

INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Manual higher education institutions

Underpinning the development
of policies aimed at enhancing the
social dimension of higher education



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Higher education institutions: underpinning the development of policies aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education

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<https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/>

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Table of contents

The objective, scope and structure of the manual	5
Principles and guidelines for social dimension	5
P&Gs toolkit for social dimension	6
About this manual	6
Where to start	7
Principle 1 - Strategic commitment	8
Recommendations	8
Inspiring practices in action	11
Principle 2 - Flexibility	12
Recommendations	12
Inspiring practices in action	13
Principle 3 - Synergies and lifelong learning	15
Recommendations	15
Inspiring practices in action	16
Principle 4 - Data collection and monitoring	18
Recommendations	18
Inspiring practices in action	19
Principle 5 - Counselling and guidance	21
Recommendations	21
Inspiring practices in action	22
Principle 6 - Sustainable funding and autonomy	24
Recommendations	24
Inspiring practices in action	25
Principle 7 - Inclusive learning environments and cultures	27
Recommendations	27
Inspiring practices in action	28
Principle 8 - International mobility	30
Recommendations	30
Inspiring practices in action	36
Principle 9 - Community engagement	38
Recommendations	38
Inspiring practices in action	39
Principle 10 - Policy dialogue	40
Recommendations	40
Inspiring practices in action	41

The objective, scope and structure of the manual

Principles and guidelines for social dimension

The [2020 Rome Communiqué](#), adopted by Ministers of Higher Education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the Rome Ministerial Conference in November 2020, envisions ‘an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030’. According to this vision, ‘every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training’. In this Communiqué, Ministers committed to reinforcing social inclusion in higher education, most importantly by adopting the [Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA](#) – henceforth referred to as the Principles and Guidelines (P&Gs) – developed by the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG).

The document includes principles and guidelines in ten areas to be followed by higher education institutions in order to ‘interconnect the principles of accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion into all laws, policies and practices concerning higher education in such a way that access, participation, progress and completion of higher education depend primarily on students’ abilities, not on their personal characteristics or circumstances beyond their direct influence’¹. This essentially means the mainstreaming of social inclusion and equity principles, where all higher education policies serve the purpose of ‘leaving no one behind’. As such, most P&Gs point towards measures creating the necessary conditions for an accessible, equitable, diverse and inclusive higher education.

The P&Gs feature ten principles, which are high-level political commitments. The principles are intended to underpin the development of policies aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education. The guidelines serve as recommendations to assist policy makers in (practically) implementing these principles. It is advised that public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) incorporate these principles across various dimensions of higher education, including learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge circulation and outreach, as well as institutional governance and management. Additionally, the principles should guide policies that empower both current and future students and staff within higher education.

Higher education institutions can strategically select indicators within the social dimension that align with their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as their specific context and priorities². The toolbox approach offers flexibility to focus on indicators and descriptors that are most relevant to the institution’s goals and environment.

At the same time, it is crucial for institutions to consider their socio-economic context and catchment area. By developing strategies that address the specific needs of their region and student population, they not only strengthen social cohesion but also make a meaningful contribution to broader national and European goals.

1 Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, Annex II of the Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020, p. 3.

2 Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area

P&Gs toolkit for social dimension

The PLAR-U-PAGS project partners have developed a P&Gs toolkit to assist higher education institutions in evaluating their current policies and practices related to the social dimension and provide them with advice and tips on how to implement the principles.

Contained within the toolbox are:

- **The framework:** intended to help higher education institutions to understand the policies, concepts and practices that need to be considered to develop a good national and/or institutional social dimension strategy.
- **The self-assessment tool:** designed for higher education institutions, to help them assess their current practices against social dimension principles and to provide advice on action items for improvement.
- **The manual:** intended to offer higher education institutions tips and advice on how to sustainably implement the specific P&Gs.

These tools are available at: inclusivehighereducation.eu

About this manual

This manual aims to help higher education institutions shape the policy and practice of their institutions regarding access and diversity by providing information and advice on how to implement the P&Gs. The manual follows the structure of the Principles and Guidelines, focusing on the ten areas addressed by the document:

- **Strategic commitment:** a strategic commitment of educational authorities towards the social dimension of higher education, including setting concrete, measurable targets through which progress can be assessed.
- **Flexibility:** creating processes to widen access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies.
- **Synergies and lifelong learning:** considering the education system as a whole, situating higher education studies within a lifelong learning perspective.
- **Data and monitoring:** the need to monitor the widening participation of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education.
- **Counselling Services:** accessible counselling and mental health services to support student well-being and academic success effectively.
- **Funding:** the need for sufficient and sustainable funding, and for sufficient autonomy to embrace diversity and enhance equity and inclusion.
- **Needs based approach:** responding to the needs of diverse students and staff creates an inclusive learning environment and inclusive institutional culture
- **International Mobility:** equal access for all students and staff to all opportunities offered by mobility programmes, fostering student participation in both physical and blended mobility.
- **Community Engagement:** engaging with external community stakeholders to increase the societal impact of higher education.

- **Policy Dialogue:** dialogue between public authorities, higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders to take forward the implementation of the P&Gs.

Each section includes recommendations for higher education institutions. Each section closes with a snippet of related ‘Inspiring Practices in Action’ from one of the countries around Europe identified by the project partners as operating some good practice in social dimension.

Where to start

Before getting started with this manual, higher education institutions should begin the process of reflecting on the principles and guidelines by using the self-assessment tool at www.inclusivehighereducation.eu. This tool helps them to review their current policies and practices against the social dimension framework and offers areas for improvement that can be further explored using this manual.

A valuable way for institutions to proceed is to ask different actors to run the self-assessment tool from their own perspective. Staff can then reflect on the differences in their responses, discuss their understanding of the framework from their position, and seek agreement on the strengths and weaknesses of current national/institutional policy and practice related to social dimension.

These initial discussions can serve as a platform for future collaboration on the social dimension by key stakeholders and provide a starting point for jointly planning the broader institutional dialogue around the various principles and guidelines discussed later in this publication.

Principle 1 - Strategic commitment

The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU levels. Strengthening the social dimension of higher education and fostering equity and inclusion to reflect the diversity of society is the responsibility of a higher education system as a whole and should be regarded as a continuous commitment.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider how best to:

- Participate in a **broad-based social dialogue** between public authorities, other higher education institutions, student and staff representatives and other key stakeholders for the development of a social dimension strategy or policy plan which strengthens diversity, equity and inclusion of students and staff.
- Develop a **comprehensive action plan or social dimension strategy** that focuses on embedding the social dimension across your institution policy by creating **clear definitions, measurable targets, and management systems** to ensure consistent implementation.
- **Assess and monitor** the action plan or social dimension strategy within concrete timeframes.

Recommendations

Broad-based social dialogue

- **Participate in a broad-based social dialogue.** Given that inequity or underrepresentation is likely to be entrenched within an education system and given that inequity problems are likely to be longstanding, it is important that the higher education strategy on equity takes into account the views of relevant stakeholders. In other words, a higher education strategy with a social dimension is more likely to be effective if a social dialogue has taken place. According to the guidelines, the preconditions of creating an inclusive higher education strategy include a broad-based dialogue between public authorities, higher education institutions, student and staff representatives and other key stakeholders.
- **Involve students when developing new strategies and policies.** It is important to specifically take into account the voices from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. They are the experts in their lived experiences and have the greatest understanding of the potential impact of diversity, facilitators and the barriers that may exist.
- **Ensure leadership commitment** to the development of a social dimension strategy and/or policies that address inclusion, diversity and equity. It is vital to get both top-down and bottom-up support for social dimension strategies. Include therefore your institutional leaders in the dialogue as early as possible. Their responsibilities may include providing structures and resources to deliver on the strategy and policies.

