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Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

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Building trust with underrepresented student groups

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The internationalisation strategies and mobility exchanges are left with many COVID-19-impacted questions about the close and distant futures of international higher education – both in Europe and around the globe. While hoping to fully return back to life-changing international study experiences, undeniably, the pending issues are felt the strongest by students, and most of all by those who come from an underrepresented group as it is much harder for them to make any tentative planning and find usually not widely available support.

Overall, together with my ex-colleague student representatives, we would very often argue that the needs of underrepresented students are not usually addressed and rather often remain a deprioritised aspect of international mobilities. This was a commonly seen pre-covid reality and I would argue it hasn't changed much yet in practice.

The findings from the Bologna with Students Eyes 2020[1] conducted by the European Students' Union before the outbreak of COVID-19 indicate that *"Mobility remains a privilege for students that enjoy the necessary financial support from other sources, leaving prospective mobile students from lower socio-economic backgrounds behind. Εfinancial difficulties are the number one consideration for students who would like to undergo a learning mobility period but ultimately decide against it."* This is not a new phenomenon, of course, and, more and more, the issue is being addressed in policy documents and national strategies. For instance, the National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020–2030[t] of Austria mentions that "As well as better advice on support options, these groups [underrepresented groups] will also require more generous funding." Nonetheless, we all know well that funding issues are never easy to solve. Independent from how much students (and others) call for additional funding for underrepresented groups, increasing funds is rather a long-term process conditioned with various funding schemes, procedures, budgeting arrangements, political will, etc. It is certainly expected that all the different stakeholders, including university leadership and those from international offices working closely on mobility issues, would work towards allocating additional funds to enhance the participation of underrepresented groups in international mobilities. And in the meantime, what are the other non-financial obstacles preventing underrepresented students from going on international mobility? What can be done to support them in their potential aspirations for an international study experience?

[1] https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/0037-Bologna-Publication-2021-WEB3.pdf, page 60. Accessed on 22/08/21

[2] http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Austria_Mobility_and_Internationalization_Strategy_2020.pdf, page 13. Accessed on 23/08/21

Usually, the student community of a university is composed of quite dissimilar groups. Some come from distant underprivileged regions of a country, some have caring responsibilities for their families, the others don't have a family member with a higher education background, and/or have a disability, and/or face religious/gender/race discrimination out of the cultural norms of a certain country. We can think of other aspects that make a student community diverse in its needs, but the most important is to acknowledge the needs that exist and use them to determine the different barriers these student groups might face while thinking of international mobility. I very well remember that as a European students' representative I have been often approached by university staff who were frustrated and disappointed by a low enthusiasm from students, let alone from underrepresented groups, to be involved in Erasmus+ short-term mobility. It became clear to me that often within a university there is no detailed understanding of what some distinctive needs of different student groups are and how personalised should be the approach of addressing them. Therefore, an important step here will be to identify students' needs, map them out and develop targeted measures for engaging these student groups.

Various sociological approaches are developed for identifying groups of people with certain backgrounds, current conditions, etc. It is crucial that universities invest in having staff members skilled in the field of sociology to carefully handle these steps. Furthermore, it is essential that finding the different needs among student groups does not lead into segregations within the student community. This shall be addressed with high sensitivity and engage underrepresented students without making them feel underprivileged yet again. Internal university procedures will be one part of ensuring that underrepresented students are not separated from the rest. Another part is, I think, involving various students groups in initiatives that aim to show solidarity and empowerment for students with specific needs.

Being a student representative in Armenia back in 2015/16, together with some other fellow students we developed a project around the idea of using the experience of a few already mobile students from underrepresented backgrounds to encourage and support those who were less inclined to go on mobility. We conducted focus-group semi-structured interviews with students who recently came back from short-term mobility for unpacking all their experiences and hardships – from the moment of thinking and making a decision to apply, travelling and settling in a new university up to relocating back from abroad. We analysed all the main barriers faced, we identified the steps where more support and encouragement were needed. We also identified what students would need to learn in order to feel more confident to go on mobility.

First and foremost, it was about students feeling trust towards the person from the international office communicating with them. The relationship was desired to be more like with a mentor, rather than with a university staff member. Students often expected to have someone who could understand their needs in every detail, reassure them about the support available on every step and guide them in the process. Next, we found that hearing a testimony from a fellow student recently back from mobility can be very powerful to spark an interest in international mobility. The testimony, however, should not be only about how everything was perfect in the host country, but it should involve honest feedback on what worked and what did not, how difficult some steps were and how were they overcome. Tips on living with a limited budget, getting along with the locals, understanding the culture and the religion, comparisons of home and host university study methods, finding support communities, managing the stress, taking care of mental and physical health, coming back and having their experience recognised with no issues – all these and many more are topics on which successfully returned students have a lot to share and encourage their fellow students.

Following the focus group interviews, our next step was supposed to be arranging discussions with potential students and providing them opportunities to chat with recently returned students in small groups or one-on-one. The universities from where we interviewed students were unwilling to support us in launching such gatherings, so we had to drop the project. It was frustrating but a great learning for me. I would certainly recommend for university leaders and international office members to be open for cooperation with students and student representatives while working on the inclusion of students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Another way of involving students from underrepresented backgrounds is developing more flexible timeframes for mobilities. It is not only the finances but, for example, the caring responsibilities or work obligations that prevent many students from going on an international exchange that takes several months. Shorter mobility windows need to be developed in order to make the international experiences really accessible for these groups of students too.

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The aspects to consider are many, as in the end, there are so many different backgrounds and needs the student groups come with. It is not only about increasing the funding; rather more often it is about having knowledgeable staff members who can analyze the student population and understand their needs; it is about finding the skilled and compassionate people for the international offices who will be motivated to help underrepresented students meet challenges and it is about creating open connections between different groups of students. If universities embrace the student diversity, unpack the details about it and engage in cooperation with students, many possible solutions can be created. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and, regardless of the struggles, universities can always find a way to secure underrepresented students with fair access to and support for having a life-changing international experience.

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.