

REPORT

PEER LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Within the Erasmus+ Project 'Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area'



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Report on Peer Learning Activities for the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area, within the Erasmus+ Project 'Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area'

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Summary

Overview

This report synthesizes findings from the peer learning activities organized within the project "PLAR-U-PAGs: Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)", funded by Erasmus+ KA3. The project aims to enhance the implementation of the "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA." These principles focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, guiding national policies and higher education institutions towards making higher education more equitable and inclusive.

Key Activities and Findings

Through a series of four strategically designed Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), which form part of work package 2 in the project PLAR-U-PAGs, the project engaged a broad array of stakeholders in discussions aimed at enhancing the implementation of the social dimension principles within the EHEA. These discussions addressed various critical aspects of the Principles and Guidelines and their implementation, yielding significant insights:

- **Strategic Approach:** Stakeholders identified the need for integrating the social dimension more deeply into higher education strategies. This involves revising legal frameworks and curriculum designs to adapt to the diverse needs of students and staff, ensuring that inclusion is at the core of educational planning.
- **Inclusiveness:** The PLAs highlighted successful programs that foster inclusive environments at all educational levels, particularly emphasizing the importance of support for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.
- **Data and Monitoring:** There was a consensus on the importance of robust data collection methods. Enhanced data initiatives have begun to support evidence-based

policymaking, though the need for greater standardization and utilization of this data remains a challenge.

- **Funding:** It was concluded that aligning financial support with social dimension goals is crucial. Ensuring that funding models directly support inclusivity targets is essential for higher education institutions to have the necessary resources to foster a comprehensive inclusive environment.
- **International Mobility:** Discussions also focused on making international mobility programs more inclusive by promoting participation from students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and ensuring that mobility opportunities are equitable.
- **Counselling Services:** The expansion of counselling and mental health services was identified as an important area of development to support student well-being and academic success effectively.
- **Community Engagement:** Enhancing the role of higher education institutions in their local communities was seen as a way to increase their societal impact and foster social dimension in higher education.
- **Policy Dialogue:** Ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders was emphasized as crucial for developing responsive and adaptive education policies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report underscores the importance of integrating the social dimension into all facets of higher education within the EHEA. The discussions from the PLAs have led to actionable insights that EHEA member states can apply in practice:

- **Strengthen Integration:** Align higher education strategies with the social dimension by revising legal and curriculum frameworks to ensure inclusivity.
- **Support Diversity:** Enhance support for diverse student needs through inclusive programs, flexible learning options, and equitable international mobility opportunities.

- **Enhance Resources:** Secure funding and resources to support comprehensive counselling services and community engagement initiatives, fostering an inclusive educational environment.
- **Foster Dialogue:** Maintain continuous stakeholder engagement to adapt and refine policies, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of the educational community.

As the PLAR-U-PAGs project moves towards its conclusion in June 2025, future key project activities will focus on developing the PAGs Toolkit, Mental Health Framework, and the Web Portal on Scholarships. These project initiatives aim to provide practical tools and support for national authorities and higher education institutions, enhancing the social dimension of higher education across the EHEA.

Introduction

The project “Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area (PLAR-U-PAGs)” is a three-year project co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy Reform. The general objective of this project, which runs from June 2022 until May 2025, is to support national authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the implementation of the “Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (PAGs)”.¹

The PLAR-U-PAGs project is led by the Ministry of Education and Training Belgium/Flemish Community. Partners are the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO), the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in Croatia, and the European Students' Union (ESU). Three individual experts - Ronny Bruffaerts (KU Leuven), Frederik De Decker (Ghent University) and Howard Davies (European University Association) - support the project team with the implementation of the project activities.

The Principles and Guidelines (PAGs) were adopted by the EHEA ministers of education in 2020 as an annex to the Rome Communiqué in 2020, aiming to improve the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA member states by “moving beyond widening accessibility clauses and instead focusing on the concept of ‘leaving no one behind’ as a crucial step forward when looking to strengthen our societies and democracies”. The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) defines social dimension as “a process containing specific and transversal policies aimed at creating an inclusive environment in higher education in which the composition of the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels corresponds to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA

¹ In the further text we use the abbreviated title ‘PAGs’ instead of the full name of the document: Rome Ministerial Communiqué. (2020). Annex II to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area. Rome: EHEA Ministerial Conference. Available at <https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communications>

countries”². This definition of the social dimension “encompasses also the desired inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities”³.

The PAGs feature ten principles, which are high-level political commitments. These principles are intended to underpin the development of policies aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education. The guidelines within the document serve as recommendations to assist policy makers in practically implementing these principles. It is advised that public authorities and 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.

Within the project, four peer learning activities (PLAs) were organized to enhance the exchange of best practices among EHEA countries at varying levels of implementing the principles of the social dimension. Each PLA focused on two or three specific principles of the social dimension, facilitating an in-depth discussion among the participants. The participants included representatives from national public authorities, public agencies for higher education, higher education institutions, student organizations, and various national and international organizations.

The objectives of the PLAs were to:

- Explore measures implemented by national authorities and HEIs that enhance the social dimension of higher education.
- Assess the effectiveness of these policies, measures, and practices for the social dimension.

² Bologna Follow-up Group [BFUG]. (2024). Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area. Tirana: Bologna Follow-up Group. Available at <https://www.ehea.info/page-Working-Group-SD>

³ Ibidem

- Evaluate the needs and expectations of national authorities and HEIs regarding the implementation of the principles for the social dimension of higher education.
- Provide the basis for the PAGs Toolkit and the mental health toolkit (a comprehensive action framework with guidelines and a self-assessment tool) as well as the website on scholarships to be developed within the PLAR-U-PAGs project.

The PLAs were structured to accommodate a maximum of 30 participants from up to 15 EHEA countries, each at varying stages of implementation. These participants engaged in mutual sharing, exchanging knowledge, concerns, and ideas related to the implementation of the PAGs. Prior to each PLA, an open call was issued, along with a survey assessing the current status of implementation of the principles of the social dimension and documenting best practices. The surveys, distributed to the ministries of education of the EHEA countries, were completed and returned before the PLAs. The data gathered from these surveys served as a foundation for discussions during the PLAs.

