



InclusiPHE

Inclusive Engagement of Non-Traditional
Students in Professional Higher Education

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**

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Abbreviations

| | |
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| EHEA | European Higher Education Area |
| EU | European Union |
| FG | Focus group |
| HEIs | Higher Education Institutions |
| ICT | Information and communication technologies |
| IR | Internal research |
| ISCED | International standard classification of education |
| LGBTQIA+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer, Intersexual and Asexual |
| NCES | National Center for Education Statistics |
| NTS | Non-traditional student |
| PHE | Professional Higher Education |
| PHEI | Professional Higher Education Institution |
| STEM | Science, technology, engineering and mathematics |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |

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1 Management Summary

Nothing less than a complete shift in the way universities see their role in society will be enough. Universities need to shift their mission from educating the few to educating all. Today, more than ever, we are in urgent need for universities to lead the way in educating everyone but especially the most vulnerable people in their communities and around the world. (Jalbout 2019, p. 1)

Higher Education Institutions in Europe are experiencing a steady growth of an increasingly diverse student body. Especially the Professional Higher Education (PHE) Institutions, with their rather strong practical orientation, are attracting a large number of new student groups, the so-called non-traditional students (NTS). In order to embrace this increasing diversity, higher education institutions need to adapt structurally and culturally to the needs of these students and to enable inclusion in the everyday study experience. One way of doing this is in partnership with the existing student quality assurance and representation structures within the universities, the student organisations. But even here, non-traditional students are not sufficiently represented to put their needs on the agenda.

The InclusiPHE project addresses this issue and tries to find ways of supporting non-traditional students in terms of student engagement and to break down structural and cultural barriers in order to create a more inclusive higher education environment inside and outside the classroom.

Before guidelines or recommendations for action can be designed, the barriers and problems need to be closely examined and analysed in order to derive the needs of the NTS. The aim of this first research phase will be to

- Identify the different types of non-traditional students
- Identify the different dimensions and levels of student engagement in PHE
- Identify the challenges and barriers for student engagement in PHE

- Identify the best practices for inclusive student engagement in PHE
- Identify the different perspectives on inclusive student engagement
- Identify ideas for inclusive engagement in broader society

An iterative multi-approach research design was set up, aiming at taking advantage of the multiple institutions involved in the InclusiPHE project and to use their respective networks and resources in order to gather qualitative information. An internal research was conducted within the PHEs and partner organisations. Based on the results, four PHE-internal and one international focus group with a total of 34 experts discussed the identified topics in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers for inclusive student engagement in PHEIs.

The non-traditional student

The term non-traditional student is context-dependent, can be permanent but also temporary or episodic and cannot always be traced back to exactly one diversity feature. In this report, NTS are identified as belonging to at least one of three groups: underrepresented students, disadvantaged students or vulnerable students. Within PHE institutions, the following diversity characteristics were identified by the partners as being associated with non-traditional students: Impairments, Migration background, Mature students, Gender imbalance, Gender identity, expression and sexual orientation, Socio-economic background of the parental home, Caretaking responsibilities, International background, Alternative education path, Re-entering studies.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has several forms and dimensions and is often discussed in the context of higher education in connection with teaching & learning. Within the InclusiPHE project, the focus is primarily on student-led organisations as political actors and co-creation partners in the design processes of higher education structures. Student engagement can be expressed at different levels such as course level, faculty level or international level. The focus can be educational and programme- as well as target group-oriented.

Problems and Challenges

Even though non-traditional students are a very large heterogeneous group, they report similar problems and barriers in terms of student engagement. Five problem areas could be identified and analysed more precisely.

- time and finance problems
- visibility problems of student engagement results and opportunities
- identification problems with the work and goals of student-led organisations
- image problems of student-led organisations
- accessibility problems of student-led organisations

Needs and Potentials

Based on the problems and challenges, different potentials and needs could be derived to make student engagement but also higher education institutions in general more inclusive. These are at different levels and require structural or cultural adaptations by institutions or student-led organisations themselves. Possible identified potentials are:

- Offering different participation opportunities
- Increasing the visibility of diversity

- Strengthening support systems for NTS
- Increasing points of contact between student-led organisations and NTS
- Strengthening networks between different levels of student-led organisations
- Professionalising, informing and sensitising the teaching staff to the needs of NTS
- Involving non-traditional students in the development of guidelines and policies
- Rewarding student engagement financially or in form of credit points

Conclusion

The InclusiPHE project aims at making Professional Higher Education more inclusive and student engagement more open to all students. In a first step, a broad research has been conducted in order to better understand the characteristics of non-traditional students and the barriers and challenges they face in higher education. Some potentials and good practices have already been identified - and the next InclusiPHE steps will be to address them. For this purpose, the InclusiPHE consortium will set up Strategies and Guidelines for Inclusive Student Engagement in PHE institutions and Students' Organisations and develop an online toolkit and training resources for Inclusive Student Engagement.

Altogether, the conducted research has revealed that the term non-traditional student is very broad, but the issues related to student engagement are similar for most non-traditional students. So far, student engagement within student-led organisations has been insufficiently addressed in relation to inclusion. The InclusiPHE project tries to close this gap and to give practical recommendations for action. In order to achieve these goals, both the student-led organisations and the PHE institutions need to identify, reflect and reduce their structural and cultural barriers. This process will be challenging, but it is essential for a more inclusive higher education.

2 Introduction

The world is changing, and so is higher education. The challenges of tomorrow cannot solely be resolved with today's knowledge but by equipping all students with the necessary skills for doing so. However, this ambitious undertaking is not an obvious one. It needs students to engage with their institutions beyond classes and lectures, to become a full part of their higher education institutions. However, in order for students to do so, they must feel like their institution is a place for all of them - welcome - and for this, all parts of the study journey must reflect the diversity of the student body. However, many students face specific challenges and barriers for becoming an integral part of the institution. In order to address these barriers, we must understand them and work towards representing all students on different levels. All students must feel welcome in student engagement and representation in order to reflect barriers and challenges for making higher education institutions adapt and change.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are becoming more diverse with a new and more heterogeneous student body "in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life-situation, motivation to study, current and future occupational profiles". This is related to an ongoing process of expanding higher education, of opening access and of new labour market requirements asking for highly qualified graduates (Schuetze et al. 2002, p. 311 f.), asking for new strategies in order to do justice to the different facets of cultural and social background, the individual educational and experiential background and the living circumstances of the students (Nibuhr et al. 2012, p. 4).

This also holds true for Professional Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) which the InclusiPHE project will focus on - they typically attract a more diverse range of students with a higher proportion of non-traditional students compared to more classical universities. There tend to be more adult students, lifelong learners, parent students, students from a migrant background, students with an impairment, etc. At the same time, PHE curricula have specific characteristics that influence student engagement which is often overlooked in European and national higher education policy discussions, such as shorter times spent in the institution due to many students studying at shorter courses and considerable time spent on practical placements outside the institution.

For a Professional Higher Education Institution 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 and 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. This report is the first step and the basis for addressing the related challenges in making Professional Higher Education more inclusive. It sets out to identify and understand the barriers and challenges that non-traditional students are facing when it comes to inclusive student engagement in Professional Higher Education.

Info Box: The InclusiPHE Project

On 25 May 2018, European Ministers of higher education adopted the Paris Communiqué in which they reiterated their commitment to the goals and policies of the European Higher Education Area, whilst also acknowledging that “further effort is required to strengthen the social dimension of higher education”, since “the student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations” and that there is a need to “improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups.”

The InclusiPHE project connects the social dimension of HE with another fundamental pillar of the EHEA - students' engagement - and has as main objective to contribute to creating a more inclusive environment at PHEIs, by creating sets of interventions aimed at increasing non-traditional students' engagement in the life of their academic institution. To respond to the needs and challenges of wider society students need to obtain key competences for active citizenship. These competences can be developed through students' engagement to University governance and participation in decision making at various levels, inclusive strategies by student-led organizations, inclusive curricula, participative working methods and partnerships between PHE providers, local communities and civil society organisations. Also to maximise the retention and success of non-traditional students, an inclusive learning environment is central and research has demonstrated that student retention and success is improved through effective student engagement and sense of belonging.

InclusiPHE will explore the complex engagement of different students in the life of their institutions. The project aims to improve policies, mechanisms and practices for inclusive engagement of all students regardless of their background and circumstances - to engage students in all aspects of teaching & learning journey, quality assurance & institutional decision making, within the life of the institution and student life in the wider sense, and also enabling them to fully embrace the democratic values of Higher Education (HE) in their interactions with wider society.

The InclusiPHE consortium consists of 8 members and is led by Mondragon University (Spain). Other partners are the European Students' Union (Belgium), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – EURASHE (Belgium), the Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia), Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (Malta), Knowledge Innovation Centre (Malta), Duale Hochschule Baden-Wuerttemberg (Germany), University College Leuven-Limburg (Belgium).

2.1 The report

This report is the first step and the basis for addressing the related challenges in making Professional Higher Education more inclusive. It is the result of an iterative and multi-approach research conducted in the first half of the year 2021 and providing the basis for the next steps of the InclusiPHE project. The objectives of the research undertaken are summarized in the following figure.

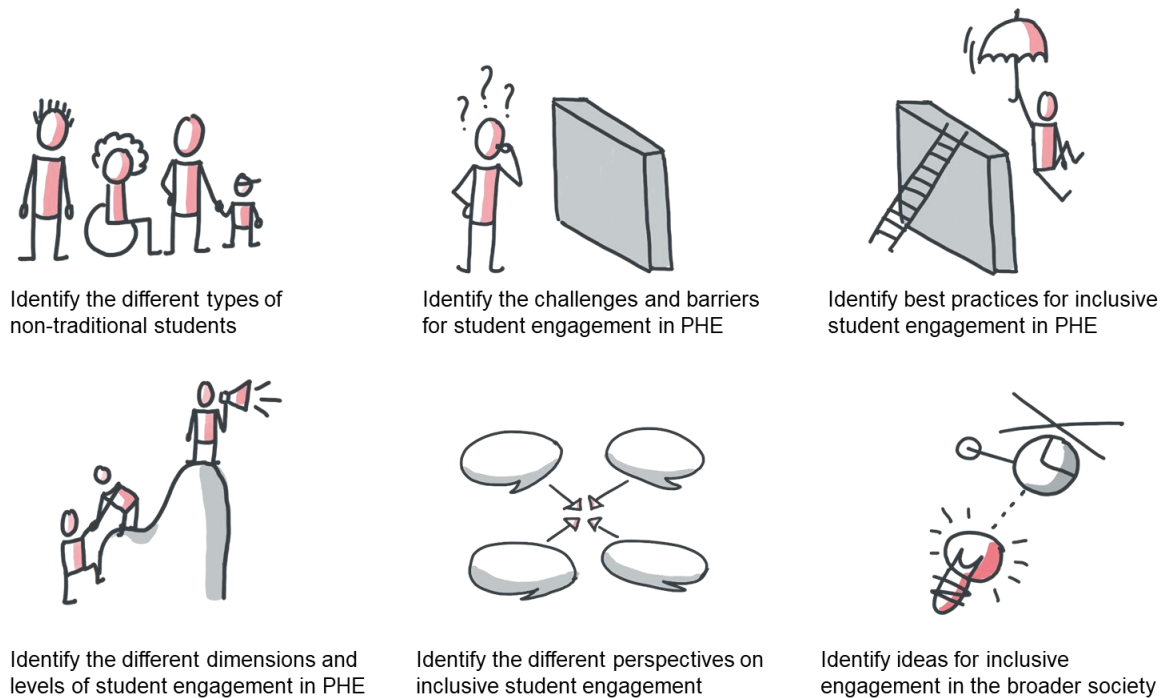


Fig. 1 Objectives of the InclusiPHE research report

2.2 InclusiPHE and related EU projects

The InclusiPHE initiative is the first one to consider inclusive student engagement barriers and challenges specifically for non-traditional students in Professional Higher Education. However, it builds on results of other initiatives and is complementary to them in contributing to a more inclusive, equal and social future higher education. Involved partners have already been involved in other current and previous projects with a focus on students' engagement, the social dimension of HE and/or inclusion of disadvantaged students and will add to the expertise and knowledge base that InclusiPHE builds on, in particular:

