



# **Inclusion in higher education – Promoting life changing opportunities for people of under- represented groups**

Policy conclusions from the PLA in  
Brussels, 11-12 April 2019

ET2020 Working Group on Higher Education

# SETTING THE SCENE

## PLA setting and participation

This report summarises the conclusions of the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on “Inclusion in Higher Education - Promoting Life Changing Opportunities for People of Under-Represented Groups” that took place on 11 and 12 April in Brussels under the auspices of the ET2020 Working Group on Higher Education.

The PLA brought together representatives of public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) from 15 countries<sup>1</sup>. In addition, experts and speakers were invited from the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), European Students’ Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), European Parliamentary Research Service, EURYDICE, and the World Bank. Furthermore three centres engaged in the research and/or promotion of inclusion contributed to the meeting, namely ECHO, the Center for Diversity Policy in Higher Education from the Netherlands, the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) and IHS Institute for Advanced Studies from Austria. The Touro Law Center shared the experience of a private law school in the United States.

## Objective and aims

The aim of this PLA was to explore measures taken by higher education authorities and institutions to enhance inclusion of disadvantaged and under-represented groups in higher education, and assess the effectiveness of related policies and practices, with a focus on comprehensive strategies for inclusion of learners from these groups. The PLA outcomes will contribute to the discussions at the meeting of the Directors General for Higher Education of the EU Member States under the upcoming Finnish Presidency.

## Context

The increase in higher education participation and attainment in Europe over the past two decades has so far not led to wider participation. Challenges persist in participation of students at national or institutional levels who fall within one or more categories that are statistically less likely to access and attain higher education. Despite the continuing policy focus on inclusion, manifested in the pursuit of European Education Area by 2025, **the evidence from EUROSTUDENT<sup>i</sup> and the Bologna Process Implementation Report<sup>ii</sup> shows persisting under-representation in higher education**: Parental education remains a strong predictor of access, success and completion in all countries. People with disabilities and mature students are under-represented, and migrants are much less likely to attain a degree. There are also strong regional (within country) differences and gender imbalances by discipline. The under-represented groups have lower retention and completion rates.

Most PLA countries are **in the process of considering, planning or implementing reforms** in this domain. While inclusion, non-discrimination and equal opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> AT, BE/FL, CZ, FI, FR, HR, HU, MK, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI

are part of the national higher education policies and strategies in all PLA countries, the ambition, scale and scope of these policies and strategies vary across systems. So far **only three of the fifteen PLA countries – Austria, Ireland and Croatia – have developed a comprehensive strategy and an implementation plan for inclusion**, but apart from Ireland, they are in early stages of development. As the Irish strategy dates back to the early 2000s and its current National Access Plans has recently been evaluated, its experiences were widely shared at the PLA.

## Progress so far

The PLA showed a need for **more comprehensive approaches** in higher education inclusion policies. While quality and inclusion are increasingly seen as complementary elements, both pursued through the focus on student-centred higher education in countries such as France, Netherlands and Ireland, **few countries have made clear progress in widening access and ensuring success of students from under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups**.

Most PLA governments **do not clearly define strategies to promote inclusion, nor do they establish concrete targets to enrol and support students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups**. If they do so, they tend to target only some, not all of the groups relevant in their national and regional contexts. They may also see inclusion as a task for a part of the higher education system, leaving aside the most prestigious institutions. Furthermore, the PLA countries **rarely mobilise adequate resources** to support students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Actions to help them to complete their studies and enter the labour market successfully are even less frequent. As a result, there is **limited progress in ensuring that the composition of higher education student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of population**.

## Inclusion and quality

Part of the challenge is the limited acknowledgement that higher education diversity and inclusion can enhance quality and learning outcomes, innovation and creativity. International evidence shows that diversity in the classroom improves problem-solving skills<sup>iii</sup> as well as learning outcomes by enhancing complex thinking and aspirations for post-graduate study<sup>iv</sup>. While classroom diversity benefits all students, it is particularly beneficial for majority students with no previous direct exposure to minority peers<sup>v</sup>. The benefits of diversity for innovation and creativity have been demonstrated in a range of studies<sup>vi</sup> which identify the diversity of perspectives, experiences, cultures, genders and age as a critical ingredient in organization's ability to innovate and adapt in a fast-changing environment.

## SUMMARY OF KEY POLICY CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ The rationale of enhancing inclusion in higher education is based on arguments of economic necessity, social justice and quality. Equity is a condition for

excellence and high quality, which implies that inclusion is a responsibility for all higher education institutions.