The project originally developed a methodology to select representatives of 15 countries for each PLA. However, in spite of the efforts of the consortium to attract participation, the maximum of 30 applicants per PLA was never reached, thus making the application of the selection methodology unnecessary.

In this report, we summarize the findings and conclusions from all four PLAs and offer recommendations on how national authorities, higher education institutions, and other key stakeholders can collaborate more effectively to implement the PAGs. The presentations and reports from each PLA are accessible on the website of the project PLAR-U-PAGs:

www.inclusivehighereducation.eu.

Overview of Peer-Learning Activities Organized within the Project

The full list of participants, presentations, agendas and reports from all four PLAs can be found at the PLAR-U-PAGs project website <https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/>. Brief summaries of each PLA are presented below.

First Peer-Learning Activity: 16-17 November 2022, Zagreb, Croatia

The first PLA was hosted by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education in Zagreb on November 16-17, 2022. The two-day PLA, with participants from 16 EHEA countries, focused on three principles of the social dimension: Principle 1 on integrating the social dimension into higher education strategies, Principle 5 addressing students' mental health, and Principle 10 concerning the policy dialogue among stakeholders in higher education.

On the first day, a representative from Eurydice at the European Commission, delivered the keynote speech. He emphasized the importance of embedding a strong social dimension component within higher education policies at national and European level. Following the keynote, representatives from the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) in Belgium and the Agency for Mobility and EU Programs, Croatia, led a workshop on Principle 1.

The second day continued with workshops on Principles 5 and 10. An expert from KU Leuven presented on students' mental health, offering insights into a public mental health perspective that highlighted the need for a comprehensive and society-wide approach to fostering student mental health within the higher education sector. The final workshop of the event, led by the representatives from the European Students' Union and the Ghent University focused on Principle 10. They discussed the importance of engaging stakeholders in the development of educational policies and presented a successful case study from Flanders demonstrating stakeholder synergy through policy dialogue. In parallel to the main

sessions, focus groups convened to discuss the development of a European web portal on students' financial aid and a toolkit for implementing the PAGs.

The agenda of this PLA, along with more detailed information about the event, is available on the project PLAR-U-PAGs website:

<https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/news/first-peer-learning-activity-sets-project-good-start>.

Second Peer-Learning Activity: 9-10 February 2023, Ghent, Belgium

The second peer-learning activity (PLA 2) took place on February 9-10, 2023, at the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) in Ghent, Belgium, focusing on Principles of the social dimension 2, 4, and 5.

Day One featured discussions on Principle 2, which focuses on legal regulations to build up higher education strategies. A representative from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research led a session that detailed Austria's legal framework and its impact on promoting the social dimension within higher education. The discussions highlighted the success of Austria's national strategy for the social dimension in higher education, which includes specific goals such as fostering inclusion of educationally disadvantaged students and improving gender balance and participation of students with migrant backgrounds in higher education.

In the afternoon, attention shifted to Principle 4, which deals with the reliability of data for improving the social dimension in higher education. Experts from KU Leuven and Vienna Institute for Advanced Studies provided insights into effective data collection strategies and discussed the challenges faced in gathering and utilizing data to foster inclusivity. The workshops emphasized the necessity of accurate data in formulating and assessing policies that aim to enhance the social dimension.

Day Two opened with a recap summarizing rich discussions from the previous day. The day was largely dedicated to Principle 5 with a focus on students' mental health. Representatives from KU Leuven and SIHO discussed the critical aspects of fostering mental health support within the higher education sector, advocating for a community of care and preventive approaches to mental health challenges.

Parallel focus groups also convened to discuss the development of a European web portal on students' financial aid and a toolkit for implementing the PAGs, ensuring these tools effectively meet the diverse needs of the EHEA's HEIs and students. The PLA concluded with reflections and closing remarks reiterating the commitment to continue the collaborative efforts and applying the insights gained from the discussions to future PLAR-U-PAGs project activities and broader strategies concerning the social dimension across the EHEA.

The agenda of this PLA, along with more detailed information about the event, is available on the project PLAR-U-PAGs website:

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

Third Peer-Learning Activity: 13-14 June 2023, online

The third peer-learning activity (PLA 3) of the PLAR-U-PAGs project was conducted online, hosted by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, bringing together experts, educators, and policymakers to focus on the implementation of the PAGs aimed at fostering equity and inclusion across the higher education sector. This PLA emphasized Principle 3 addressing the need for cohesive educational policies on the social dimension at all levels of education; Principle 5 on mental health support to students; Principle 7 on institutional capacity building for diversity; and Principle 9 on enhanced community engagement within higher education.

The event began with discussions on Principle 3, which calls for connecting inclusion policies from early childhood through to adult learning. It was highlighted that although many EHEA

countries have established top-level coordination structures for enhancing social dimension in education, direct inclusion of underrepresented and disadvantaged students still remains limited. This principle stressed the importance of creating coherent policies that encompass health, employment, and social welfare to support equity and inclusion across all levels of education. Representatives from the Lifelong Learning Platform and the European Association for Education of Adults talked about EU-level policies and practices.

Attention then shifted to mental health under Principle 5, with the representative of the University of Manchester sharing its holistic approach to student mental health and wellbeing. The University of Manchester detailed a model that includes a range of interventions from public health initiatives to specialized supports, underscoring the need for comprehensive mental health strategies in higher education settings. The session reflected on the challenges and benefits brought about by the pandemic, particularly the increased engagement of students in mental health services through online platforms.

The discussions on Principle 7 focused on strengthening the capacity of HEIs to address the needs of a diverse student and staff body. A representative from the European University Association listed numerous efforts that European universities invest into providing access to refugees, and the barriers that still prevent them from entering HE in significant numbers. In the discussion it was noted that while support for adapting infrastructure and providing financial assistance for underrepresented groups is available, creating an inclusive institutional culture is a substantial challenge that requires a shift in the mindset of higher education staff and students and enhanced coordination among them.