Plan or strategy document

- **Map the current approaches.** Strategic commitment to the social dimension of higher education can take many different forms. Many regulations and actions have already been put in place. It is important to value good practices. For this reason, it is important to map these current approaches. The overview can serve as a starting point for developing a policy plan with goals and indicators.
- **Choose a coherent approach.** There are different paths to foster equity, diversity and inclusion. In this approach, free education, gender equality and the rights of people with disabilities are the norm in legislation. The mainstream approach is based on the belief that if social dimension conditions are favourable to all students, there is a greater likelihood of de facto equity; and mainstreaming equity considerations in all policies and strategic planning is necessary in order to ensure equity and inclusion among students and staff. Alternatively, the focus may be on policies that specifically target disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of students and staff. This approach rests on the assumption that while general policy measures may also benefit disadvantaged groups, the vulnerable position of students and staff from underrepresented groups requires policy action targeting their specific needs. The different approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive but can complement each other to contribute more effectively to the strengthening of the social dimension.

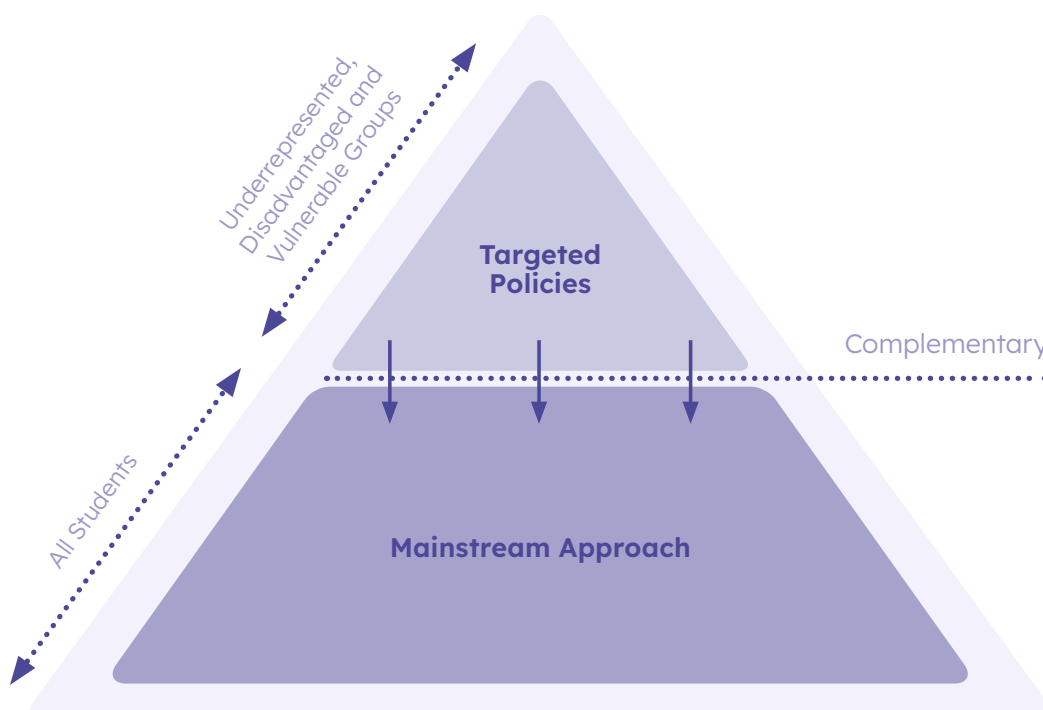


Figure 1: Coherent Approach

- **Integrate definitions, main strategic objectives, potential targets, and the main policy measures in the policy plan.** Having an institutional strategy, a similar major policy plan or a set of targeted measures concerning students and staff is a clear signal that the top-level education management regards equity as a policy priority that it is willing to act upon. The targets should aim at widening access, supporting participation in and completion of studies for all current and future students. Targets enable all parties to reflect on progress made and to evaluate the effectiveness of activities, allowing strategies to adapt - according to their success - measures such as participation levels and student feedback. Objectives should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.
 - **Specific:** The objective should be clearly and precisely defined
 - **Measurable:** The progress and success of the goal should be assessable through concrete criteria
 - **Achievable:** The goal should be attainable
 - **Relevant:** It should be relevant for the stakeholders attempting to achieve it
 - **Time-bound:** There should be a clear deadline to reach the goal, which helps maintain focus and motivation
- **Align the strategy across all levels of educational policy.** The strategies should ideally align and be agreed upon through a broad dialogue between the different stakeholders in the higher education landscape at different levels. Streamline administrative processes across the board to reduce red tape and make it easier to implement and manage social dimension strategies. We encourage non-HEI bodies to consult the manual for public authorities for more details.



Figure 2: Education policy levels of the social dialogue

Monitor and evaluate the action plan or strategy

- **Assess the implementation and impact of your institutional strategies and policies together with stakeholders.** Discuss with stakeholders the implementation of existing procedures to identify bottlenecks and inefficiencies, and monitor whether the selected targets are reached within proposed deadlines. In order to implement and monitor targets, adopt a systematic and robust approach to gathering data about the participation of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students and staff.

Inspiring practices in action

Finland – Finnish accessibility plan for higher education

Every Finnish higher education institution has to have an equality and non-discrimination plan/ accessibility plan. Based on legislation Finnish higher education institutions are required to monitor and assess their activities and to take part in external international evaluations, e.g. audits of their quality systems implemented by the Finnish Education evaluation centre. HE institutions report annually to the Ministry of Education by submitting their operating and financial plans. In addition, the Ministry obtains information from national statistics. As a part of the national steering of HE institutions, accessibility and equity are embedded in 4-year performance-based agreements. These are monitored every two years by the Ministry of Education in close co-operation with the HE institutions and updated every four years.

Consult the top-level strategy: [“Towards more accessible higher education and higher education institutions”](#).

The Netherlands – University of Amsterdam Gender Equality Plan

The University of Amsterdam has a Gender Equality Plan. It strives to be an inclusive university, a place where everyone may develop themselves to their full potential and feel welcome, safe, respected, supported and valued. The university recognizes that the universal right to education guarantees fair and equitable treatment, access, opportunity and advancement for all its current and prospective students, faculty and staff. Through community involvement with the rich diversity of Amsterdam the university works to make the University of Amsterdam a place that embraces opportunities to engage with the complex questions of heritage and social responsibility. By cooperating with the university and local communities it facilitates and mobilizes centralised and decentralised support for a diversity of people and knowledges.

The University of Amsterdam has a designated, fully staffed Chief Diversity Office (CDO) Team D&I Office and a network of Faculty Diversity Officers. The University also has dedicated HR capacity on both a central and decentral level to support and contribute toward further Gender Equality. The CDO team has recently funded a wide variety of initiatives through their Grassroots Funding initiative, which promoted not only gender equality, but also raised awareness of and fought discrimination within the institution. The University of Amsterdam and a number of its staff members are actively involved in the Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH), which actively promotes and strives towards equal representation of Women within Dutch Academia.

There is also a data collection and monitoring linked to this policy at the University of Amsterdam. In 2021 the University carried out a first comprehensive analysis of gender differences in payment and career paths, which included the data of more than 1100 scientists and data on promotions from the year 2005 onwards. The University is committed to continue and expand the collection of gender-related data in line with the monitoring of the effects of the policy measures within the institution D&I Policy Framework and the Strategic Ambitions towards a more inclusive academic culture. For example, it sets a target for the percentage of female professors to reach at least 30% by 2025.