- ❖ A long-term commitment, evidence-based strategy and an action plan for inclusion with policy priorities and targets for under-represented and disadvantaged groups are key enablers for progress in inclusion in higher education.
- ❖ Changes in the legislation, quality assurance and funding policies should enable and ensure actions which enhance inclusion and mobilise higher education institutions.
- ❖ A holistic policy approach to inclusion in education, meaning coherence through early childhood and schools to higher education, will enable tackling the disadvantage in education.
- ❖ A whole-of-government approach, coordination and synergies across related policy areas (education, teaching and learning of native languages, employment, health and social welfare, housing, migration) will further enhance effective approaches to preventing and reducing the impact of disadvantage on higher education.
- ❖ Broad-based dialogue and collaboration between government, higher education institutions, and key stakeholders including social partners and people from the under-represented and disadvantaged groups should be embedded in the design and implementation of higher education inclusion policies.
- ❖ Financial incentives and other support, including preparatory classes, guidance sessions and extra-support classes need to be available for students, including tailored support for students from different under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Authorities should ensure that students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are not prevented from accessing and completing higher education irrespective of the student fee and support mix.
- ❖ Funding targeted at increasing inclusion at institutions should be embedded in the funding formula and/or funding agreements in order to ensure a secure base for the promotion of inclusion, while well-designed supplementary competitive funds can initiate and lead to a sustainable change.
- ❖ Support should be available for academic and administrative staff in higher education institutions to enhance the quality of learning and teaching, study experience and provision of other support for vulnerable students. Diversity of higher education staff should be increased in order to create role models for and to enhance sense of belonging of students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.
- ❖ Sound inclusion policies need to be based on data, evidence and transparency: they require investments in identifying educational disadvantage and target groups, measuring performance and progress towards targets, monitoring the intended and unintended effects of policies, and analysing the complexity of underlying factors. Open and transparent communication of results is key to bringing wider attention to the issues.

## PLA MESSAGES ON POLICY-MAKING

### Enabling policy mixes underpin inclusion in higher education.

**Progress in higher education inclusion is a long journey, which requires commitment and collaboration, as well as critical reflection on and continuing adaptation of policy measures.** In addition to enabling legislation and quality assurance, policy mixes may vary across countries but ideally include the following elements:

- **Evidence-based strategy and action plan** for inclusion identifying system-wide policy priorities and targets for under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups;
- **Whole-of-government approach** and synergies with related sector policies;
- **A holistic approach to disadvantage from early childhood** to tertiary education and beyond;
- Broad-based **dialogue and collaboration** including people from under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups;
- **Financial and other supports for higher education institutions and students**, notably students from under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups; and
- **Data, monitoring, evaluation and communication of results.**

### Comprehensive strategy and a long-term policy commitment are key enablers for inclusion in higher education.

**A shared agreement about the need for inclusion of vulnerable people in society paves the way for progress in inclusion in higher education.** Most PLA countries identify inclusion as a priority topic in the higher education agenda but lack a clear focus on disadvantaged groups, for instance because of a conviction that widening participation challenges are sufficiently addressed by providing universal and mainstreamed measures and support. Ireland stands out from the rest of the countries thanks to its long-standing policy commitment to inclusion and consistent incremental development for nearly two decades.

**Creating a shared agreement about the necessity of inclusion is based on arguments of economic necessity, social justice and quality.** Research evidence shows that inclusion in education reduces the waste of human resources and economic losses given that the fiscal gains are significantly higher than costs of investment in public education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also evidence that inclusion benefits everyone in the society, not just the poorest<sup>vii</sup>, while differences in cognitive development, intelligence and learning outcomes are a consequence of socio-economic inequalities, not the cause<sup>viii</sup>. Finally, equity in education is compatible with strong learning outcomes and high performance<sup>ix</sup>.

**Identifying disadvantage and targeting policy support in the right 'place' remain challenging, particularly in terms of different regions and different societal groups.**

## **A whole-of-government approach is key to effective multi-strand policies to address educational disadvantage.**

**Coordination and synergies across policy areas such as education, employment, health and social welfare, housing and migration ensure effective approaches to preventing and reducing the impact of disadvantage on the access and success in higher education, learning outcomes, employment and life chances in general.** The higher education inclusion policies do not work in isolation but are part of a broader framework of cross-sectoral policies, which address disadvantage and exclusion in the society<sup>xi</sup>. A clearly articulated national antipoverty and social inclusion framework will enhance the progress in inclusion in higher education. In Ireland, the development of the National Access Plans takes place within the context of national antipoverty and social inclusion policies. A wide and on-going consultation is in place to ensure alignment with cross-sectoral policies.

## **Tackling the disadvantage in education requires a holistic approach and coherent policies from early childhood on.**

**The slow progress in inclusion in higher education points to the need to develop a holistic approach in education and inclusion policies, meaning coherence through early childhood education to schools and tertiary education.** In several countries, inclusion in higher education is constrained by policy failures at earlier levels of education. Solutions include ensuring access to early childhood education for all children as well as high quality public provision at schools; abolishing or delaying tracking of children to “doers and thinkers”, and ensuring permeability, transitions, second chances and alternative routes to higher education etc. In practice, however, admission policies, alternative pathways and recognition of prior learning continue to play a marginal role.

## **Sustained change requires broad-based collaboration to ensure that inclusion becomes a collective responsibility.**

**Ongoing dialogue and collaboration between the government, higher education institutions and stakeholders is essential for developing commitment to inclusion policies.** Policy-makers in PLA countries increasingly use dialogue to develop and implement reforms underpinning inclusion in higher education, but the coverage of the stakeholders varies across systems.