- IDEAS (Identifying Effective Approaches to Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education), aimed to increase equitable access, participation & completion of Higher Education across Europe
- ESSA (European Students Sustainability Auditing), aimed at improving levels of student satisfaction by allowing them to engage with real-world issues in the sphere of social responsibility
- IBelong (Towards a sense of belonging in an inclusive learning environment), which uses a novel approach to creating interventions at HEIs that would assist disadvantaged, non-

traditional students feel at home at University, developing their sense of belonging and this increasing retention rates and academic success of non-traditional students.

- NEXUS (Promoting the nexus of migrants through active citizenship), which is looking at the role civic education plays in inclusion of disadvantaged communities with a special focus on newly arrived migrants
- STUPS (Student Participation Without Borders) which aims to strengthen and promote the role of students in the good governance of Higher Education institutions and in student participation to fight inequalities
- BWSE (Bologna with Students' Eyes), starting in 2020, including collection of data through National Unions of Students in Europe, covering all the aspects of the social dimension of HE.

Other initiatives related to the challenges addressed by InclusiPHE:

- ENGAGE Students (Promoting Social Responsibility of Students by Embedding Service Learning into Education Curricula), focusing on social responsibility of higher education institutions at students and teachers level.
- IN-EDU (INclusive communities through Media literacy & Critical Thinking EDUcation), focusing developing good practice in media literacy and critical thinking education via inclusive, non-formal learning programmes which combine training and events at community level
- SIEM (Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility), focusing on making international mobility opportunities more inclusive, enabling students from all backgrounds to study, work or volunteer abroad.
- EPFIME (Inclusive Mobility), focusing on how national authorities and higher education institutions can collaborate more strongly to ensure the quality and the transferability of support services for both incoming and outgoing students with disabilities in exchange programmes.
- STEP (European Student Engagement Project), contributing to the recognition and improvement of students' active participation in Europe.
- MEDUSA (Master to Educate in Diversity and Social Inclusion), aiming at the development of an international online Master in diversity education and social inclusion able to foster positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs.



3 Explanation of terms

3.1 Non-traditional student

With the Bologna Process, the general wish of the EU countries was expressed that “(t)he student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations”¹. There are new groups of diverse students who are increasingly entering higher education institutions (HEIs), also called non-traditional students (NTS).

The term non-traditional student is broadly used in the context of higher education. Hall (1997) provides a definition of diversity which can be applied to non-traditional students where he includes differences in age, ethnicity, gender, skin colour, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, religion, language, race, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. In addition to speaking of non-traditional students, some refer to this type of students as underrepresented groups (Zinciewicz et al. 2004). The definition of a non-traditional student is therefore also context-dependent and can have different connotations depending on the country, institute or field of study. In addition, the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional students are blurred, so a student can be traditional in some aspects and non-traditional in others at the same time (Schuetze et al. 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categorize a student as non-traditional if he or she inherits one of the following seven characteristics: Delays enrolment in college, attends part time, works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled, financial independence, caretaking responsibilities, single parent, no high school diploma (Choy 2002). The problem with the imprecise definitions of non-traditional students is that if they cannot be identified, it is difficult to address their individual challenges and needs.

The ‘Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimensions of Higher Education in the EHEA’ report refers to a broad classification of student groups which can be applied to better understand the concept of non-traditional students. The first group mentioned are the **underrepresented students**. They are described as “underrepresented in relation to 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” (EHEAROME2020 2020, p. 9). Students often have combinations of several of these characteristics and the classification as underrepresented can also depend on the context and levels of higher education. The second group are the **disadvantaged students**, facing “specific challenges compared to their peers in higher education. This 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)” (EHEAROME2020 2020, p. 9). 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. The last group are the **vulnerable students**. As well as the disadvantaged students, they face specific challenges but have in addition a specific 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 own well-being and need additional support and are therefore categorized as vulnerable students (EHEAROME2020 2020, p. 9).

¹ London Communiqué: Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalized world, 18 May 2007

Since the characteristics of non-traditional students are constantly in a state of flux and we are therefore unable to give a precise definition, we refer to this classification when talking about non-traditional students.

In the InclusiPHE project context, every student who does not feel like an integral part of the student and institutional community and/or who, due to their specific circumstances, does not have the opportunity to get involved in student engagement during their studies is a non-traditional student, even if only to a small extent.

3.2 Inclusion

Inclusion can be understood as an organisational approach that values and recognises diversity, rejects stigmatisation of groups and cares for the rights and inclusion of vulnerable groups (Tienda 2013, p. 467). Diversity provides the basis for inclusion and access to education for different groups. However, diversity alone does not automatically lead to the inclusion of these groups in everyday university life (Tienda 2013, p. 470).

The UNESCO Commission states here that inclusive education means that all people can participate in quality education and develop their full potential. In this interpretation inclusion is on the one hand a cultural but also a systemic issue. In order to realise inclusive education and equal opportunities in education, a systemic change must take place. As different as people are, so are their ways of learning and educating themselves. In this explanation, the education systems must be able to adapt flexibly to this heterogeneity and not be rigid. It is not the learner who must integrate into an existing system, but the education system must consider and adapt to the needs of all learners. Thus, the concept of inclusion goes beyond the concept of integration (UNESCO 2020).

To understand the exact meaning of the term inclusion, a distinction should be made with regard to the term exclusion and integration (see Fig. 2). Exclusion denies access to certain groups that are not seen as part of the group or society. Social exclusion refers to the process that pushes people to the margins of society and that denies a person the right to participate fully (Bourdieu 1992). Integration is often mistakenly equated with inclusion and illustrates the effort to include certain groups that were not originally identified as part of society. Integration means equal access within a system but not that the general conditions adapt to the needs of the new members (Hinz 2002). Finally, inclusion aims at the principle of full participation and demands equal access at all levels and systematic as well as cultural adaptations to meet the needs of all (UNESCO 2020).

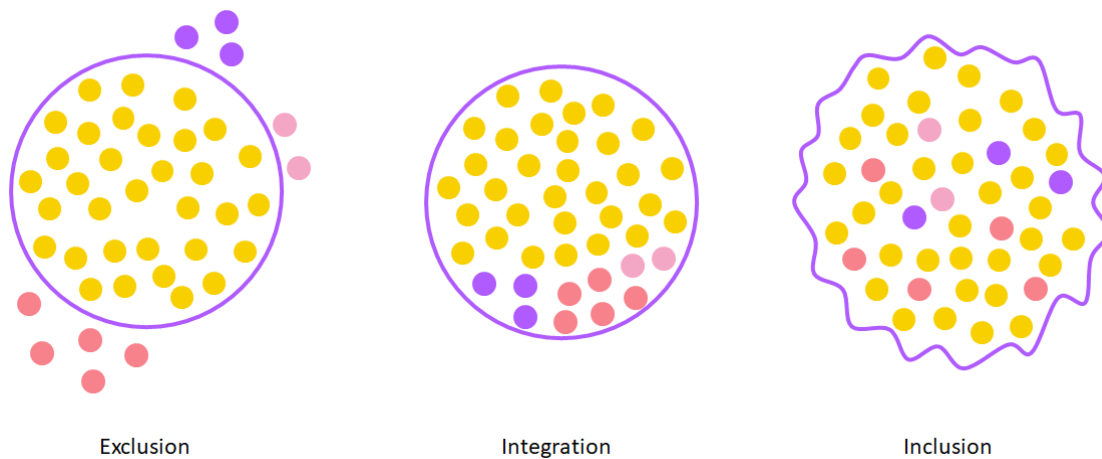


Fig. 2: Graphic illustration of the differences between exclusion, integration and inclusion (own representation cf. Schmoelz et al. 2017)

3.3 Diversity

Current social and economic developments show that a balanced diversity (according to socio-economic and geographic origin, gender, socio-cultural background, mentality, horizon of experience, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc.) can achieve two effects within an organisation, in particular: on the one hand, optimisation, innovative capacity and gain in excellence through the inclusion of different perspectives, and on the other hand, a target group orientation that recognises the relevance of previously excluded groups of people (Nibuhr et al. 2012, p. 16).

Diversity describes the recognition of groups and individual characteristics. The Diversity Wheel (see figure 3) by Corina Nibuhr und Timur Diehn (2012) based on the work of Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe (2003) and Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener (1991) provides a good overview of different diversity characteristics. The characteristics are divided into four dimensions. Firstly, **personality**, which describes the general behaviour of a person and their way of interaction with others. Secondly, the **internal dimension** with characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical abilities or social background. The individual cannot self-select or control these characteristics. Thirdly the **external dimension** includes characteristics such as place of residence, marital status or education; these characteristics are therefore not innate, but rather the results of life events and decisions made (Loden et al. 1991; Gardenswartz et al. 2003). And lastly, the **organisational dimension**, including elements that are dependent on one's positioning in the institution (Gardenswartz et al. 2003).