Principle 2 – Flexibility

Legal regulations or policy documents should allow and enable higher education institutions to develop their own strategies to fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies.

Higher education institutions could therefore consider to:

- Develop **flexible study options**, such as part-time, blended, and online learning, as well as micro credentials and modular programmes, to accommodate diverse student needs.
- **Remove institutional barriers** by adapting administrative and academic requirements and providing targeted support for underrepresented groups through outreach programmes, mentoring, and financial aid and collaborate with businesses and societal organizations to validate work-based and informal learning experiences.
- Invest in **professional development** for teachers and support staff to enhance inclusive education practices.
- Strengthen RPL frameworks by **ensuring transparent, consistent recognition of prior learning** for both access to and completion of higher education.
- **Improve awareness** by providing clear information on RPL opportunities and application procedures.

Recommendations

Flexible study pathways

- **Develop and implement flexible study modes.** Flexible forms of education, such as part-time studies, blended and distance/online learning, represent a way to increase and expand the qualifications of people for whom full-time or on campus study in accredited degree programmes is difficult to access, especially due to socioeconomic, but also health, geographical and other barriers. Short courses and distance/online learning make it easier to reconcile study with professional, family and personal life and to better adapt to the specific needs of individual students, especially ‘non-conventional’ students. Promoting these forms of education in your own institution is one of the ways to reduce inequalities in access to higher education.
- **Remove institutional barriers to flexibility.** Reconsider various requirements from students across the board and implement experiences from specific types of flexible provision to all programmes and students. Equity and inclusion are even better served if flexible study programmes are combined with actions specifically targeting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups who tend to be also underrepresented in higher education. For example, there are usually tuition fees for part-time study programmes, but these are often waived for special education needs (SEN) students. A significant number of countries and higher education institutions have also started investing resources and taking on board initiatives aimed at widening access for disadvantaged students. These initiatives include outreach and bridging programmes or services like personal and professional counselling, mentoring and tutoring systems or general academic support for underrepresented students.

- **Promote professional development for teachers and support staff.** Teachers and support staff need training to effectively address diverse learning needs and promote inclusive education.

Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning

- **Collaborate with businesses and societal organizations.** This can be added to your recommendation on using supportive policy frameworks. Businesses and societal organizations can help recognize skills acquired outside the formal education system and provide practical support in implementing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- Follow trainings and use **training and financial support** provided by the national agencies. Financial support can be used by your institution to reduce administrative costs and increase capacity building for recognition of assessors of prior learning experiences.
- Ensure comprehensive **information provision** to raise awareness among potential candidates about recognition of prior learning opportunities.

Inspiring practices in action

Ireland - Pilot Framework for Recognition of Prior Learning in higher education

The **Pilot Framework for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education** was developed collaboratively by fourteen higher education institutions in Ireland and agreed in principle by their Registrars. The Framework's main aim is to support higher education institutions to develop a shared understanding of RPL and to achieve coherence and consistency in policy and practice. The RPL process is embedded in the quality assurance procedures of each higher education institution and is aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications.

This national initiative is a collaboration between the seven IUA Universities, the Institutes of Technology, and Technological Universities, and has built a consistent and coherent approach to recognition of prior learning within and across the entire public higher education sector. Funded under the Irish Government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 (Innovation and agility), the project brings about in the higher education institutions a significant shift in RPL policy, procedure and practice. The vision is that RPL will be an integral part of the higher education system, widely understood, celebrated and utilised as a flexible pathway to further learning, certification and professional development.

The project has worked with a diverse range of key national stakeholders, including national education agencies, QQI, the HEA and SOLAS; the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) and the RPL Practitioners Network; as well as employer and enterprise representative bodies.

Consult the project: <https://www.priorlearning.ie/>

OECD - International guidelines and recommendations for RPL³

The 10-step process of OECD offers a valuable approach to set up a sustainable recognition system of prior learning (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3 - 10-steps to set up a sustainable recognition system of prior learning

The first two decisions are the most relevant, as they have an impact on subsequent decisions, as well as on the institutions that should be involved in the governance of the validation system. First of all, institutions should decide on the potential beneficiaries of the system (Decision 1): should the system be open to everyone or should it target a subgroup of population? Secondly, in Decision 2, the type of skills that can be recognised through the system should be chosen. Validation systems can assess general skills, such as literacy or numeracy, or job specific skills. Depending on this choice, the benchmark used to evaluate and validate skills will vary (Decision 3). Additionally, if the system does not rely on already defined frameworks, the occupations or qualifications to prioritise should be identified (Decision 4), and the information included in the RPL standards should be determined (Decision 5). Once the benchmark for the RPL process has been defined, the evaluation methods must be chosen in Decision 6, as well as the professionals in charge of conducting the assessment (Decision 7). In decision 8, institutions must decide what type of certificate will be awarded at the conclusion of the RPL process, as well as any additional post-validation support provided. Finally, the last two Decisions ensure the high quality of the validation system (Decision 9) and the undertaking of information and awareness raising activities to boost the use of the system by potential beneficiaries (Decision 10).

Consult the practical guide: [Recognition of prior learning practical guide for policy makers](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/publications)

3 <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/publications>

Principle 3 - Synergies and lifelong learning

The inclusiveness of the entire education system should be improved by developing coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education and throughout lifelong learning.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- Participate in the **national social dialogue** on diversity, equity and inclusion between **different levels of education** and connect with representatives of **other policy areas in creating shared commitments** for the enhancement of diversity, equity and inclusion in education.
- **Cooperate with local educational institutions at all levels**, from pre-schools to adult education, through lectures, workshops and mutually beneficial research and community development projects, while also enabling learners from various levels and backgrounds to get acquainted with higher education.
- Provide a **legal framework, information and guidelines** on lifelong learning options
- Facilitate **trainings about diversity, equity and inclusion for educational staff**. It is especially important to train future teachers in matters of equity, diversity and inclusion.

Recommendations

Cooperation and stakeholder involvement

- **Establish collaborative structures** between relevant departments, organizations, and different education levels to align policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Mechanisms such as education councils, commissions, or working groups can facilitate this coordination.
- **Engage regularly with other higher education institutions and governmental bodies** (regional, national, and European agencies) to maintain policy coherence.
- **Include representatives from underrepresented groups** in decision-making forums, such as student organizations, advocacy groups, and community leaders.
- **Expand discussions beyond the education sector** by including stakeholders from employment, finance, health, social welfare, housing, and migration sectors.
- **Create a contact point for dealing with diversity, equality and inclusion** within your institution. This office should provide guidance on accessing information for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and offer direct support services. In addition, this point of contact should also include a signalling function to the government.

Policy and Financial Support for Lifelong Learning and Inclusion

- **Provide policies that facilitate access to your institution to adult learners, often referred to as ‘delayed transition students’**. Ensure that alternative access measures explicitly target mature students. Financial support for the development of micro-credentials and modular higher education systems contribute to the accessibility of higher education for adult learners.

- **Provide targeted financial support** for adult learners, ensuring funding opportunities are accessible regardless of age and explicitly supporting students who combine work and studies.
- **Ensure comprehensive information provision to raise awareness among potential adult candidates** about lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning opportunities.

Diversity, equity and inclusion training

- **Ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) competences are integrated into initial teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes.** By making DEI an integral part of teacher education, future educators will be better equipped to create inclusive and equitable learning environments at all levels of education. This fosters a more inclusive educational system where all students feel valued and supported, promoting better educational outcomes for diverse student populations.
- **Develop mentorship and peer-support programmes** to help educators and students from underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups navigate academic and professional challenges.