The session on Principle 9, led by the Institute for the Development of Education in Croatia, introduced the European platform for community engagement in higher education. Developed through collaborative Erasmus+ projects, this platform includes tools for assessing higher education institutions' engagement and methodologies for developing action plans that enhance the role of HEIs in their communities. A representative from the University of

Rijeka shared how the university used these tools to identify strengths and weaknesses in community engagement initiatives, demonstrating the practical impact of the platform.

The agenda of this PLA, along with more detailed information about the event, is available on the project PLAR-U-PAGs website:

<https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/news/third-pla-activity-online>.

Fourth Peer-Learning Activity: 6-7 December 2023, Ghent, Belgium

The fourth peer-learning activity (PLA 4), held on December 6-7, 2023, at the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) in Ghent, Belgium, focused on Principles of the social dimension 5, 6, and 8.

The activity opened with a detailed examination of Principle 5, which centres on students' mental health and conflict resolution. Representatives from the Tbilisi State University described the development of psychological counselling centres in Georgian higher education institutions. The discussions expanded to include conflict resolution mechanisms within the EHEA, emphasizing the role of ombudspersons in managing disputes and enhancing student support systems.

Day two shifted focus to Principle 6, addressing sustainable funding and financial autonomy of higher education institutions. The session featured a case study from Austria, detailing Austria's approach to integrating the social dimension into funding strategies for higher education institutions. The discussion focused on the financial challenges faced by students and the performance-based funding models that aim to enhance equity and inclusion within the higher education sector.

The discussion then transitioned to Principle 8, which deals with the inclusivity of international mobility programs. This segment explored the disparities in mobility opportunities for students from different backgrounds and the efforts to make such programs more inclusive. Presentations and panel discussions shed light on the varying

strategies adopted by countries like Ireland, Austria, and Belgium to enhance accessibility and inclusivity in their international mobility efforts.

The event concluded with reflections on the progress made in addressing the social dimensions of higher education and the ongoing challenges that remain. The discussions underscored the importance of continued collaboration and innovation to ensure that higher education systems across Europe are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all students and staff.

The agenda of this PLA, along with more detailed information about the event, is available on the project PLAR-U-PAGs website:

<https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/news/fourth-peer-learning-activity-ghent>.

Experiences in the implementation of the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area Member States

For each PLA, the PLAR-U-PAGs project issued an open call and conducted a survey to assess the current status of the implementation of the principles of the social dimension in EHEA member states, highlighting good practices. The BFUG secretariat distributed this survey to the ministries of education in EHEA countries. The survey aimed to collect information on the implementation of PAGs as well as provide additional insights on selected topics, such as service provision for student mental health.

The number of responding countries varied from 14 to 20. In their responses, countries provided numerous examples of current practices, some of which were also presented during the PLAs through presentations or discussions. In the text below, the authors of this report have selected certain practices and summarized the discussions from the PLAs.

Principle 1. Strategic Approach to the Social Dimension

The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level. 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.

Data

Strategy Implementation: The survey revealed that 16 out of the 20 countries have top-level strategies or major policy plans specifically addressing the social dimension of higher education. Some country strategies aim to improve access and reduce dropout rates. Other country strategies include measures to promote gender diversity and success for all students across different fields of study.

Measurable Targets: Among the countries with strategies concerning the social dimension in higher education, the results of the survey indicated that the clarity and manageability of these targets often vary, with some countries setting clear goals for higher education participation and completion rates, while others have less clearly defined objectives. The variation underscores the need for clearer definitions and management systems to ensure effective policy implementation.

Social Dialogue: The survey highlighted social dialogue in nearly all participating countries when developing higher education strategies for the social dimension. This dialogue typically involves a broad range of stakeholders, including top-level education authorities, higher education institutions, student and staff unions, and representatives of disadvantaged groups. Such inclusive dialogues help ensure that the strategies are comprehensive and cater to the diverse needs of the students and staff in higher education.

Barriers to Implementation: Despite strategic commitments, many countries face barriers in effectively implementing these strategies. Common challenges include a lack of relevant data on the student population, especially disadvantaged groups; bureaucratic procedures; and cultural resistance and inconsistent implementation within institutions.

Quality Assurance: An interesting aspect of implementing Principle 1 is the role of quality assurance systems in higher education, tasked with monitoring whether institutions have policies in place to enhance the social dimension. The survey results show that this is a standard requirement in 18 out of the 20 participating countries.

Practices

One approach mentioned by countries was to integrate the social dimension into all aspects of higher education planning and policymaking, ensuring that equity and inclusion are considered in every aspect of the students' study experience. Another approach was to focus on a single key topic. For instance, one country chose to focus on access and widening participation, with a country report allowing HEIs to analyse and improve their approaches

by defining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. Some countries chose to combat discrimination and promote inclusion through a comprehensive national agenda against discrimination in higher education. This agenda included measures such as manifestos against discrimination connected with participation in internship programs and proactive policies to support students from diverse backgrounds, emphasizing student involvement and feedback in the process of defining policies, and tailoring initiatives to meet their actual needs.

Principle 2. Flexibility of Higher Education Systems

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

Data

Legislative Updates and Projects: A number of countries have updated their higher education legislation to remove barriers to access and/or cater to the needs of vulnerable groups including people with disabilities and special education needs, or family responsibilities.

Study Options and Inclusivity: The survey data shows that in the majority of the 18 participating countries in the PLA 2, HEIs are allowed to offer part-time, blended, and distance learning options. These flexible study options are integral to accommodating diverse student needs and schedules. In terms of inclusive curriculum and tailored teaching strategies, about a third of the responding countries require the implementation of inclusive curricula, and roughly half recommend it.

Support for Tailored Programs: More than half of the surveyed countries receive support from their public authorities to develop tailored programs or modules for underrepresented,

disadvantaged, and vulnerable students. Significant barriers impede further progress, including unsuitable funding arrangements and a general lack of coordination among stakeholders, notably between employers and educational institutions.

