



INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Report PLA1

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

Venue: Ministry of Science and Education, Donje Svetice 38, 10 000
Zagreb (Croatia), Multimedial Hall

16 – 17 November 2022

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Introduction

PLA1

This report summarises the conclusions of the first peer-learning activity (PLA) in the context of the PLAR-U-PAGs project. The PLA took place on 16-17 November 2022 and was hosted by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education in Zagreb.

The first PLA focused on the PAGs 1, 5 and 10:

- Principle 1: Social Dimension on Higher Education Strategies
- Principle 5: Students' Mental Health
- Principle 10: Synergy of Stakeholders in Higher Education with Principles and Guidelines

The participants of the PLA were nominated by their countries based on a survey at the beginning of the project among BFUG members.¹ Participants were then selected based on the aim to achieve a regional mix as well as a mix regarding the stage of implementation concerning social dimension measures. Most of the 16² participating EHEA-countries 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. In addition a representative of the European Commission provided a keynote speech at the start of the programme. The project experts and partners supported the preparation of the PLA, and acted as speakers and moderators.

About the PLAR-U-PAGs project

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 3-year project co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy Reform. The project will run from June 2022 until May 2025.

The [Principles and Guidelines \(PAGs\) to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area](#) (EHEA) expressly spell out the key principles for social dimension enhancement for the next decade. As the PAGs have recently been adopted, national authorities and higher education institutions are in the process of considering and planning how to implement them in their systems. The general objective of this project is to support national authorities and higher education institutions across the EHEA in the implementation of the PAGs for Social Dimension.

The PLAR-U-PAGs project will work on the following outputs that will be included in the inclusivhighereducation.eu webpage:

- 4 peer-learning activities (reports)
 - November 2022, focus on principles 1, 5 and 10
 - February 2023, focus on principles 2, 4 and 5
 - June 2023, focus on principles 3, 5, 7 and 9
 - October 2023, focus on principles 5, 6 and 8
- PAGs toolkit

¹ The survey was open to all EHEA countries, both those interested in participating in the PLA or not. 20 out of 48 EHEA countries participated: Albania, Austria, Belgium/Flemish Community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Greece, Finland, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Malta, The Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland.

² Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden.

- Framework with a self-assessment tool and guideline for mental health
- Central scholarship webportal

The project is led by the Ministry of Education and Training Belgium/Flemish Community (MINEDU-FC) and the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) of the Flemish Community of Belgium. They collaborate with the Ministry of Science and Education, Republic of Croatia (MINEDU-CR), the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in Zagreb, and the European Students' Union (ESU). Three individual experts support the project team with the implementation of the project activities.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Setting the scene – key note presentation

David Crosier, Education Analyst at Eurydice, European Commission provided a keynote speech, addressing the challenges of the social dimension. He provided some examples on why a social dimension policy is needed:

1. Parental educational background: the educational background of parents has an important impact. There is an overrepresentation of students with highly educated parents (which means an underrepresentation of students with parents who have a medium/low education level).
2. Gender: there is a strong differentiation between study fields in terms of gender. The strongest overrepresentation of women (80%) can be found in education and health. The strongest overrepresentation of men (80%) is found in ICT and engineering. This raises questions on what type of society we want.
3. Monitoring of student characteristics: gender, age and qualifications are routinely collected at entry into higher education, but there is a general decline in attention to characteristics at different stages. Furthermore, there is a lack of concern for characteristics such as disability, socio-economic status and migrant/minority status. What is monitored is a reflection of what is considered important in a country.

Inequity is growing, and the future will be even more challenging. An engaged political approach for putting equity as the central concern should be the key priority throughout education systems: from early childhood to adult education. The PAGs cover all aspects of social dimension policy-making and provide a roadmap to creating fair, equitable systems. They now need to be implemented.

Answering a question on the sensitivities regarding the collection of certain data (e.g. migrant status), Crosier answered that if there is no data and no understanding of the issue, it is hard to make evidence-informed policy. There may be different sensitivities regarding the collection of such data, but there is at least a need to reflect on this.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Principle 1: Social Dimension on Higher Education Strategies

Principle 1: 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.

