

Manual public authorities

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

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Manual public authorities: underpinning the development of policies aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education

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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 national education authorities 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.

Authorities can strategically choose indicators for social dimension that align with their approach to equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education, as well as with national priorities and capacities within their higher education system.² In certain higher education systems, particularly those with a universal approach, some listed indicators and descriptors may not be applicable. The toolbox approach allows public authorities to omit certain indicators and descriptors, focusing only on those that fit their national higher education system. It is essential to recognize that various approaches can lead to positive outcomes for the social dimension in the EHEA.

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 national authorities 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 is:

- **The framework:** intended to help public authorities and 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 public authorities and 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 public authorities institutions tips and advice on how to sustainably implement the specific P&Gs.

All of these tools are available at: inclusivehighereducation.eu

About this manual

This manual aims to help public authorities 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 conditions for higher education institutions 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 or 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 academic and financial 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.

Where to start

Before getting started with this manual, public authorities should begin the process of reflecting on the principles and guidelines by using the self-assessment tool at www.inclusivehighereducation.eu. This tool helps public authorities 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 public authorities and 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 public authorities should consider to:

- Undertake a **broad-based social dialogue** approach between public authorities, 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 all levels (national, regional, institutional) of education policy by creating **clear definitions, measurable targets, and management systems** to ensure consistent implementation across various educational institutions and systems.
- Assess and monitor the action plan or social dimension strategy by responsible bodies within concrete timeframes.

Recommendations

Broad-based social dialogue

- **Undertake a broad-based social dialogue.** Given that inequity or underrepresentation is likely to be entrenched within an education system and given that any 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. By involving a diverse group of dialogue partners to co-create strategies, your authority gets the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives towards an inclusive strategy and as well as to create buy-in from the partners who will be delivering it.
- **Involve relevant stakeholders.** Relevant stakeholders and their responsibilities might differ from country to country, but key parties are likely including higher education institutions, student and staff representatives, social partners, non-governmental organisations (representing minority and disadvantaged students) and people from underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (**Figure 1**). 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.



Figure 1 Relevant stakeholders in a social dialogue

- **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 government leaders in the dialogue as early as possible. Their responsibilities may include providing structures and resources to deliver on the strategy and policies.
- **Install a sustainable format to facilitate social dialogue.** There are various ways of setting up a social dialogue, such as the creation of a dedicated steering group, the formation of staff focus groups, the running of consultation workshops, institutional surveys, consultation, panels and discussion events, annual networking conferences, etc. A dedicated task force or steering group could be set up to discuss the inclusion strategy and its regular evaluation.

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 a mainstream approach, your public authority mainstreams equity and inclusion principles into the structures, organisation and financing of higher education rather than following a policy model based on targeted strategies that might more

frequently be vulnerable to political change. In this approach, accessible 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.

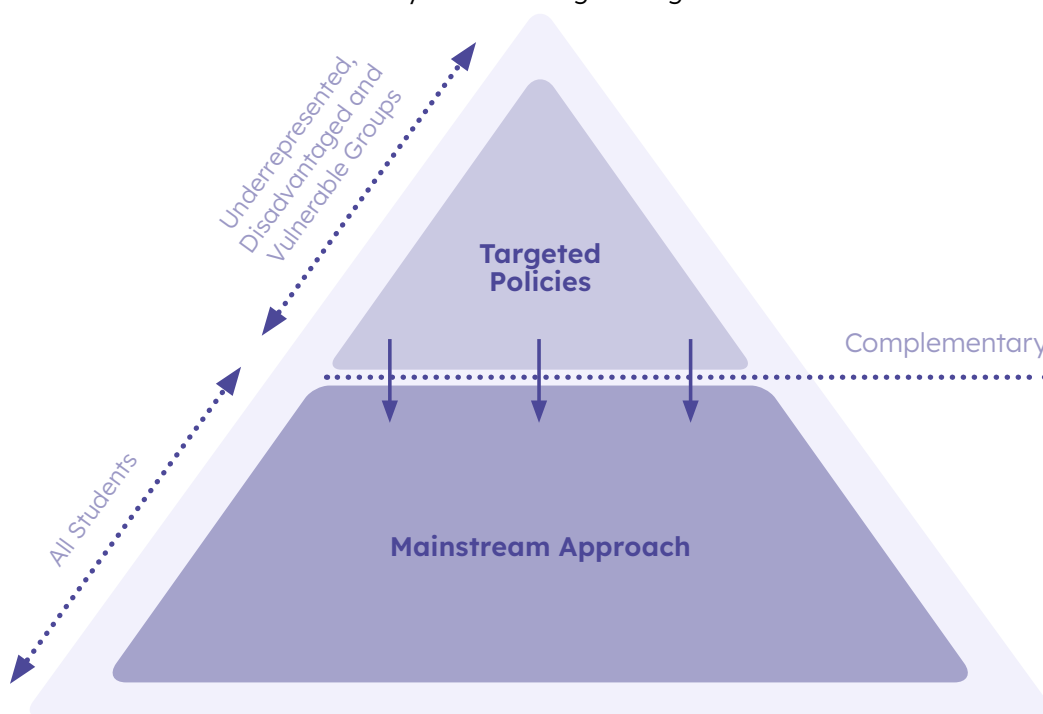


Figure 2: Coherent Approach

- **Integrate definitions, main strategic objectives, potential targets, and the main policy measures in the policy plan.** Having a national strategy, a similar major policy plan or a set of targeted measures concerning students and staff is a clear signal that your top-level education authority 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. The objective 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 (Figure 3).** The strategies should ideally align and be agreed upon through a broad dialogue between the different stakeholders at different levels. Your public authority should simplify administrative processes to reduce bureaucracy, making it easier to implement and manage strategies for the social dimension.