Inspiring practices in action

Hungary - Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (HNSIS)

With its updated version of the National Social Inclusion Strategy (NSIS) the Government of Hungary continues its long-term inclusion policy that seeks to achieve a fundamental change of attitude concerning poverty and the Roma population. Top level coordination mechanisms have been developed to implement the NSIS, which covers the whole education spectrum and has a few action lines focused on promoting social inclusion and supporting Roma and other disadvantaged groups.

United Kingdom - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Centre

Imperial College in London makes a specific commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. There is a dedicated team - [the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Centre](#) - that works to support staff and makes Imperial College a better place to work by promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This team offers guidance, training and support as part of the College's HR services. They listen and talk to staff across Imperial College and work towards mainstreaming equality, diversity and inclusion. This team works with individuals, teams, and departments, providing help and advice.

Their main responsibilities are:

- Working in collaboration to promote DEI and to eliminate all forms of discrimination.
- Influencing and advising on best practice, specifically ensuring compliance with EDI legislation and Imperial policies and procedures.
- Providing a variety of training courses for Imperial College staff, as well as the development of programmes.
- Working with the institution's diversity staff networks, facilitating two way communication, and ensuring year-on-year progress.
- Building collaborative working relationships with appropriate community groups, professionals and sector-wide peers.

VUB - Lifelong learning options

The Vrij Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in Flanders provides a wide range of offerings around [Lifelong learning options](#) on its website. These include various options such as postgraduate certificates, permanent training or micro-credentials. They clearly state in their communication what possible options are available, such as evening and/or weekend courses. The website clearly indicates who to contact for specific questions.

Principle 4 – Data collection and monitoring

Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Higher education systems should define the purpose and goals of collecting certain types of data, taking into account the particularities of the national legal frameworks. Adequate capacities to collect, process and use such data to inform and support the social dimension of higher education should be developed.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- **Participate in national surveys or administrative data collection on student characteristics and their participation** in higher education. By participating in these surveys, institutions can use the results to develop support measures and practices for identified underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups.
- **Monitor and evaluate data** to identify potential systemic barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This data can then be used to adjust policies and practices that promote access and success for all students.

Recommendations

Data collection and utilisation

- **Align definitions and criteria with European, national legal or regulatory definitions** and those **used by cooperating higher education institutions** to gather data on disadvantaged, underrepresented, and vulnerable students more specifically. Continuous national data collection is necessary for the development of effective policies. Therefore, it is relevant for higher education institutions to participate in monitoring. Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education.
- **Connect your institutional data collection systems and platforms** about student characteristics and experiences **with other public registers**, allowing for easy data exchange and integration. By identifying and analysing the obstacles these students face in their studies and connecting this information with other policy areas like finance, housing, and social services, institutions can use the findings from these surveys and data collections to develop student support measures and enhance practices that support underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups.

Systematic approach to evaluate data and optimise policies and procedures

- **Monitor and evaluate the participation** of disadvantaged, vulnerable, and underrepresented students specifically at the educational level. Supporting staff in gathering and analysing feedback from all stakeholders, and specifically from disadvantaged, vulnerable, and underrepresented students about their experiences with procedures and the support they receive, ensures that data analysis offers both a 'big picture' view of progress on the social dimension and opportunities to look at potential areas of underrepresentation at a more granular level (e.g., by disability type, field of study, etc.).

- **Conduct analyses of student data (quantitative and qualitative) across all education levels, lifelong learning, and labour market entry enabling the evaluation of the effectiveness of overarching social dimension policies.** For example, by comparing graduation rates from secondary education with enrolment data in higher education, authorities can identify and address barriers in the transition process.

Collaboration with stakeholders

- **Collaborate with other educational institutions, government agencies, and social organizations** to share data and develop best practices. This includes partnering on joint research projects to address barriers for underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students, establishing data sharing agreements for a comprehensive understanding of student demographics, organizing and participating in workshops and conferences to exchange knowledge, working with government agencies to shape inclusive policies, and collaborating with social organizations to provide support services like mentoring, financial aid, and housing assistance. Such collaboration enhances the quality and usability of collected data, leading to more effective and inclusive policies and practices.

Inspiring practices in action

Belgium - Flemish Community - Charter underrepresented groups⁴

The Flemish Ministry of Education and training and the higher education institutions have made agreements on the definitions of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In 2017 all universities and universities of applied sciences agreed to register and to monitor students from underrepresented groups in a uniform way. Guidelines are recorded in the Charter underrepresented groups.

The aim of the Charter is to monitor the participation, the intake and outflow of underrepresented groups at Flemish level. Target groups in the charter are students with disabilities, students with a migration background, new entrants, scholarship (and so-called “almost scholarship”) students, working students, foreign language students, multilingual students, ...and students from a short-educated or medium-skilled environment.

The uniform data, collected with the consent of students, have been collected since 2018-2019 at institutional level. Universities annually compile their intake figures of generational students at the aggregated level. This provides a first picture of the participation rate in higher education. These data are not gathered at national/Flemish level.

4 <https://www.inclusivehighereducation.eu/news/second-peer-learning-activity-ghent>

EUROSTUDENT – capacity building on national monitoring for the social dimension

The [Eurostudent](#) project collects and analyses comparable data on the social dimension of European higher education. A wide range of topics related to students' social and economic conditions are covered. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. It does this through coupling a central coordination approach with a strong network of national partners in each participating country. In this way, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the respective national frameworks in international comparison can be made. The main users of the findings are higher education policymakers at national and European level, researchers in this field, managers of higher education institutions and students all over Europe.

EUROSTUDENT assists in capacity-building in order to establish policy-relevant and robust national monitoring structures for the social dimension of higher education. It provides a broad, policy-relevant cross-country comparison of data on the social dimension of European higher education. EUROSTUDENT supports countries in their efforts to use the insights from the international comparison to review and improve the social dimension of higher education in their country. It publishes several different types of reports.

United Kingdom – Equality Reports at the University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh has a comprehensive policy on Equality, Diversity & Inclusion. The university regularly collects and analyses data on access, retention and success of students from underrepresented groups. It uses this data to identify potential barriers and develop strategies for improvement. These assessments help take concrete steps toward a more inclusive learning environment.

It also publishes annual Equality Reports and data dashboards specifically to monitor its diversity and equity performance, and it evaluates the impact of its policies and strategies. This website contains information about its DEI policies, reports, and the steps the university is taking to monitor and address systemic barriers. Consult [the data dashboards and reports](#).

Principle 5 - Counselling and guidance

Public authorities should have policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- Offer **effective academic and career guidance** for potential and enrolled students, incorporating advice from alumni associations and using graduate tracking data where possible
- Provide **effective psychological counselling** for potential and enrolled students
- Ensure the capacity to **mediate conflicts, particularly related to equity issues**

Recommendations

Accessible academic and career counselling

- **Provide free, accessible, and timely academic and career counselling and guidance services to potential and enrolled students.** The services under consideration can help actual and potential students in many different ways, including instilling confidence to achieve academic success; developing skills to improve organisation, study habits, and time management; working through personal problems that may affect their capacity to study effectively and live well; identifying interests, strengths, and aptitudes, and preparing for future academic, career, and social challenges. Because of the many potential benefits, the principle and its guidelines recommend that services are accessible to all actual and potential students and provided free of charge.
- Organise regular **informative sessions and workshops** about different study programmes and career opportunities for potential students. Offer opportunities for potential students to shadow current students for a day or a week to get a realistic view of the study. Develop online platforms where potential students can access information about various programmes, career opportunities, and self-assessment tools to discover their interests and skills.
- Collaborate **among counselling providers** (both within HEI and externally) to share best practices and avoid duplication (e.g. peer learning activities, working groups, attending national and international events and joining networks).