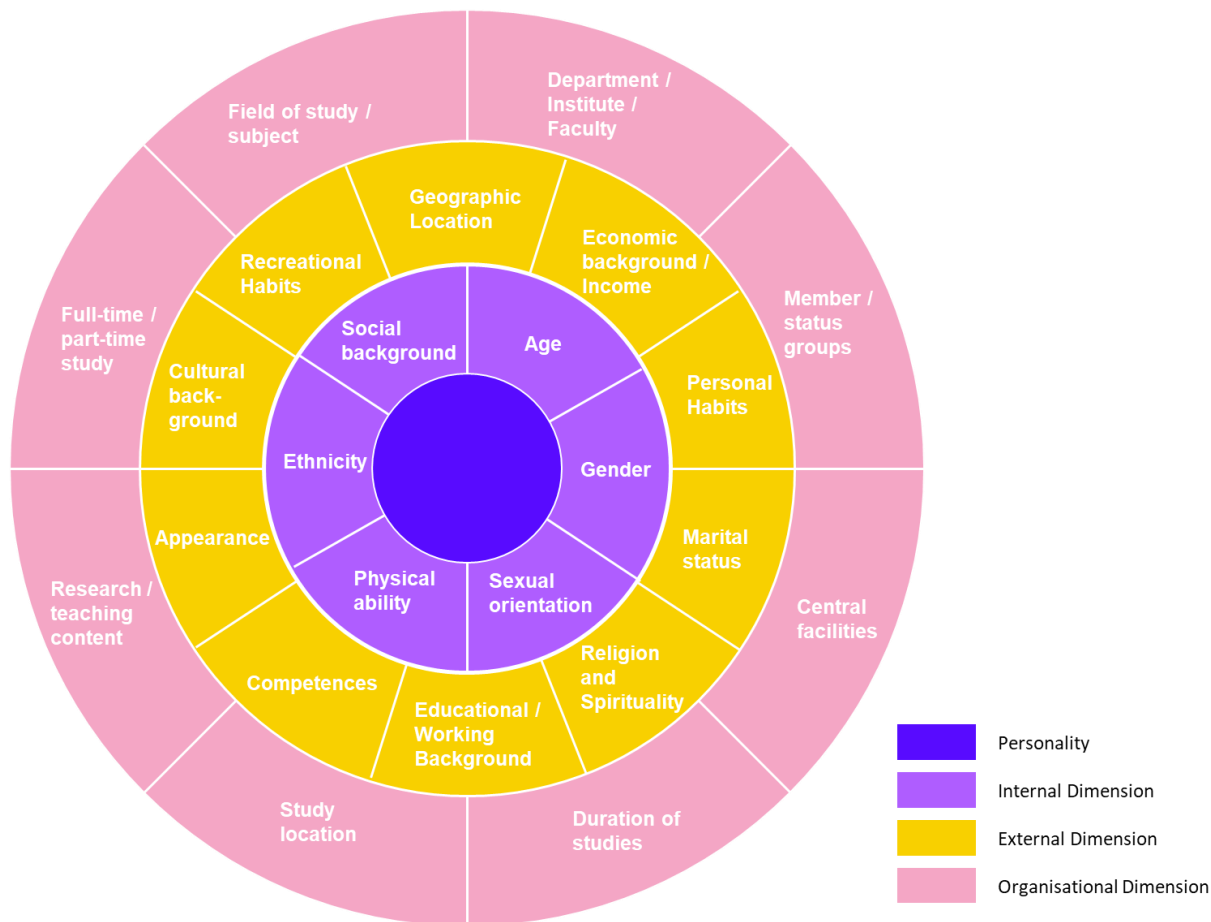


Fig. 3: Diversity Wheel (own representation c.f. Nibuhr et al. 2012, based on Loden et al. 1991; Gardenswartz et al. 2003)

In order for higher education institutions to embrace this change and meet the complex needs of the growing and increasingly diverse student body, both structural and cultural adjustments need to be made. The keyword for facing these changes is diversity management. In this understanding, diversity management is a well-founded socio-political demand for social participation of all individuals and an economic necessity to utilize the diverse potentials available in society. Diversity management is based on certain principles that make diverse participation possible; these are anti-discrimination and equalisation of disadvantages, accessibility, equal opportunities and educational equality, creation of participation and transparency, family orientation and work-life balance, holistic approach, gender mainstreaming, interculturality, recognition and development of potential. When managing diversity, the different diversity characteristics must be considered. Behavioural aspects differ between individuals and do not automatically derive from certain personal characteristics. Certainly, target group-specific measures are necessary in some cases. However, they also carry the risk of assigning students to rigid categories and drawing conclusions about supposed deficits that have no evidence in the individual case (Nibuhr et al. 2012). The InclusiPHE project is thus embedded in a context of diversity management in higher education.

3.4 Student participation

According to Weber et al. (2013), participation means the active involvement of people in all the processes that affect their lives. Participation thus represents a central prerequisite for the functioning of democracy and plays an important role both at the societal macro-level (e.g. in the context of citizens' decisions) and at the individual micro-level (e.g. in the family). At the meso-level of organisations as central bearers of social change, participation is also increasingly being discovered as an important structural principle that ideally favours flat hierarchies and supports the active participation of people in organisational and institutional steering and decision-making processes (Weber et al. 2013, p. 9).

Student participation can be integrated on all three levels and is, especially in most European countries, well developed. In the Higher Education Authority report, the role of students is described as “competent, active and constructive partners”, who are involved in quality review processes within their institutions but also on a national or international level (Higher Education Authority 2016, p. VIII).

Participation has various forms. According to Ditzel & Bengt (2013), we can distinguish four different types:

- **Active participation:** Students are involved in committees and organised structures. Students in this group are strongly intrinsically motivated and socialised as helpful and active people. For them, participation is partly a value in itself. They are visible to the university as persons and thus approachable.
- **Ad hoc participation:** Students are not involved in their everyday lives, but participate in special, attention-grabbing actions such as education strikes, action days or even university events. Students in this group are committed to achieving specific goals. Students in this group tend not to be visible to the university, but are generally accessible to the university's information and communication services.
- **Passive participation:** Students only participate in low-involvement activities and only if this results in a concrete benefit, e.g. in evaluation procedures. Students in this group are not visible, but potentially accessible. It is possible to motivate them extrinsically for participation.
- **No participation:** The priorities of students in this group lie in other areas. For them, completing their studies, earning a living, family or leisure come first. Students in this group are neither visible nor can active participation be expected (Ditzel et al. 2013, p. 179–181).

The closer the participation opportunities and issues are to the reality of studying, the greater the attention students are likely to pay in this regard. Turning points that lead to a greater closeness to the university occur on the side of the committed students through joining the student council or the student-led organisations and on the side of the non-committed students through taking up an auxiliary job, through more intensive contact with fellow students, teachers and through student projects (Ditzel et al. 2013, p. 179–181).

3.5 Student engagement

A diverse student body holds the challenge for PHEIs to create opportunities to include all students in the structural and cultural development and design of the institution and to represent their opinions and needs. This involvement can be strengthened by supporting inclusive access to engagement opportunities to ensure a perspective-rich development and design process between higher education institutions and students (National Student Engagement Programme 2020).

Student Engagement can be described as a process of collaboration between the higher education institute and the students to shape decision-making, structures and cultures in higher education. It is also often expressed in phrases like 'student voice' and 'students as partners' (Finn et al. 2012). Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) state that "[a]ll partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership" (Healey et al, 2014). This suggests that when talking about student engagement and the development and optimisation of processes and structures, students should already be engaged in this process.

Ashwin et al. defines student engagement in terms of what is "formed" by students, distinguishing between "formation of understanding" which refers to the individual engagement of students in lectures to produce learning outcomes, "formation of curricula" which focuses more on changing course content, and "formation of communities" which concentrates on the opportunities for students to build networks e.g. in the form of student-led organisations, to change the institution and its structures in a sustainable way (Ashwin et al. 2015). Consequently, student Engagement cannot be tied to one specific part or dimension of the institution and can be found in curricular and extra-curricular contexts (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017).

The National Student Engagement Programme (2020) defines four domains of student engagement. In the '**Governance and Management**' domain, student engagement is primarily understood as participation in committees in which they influence the development, implementation and evaluation of policies. The second domain is '**Teaching and Learning**' and refers to student engagement of students in their own learning and in the process of enhancing that learning experience. Third, '**Quality Assurance and Enhancement**' means participation in all processes of quality assurance and enhancement. The last domain of student engagement is '**Student representation and organisation**', giving students the opportunity to come together in self-organised groups, to participate in democratic processes, to elect representatives and to proactively start discussions about student-centred change within higher education institutions (National Student Engagement Programme 2020, p. 10). The InclusiPHE project intends to address all domains, focussing on governance and management, quality assurance and enhancement, and especially on student representation and organisation.

Student-led organisations are thematic or political associations of students who come together in groups outside their lectures. Student engagement is hereby linked to participation and means the involvement of students in activities that shape processes within their study environment. Participation within organisations such as PHEIs means that students can express their opinions and get involved for example in university committees (Ditzel et al. 2013).

Student engagement can operate on various levels with different goals. It can be classified in seven levels (see figure 4). At the international level, the European Students' Union (ESU) is an example of an umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries, aiming to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and, in particular, the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO (ESU 2020). These unions or organisations can also be found on a national or regional level, often with a thematic, political or study programme-related agenda. On an institutional level, student-led organisations are given an active role in board discussions, policy making and general changes which affect all students at the institution. On Campus / Faculty level, student engagement includes students from the same campus or faculty who focus mostly on catering, facilities, mobility, etc. Student engagement on the Programme / Department level or the class level often takes place for students who enrol in the same programme, sometimes represented by class representatives, mostly focused on improving their learning experience and solving specific problems in their programme together with their teaching staff. Student engagement on the individual level is about students engaging in their own learning process (Higher Education Authority 2016; UCLL IR 2021). This level scheme shows that student engagement can take place within or outside a student-led organisation.