**Dialogue and collaboration with the higher education staff and students is essential for developing effective policies.** PLA case studies showed the need for policy makers and institutional leaders to engage with the higher education community in order to address implicit biases, low expectations for students from target groups or misconceived perceptions that high dropout rates are a sign of high standards. Student unions, which have an understanding of the challenges and opportunities that students face, need to be fully involved. Students in pre-tertiary education can also support policy design as exemplified by the Netherlands, where secondary vocational students have developed project proposals to boost inclusion and improve transition to higher education.

**National and institutional level policies and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the voices of people from under-represented and disadvantaged groups and vulnerable students are heard.** The inclusion policies in Ireland have been informed by those experiencing poverty and social exclusion. In Belgium, the University of Antwerpen uses student panels and focus group discussions to ensure participation and feedback from students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Expanding the dialogue to social partners, local communities and employers is also important.** In France, broad dialogue and consultation on education has been used to enable a new legislation facilitating higher education access and success. In Ireland, the design of the National Access Plan included an extensive consultation process, invited submissions from 54 organisations and focus group discussions. In most countries, collaboration between the higher education sector and employers should be enhanced in order to improve inclusion in recruitment practices, not the least because the socio-economic background continues to determine graduate careers.

## **Collaboration between higher education institutions and schools and local communities improves inclusion.**

**Early interventions and collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and schools are key to improving the quality of learning and teaching in pre-tertiary education, and raising aspirations and learning outcomes of vulnerable children and youth.** Research evidence shows that a multi-pronged response to disadvantage and under-representation may be best tackled at schools where the well-being of children and young people can be nurtured and monitored<sup>xii</sup>.

**Developing, strengthening and expanding the links between higher education institutions and schools need to start earlier, target vulnerable students and need to be supported by evidence of impact and effectiveness.** While higher education institutions frequently collaborate with schools, it often concentrates on the transition phase to higher education and targets high achievers rather than vulnerable students. Effective policies reach out to younger children in primary and early childhood education, before they would need to make choices between different tracks of the education system, often determining their later educational path. Mentoring is also a widely used mechanism, increasingly involving higher education students from disadvantaged groups as mentors - as the [Students4Students](#) projects in the Netherlands show.

**Authorities also need to ensure that guidance and counselling are reaching the students in need and that they are coherent across schools, vocational education institutes, higher education institutions and employers.** Sweden has invested in guidance material<sup>xiii</sup> in order to raise aspirations of children. This is a response based on research which showed that guidance and counselling do not reach or are less effective for students who lack cultural capital at home or in their social networks<sup>xiv</sup>. All education systems have in place some kind of academic guidance, like

the new online platform [Parcoursup](#) in France, which provides detailed information on trainings, access conditions, the knowledge and skills students require to succeed. It offers personalized study pathways and guidance, among others through reinforcing the role of secondary school teachers in guidance provision. The effectiveness of guidance services is key, in order to reach the envisaged target groups. There is need to monitor if such services are fit for purpose and reach the students in most need. Guidance and counselling for mature students should also be improved, including information on different pathways into and through higher education.

**Community-based approaches and collaboration between higher education institutions on regional level may provide an effective way to pursue outreach to schools and communities and address 'cold spots' or regional disadvantage in higher education.** Governments can incentivise such collaboration by supporting regional consortia of higher education institutions (and other institutions). For instance, Ireland provides regional clusters of higher education institutions with extra financial support to develop a regional and community partnership approach, in order to attract students from under-represented groups. France aims to address low participation in remote/peripheral areas through 'Connected Campuses' which take advantage of Massive Open Online Courses combined with localised learning support to attract new students from underserved areas. These policies are in early stages of development and require monitoring and evaluation.

**Both financial and non-financial support should be available to learners from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.**

**The affordability of higher education depends on the net financial costs to students rather than the existence of tuition fees.** Only a few countries worldwide have been able to widen access and improve success without cost-sharing between the state and households. **Therefore, possible student fees need to be balanced with investments in student support systems to ensure opportunities for equal access and success in higher education.**

**Whatever the student fee and support mix is, higher education systems should ensure that students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are not prevented from accessing and completing higher education as a consequence.** Creating 'targeted free tuition' for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while charging fees to other students could provide an option for some countries which currently use a dual track fee system, in which high-achieving students - mainly from wealthier backgrounds - receive their education for free, while others - often from disadvantaged backgrounds - pay fees<sup>xv</sup>. The European Student Union flags gaps in the support for housing, for mental health and disability support. Half of the national student unions are dissatisfied with available measures. Commendable student-centred approaches focus on enhancing the wellbeing of

students but may also ensure that students are making suitable study choices as is the case in the Netherlands ('study choice check'<sup>2</sup> and 'binding study advice'<sup>3</sup>).

**Investments in the sense of belonging and safety on campus are important to enhance inclusion of all students, but particularly those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.** Finland is working to create a stronger sense of belonging and a safe environment for all students to succeed through the development of student groups and communities. Student-driven projects in the Netherlands, at the University of Utrecht, are focusing on developing a safe environment for dialogue. In Flanders, the University of Antwerpen has launched new policies to enhance the sense of belonging of students from minority backgrounds. In FH Campus Wien all staff and students have signed a code of conduct and are committed to discrimination free language.