Non-Formal and Informal Learning Recognition: The survey revealed a strong emphasis on recognizing non-formal and informal learning (recognition of prior learning - RPL), with nearly all surveyed countries (18) allowing entry to higher education based on such recognition. Nevertheless, RPL processes are fraught with difficulties including expensive procedural costs, a lack of necessary skills among practitioners, and inadequate information provision. Despite these hurdles, RPL remains a critical component for enhancing access to higher education, especially for those who may enter HE without formal qualifications.

Practices

One of the surveyed countries has a range of support measures designed to enhance access to higher education and support students throughout their academic and professional development. These include a program designed to help students who are uncertain about their academic direction by allowing them to take a year to explore different study fields and solidify their career aspirations, thus improving their chances of success in higher education and beyond. Additionally, affirmative action measures are implemented, including quotas for scholarship holders from disadvantaged backgrounds at the most prestigious institutions in the system. These measures are intended to break down the barriers that typically prevent students from less privileged backgrounds from accessing highly competitive educational institutions, thereby promoting a more diverse and inclusive student population.

Other countries emphasize flexible learning pathways, including RPL, and inclusive curriculum design. One country focused its current strategic plan for higher education on improving the availability and relevance of flexible forms of education, such as online learning, to make higher education more accessible. Another country with a tradition in implementing RPL has a national initiative to strengthen and standardize it across the higher

education system, supported by funding for HEIs. Some countries that used to have compulsory school-finishing exams are successfully removing this obligation to increase enrolment of disadvantaged students.

Principle 3. The Inclusiveness of the Entire Education System

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.

Data

Top-level Coordination and Stakeholder Involvement: Most of the 14 countries surveyed for the PLA 3 have established coordination structures at the highest levels to ensure seamless policy alignment across different stages of education—from early childhood to higher education. These structures often bring together senior officials responsible for finance, health, employment, social welfare, housing, and migration, facilitating a holistic strategy for the development of the social dimension at all levels of education. Despite this extensive governmental engagement, the direct involvement of representatives from underrepresented groups in these coordination forums is notably sparse.

Inclusivity Measures and Support for Underrepresented Groups: A number of countries have implemented specific measures to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion within their educational systems. These measures are designed to support not only current students from underrepresented groups but also adults returning to higher education and potential students who may face barriers to access. Additionally, five out of 14 countries have recognized the importance of engaging with employers and local communities to support educational access and success, thereby creating a supportive ecosystem around the students.

Practices

One approach by countries was to produce all-encompassing strategies and committees to improve the inclusivity of the entire education system. The groups these strategies focus on, of course, differ across countries and include, among others, people with disabilities, individuals from disadvantaged social or educational backgrounds, refugees, and the Roma minority. Another approach was to encourage HEIs to cooperate with secondary and primary schools and/or adult education institutions, sometimes establishing common education centres in disadvantaged regions or catering to specific populations.

Countries also established dedicated websites that serve as online resource hubs, providing accessibility information related to HEIs, support services, advocacy efforts, and networking opportunities for students with disabilities. These websites offer guidance on accessible facilities, accommodations, and rights within the higher education system, while also raising awareness and advocating for inclusive policies and practices.

These national efforts are further supported by the EU's Council Recommendation, "Pathways to School Success," which promotes educational success by addressing disparities and ensuring that students, especially those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, have better support and opportunities throughout their education. This recommendation is part of the EU's broader efforts to encourage member states to improve educational outcomes and reduce early school leaving.

Principle 4. Monitoring and Data Collection

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.

Data

Data Collection and Monitoring Enhancements: In recent years, significant advancements have been made in data collection systems within higher education across various countries to better understand and enhance the social dimension of higher education. Several countries are either establishing or updating systems that allow for centralized analyses of data on students collected from various sources. A number of countries are combining administrative data with survey data or introducing individual student IDs to track students across different stages of their education.

Legislative Developments and Institutional Efforts: Legislative frameworks have been updated to support enhanced data collection and the implementation of strategies to improve the social dimension of higher education. Data collection is sometimes supported by funding for specialized units within HEIs or for specific social dimension objectives in program agreements between HEIs and the responsible ministries for higher education.

Focus on Inclusion in Data Utilization: Some countries are establishing centralized portals to collect data, such as through centralized admission platforms or those that provide services to specific populations. Ideally, such platforms facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational pathways and reorientation choices of students and provide a comprehensive view of inclusion related to study programs. Crucially, experiences show that this can be done in line with European and national data protection standards, even making the data publicly available for analysis. U-Multirank, an international ranking of higher education

institutions, introduced social dimension indicators in 2022. Additionally, some countries conduct annual surveys to monitor the enrolment and support structures available for students with disabilities. These surveys ensure that the needs of all students are being met and supported, providing a comprehensive view of inclusion in study programs.

Challenges and Barriers in Data Management: Despite these advancements, significant barriers remain in the effective collection and utilization of data. Challenges include compliance with data protection regulations as well the logistical difficulties in integrating data systems across various administrative bodies. Furthermore, the need for sufficient resources and expertise to manage and analyse data effectively is a widespread concern.

Practices

Each EHEA member state's approach leverages both legislative frameworks and innovative technologies to collect and utilize data effectively, aiming to support disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Some countries surveyed for the PLA 2 have centralized data collection on student characteristics among potential students, and students currently participating in higher education, with a focus on underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students. Almost all countries collect information on age, gender, and residence, followed by data on socioeconomic background, and employment status. Additionally, many countries participate in European-level surveys such as Eurostudent and Eurograduate, or have specific national surveys of students' social status or careers after graduation.

An interesting institutional practice discussed at the PLA 2 was diversity data collection by one European University alliance. Its report outlines current practices across member universities and offers practical recommendations for enhancing data collection strategies. The report underscored the importance of institutional leadership in successfully gathering and utilizing relevant data to support diverse student populations. This focus on leadership highlights that effective data collection and the subsequent support for students are greatly enhanced by strong institutional support.

Principle 5. Counselling and Guidance

Public authorities should have policies that enable HEIs 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.

Data

The survey, which gathered responses from 20 EHEA countries, aimed to assess the implementation of Principle 5 focusing on student mental health in higher education. It provided significant insights into how these countries manage mental health services for students.