Accessible psychological counselling

- **Provide free, accessible, and timely psychological counselling and guidance services to potential and enrolled students in higher education.** Ensure that psychological counselling is available at public centres and/or within the institution. Facilitate collaboration among providers (both within HEI and externally) to share best practices and avoid unnecessary replication. Make sure that regulations focus on all prospective and current students and that services can be offered for free.
- Ensure that **information about available counselling services is easily accessible to potential students** through the institution's website, brochures, and during open days. Implement preventive programmes that focus on promoting mental health, such as workshops on stress management and mindfulness. Collaborate with secondary schools to inform potential students early about the available psychological support through guest lectures, information sessions, and joint projects.
- **Promote mental health literacy by using various outreach programmes and resources that are designed to increase awareness and provide accessible mental health support on a large scale.**

Conflict Resolution Policies

- **Create a policy for conflict resolution and state what the concrete mandate of impartial bodies/ombudsperson is.** If there is no ombudsperson at national level make sure to appoint an ombudsperson at your institution. Make sure they are known in both staff and student circles and make their role clear: providing access to counselling and legal services for both students and staff if they have any concerns related to discrimination issues. It is important that students are directly involved in drafting these policies (connect different delegates from student groups, student organisations, student associations,...). This involvement can be set up by organising student committees, feedback surveys, focus groups, open forums,...

Inspiring practices in action

Belgium – Student support services - Flemish Community Mental Health strategy

The Flemish Community in Belgium has rolled out a specific and sustainable student mental health strategy which takes a public mental health perspective as its starting point. The approach proceeds from scientific epidemiological data on the needs at the level of the whole student population and addresses both occurrence (prevalence) and prevention of mental health problems. Such an approach shifts the focus from high-risk students and mental disorders to the emotional health of the entire student population, and, accordingly, interventions that can improve the resilience of all students. Improving psychological resilience of the broad student population will reduce the number of students that develop mental disorders when confronted with internal or external stresses. Such enhanced resilience skills act as a psychological safety net when students are confronted with exceptional risk factors, such as the Covid-19. A wide range of low-threshold e-health interventions free of charge to (international) students is available on the online [MoodSpace](#) platform. Going beyond these, the Flemish policy helps universities adopt a more proactive, preventive approach. Students are actively involved in the development and evaluation of interventions and policy implementation.

The Netherlands - Ombuds Officer University of Leiden

The University Ombuds Officer at the University of Leiden deals with complaints from students who believe they have not been treated fairly by a university staff member or administrative body. Students can submit a complaint up to 12 months after the incident occurred, even if they have since completed their studies. The Ombuds Officer has a fully independent position within the university and a duty of confidentiality, which ensures all complaints are dealt with in strict confidence. They are able to deal with a complaint in an impartial way and issue advice on how to avoid similar problems in the future. The Ombuds Officer also plays an important role in drawing attention to frequently occurring issues within the university and making suggestions for improvement. Consult [the role of the Ombuds Officer](#).

Principle 6 - Sustainable funding and autonomy

Public authorities should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions enabling them to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- Apply for public **funding** that supports you to **achieve goals** for broadening access, increasing participation and supporting completion, especially for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.
- Offer **universal or needs-based grants** for students, to support students for both **direct and indirect study costs**.
- Offer clear, current, and **accessible information and assistance** on internal and external financial support mechanisms to all students, especially those who are underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable.

Recommendations

Apply for public funding for higher education institutions

- **Define concrete action steps linked to the strategic objectives** in order to achieve those objectives and get rewarded by governmental funding. The first guideline proposes that higher education funding systems should be closely aligned to strategic objectives related to the social dimension. The objectives should focus on improving access to, participation in, or completion of higher education for vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups. These objectives can then be the basis for determining the amount of public funding your higher education institution receives to support underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. For example, achieve a 15% increase in the graduation rates of first-generation undergraduate students within four years. Afterwards, it is important to collect data on the achievement of these performance-based goals and **monitor** the received funding on the base of these findings.

Support and grants

- **Offer universal and/or need-based grants covering both direct costs (tuition and study materials) and indirect costs (accommodation and transport). Provide the possibility for grants to all students, whether studying full- or part-time.** Financial support through grants can contribute to promoting social mobility by providing equal opportunities for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. By ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder access to higher education, collaborate with governments in helping to engender a more equitable society where individuals can achieve their full potential regardless of their economic circumstances. When all students are eligible for grants with no other criterion than student status involved (such as academic performance or financial status), the type of grant system is understood as 'universal'. This is the model

which is seen as the gold standard in the principle and its guidelines. Disadvantaged students are not specifically targeted, but due to the universal approach, they benefit from it. As all students are treated equally, there is no potential for any stigma in relation to receiving a grant. In many systems, grants are awarded based on assessed financial need (needs-based grants). Eligibility is determined based on a set of socio-economic criteria, the most frequent being family income. These systems intend grants to reach those students with the greatest financial need and are therefore designed to support the participation of disadvantaged students.

In addition, annually collect data about these grants and **monitor** the extent to which they reach the students who need them. A major concern is that public assistance is distributed consistently across age groups. Parent students in particular tend to have more financial problems, which means that support is not sufficient, especially in regions with a high cost of living.

Information provision

- **Provide up-to-date, transparent information about direct and indirect financial support to students through easily accessible communication channels.** Focus on reaching underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students with this information. Collaborate with your public authority by creating specific, targeted campaigns for disadvantaged students to inform them that these opportunities are available and are a good opportunity to consider; for this you can use inclusive resources (e.g., testimonials from (other) disadvantaged students, videos in sign language, brochures in Braille). Ensure students can access and understand key information to make an informed decision.

Inspiring practices in action

France - Sciences Po financial aid

The website of [Sciences Po](#), an international research university, aims to keep international students well informed about their options and to support them in finding the right financial aid to continue their studies. It provides a clear, structured overview of everything a student needs to know to apply for a scholarship. The guide on this website covers a wide range of information, including:

- **Types of Scholarships:** The website describes various scholarships, including merit-based scholarships for academic excellence and needs-based scholarships for students in need of financial assistance.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** The guide explains in detail who qualifies for specific scholarships, with criteria varying by scholarship. This can range from academic achievement, income thresholds to specific nationalities.
- **Application Process:** There are step-by-step explanations on how students can apply, including what documents are needed and the selection process.
- **Deadlines:** The site contains crucial information about deadlines for the various scholarships so that students can submit their applications in a timely manner.

- External Scholarships: In addition to internal funding opportunities, the site also provides information on external scholarships available through other organizations or governments.
- Continuity and Renewal: The site also provides guidelines on how a student can renew a scholarship and the conditions associated with its retention.
- FAQs and Support: There is a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section to answer students' most common concerns and confusions, as well as contact information for further support.

Ghent University of Applied Sciences (HOGENT)

HOGENT provides extensive information about various forms of financial support through its website. This includes details about study grants, interest-free loans, and other support options. The information is easily accessible for students, with clear explanations of application procedures and eligibility requirements. HOGENT utilizes several communication channels to inform students: Website: The financial support section on the HOGENT website contains detailed information about available scholarships and loans. Student Services (STUVO): STUVO offers personal guidance and can assist students in applying for financial support. Contact Options: Students can easily get in touch via email or phone, and there are options for digital or in-person appointments.

HOGENT also organises an online information session 'funding in higher education' for students.

HOGENT provides assistance for students facing temporary financial difficulties, such as advances on study grants or instalment payments for tuition fees. There are also specific measures for students with disabilities or those eligible for reduced tuition fees.

Consult: [HOGENT](#) ; ['funding in higher education'](#).