While Europe lacks robust evidence in the domain of safety on campus, a recent [study from Australia](#) points to high rates of (sexual) violence against students, massive under-reporting, and a lack of adequate university policies and practices to address the problem; vulnerable students from ethnic minorities, LGBT<sup>4</sup> and disabled students are the usual victims<sup>xvi</sup>.

## **Effective inclusion policies require financial incentives to higher education institutions.**

**Embedding inclusion in funding for higher education institutions helps create a secure base for the promotion of inclusion.** The PLA countries incentivise higher education institutions by integrating inclusion in the funding formula, performance-based funding system, funding agreements/compacts. In Flanders and Ireland, for example, the outcome-based funding system rewards institutions for enrolling students from equity groups. In Austria, the federal government aims to withhold 0.5% of institutional funding if a university does not develop an institutional strategy or approach to inclusion. The impact of these incentives on the access and success of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups needs to be better monitored and evaluated.

**Indicator-based funding systems can encourage widening participation by awarding points to institutions which excel in enrolling low-income students, students with disabilities or students from ethnic or migration backgrounds or other forms of disadvantage.** This would ensure that institutions with open access policies and excellent graduation and employment outcomes receive more funding.

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<sup>2</sup> Dutch HEIs offer prospective students a pre-enrolment matching system to help them evaluate their selection of the study field and find out whether they have the skills, competences and motivation to complete the degree.

<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the first study year, the Dutch students receive a 'Binding Study Advice', advising them whether they can continue or not in their study programme based on their first year performance. HEIs are free to define the criteria on what condition students have to leave the programme.

<sup>4</sup> Lesbian, gay, bi, trans

**International experience shows that additional funds, even if marginal, can initiate positive change, while performance-based funding can ensure focus on general tasks of higher education institutions<sup>xvii</sup>.** Several countries are using time-limited, competitive or non-competitive project-based funds to boost inclusion, including Ireland (for PATH fund see above) and Romania where the ROSE project is supporting institutions to develop learning centres to develop more strategic approach towards inclusion. **Such incentives need to be well designed to ensure sustainability beyond the time when the funding is ending.**

**Significant funding for Member States and higher education institutions will be made available from the European Union's new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027** through Erasmus+, ERDF and ESF<sup>5</sup> with specific objectives dedicated to improving inclusion in higher education. Given the ex-ante conditionalities, countries should consider making investments in inclusion in order to prepare for the calls.

## **Investing in higher education staff is crucial.**

**Higher education staff requires substantial support to enhance the quality of learning and teaching, study experience and provision of other support for vulnerable students.** Progressive institutions are developing professional development and human resources policies including changes in time allocation models etc. These policies should meet the needs of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups, addressing their potential strengths rather than weaknesses. Similar measures are needed to support the administrative staff in order to enhance diversity sensitive approaches and flexibility in meeting students.

**High quality learning and teaching and comprehensive student support systems will enhance access and success of all students, but complementary support for vulnerable students should also be available.** Some institutions - such as Malmo University in Sweden and the University of Antwerpen in Belgium - support the development of pedagogical skills of their teaching staff to address the needs of non-traditional students. In general, more efforts are required in this domain to respond to the growing demand for professional development for higher education teaching staff as evidenced in the results of the INVITED study<sup>xviii</sup>.

**Gender perspective should be embedded in the institutional policies and practices including quality assurance to address the limited women's participation in the higher ranks of staff and institutional management.** Assumptions that gender parity has been achieved because the proportion of females is equal to or higher than that of males are misguided given the persisting disparities across disciplines, in PhD studies and under-representation of women in the senior positions of the academia and administration. Gender segregation by discipline is in general undesirable and also problematic in fields where women are in majority, such as teacher education and nursing. Ireland has launched an initiative to create new and additional senior academic positions for women. Sweden's framework for institutional

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<sup>5</sup> Notable funding sources include ERASMUS, Regional Development and Cohesion Funds channelled through the ERD and ESF+, and the Horizon Europe.

reviews of quality assurance processes may serve as a source of inspiration as it aims to embed the gender perspective in all higher education processes.

**Increasing the diversity among higher education staff is an effective way to offer role models and enhance the sense of belonging among students from under-represented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.** Evidence from Sweden shows that the diversity within higher education staff declines, the higher the rank. Examples of efforts to increase diversity among higher education staff include Ireland's PATH fund, which provides funding for initiatives to widen access to initial teacher training courses, in order to increase diversity in the teaching profession. In the Netherlands, the ministry aims to increase cultural diversity among its own staff and design human resource policies to rule out any implicit biases.

## **Data and evidence-based policies underpin inclusion in higher education.**

**Sound policies in higher education inclusion are based on data and evidence. The systems and institutions that use data, regular surveys, research and analysis to develop an understanding of disadvantage and underrepresentation in education, as well as transitions of students across the education system, are more likely to develop effective policies in inclusion.** While several PLA countries now collect general data on access, participation and completion and increasingly also transition to the labour market, this rarely provides information on students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. There is also limited evidence of using this intelligence to inform inclusion policies. Authorities can encourage institutions to make better use of data, by supporting a uniform approach to data collection and indicators and also ensuring participation in the Eurostudent project.

**The identification of educational disadvantage, covering intersectionality<sup>6</sup>, could be enabled through a basket of population-based and individual indicators shared across schools, vocational education institutes and higher education institutions.** Several education systems have centralised data on students at primary, secondary and tertiary level which provides an opportunity to better understand students' transitions throughout the education system, and could facilitate targeting and coordination of widening participation activities. Furthermore, as the socio-economic background continues to affect graduate employment outcomes, there is also a need to collaborate with employers to monitor and publish data on recruitment of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**New data-driven methods can overcome the challenges in the identification of disadvantage, but may give rise to ethical issues, which need to be anticipated and addressed in advance.** Ireland's new Data Plan provides an interesting example as it is based on a regional approach that identifies deprived Small Areas and links datasets relating to secondary and tertiary education, whereby

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<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality refers to the complex cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of disadvantage combine, overlap or intersect in the experiences of marginalisation of individuals and groups.

information from different sources is brought together at the level of the individual or residence, using an aggregate-level indicator as proxy.

**Streamlining the data collection and reporting systems can eliminate the need for repeated evidence of disadvantage by students, and limit administrative effort in reporting duties for institutions.** Repeated collection of the same data from students and by institutions can be avoided by developing lean systems which take advantage of data sharing and available reviews and surveys. For instance, Ireland's new system aims to maximise the 'value-for-money' as the information for monitoring equity of access can be obtained through data linkage across administrative datasets relating to post-primary and tertiary education and identifying and geocoding the students who complete post-primary education, who apply to higher education institutions, and who access and complete higher education. Other groups, like students with a disability or mature students, can also be identified.

**Evaluation of policies and interventions that support and promote inclusion in higher education should focus on 'what works' in practice, underpinned by the systematic use of evidence to inform policy at national and institutional levels.** The impact of diverse policies and experimentations in higher education systems and institutions needs to be evaluated in order to ensure improved results in inclusion, particularly for students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

**The complexity of identification of disadvantage, reporting, monitoring and evaluation of impacts call for enhanced capacity building among the state and institutional administrations as well as cross-country peer learning.** Related challenges centre around the rapid development of advanced data analytics and machine learning, the quality of data, ethical issues, data protection etc. which necessitate enhanced capacity building among higher education staff.

**Inclusion and equity related aspects should also be integrated into quality assurance mechanisms. This would allow monitoring whether institutions are making progress in this domain.** Few countries have embedded inclusion in their quality assurance systems. Croatia is making headway in this area as it aims to include standards related to the improvement of the social dimension of higher education in the quality assurance system.

Finally, **the results of monitoring and evaluations should be widely communicated within the higher education community as well as the larger audience to bring attention to the importance of inclusion in higher education**

## **Integrated institutional strategies**

**While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions for enhancing inclusion in universities, a whole-of-the-institution approach across the student lifecycle is likely to bring best results.** A variety of approaches may be used with policies and strategies varying from institution to institution. Typical components include:

- Institutional commitment to a culture of inclusion underpinned with dedicated resources and coherent communication;

- Staff development to ensure that mainstreaming inclusion becomes a priority for all staff;
- Enhancement of student capacity by establishing high expectations for student success and providing comprehensive student support systems as well as diversity sensitive supports to those in need;
- Evidence and data to identify access, retention and success issues across disciplines and student groups;
- Systems to monitor student behaviour, participation and performance in order to identify students at risk, underpinned with early intervention measures; and
- Evaluation of data and experience over student life cycle (access, progress, completion, transition to the labour market).

**Authorities can mobilise institutions to enhance inclusion by mandating them to develop inclusion strategies, underpinned with incentives, monitoring and evaluation.** Authorities in several PLA countries have mandated higher education institutions to develop inclusion strategies, but these policies are reaching uneven results due to the variation in incentives and monitoring systems as well as overall framework conditions. In Sweden, all higher education institutions have made a commitment to inclusion, but given the lack of clear mandate and monitoring by the authorities, only a few – such as Malmo University – have established targets or defined what inclusion means in their own contexts. In Ireland, the objectives for inclusion are incorporated in the institutional strategies of all seven universities, in line with the requirements under the System Performance Framework; progress in mainstreaming has been confirmed by evaluations.

**Enhancing inclusion at the system and institutional level remains a challenge in many countries. This points to the need for knowledge sharing. A practical step is to sponsor an agency, centre or network with focus on inclusion in higher education to allow accumulation of knowledge and sustainable and scalable results.** In Sweden, *the Council for Higher Education*, has the responsibility to support higher education institutions in inclusion and widening participation, while *INCLUDE*, the national network of higher education institutions, shares experience, policies and good practice in this domain. In Flanders, *the Support Center for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO)* serves both policy makers and institutions: its inclusive support model for students with disabilities is expected to serve as an inspiration for the development of an inclusive model for other disadvantaged groups. In the Netherlands, the *ECHO, the Center for Diversity Policy in Higher Education* supports authorities, institutions and employers in the design and implementation of diversity policies.

## **FURTHER ACTION AT THE EU LEVEL**

**The European Commission contributes to strengthening evidence-based policies in countries and institutions by commissioning comparative research, fostering staff training opportunities, and promoting mobility opportunities and collaboration between higher education institutions.** New research efforts

could cover for example: a study on guidance and counselling; a comparative study on safety of campus in European higher education institutions; a study on 'targeted free tuition' for students from disadvantaged backgrounds; research and case studies on the impact of inclusion and diversity on quality, study experience and learning outcomes (whether in classroom or in higher education in general), as well as analysis of diversity as a channel of creativity and innovation in higher education.

**The development of metrics and indicators** could cover European standard metrics to measure and monitor inclusion or a set of indicators for social inclusion across all levels of education in the new strategic framework for Education and Training of the European Union, for instance in the ET Monitor in order to allow tracking the development over time.

A policy document (Council Recommendations, for example) could enhance the importance of inclusion in higher education, backed up by a "HEI Inclusion Index" to be used as a marker of quality, and a campaign for awareness raising on diversity and inclusion on the European and national levels as well as other awareness raising events, like a "Disability-friendly University" competition.

**Some PLA participants proposed more direct support for students with fewer opportunities to participate in mobility programmes.** There are further plans to increase the inclusive character of the Erasmus programme in the next programming period, including putting in place a cross-sectoral inclusion strategy and re-enforcing the commitment of higher education institutions to the principles of non-discrimination, transparency and inclusion in the programme through a new version of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). In this context the European Commission has commissioned a study to look into the improvement of the grant allocation mechanisms and support provided to disadvantaged students in the Erasmus programme, including students with special needs, from a disadvantaged socio-economic background and mature students that may have care taking responsibilities. Cooperation between national policy-makers and the Erasmus+ National Agencies would strengthen the impact of these measures and may be required in some cases to implement possible solutions. The further development of the European Student Card could ensure that at each transition information would follow the student without the need to repeatedly provide evidence about disadvantage. Institutions would benefit from support for strategy development for inclusion of disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

**The open method of coordination enhances peer learning, networking and cooperation between governments and higher education institutions.** Shared learning could help countries and institutions find solutions how to enhance inclusion in higher education while enhancing quality and excellence. Further exchanges between policy makers and HEIs, bringing together specialists in data and ethics, could focus on data collection and usage in order to enhance comparability across countries and understand barriers in terms of sensitive data. The open method of coordination could also focus on the benefits and risks of data-driven developments, including ethical issues, data protection issues, deepening the understanding why data is important and which changes in the national legislation are needed to ensure compatibility with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

<b>POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INCLUSION IN PLA COUNTRIES</b>	
<b>AT</b>	<p><b>Austria's National Strategy on the social dimension of higher education</b> was launched in February 2017. It was the result of a longer (18 months) strategy development process, led by the federal ministry, involving members of HEIs, employers and industry associations, the student union and other stakeholders. The strategy has 3 target dimensions: (1) More inclusive access; (2) Avoid dropout and improve academic success; and (3) Create indicators and optimise the regulation of higher education policy. There are 9 objectives with clear targets. <b>Inclusion is also embedded in the universities' funding system:</b> the federal government may withhold 0.5% of the overall university budget if a university does not develop an institutional strategy or approach to inclusion. Inclusion is also implemented into universities of applied sciences through institutional strategies. Institutions such as FH Campus Wien have developed a whole-of-the institution approach to inclusion covering e.g. a code of conduct for students and staff.</p>
<b>BEfl</b>	<p><b>Flanders has recently defined 9 disadvantaged groups;</b> all higher education institutions have agreed to register students to these groups on the basis of shared definitions in order to provide robust data on the progress and completion of these students. The data will be publically available on an aggregate level. The registration and monitoring for policy on Flemish level will start in autumn 2019. <b>Inclusion is embedded in the higher education funding through an additional weight assigned in the formula</b> to credits completed by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Inclusion is <b>also embedded in the higher education internationalisation strategy:</b> 33% of mobile students should come from disadvantaged groups (students on means-tested grants, students with disabilities or in employment). These students receive an additional monthly top-up scholarship. Higher education institutions are required to channel at least 25% of all Flemish mobility grants to students from target groups.</p>
<b>CZ</b>	<p><b>The Strategic Plan for HEIs in 2016-2020 has set the target that the share of students with specific educational needs in higher education should be close to their share among high school graduates.</b> A national study on inequalities in access, participation and completion and the geographical dimension is under development. Collection of data on ethnic background, faith and impairments is legally restricted. Means-tested grants are available for 1% of the student population.</p>
<b>FI</b>	<p><b>In Finland, equal access to high-quality education is the underlying principle.</b> Cross-sectoral policies address continuous education, immigration and policies for persons not involved in education or in employment. There are no targets for special groups, but the data is monitored. Finland provides tuition free education and financial aid is available to all fulltime students (study grants, housing supplement, loans). Disability benefits are also available. <b>A government-funded project, coordinated by the University of Jyväskylä is working to create</b> a stronger sense of belonging and a safe environment for all students, to help them succeed through the <b>development of student groups and student communities.</b></p>
<b>FR</b>	<p><b>Inclusion is high on the policy agenda, as evidenced in France's first national higher education strategy 'StraNES' (2015). The strategy</b> puts a strong focus on reducing the participation gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds and on increasing participation among students from technical and professional schools. Collection of data on ethnic background is restricted by law. <b>Policy instruments focus on improving the information and orientation of prospective students.</b> HEIs are stimulated to integrate students into academic and social life, by offering them more diverse and flexible study opportunities, orientation and support in their studies. <b>Means-tested scholarships</b> are available to about 25%-30% of the students. Other funding instruments boost excellence and collaboration between regional HEIs and improve the quality and attractiveness of study programmes. <b>The "Guidance and students success law" (Loi ORE) of 8 March 2018</b> aims to improve the orientation, access and completion rates of all students and includes specific measures to support students with special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds. It mandates HEIs to establish an individual learning agreement (contrat de réussite pédagogique) with each student, and develop tailored support and personalised learning paths (modularization of the courses). The <b>'Connected Campuses'</b> programme aims to address low participation in remote/peripheral areas by taking advantage of Massive Open Online Courses combined with localised learning support to attract students from underserved areas. There is also an effort to improve the reception of international students.</p>
<b>IE</b>	<p><b>In Ireland, equity of access to higher education is a long-standing policy priority. Its</b> vision is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The publication of <b>National Access Plans every five to seven years periodically renews the commitment to broadening participation</b> of persons from under-represented groups and communities in higher education. The current Plan for 2015-2021 has five goals: (1) To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs; (2) To assess the impact; (3) To gather data on access and participation to inform policy; (4) To build pathways from further education and foster other entry routes to higher education; and (5) To develop regional and community partnerships for</p>

