Report: PeerLearning Activity 3

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

Online, June 13th and 14th, 2023

This report summarises the third peer-learning activity (PLA) in the context of the PLAR-U-PAGs project. The PLA took place on 13-14 June 2023, online. It focused on the following PAGs:

- Principle 3: Connecting policies of inclusion in the educational system from early childhood to adult learning

- Principle 5: Effective counselling and guidance for students with the focus on mental health

- Principle 7: Strengthening the capacity of HEIs for diversity and inclusion

- Principle 9: Community and Civic Engagement in Higher Education

Most of the 14 participating EHEA-members[1] were represented by a member of the ministry. There were also several representatives of universities, national and international organisations, as well as student representatives present. The project experts and partners supported the preparation of the PLA, and acted as speakers and moderators.

The event was launched with a short welcome and opening remarks.

Principle 3: Connecting policies of inclusion in the educational system from early childhood to adult learning

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

Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey:

·   14 countries responded.

·   The majority (10) have a top-level coordination structure/mechanism in place between educational levels, and most (9) include representatives of top-level authorities dealing with budget, health, employment, social welfare, housing, and/or migration policies.

·   However, only 3 countries involve representatives of underrepresented groups.

·   12 countries have top-level measures in the higher education system to increase the proportion of students with certain characteristics who are underrepresented in higher education. The characteristics considered most often are disability and low socio-economic status, followed by special education needs and refugee status. In 10 countries there are admission measures supporting access to these groups.

·   5 countries implement the support measures in cooperation with employers and local communities.

·   While 9 countries implement measures to support completion of studies for students from underrepresented groups, only 5 aim to support adults who decide to return to or enter higher education at later stages in their lives.

Other results from the survey, including main barriers in implementing the principle, best practices and proposed indicators can be found in the presentation.

Andrei FRANK from Lifelong Learning Platform held a presentation on Policy Coherence in the EU Education and Training Agenda. The LLL platform found a lack of policy coherence at the EU level, "dividing adults and young learners" and putting different targets in different documents, making equity and inclusion "everyone and no one's responsibility" and putting it in "headline sections – less focus on specific actions". Still, examples of good practice were listed, such as the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success, Proposals for Council Recommendations on digital skills - whole-of-government approaches, and Individual Learning Accounts.

Davide MURARO from the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) talked about the potential of non-formal adult education as a bridge towards formal education programmes, showing that there are many obstacles to adult participation in education – primarily a lack of time.

Júlia KOMLOVSZKI from the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Innovation and Orsolya HAUER from the Hungarian Rector's Conference presented Governmental measures and best practices of Hungary. They noted that Hungary has an Education and Training Coordination Working Group that encompasses government departments in charge of all levels of education and family affairs, who meet once or twice a year and coordinate with social partners. There is also a parallel Committee for Social Inclusion and Roma Affairs. ESF+ funds are directed towards preventing drop-out of disadvantaged students through mentoring, social competence development and adaptations of teaching and learning environment. Hungary is introducing performance funding with social dimension indicators. The rate of enrolment for disadvantaged students particularly increased when a school-finishing exam was removed as compulsory (Resulting in 27% increase in the number of applicants for HE, above all among disadvantaged applicants.) Support for women in science includes on-site childcare in HEIs, preventing STEM dropouts, removing student loans for those who have children while studying. Various innovative programmes exist for the Roma minority. The Hungarian representatives consider the statistical follow-up of educational pathways to be the necessary next step.

Examples of other countries were also discussed. Ireland has the overarching National Access Plan with a steering group appointed, but also separate calls for funding for developing T&L which encompass social dimension measures, in

particular, the universal design of courses. Finland has an accessibility plan and Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland initiative that all HEIs benefit from. France has non-standard entry qualifications (plus financial support to move to study and special assistance in studying programmes). In the discussion, the participants compared experiences in supporting access, agreeing that it means little if the students dropout. Anecdotal data show that it is crucial that students are well supported throughout the first year of studies.

Principle 5: Effective counseling and guidance for students with the focus on mental health

Principle 5 was already discussed in the previous PLAs. This time, dr.Simon Merrywest presented the University of Manchester's whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing. It is a 'stepped care model' with 5 steps, from a university wide, public health preventative approach and widely applied low intensity interventions to specialised support and interventions. In the discussion, international students were mentioned as underrepresented in mental-health focused activities due to cultural and language barriers. At the same time, overall participation increased in the pandemic when online services were introduced, which is why they were largely kept.

Principle 7: strengthening the capacity of HEIs for diversity and inclusion

Public authorities should help higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity to respond to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures.

Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey:

· Only a few countries mandate their HEIs to offer training on diversity, equity or inclusion to their staff. However, 5 countries report mapping needs of students and staff regarding an inclusive learning environment and inclusive institutional cultures, and 6 countries support the establishment of mentoring networks aimed at increasing diversity.

· Out of the 14 countries that responded, 12 encourage adaptations of buildings and infrastructure to the needs of various underrepresented groups in some form, and 7 offer targeted financial support.

The comments from the survey note that the supply of appropriate support is available. However, creating an inclusive institutional culture requires better coordination, a cultural shift and an adapted mindset, all of which take time.

Alison MORRISROE 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 – while the data available is from 2019 and there have probably been some positive developments, especially regarding researchers and students from Ukraine. In the discussion, there was some agreement that refugees are generally well-supported at the level of HEIs, but the majority never approach HEIs for various reasons that need to be tackled at higher policy levels.

The discussion further considered if there is a need for a specific approach to diversity, or if it is better to build it into the existing policies and HEI approaches to training – the Belgian experience seems to show that highlighting diversity and inclusion as separate issues might be a necessary first step. HEI and teacher

autonomy was noted – with the participants agreeing that there is a high demand among them for diversity and inclusion training, especially since the pandemic.

Principle 9: Community and Civic Engagement in Higher Education

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

Again, Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey. It has shown that while the majority of countries do support some form of HEI community engagement, it is rarely focused on the social dimension. Examples of good practice mentioned included Greece, where community engagement is a core mission of HEIs, HEI-supported Community Higher Education Training Centres in Hungary, and Ireland, which provides funding to support the development of regional and community partnership strategies to increase access to higher education by specified groups. While civic engagement usually is not part of the legally defined steps towards professional advancement of HEI staff, HEIs mostly take it into account in some form. Most HEIs are currently working towards a skills-based model that can recognize student engagement. As examples of good practice, France was mentioned with a special status of "engaged student" which comes with a number of benefits.

Ninoslav ŠĆUKANEC SCHMIDT from the Croatian NGO, Institute for the Development of Education, presented the European platform for community engagement in higher education, developed within two Erasmus projects. The TEFCE project created a toolbox to 'measure' HEI engagement while the SHEFCE project took this further by providing methodology and templates for university action plans for community engagement.

Bojana ĆULUM ILIĆ from the University of Rijeka, a partner in both projects, presented the approach of her institution, with a thorough analysis using the toolbox which identified strengths and weaknesses, and helped highlight and further develop a number of university-supported community initiatives.