



InclusiPHE
Inclusive Engagement of Non-Traditional
Students in Professional Higher Education

Recommendations for inclusive students' engagement in PHE

Policy Paper



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Abbreviations

EHEA	European Higher Education Area
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer, Intersexual and Asexual
NTS	Non-traditional students
PHE	Professional Higher Education
PHEIs	Professional Higher Education Institutions

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1 Introduction

Due to their rather strong practical orientation, Professional Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are attracting a large number of new student groups, the so-called non-traditional students (NTS). To be truly inclusive, such institutions must reflect this diversity of students and adapt structurally and culturally to their needs. Therefore, PHEIs particularly mirror the diversity of our societies in line with the "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA", which considers the need for ensuring a representation of a "heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries".

The main mission of the InclusiPHE project is to improve policies, mechanisms, culture and practices at PHE institutions for inclusive engagement of NTS, pursuing the vision that an inclusive environment in PHEIs is linked to a full engagement of all students in every aspect of Teaching and Learning, institutional decision-making, management and participation in student life in the wider sense. This policy paper aims to address recommendations for fostering inclusive student engagement in PHE based on the lessons learned through the project. These recommendations will provide PHE institutions with an in-depth knowledge of the needs and capacities of their diverse student body and suggest strategies for improving the academic environments for all students and for optimally supporting the (formal and informal) students' engagement.

The report compiles descriptions of the main concepts and findings of the project, in the next chapter, as well as a set of recommendations for inclusive student engagement specifically aimed at the PHE sector in chapter 3.

2 Needs and challenges

2.1 Concepts

The term **non-traditional student**¹ is broadly used in the context of HE. According to sources included in our report *Stronger Together Towards inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students in Professional Higher Education Needs assessment for students' engagement non-traditional students in PHE*, NTS may be associated with different diversity characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, skin colour, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, religion, language, race, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. The 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimensions of Higher Education in the

¹ This term is used throughout the project to encompass different categories of students that are often used interchangeable but have their specific characteristics (as outlined later in the report).

EHEA' report refers to a broad classification of student groups that can be applied to better understand the concept of NTS. There are three groups of NTS:

1. **Underrepresented students** are described as “underrepresented about certain characteristics (e.g. gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socio-economic background, ethnic minorities) if its share among the students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population”². Students often have combinations of several of these characteristics and the classification as underrepresented can also depend on the context and levels of HE.
2. **Disadvantaged students** face “specific challenges compared to their peers in HE, which can take many forms (e.g. impairment, low family income, 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)”³. The temporal dimension must be considered as disadvantages can be partly permanent and partly appear and disappear. A disadvantaged student can but does not necessarily have to be an underrepresented student as well.
3. **Vulnerable students**, as well as disadvantaged students, face specific challenges and require a precise need for protection. This is the case for students with a risk for discrimination, who suffer from an illness or impairment or whose residence permit depends on the success of their studies. This group are not always able to ensure their well-being and needs additional support and are therefore categorised as vulnerable students⁴.

NTS thus represent a very large heterogeneous group and are constantly in mutation. However, under the project context, a non-traditional student is every student who experiences a sense of exclusion from the student and institutional community and/or lacks the opportunity to be fully engaged during their studies.

Regarding **student engagement**⁵, the project research has shown that it can take several forms and dimensions, nevertheless, the focus in this context is primarily on student-led organisations as political actors and co-creation partners in the design processes within the HE structures. A distinction can be made between different types of student-led organisations depending on the content:

- Education/programme-related organisations: HEIs can have a students’ union or council that represents students in all issues related to their student experience and study programmes can have student-led organisations, which organise multiple social,

² EHEA (Ed.). Rome Ministerial Communiqué: EHEA Rome 2020. p. 9. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

³ EHEA (Ed.). Rome Ministerial Communiqué: EHEA Rome 2020. p. 9. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

⁴ EHEA (Ed.). Rome Ministerial Communiqué: EHEA Rome 2020. p. 9. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

⁵ The project encompasses all forms of student engagement, for example, including student organisations, involvement of students in Quality Assurance activities as part of their course activities. Nevertheless, student organisations are recognised as having a key role in encouraging and facilitating student engagement.

political, cultural and sports activities to bring students together inside and outside the study environment.

