first-generation college students and students from underrepresented backgrounds who may face unique challenges. Moreover, creating an inclusive campus culture through diversity training for staff and faculty and the promotion of curricula that reflect diverse perspectives can help foster a sense of belonging among all students.

Lastly, collaboration between institutions, government agencies, and community organizations is vital. Leaders should actively seek partnerships that promote outreach to marginalized communities, such as summer programs, early college awareness campaigns, and pathway initiatives that prepare underserved students for success in higher education. These partnerships can help institutions identify and address barriers before students even enter the university system, thereby improving long-term retention and success rates.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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