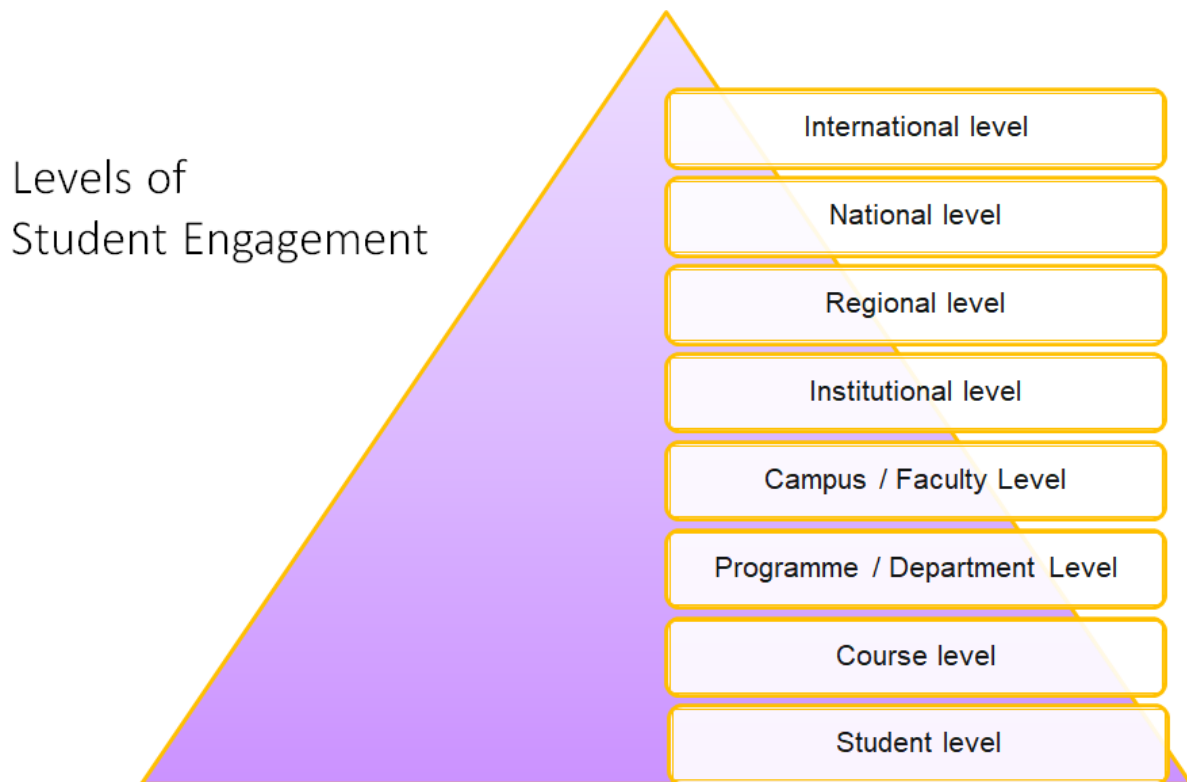
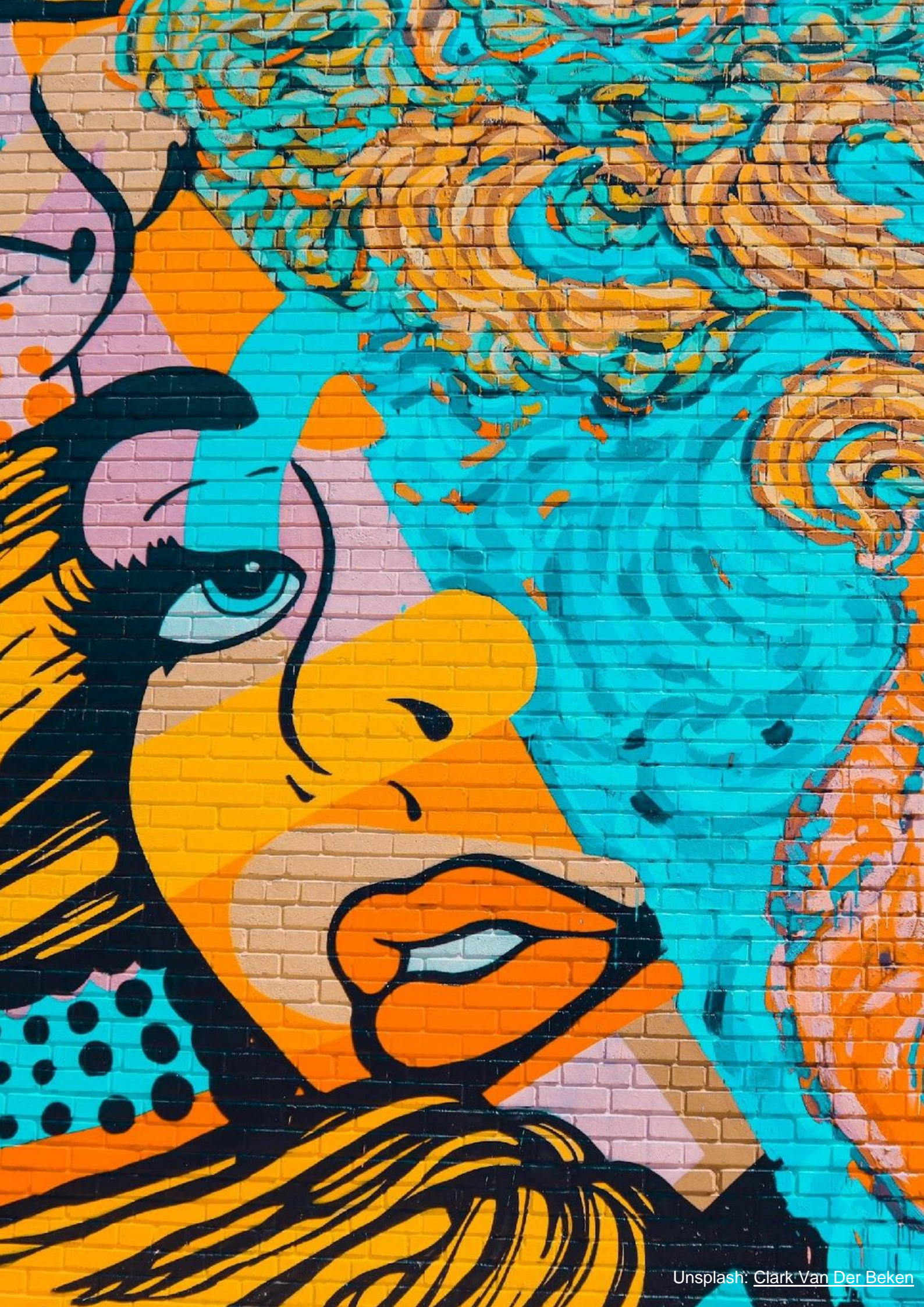


Fig. 4: Levels of student engagement

In terms of content, a distinction can be made between different types of student-led organisations, for example:

- a. **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, political, cultural and sport activities to bring students together inside and outside the study environment.
- b. **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.) (UCLL IR).

Especially through the Bologna Process, student-led organisations have gained importance and contribute to quality assurance within institutions (Higher Education Authority 2016, p. VIII). Student-led organisations not only give participants a sense of thematic belonging, but can also provide a social support network for students and thus strengthen the bond with the institution. Furthermore, as Rosch et al. (2017) explain, student-led organisations give students the opportunity to increase self-awareness and develop leadership qualities, as these organisations often represent different roles and structures that can also be found in the professional working world. Hence, with student-led organisations as a preparation for the professional world, it is even more important for non-traditional students to have the opportunity to become engaged.



4 Design and methodology of the research

For starting the InclusiPHE project in the end of 2020, the project team set out for an iterative multi-approach research design in order to identify different characteristics of non-traditional students as well as barriers and challenges related to their study experience and inclusive student engagement in Professional Higher Education (see fig. 5).

The aim was to take advantage of the multiple institutions involved in the InclusiPHE project and to use their respective networks and resources in order to gather qualitative information.



Internal Research (8 Partner Institutions)



PHE Internal Focus Groups (4 Partner Institutions)



International Focus Group (1 Partner Institution)



Podcast with student representatives

Fig. 5: Overview Research activities

4.1 Internal research

In order to identify the different characteristics of non-traditional students and to expose barriers in relation to the student engagement opportunity, a semi-structured internal research was conducted in written form between 24.02.21 and 29.03.21. Eight institutions from Germany, Croatia, Belgium, Spain and Malta participated in the research process. Four of the eight institutes are PHEIs and two are research institutes with a research focus on higher education. All these countries are members of the EU and the EHEA although country-specific differences are to be expected. Nevertheless, the results should not be regarded as a global standard. The semi-structured internal research was designed based on an internal literature review on PHE, inclusive student engagement and non-traditional students and contained questions on the following topics:

- Dimensions and characteristics of non-traditional students at PHEI.
- Student engagement opportunities at the individual institutes.
- Participation barriers for non-traditional students with a focus on extracurricular activities and student associations.
- Good practices at own institution or from broader society.

The experts drew their answers from internal research, their own assessments and conversations with student support staff and documented the information in forms prepared by the research team.

4.2 Internal focus groups

In addition to the information derived from the qualitative expert surveys, four focus groups were conducted by the InclusiPHE PHEIs in Malta (MCAST), Spain (MU), Belgium (UCLL) and Germany (DHBW). As part of the research project, the opinions of 28 experts, student representatives and non-traditional students were collected and analysed through semi-structured focus groups. Similar to the expert surveys, the online focus groups had the four topic areas: Dimensions and characteristics of non-traditional students, student engagement opportunities, participation barriers and good practices. In order to be able to compare the results more effectively, a semi-structured focus group guideline was provided, which contained a variety of questions on the individual topic areas and was addressing research gaps that had emerged from the first part of the research process. To participate in the focus group, the individuals had to either belong to the group of non-traditional students, be a representative of a student-led organisation or have a professional background as a student-support staff or PHE institutional leader. The aim of this internal focus group was to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers for inclusive student engagement in PHEIs as identified in the internal research. The focus groups were recorded for internal documentation and the results were documented in forms prepared by the research team.

The following table gives an overview of the participants and their positions or areas of experience in the four internal focus groups.

| IP | Position / Area of experience | Country |
|-----------------------|---|---------|
| 1. Focus Group | | |
| 1 | Non-traditional student | Malta |
| 2 | Non-traditional student | Malta |
| 3 | Non-traditional student | Malta |
| 4 | Non-traditional student | Malta |
| 5 | Student Support Coordinator | Malta |
| 6 | Social Worker and Chaplain | Malta |
| 7 | Student Mentor and Part-time Lecturer | Malta |
| 8 | Director Outreach Services and Students' Affairs | Malta |
| 2. Focus Group | | |
| 9 | Student representative | Spain |
| 10 | Non-traditional student | Spain |
| 11 | Academic Coordinator | Spain |
| 12 | Coordinator of University-Business Relations | Spain |
| 13 | Member of the Student Council | Spain |
| 14 | Dean of the School of Engineering | Spain |
| 15 | Non-traditional student | Spain |
| 3. Focus Group | | |
| 16 | Head of Education and Students Affairs | Belgium |
| 17 | Student Support Staff | Belgium |
| 18 | Student representative | Belgium |
| 19 | Non-traditional students | Belgium |
| 20 | Non-traditional students | Belgium |
| 21 | Non-traditional students | Belgium |
| 4. Focus Group | | |
| 22 | Head of Student Counselling and University Communication | Germany |
| 23 | Head of the Psychotherapeutic Student Counselling Centre | Germany |
| 24 | Representative for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses | Germany |
| 25 | Management of the research project on the course of studies | Germany |
| 26 | Researcher in the research project on the course of studies | Germany |
| 27 | Chairman of the General Students' Committee | Germany |
| 28 | Student representative | Germany |

Tab. 1: Overview of focus group participants

4.3 International focus group

Drawing from the European Students' Union/ESU's network, an international focus group was set up with representatives from four national student unions (CREUP, FAGE, ISO, USI, VVS). Beforehand and based on the results of the internal research and the internal focus groups, a digital written survey was conducted, addressing specific research gaps from the previous research steps, complemented by the International Focus Group. The international focus group was recorded for internal documentation and the results were documented in forms prepared by the research team.

| Student Union | Position / Area of experience | Country |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------|
| International Focus Group | | |
| FAGE | International Officer | France |
| USI | Vice-President for the Southern Region | Ireland |
| USI | Vice-President for Academic Affairs | Ireland |
| CREUP | Member of International Affairs Committee | Spain |
| ISO | Board Member | The Netherlands |
| VVS | Anonymous | Belgium |

Tab. 2: International Focus Group ESU Participants

4.4 Podcast interview with student representatives

In addition to an internal focus group, DHBW also conducted an interview with two student representatives of the local student council at DHBW Karlsruhe, one of them being a non-traditional student, studying at DHBW after having completed vocational training. This decision was taken in order to give more space for the student perspective than was possible during the internal focus group due to the large participation of different experts. This podcast interview had a specific focus on the COVID-19 situation for (non-traditional) students and its implications for inclusive student engagement and thus added another layer of perspectives to the research project. It is being edited and released in the podcast series “Studium im Shutdown” that has interviewed students since the COVID-19 shutdown started and thus created an audience and awareness for the student perspective during the COVID-19 shutdown. The messages considered important for the research project were documented in written form.

