



FernUniversität
in Hagen

Inclusive Distance Higher Education in the Global South and North

EUROSTUDENT Talks

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Contents

- Overview
- Policy analysis
- What will be done in the future
- Q&A

Inclusion in Education

- Education is a human right, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 26(1), 1948
- International agreed principle of *Education for All*, UNESCO, 1990
- Inclusion of disadvantaged groups
- Efforts to implement this goal in HE is being continued, in terms of 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all', UNESCO, 2015
- The role of DHE in this context will be further examined

Distance Higher Education

- liberal and altruistic basic idea

Chances: Access to education regardless of geographical, socio-economic status, age, gender

Challenges: Limited accessibility for students with disabilities, digital divide, digital literacy and skills

As DE aims to meet the requirements of *Education for All* and has the potential to provide *inclusive education*, but at the same time only partially succeeds in doing so, it represents an area of research that promises to contribute relevant findings.

International Acts, Conventions & Covenants

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 26(1), 1948
- Declaration of *Education for All*, UNESCO, 1990 → focus on marginalised groups
- Salamanca Agreement, 1994
- World Education Forum in Dakar, 2000
- MDG's, 2000
- UN-CRPD, 2006
- SDGs, 2015

Problem: EFA has not yet been realised

Target Goal 4.5: 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all', UNESCO, 2015

Aim of the project...

→ Student perspectives on inclusive Distance Higher Education in 2050

Methodology

1. Literature Review
2. Policy Analysis
3. Future Workshops at UNISA and FeU with students

How to approach the field?

Study design

Two Examples/ Case studies...

of Distance Universities in the Global South and in the Global North

1. The University of South Africa (UNISA)
2. The FernUniversität in Hagen (FeU)

Why? What are the benefits?

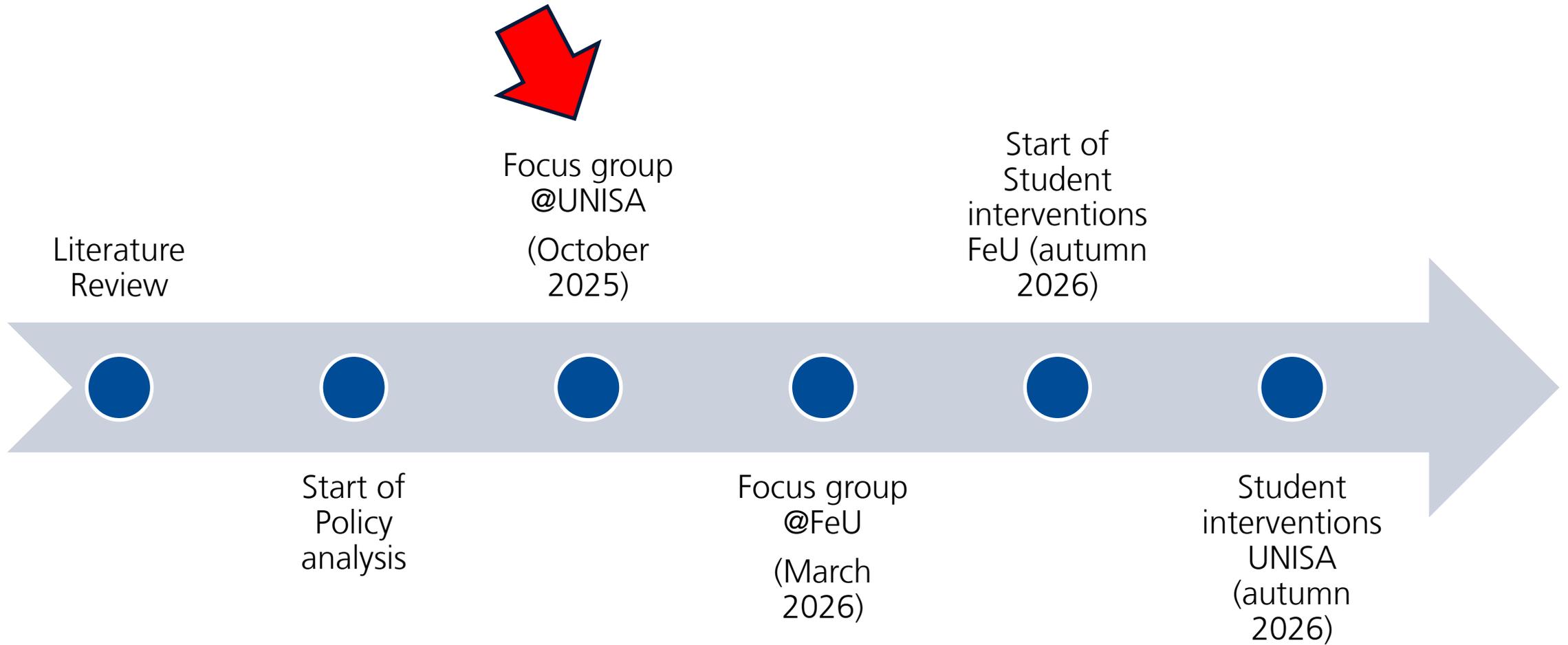
- The project is aiming for maximum possible international perspective
- Shared basic characteristics (use of concepts as ODeL or blended learning)
- Have unique characteristics (geographical location / cultural imprints)
- UNISA and FeU have a MoU (Signed in 2024) → facilitate access to students
- Letter of intent signed in 2025 for a new collaboration project