Legal Requirements and Service Provision: The data indicates that among the responding countries, 13 have a top-level legal requirement to provide academic guidance, 9 for psychological counselling services, and 12 for career guidance. This demonstrates a strong commitment across these countries to support higher education students comprehensively.

Service Providers: In most surveyed countries, HEIs or public authorities (including local, regional, or top-level) are the primary providers of mental health and counselling services in higher education. Often, the provision by public authorities is in accordance with legal mandates, reflecting a structured approach to student support.

Strategies and Action Plans: Although services are broadly available, only 8 of the 20 countries reported having a specific strategy, action plan, or framework explicitly focusing on student mental health. Half of the surveyed countries actively collect and monitor data on student mental health, although the methods and depth of this data collection vary widely.

Promotion of Mental Health: Furthermore, 13 of the 20 countries have initiated special national campaigns or channels to promote mental health among students. These include various outreach programs and resources that are designed to increase awareness and provide accessible mental health support on a larger scale.

Conflict Resolution Policies: Most countries have national policies for conflict resolution in higher education and institutions similar to an ombudsman. However, only 12 out of 23 systems have directly involved students in defining these policies, a practice deemed crucial in the PLA discussion. Countries vary in their models of ombudsman appointments. While some appoint an ombudsman at the national level, others have an ombudsman at each higher education institution. These models differ in terms of expertise, manner of appointments, and relationships with other bodies in higher education, all of which influence their effectiveness.

Practices

The Flemish Community in Belgium presented its comprehensive mental health strategy, adopting a public mental health perspective that focuses on the entire student population rather than only high-risk individuals. This strategy is characterized by both cross-sectional and longitudinal monitoring of students' mental health. Flemish representatives highlighted the importance of protective factors such as connectedness and friendship, which buffer against the development of mental disorders. They advocate for a 'community of caring' approach, targeting the entire student population rather than focusing solely on those with problems. The online MoodSpace⁴ platform offers a range of e-health interventions, accessible free of charge to all students, including international ones. This approach supports a proactive, preventive strategy where students are actively involved in developing and evaluating mental health interventions and policies.

⁴ Available at <https://moodspace.be/en>

Other countries have also adopted similar approaches, supporting the establishment of centralized websites for student health services, aiming to enhance the promotion of students' mental and physical health. These web portals supplement existing health services at universities and include resources like web lectures, courses, and workshops, often available in English in addition to local languages. In one example, the portal enables students to book free psychological consultations with independent practitioners.

Another well-supported type of intervention is the establishment of tutoring and peer networks, either by HEIs or by student associations. Networks are also established at the national level, comprising experts, higher education institutions' staff, and students, facilitating the sharing of knowledge and best practices.

Principle 6. Funding to Higher Education Institutions

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

Data

Overview of Funding Trends: Data from Eurydice (2022)⁵ shows that from 2013 to 2018, public expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP has seen varying trends across Europe. Some countries experienced a noticeable increase in funding, whereas in 16 countries funding declined, and in 11 it remained stable. According to Eurydice (2022)⁶ and the survey for the PLA 4, only few countries, specifically allocate public funding based on HEIs meeting equity-related targets. These targets often focus on increasing access, participation, or completion of higher education for vulnerable, disadvantaged, and

⁵ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice [Eurydice]. (2022). Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/towards-equity-and-inclusion-higher-education-europe>

⁶ Ibidem

underrepresented groups. This strategic funding approach aims to ensure that financial mechanisms do not negatively impact HEIs' core funding while promoting social dimension in higher education.

Student Support and Grants: The distinction between grants and loans is crucial in the support system for students. Grants, which do not require repayment, are a more significant form of support compared to loans, which are less favourable due to the repayment obligation. Eurydice's (2022)⁷ findings highlight that universal or need-based grants are prevalent across Europe. However, disparities exist, with some countries offering minimal to no need-based grants, emphasizing the uneven support landscape for students across different regions.

Practices

Some countries exemplify a strategic approach to higher education funding that targets the social dimension of higher education. In these countries public universities engage in performance agreements with public authorities that specify measures related to the social dimension. These agreements condition the complete transfer of the planned budget on the successful implementation of these measures, ensuring that funding supports not only the general operations of HEIs but also enhances their efforts to increase access, participation, and completion for underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups.

Findings from the EUROSTUDENT 7 survey illuminate the varied financial challenges faced by students, particularly noting that older students generally encounter more severe financial difficulties. The survey highlights that while public support forms a significant portion of total student income, it is not consistently distributed across different age groups nor does it adequately cover the total costs, especially in regions with high living costs. This discrepancy leads to significant financial difficulties, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those who transition into higher education later in life. Addressing these

⁷ Ibidem

disparities requires aligning financial aid more closely with the actual needs of students to enhance their educational outcomes.

Principle 7. Inclusive Institutional Culture

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.

Data

Training for Academic and Administrative Staff: The survey data from PLA 3 on training within HEIs for academic and administrative staff reveals a fragmented landscape. Training on diversity, equity, and inclusion is mandatory in only a few countries. The data also suggests a variety of approaches, some possibly non-standardized, highlighting inconsistencies that could impede the development of inclusive environments across higher education institutions.

Existence of Mentoring Network: Governments in six out of 14 countries support the establishment of mentoring networks at local, regional or national level ensuring students receive guidance on interacting with diverse peers.

Accessibility of Higher Education Buildings and Infrastructure: Policies that recommend how HEIs should adapt their buildings and infrastructure for underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students are in place in five out of 14 countries but mandatory only in four countries. Additionally, financial support from the government to enhance accessibility is provided in seven countries.

Challenges in Implementation: One of the primary obstacles in implementing Principle 7 effectively is the coordination among various stakeholders involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives in higher education. Furthermore, the scarcity of qualified personnel is a

widespread issue that prevents the full achievement of diversity and inclusion objectives within higher education institutions.

Practices

Examples exist of countries where, despite a lack of centralized requirements, HEIs actively take the initiative to provide support and training for various equality measures. Several countries offer support and training within higher education by implementing overarching policy goals, such as promoting gender equality or combating violence, racism, and ethnic discrimination. While some countries provide specialized training opportunities through public tenders, others focus on supporting HEIs in their own initiatives and exchanging good practices through conferences and events.