Figure 3: Education policy levels of the social dialogue

Monitor and evaluate the action plan or strategy

- **Assess the implementation and impact of the national 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. To implement and monitor targets effectively, adopt a systematic and robust approach to collecting data on the participation of underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students and staff.
- **Provide a clear mandate for expert organisations or quality assurance systems to monitor the policies.** Based on national contexts, external quality assurance frameworks could be used for monitoring the implementation of the national social dimension strategy or action plan. Make sure monitoring is done at regular intervals. The quality assurance agency can also play a vital role in monitoring what higher education institutions do for promoting equity and inclusion.
- **Provide incentives for higher education institutions to co-create strategies and policies on diversity, equity and inclusion at institutional level.** The national legislative framework and financial funding could oblige the institutions to develop a strategic commitment towards diversity, equity and inclusion. It is also important to provide training and resources to staff to ensure smooth execution of new procedures.

Inspiring practices in action

Ireland - National Access Plan 'A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028'

In Ireland, equity of access to higher education is a fundamental policy principle, one that has been endorsed by successive governments in policy statements and commitments over the past thirty years. [The fourth National Access Plan 'A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028'](#), known as the 'National Access

Plan', was published in August 2022. It builds on the vision of previous plans and ambitions for a more inclusive and diverse student population in higher education.

The ambition of the fourth National Access Plan extends beyond access to a greater focus on participation and student success. The two overarching ambitions of this plan are that the higher education student body, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population, and that the higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments³ which support student success and outcomes, equity and diversity. This National Access Plan identifies three main groups who are underrepresented in higher education: students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, who are members of Irish Traveler or Roma communities, and who have disabilities, including intellectual disabilities. The student is at the core of every aspect of this Plan.

Everything is directed at delivering positive and inclusive outcomes for all students at every stage of their higher education journey.

The **action plan** proposes nine key performance indicators and four overarching targets for the higher education system. For example, the strategy sets out to increase the current transition rate of new entrants from socio-economically disadvantaged areas from 42% to 54% by 2029. Another measurable target is increasing the current transition rate of new entrants from 12.4% to 16% by 2029. The key performance indicators will be measured annually where possible.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) agreed that consultation on the Plan should be as extensive as possible. To facilitate this, the [Higher Education Authority](#) (HEA) published a Consultation Paper and launched a public call for submissions in April 2021. The response to the consultation process was high and 122 submissions were received from a wide range of stakeholders. Other consultation events during development included the National Access Forum and a Student Consultation meeting. Over 200 people attended these consultation events. One-to-one consultations with a range of organisations, government departments and agencies were also facilitated and a special meeting of the National Access Plan Steering Group was held. Data was sought from multiple sources and rigorous analysis was used to ensure the Plan has a firm footing.

The mid-term review (in 2025) will consider how targets and indicators can be refined or developed. The new Access Data Plan will greatly improve performance measurement and it is intended to put it in place early in the lifetime of the Plan to examine ways to improve data collection for priority groups.

Consult the [fourth National Access Plan 'A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028'](#)

Consult the [Consultation Outcome Report](#)

3 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.

Finland – Finnish accessibility plan for higher education

Equality and non-discrimination are basic principles in Finland and are enshrined in legislation (Constitution of Finland, Act on Equality between Women and Men and Non-discrimination Act). According to the law, every higher education institution in Finland is responsible for enhancing equality and equity, as well as being responsible for monitoring the impact of measures and promoting access and success for students from specific equity groups. Every 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 (i.e. international) evaluations, and for example, 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.

In line with the Government programme, the Ministry of Education and Culture appointed in June 2020 a steering group, a scientific panel and a rapporteur to prepare an Accessibility Plan for Higher Education. The aim was to examine accessibility in higher education from the perspectives of socio-economic status, regions, gender, immigrant background, ethnic groups, language groups and people with disabilities. In 2021, Finland adopted a top-level strategy **“Towards more accessible higher education and higher education institutions”**. The overall objective of the accessibility plan is to promote accessibility, equality, participation and diversity in higher education for all parties operating in the higher education field, including the underrepresented and minority groups.

Based on background research and international comparison, the plan describes the state of accessibility of higher education in Finland and presents 38 goals promoting accessibility, inclusion and diversity. Some of the goals require the accessibility of higher education to be written in to the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act. They also require all Finnish higher education institutions to produce their own accessibility plans which are, to be integrated into higher education institution management systems. Other objectives presented in the plan are related, for example, to supporting students during studies, study and career guidance, student selection, teacher education and continuous learning. Objectives are also set for the engagement and competence development among personnel and students, elimination of discrimination, harassment and racism and promotion of well-being. In addition to increasing accessibility, targets concerning underrepresented groups, such as those with immigrant backgrounds as well as people with disabilities, have also been set.

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.