Podcast interview DHBW Participants

- member of local student council and non-traditional student
- head of local student council

4.5 Analysis of research data

All InclusiPHE project partners have been involved in this iterative multiperspective qualitative research and contributed to a better understanding of the nature and quality of challenges and barriers non-traditional students might be facing while studying at PHEIs and to inclusive student engagement. Due to the subsequent structure of the research process, the research steps could always be built upon the results and information gathered in the former research step, thus qualitatively building a set of contextualized data on inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students in PHEIs. The subsequent steps had been based on the previous ones in order to (1) validate research results from these steps, (2) close research gaps identified in these steps and (3) gain a deeper understanding of issues and challenges identified in these steps. The present report reflects this research process and builds on it by referring to multiple resources from all parts of the research process and from literature on PHE, inclusive student engagement and non-traditional students.

4.6 Limitations

The research undertaken has taken place during the COVID-19 shutdown. All research and coordination activities have taken place digitally, thus influencing the research process. The digital format of, for example, focus groups, could be a barrier for some students to participate and it might be harder to reach non-traditional students. On the other hand, the digital format might make it easier for other stakeholders, e.g. with heavy schedules, to join and hence make it possible to have many different persons participate in the focus groups and the research process.

Concerning the participation of non-traditional students, it has been stated before that their voices should be crucial in the research process by having them participate in focus groups, with the related challenges of reaching them and knowing exactly who they are - this being a research gap itself. One approach has thus been not to invite representatives of all types of NTS (this holding the risk of tokenizing or stigmatizing students and of 'missing' some of them) but to create a diverse focus group participant setup in order to gain a broad range of perspectives on inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students. However, it can be assumed that not all the necessary perspectives have been reflected during the research process.

When doing research on inclusive student engagement, it is crucial to reflect on the research process itself being (non-)inclusive of students and their perspectives. One means of doing so is the evaluation of the conditions for student voice (Higher Education Authority 2016, p. 17), evaluating who is speaking and listening, amongst others. During the whole research process in InclusiPHE, the European Students' Union/ESU has been involved, consisting of students themselves and representing them in close collaboration with PHEIs and research institutions. Students have been involved mostly in sharing their perspectives in the different focus groups and the podcast interview but have been less involved in the research design itself. However, it has been of the research team's utmost concern to value the students' perspective as experts for their own study experience and situation. The decision to release one of the interviews as a podcast episode has also been made for making the student perspective visible in public and to stress its importance for our research process. It is important to value and consider the student input when designing the next steps, measures and tools of the InclusiPHE project.

4.7 Reference overview

The references used in the report to refer to different parts of the research process are as follows:

- Internal Research
 - IR DHBW 2021
 - IR EURASHE 2021
 - IR ESU 2021
 - IR UCLL 2021
 - IR MCAST 2021
 - IR MU 2021
 - IR ESU 2021
- Internal Focus Groups
 - FG DHBW 2021
 - FG UCLL 2021
 - FG MCAST 2021
 - FG MU 2021

- International Focus Group
 - FG ESU CREUP/FAGE/ISO/USI/VVS 2021
 - FG Survey ESU CREUP/FAGE/ISO/USI/VVS 2021
- Podcast with student representatives
 - PC DHBW 2021



5 Results of the research

5.1 Professional Higher Education - institutional and student characteristics

The InclusiPHE project addresses the inclusive engagement of non-traditional students - with a particular focus on higher education institutions in the field of applied sciences and vocational higher education. In higher education, these types of institutions are becoming increasingly important in many European countries and have a growing impact on regional innovation and prosperity. In recent years, for example, more and more students have enrolled at German universities of applied sciences, currently accounting for around 40% of all students in higher education (DAAD 2021), and the research budget of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has increased six-fold since 2005 (BMBF 2020).

5.1.1 Institutional characteristics

As public sector organisations, PHEIs have two main institutional tasks: Education and scientific research - and they fulfil an important regional innovation role. Especially at the regional level, where Professional Higher Education Institutions act as links and crucial connections between regional SMEs, regional organisations and society, they play an increasingly important role in improving European competitiveness and innovation capacity. PHE can be defined as a “form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance” (Camilleri et al. 2014, p. 24), meaning that PHE focuses more strongly on practical experiences and their integration in the study programme than other forms of higher education (ibid., p. 21). With its practical focus, it can play an important role in lifelong learning processes for different target groups.

While professional higher education institutions have introduced considerable heterogeneity into the higher education system in Europe by offering an approach that combines authentic practical experience and study with the aim of enhanced competence development and increased employability, the objectives of higher education are still defined by the Council of Europe's 'four pillars' in higher education i.e. “preparation for sustainable employment, personal development, preparing students for active citizenship, and creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation” (Council of the European Union 2018).

However, PHE has not achieved the same level of recognition in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and, according to Camilleri et al. (2014), around 40% of internal and external stakeholders have a poor understanding of the term. Given the diversity and variance of the education sector, it is considered difficult to analyse PHE, which hinders the recognition of qualifications and impedes the necessary policies to strengthen and promote growth. To address these challenges, the HAPHE (Harmonising Approaches to Professional Higher Education) project was launched by the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) to work with different stakeholders from education, business and society to harmonise the approach to PHE at European level. The aim of the HAPHE project was to improve and ensure the transparency of PHE provision and to strengthen the PHE sector within Europe - stimulating further EURASHE-inspired initiatives such as PHEXCEL (Testing the Feasibility of a Quality Label for Professional Higher Education Excellence), BuildPHE (Building Professional Higher Education Capacity in Europe), PROCSEE (Strengthening Professional Higher

Education in Central and South-Eastern Europe) and RECAPHE (Enhancing Staff Research and Innovation Capacity in Professional Higher Education).

Concerning non-traditional students, one of the key findings of the HAPHE Project is that the “self-understanding of PHE among staff is usually not linked to providing higher education for non-traditional learners” (Camilleri et al. 2014, p. 96). The related recommendation is that “PHE providers should develop measures to make PHE more attractive and accessible to non-traditional groups” (ibid.). The InclusiPHE project sets out to do so.

Even with a shared understanding that PHE focuses more strongly on practical experiences and integrating theory and practice within the study programme, there are still specific institutional, regional and national approaches to it from within the project consortium and the countries or students’ unions that participated in the ESU international focus group.

There are different national approaches to professional higher education delivered by different types of institutions in different types of programmes all over Europe. For example, PHE is delivered in University, Institutes of Technology and Technological University settings in Ireland (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). In Flanders, Higher Vocational Education or ‘Hoger Beroepsonderwijs’ is mostly the responsibility of the Universities of Applied Sciences which offer other types of education as well (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021) – the same applies to the Netherlands. These universities are regarded as more directly connected to jobs on the job market and as more practice-focused, the study programmes usually characterised by a significant portion of internships. Moreover, the PHE programmes are usually regarded to be presented in a more structured way to the student in which there is less focus on independent study in comparison to research universities (FG Survey ESU ISO 2021). In Spain, PHE can be described as a non-university education oriented towards the more practical aspects of the different disciplines, distributed in specific two-year cycles (FG Survey ESU CREUP 2021). In Germany, PHE can be delivered in a dual mode, an example being the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) with its dual model of alternating theory and practice phases for integrating academic studies with workplace training. To sum up, PHE programmes vary when it comes to the delivering institutions and the duration of these programmes but share the characteristics of a more practice-oriented approach than University study programmes.

5.1.2 Student characteristics

The diversity of Europe’s PHE landscape is also reflected in the student population at PHEIs and the students considered as non-traditional students within PHE programmes. In Ireland, for example, Professional Higher Education tends to be particularly delivered in Institutes of Technology which tend to comprise a higher proportion of mature students and students on part-time courses as well as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, the student population varies also according to different study fields: Nursing and Social Care tend to attract a wider range of non-traditional students, particularly mature students, students with caring responsibilities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Other professions, particularly Medicine, tend to attract much lower proportions of non-traditional students and are currently only delivered in Universities (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). PHE students also differ from university students in that they are often students looking for the more practical side of studying who want to see a clear link between their study programme and the job market. For VVS, non-traditional students in PHE programmes could be described as students that are already working, students that come from technical or vocational secondary education, students that want a degree with a strong link to the job market or students that might have had some trouble in a university or a university of Applied Sciences (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021). In Spain, PHE students tend to come from intermediate vocational training rather than having completed the baccalaureate or the university entrance exams, and the age of the population tends

to be a little older than the university population, as many professionals who are already working are enrolling to improve their knowledge and their chances of promotion (FG Survey ESU CREUP 2021). The Eurostudent report underlines that students enrolled in PHE programmes, tend to access via alternative access routes and to not have a higher education background (Hauschildt et al. 2018, p. 106). Research confirms this for DHBW, with students being more focused on a specific educational pathway than in other HEIs (Kramer et al. 2011, p. 470–471) and a higher interest for technical and artisanal topics (ibid., p. 477-479).

From within the InclusiPHE consortium, according to MU, the main characteristics of the non-traditional student population are mainly related to geographical origin and migration, physical or psychological disabilities, socio-economic background, academic background, age or gender identity. Some students may be related to more than one of these characteristics (IR MU 2021). According to MCAST, PHEIs offer a variety of VET programmes with the possibility of following short-term, flexible and practice-based courses that certify students to fulfil the needs of particular sectors within the job market. The focus on practice-based learning in PHEIs accommodates learners who are more inclined to retain knowledge and skills through kinaesthetic learning as opposed to auditory learning, which is the common means of instruction in academic Universities (IR MCAST 2021). Even if student characteristics and thus also NTS characteristics can differ between PHEIs and different programmes, PHE students can be described as more diverse and with a higher proportion of non-traditional students compared to more academic universities. More specifically, there tend to be more adult students, parent students, students who work part-time or full-time besides their studies, students from a migrant background or students with an impairment. In addition, in most countries, PHE students are more likely to be younger, 1st generation students and 1st cycle students, but less likely to be international students. In terms of study characteristics, PHEI students tend to have shorter courses and spend more time on practical placements outside the institution. They also are more likely to live with their parents than on their own or in student accommodation and thus travel to the HEI. Partly as a consequence of this, it is more likely that PHE students stay within their own region to study whereas students from academic universities are usually coming from all over the country (IR KIC 2021).

5.2 Types and characteristics of non-traditional students

Before talking about the characteristics and distribution of non-traditional students in the EU, it is important to get an idea of who the average, the ‘traditional’ student is. The European initiative Eurostudent collects and links data on relevant issues in the lives of students from 28 European countries. In its 2018 report "Social and Economic conditions of Student Life in Europe", a synopsis has been created that presents a compendium of indicators on the social dimension of higher education in Eurostudent countries. The indicators are based on a survey with 320.000 students from 28 participating countries (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

According to this survey, at least half of all students in Europe are younger than 25, have no children, are born in the country of their studies and have no physical or mental impairments. In addition, the majority of students are female, but within certain fields of study, such as Information and communication technologies (ICT), the proportion of male students prevails. Over 80 % of the students with parents with higher education background are from financially stable parental homes and without higher education background it's still over 70% (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

In the different focus groups, the definition of the non-traditional student differs only slightly; primarily, the NTS is described as an individual, who differs from the majority of students in one or more points. In most cases, they are distinguished from their fellow students by certain demographic or socio-economic parameters (FG MCAST 2021, FG MU 2021, ESU FG 2021). Nevertheless, it has been pointed out several times that just because students do not conform to the norm does not mean that they are excluded, have problems in their studies or with engagement opportunities (FG UCLL 2021, FG MU 2021, FG DHBW 2021). In addition, it is not possible to classify students as non-traditional consistently as demarcations from the norm can also arise during the course of studies due to changes in external circumstances or illnesses (FG DHBW 2021). The term of intersectionality should be mentioned in this context. Intersectionality focuses on how different discriminations can affect a person at the same time and have their own implications for each person and their needs. The characteristics of groups are not the only characteristics they have and there are other discriminations to be considered (IR MU 2021).

Although, as mentioned above, the definition of non-traditional students is very broad and contextual, we asked our partners and focus group participants during the research process: "What are characteristics that make a student non-traditional?". The answers were very coherent among participants, suggesting that there is a common understanding of the term 'non-traditional student' (NTS).

The following characteristics were mentioned most frequently by the project partners, experts and students:

- Students with disabilities
- Migration background
- Mature students
- Gender imbalance
- Gender identity, expression and sexual orientation
- Socio-economic background of the parental home
- Caretaking responsibilities
- International background
- Alternative education path
- Re-entering studies

In order to better describe the different characteristics, we have assigned them to the different diversity dimensions (see fig. 6) and further specified them below, drawing on the results of our internal research and data from the Eurostudent survey.

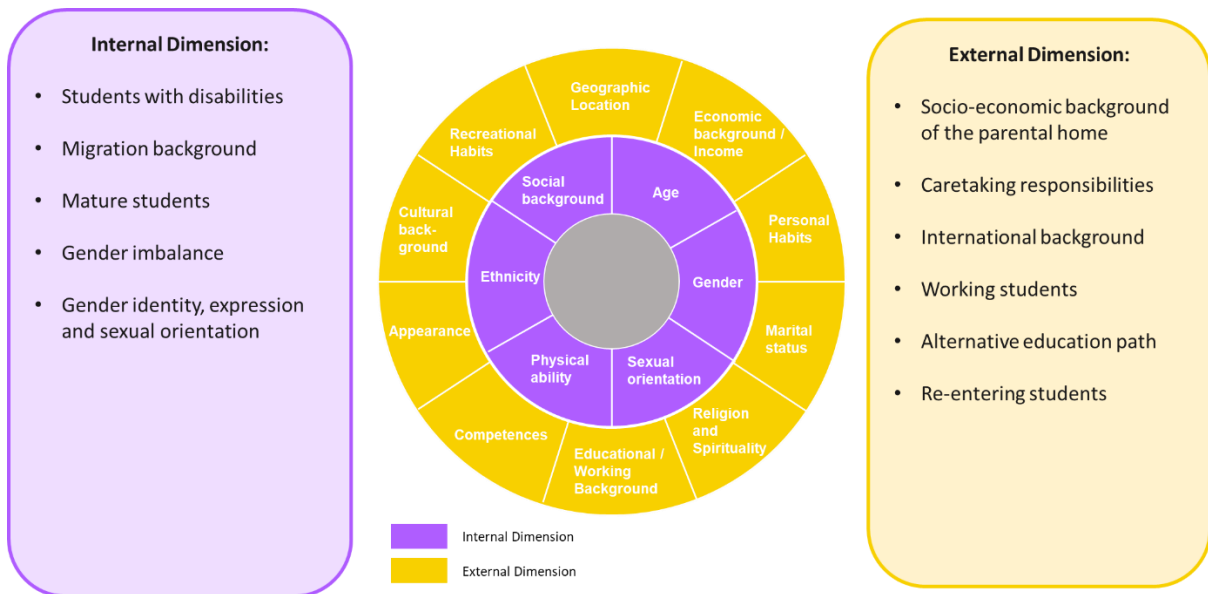


Fig. 6: Characteristics of external and internal diversity dimensions of non-traditional students

5.2.1 Internal dimension

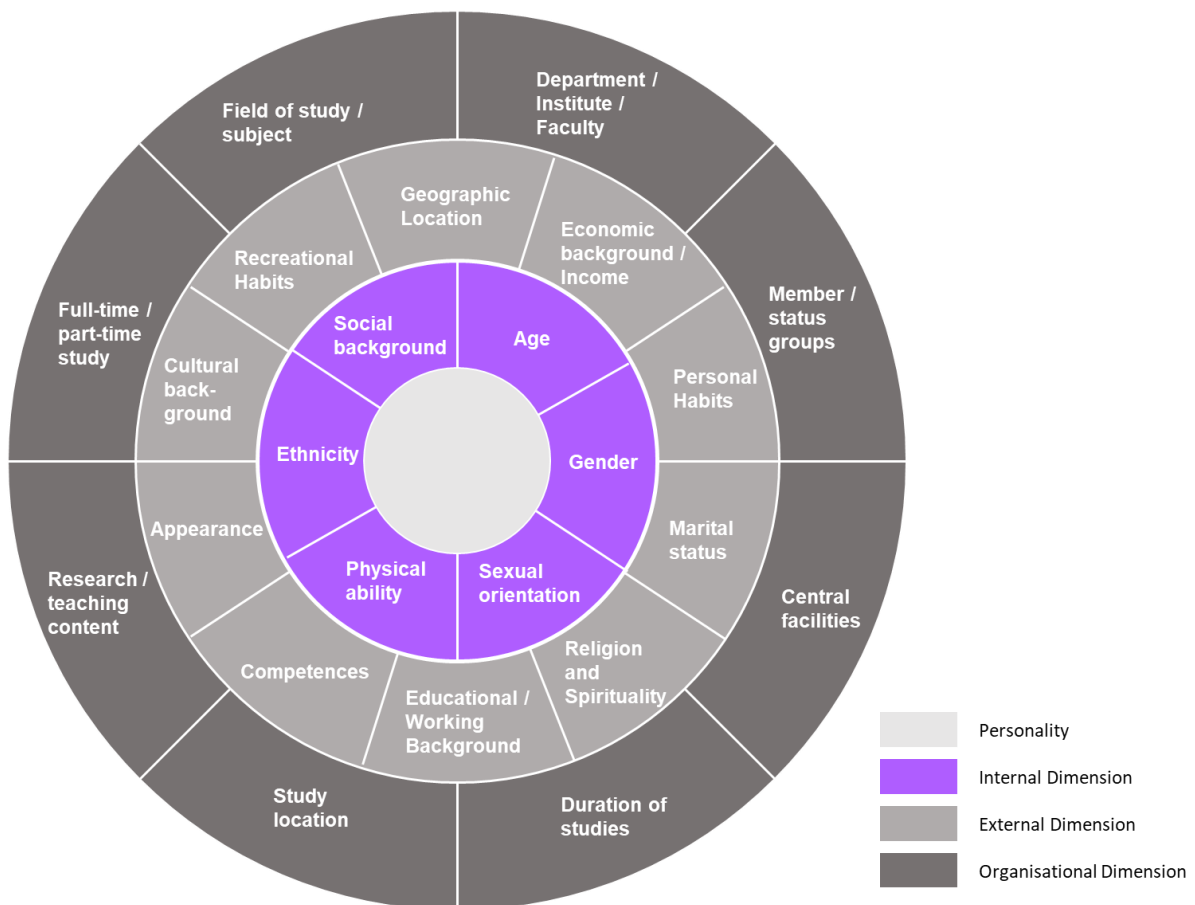


Fig. 7: Internal Dimension

In the Internal Dimension, we have clustered non-traditional student characteristics with regard to age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, ethnicity and social background. These are often parameters that are already known before the start of one's study pathway.

Typical characteristics of student groups with diversity characteristics of the internal dimension are:

- Impairments
- Migration Background
- Mature students
- Gender imbalance
- Gender identity, expression and sexual orientation

5.2.1.1 Students with disabilities

Definition and scope: The types of disabilities or functional diversity can be differentiated into physical and chronic diseases, mental health problems, mobility impairments, sensory impairments (vision, hearing) or learning difficulties (dyslexia, ADHD). To have a disability does not necessarily mean that individuals in this group of students also feel limitations related to these impairments - but one third of the students indicate at least some limitations. In almost all Eurostudent countries, students with severe limitations are the least satisfied with the support offered, with students whose impairments are not noticeable the least satisfied with the support received (Hauschildt et al. 2018, 36 ff). This insight is also shared by other studies that claim that students with non-visible disabilities for third parties are less successful in adjusting to their studies than students with recognizable impairments. One reason is that students with visible impairments have to explain themselves less often and are provided services more proactively (Adams et al. 2010).

Differences to non-traditional students: The challenges of studying for students with impairments can vary depending on the nature and extent of the disability, impairment or functional limitation. Studies by the Deutsches Studierendennetzwerk have found that many students with impairments have difficulty meeting time and attendance requirements, resulting in delays and interruptions to their studies due to their impairments. Many impaired students also have financial difficulties (Deutsches Studentenwerk 2011; Bratz, 2020). Furthermore, their everyday life is marked by additional administrative and medical work. In addition, there is an additional planning effort for self-studying; besides accessibility to lecture materials, it is also important to make the materials available in a well-structured way and suitable for the target group (e.g. upload resources one week in advance rather than one or two days) - some students cannot read more than 40 pages a day or less and need the extra time to plan (Bratz 2020).

Distribution: In Eurostudent countries the share of students with impairments range from 7 to 39 % (Hauschildt et al. 2018, p. 36 ff.).

5.2.1.2 Migration background

Definition and scope: The migration background is determined by the origin of the entry qualification into higher education, the place of birth of the student and the place of birth of the parents (see fig. 8). Students with first generation migration background attended and completed the national school system, are born in a country other than the country of study and have at least one parent who is also from another country. Students with a second-generation migration background attended and completed the national school system, were born in the country of study but have at least one parent who was born abroad. Refugees are also among the students with a migration background (Hauschildt et al. 2018, S. 29).

Differences to non-traditional students: Primary differences to traditional students for non-traditional students with this diversity characteristic can be language level, social and cultural backgrounds, educational expectations, legal status, cultural gender roles, appearance and religious affiliation (Griga 2013).