Principle 7 - Inclusive learning environments and cultures

Public authorities should help HEIs to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- **Use adequate means and tools** to improve **initial and continuing professional training** for academic and administrative staff to enable them to work professionally and equitably with a diverse student body and staff.
- **Monitor the quality** of initial and **continuous staff and student training** in your higher education institution on diversity, equity or inclusion.
- Apply for financial support to ensure universal accessibility of your **buildings and infrastructure**.

Recommendations

Training for staff & students

- **Use adequate means and tools to improve initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff to enable them to work professionally and equitably with a diverse student body and staff.** Working 'equitably and with a diverse student body and staff' is not necessarily easy or obvious. Appropriate training can help academic and administrative staff to respond better to the needs of a diverse student body and to work better with colleagues of different backgrounds and/or orientations.
- **Ensure that standardised training on diversity, equity and inclusion is available for both staff and students.** Collaborate therefore with public authorities, student representatives and other higher education institutions to develop common concepts, frameworks, and tools for the training (e.g. inclusive facilities, universal design, responding to discriminatory speech, intercultural and inclusive communication, dealing with diversity, interculturalism). Collaborating with external organisations can also provide valuable support and resources for advancing diversity and inclusion agendas.
- Develop **e-learning modules and online workshops** to ensure broad accessibility to inclusion training.
- Implement a **mentoring programme** where experienced staff guide new colleagues in working in a diverse environment.

Monitoring training quality

- **Provide monitoring** to the quality of staff and student training on diversity, equity or inclusion. Make sure to include representatives from underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups in the monitoring process, and utilise existing quality assurance frameworks where applicable.
- Conduct annual student and staff satisfaction **surveys** to measure the impact of inclusion trainings.
- Publish periodic **reports** on the results of training initiatives and take action based on the findings.

Accessibility of Higher Education Buildings and Infrastructure

- **Meet the mandatory accessibility standards that state how your higher education institution should adapt its buildings and infrastructure to accommodate underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students and staff. Regularly monitor the implementation** of these improvements to ensure you meet the needs of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students and staff.
- Install **clear signage and assistive technologies**, such as Braille signs and voice-activated navigation systems, to improve accessibility.
- Provide **accessible digital learning environments and websites** with support for screen readers and other aids.

Inspiring practices in action

Ireland - CPD - the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning

Implementation of universal design principles in Teaching & Learning promotes inclusivity and equity while also ‘futureproofing’ teaching. As part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning’s open access digital badge initiative, AHEAD⁵ and University College Dublin have teamed up to create the digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning. The [Universal Design in Teaching and Learning – Open Courses](#) includes instructions and learning materials for a short introductory professional development course on universal design for learning. In partnership with the Forum, these materials are freely available to institutions interested in rolling it out locally by volunteer course facilitators. AHEAD and UCD provide the learning materials, the institution provides the staff time and administrative support to roll it out. The course can be rolled out in a completely online or blended mode of delivery and takes about 25 hours of learner effort in total. Every participant who completes the course receives the Forum’s digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning.

⁵ <https://www.ahead.ie/>

The Netherlands – NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences

NHL Stenden has developed a Short Advanced Programme (SAP) titled “[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in an educational environment](#).” This programme is designed to enhance the skills of both staff and students in understanding and implementing DEI principles within educational settings.

Training Components:

- The SAP includes workshops that raise awareness about diversity and inclusion, allowing participants to share experiences and learn from each other in a multicultural environment.
- It aims to equip staff with the tools necessary to create inclusive learning environments, addressing challenges faced by diverse student populations.

Collaboration: The programme is jointly organised with the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), emphasizing a collaborative approach to professional development across institutions.

Learning Outcomes: Participants will develop an understanding of how DEI affects organizations and individuals, create evidence-based interventions for inclusivity, and reflect on their learning through team interactions in diverse settings.

Principle 8 - International mobility

International mobility programmes in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that fosters diversity, equity and inclusion and should particularly foster participation of students and staff from vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds.

More specifically higher education institutions should consider to:

- Develop an **inclusive mobility strategy** with a variety of mobility programmes, including international mobility, online, and blended mobility. Establish **quantitative targets** to encourage the participation of students and staff from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups.
- **Monitor** specific characteristics and experiences of students and staff participating in international mobility programmes.
- Provide targeted **administrative and financial support for students and staff** from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to help them participate in international mobility.

Recommendations

Action plan for international mobility

- **Set up a broad-based internal dialogue.** All relevant stakeholders (staff, students (especially from vulnerable groups), alumni,...) should engage in the creation and evaluation of an institutional internationalisation/mobility strategy and other related policies and procedures. Make sure these include elements on streamlined application processes and structured support programmes.
- **Leadership commitment** in higher education institutions is vital. Once leaders are convinced of the importance of inclusive mobility strategies, and willing to prioritise them within the higher education institutions, new initiatives can be set up. The diagram below includes **tips to enhance leadership commitment** towards inclusive mobility within your institution.

Refer to and align with European strategies

Getting leadership commitment is easier if inclusive mobility is already put forward and recognised as a priority at **European level**. **Align your institutional commitment** with European strategies.

For example: refer to the commitments made by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Conference held in Rome in November 2020, where ministers adopted the **principles and guidelines to strengthen the social dimension**.

Refer to fact & figures

If your higher education institution needs to address the importance of a more inclusive mobility strategy, **refer to facts and figures** and put the **benefits** of an inclusive strategy in the spotlight. It is also recommended to look up **good practices** and good examples at other higher education institutions, and check the outcomes and benefits of their inclusive internationalisation strategies.

Involve experts

To help get the institutions leaders on board, you might consider bringing in an (internal) **expert** on the subject of inclusion and mobility. Sometimes the support of an expert can break down walls, and help showcase the importance of well-designed inclusive strategies.

- **Provide a variety of mobility programmes to suit different needs and aspirations of a diverse student body (short term mobilities, virtual exchanges/online mobility, blended mobilities, joint study programmes at different levels, summer and winter schools, etc.).** There is no one-size-fits-all solution to widening access to mobility, and students' differing circumstances require varying approaches. Offering more flexible, short mobility opportunities is highly valued by disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students. Short, online or blended mobilities can often act as a first step and build student confidence to participate in longer mobility experiences at a later date.

- **Set quantitative targets for the participation of students in internationalisation and mobility programmes, especially for the participation of disadvantaged students.** Make sure these targets are realistic, defined and measurable, so as to allow for a proper evaluation of your results. Come up with targets for both incoming and outgoing mobility programmes and outline how the authority will track the participation or progress. Targets enable all parties to reflect on progress made and evaluate the effectiveness of activities, allowing mobility programmes to adapt according to success measures such as participation levels and student feedback. Make sure to align or exceed European targets or figures in your mobility targets.
- Set **quantitative targets** for the participation of students in internationalisation and mobility programmes, especially for the participation of disadvantaged students. Make sure these targets are realistic, defined, and measurable, so as to allow for a proper evaluation of your results. Come up with targets for both incoming and outgoing mobility programmes and outline how the authority will track participation and progress. Targets enable all parties to reflect on progress made and evaluate the effectiveness of activities, allowing mobility programmes to adapt according to success measures such as participation levels and student feedback. Make sure to align or exceed European targets or figures in your mobility targets. In particular, consider the EU Council Recommendation (Europe on the Move)⁶, which sets a target date of 2027 for ensuring that at least 20% of all mobile students are from the category of ‘students with fewer opportunities’.