Public authorities should therefore consider to:

- Establish a **top-level regulation** allowing higher education institutions to develop flexible and equitable study modes such as part-time studies, blended and distance learning.
- Create a **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)** that facilitates the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning as well as the recognition of micro-credentials, both for entry to and successful completion of higher education programmes.
- **Assign quality assurance agencies** to monitor the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Recommendations

Legal regulations for flexible study pathways

- **Provide legislation that allows all higher education institutions to organise flexible study programmes** (part-time studies, blended and distant learning). If top-level regulations allow for flexible and inclusive study programmes, then it is the responsibility of individual higher education institutions to design and operate them, and it is up to the respective quality assurance agencies to monitor the higher education institutions' activities in this regard.
- **Stimulate the development and implementation of flexible study modes through funding and policy measures.** Flexible forms of education, such as part-time studies, blended and distance learning, represent a way to increase and expand the qualifications of people for whom full-time study in accredited degree programmes is difficult to access, especially due to socio-economic, but also health, geographical and other barriers. Short courses and distance 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 is one of the ways to reduce inequalities in access to higher education.
- **Support specific action and/or implementation of tailored programmes for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable 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. Education authorities can provide funding structures for higher education institutions to facilitate the development of tailored programmes that are suitable and adaptable to the diverse needs of students. They can also ensure that coordination mechanisms are in place to streamline collaboration among stakeholders.

Facilitating the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) and micro-credentials

- **Establish legislation with supportive policies, frameworks and guidelines for higher education institutions in facilitating access to higher education through recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning**, both for accessing first-cycle higher education and for the completion of first-cycle study programmes. In the vast majority of cases, if not all, access to higher education follows upper secondary education and its successful completion. Consequently, those who do not complete the upper level are unable to enter higher education, unless there is an alternative route. One such alternative is the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning, or RPL in short. The official recognition of knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal settings, such as in-work training, or informal settings, such as self-learning, can make a great difference in how open a higher education system is. The education authority should provide a framework, standards and guidelines facilitating RPL. The guidelines and standards should include specific learning outcomes and take into account relevant work experiences, evidence of professional development, portfolio of work, reflective reports, skills tests and practical examinations, and interviews with the assessment committee. This implies the development of various assessment methods such as portfolios, practical tests and interviews. Ensure that there are no limits to recognition, either in terms of the types of higher education institution that can make use of it, or concerning the number of credits that can be recognised or validated. In addition, as with recognition procedures providing access to higher education, allow also types of non-formal and informal experiences to be recognised, such as experiences resulting from daily activities related to family or leisure. Ensure transparency and consistency in their application.
- **Provide training and financial support for higher education institutions.** By providing financial resources to higher education institutions administrative costs can be reduced and capacity building for recognition of prior learning assessors can be increased.
- **Ensure comprehensive information provision** to raise awareness among potential candidates about recognition of prior learning opportunities.
- **Provide financial support to candidates.** The learner is central to the RPL process. By providing financial support to candidates, national authorities can lower the costs associated with RPL processes (registration fees, administrative fees, or the cost of an assessment) making them more accessible to candidates of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Monitor the recognition of non-formal, informal learning and micro-credentials

- **Quality Assurance Frameworks and monitoring.** National qualifications frameworks promote the readability and comparability of qualifications – both within and across countries. They are used for describing and clearly expressing the differences between qualifications in all cycles and levels of education. Qualifications frameworks are able to link many of the structural elements promoted and developed by the Bologna Process – three-cycle degree structures, ECTS credits, learning outcomes and quality assurance. This plays an important role in increasing the transparency of qualifications systems. Ensure that RPL processes are fully embedded in the quality assurance procedures of a HEI and that they are aligned with the NQF, of which HEIs and Quality Assurance Agencies are joint custodians. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in implementing recognition procedures and it is important that quality assurance agencies monitor the implementation of RPL. Provide that quality assurance agencies are required to address the implementation of the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in higher education in their external evaluation process.

Inspiring practices in action

Czech Republic - Improve the availability and relevance of flexible forms of education

In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports developed the Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2021+ (SP2021+). Based on the 2030+ Education Policy Strategy and the Innovation Strategy “Country for the Future,” the plan outlines six priorities for higher education development, including improving flexible learning opportunities.

The goal is to offer a wide range of flexible education options, including accredited programmes (such as distance learning) and shorter courses or modules (lifelong learning), while enhancing the accessibility and quality of open educational resources.

The plan provides financial and organizational support for staff and units developing flexible education programmes and incentivizes institutions to expand these offerings. The scope of lifelong learning will be considered in funding calculations for public institutions.

It also promotes establishing specialized units within and between institutions, supported by [ESIF funds](#), to innovate flexible education. Investments include online tools, recording equipment, and verification software, alongside workshops and methodological support to enhance quality and effectiveness.

Consult the [Ministry for Higher Education’s Strategic Plan for 2021 \(“SP2021+”\)](#)

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.

Consult the framework: [the Pilot Framework RPL in Higher Education](#)

OECD - International guidelines and recommendations for RPL⁴

The 10-step process of OECD offers a valuable approach to set up a sustainable recognition system of prior learning (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4 - 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

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

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](#)

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 public authorities should consider to:

- Organise **a national social dialogue** on diversity, equity and inclusion between **different levels of education** and connect representatives of **other policy areas in creating shared commitments** for the enhancement of diversity, equity and inclusion in 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

Top-level coordination and stakeholder involvement

- **Build collaboration between relevant departments/organisations and different levels of education with a mandate including questions related to diversity, equity and inclusion.** This is vital to align policies and regulations in different fields. Engage at regular times with higher education institutions and state bodies (regional, national and European agencies). Structural mechanisms such as an education council, commissions or working groups facilitate the development of coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education and throughout lifelong learning. Relevant actors to involve are secondary and elementary schools and/or adult education institutions. Make sure that there is a direct involvement of representatives from underrepresented groups in these coordination forums. This can be done this by using delegates from student representatives, student groups, etc. Consider including representatives of other policy areas in the discussions such as employment, but also stakeholders from areas such as finance, health, employment, social welfare, housing, and migration (**Figure 5**).