Survey results

Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey:

- 50% of the respondents indicate to have a top-level strategy being implemented related to social dimension, equity, inclusion or diversity in higher education.
- Most of them indicate to have measurable targets in place; however, there are many differences between countries in terms of type of targets and areas where targets are set.
- Top-level strategies or other major policy plans or steering documents furthermore tends to focus on students and less on academic and especially administrative staff.
- Almost all countries have conducted (or are conducting) a social dialogue when developing a higher education strategy for social dimension. They involve a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of disadvantaged students and staff (in 83% of the countries).
- Quality assurance agencies are in most countries not required to monitor whether HEIs have policies in place to improve the social dimension, equity, inclusion and diversity in higher education.

Other results from the survey, including main barriers, best practices and proposed indicators can be found in the [presentation on the survey results on Principle 1](#).

Presentation: Inclusion and diversity within Erasmus+

Dorina Sraka of the Agency for Mobility and EU Programs, Croatia, presented the SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource centre.

The 11 SALTO (Support Advanced Learning Training Opportunities) centres provide support to national agencies. They provide several project activities, including study periods, courses, job shadowing, traineeships, etc. Some focus more on youth, some more on education and training and some are cross-sectoral. The SALTO centre in Croatia was established in April 2022 and focuses on inclusion and diversity in education and training.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Workshop

The aim of the workshop was to strengthen mutual learning and deepen the exchange of practices and challenges between higher education authorities on principle 1.

In particular, the discussion addressed the following points:

- How has the inclusion strategy been developed in your country?
- How are disadvantaged students and underrepresented and vulnerable students defined and monitored? How are targets set?
- What measures are implemented? What good practice examples exist?
- What barriers remain at the national and institutional level? How can these be overcome?

In the discussion, some experiences from different countries were shared:

- Croatia: a national group for enhancing social dimension in higher education has been established. This group drafted the National plan for enhancing social dimension in higher

education 2019-2021 and the new one is under development. This group includes a wide range of stakeholders: students, professors, experts, ministries, agencies etc.

- Georgia: 14 groups of students have been identified as requiring (financial) support, e.g. students from low-income backgrounds, occupied territories, disabilities, national minorities, larger families, high mountain areas.
- Cyprus: the focus for inclusion in higher education will be on 1) support for students with special needs, and 2) amendments needed in procedures for the teaching process, material and assessment.
- Ireland: the current national action plan (2022-2028) is the fourth of its kind. There are three groups of focus: socio-economic, Roma/travellers communities and learning disabilities.

An issue that emerged was that of gathering data on specific groups. In several countries, there is a reluctance to gather specific data on a central level: higher education institutions may collect data, but not all data is shared with the central government/authorities, in order to protect students' privacy. Nevertheless, it is important to have good, reliable and relevant data in order to make policies.

Some conclusions after the discussion:

- Context matters: we can start from a similar Bologna basis, but each national context needs to be taken into account.
- Identification of target groups is key for gathering data.
- Autonomy of HEIs: there is a tension with the autonomy of HEIs and the gathering of data. Voluntary basis interventions may help here.
- Students are important change-agents and can best reach out to other students.
- Staff members are also key players and staff development should not be forgotten.

Principle 5: Students' Mental Health

Principle 5: Public authorities should have policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market.

Survey results

Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey:

- Some countries have a top-level legal requirement to provide the following services to higher education students: academic guidance (13), psychological counselling (9) and career guidance (12).
- Although student mental health is receiving more attention, the impact of counselling is an under-researched area at European level. This is related to the complex range of very different guidance and counselling systems, as well as to the failure to prioritise mental well-being in general. Only a few countries pursue specific national strategies or frameworks for the prevention and treatment of students' mental health problems.
- 8 out of the 20 responding countries said to have a specific strategy, action plan or framework on student mental health.

Other results from the survey, including main barriers, best practices and proposed indicators can be found in the [presentation on the survey results on Principle 5](#).

Presentation: Student Mental health, a public mental health perspective

Prof. dr. Ronny Bruffaerts, professor at KU Leuven, Belgium and expert in the PLAR-U-PAGs project provided a presentation on the state of the art on student mental health and the public mental health perspective.

He noted that the age of 18 to 24 years is a very intense period. Emotional problems are common in college; this includes a lot of minor emotional problems – it is not a new problem, neither did it emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The incidence of emotional problems in students and in the general population has remained fairly stable over the years. However, more people are likely to seek help.