Monitoring international mobility

- **Agree on definitions and criteria to identify disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students and students with fewer opportunities.** Align definitions and criteria with European, national legal or regulatory definitions and those used in other higher education institutions to gather data on disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students more specifically. Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension.
- **Monitor and evaluate the participation of students in all mobility programmes, and monitor the participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students specifically.** Gather and analyse feedback from all stakeholders, and specifically from disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students about their mobility experiences and experiences with procedures and support received. Ensure that data analysis offers both a ‘big-picture’ view of progress on inclusive mobility and opportunities to look at potential areas of underrepresentation at a more granular level (e.g. by disability type, mobility programme type, field of study, etc.).

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/13/greater-opportunities-to-learn-and-study-abroad-council-adopts-recommendation/>

Tips for effective monitoring

Make sure to collect **both quantitative and qualitative data** on the experiences of disadvantaged students, and ensure that this data is **reviewed and analysed periodically**.

Where possible, **link** the monitoring **with national data collection systems** on this topic and work with national ministries and agencies to feed into them. Where national collection of such data does not exist, seek opportunities to engage with ministries and agencies to propose this.

Ensure that data is gathered for **all incoming and outgoing students**, with a specific focus on the participation rate of disadvantaged students.

Make sure to also collect data relating to **staff** mobility.

Be mindful of both national and European data protection law, ensuring that **privacy and confidentiality** are key principles in the design.

Make sure that students give their **informed consent** for the collection of any data concerning access needs, and that they are informed of the intended subsequent use of such data.

Only collect data which is likely to be **relevant** in tracking progress and identifying areas of underrepresentation or need for improvement. This may include tracking age, socio-demographic characteristics, field of study, mobility programme type, country of the home institution (for incoming students) or type of support required.

- **Updating strategies.** Ultimately, all evidence gathered from data and the overview of obstacles disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students face related to their participation in mobility should be used to improve and update the institutional mobility strategies and policies and associated procedures. This in turn will support your higher education institution to increase participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students and provide the most inclusive experience possible for all students.

Financial and non-financial support for higher education institutions

- **Build cooperation between relevant departments/organisations at national level.** This is vital to align policies and regulations in different fields. Engage at regular intervals with public authorities and state bodies (regional, national and European agencies). Strengthening the social dimension in international mobility should be regarded as a continuous commitment. A learning network between public authority staff, higher education institutional staff and those in relevant national agencies and state bodies ensures that inclusion issues regarding procedures, application and funding or other relevant topics can be explored and resolved quickly and efficiently. It can facilitate the process of redesigning processes.

- **Provide information and awareness sessions and training under a Continuing Professional Development programme/plan for staff with specific roles in the field of inclusion and internationalisation.** Identify knowledge gaps in relation to inclusive mobility. This can take place as mentioned above in a learning network.
- **Deliver professional training** on how to successfully organise equitable and inclusive international learning mobility, in particular blended mobility and internationalisation at home (e.g., international online collaboration on the courses), along with the physical mobility. In addition, **adopt new technologies** that enhance accessibility and participation of underrepresented groups in mobility programmes.

Support for students

- **Provide a concise overview of information about (additional) support services and mobility grants for disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students, as well as their portability status, including the responsible organisations and a contact person.** A lack of information about the transportability of mobility grants and support services abroad represents a significant barrier for disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students. Therefore it is vital that higher education institutions provide clear information on eligibility for mobility grants, what is covered by each grant, evidence required to demonstrate disadvantaged status (if relevant), other key information required to apply for the grant and where to find grant application and submission information. Make information on eligibility easy to understand. It is also important to gather information about which national support grants and loans are transferable to study in other jurisdictions. Make sure to integrate positive statements and messages about mobility opportunities in the information overview, by emphasising the added value of mobility. This will help to show disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students that mobility experiences are available to them and represent a great opportunity for them.
- **Inclusive applications and assistance.** Make the application process more inclusive and **eliminate barriers by creating user-friendly applications**, making it easier to apply. Below you can find a roadmap with different elements to keep in mind when assisting students with the use of inclusive applications.

Make sure that applications are available both in paper and digital format, and provide other **alternative formats** (e.g., braille).

Ensure that the application process is **easy to navigate**.

Where possible **simplify the process** by removing unnecessary questions, steps or paperwork throughout the procedure.

Examine how the number of questions and documents could be limited.

Ensure that disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented feel safe to disclose a specific condition from the beginning of the application process.

Facilitate a **preparatory visit** to the host institution before the mobility programme, should one be required prior to the application or departure.

- **Ensure a needs-based approach.** Mobility programmes and financial support systems should aim to be universally applicable to all students, however, when this is not possible, the public student financial support systems should be primarily needs-based and should make mobility affordable for all students. Provide additional support measures for disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students such as additional top-up grants and grants for preparatory visits and ensure a fair system of allocation to disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students. Ensure that the scholarships cover a significant portion of the costs incurred by the students and are paid on time.
- **Create a communication campaign designed to raise awareness of the value of outbound mobility,** specifically focusing on the experiences of disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students. This will help disadvantaged, vulnerable, and underrepresented students see that mobility experiences are available to them and represent a tremendous opportunity for them. Before getting started, keep in mind the following tips on the provision of information and advice regarding grants and funding:

Tips on the provision of information and advice regarding grants and funding

Give clear details on grants and funding to support opportunities to study, work or volunteer abroad, and highlight any additional funding, specifically for disadvantaged students.

Provide clear information on how to apply.

Support students by calculating the real costs up front, as well as the coverage of associated grants.

Ensure clear information is available on the website of the institution.

Ensure targeted information is provided through multiple channels.

Provide the contact details of a representative of your international and inclusion office for more information.

Provide information and links to any available national support organisations.

Encourage early application to ensure there is enough time to complete all the necessary formalities.

Make information on eligibility easy to understand and share information on other sources of funding with students so that they can take advantage of the multiple funding opportunities available.

Provide clear and transparent information relating to costs abroad, both in terms of living expenses (travel, food, accommodation) and opportunities to work abroad. This will enable students to better plan their budgets for their mobility period.

Inspiring practices in action

Belgium Flemish Community – Brains on the Move

In 2013 the Flemish government (Belgium) has adopted the action plan [Brains on the move](#). In this internationalisation strategy, inclusion was given a central place and a benchmark was set concerning the mobility of underrepresented groups in higher education. The Flemish government strives for 33% of all outgoing mobile students to belong to underrepresented groups (among them students with disabilities). Furthermore, concrete actions have been taken to promote mobility among these groups. Monthly top-up scholarships are available for these students and at least 25% of all Flemish mobility grants should go to students from these groups.

InclusiveMobility Framework

The [inclusivemobility.eu](#) platform aims to support higher education institutions, national agencies and ministries of education in assessing the inclusiveness of their institutional policies and practices on international mobility. In addition, it aims to provide them with feedback and advice for further improvement on this policy. This platform contains the inclusive mobility framework, the self-assessment, the toolbox and training packages.

The framework aims to provide a comprehensive overview of strategic goals and related action points that stakeholders can take to adopt a strategy for sustainable inclusive mobility at the institutional and/or national level. Each framework focuses on student mobility between higher education institutions.

The self-assessment aims to support higher education institutions, national agencies and ministries of education in assessing the inclusiveness of their institutional policies and practices on international mobility. In addition, it also aims to provide them with feedback and advice for further improvement.

The toolbox is designed to inspire stakeholders with publications, reports and videos to stay up to date on the topic of inclusive mobility. The toolbox is continuously updated and enriched with new resources.

The training packages include e-learning modules with useful tips for each stakeholder on how to make your mobility programmes more inclusive.

Belgium Flemish Community – The Stepping Stone Principle for Internationalisation at Ghent University: What Does It Mean?