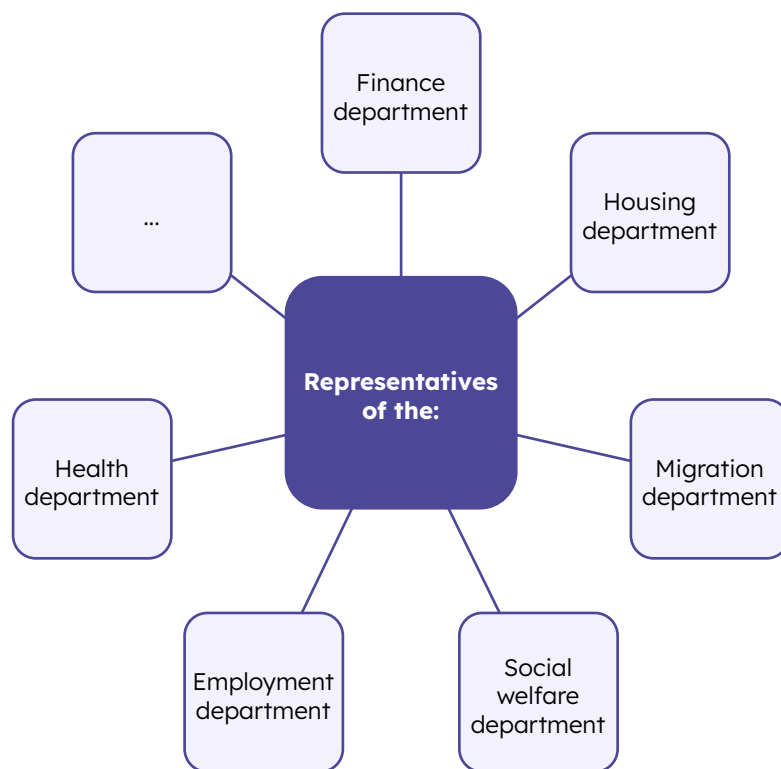


Figure 5: Consultation stakeholders

- **Consider creating a national or regional contact point for dealing with diversity, equity and inclusion in the whole education sector.** Such a contact point could, among its services, provide support and guidance to educational institutions on how to make the information for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups publicly accessible.

Legal framework for lifelong learning and inclusion options

- **Provide policies that facilitate access to higher education to adult learners, often referred to as ‘delayed transition students’.** This support is strongly related to the alternative access routes discussed in principle 2. 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.
- **Ensure targeted financial support to adult learners.** Ensure that financial support is also accessible to students irrespective of their age. Specify in the legal framework that there are no age-related funding restrictions for students. Ensure financial support for students combining 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.

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 number of action lines focused on promoting social inclusion and supporting Roma and other disadvantaged groups.

Consult [National Social Inclusion Strategy \(NSIS\)](#)

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 public authorities should consider to:

- **Ensure the organisation of national surveys or administrative data collection on student characteristics and their participation process** in higher education and translate the results into student support measures and practices for the identified underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.
- **Monitor and evaluate data** on potential systemic barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion for students at all levels of education.

Recommendations

Data collection & translating results

- **Agree on definitions and criteria to identify disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students.** In order to develop effective policies, continuous national data collection is necessary. Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Align definitions and criteria with European, national legal or regulatory definitions and those used in higher education institutions to gather data on disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students more specifically.
- **Put in place adequate legislation and measures to collect, process and protect data on the social dimension.** In order to develop effective policies, continuous national data collection is necessary. Install a systematic and robust approach to gathering data on the composition of the student body, access and participation, drop-out and completion of higher education, including the transition to the labour market after completion of studies, and allow for the identification of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups⁵. Only collect data which is likely to be relevant in tracking progress and identifying areas of underrepresentation or need for improvement. In order to make such data collection comparable internationally, indicators that are relevant for the social dimension should be developed at the EHEA level through Eurostudent or similar surveys and data collection processes. With the aim of rationalising the process and avoiding an administrative burden on public administration and higher education institutions, this development should take account of existing national practices and relevant data collection processes. It is important to provide logistical support in the integration of data systems across different administrative bodies. Support higher education institutions in

5 <https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/NAITDOC/Participant+with+fewer+opportunities>

organizing surveys and research to understand issues of underrepresentation, disadvantage, and vulnerability among students. Identify nationally the categories of students who are underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable, such as those with chronic illnesses, mental health issues, disabilities, specific needs, financial difficulties, challenging family situations, poor living conditions, or employment problems.

- **Ensure that data collection systems and platforms about student characteristics and experiences are compatible with other public registers, allowing for easy data exchange and integration.** Identify and analyse the obstacles these students face in their studies, and connect this information with other policy areas like finance, housing, and social services. Make survey results or administrative data sets accessible to the public, higher education institutions, and researchers to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Use the findings from these surveys and data collections to develop student support measures and enhance practices that support underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups. It is important that your national authority collect data prior to entry in higher education as well as at entry in higher education, during studies and upon graduation.

Systematic approach to evaluate data and optimise policies and procedures

- **Monitor and evaluate the participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students specifically at national level.** Support higher education institutions and national bodies 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. Ensure that data analysis offers both a ‘big-picture’ view of progress on 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.). Analyses of student data (quantitative and qualitative) across all education levels, lifelong learning, and labour market entry allow the evaluation of the effectiveness of the over-arching 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.
- **Use data gathered and the results of data analysis to improve and update the national inclusion strategies and policies and associated procedures.** This in turn will support higher education institutions and national bodies to increase participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students and provide the most inclusive experience possible for all students.