Research Question & Method

What understanding of inclusion exists at the respective institution?

A combination of document analysis and focus group discussions is necessary for:

- the perspectives of the institution's stakeholders on practice
- more holistic understanding on how inclusion is understood
- insights into the student groups that the universities focus on



Argument

- In order to understand how students perceive inclusion and how they envisage an inclusive DHE in the future, it is important to establish how inclusion is understood within the institution's policies and among its staff. This is because it is often unclear which groups are underrepresented.

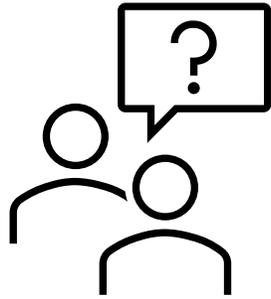
Policies build the base

The Case of UNISA

Mission and goals:

- serving society by providing open and interactive distance learning to all
- playing a leading role in representing the African perspective
- academic excellence through technology-oriented education, dynamic, interdisciplinary communication
- future orientation
- rethinking Africa's intellectual future

A story from (the University of) South Africa



Selected results - document analysis

- Commitment of social justice and fairness (Open Distance e-Learning Policy, 2018, p. 1)
- Pursuit of equality, irrespective of race, creed, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, disability, social or cultural background (Student Charter, 2007, p. 1)
- 'Responsible open admission' policy promotes equity of access and the provision of appropriate student support (ODeL-Policy, 2018, p. 2)
- '*equity and fairness*' in regard of 'ethical and collective responsibility' (UNISA Strategy 2030, p. 10)
- Emphasis of equality among all twelve official SA languages, including sign language (Language Policy, 2023 p. 5)
- Disadvantaged students: those whose annual personal or household income falls within the annual means test; (Financial Assistance to Students Policy, 2016, p. 1)

Language Inclusivity at UNISA

Examples of proposed Implementation Strategy for the language Policy

Strategic Goal	Action	Financial/HR Implications	Timeline	Responsibility
Use and promotion of African languages in teaching and learning	Writing and translating study material in the indigenous languages	College Language Plans	Ongoing	VP: TLCESS; Colleges and Departments
Provide support for students with disabilities	Sign Language Interpreting, Targeted teaching and learning support for SwD	Intervention Support by ARCWiD, and specialists	Year 1/2/3	Registrar, ARCWiD

VP: Institutional Development; TLCESS: Unisa Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support; ARCWiD: The Advocacy Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities

Findings from the focus group discussion

Challenges

- structuring and functioning of institutions → disconnect between theory, practice and policy.
- the role of policy is centralized
- policies are described as performative:
 - 'the issue in South Africa, where you've got good policies, but what you see on the policy, they are just performative'* (transcript)
- teaching is trial and error
- *'no mention of inclusion...even the quality indicators currently, they don't have inclusion'* (transcript)
- SwD might not be able to advocate as others can, e.g. in the SRC. This means the policies are not designed to let students advocate

Envisioning from institutional perspective:

- instead of having a unit (e.g. a disability unit) there should be:
 - inclusive learning specialists or consultants at each college (e.g. college of education, college of law...)
 - it should be context-based + considering the academic project itself
 - Lecturer education on inclusion at the specific institution and college (e.g. at the IODL)
 - Student advocacy: *'potentially a lot of students are not even aware of their own learning preferences (...) they just follow what the lecturer gives them. And, the lecturer does not have the capacity to go to each individual student, among 900 students (...) know them, and their preferences, and analyse them from a point of experience...'*

Furthermore

- political will to implement policies (e.g. through financial support)
- decentralisation
- synergy of policies
- higher student representation from marginalised groups in the SRC (Student Representative Council)
- Instead of being a punitive truth... 'the first definition should be that a policy is a statement of intent' (transcript)

→ **declaring the aim**

'rethinking our higher education institutions'

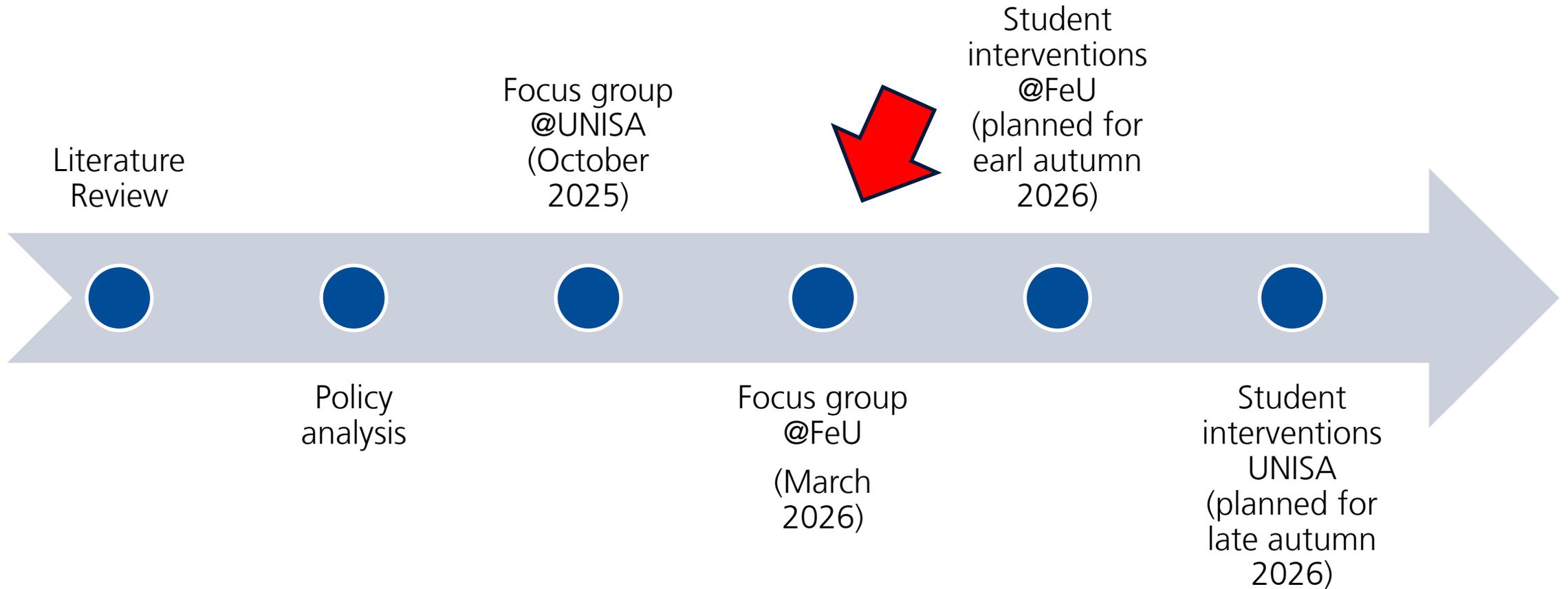
- rethinking of structuring and functioning of the institution
- a university where the role of policy is decentralized
- rethinking Leadership
- the political will to implement policies