There is however a cohort effect: people born more recently have a higher probability to develop mental health disorders. When disaggregating the higher risk, it shows that this results in more externalising problems such as self-harm. This changing nature of problems among students is worrisome. Minority groups that seem at higher risk are LGBTQ+ and racial minority groups.

Protective factors that come in play are connectedness and friendship: this is a buffering effect for developing mental disorders. We should focus on a ‘community of caring approach’, targeting the entire student population, rather than only those with problems.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Workshop

The aim of the workshop was to strengthen mutual learning and deepen the exchange of practices and challenges between higher education authorities on principle 5 and student mental health.

In particular this workshop addressed the following points:

- What does (international) research teach us about student mental health?
- How is student mental health defined and prioritised in your country and your universities and university system?
- What psychological and/or psychiatric counselling services does your country and your university system provide?
- What barriers remain at the national and institutional level? How can these be overcome? What can be done by different actors to make universities more mental health places? Where could European cooperation and support bring added value and help to overcome these barriers?

In the discussion, some experiences from different countries were shared:

- Flanders: data has provided the leverage to take action on mental health. All stakeholders are involved. The results between HEIs are not compared among each other, but each HEI can get a safe report with their own data compared to the overall Flemish level. The new portal MoodSpace provides a good place to promote students’ mental health.
- Georgia: many students consider that it is good to be more open towards the topic of mental health, but there seems to be a fear of stigmatisation. However, Ronny Bruffaerts answered

that in the bigger picture, stigma is not a major driver of not seeking help (just 5%). It are foremost cognitive barriers. A good practice is to provide e-treatment.

Some conclusions after the discussion:

- It is important to work on resilience, as well as community building.
- A community approach needs to be taken. It is important to take mental health strategies for children at an early age, before it becomes a problem.
- A cooperative approach is important to ensure buy-in and trust from HEIs, such as in the case of MoodSpace.

Principle 10: Synergy of Stakeholders in Higher Education with Principles and Guidelines

Principle 10: Public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level.

Survey results

Valérie Van Hees presented the key results of the survey:

- Almost all countries have conducted (or are conducting) a social dialogue when developing a higher education strategy for social dimension.
- Representatives of disadvantaged students and staff included are specifically invited in 83% of the countries.
- Now it is the time to also start more policy dialogues.

Other results from the survey, including main barriers, best practices and proposed indicators can be found in the [presentation on the survey results on Principle 10](#).

Presentation: Students' perspective

Carlotta Eklöh, board member of the German student organisation *Freier Zusammenschluss von student*innenschaften* and joining the PLA on behalf of the European Students' Union, provided the students' perspective regarding synergies with stakeholders in higher education for PAGs.

She noted that the system in Germany comprises many levels, which makes stakeholder dialogue complex. When addressing issues, there is often a short timeframe and there is rapid shifting between topics in dialogues. For student representatives, this is a challenge, as they have limited time and capacity. Furthermore, often new policies are presented in an 'informing' way, rather than truly being a dialogue.

In an ideal policy dialogue, she notes that it is important to create mutual understanding on what we want to achieve. She proposed two perspectives:

- Institutional perspective: set a format, dedicated timing and forum, ensure relevant members are present and address issues at the right level.
- Stakeholder perspective: reflect on when to engage stakeholders (for all policies that touch on social dimension), how to engage stakeholders (consultation vs. cooperation), and how to learn from each other.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Presentation: principle 10: synergy of stakeholders in higher education with principles and guidelines, case study Flanders - BE

Frederik De Decker of Ghent University (Belgium) and expert in the PLAR-U-PAGs project provided a case study from Flanders regarding synergy with stakeholders.

In the Flemish Community policy dialogue takes place within an already existing established national HE policy body or forum addressing other HE issues. There are two experts within the Flemish Education Council (VLOR): 1) Diversity Committee and 2) Working group on International Tendencies in Higher Education Policy. In all VLOR-committees there are students, staff, HEI management, ministry representatives and experts. They prepare input for advice requested by the minister or on the initiative of the Council (at their own request).

This process has concretely led to a similar basis for better registration at HEIs and increased the focus on inclusive mobility in internationalisation policies, among other things. This shows the positive effect of embedding dialogue in regular policy making, as it will improve the quality and end results of policies.

More information can be found in this [presentation](#).

Workshop

The aim of the workshop was to strengthen mutual learning and deepen the exchange of practices and challenges between higher education authorities on principle 10.

In particular, the discussion addressed the following points:

- How to establish a top-level policy dialogue on the P&Gs at system level?
- How to ensure that students of underrepresented groups are actively involved in an inclusive way?
- How to engage with universities? How to establish a social dialogue on the P&Gs at university level and at the level of European Universities Alliances?

It was highlighted that we need to think more about cross-sectoral cooperation, both vertical and horizontal. Stakeholders (students, pupils' council, graduates, social welfare, labour market, etc.) should be included from the beginning. Also between ministries (education, labour, etc.) and within ministries (different educational levels) dialogue remains essential.

The question arose on the tension between different levels, notably between national and European level. EU projects can be a good vehicle to build capacity and raise awareness for certain topics between HEIs at international level, but at the same time we have to be cautious that the national level does not get overlooked. On the other side, regional cooperation and the involvement of local authorities is also necessary and can grow both top-down and bottom-up.

On how to include students in an inclusive way, it was noted that there are some specific organisations that represent for example students with chronic illnesses. There is however a huge dilemma: not all students can take up the responsibility of student representation, especially those who for example need to combine their studies with a job or care duties. Hence, it is hard to get those groups that we want to target with the social dimension around the table. Compensation (financial or in terms of ECTS) for student representation could provide more incentive for students

to take up this role, but also better communication and feedback gathering at HEIs needs to be looked further into.

Parallel Focus Groups

FG1 on the European Web Portal on Students Financial Aid (IDE)

IDE will lead the work package on creating a central web portal on financial assistance and psychological counselling services at the EHEA level. This portal will enable a Europe-wide network of cooperation, staff training and information sharing.

IDE suggested several sections that could be part of the web portal:

- Scholarships information: a searchable database of available financial aid.
- Educentre: to educate students on how to be successful in the application process.
- Alumni centre: with experiences of former students that received financial aid.
- European online scholarship fair: to be planned once a year, allowing to speak with people from the offering institutions.
- Useful resources
- Electronic publications and social media

During this focus group, these plans were discussed and input was provided. The plan was welcomed as a valuable tool to students and staff. However, some concerns also emerged:

- Defining Scholarships
- Visibility of the portal
- Added value to students as compared to existing portals
- Identification of scholarships: how to ensure correct and up-to-date information?
- How to ensure it particularly supports social dimension? What types of scholarships should be included – only those that target specific groups?
- Language of scholarships

At the next PLA in February, these issues will be discussed more in detail. IDE will prepare a proposal on what the portal would look like and will prepare questions and a methodology to have a structured dialogue.

FG2 on the Toolkit on Principles and Guidelines (SIHO)

SIHO will lead the work package on creating a Toolkit on the Principles and Guidelines to support national authorities and higher education institutions to check their current policies and practices on the social dimension and receive advice with action points for improvement. At the same time, a comprehensive action framework will be developed, including a self-assessment tool and guidelines to support sustainable mental health strategies at the national and institutional levels.

During this focus group, these plans were discussed and input was provided, leading to the following conclusions on the Toolkit on Principles and Guidelines:

- For each PAG a framework will be made, identifying the indicators and the outcomes.
- For each principle, a self-assessment tool will be developed, so that institutions can see where they stand.
- A manual will be developed on how to implement each indicator in your country.

- Outputs are aimed at both national authorities and HEIs.

The following conclusions were made for the mental health framework:

- The micro-, meso- and macro-level will be taken into account.
- This framework is also aimed at both national authorities and HEIs.
- It is important to have data, but also to have good practices to convince action. A submission form will be added on the website where all can share inspiring practices.

Next steps

The next steps for the survey and call for participation in PLA2 are:

- Early December: survey on principles 2 and 4 to be shared
- 23 December: deadline survey and application for participation in PLA2

The next PLAs will take place on:

- 9-10 February 2023 PLA 2 Belgium, Ghent
- 13-14 June 2023 PLA 3 Croatia, Dubrovnik (tbc)
- October 2023 PLA 4 Belgium (tbc)