Inspiring practices in action

Belgium - Flemish Community - Charter underrepresented groups⁶

The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and the higher education sector have reached agreement 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.

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

The aim of the Charter is to monitor the participation, the flow and outflow of underrepresented groups in Flanders. Target groups in the Charter are students with disabilities, students with a migration background, new entrants, scholarship (and almost scholarship) students, working students, foreign language students, multilingual students, and students from a short-educated or middle-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. It would be an added value to collect this at the levels or Flemish level.

Sweden - The Swedish Higher Education Authority

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) is responsible for official statistics on higher education in Sweden. Every year UKÄ publishes a comprehensive overview of higher education and research in Sweden in the form of an annual status report. The report deals with what has happened during the preceding year as well as long-term trends. The report is based on the statistical data regularly reported by the higher education institutions to Statistics Sweden and UKÄ. Among other things the report contains data on the number of applicants, new entrants and students participating in higher education. One section of the report focuses on widening participation and how underrepresented groups participate in higher education. There is however no data on disadvantaged and/or vulnerable students.

Consult: Swedish Higher Education Authority (uka.se)

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 policy-makers 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.

Consult: [Eurostudent](http://eurostudent.eu)

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 public authorities should consider to:

- Provide a **top-level legal requirement** that enables higher education institutions to provide **effective academic and career guidance** for potential and enrolled students
- Provide a **top-level legal requirement** that enables higher education institutions to provide **effective psychological counselling** for potential and enrolled students
- Ensure that higher education institutions have **the capacity to mediate conflicts, particularly related to equity issues**

Recommendations

Accessible academic and career counselling

- **Provide top-level legal regulation that supports higher education institutions in providing free, accessible, and timely academic and careers counselling and guidance services to potential and enrolled students in higher education.** 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. Make sure that regulations focus on all prospective and current students and that services can be offered for free.
- **Facilitate the collaboration among counselling providers** (both within HEIs and externally) **to share best practices and avoid duplication** (e.g. peer learning activities, working groups).

Accessible psychological counselling

- **Provide top-level legal regulation that supports higher education institutions in providing 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 educational institutions. 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.

- **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.
- Develop a **specific strategy, action plan or framework that explicitly addresses student mental health**. Actively collect and monitor student mental health data with national standardised methods.

Conflict Resolution Policies

- **Create a national policy for conflict resolution in higher education and state what the concrete mandate of impartial bodies/ombudsperson is.** This ombudsperson can be appointed at national level or there can be an ombudsperson at each institution of higher education. 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 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.

Consult: [MoodSpace](#)

Austria- Student Ombuds Office

The Austrian Student Ombuds Office was established by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Act of 2011 and operates under the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. It functions independently and is not subordinate to any other authority. The office is responsible for potential and enrolled students within the Austrian higher education system, including public universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities, and university colleges of teacher education, as well as for matters related to student grants and student accommodation. Higher education institutions are obliged to provide the necessary information to the Austrian Student Ombuds Office upon request. The Ombuds Office collaborates with the Student Union and submits annual reports to the federal minister and the parliament. Additionally, it provides recommendations to legislators and authorities within higher education institutions.

At Austrian higher education institutions (HEIs), 23 student ombuds institutions have been established. The aims of the Austrian network include the discussion of concerns and challenges in a confidential environment, support in establishing and professionalising Ombuds-type institutions, and the initiation, support, and promotion of cross-institutional developments in line with the areas of activity. The Austrian Student Ombuds Office provides an information leaflet listing all Ombuds-type institutions established at HEIs in Austria. It organises a virtual exchange on current issues every two months and offers training activity programmes for Ombuds-type institutions at HEIs once per semester.

In addition, minimum requirements have been set for ombudspersons. In terms of organisation, these are about omni-partisanship, confidentiality and not being constrained by regulations. They have powers of access to information, of reporting to decision-making bodies and making recommendations (which may conflict with confidentiality).

At public universities in Austria, a Working Group on Equal Opportunities (AKG) is established by the senate of each university. This group is responsible for combating gender discrimination as well as discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or conviction, age, or sexual orientation by university governing bodies. It also advises and supports the university's members and governing bodies in connection with these issues. At universities of applied sciences and private universities, an Ombud for Equal Treatment is established. This office ensures equal treatment and equality between women and men in employment and occupation, as well as equal treatment irrespective of ethnicity or race, religion or belief, age, or sexual orientation. Additionally, it addresses equal treatment irrespective of sex, ethnicity, or race in other areas. Across all sectors, the Austrian Student Ombuds Office plays a key role by providing information, giving advice, and cooperating with the competent bodies to ensure fairness and equality within the educational institutions.

Consult: [Ombudsstelle für Studierende an Universitäten & Hochschulen \(hochschulombudsstelle.at\)](https://hochschulombudsstelle.at)

ENOHE

the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education. It is an international association comprising ombuds from higher education institutions around the world. It serves as both an association and an informal network, facilitating learning and cooperation among higher education ombuds. ENOHE aims to share approaches to common problems in higher education, expand knowledge and compare working methods, enhance skills and develop competencies, and foster mutual learning among its members. In addition, ENOHE provides annual conferences, webinars on current topics, publications (occasional papers, etc.), working groups, and a training activity programme. Through these efforts, ENOHE helps implement good governance at higher education institutions and establishes a solid foundation for the ombud function in higher education.