The [stepping stone principle](#) refers to a type of curriculum design, by means of which every student receives maximum opportunities for acquiring international and intercultural competencies (IIC). Throughout, the curriculum offers students international and intercultural learning opportunities, the intensity of which gradually increases as graduation approaches. These international and intercultural learning opportunities, in other words, start with low-threshold internationalisation at home (I@H) initiatives such as an international case study or guest speaker, followed by short-term mobility (excursions, short work placements), and finally resulting in longer periods of credit or degree mobility (Erasmus+ exchange programmes or an international joint programme).

The first learning opportunity that is offered thus becomes the stepping stone to go on and discover the next. There is a broad range of possible stepping stones for internationalisation (cf. 3.4 How to Design My Curriculum). Incorporating such stepping stones into a curriculum necessarily goes hand in hand with designing a learning pathway for the acquisition of international and intercultural competencies. It is a way for the study programme to achieve Ghent University's strategic education objective on Internationalisation.

The incorporation of such stepping stones into the curriculum is a way of offering your students a more diverse set of international and intercultural learning opportunities. In so doing, you also foster a more inclusive approach to internationalisation. The use of stepping stones gives students the opportunity to acquire international and intercultural skills gradually throughout their study career in a way that is stimulating and well-considered. A gradual introduction to internationalisation may possibly trigger more students to embark on a study-abroad experience. However, a study-abroad experience is not a prerequisite to acquire the intended international and intercultural skills. This is why, ideally, a study programme consists of mandatory I@H components as well as elective mobility components, allowing students to acquire the intended competencies albeit by means of different learning tracks. Mobility, in other words, is just one means to an end. The ultimate goal that any study programme should bear in mind is that each student acquires 100% of the intended international and intercultural competencies.

Principle 9 - Community engagement

Higher educational institutions should ensure that community engagement in higher education promotes diversity, equity and inclusion.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- Establish local, regional, or national **networks** that support the development of community engagement activities in higher education, particularly those focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Develop a **policy framework** that recognises community engagement activities as a **criterion for career progression** and integrates these activities into the curriculum.

Recommendations

Networks for community engagement

- **Attend or organise networks for community engagement at different levels involved.** Stakeholders can be local and public authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens or citizens' groups. Attend or organise networking events like trainings, conferences, and online platforms where different institutions can share successful community engagement strategies with different stakeholders, such as local and public authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens.

Contractual frameworks and Career Advancement

- Develop a **contractual framework** that links community engagement to career advancement within your higher education institution (HEI). Integrate community engagement into the core mission of your institution by developing initiatives that promote social responsibility and local collaboration. Specifically, community engagement should be connected to:
 - **Teaching and Learning:** Involve students in projects that benefit the community.
 - **Research:** Encourage research focused on local issues and solutions.
 - **Service and Knowledge Exchange:** Organise workshops and events for the community.
 - **Students and Staff:** Promote volunteer work and community projects as part of professional development.
 - **Management:** Ensure community engagement is a key component of policy-making and strategic planning.
- Develop clear guidelines and metrics to assess the impact of community engagement, such as:
 - **Quantitative Metrics:** Number of students and staff involved, number of projects, and hours spent on community activities.
 - **Qualitative Metrics:** Community feedback, improvements in local conditions, and personal growth of participants.

Financial assistance

- **Engage in initiatives focusing on enhancing community engagement and apply for funds to develop effective partnerships** among your HEI and local organisations, including schools and voluntary organisations, to increase access to higher education for targeted groups. Make sure to meet the criteria for eligibility and application processes to ensure transparency and effectiveness in receiving distributed funds.

Inspiring practices in action

France - Recognition of student engagement

Some universities in France have launched an initiative to boost student engagement through the '[Recognition of student engagement](#)' status. This designation creates conditions which facilitate the active participation of students in extracurricular and community engagement activities. They include flexible scheduling to accommodate engagement activities, official authorisation of absences related to community commitments, exemptions from certain attendance requirements, and the ability to stagger their coursework according to their needs. Recognising the importance of such commitments, this status is formally integrated into the assessment process, ensuring that students' contributions to community and university life are acknowledged as part of their academic progression and graduation credentials. Students interested in this opportunity should apply to the Department of Student Life. This department will assess the eligibility of the application and forward it to the relevant academic sector (Undergraduate College or Schools). The academic sector will then evaluate the request based on the type of activity and the justification provided by the students regarding the skills acquired and their relevance to their academic programme. Students who receive this status benefit also from special arrangements for the proper pursuit of their studies, such as organisation of the timetable, authorisation for justified absences with regard to the commitment, exemption from attendance, and staggering of the curriculum. The validation of the committed student status is part of the graduation process.

Croatia - TEFCE Toolbox

The Erasmus+ programme has supported the development of the [TEFCE Toolbox: An Institutional Self-Reflection Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education](#), an innovative tool designed for enhancing community engagement in European higher education. This toolbox helps higher education institutions, communities, and public authorities evaluate and improve their community engagement efforts. Its effectiveness has been confirmed through its application at various European universities. Complementarily, the SHEFCE project, has created an online platform and templates to help higher education institutions formulate action plans based on the TEFCE Toolbox's insights. This platform supports higher education institutions in partnering with external communities to meet societal needs, showcasing institutional profiles, best practices, and facilitating networking with experts for future projects.

Principle 10 – Policy dialogue

Public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with HEIs and other relevant stakeholders about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level.

More specifically higher education institutions could consider to:

- **Engage in specific forums** dedicated to the Principles and Guidelines' implementation, ensuring active engagement and regular evaluation.
- **Strengthen the social dimension** of higher education through **international collaboration and knowledge exchange**.

Recommendations

Establishment of a policy dialogue on social dimension

- **Engage in specific forums dedicated to the Principles and Guidelines' implementation, ensuring active engagement and regular evaluation.** Other involved relevant stakeholders such as public authorities, student and staff unions are also participating in this dialogue. It is important to engage via consultation and cooperation. These initiatives can take the form of national annual networking conferences. Furthermore, it is also important to define clear objectives, roles, and responsibilities to ensure effective partnership management between the other stakeholders. Regularly fill in the satisfaction survey related to your participation in this policy dialogue.

International cooperation

- Participate in **knowledge sharing platforms** by developing online repositories, publications, and presentations that highlight successful policies and practices. Conferences and workshops also offer opportunities to learn from global best practices, network with peers, exchange knowledge and collaborate on social dimension policy. In addition, leveraging EU projects can build capacity for stakeholder engagement in policy dialogue on the social dimension.

Inspiring practices in action

Austria – Strategy on social dimensions

Austria's approach involves annual networking conferences that bring together a wide array of stakeholders from the higher education sector. These conferences are crucial for presenting and discussing interim evaluations of the national strategy on the social dimension, ensuring continuous stakeholder engagement and feedback. Annual networking conferences take place with representatives from all higher education sectors, the Austrian students union, chamber of commerce, scientific council, quality assurance agency and the chamber of employees. An interim evaluation of national strategy on the social dimension of higher education was presented and discussed at the networking conference in November 2022. All higher education stakeholders were invited to the conference.

Belgium – SIHO – Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education

The Flemish Community in Belgium has institutionalized support through the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education ([SIHO](#)), which assists both policymakers and higher education institutions in implementing equity and inclusion measures. SIHO's work includes developing tools that encourage a broad-based dialogue on the Principles and Guidelines, thus enhancing the overall policy implementation process.

Croatia – National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education

Croatia established the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education to gather stakeholder representatives as well as national authorities in developing policies at the national level and monitoring their implementation. The Group also provides national definitions of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and organises trainings and forums.

INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION