PLAR-4-SIMP
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BACKGROUND PAPER on inclusion in internationalisation and inclusive mobility

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Table of contents

1. Current trends and strategic thinking on social dimension and inclusive mobility across the European Higher Education Area

The student population in higher education has become more diverse. Through efforts at institutional, national and European level (European Union and the Bologna Process), multiple policies, programmes and actions have been put in place in the past two decades to widen participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), addressing specific disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

As a continuation of this trend, in the last five years the ambition to widen participation in higher education has started to increasingly focus also on international higher education activities, and particularly on international student mobility (programmes), aiming to make the latter more inclusive. This development is fuelled, on the one hand, by a growing awareness, through studies (EPFIME, 2020; EUA, 2020; IMA, 2019; UUKI, 2017), of the very low participation of disadvantaged students in such programmes and of the negative consequences of their under-participation: the by default disadvantage that such students experience becomes even bigger through non-participation in international higher education activities (and in student mobility in particular), further affecting the later employability of these students compared to their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

This change is equally promoted by several related policy developments:

- A renewed impetus in the Bologna Process framework on the need to develop more inclusive and innovative approaches for teaching and learning (Paris Communiqué 2018) as part of higher education's social responsibility mission, and in order to build more inclusive societies, resulting in the strategic policy document 2020-2030 "Principles and Guidelines (PAG) to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)". The latter defines ten principles for the social dimension for the upcoming decade as the basis for conceptualising different policies for social dimension enhancement (BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, Draft 2020).
- Higher ambitions for the upcoming Erasmus programme (2021-2027), which aims to triple the number of beneficiaries, coupled with the (surprising?) realisation that despite the existence of targeted support through "special needs grants" in predecessor programmes, a very low percentage – only between is stagnating between 0.11% and 0.18% - of participating students have requested the "special needs" support between 2014 and 2018.
- Growing support from the European Parliament in the framework of the Erasmus programme negotiations for strengthening the inclusive character of the programme, as a necessary precondition for reaching the ambitious participation targets.
- A new debate on inclusion vs. excellence in the context of the European Universities Initiative, which aimed to support from the start academic excellence while encouraging inclusive participation, through balanced representation in terms of geography and types of institutions, and highlighting the role that inclusion can have in fostering excellence in higher education and research.

Despite the broad political commitments at European and international levels, only a few countries have followed up with concrete actions at the system level to foster social inclusion in mobility programmes. The Bologna implementation report 2018 indicates that the large majority of education systems only provide one single support measure targeting the mobility participation of disadvantaged students (typically financial support), or none at all, and only four education systems complement the direct support offered to students with incentives and recommendations for higher education institutions to take a more proactive role in improving access and success opportunities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice; 2018).

Thus far, efforts to widen the social dimension in international higher education have primarily focused on one specific internationalisation activity – international student mobility and related funding programmes –, this being also the type of activity that the PLAR-4-SIMP project aims to primarily support as well, by facilitating peer learning and developing resources for higher education authorities and institutions that are in the process of considering, planning, and implementing reforms to widen the participation of disadvantaged students in mobility programmes. This is meant to strengthen mutual

learning and deepen the exchange of practices between EHEA countries in different implementation stages.

A new trend in the EHEA context is that (some) EHEA countries are striving to address collectively a number of underrepresented groups in student mobility that were previously targeted separately, aiming to develop comprehensive, system-level policies and approaches for inclusive mobility and internationalisation.

2. Core concepts - social dimension (in internationalisation) and inclusive mobility

Given the trend of increasing diversification of student populations in many countries and higher education institutions across EHEA, combined with growing comprehensive internationalisation ambitions, strategic and systemic approaches to widen the social dimension become a necessary response, not only in higher education in general, but also in international activities for all students enrolled in higher education.

In an educational context, **the social dimension** encompasses *"the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity and diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities" (*BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 2020).

Furthermore, principle eight in the strategic policy document 2020-2030 "Principles and Guidelines (PAG) to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)" focuses specifically on international mobility programmes. From an **internationalisation social dimension perspective***, "international mobility programmes in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that foster diversity, equity and inclusion and should particularly foster participation of students and staff from vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds" (*BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 2020, p.5).

According to this principle, public authorities and higher education institutions are called to ensure equal access for all to the learning opportunities offered by national and international learning and training mobility programmes and to actively address obstacles to mobility for vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented groups of students and staff. Besides further support to physical mobility, including full portability of grants and loans across the EHEA, public authorities and higher education institutions should also facilitate the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to support blended mobility and to foster internationalisation at home by embedding international online cooperation into courses. Blended mobility is the combination of a period of international physical mobility abroad and a period of online learning. Such online cooperation can be used to extend the learning outcomes and enhance the impact of physical mobility, for example by bringing together a more diverse group of participants, or to offer a broader range of mobility options" (*BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 2020, p.5).

The Inclusive Mobility Alliance (2019), defined **inclusive mobility** as *"creating and ensuring adequate conditions to learn, work, or volunteer abroad for people with fewer opportunities, by addressing their diverse support needs. It is a needs-based approach to what the individual beneficiary needs to ensure a safe and exciting mobility period abroad. It is important to not generalise needs, needs are specific and the individualised aspect of it is highly important."*

3. Disadvantage and underrepresentation in mobility

While trying to identify specific disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to strengthen the social dimension in international student mobility, it is important to take note of the current absence of a unified terminology across EHEA countries and higher education institutions, as well as a generalised lack of data that would allow for cross-country comparisons and for assessing the degree of underrepresentation in (international) higher education. Often different terms are used interchangeably to refer to the same disadvantaged groups, such as: students with "special needs" used interchangeably for students with "impairments"; students from "disadvantaged backgrounds" or students with "fewer/ limited opportunities" to generally refer to students from lower socio-economic, or students without higher education background (at times also referred to as first-generation into higher education students).

How disadvantage and underrepresentation are defined and understood in partner countries also seems to be of crucial importance for achieving inclusive mobility in practice, sometimes leading to a discrepancy between the intended objectives and the reality on the ground. For example, a recent study (EUA, 2020) found that in the International Credit Mobility (ICM) in the Erasmus programme, the focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds was much weaker than initially intended by the European Commission. This is partly due to the fact that legal definitions of "disadvantage" in the partner countries varied, as did their implementation. Despite disadvantage being an additional selection criterion for students on the basis of equal academic merit, it is rarely used, and selection for the ICM was in most cases only based on academic and linguistic preparedness.

In the framework of the PLAR-4-SIMP project, we will use the definitions as proposed in the "Principles and Guidelines (PAG) to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)":

Underrepresented students: A group of learners is underrepresented in relation to certain characteristics (e.g. gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socio-economic background) if its share among the students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population. This can be documented at the time of admission, during the course of studies or at graduation. Individuals usually have several underrepresented

characteristics, which is why combinations of underrepresented characteristics ("intersectionality") should always be considered. Furthermore, underrepresentation can also impact at different levels of higher education – study programme, faculty or department, higher education institution, higher education system. This definition is complementary to the London Communiqué (2010), "that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations", but does not fully cover it (BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 2020, p. 6-7).

Disadvantaged students often face specific challenges compared to their peers in higher education. This can take many forms (e.g. disability, low-income family, little or no family support, orphan, many school moves, mental health, pregnancy, having less time to study, because one has to earn one's living by working or having caring duties). The disadvantage may be permanent, may occur from time to time or only for a limited period. Disadvantaged students can be part of an underrepresented group, but do not have to be. Therefore, disadvantaged and underrepresented are not synonymous (BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 2020, p. 7).

From an **inclusive mobility perspective**, underrepresentation and disadvantage must be addressed as widely and as comprehensively as possible when designing inclusive mobility strategies, covering the at least the needs of following groups:
· Students with disabilities,
· Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds,
· Students without a higher education background (also referred to as first-generation in higher education students; or first time academics),
· Students from minority groups (including race, sexual orientation, gender identity),
· Students with a migrant or refugee background,
· Working students,
· Students with family obligations, including caretaker students, and
· Non-mobile or less-mobile students, i.e. students that may not be underrepresented in higher education in general, but that become underrepresented in mobility activities (e.g. students in teacher education etc. that tend to less often study abroad compared to students in other subject areas).
The PLAR-4-SIMP will primarily focus on peer learning and resources to widen the participation of disadvantaged students in mobility programmes.

4. A students' needs-based approach for inclusive mobility

Previous research underlines the centrality of developing needs-based and individualised approaches to support the wider participation of disadvantaged and underrepresented students in international student mobility, as well as developing such approaches together with, rather than for the target groups.

A general distinction is usually made (EFPIME, 2020; IMA, 2019) in the **needs** of the target groups of students at **three important stages**, namely in the
- *Pre-mobility* stage, with need for accessible information, communication between actors, respectful procedures, support in the application process, encouraging mobility (positive activities/incentives).
- *During mobility*, with need for support services for diverse needs, tools to become independent, access to accommodation, health care, leisure etc., accessible learning conditions and portals.
- *Post mobility*, with need for support in providing feedback, accessible/clear assessment tools, evaluation of inclusivity, reintegration support.

Closely linked to the specific support needs are the barriers that disadvantaged students face when considering (if at all) international mobility experiences. While some of these barriers (worries, perceptions) are the same across all target groups, some are specific to certain disadvantaged groups.

What the students from disadvantaged groups have in common (UUKi, 2017) are concerns related to:
- Finances, and specifically to the cost of the programme, accommodation, travel, subsistence, course materials, visas, passports, insurances and health services.
- Accommodation, linked to the difficulty of finding accommodation within budget; or securing accommodation upon return for a shorter period of time than the norm.
- Language, namely the uncertainty of having the necessary language proficiency, especially for short-term mobility, to do well in the host country.

By way of example, reported group-specific concerns (EPFIME, 2020; UUKi, 2017) were the following:
- Some students from minority groups reported worries over how they will be perceived by people in the host country, fearing racism or improper behaviour, for example.
- Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported fears associated with leaving their support networks and being for the first time abroad, having no frame of reference amongst family or friends. They also reported financial worries, related to requests for upfront payments (for rent, moving costs, and deposits for accommodation, travel, and proof of available funds which is prohibitive for most students).
- Students with disabilities were concerned about the transportability of grant and support systems/services, access to accommodation and to medical services in the host country, particularly for emergency situations and crises.
- Students from religious minorities feared access to adequate food in the host country, as well as discrimination.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed that disadvantaged groups can face new and additional challenges compared to their more advantaged peers in following online education and virtual mobility, due to limited access to the necessary infrastructure and technology (computers, internet network, etc.) or to the new modes of delivery being not (yet) aligned to their specific access needs.

For many disadvantaged students, undertaking an international mobility experience given the above concerns remains "a massive leap of faith" (UUKi, 2017), and the reality is that without targeted support and a comprehensive approach, many such students might never even consider the possibility of studying abroad. Previous studies (UUKi, 2017) found that students from more advantaged backgrounds were indeed more likely (65% more so in the UK) to engage in outward mobility than their disadvantaged peers, despite the fact that the personal and career benefits of outgoing mobility are more pronounced for students from disadvantaged backgrounds when compared to their non-mobile peers. On all counts the target groups are underrepresented in mobility and students with overlapping disadvantages unsurprisingly had an even lower likelihood of participating in mobility schemes

5. Enabling factors for inclusive mobility

For an **inclusive internationalisation process**, the gap in participation of disadvantaged and underrepresented students must be tackled in both *internationalisation abroad* and *internationalisation at home* activities (ACA Reflection Paper, 2019). In *internationalisation at home* endeavours, inclusiveness can be fostered, for example, through:
  · measures addressing the *curriculum*: integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum in the full awareness of the diversity of student groups on campus and their access needs;
  · measures adapting the *forms of delivery*: e.g. by developing complementary online formats and models (such as COIL);
  · measures ensuring *diversity in incoming student mobility* (be it for credit or degree) and proper integration of this diverse student population on campus, avoiding 'ghettoisation'; and that
  · changes in *funding schemes*, ensuring for example that scholarship programmes at European, national and university level employ selection criteria that take note of the reality of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In turn, *internationalisation abroad* activities can become more inclusive by:
  · widening participation of underrepresented groups in outgoing credit mobility and in specific programmes (e.g. Erasmus);
  · developing complementary mobility formats (in terms of duration and delivery) to respond to the specific challenges encountered by students from the disadvantaged groups;

- addressing inclusion beyond student (and staff) mobility, to cover mobility of study programmes and institutions (generally called transnational education – TNE), as well as
- the forms that bridge *at home* and *abroad* elements, from virtual exchanges and blended learning, to joint study programmes at different levels, English or other foreign-language-taught study programmes at home, to summer and winter schools, etc.

A number of institutional-level actions can incentivise, based on previous findings, participation of disadvantaged and underrepresented students (ACA Reflection Paper, 2019; EPFIME, 2020; IMA, 2019; UUKi, 2017), such as:

- Taking a whole institutional approach to widening participation in mobility, backed by specific, individualised and increased support measures.
- Creating synergies between the work of International Relations Offices and Disability Offices in HEIs.
- Listening to underrepresented groups and involving them in the design and delivery of support measures (co-creation and co-delivery).
- Offering short-term opportunities.
- Providing targeted funding and adapting the scholarships selection criteria to the specificities of these target groups, to prevent discrimination and under-representation.
- Using diverse marketing channels and tailor-made messages, enabling inclusive communication.
- Providing information to parents and care-takers.
- Starting the preparation for mobility early.
- Offering expert support when preparing for mobility and while abroad.
- Providing tailored language learning.
- Creating pre-mobility networks.
- Enhancing employability skills through post-mobility activities.
- Creating mobile student ambassador schemes.

What prior analyses also make very clear is that achieving inclusive mobility is a long-term goal, that it requires concerted and comprehensive institutional-level commitment and measures, as well as a multi-layered approach and cooperation between policy-makers, mobility funding bodies, HEIs and their internal constituencies as well as the disadvantaged and underrepresented students themselves. The Inclusive Mobility Frameworks (EPFIME, 2020) provides clear strategic objectives and action points to support Ministries of Education, national agencies and higher education institutions to reach a sustainable inclusive mobility strategy at institutional level (before, during and after mobility).

6. References and additional resources

Additional resources that can be consulted for further preparation for the PLA are listed below (non-exhaustively, in alphabetical order):

- ACA Reflection Paper (2019). *Internationalisation for all? Wider inclusion in the internationalisation of higher education*. Retrieved from: https://aca-secretariat.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ACA-2019-April_Reflection_Paper_Inclusion-1.pdf
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- EPFIME Research Report (2020). *Making Mobility Programmes more Inclusive for Students with Disabilities.*
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