The role of student voices

- **Advocacy** of the students:
- The student needs to know what they need: about learning abilities, preferences...
 - Step 1:** Lecturers need to enable and capacitate them
 - Step 2:** Students need to articulate what it is that they need from the lecturer/ from the institution
 - Step 3:** They can advocate for themselves

A key message

- UNISA's understanding of inclusion is strongly related to equity and fairness in their policy documents
- the focus group revealed that the policies are necessary, but they are not reflecting on how inclusion is lived at the university and what implementation challenges there are
- a problem is to include a sample of diverse student voices from different marginalised groups, e.g. in the SRC



Next steps

- adapt a future workshop methodology to make suitable for the sample
- considering the results of the policy analysis
- sample strategy
- participants (students) needs, e.g. technical devices, accessibility
- planning virtual or on-site format
- the process can lead to implications for further research methodologies that are more inclusive and accessible

Conclusion

Institutional policies on inclusion are necessary to give a frame for inclusion. But as inclusion is a complex construct, it is necessary to explore the perspectives of all actors of the institution, including student voices. When we think about these, it needs to be considered, that they can come from diverse backgrounds and marginalised groups as:

students with disabilities, ESL students, students studying from incarceration... maybe

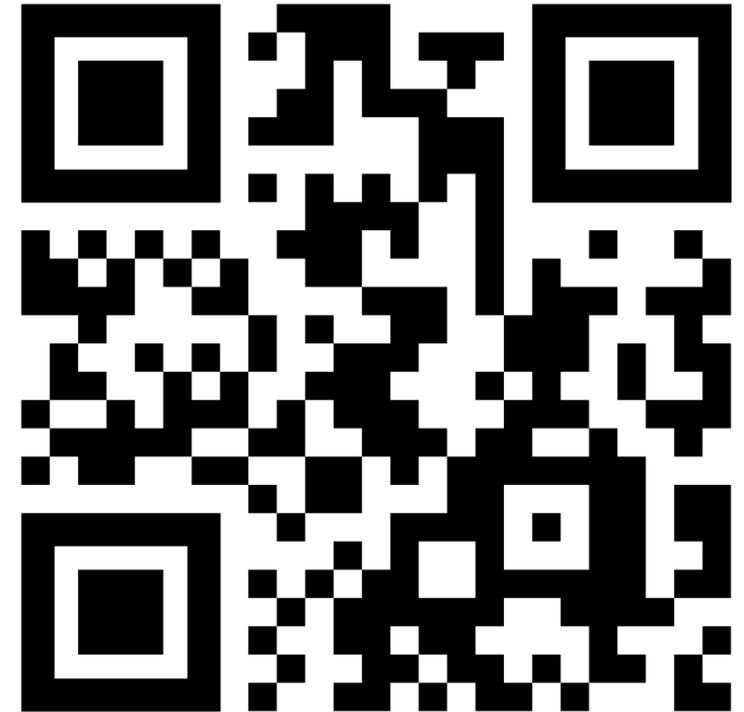
...this is a story about the diversity of inclusion!

Recommendation on Open Access publication

Cendon, Eva; Mpine Makoe; Irina Haury (2026)

Contributions to Higher Education Research

**The Future of the University: Global, Sustainable, and Inclusive
Special Issue, Vol 48(1).**



Thank you!

Q & A