Consult: [ENOHE – European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education](#)

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 public authorities should consider to:

- Allocate state **funding** to higher education institutions that supports them to **achieve goals** for widening access, increasing participation and supporting completion, especially for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.
- Offer **universal or needs-based grants** for students, covering both **direct and indirect study costs**.
- Establish a top-level policy regarding raising accessibility, affordability and quality of higher education through **indirect support** to lower the costs of these services for all students.
- Offer clear, current, and **accessible information and assistance** on financial support to all students, especially those who are underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable.

Recommendations

Tailoring Public Funding to higher education institutions

- **Set strategic objectives and reward higher education institutions for meeting agreed objectives or targets.** The first guideline proposes that higher education funding systems should be closely aligned to strategic objectives related to the social dimension. Higher education institutions should be supported and rewarded for meeting agreed targets, such as widening access, increasing participation in, and completion of higher education studies, especially in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. However, this should not be done at the expense of core funding. 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** higher education institutions receive to support underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. For example, achieve a 15% increase in the graduation rates of first-generation college students within four years. Afterwards, it is important to collect data on the achievement of these performance-based goals and **monitor** the funding on the basis of these findings.

Support and grants

- **Provide universal and/or needs-based grants covering both direct costs (tuition and study materials) and indirect costs (accommodation and transport). Provide the grants for all students, whether studying full- or part-time.** Grants are a form of public financial support that is provided directly to students and, in contrast with loans, do not need to be paid back. Government 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, governments can help 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 on the basis of assessed financial need (needs-based grants). Eligibility is determined on the basis of 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. Tailor the grant award to regional socio-economic backgrounds and the place of study and use student consultations to ensure that these grants get to the students who need them (both full-time and part-time 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.

- **Establish a top-level policy regarding raising accessibility, affordability and quality of higher education through indirect support to lower the costs of these services for all students.** As government you can provide indirect financial support to higher education students by providing support to higher education institutions to make their services more affordable and accessible for students from lower-income backgrounds. This allows students to focus more on their studies rather than worrying about related expenses. Indirect financial support can also enable students to access better educational resources and facilities, including research materials, laboratories, and library resources. This can contribute to improved educational outcomes and a higher quality of educational experience. Indirect financial support can therefore add to the incentives for students to pursue higher education. For example, the provision of funding for the student services of higher education institutions to implement policies to fund dormitories, canteens, and transport services to lower costs for all students, including international ones.

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. Your public authority can do this 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

Austria – performance funding of HEIs

In Austria, the funding of higher education institutions follows the objectives of the national strategy on the social dimension of higher education. Every public university has a performance agreement with the ministry which includes measures regarding the social dimension, and the earmarked part of budget is only transferred if these social dimension measures are implemented.

Consult the [National strategy on the social dimension of higher education. Towards more inclusive access and wider participation](#)

Croatia – scholarship portal

The Institute for the Development of Education in Croatia created the [website](#) as an online information point on scholarships available to Croatian citizens who wish to study both in Croatia and abroad. The main aim of the web portal is to provide information on scholarship programmes available to Croatian citizens and to guide them through the application process. The portal provides access to information on scholarships for a greater number of people, leading to greater transparency of scholarship programmes.

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 public authorities should consider to:

- **Support and provide adequate means and tools** to higher education institutions 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 higher education institutions on diversity, equity or inclusion.
- Provide financial support to higher education institutions to ensure universal accessibility of their **buildings and infrastructure**.

Recommendations

Training for staff & students

- **Support and provide adequate means and tools to higher education institutions 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 student representatives and higher education institutions to develop common concepts, frameworks, and tools for the trainings (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. Guarantee that participation in these trainings receives recognition and rewards for active engagement and contributions. You can organise workshops, conferences and other events where HEIs can exchange good practices. Additionally, establishing dedicated roles like Diversity Officers can lead institutional efforts and ensure policies are effectively implemented (for example: gate keeper training).

Monitoring training quality

- **Designate an appropriate body to periodically monitor the quality of staff and student training.** Make sure to include representatives from underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups in the monitoring process, and utilise existing quality assurance frameworks where applicable.

Accessibility of Higher Education Buildings and Infrastructure

Establish and enforce accessibility standards that recommend how higher education institutions should adapt their buildings and infrastructure to accommodate underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students. Regularly monitor the implementation of these improvements to ensure they meet the needs of underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students and staff.

Inspiring practices in action

Belgium - The Support Centre of Inclusive Higher Education

SIHO (SIHO, Steunpunt Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs) (to support inclusive higher education) is established by decree, and serves both policymakers and higher education institutions in the development and implementation of equity and inclusion measures for inclusive higher education, for example through developing guidelines, coordinating projects, and assisting students. SIHO supports Flemish universities and university colleges in realising inclusive higher education. It informs higher education institutions about the latest regulations, supports them to develop a policy plan on inclusion and mental health, and develops guidelines to help them put their inclusive policies into practice. SIHO provides staff training on inclusion, diversity and equity free of charge. The primary objective of SIHO is to ensure that students with disabilities or specific educational needs have equal opportunities and access to higher education. However, the concept of inclusion is also considered more broadly, so that in 2023, for example, financial support was given through SIHO to develop and organise training on student mental health issues. In the recent years (2020-2024) increased focus is on achieving inclusion through universal design.

Consult SIHO's webpage: [SIHO](#)

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 'future-proofing' teaching. As part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning's open access digital badge initiative, [AHEAD](#) and UCD Access & Lifelong Learning have teamed up to create the digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning. This course contains 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.