- Target audience-related or hobby-related organisations: A group of students, connected by their hobby or target audience, can organise open activities (film or book club, LGBTQIA+ student group, international student group, football club, etc.) (e.g. University College Leuven-Limburg).

In the online tool for PHEIs,⁶ the project consortium included five categories – governance and management, quality assurance processes, well-being and participation processes, teaching and learning strategies and access strategies – which can guide and support the assessment of NTS engagement. Additionally, the three categories included in the online tool for student unions⁷ – governance and management, well-being and participation, and accessibility and inclusion – complement this assessment of student engagement in the different structures.

2.2 Main findings

As a result of the research conducted in InclusiPHE, evidence shows the main challenges and barriers for NTS concerning student engagement, as follows:

- Time: Finance one's studies (money vs. time); fear of committing to a long-term engagement – international mobility, internships; fear of the workload - not compatible with study workload.
- Visibility: lack of presence of results/possibility for change; lack of information about tasks and participation opportunities.
- Identification: does not relate to one's challenges, everyday life, or identity; representation of students is stereotyped, e.g., PR materials, also in course materials; fear of not having the right skills, insecurities.
- Image: not interested in political games; selection and election process for specific roles; associate student organisations with heavy drinking culture.
- Accessibility: language barriers, mobility barriers.⁸

3 Recommendations

The consortium has advanced some potentials and needs analysis earlier in the project, which is also considered in the following subchapters. Based on lessons learned through the project,

⁶ https://inclusiphe.eu/assesst_fpage/

⁷ https://inclusiphe.eu/assesst_fpage/

⁸ To learn more on the methodology behind the main challenges and barriers for non-traditional students concerning student engagement, please consult "Stronger Together Towards inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students in Professional Higher Education Needs assessment for students' engagement of non-traditional students in PHE". <https://inclusiphe.eu/mapping-report/>

the following recommendations for inclusive student engagement are specifically aimed at the PHE sector with strategies for improving PHEI environments that can best support students' engagement in formal and informal students' engagement processes. The recommendations are divided by levels, being: institutional and local, national and European level.

3.1 Institutional and local level

Support system

To enhance the participation of NTS, it's imperative to implement a comprehensive approach that effectively assists those confronting unique challenges throughout their studies. This entails establishing a robust support system that recognises and caters to the diverse needs of students, encompassing not only financial assistance but also counselling services (e.g. specific advice and information on grants, scholarships, job offers training courses, etc.). These support resources should be easily accessible and prominently visible on campus, with PHEI bearing the responsibility for ensuring universal access. Moreover, facilitating student involvement in mentoring programmes (including when welcoming new students) can play an essential role in destigmatising NTS and identifying and addressing issues and obstacles they may encounter during their educational pursuits.

It is crucial to apply principles of universal design where physical spaces, transport, communication, information and communication technologies, virtual spaces and other services are available to NTS under the same conditions as the rest of the student community.

Different participation opportunities

To ensure that the study experience for each person is as inclusive as possible, it is of utmost importance that there are different avenues for student engagement, including those provided through student unions. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many normally in-person meetings and activities were moved to online platforms, and some of the solutions found to adapt to the pandemic are solutions that hold also relevance for the present and the future. This does not imply a complete shift to remotely organised engagement, but rather that for a truly inclusive approach taking stock of both the physical and digital sphere is advisable.

Additionally, some students are indeed interested in participation but face time constraints. To include those students in the activities, it is essential to include tasks and initiatives that are shorter in duration and thematically centred, rather than only creating avenues that necessitate mid- to long-term commitment. Participation in activities promoted by student unions must be supported by the HEIs and, in certain cases, developed in partnership.

Contact points between student-led organisations and non-traditional students

One of the main tasks of student-led organisations is to act as a social hub for incoming students, especially newcomers. In particular, events organised by student-led organisations serve as excellent opportunities for students to meet peers both from within and outside the higher education institution and establish their network. To ensure that the events reach all students, including those considered non-traditional, it is crucial to broaden the scope of the events and activities and to strengthen contacts between student-led organisations and NTS. Accordingly, universities and student unions should work together to ensure that all students are aware of the diverse activities offered by different stakeholders.