Principle 8. International Mobility

International mobility programs 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.

Data

Support Measures for Underrepresented Students: Survey data for the PLA 4 indicates that targeted measures to enhance international mobility for underrepresented students are not widely implemented. While some countries offer recommendations or incentives for HEIs to introduce measures like mentoring, guidance, and subsidized accommodations and meals for international students, these are inconsistently applied and often lack in scope and effectiveness. Additionally, there is a notable deficiency in setting quantitative targets at national levels for international mobility participation among students with specific characteristics, with most target-setting relegated to national Erasmus+ agencies.

Staff Mobility and Policy Measures: The support for staff international mobility is even less structured than for students, with few top-level policy measures targeting disadvantaged or underrepresented groups among academic and administrative staff. This disparity indicates a significant oversight in fully realizing this principle, as staff mobility is crucial for fostering an inclusive educational environment at HEIs.

Monitoring and Systematic Support: Systematic monitoring of the participation and experiences of international mobility participants is rare, and data often lacks detailed breakdowns by diverse background characteristics of students and staff, other than age and gender.

Blended Learning Mobility and Internationalization at Home: Support for blended learning mobility and internationalization at home is provided systematically by less than half of the education systems. This indicates a gap in supporting HEIs to incorporate blended and international online cooperation into their courses, which can significantly enhance the learning outcomes and accessibility of international mobility programs.

Practices

The Erasmus+ program has taken proactive measures to ensure equity and inclusion in higher education by providing additional financial support to address the diverse barriers faced by students. Recognizing varied challenges such as health issues, cultural adaptation, social integration, economic constraints, and geographic limitations, the program offers an extra €250 per month for students participating in both study and internship mobility. This is in addition to the standard Erasmus+ scholarship and is designed to promote equal opportunities. This financial initiative is a key part of fostering equity and inclusion, aligning with the priorities of the current Erasmus+ programming period from 2021 to 2027.

Several countries provide specific funding and support for groups identified as underrepresented in mobility programs. In one case, a survey indicated that a lack of information about opportunities, rather than the opportunities themselves, was a crucial

obstacle. To address this, efforts were focused on facilitating peer-to-peer meetings (both within HEIs and with peers from potential receiving HEIs) and creating comprehensive guides on higher education institutions' support services tailored for specific student groups.

One university presented a study seeking to establish whether different social groups of students require varied internationalization activities. The findings suggest that integrating international elements into the formal curriculum might be the most effective way to achieve inclusivity in internationalization efforts. This approach allows students to participate in international experiences without the extra barriers associated with activities outside their formal study schedules, making international exposure more accessible to a broader student base. Universities could have a dedicated unit that brings together mobility coordinators, communication and policy officers, and inclusion experts from central departments and various faculties. This group's strategic composition enables it to spearhead initiatives that ensure international programs are accessible and equitable for all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Finally, the establishment of the European Inclusive Mobility⁸ platform stands out as a significant step toward equity and inclusion in international mobility programs in higher education. The platform serves as a centralized European resource detailing the support services offered by HEIs, national agencies, and ministries of education to international students. The platform is coordinated by SIHO in the Flemish Community of Belgium.

⁸ Available at <https://inclusivemobility.eu/>

Principle 9. Community Engagement

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

Data

Financial and Non-Financial Support: In the area of supporting community engagement activities in higher education, a mix of financial and non-financial assistance is provided. The latter may include resources such as training, networking opportunities, or logistical assistance. Regarding the formation of networks that facilitate community engagement in higher education, five out of thirteen countries surveyed for the PLA 3 have public authorities that initiate or support such networks at local, regional or national level.

Legal Frameworks and Career Advancement: The integration of community engagement into the professional advancement of academic and administrative staff shows limited implementation, as it is ensured in only 2 responding countries and has limited recognition in an additional 10.

External Quality Assurance: The survey for the PLA 3 encompassed 13 countries; three of them require their external quality assurance agencies to evaluate HEIs' community engagement activities. Five countries have established standards or criteria within their quality assurance frameworks in higher education specifically for evaluating community engagement, indicating a structured approach to ensuring quality in community engagement activities.

Practices

Community engagement is an important aspect of higher education, enabling mutual benefits between HEIs and their broader communities. In one country, the "engaged student" status was created to provide various academic adjustments designed to facilitate the active participation of students in extracurricular and community engagement activities.

The adjustments include flexible scheduling to accommodate engagement activities, official authorization for absences related to their community commitments, exemptions from certain attendance requirements, and the ability to stagger their coursework according to their needs. Recognizing the importance of such engagements, 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.

One country reported considering community engagement as a core mission of its higher education institutions, with many initiatives demonstrating societal responsibility and robust local collaboration. Another country reported proactively mapping community engagement activities by gathering data from HEIs regarding their involvement in networks and partnerships with various stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations and local organizations. This methodical approach helps in identifying and expanding effective community engagement practices in higher education. Other countries reported on initiatives focusing on enhancing community engagement by providing funds to develop effective partnerships among HEIs and local organizations, including schools and voluntary organizations, to increase access to higher education for targeted groups.

The Erasmus+ programme has supported the development of the "TEFCE Toolbox: An Institutional Self-Reflection Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education,"⁹ an innovative tool designed to enhance community engagement in European higher education. Coordinated by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in Croatia, this toolbox helps institutions, communities, and public authorities evaluate and improve their community engagement efforts. It also enables HEIs to formulate action plans based on the TEFCE Toolbox's insights. Its effectiveness has been confirmed through its application at various European HEIs. Both the toolbox and institutional action planning guidelines are

⁹ Available at <https://community-engagement.eu/toolbox/>

available on the European online platform for community engagement¹⁰, which supports HEIs in partnering with external communities to meet societal needs, showcases institutional profiles, best practices, and facilitates networking with experts for future projects.

Principle 10. Policy Dialogue

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

Data

Establishment of Policy Dialogue: Out of the 19 countries surveyed, half have not yet established any policy dialogue concerning the implementation of the PAGs, indicating a significant gap in formalized dialogue at the national level. However, two countries have set up specific forums dedicated exclusively to the PAGs' implementation.