Consult: [Universal Design in Teaching and Learning – Open Courses](#)

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 public authorities should consider to:

- Develop **an inclusive mobility action plan/strategy with a variety of mobility programmes and quantitative targets** for stimulating international mobility 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 **financial and non-financial support to national agencies and higher education institutions** in creating equitable and inclusive international learning mobility.
- 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

Establish a broad-based dialogue. To implement a sustainable and comprehensive inclusive mobility strategy at national level, all relevant stakeholders (public authorities, higher education institutions, student and staff representatives, social partners, non-governmental organisations, people from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups) should engage in the creation and evaluation of internationalisation/mobility strategies and other related policies and procedures. Means to set up a broad-based dialogue are: the creation of a dedicated steering group, the formation of staff focus groups, the running of consultation workshops, institutional surveys. Make sure your public authority provides dedicated funding, streamlined application processes, and structured support programmes.

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 governmental 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 you need 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 ministries, and check the outcomes and benefits of their inclusive internationalisation strategies.

Involve experts

To help get the government 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.

Leadership commitment is vital. Once leaders are convinced of the importance of inclusive mobility strategies, and are willing to prioritise them within the public authority, new initiatives can be set up. The diagram below includes tips to enhance leadership commitment towards inclusive mobility within your public authority.

- **Provide a variety of mobility programmes to suit different needs and aspirations of a diverse student body (short term mobilities, virtual exchanges, 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 are highly valued by disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students. Short 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 national mobility targets.

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 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 of higher education. The Erasmus+ programme, as the main framework for mobilities within the EU and with partner countries, plays a crucial role in this context
- **Put in place adequate legislation and measures to collect, process and use data to inform and support inclusion in international mobility.** In order to develop effective policies, continuous national data collection is necessary. Adopt a systematic and robust approach to gathering data about the participation of disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students in different mobility programmes. 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 mobility programme type, duration, purpose (study, internship, research, ...), country of host institution or type of support required. In order to make such data collection comparable internationally, indicators that are relevant for the social dimension should be developed at the EHEA level through Eurostudent or similar surveys and data collection processes. With the aim of rationalising the process and avoiding an administrative burden on public administrations and higher education institutions, this development should take account of existing national practices and relevant data collection processes.

- **Monitor and evaluate the participation of students in all mobility programmes, and monitor the participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students specifically on national level.** Support higher education institutions and national agencies in gathering and analysing 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.).
- **Appoint and/or supply a national body to study the impact of mobility on disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students.** A research project to analyse the impact of student mobility at national will help to communicate the benefits of mobility programmes and motivate more students with disabilities to take the initiative to be mobile to another country throughout their education. Use data gathered and the overview of obstacles disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable students face related to their participation in mobility to improve and update the national mobility strategies and policies and associated procedures. This in turn will support higher education institutions and national agencies to increase participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students and provide the most inclusive experience possible for all students. Your national authority may also designate the national agency to carry out this task. Below you find a roadmap with 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**.

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

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 national mobility strategies and policies and associated procedures. This in turn will support higher education institutions and national agencies to increase participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students and provide the most inclusive experience possible for all students. The diagram below shows how this process can inform the update and development of inclusive mobility strategies and practices on a periodic basis.

Financial and non-financial support for national agencies and 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 higher education institutions 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 and address knowledge gaps on inclusive mobility by creating a learning network that connects public authorities, higher education institutions, and national agencies. This network facilitates the swift resolution of practical inclusion challenges, such as procedures, applications, and funding, while streamlining the redesign of key processes.
- **Support higher education institutions to 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, **assist in adopting new technologies** that enhance accessibility and participation of underrepresented groups in mobility programmes.
- **Provide a scheme to incentivise higher education institutions and national agencies to reach predefined targets.** Higher education funding systems should facilitate the attainment of strategic objectives related to internationalisation in higher education. Support and reward higher education institutions for meeting agreed targets in widening access, increasing participation in mobility programmes, in particular in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. The EU Council Recommendation ([Europe on the move](#)), 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’ (e.g. by ear-marking a percentage of the budget conditional on reaching certain targets, by recognising the most inclusive institutions in mobility with an award, by organising exchange of good practices among institutions, by providing support on national level on how to improve inclusion, etc). Mechanisms for achieving these targets should not have negative financial consequences for higher education institutions’ core funding.

Support for students

- **Provide a concise overview of information about (additional) support services and 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 grants and support services abroad represents a significant barrier for disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students. Therefore it is vital that public authorities provide clear information on eligibility for 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.

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 students 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.

- **Inclusive applications and assistance.** Make the application process more inclusive and lift barriers where national authorities should **create user-friendly applications**, making it easier to apply. Below you can find a roadmap with different elements to keep in mind when developing more inclusive applications.
- **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, 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.

- **Appoint and/or supply a national body to 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 you get started, keep in mind the following 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 public authority.

Ensure targeted information is provided through multiple channels.

Provide the contact details of a representative of your ministry 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) 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.

Consult [Brains on the move](#)

Austria - National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020-2030

In Austria, concerted efforts to advance inclusive international mobility in higher education are exemplified by the country's National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020-2030. The strategy articulates a clear commitment to enhancing participation for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, guided by performance agreements between public universities and the Ministry of Education. These agreements incentivise universities to meet specific inclusivity targets, further supported by the Erasmus+ programme's focus on providing additional financial aid to students facing extra mobility costs due to disability, illness, or childcare responsibilities. Initiatives like the University College of Teacher Education Styria's programmes for the hearing impaired and the IMC Krems University of Applied Sciences' Family-Mobility scheme underscore Austria's proactive stance in breaking down barriers to mobility and cultivating a more inclusive higher education landscape.