Distribution: The share of first-generation migrants in higher education is lower than the share of second-generation migrants. The share of students with second generation background is between 0.2% and 28% in the Eurostudent countries (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

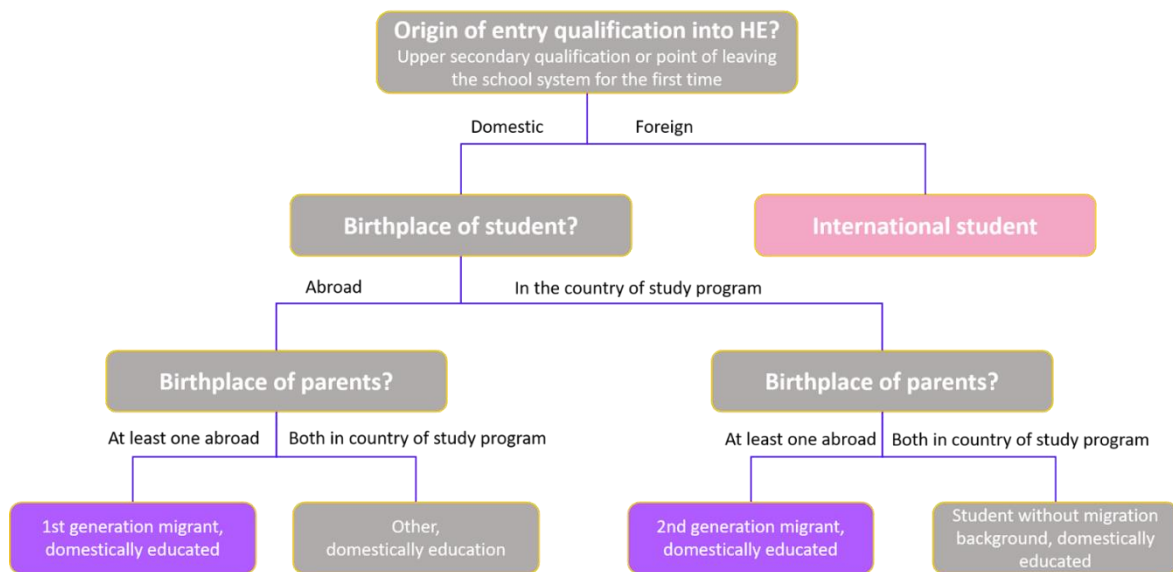


Fig. 8: Categorisation of students with migration background (own representation cf. Hauschildt et al., 2018 p. 34)

5.2.1.3 Mature students

Definition and scope: Mature students are students who are notably older than average students. The age profiles of students vary by country, but the average student is younger than 25 years. The Nordic countries like Finland, Iceland and Sweden have the largest share of students over 30 years old (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Differences to non-traditional students: In comparison to traditional students, adult students have to pay more attention to study-related laws, rules and regulations, e.g. public student support, scholarships or costs for insurances. Older students often have more responsibilities than younger students and are more likely to be employed alongside their studies (Hauschildt et al. 2018). Due to their age and related perceptions and misconceptions, mature students might also struggle with developing a sense of belonging within the student community and student-led organisations.

Distribution: In the Eurostudent countries the share of students with an age between 25 and 29 years is between 8 and 32% with an average of 18%. The share of students older than 30 years is between 2 and 35% depending on the country with an average of 14%. The age of the students depends very much on the respective country of study, but also on the field of study (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

5.2.1.4 Gender imbalance

Definition and scope: Gender imbalance refers to the conscious recognition and promotion of gender equality, access and representation in institutions - in this case, the balance between men and women in different study programmes, especially in the area ICT or STEM (Botella et al. 2019).

Differences to non-traditional students: Studies show that young women often choose not to pursue careers in STEM or ICT at a young age (Botella et al. 2019). A survey of women working in technology found that almost half of the women said that there were not enough female role models. 14% of women said that educational institutions do not promote or encourage women's involvement in ICT and STEM fields (ISACA, 2017). Reasons for the lack of interest among young women and the insufficient support from the institutional side can be systematic patterns of beliefs about gender roles, gender patterns and stereotypes deeply installed in family and society about what careers are appropriate for both men and women (Botella et al. 2019). This can also be the case for fields with a distinctly small share of male students.

Distribution: Female students generally constitute more than half the student body across Europe and are therefore not generally considered a minority. Nevertheless, there is a difference in the distributions, which mostly depends on the field of study. For example, on the one hand, female students are the clear majority (78% and 72%) in education and health-oriented programmes, but on the other hand, they are clearly in the minority (21%) in ICT programmes and in engineering and construction (29%) (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

5.2.1.5 Gender identity, expression and sexual orientation

Definition and scope: Gender identity and sexuality includes the groups of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning and/or transgender (LGBTQIA+).

Differences to non-traditional students: Homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of LGBTQIA+ people and heteronormativity, a social construct that makes LGBTQIA+ identities invisible and assumes that heterosexual relationships are the norm, are powerful constructs that have direct and indirect effects on the belonging, health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ people (Mayer et al. 2008). The European country ranking tool 'Rainbow Europe' gives an overview of all European countries and their ranking based on how the laws and policies of each country impact the lives of LGBTQIA+ people, showing that the systematic discrimination in European and EU countries is still significant (ILGA-Europe). Students from the LGBTQIA+ community sometimes have to deal with strong discrimination from fellow students, teachers and staff but also from their own country's regulations and policies.

Distribution: The exact distribution of LGBTQIA+ students within European countries cannot be fully determined, which can be explained by the large proportion of LGBTQIA+ students who prefer to not disclose their (non-cis) gender identity and/or (non-heterosexual) sexual orientation during their studies, thus, this group of students is perhaps the relatively most invisible of all NTSSs.

5.2.2 External dimension

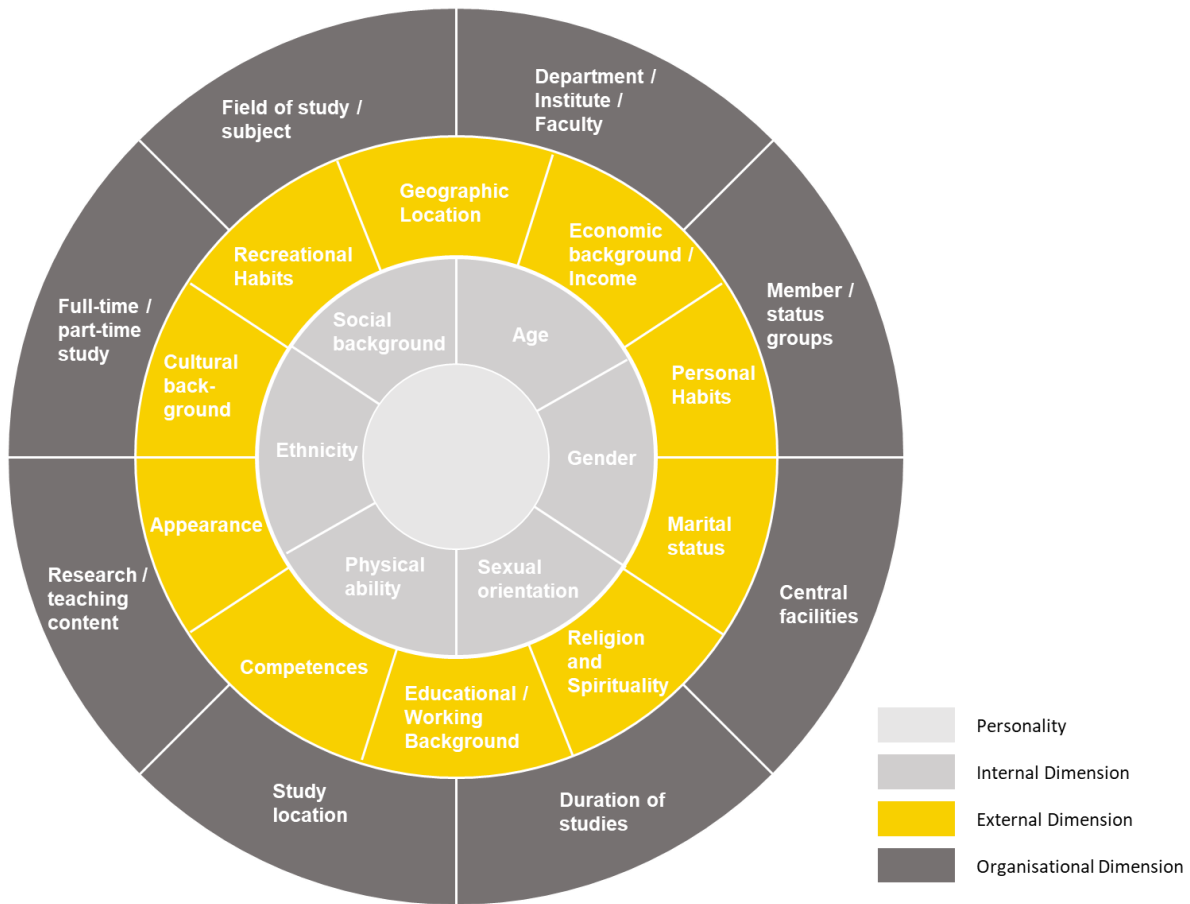


Fig. 9: External Dimension

The external dimension inhabits diversity characteristics such as geographic location, marital status, cultural background, appearance, competences, educational / working background, religion and spirituality, recreational habits, personal habits and economic background / income.

Typical characteristics of student groups with diversity characteristics of the external dimension are:

- Socio-economic background of the parental home
- Caretaking responsibilities
- International background
- Working students
- Alternative education path
- Re-entering students

5.2.2.1 Socio-economic background of the parental home

Definition and scope: With regard to the socio-economic background of the parental home, two characterising factors can be mentioned; firstly the academic background of the students with regard to the so-called first-generation students and secondly the financial situation of the students' parents.

Various studies show that young people with parents without an academic background enter higher education at a lower rate than their peers with parents with an academic background (Bar-Haim & Shavit 2013). Higher education background means in this case an International standard classification of education (ISCED) level 5 till 8 (tertiary education). Once access to higher education is achieved, however, certain distributions within higher education systems may be derived from the academic background of students' parents, both vertically in the choice of subjects or type of higher education institution, and horizontally in the depth of degree attainment, as, for example, comparatively fewer students with parents without an academic background pursue a master's or doctoral degree than their peers whose parents have an academic background (Margison 2016).

Another factor in regard to the socio-economic background of the parental home is the financial situation of the students' parents. The family's income has effects of the acquisition of social and cultural capital as well as on the financial support the parents can offer their child (Pfeffer et al. 2012).

Moreover, other socio-economic factors might apply for students with a complicated family background, such as single-parent or orphaned students, students who've been taken in care, students with a violent and/or addicted parent, etc. and can also occur among students who would in other aspects be perceived as more traditional (FG MCAST 2021).

Differences to non-traditional students: Students from non-academic families are more likely to find themselves in a non-familiar environment than traditional students. People's habitus, the environment, culture and practices within higher education can be perceived as unusual and intimidating by first-generation students and it might be more difficult to develop a sense of belonging (Holmegard et al. 2017). These students also tend to have more doubts about their intentions with regard to their studies and their educational path (Hauschildt et al. 2018). Students without an academic background start their studies later on average, study less often at universities but rather at other institutions of higher education, and are more likely to rely on part-time jobs (Hauschildt et al. 2018). The students from parental homes with financial difficulties lack the certainty that they have a safety net if they encounter failure during their studies. This can also reduce the possibility of making an attempt to gain a higher educational degree (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Distribution: In the Eurostudent countries, the range of students with parents with non-tertiary education lies between 22% and 73%. About 22% of the students claim that their parents are not financially well-off.