	<p>increasing access. <b>The plan is evidence-based, developed in collaboration with stakeholders (including target groups), aligned with wider anti-poverty and social inclusion policies, and underpinned with funding incentives to students and HEIs.</b> Student success and inclusion are tied to performance funding, and institutions have been mandated to develop a Strategy for Student Success by 2020 in line with the System Performance Framework for higher education for 2018-2021. This strategy stresses the importance of a whole-of-institution approach. The targets for special groups are monitored and evaluated. <b>Evaluations have shown that the national access plan is achieving its targets</b> for most target groups. Ireland is currently developing a <b>New Data Plan</b> for identifying educational disadvantage.</p>
HR	<p><b>Croatia launched the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in January 2019</b> for the 2019-2021 period. The plan has 6 goals which will be included in the funding agreements with HEIs: (1) Collect and process relevant data and use it to improve the social dimension; (2) Improve access for under-represented and vulnerable groups and remove barriers to entry; (3) Provide equal opportunities for all students; (4) Increase the rate of higher education completion and employment of under-represented and vulnerable groups; (5) Improve financial aid to students of underrepresented and vulnerable groups (6) Include standards related to the improvement of the social dimension of higher education in the quality assurance system. A dedicated National Group is in place to coordinate and monitor the implementation. Related strategies include the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2013-2020. The coverage of <b>means-based grants</b> has been improved with the help of ESF.</p>
HU	<p>In line with the higher education law in Hungary, <b>students receive extra points at admission for disadvantage, disability and child care.</b> (Students are divided into subgroups based on the family background index used in the National Competence Measurement. Those who have -0.5 index are considered disadvantaged.) <b>A range of EU-funded programmes</b> support: Roma colleges, community-based higher education training centers in underserved areas, pedagogical training practice in disadvantaged districts, participation of women in academia etc. Hungary is also linking the universities' third mission with social inclusion through a new programme which will send university <b>students to mentor at schools in the three most disadvantaged regions</b> in return for a scholarship and training in mentoring.</p>
MK	<p><b>The authorities in North Macedonia set the annual enrolment quotas for minority students</b> in programmes in public universities (10%). Students without parents, with one parent, and students with disabilities have the right to study on public universities with no tuition fee or a reduced fee. Roma students benefit from special quotas. Public universities also offer support for students with caring responsibilities.</p>
NL	<p><b>In the Netherlands, inclusion is part of the policy agenda with focus on student success and wellbeing.</b> Inclusion policies aim to ensure that students make <b>informed decisions about their study choices.</b> HEIs offer prospective students a pre-enrolment matching system to help them evaluate their selection of the study field and find out whether they can complete their degree. Towards the end of the first year, students receive a 'Binding Study Advice', advising them, based on their performance, whether they can continue or not in their study programme. HEIs are free to define the criteria on what condition students have to leave the programme. <b>Disadvantaged students are entitled to need-based grants,</b> while all students have access to a loan as the "advance instalment for studies", subject to favourable repayment. <b>Innovative approaches include</b> cooperation with secondary vocational students in the design of project proposals to improve transition to higher education as well as <b>Students4Students projects.</b> <b>ECHO, the Center for Diversity Policy in Higher Education,</b> supports authorities, HEIs and employers in the design and implementation of diversity policies. The ministry aims to increase cultural diversity among its own staff and design human resource policies to rule out any implicit biases. The <b>privacy regulations</b> prohibit detailed monitoring of representations of cultural backgrounds.</p>
PL	<p>Poland's <b>Accessibility Plus</b> Programme targets adult learners and people with disabilities, and enhances, among other things, access to universities in terms of physical accessibility and universal design of study modules. The new higher education law targets students with disabilities, those from remote areas and adult learners. It mandates institutions to provide dedicated support to students with disabilities. The Jagiellonian University is running a pilot project with the university hospital (<b>SOWA student support and adaptation centre</b>) which responds to the growing number of young people with diverse problems such as health and emotional problems.</p>
PT	<p>Portugal is supporting inclusion in higher education through measures such as <b>investments in Programme +Superior to increase access of student from disadvantaged backgrounds from regions</b> with low population density; <b>means-based scholarships,</b> investments in student residences and a focus of <b>students with disabilities</b> covering a special contingent of access and support at institutional and national level. <b>ESES, the Higher School of Education of Santarém</b> has a long experience in developing projects in Inclusive Education with focus on special needs.</p>
RO	<p><b>Romania supports access to higher education for under-represented and disadvantaged groups through distinct admissions and state-budgeted study places.</b></p>