Consult the strategy [National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020-2030](#)

InclusiveMobility Framework

The inclusive mobility 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.

Framework inclusive mobility: 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.

Self-assessment: 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.

Toolbox: 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.

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

Consult inclusivemobility.eu

Croatia – extensive list of disadvantaged groups eligible for Erasmus+ top-ups

Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Youth has established the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education which includes stakeholder and government representatives; the Group's tasks include publishing a list of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in Croatian higher education. The list is based on EUROSTUDENT as well as national administrative and survey data, as well as information from HEIs, students and NGOs, and operationalises the definition of disadvantaged groups from the Erasmus Programme Guide at the national level. In its 2024 edition, the list includes 17 groups of students, including students with additional caring responsibilities, students from rural areas, Roma students, students with disabilities and students who have completed vocational education. The national Erasmus+ agency uses this list to provide top-ups for the Erasmus+ mobility support.

SALTO Resource Centre for Inclusion and Diversity in Education and Training

The [SALTO Resource Centre](#) was established in 2022 and is hosted by Croatian Agency for Mobility and EU programmes. Its mission is to support and promote inclusion and diversity in Erasmus+, and it offers a range of resources and services to help individuals, organizations and institutions participate in Erasmus+ in an inclusive way. This includes guidance on how to design projects and information on best practices for promoting inclusion.

Principle 9 - Community engagement

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

More specifically public authorities should consider to:

- Provide **financial assistance** to higher education institutions to develop community engagement activities that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- 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** in collaboration with higher education institutions that recognises community engagement activities as a **criterion for career progression** and integrates these activities into the designated teaching and research workload.

Recommendations

Networks for community engagement

- **Initiate or support networks for community engagement at local, regional or national level.** Stakeholders can be local authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens or citizens' groups. Initiate networking events like trainings, conferences, and online platforms where institutions can share successful community engagement strategies with different stakeholders, such as local authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens. Provide logistical support to sustain networks of community engagement, ensuring ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing. In addition, set up government agencies that initiate or support community involvement networks in higher education at the local, regional, or national level.

Legal Frameworks and Career Advancement

- **Provide a legal framework that ensures that community engagement contributes to career advancement in HEIs. Embed community engagement as a core mission of higher education institutions,** with many initiatives demonstrating social responsibility and robust local collaboration. More specifically, community engagement should be connected to teaching and learning, research, service and knowledge exchange, students and staff and management of higher education institutions. Work closely with institutions to develop clear guidelines and metrics for assessing community engagement activities.

Financial assistance

- **Provide financial assistance to higher education institutions to develop community engagement activities that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.**
- **Support initiatives focusing on enhancing community engagement by providing funds to develop effective partnerships** among HEIs and local organisations, including schools and voluntary organisations, to increase access to higher education for targeted groups. Establish clear criteria for eligibility and application processes to ensure transparency and effectiveness in distributing funds.

Inspiring practices in action

France - Recognition of student engagement

Some universities in France have launched an initiative to boost student engagement through the “engaged student” 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.

Consult [Recognition of student engagement | Sciences Po Students](#)

Hungary – Community Higher Education Training Centres

Hungary has established Community Higher Education Training Centres, which, although not Higher Education Institutions themselves, provide necessary support for academic activities and facilitate community engagement outside the main university campuses. This model facilitates the extension of educational activities into the community, providing a practical and engaged learning environment.

Ireland’s Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) 3 initiative focuses on enhancing community engagement by providing funds to develop effective partnerships. This initiative promotes the formation of collaborations among higher education institutions and local organisations, including schools and voluntary organisations, to increase access to higher education for targeted groups.

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 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 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.

Consult www.community-engagement.eu

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 your public authority should consider to:

- Set up 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

- **Set up specific forums dedicated to the Principles and Guidelines' implementation, ensuring active engagement and regular evaluation.** Involve relevant stakeholders such as higher education institutions and their representative bodies, student and staff unions. You can organise this dialogue in several ways, such as scheduling regular meetings, forums and focus groups to gather input, discuss policy development and evaluate social dimension plans. It is important to engage the stakeholders 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 these stakeholders. Regularly survey the satisfaction of relevant stakeholders related to their participation in this policy dialogue.
- Install **collaborative systems** within regional consortia, enabling them to collectively address issues, including social action. By targeting specific initiatives, such as combating discrimination in internships, and organizing dialogues and evaluating these initiatives, public authorities ensure dedicated attention to resolving specific issues effectively.

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

Albania – Council of Higher Education and Scientific Research

Albania utilizes the Council of Higher Education and Scientific Research as a strategic advisory body to the minister, ensuring that discussions related to the Principles and Guidelines of the Bologna Process are thorough and reflective of national needs. This formal structure facilitates a systematic approach to integrating these principles into the higher education policy framework. In Albania, the Council of Higher Education and Scientific Research serves as an advisory body to the minister of education. In this forum aspects related to the principles and guidelines of Bologna Process are discussed thoroughly.

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.

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

The Croatian National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education has based its current activity plan (Plan of Measures of the Enhancement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education 2023-25, [available in Croatian](#) only) on the EHEA Principles and Guidelines, listing concrete steps towards implementing each of the principles within the local context.

INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION