

Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

#ACATHINKS

MAY 2021

Supporting higher education institutions to develop
strategic plans for more inclusive mobilities



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Valérie Van Hees (she/her) is the coordinator of the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO, Belgium) and has accumulated over 20 years of experience in the field of policy and services on social inclusion in higher education. At SIHO, she forms a bridge between policy and practice on a daily basis, being a point of contact for both the Flemish government and higher education staff. Valérie is project manager of the inclusive mobility project 'Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe' (EPFIME) and Peer Learning Activities and Resources for Social Inclusion in Mobility Programmes (PLAR-4-SIMP). Currently, she is also a PhD candidate at Ghent University.



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Dominique Montagnese (he/him) is an expert on Inclusive Mobility for the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO, Belgium). At SIHO, Dominique Montagnese supports research projects on inclusive mobility and inclusion at large, provides coaching and training of staff of higher education and formulates policy recommendations and tips on the topic of, amongst other things, inclusion, and mobility. Dominique Montagnese has been working with international mobility programmes for more than 10 years and with social inclusion in mobility for more than 6 years. He is the initiator of several projects linking inclusion and Erasmus+ mobilities, such as MapAbility, MappED! and the Inclusive Mobility Alliance which he currently chairs.

Enhancing the social dimension of higher education (HE) is a central pillar of the Bologna Process since its inception and was reconfirmed by the 2020 [Rome Communiqué](#) last year. In the [latter](#), European Higher Education Area (EHEA) ministers committed to tackle social barriers and develop policies that encourage and support higher education institutions (HEIs) to fulfil their social responsibility and to build an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030. The annexed [Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area \(EHEA\)](#) directly spell out the key priorities for inclusive international mobility for the next decade. The new Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 also has inclusion in the forefront. Inclusion, as one of the four horizontal priorities, is an underlying principle that informs all aspects of the programme, offering HEIs a variety of instruments to engage with an increasingly diverse student community.

EHEA countries and HE systems are differently equipped to enact these policy priorities on inclusion. The Flemish Community (Belgium) has a long tradition on inclusive mobility. The [Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education](#)



[SIHO], a national body supporting the Flemish government, policy makers and HEIs in implementing equity and inclusion measures in policy and practice, stands out as an actor to support higher education institutions to implement such measures, especially since the adoption of SIHO's Action Plan for Mobility "Brains on the Move" in 2013. "Brains on the Move" includes a broad range of initiatives that contribute to achieving the benchmark of 33% of all outgoing mobile students to belong to underrepresented groups. To that end, SIHO coordinates a Flemish learning network on inclusive mobility with the aim to support international officers, inclusion officers and policy makers in making their daily mobility practices and policies more inclusive, along with conducting European projects on this topic together with the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. It is from this experience and with this expertise that SIHO has a few insights to share about how to support HEIs in designing inclusive mobilities.

WHY AIM FOR MORE INCLUSIVE MOBILITIES?

While the overall number of young people and students experiencing international exchanges was increasing rapidly pre COVID-19 times, the number of disadvantaged students taking part in mobility programmes has been almost stagnant over the past decade. According to the 2019 Erasmus+ Annual report, about 21,000 students active in a mobility programme in higher education were considered students with fewer opportunities - less than 7% of the overall participants when compared to the total number of 312,347 participants within the regular Erasmus+ (previous KA103). The proportion of the higher education student population receiving special needs financial support in the Erasmus+ programme between 2009 and 2019 oscillated between 0.11% and 0.15%, indicating that students with disabilities have been further disadvantaged respective of their peers (Figure 1). As stated in the Bologna Implementation Report, this calls for improving attention to the mobility participation of students with disabilities throughout the EHEA.

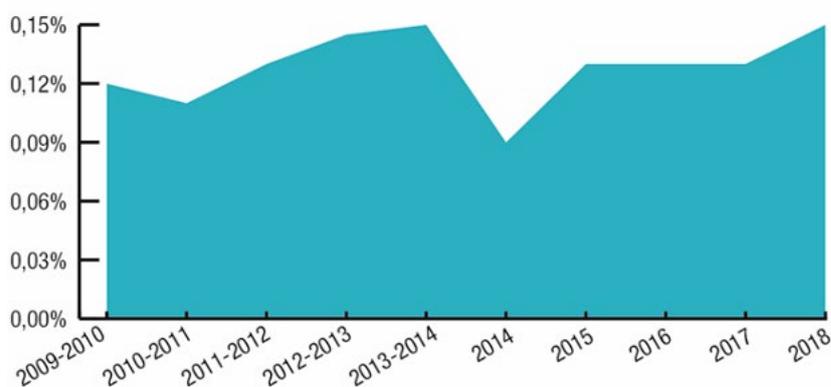


Figure 1. Erasmus+ students and trainees who received the Erasmus+ Special Needs Support
Source EPFIME research report Making mobility programmes more inclusive for students with disabilities

To investigate this inclusion mobility gap deeper, a recent study was conducted by SIHO and the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training in the framework of the project [Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework for Inclusive Mobility across Europe \[EPFIME\]](#). The project focused specifically on the participation gap of students with disabilities in mobility programmes and proved useful in guiding the observations shared in the proceeding sections. The study reports on data from 1,134 students with disabilities across 34 countries, 114 HEIs in 24 countries and 23 Ministries of Education across the EHEA, and examined, in-depth, the needs and expectations for inclusive mobility of national authorities, students with disabilities and HEIs across Europe.

WHERE ARE WE WITH INCLUSIVE MOBILITY STRATEGIES?

The EPFIME research shows that many countries and HEIs - as a core part of their values - have discovered that diversity breeds excellence and are embracing new ways to enable the participation of students with disabilities in higher education. However, the equity, diversity and inclusion strategies differ widely across national and higher education systems in EHEA. They are dependent on the overall societal discourse, the country's welfare system and its legislative framework, as well as the institutional culture and governance structures. While some national and institutional strategies are very detailed in terms of the goals and the actions to be taken, most are more general.



Despite the broad political commitments at European and international levels to strengthen the social dimension, only a few countries have followed up with concrete actions and measures systemically to foster social inclusion in mobility programmes. Although quantitative policy objectives signal a strong political commitment towards increasing the participation of disadvantaged students in mobility programmes, so far, only four education systems (Austria, Belgium-Flemish Community, France and Slovenia) have set such an objective or target. And only six countries, corresponding to eight EHEA systems (Austria, Belgium – the French and Flemish Communities, France, Germany, Italy and the systems in the United Kingdom), monitor the overall participation of students from underrepresented groups in mobility programmes. Although data collection is crucial to better understand the current situation and know which improvements to make to foster the inclusiveness of mobility programmes, it is currently not common and often limited to collecting mobility data about outgoing mobility in the Erasmus+ programme. The impact of mobility abroad on students with disabilities is rarely evaluated by national authorities, including Erasmus+ National Agencies and National Erasmus+ Offices.

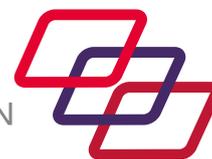
In addition to various gaps in inclusive mobility strategies, the study's findings also identified numerous barriers in five other main areas:

- The information provision and promotion on mobility abroad for students with disabilities is lacking. Campaigns are limited and their one-size fits all approach doesn't always reach students with disabilities.
- Students with disabilities, higher education institutions, and national authorities report significant barriers in the application process and the transportability of grants and support services abroad.
- Institutions of higher education do not automatically acknowledge the disability status as well as the reasonable adjustments offered by the home institution. Disclosure of the disability is also an important topic for students with disabilities.
- Students with disabilities point out the lack of available information regarding the accessibility of the destination city/town, transport, housing and campus, as well as support for everyday life (e.g. medical support, cooking, social events, etc.)
- The lack of awareness about the barriers, as well as the lack of communication and collaboration between different stakeholders, both inside and outside organisations (departments of Ministries, inter-departments of higher education institutions, National Agencies for Erasmus+, etc.) are barriers to supporting students with disabilities in mobility programmes effectively.

