



## Peer Learning Activities and Resources to underpin the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension (PLAR-U-PAGs)

9th February 2023 - 10th February 2023

### TAKEAWAYS

#### Principle 2: Legal regulations to build up HE strategies

*Helga Posset, Advisor, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*

Austria has some legal provisions in order to promote Social Dimension in Higher education institutions. It is mainly done within the performance agreements under public universities, and state supervision under university colleges of teacher education.

2015 was the tipping point for a political commitment together with stakeholders to build up a new national development plan. 2017 was its first great success of implementation. This National strategy on the Social Dimension in Higher Education has 9 qualitative goals:

1. Increase the number of “educationally disadvantaged” students in HE
2. Widen inclusive access
3. Promote gender balance
4. Widen participation for students with migrant background
5. Strive for regional balance in HE access
6. Promote social dimension in mobility
7. Improve compatibility
8. Raise number of received student grants
9. promote equal opportunity in medicine studies

#### Legal regulation in relation to the SD strategy in public universities:

Integration of the SD into the new public university funding system - 0,5% of the overall global university budgets can be retained by the federal minister (Amendment 2018 to Universities Act 2002, §12a, par.4)

- *Integration of SD into the performance agreements 2019-2021:* (a) More than 1/3 of public universities have developed institutional SD strategies; (b) Other universities are systematically implementing SD measures; and (c) Along with the performance agreements 2019-2021: tender on digital and social transformation of HE, 50 mio €.
- *Performance agreements in 2022-2024:* (a) 3 more universities adopt their own institutional SD strategies; (b) systematical implementation and evaluation of measures; (c) Other universities are systematically implementing SD measures; (d) Inflation put financial pressure on universities: additions to PAs agreed; (e) so far very few adaptations concerning SD measures, budget-cuts elsewhere; (f) financial value of SD budget retention: 400.000 up to 8 mio€.
- *Other HE Policy Measures*
  - 2018/19: Integration of SD into the "Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) through to 2023/24", expansion to UAS sector
  - 2020: HMIS2020-2030 "Higher Education Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy", focus on underrepresented groups



- Between 2020 and 2022, they created some Covid-19 measures as the expansion of Psychological Student Counseling, and one-time top-up for recipients of student support.
- *Amendments to student support act:* (a) 2017: higher financial support, higher share of recipients; (b) 2020: prolongations of deadlines and other adaptations to the pandemic situation; (c) 2022: automatic inflation adjustment of most social security funds.
- New legal provisions regarding “recognition” - Validation procedures

#### **Legal regulation in relation to the SD strategy in University Colleges of Teacher Education:**

Each University College of Teacher Education has to establish an expert unit for gender- and diversity competences (taking into account several steering documents, e.g. National Strategy on SD; decree on equity and gender pedagogy; Higher Education Conference-Recommendations with regard to widening gender competence in higher education processes, UN SDG 4 and 5). This is planned to be established by 2024.

#### *Iris Kimizoglu, European Students' Union, Germany*

From the students' perspective there are the **following suggestions** to be set up as standard in Higher Education:

- Course flexibility
- Assignment flexibility (recognition of prior/informal learning)
- Programme duration flexibility (delayed transition)
- Permeability (linked also with internships, traineeship etc.)
- Flexibility in modes of learning (hybrid, online)
- Flexibility in achieving learning outcomes (elective course program)
- Non-traditional learning (MOOCs, Microcredentials etc.)
- International dimension (Bi/Joint/Multiple degrees)
- Peer support for HEIs to enhance transparency, accessibility & time-efficiency of recognition procedures & plausibility checks.
- Harmonization in the assessment of foreign diplomas/learning -> building more trust in automatic recognition.
- Community engagement between stakeholders -> simplifying processes such as visa and work permits, financial insecurity, inadequate language support.
- Strengthening European Qualification Passport for Refugees -> cross-country recognition
- Timely procedures since students are dependent on admission deadlines
- RPL procedures depend on HEIs -> harmonisation and standardisation (eg. inclusion in NOF)
- Social Dialogue & student-centred policy approach -> policy discussions being structured, ensuring to extend from European to the national level
- Linking quality assurance processes to RPL
- Creating a social policy driven environment that supports flexible learning pathways & inclusive curriculum design
- Raising awareness & knowledge about procedures and rights
- Access to free Diploma Supplement
- [Students' Right Charter](#)



## Principle 2: Workshop discussion

### Austria

- Austria holds national conferences over the Social Dimension topics, for instance, November 2022 was the last one.
- At the governmental level, it is not possible to facilitate a networking platform among HEIs. The current contact point for Social Dimension at a national level remains the Education Ministry of Austria.

### Students

- Students answered that in only a few countries, according to the BWSE Survey in 2020, the diploma supplement was not free of charge.
- Most of the time the Bologna process is not implemented correctly. This is the reason why many students change institutions as procedures are not harmonized.
- Student's do not consider European University initiatives to make things easier, but more complicated in the short term.