Barriers to Effective Implementation: The main barriers identified across various countries include limited human resources, insufficient funding, lack of time for stakeholder engagement, and the absence of a centralized practice collection related to community engagement in higher education, which hinders the creation of synergies. Specific challenges cited include the lack of formal designations for institutions to address the PAGs and the overall low level of organized stakeholder dialogue, which affects motivation and involvement in the process.

Practices

Four countries report having established initiatives that generally address the social dimension in higher education. These initiatives can take the form of national annual networking conferences involving various stakeholders from the higher education sector to discuss and evaluate social dimension plans.

¹⁰ Available at <https://community-engagement.eu/>

Some countries have established a strategic advisory body or working group on the social dimension in higher education, ensuring that discussions related to the PAGs are thorough and reflective of national needs. These formal structures facilitate a systematic approach to integrating the principles of the social dimension into the higher education policy framework.

Several countries have established collaborative systems within regional consortia, enabling them to collectively address issues, including social action. This approach enhances resource sharing and strategic alignment across institutions, significantly improving the implementation efficiency of social dimension policies. Other countries have adopted a focused approach by targeting specific initiatives, such as combating discrimination in internships. By organizing stakeholder dialogues and evaluating these initiatives, they ensure dedicated attention to resolving specific issues effectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Best Practices to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area

This list of recommendations is derived from a detailed analysis of the outcomes and challenges identified in the implementation of the “Principles and Guidelines for Strengthening the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (PAGs)”. By incorporating these recommendations, EHEA member states, HEIs and other relevant stakeholders can ensure a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students and staff.

1. Enhancing Strategic Planning and Coordination

Effective practices involve the development of comprehensive and coordinated strategies that focus on embedding the social dimension across all levels (national, regional, institutional) of education policy. This includes setting clear, measurable objectives and ensuring consistent implementation across various educational institutions and systems. Enhanced collaboration among stakeholders, streamlined data practices, and a sustained commitment to inclusive policy development are essential for advancing the social dimension across the EHEA. This will ensure that higher education remains a key driver for fostering equity and inclusion, reflecting and supporting the diversity of society.

2. Support for Flexible Learning Pathways

To better cater to the needs of diverse student populations, HEIs need to develop flexible learning modalities, including part-time, online, and blended learning options. To facilitate this, they would welcome national policies that support this. Recognized as robust and fully supported, these learning pathways enable students who balance higher education with work, family commitments, or other personal circumstances to access, participate in, and complete their higher education more equitably. Implementing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RPL) could further facilitate access to higher education for non-traditional students, supporting lifelong learning and career development. However, the

implementation of RPL requires additional investments from both public authorities and HEIs.

3. Policy Coherence Across Educational Levels

National authorities need to develop policies to facilitate a seamless transition between different educational stages - from early childhood to lifelong learning. This can be achieved by establishing a cross-sectoral task force comprising representatives from education, social welfare, health, and labour departments to ensure that policies across these domains are harmoniously aligned. By doing so, a comprehensive support system can be created by public authorities that not only enables smooth transitions between educational stages but also actively incorporates wraparound services to address the socio-economic barriers to educational access and success. Fully engaging underrepresented groups in policy-making processes and addressing specific barriers is crucial for the achievement of this principle. For HEIs, this will offer a framework to include in their study success policies and, possibly, to further their cooperation with schools and other education providers in their local communities.

4. Robust and Inclusive Data Collection

Successful practices involve diverse data collection methods that enhance understanding of equity and inclusion within the higher education system and individual HEIs. This data helps adjust policies and practices to better serve all students and staff, especially those from underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups. While GDPR and national regulation as well as the need for standardization across institutions and systems do present challenges, many countries navigate these successfully. Advanced methods, such as using individual student IDs and tracking students through different education stages, have evolved to foster inclusivity.

Public authorities are centralizing administrative data from various sources, enabling comprehensive tracking of student pathways during and after their academic pursuits.

Including detailed information about specific fields and study programs allows for targeted analyses and interventions. Integrating survey and qualitative data through focus groups and interviews complements administrative records, offering insights into the experiences of underrepresented groups.

Challenges remain in integrating these complex data systems into the operations of HEIs. Issues like staff turnover and managing comprehensive data systems require ongoing national support, including funding and specialized training. Collaborative efforts between national public authorities and HEIs are crucial for maintaining data integrity and ensuring that the collected data effectively supports the enhancement of the social dimension in higher education. This approach helps overcome logistical and legal hurdles, ensuring that higher education reforms are both impactful and inclusive.

5. Access to Counselling and Mental Health Services

Public authorities use various approaches to ensuring that all HEIs are equipped with adequate resources to offer comprehensive counselling services, including career guidance, psychological counselling, and academic advising, to support students throughout their educational journey and into the workforce. Successful policies promote the development of a 'community of caring' within HEIs, emphasizing the importance of protective factors such as connectedness and friendship, which have proven to buffer against the development of mental disorders. This approach targets the entire student population, rather than focusing solely on those with problems, fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment that enhances both student well-being and academic success.

6. Adequate Funding Models

Successful funding models not only ensure sustainability but also incentivize HEIs to meet social dimension targets while ensuring that financial mechanisms do not negatively impact HEIs' core funding. These models include performance-based funding systems that reward institutions for effectively implementing equity and inclusion initiatives. Another important

aspect is prioritization of grants over loans by public authorities to reduce student financial barriers, suggesting a pathway for other countries within the EHEA to enhance their higher education strategies to support underrepresented and vulnerable groups more effectively.

7. Inclusive Cultures in Higher Education

HEIs would benefit from support in fostering the inclusivity of their institutional cultures and learning environments. Such initiatives include support for the development and expansion of mentoring networks that involve both staff and students. These efforts promote the social dimension organically through community building and shared experiences. Funding can be allocated to training programs in equity and inclusion for both staff and students, as well as encouraging participation with recognition and rewards for active engagement and contributions.