These findings clearly indicate that for students with disabilities, undertaking an international mobility experience remains “a massive leap of faith,” and the reality for many students with disabilities is that without a comprehensive approach to targeted support, they might never even consider the possibility of studying abroad. The EPFIME study, however, clearly highlights that students with disabilities are very interested to study, train or volunteer abroad. Similar to the general student population, the opportunity to live abroad, improving and widening career prospects, expanding social networks, and learning different languages and teaching methods are the main motivators for students with disabilities to take part in mobility. The impact of international mobility exchanges shows in advantages that are similar to the general student population in terms of higher academic and employment achievement, increased language skills, personal confidence and social skills development. In addition, students with disabilities who went abroad testified about a more normalised self-perception. This underscores the need for institutions to commit to designing inclusive mobilities.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

The EPFIME research data, as well as our specific experience in supporting higher education institutions, allowed us to create an [inclusive mobility framework](#), suggesting a comprehensive overview of objectives and action points that HEIs should undertake in terms of mobility strategies, awareness and cooperation, information provision and communication, grants and application procedures, and support services. For example, HEIs can start working on making their internationalisation strategy more inclusive by involving their leadership early in the process, having a diverse student body in the discussions, and by starting an institution-wide dialogue inclusive of all departments and faculties. It also elaborates on the necessity to provide a variety of mobility programmes to suit different needs and aspirations of a diverse student body (short term mobilities, virtual exchanges, joint study programmes at different levels, summer and winter schools, etc.), and the necessity to provide a concise overview of information about mobility opportunities and support for students including the additional information for disadvantaged



students from onset. The accompanying *[inclusive mobility guidelines to make mobility programmes more inclusive for students with disabilities for HEIs](#)* address the same structures and themes as the framework, but provide very practical tips, tricks and advice to implement the inclusive mobility framework and design inclusive mobilities: how to promote mobility opportunities towards each and every student through a variety of accessible and inclusive formats, how to create inclusive and accessible events or design inclusive communication campaigns to promote mobility and study abroad, and on how to ensure the necessary resources, structures and corporations are in place to ensure qualitative support pre, during and after mobility. The guidelines also elaborate on how the various stakeholders can work together to implement a sustainable strategy at the institutional level, as it is crucial to take a step-by-step and an institution-wide approach. From daily practice, we know that this is one of the biggest challenges for educational institutions.

HOW TO START THE INSTITUTION-WIDE DIALOGUE?

A valuable way for institutions to start this endeavour is for staff of International Offices and the Disability/Inclusion Offices to reflect on the current and desired approach each from their own perspective. The *[self-assessment tools](#)* can support each stakeholder to check their current practice against the inclusive mobility framework and advise on action points for improvement on the same themes. After completion, the international and inclusion officers can then reflect on the differences and similarities in how they each responded, discuss their understanding of the inclusive mobility framework from their position, and seek agreement on the strengths and weaknesses of the current institutional policy and practices concerning inclusive mobility. These initial discussions can act as a platform for future collaborations on inclusive mobility by key stakeholders across the university, and provide a starting point to collectively plan the wider institutional dialogue on inclusive mobility with students, departments and faculties to eventually create a joint action plan. This self-assessment practice can be integrated as routine to illustrate how and if conceptualisations and efforts/actions have changed over time.

All the tools are available on the *[inclusive mobility framework website](#)*.

Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights is a new “ACA Think Pieces” series launched in March 2021. Each contribution in this series will explore the multi-faceted nature of inclusion from a different international education perspective, including, for example: concrete advice regarding developing strategic inclusion plans for inclusive higher education mobility, how to measure progress on inclusion-related goals, practical examples of data collection to enhance diversity, synergies of excellent inclusion practices from the Erasmus+ youth sector relevant for higher education, etc. Articles will be authored by expert colleagues in internationalisation of higher education and inclusion, and will be published electronically on ACA’s website towards the end of each month from March until the end of 2021.