### Cyprus

- Regarding a new HE regulation, we try to modernize ours regarding the entrance in HEI. For instance, in public universities there is a law that says that 10% of their students' need to come from minorities or have special needs. However, this does not occur in private universities.

### Legal regulations and funding in place for refugees

- **Estonia.** We made an amendment that could regulate refugees without necessary documents.
- **Belgium.** The association of different HEI checks of refugees without the necessary documents have the competences to start an education. There is a difference in two different ways to education, one more selective than the other.
- **France.** In one way there is an academic selection, therefore it is less inclusive. They have to accept a certain student's quotation with scholarships. The purpose is to help students to proceed in their studies, however it is in the regulation of each school.

### Guidance as a key feature of education processes

- **Malta.** This is not well included in the legislation but it is rather seen as a recommendation. There is a limitation of resources.
- **Flemish.** In Flanders the parents' income comes into account. Some students don't qualify for the grant, but can get a reduced introduction fee.

### Regulation of Social Dimension in private institutions

- **Austria** has difficulties with this.
- **Croatia** does not differentiate. The ministry of education regulates the quality of all HEI, public and private. Funding is only one part of it, as they only fund public HEI. Public HEI have to report how they spend the funding. But the whole HEI act is for all the institutions. There are different quality standards for universities and colleges.
- **Portugal,** they have similar regulations for all HEI.



#### Principle 4: Reliable data for the improvement of Social Dimension in the HE

*Tom Bekers, Data policy officer, Co-author of [Diversity Data Collection](#) report, UNA Europa*

- This report is a guide on how to drive data collection research. It takes into account university staff and students. In the report we can also find good practices.
- When collecting data there are many different indicators that need to be taken into account: collection, availability (population sample), indicators, how they are used, how they are collected (instruments), when it is collected (update/revision), who is collecting it, and policy.
- The main issues when collecting data are: (a) Needs-driven data collection; (b) Interests underlying data collection; (c) Data protection; (d) Definitions of diversity indicators; (e) Intersectionality; (f) Methodological issues; (g) Expertise and responsibility.

*Martin Unger, Data policy officer, EUROSTUDENT*

EUROSTUDENT has national and international data, as well as students and staff data. This presentation is mainly focused on national and student data, with the aim to improve the situation of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented students.

When talking about data, we mean **microdata**: individual data from individual students, not aggregates of groups. If a country does not have microdata, this should be the first step to make.

Developing Social Dimension indicators: EUROGRADUATE, EURYDICE, U-Multirank, BFUG-WG, and EUROSTUDENT. **EURYDICE indicators**: they are not all of the same relevance. They are not all used by all countries (38 countries). The most relevant indicators are: age, gender, entry-qualifications, first generation, migrant background, low socioeconomic background, and region. *\*To be considered*: administration should collect not only sex (origin) but gender (identity); location of prior education;

**EUROSTUDENTS recommend** a unique ID per student across all types of HEIs and which one keeps for life allows tracking through the HI system and information about LLL: (a) Who studies for how long?; (b) Who takes up a Master's degree after the BA?; (c) Who changed the type of HEI?; (d) Who comes back years later to continue their studies?

Close cooperation between students and HEI is really needed when doing surveys, as a survey can hardly provide answers to the situation of small groups. For this reason, qualitative interviews might overcome that problem.

Fields of study or even individual programmes are central to the analysis of the social dimension.

*Gohar Hovhannisyana, Project and Policy Officer, EUA*

- Changing discourse**: diversity, equity & inclusion as mission values & part of social responsibility, drivers for excellence
- Strategies**: in place in most cases, also in the absence of legal or performance based requirement
- Role of leadership**: driving strategy development at central level; leadership commitment key for successful implementation.
- Stakeholder involvement**: successful measures are multi-stakeholder oriented, involve the entire community, incl. the target groups.
- Persistent challenges**: lack of resources, awareness & knowledge; collection & use of data, identification & outreach to target groups...
- Need for support**: additional resources, staff training for all, targeted financial student support ...
- Holistic approach**: need to connect different areas & levels within HEIs and outside with other actors and educational levels.



## Principle 4: Workshop Discussion

### Best methods of collecting data on vulnerable groups in HE?

- **Surveys** among the targeted groups, either online or in person.
- **Focus Groups** with representatives from the targeted groups could provide an opportunity for open-ended discussions and the collection of qualitative data.
- **Interviews** with individuals from the targeted groups can provide in-depth information on their experiences and perspectives. This method can be either one-on-one or in small groups.
- **Data Collection Tools** such as software for tracking accessibility or software for tracking demographic information that can be used to gather information about the targeted groups.
- **Social media platforms** can be a valuable tool for collecting data on the experiences and perspectives of vulnerable groups in higher education. Posts, comments, and hashtags related to experiences in higher education can provide valuable insights into the challenges and needs of marginalized communities.

### Do you think surveys are the best method of data collection (according to your country's case)?

- **Flemish representatives** consider it gives you, at least, basic information.
- **Croatia.** It allows us to understand more deeply why certain groups are underrepresented from primary to tertiary education. Likewise, Interviews and FG are good tools for those audiences who are not willing to show themselves in a public space.