Training teachers and awareness raising on different student needs

The initial and professional training of both teachers and administrative staff needs to include training on the social dimension in HE and on the needs of NTS as the primary and most important point of contact within the institutions. Therefore it is crucial that they learn and become aware of the needs of the students concerning a wide range of differing needs that occur within and beyond their studies. Given that situations and needs can be quite complex, not least due to intersectional considerations, it is of utmost importance that educational staff as well as administrative staff are aware of and also understand the needs of NTS in particular. In this way, they can also genuinely welcome everyone into the classroom under an institutional culture that supports these engagement activities.

Compensating students and including students' engagement in curricula

Recognising the invaluable importance of student engagement, institutions should enhance accessibility through different means. Integrating student engagement no matter whether it occurs within or beyond the higher educational sphere into the curriculum or offering credits is an important way to allow students to find the time for these kinds of activities. In addition, monetary allowances are an important feature to increase the possibility for otherwise working students to participate. Such measures would not only generate greater enthusiasm for these activities but also ensure their continuity. Students wouldn't have to temporarily set aside their studies while actively engaging in student organisations or higher education institutions' democratic structures, which, in turn, could expedite the graduation process.

In a nutshell, PHEIs need to take various measures. These include, for example, institutional measures such as comprehensive student counselling or the establishment of a childcare centre, but also measures at the national or international level.

Visibility of Diversity

To avoid the stigmatisation and marginalisation of NTS and to promote diversity within HE, students must be also represented visually in e.g. marketing and promotional materials. It is also important that student organisations genuinely represent all students because representation matters.

There needs to be guidance, training and support both in terms of gaining the practical knowledge and skills required as well as encouragement, boosts to self-confidence, 'role models, etc.

There needs to be sufficient means to take part in student engagement, (e.g. time besides studies and other obligations like care for children or relatives), and money to support this (i.e. instead of paid work).

3.2 National level

Recognition of student diversity and the need for support

Among other student support, the HE policies in the countries should focus on financial student support, regulations around student engagement, and minimum requirements for teaching and administrative staff to promote student engagement. Therefore, national-level policies in HE must consider the different categories and backgrounds of students to facilitate their engagement at the institutional level. Moreover, these policies should include certain minimum standards for educational staff to foster student engagement.

3.3 European level

Fostering networks between all levels of student organisations

Student engagement is taking place at several levels, be it the local, regional, national, European or international levels. Usually, most students, including NTS, are more often in contact with student organisations at the local level. However, contact with the higher levels must be strengthened and maintained to strengthen both feedback between student representatives on the different levels and NTS as well as to enhance the engagement of NTS on all levels of student engagement. The various European associations representing students must promote such synergies and make a real impact at the institutional and national levels towards a more engaged and inclusive student community.

Guidelines for Engagement of non-traditional students

The EHEA structures and other European-level policymakers must facilitate the engagement of NTS, by implementing policies and guidelines to facilitate a more harmonised and systematic way of engaging NTS across Europe. These guidelines should be worked out in a common effort with all relevant stakeholders.

References

EHEA (Ed.). Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA. *Rome Ministerial Communiqué: EHEA Rome 2020*. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

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About the InclusiPHE Project

For a Professional Higher Education Institution (PHEI) to be truly inclusive, it needs to reflect its diverse range of students. To achieve this, a PHEI should not just consider its study programmes and teaching & learning processes, but also aim for fully inclusive student engagement. Student engagement not only relates to student activism and student involvement in decision-making bodies, but also to the structures and practices of students' organisations themselves.

All of these elements of student engagement do not fully reflect the diverse student community in a PHEI and can be difficult to access for non-traditional students and underrepresented student groups.

The InclusiPHE project intends to contribute to a more inclusive student environment by raising awareness for full student inclusion and providing PHEIs and their students' organisations with concrete ideas, tools and guidance on how to make student engagement fully inclusive.



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