Session 1, Track 3 | Paper Session: Higher education | Adult education

Time: Friday, 25th Sept. 2026
11:00am - 1:00pm

Chair: Cristina Alarcón López, University of Vienna

Employability without Equity? The Case of Higher Education and TVET Reforms in Armenia under the Education Development State Program until 2030

Sona Balasanyan, University of Vienna

Abstract

As the 2030 deadline for Sustainable Development Goal 4 approaches, educational reforms increasingly emphasise inclusion, employability, digitalisation, and competitiveness. In Armenia, the Education Development State Program until 2030 (ESP 2030) positions higher education (HE) and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as central drivers of modernisation, labour market alignment, and international competitiveness. Recent progress reports highlight substantial reform activity, including the expansion of dual education models, the modernisation of vocational standards in areas such as robotics and cybersecurity, the prioritisation of STEM, internationalisation efforts, digital transition initiatives, and performance-oriented governance reforms.

This paper critically examines the extent to which these reforms address educational inequities and promote equitable access to meaningful educational and career opportunities. Drawing on a desk review and analytical mapping of Armenia's 2024-2025 education reform progress reports, policy documents, and implementation frameworks related to ESP 2030, the paper analyses emerging tensions between policy ambition and institutional realities. Particular attention is paid to unequal institutional capacities, fragmented implementation mechanisms, limited institutionalisation of career guidance systems, and the predominance of output-oriented reform indicators.

The analysis suggests that although reforms show strong legislative and infrastructural momentum, equity dimensions remain unevenly implemented across the TVET and HE sectors. Employability-oriented reforms often rely on traditional, supply-driven understandings of skills development, particularly through a narrow emphasis on STEM expansion and labour market competitiveness, with less attention to transversal competencies, differentiated student needs, and unequal capacities to navigate educational transitions.

Using Armenia as a case study, the paper argues that educational equity should be understood not only as formal access to educational institutions but also as the differentiated capacity to benefit from reforms, access institutional support, and translate education into sustainable futures. By examining Armenia's reform trajectory through the lenses of inequity, policy translation, and implementation gaps, the paper contributes to broader debates about the challenges of achieving SDG 4 in transitional and reform-intensive contexts.

Spatial (In)Justice in Higher Education: Informal Learning Spaces as Equity Infrastructure for Students Facing Personal Challenges — Evidence from the NIILS Study

Filiz Keser Aschenberger, University for Continuing Education Krems, Austria

Abstract

Despite extensive scholarship on educational equity and progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4, the physical and spatial dimensions of higher education remain largely absent from both research and policy frameworks. European strategies addressing the social dimension of higher education identify underrepresented student groups in detail, yet rarely consider the built learning environment as a factor shaping inequality. This paper argues that this omission constitutes a critical structural blind spot: campus spaces are not neutral but can either reinforce inequality or enable equitable participation.

Drawing on the Erasmus+ project NIILS — New Approaches for Inclusive Informal Learning Spaces, a multi-country European consortium, the paper presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted across four countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, and Türkiye), combining an online survey of N = 932 students with semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving both students and teaching staff.

Three principal findings underpin the argument. First, students systematically identified 12 availability-related and 7 accessibility-related barriers within informal learning spaces (ILS) — among them restricted facility access, opaque booking procedures, insufficient acoustic separation, and inadequate technological infrastructure — underscoring that these obstacles are structural and organisational rather than individual in character. Second, ILS availability and accessibility significantly predict both social integration (β = 0.24) and student wellbeing (β = 0.25), with social integration functioning as a partial mediator of the ILS–wellbeing relationship. Third, and most consequential for the equity agenda: 70% of surveyed students reported at least one personal challenge (financial, health, care, linguistic). For these students, deficient spatial access compounds existing disadvantage — the ILS–integration relationship is significantly stronger among students facing personal challenges (FPC) (β = 0.12), and the integration gap between FPC and non-FPC students is substantially attenuated when ILS quality is high.

The findings will be interpreted through three mutually reinforcing theoretical frameworks: Soja's spatial justice, Sen's capability approach, and Tomaševski's 4-A schema,** positioning the built campus environment as a rights-relevant, capability-shaping resource, and situating the empirical findings explicitly within international discourse on the right to education and SDG 4's within SDG 4 discourse.

The paper advances a spatial-justice reframing of equity in higher education, positioning campus space as equity infrastructure rather than a neutral backdrop. It proposes policy implications, including physical-environment criteria for institutional equality plans, and a transferable 4-A audit instrument applicable across diverse SDG 4 contexts.

Experiences of Female Academic Leaders in Higher Education: A Case Study in Cairo

Amina Sabour, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

Abstract

Such as in many contexts, the gender gap in higher education leadership persists universally. Women are still underrepresented despite the contributions they demonstrate in leading higher education institutions. This study aims to contribute to the area of research in this regard by exploring the experiences of female academic leaders in Cairo, Egypt. It specifically highlights the challenges these women face and how they manage to overcome them. Using a qualitative approach to deeply explore the phenomenon, ten interviews were conducted with female leaders at the American University in Cairo. Looking through the lens of intersectional feminism, under the umbrella of neo-patriarchy theory, this research explores the different indicators that shape and influence the experiences of these women while examining the interplay of the socio-cultural, professional, and institutional obstacles these women must deal with. The study's findings shed light on the different intersectional indicators that appear to influence female leadership in higher education when combined with gender. This last appears to be a significant determinant. The paper concludes that an intersectional perspective is needed by higher education institutions to improve the situation of female leaders in academia.

What Strategy for Lifelong Learning Do We Need? A Practice-Based Perspective from Austria's Non-Profit Adult Education Sector

John Evers, Secretary General, Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres

Abstract

The social, technological, and ecological transformations of our time are reshaping education systems worldwide. At the same time, the Austrian Federal Government is preparing a new national strategy for lifelong learning. This contribution addresses the question of which approaches - based on the experience of the Austrian Conference of Adult Education (KEBÖ) - are needed to ensure equitable and future-oriented participation in learning for all adults, regardless of origin, age, or social status.

At its core lies a broad understanding of education as a human right and as a prerequisite for democratic participation, social cohesion, and individual self-determination. The practice of adult education shows that low-threshold learning environments play a central role in advancing SDG 4: they strengthen basic skills, open access to further and higher education, foster digital, social, and transversal competencies, and create spaces for dialogue, participation, and civic engagement. Such formats are especially crucial for groups underrepresented in formal education systems - including adults with low basic skills, people with caregiving responsibilities, older learners, and migrants.

The KEBÖ identifies three strategic domains essential for a future-oriented lifelong-learning policy: securing fundamental competencies, strengthening individual agency and decision- making skills, and promoting community and civic competencies. Building on these domains, four priority action fields are highlighted: up- and reskilling for all, strengthening digital capabilities, expanding participatory and democracy-enhancing learning spaces, and fostering transformative learning for sustainable ways of living.

Derived from Austrian practice, the contribution also outlines structural conditions necessary for effective implementation: reliable and long-term funding, further development of local learning centres, recognition of non-formally acquired competencies, stronger alignment with labour-market, social, and integration policies, and a coordinated national strategy that understands lifelong learning as a cross-sectoral task.

The contribution concludes that a new culture of lifelong learning can only take root when adults have continuous, flexible, and high-quality learning opportunities throughout their lives – and when non-profit adult education is recognised and supported as a strategic pillar of a future-ready education system.