### What were the biggest obstacles in building National Graduate Tracking Mechanism and how ?

- **Cyprus.** We are currently in the implementation of the survey after being updated year by year. Regarding the National Graduation mechanism, it has had great success among universities as they are willing to participate. Likewise, in order to gain more participation, the government is considering giving some incentives, either to students or to universities. For instance, one of the incentives could be to do a special report for each university. \*In this regard, Tom Beker suggested not obliged students to respond to all questions in order to avoid low participation.

### Are students in the survey given a selection of “disabilities” to choose from or is it an open question?

- **France.** They have one global survey address to all students (this is not compulsory). It is the student who chooses if they have a disability or not. Therefore, there is a general survey and then, when a student with disabilities arrives at the university they go to the staff responsible for them, and then there is a full detailed survey for them.
- **EUROSTUDENT** highlighted that sometimes disabilities also means taking some specific medication (mental health - concentration, etc). In our survey, there is a long list of disabilities, and when clicking it is asked how it impacts and how often. This makes a ranking.

### How is GDPR compliance ensured?

- **Austria:** we don't publish anything under 30 samples, unless the data is very representative. We publish on the national scale.



## Focus Group: Web-Portal Scholarships

### Principle 5: Students' Mental Health

*Ronny Bruffaerts, Expert PLAR-U-PAGs project, Professor at KU Leuven*

- 18-24 year old people are emerging into adulthood. Their main opportunities are changes and challenges, identity exploration and focus on friends. It is the age in which the most emotional problems pop up. Looking at the statistics, 25% have some emotional problems, and 5% have severe emotional problems. This is the basis of the mental health perspective.
- Emotional problems in HE: (from the largest to the smallest): any, alcohol abuse, anxiety and depression (ADHD<sup>1</sup>), externalizing problems, and self injury. \*To some clinical concerns, self-injury is very relevant. Injury is closer to suicide one or two years after that.
- To what extent did covid affect them? The 'Netto' impact of the pandemic seems mild-to-moderate: what was there before the pandemic is much more important than what developed during the pandemic. It has increased anxiety & depressive feelings (not disorders!); Low incidence & decreased suicides; No specific pandemic-related mental disorders; Underlying, already existing problems came to the surface.
- **LGBTQI+** are most affected to have mental disorder.
- **Key element of public mental health-perspective:**
  - Screening and early detection
  - Diversified and dynamic service care offer
  - supportive climate
  - Commit to (mental) health promotion and resilience of each student
  - Monitor and evaluate
  - Community of caring
- **Promotion and prevention.** What is prevention? Flemish definition is defined as you prevent a person that has to try to kill him/herself to prevent another suicide attempt. However, this is not prevention. To take a first step, we need to define it better: strengthening resilience and stopping the development of those attempts. Real prevention is also related to a creative supportive environment. You can only create and develop strength resilience when your environment enables you to do it.
- Most of the students with mental health problems do not seek professional help due to inconvenience, logistics, ideas they haven't solved themselves. Therefore, MoodSpace was created.
- Most mental disorders are very mild and they don't need medication/treatment.

*Lynn Depalmenaer, Flemish Student Union, Belgium*

#### Pursuing our objectives

- **Defending ALL student interests externally:** advocating for students to get the support they need whilst pursuing their degree through: (a) policy papers regarding the prevention and adjustment of policies which are harmful to minoritized groups of students; and (b) representation in councils
- **Internal attention to the diverse body of students:** self-advocacy and a safe space for students: (a) Internal code of conduct; (b) position paper explicitly promoting diversity and creating a safe space; (c) accommodating students with psychological challenges, certain backgrounds and disabilities of all kinds; (d) Workshops for participation coaches.

#### Results

- Note concerning Student Health 2020
- Position paper on Student safety 2022

---

<sup>1</sup> Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder



- Flemish Human Rights Institute talks
- Housing position paper 2022
- Policy recommendations on the housing issue o
- Conversations with politicians VS included in platform concerning student housing by minister of Housing
- Rewrite of the collective decree Higher Education 2022
- Amendments to the decree
- Project Spontaan Karavaan 2022
- Engaging with students on sexually transgressive behaviour, LGBTQIA+ and disadvantage issues

### Principle 5: Workshop Discussion

In many countries they use the existing support centers. It depends on the title that 's written on the door. This can generate rejection to seek for help as you might feel stigmatized. The less you mention depression and anxiety - the more student's you get.

As far as for now, **Austria, Portugal** and **Bulgaria** have some problems to address this from the policy makers' will. Until now this has been done through individual initiatives.

**Cyprus** is lacking some data about what is going on. There has been an increase in this sector due to covid, but still a lot of work to do.

**Malta** stated that there is a great awareness. Initiatives are not coming from politicians - they launched a strategy on the face of consultation - they in SD introduce mental health.

**France:** is working on prevention , detection and other areas. All this is funded by the state. There are mental health programmes. after covid it increased.