Challenges in coordination among stakeholders and the shortage of qualified personnel remain significant barriers to widespread implementation. To achieve the full benefits of diverse and inclusive educational settings, more harmonized policies and practices are needed at both the system and HEI levels to ensure all members of the higher education community have the resources and support necessary to thrive in an equitable academic environment.

8. Promoting Inclusive Mobility and Internationalization

Targeted support measures in higher education to enhance the participation of underrepresented groups in international mobility programs are often used by national authorities, ensuring these students have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from internationalization. Since tracking and reporting on the participation rates and success stories of diverse groups in international mobility programs is an important component of this approach, HEIs would do well to focus on this. Staff training and student mentoring networks are also effective in encouraging inclusive mobility, along with the promotion of

blended mobility and internationalization at home, including the internationalization of the curricula.

Achieving this requires a cohesive, EHEA-wide commitment to institutionalizing inclusive practices in international mobility programs. This includes not only policy changes but also a cultural shift towards recognizing and actively supporting the diverse needs of all students. This endeavour must be collective, proactive, and grounded in the understanding that international mobility is a powerful tool for fostering quality in higher education, social cohesion, and global citizenship. Only through such concerted efforts can the full spectrum of benefits associated with international mobility in higher education be realized by every student and staff member, particularly those from vulnerable, disadvantaged, or underrepresented backgrounds.

9. Support for Community Engagement

HEIs need to deepen their community engagement efforts. Several public authorities encourage this by providing national frameworks and support mechanisms for partnerships that address local and regional needs, thereby ensuring alignment with the social dimension of higher education. Some HEIs recognize community engagement as one of the criteria for career progression in higher education and research, integrating it into the designated teaching and research workload, and some have also introduced a recognition system or even a special status for students engaged with community projects.

10. Stakeholder Engagement in Policy Development

Stakeholder engagement, especially regarding students and underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, is important both at the HEI and at national or regional level. The implementation of social dimension policies within the EHEA reveals varied approaches to fostering policy dialogue in higher education. Some public authorities have established dedicated forums to enhance focused discussions on the social dimension, while others face gaps in formalizing these dialogues due to limited resources, insufficient

stakeholder engagement, and the need for centralized coordination. Successful practices from various systems demonstrate the benefits of structured forums and collaborative networks facilitated by public authorities. Enhanced cross-sectoral cooperation and broader stakeholder inclusion are needed to address national priorities and local needs. Leveraging EU projects could build capacity for stakeholder engagement in policy dialogue on the social dimension, ensuring policy implementation remains sensitive to regional and local contexts.

Next Steps in the Implementation of the Project

As the PLAR-U-PAGs project progresses towards its conclusion in June 2025, several key activities are planned to ensure the effective implementation of its objectives. These activities will build on the work completed so far, focusing on providing practical tools and support for national authorities and HEIs. Future activities include the development of the PAGs Toolkit, Mental Health Framework, and the Web Portal on Scholarships aimed at strengthening the social dimension of higher education across the EHEA.

PAGs Toolkit

The project partners will develop a PAGs toolkit to assist national authorities and HEIs in evaluating their current policies and practices related to the social dimension. This toolkit will be aligned with the EHEA principles and indicators for the social dimension, enabling institutions to measure their practices against established benchmarks and receive tailored advice for improvement.

The outcomes of this initiative will be multifaceted. Firstly, a comprehensive action framework will be created, providing an overview of objectives and action points for institutional stakeholders to consider—either individually or collaboratively—to implement the PAGs at national or institutional levels. Secondly, practical guidelines will be developed, offering national authorities and HEIs tips and advice on how to sustainably implement the specific PAGs. Thirdly, self-assessment tools will be designed to help stakeholders evaluate their current practices against the PAGs framework and receive actionable advice for improvement.

Additionally, a resource centre focused on the PAGs will be established to inspire stakeholders across the EHEA. This centre will include publications, tutorials, and videos showcasing best practices in implementing the PAGs. All these resources will be freely available on the inclusivehighereducation.eu platform, ensuring wide accessibility.

Mental Health Framework

Attending university can be stressful and involve significant lifestyle changes, such as adjusting to new learning environments, interacting with diverse people, and being away from trusted support networks. While 60% of students navigate higher education without emotional problems, 40% experience mental health issues, with about one in five struggling with mental disorders. Issues like binge drinking, eating disorders, and non-suicidal self-injury have increased, highlighting the need for bold action from public authorities and HEIs to prevent and treat student mental ill-health.

To address these challenges, project partners will develop a policy report with recommendations for national authorities and HEIs to establish sustainable mental health policies in the EHEA. This will be complemented by a comprehensive action framework, outlining objectives and action points for implementing a sustainable mental health strategy at both national and institutional levels. Practical guidelines will offer tips on implementing the framework and designing sustainable mental health strategies and support services. Self-assessment tools will help stakeholders evaluate their practices against the mental health framework and receive advice for improvement.

A resource centre focused on mental health will be established to inspire stakeholders across the EHEA. This centre will include publications, tutorials, and videos showcasing best practices in implementing mental health strategies. All these resources will be freely available on the project's website.

Web Portal on Scholarships

The web portal on scholarships will provide user-friendly information and links to student scholarships within the EHEA, primarily enabling domestic students in EHEA member states to identify suitable scholarship programs and apply successfully. The portal will include essential information on scholarships for higher education, links to available programs in

each EHEA member state, and guidance on how to apply, with a focus on helping underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students.

This web portal will stand out as a unique resource within the EHEA, designed specifically to meet the needs of students seeking scholarship opportunities. Unlike existing platforms, it will offer direct, user-friendly access to a wide range of scholarship programs, making it an essential tool for enhancing access to funding opportunities and supporting students' educational journeys.

These steps will significantly contribute to the PLAR-U-PAGs project's overarching goal of enhancing the social dimension of higher education, fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment across the EHEA.

Abbreviations

BFUG	Bologna Follow-up Group
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
PAGs	Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA
PLA	Peer learning activity
PLAR-U-PAGs	Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area (Erasmus KA3 project)
RPL	Recognition of prior (non-formal and informal) learning