	<p>Persons of Roma origin, as well as students from rural areas and smaller cities can benefit from state-financed places. In the academic year 2018-2019, over 1,300 first year students from rural areas and over 1,000 Roma students in all cycles of higher education benefited from the state-funded study places. There are also scholarships, subsidies for accommodation and food, and a partial cover for transport costs. In 2016-2017, nearly 30,000 students from 48 HEIs benefited from social scholarships. <b>Support is available to HEIs through the institutional development fund (FDI) based on projects</b> for career counseling and guidance, for equity and inclusion, for monitoring graduates and their employment, for internships, etc. <b>Additional funding (FS), which covers almost one-third of institutional funding, offers universities funding based on quality criteria, including equity and inclusion.</b> Furthermore, <b>Romania's Secondary Education project (ROSE) supports the transition from upper secondary education to tertiary education and increasing the retention rate in the first year of higher education.</b> The competitive grants under the ROSE scheme support HEIs to offer summer activities and campus courses for secondary students, with focus on students at risk or from disadvantaged groups.</p>
<b>SE</b>	<p>Swedish legislation obliges HEIs to promote widening participation and comply with the anti-discrimination law. No official statistics are available on ethnicity, faith and race. The <b>Swedish Council for Higher Education has the task to support HEIs</b> in this domain through evaluations, analyses, conferences and training. In the absence of tuition fees and with student aid available for all, the main challenge is seen in the information and outreach activities to under-represented groups. <b>Evaluating prior learning and using alternative selection</b> are areas where HEIs are able to widen access to higher education. <b>Malmö University, which has a large share of students from non-traditional backgrounds, has a whole-of-the-institution approach to inclusion</b> across the student life cycle. Teaching activities in Malmö reflect the unique nature of the courses and the diverse objectives, motivations and circumstances of students. There is also a <b>national network of higher education institutions (INCLUDE)</b> which shares experience, policies and good practice among practitioners in this domain.</p>
<b>SI</b>	<p><b>Slovenia has overall targets for widening participation in higher education, but not to specific under-represented groups.</b> The Higher Education Act was amended in 2017 to define groups of students with special needs (disabilities, chronic illness and impairments) and special status (e.g. students with caring responsibilities) who are entitled to favourable treatment in the selection process, additional assistance and flexibility in studying. The rules and regulations are currently under preparation. <b>The aim is to adopt national strategy for ensuring equal opportunities for students with special needs and special status,</b> and related assistance and support.</p>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>vi</sup> See e.g. Forbes (2011). *Global Diversity and Inclusion: Fostering Innovation through a Diverse Workforce*. Retrieved from [https://www.forbes.com/forbesinsights/innovation\\_diversity/index.html](https://www.forbes.com/forbesinsights/innovation_diversity/index.html). Furthermore, Lu Hong and Scott Page from the University of Michigan have showed that groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers. According to Harvard Business School, multicultural networks promote creativity, see <https://hbswk.hbs.edu>
- <sup>vii</sup> Wilkinson R. and K. Pickett (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* London. Allen Lane. ISBN 978-1-84614-039-6
- <sup>viii</sup> Wilkinson R. and K. Pickett (2018). *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Wellbeing*. Allen Lane.
- <sup>ix</sup> OECD (2013). *PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity – giving every student the chance to succeed*, V.2, OECD Publishing. doi:10.1787/9789264201132-en.
- <sup>x</sup> Schraad-Tischler, D. and C. Kroll (2014). *Social Justice in the EU – A Cross-national Comparison*. Social Inclusion Monitor Europe (SIM) – Index Report, 2014.
- <sup>xi</sup> For more information, see NESET, the Network on Experts working on social dimension of education and training. <http://nesetweb.eu/en/>
- <sup>xii</sup> For more information, see NESET.
- <sup>xiii</sup> The video 'Valkommen tillhogskolan' (Welcome to higher education) is available as: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMQ3cgqzrnE&t=102s>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Swedish Council for Higher Education (2017). *Inheriting Education*.
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