5.2.2.2 Caretaking responsibilities

Definition and scope: Students with caretaking responsibilities are primarily students with children or students who have to take care of a family member.

Differences to non-traditional students: Students with children and caretaking responsibilities might have less time and additional responsibilities compared to their peers and struggle with balancing their studies with other responsibilities, this potentially causing high levels of stress. In addition, these students also face higher expenses than the average student (Hauschildt et al. 2018). Caretaking responsibilities towards siblings or (vulnerable) parents tend to be much more overlooked by and invisible for HEIs than students with children, for which at least some provisions are often in place.

Distribution: Up to 20% of students in the Eurostudent countries have children to take care of while studying. In general, these students are also older than their peers. In most countries, students with caretaking responsibilities are women (Hauschildt et al. 2018, p. 33 f.).

5.2.2.3 International background

Definition and scope: Compared to students with a migration background, international students completed their higher education entrance qualification in another country and then move abroad to enrol as a student (Hauschildt et al. 2018). These groups include not only European students but also refugees and third-country national students.

Differences to non-traditional students: International students often face more language barriers than their peers. Some even experience problems which result in high drop-out rate, mainly due to their difference in the respective qualification and higher effort to adapt to another educational system, even though their previous qualification achieved in their country of origin was accredited (IR MU 2021). They also report to be more often in financial distress than domestic students and have to pay more fees related to their studies (Hauschildt et al. 2018). In addition, many international students (non-EU) have very restricted visa which means that they can't afford any delays in their studies. Since in many European HE systems it's quite accepted that students take more time for their studies than the official duration – and thus have time for other activities, such as student engagement, part-time work, and occasionally missing or failing an exam (e.g. due to mental or physical illness) – this causes an extra disadvantage for international students.

Students with a refugee background face specific challenges. In comparison to the international students they have not deliberately chosen to study in the respective country for the international experience. They might have to deal with an unclear asylum status. They might not be able to provide all the necessary proof of qualifications and certificates and they might face socio-economic and cultural challenges in their daily lives. Due to possible stigmatisation and an unclear legal status it is especially difficult for this group to develop a sense of belonging in the higher educational environment and also amongst other international students.

Distribution: On average, 6% of students are enrolled in other countries and 4% doing an internship abroad. International students are more likely to be female, enrolled in universities and have standard access routes to higher education, but this pattern is not reflected in all countries. The share of international students is between 1% and 18% depending on the country (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

5.2.2.4 Working students

Definition and scope: Working students are students who work part-time or full-time alongside their studies. The motivation is either to gain practical experience and/or to finance their studies and living expenses (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Differences to non-traditional students: Studies show that working part-time jobs while studying can have a negative impact on academic performance or on the time it takes to complete a degree. This is mainly due to the lack of time available for studying (Beerkens et al. 2011). However, this effect is highly dependent on the type of employment. Work with a strong connection to the student's field of study can even have a positive effect on academic performance and also increase employability through the additional practical experience (Tuononen et al. 2015; Beerkens et al. 2011). In some institutions such as DHBW and MU, work placements are an integral part of the study structure and thus not a characteristic of NTS.

Distribution: A large proportion of students state that they have to work alongside their studies in order to be able to afford their studies and living expenses. Students with limited financial support from the state and/or their parents have to work more often than their peers with more financial support. 60% of students who have a paid job say that they primarily want to gain work experience (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

5.2.2.5 Alternative education path

Definition and scope: The standard access route to higher education is marked by the type of qualification and the point of acquisition. In terms of qualification, the student has to possess the standard national entry qualification (e.g. Matura, Abitur, Maturità etc.) or a foreign equivalent. The standard point of acquisition is obtained directly or in the next six months after leaving the school system for the first time. A student with an alternative access route either does not possess the standard national entry qualification (or a foreign equivalent) or obtained it after leaving the school system for the first time e.g. through evening school (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Differences to non-traditional students: Students with alternative access routes are more likely to have work experience in comparison to traditional students and to rely on their own earnings. Moreover, they are often older than their peers or can even be counted as mature students. First-generation students tend to enter higher education via alternative paths more often than students with an academic background (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Distribution: An average 10 % of the students in the Eurostudent countries claim to have an alternative access route to higher education.

5.2.2.6 Re-entering students

Definition and scope: Re-entering Students are students who have interrupted their studies for an indefinite period and have re-entered their studies.

Differences to non-traditional students: Students who interrupt their studies usually do so due to lack of motivation, financial difficulties or work-related reasons. Students without an academic background are more likely to report financial difficulties as a reason for interrupting their studies (Hauschildt et al. 2018).

Distribution: On average, 7% of students have interrupted their studies for at least one year. The interruption rate is higher in the Master's programme than in the Bachelor's programme (Hauschildt et al. 2018).



5.3 Challenges and barriers

The undertaken research has proven evidence of various challenges and barriers to inclusive student engagement in higher education and, more specifically, in Professional Higher Education. In order to define potentials and needs to overcome them, they must be identified and described, which is the goal of this report section. The special situation of the COVID-19 shutdown with a switch to digital teaching in most HEIs has also brought changes to student engagement opportunities which will be reflected in each section (COVID-19 focus).

Overall, the challenges and barriers for inclusive student engagement can be clustered into five main categories (see fig. 10), namely time problems, visibility problems, identification problems, image problems and accessibility problems. While some of these categories are set on a more cultural level (image and identification), others can be described as more structural problems (time, visibility, accessibility) and taking place on different levels such as course level, institutional level, national level. During the COVID-19 shutdown, there is evidence that inclusive student engagement has undergone severe changes on the structural level but less so on a cultural level.

Challenges and barriers

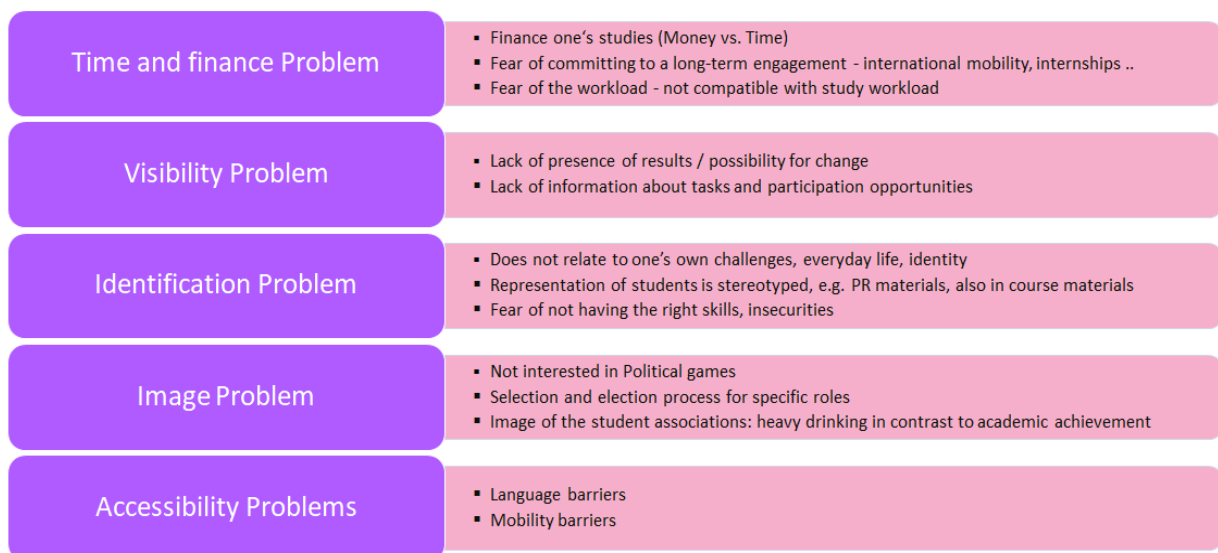


Fig. 10: Overview challenges and barriers

5.3.1 Time and finance problems

Time and finance problems are closely related and can be described in different dimensions: students might have to **work in order to finance their studies** and thus have less time available for student engagement activities. Moreover, they might be reluctant to commit to a **long-term engagement** due to other activities and interests, international mobility, internships etc. Finally, a significant **study workload** might make student engagement seem to collide with one's own study goals and objectives. In this, participation and engagement are related to financial and time resources, the latter possibly being reinforced by the Bologna process (Ditzel et al. 2013, p. 181–182).

According to the Eurostudent survey, the time budget of students “varies according to type of higher education institution (HEI), degree programme, and field of study. [...] In the large majority of countries, students at non-universities spend more time pursuing paid work” (Hauschildt et al. 2018, S.113). Concerning financial issues, when “looking at the financial situation of different student groups it turns out that students (1) whose parents are considered to be financially not well-off, (2) who have impairments, and (3) who depend on national public student support are especially affected by (very) serious financial difficulties” (Hauschildt et al. 2018, p.149).

Time is an especially crucial barrier for students who pay for their studies themselves and thus need to work in order to finance their studies and all other activities (IR UCLL 2021), this making it even harder for them to prioritise extra-curricular activities and participating in student-led organisations or to even pay for extra-curricular activities (IR MCAST 2021). Other possible barriers also related to financial problems are, unclarity or unavailability of financial support for engagement (FG Survey ESU ISO 2021).

A student at DHBW puts attention to the fact that the dual study system is already very intense with a high workload and pressure for students (FG DHBW 2021) and without a semester break, making it harder to find time for student engagement. Moreover, the study structure is very defined and does not leave much space for deviations such as taking one semester off, e.g. in case of caretaking responsibilities etc. (PC DHBW 2021, FG DHBW 2021, IR MCAST 2021). In general, additional responsibilities such as caretaking duties leave less room and space for learning and also student engagement (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). The dual structure might put a lot of time and performance pressure on students, raising the risk of mental health problems (FG DHBW 2021).

Moreover, many NTS study in part-time programmes or spend less time on campus so they could be less aware of student-led organisations and engagement possibilities (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). More time problems can be related to short-term study programmes, long internships and time spent at work for financing one’s studies (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021), this part-time employment being more likely for NTS (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). These features being even more common in PHEIs compared to more traditional universities, time problems thus being potentially even more relevant for PHE students.

In general, the high workload of education and related activities can be a barrier to student engagement (IR UCLL 2021).

COVID-19 focus

Financial issues might have become more severe for students during the COVID-19 shutdown, e.g. due to job loss, making it harder for some students to be active in student engagement and thus for student councils to find new student representatives (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021), this also holding true for international students (FG MCAST 2021).

Students with additional caring responsibilities – many of whom are mature students – often struggle to engage fully in the Higher Education experience due to practical challenges associated with their external commitments. During COVID-19, many of these students saw an increase in these caring responsibilities owing to the pandemic e.g., having to home school children which limited their ability to engage fully in their learning (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). It has also been mentioned that there is an expectation to always be easy to reach with a constant pressure to follow up e-mails and other digital communication, making the clear distinction between school time and private time disappear. This can make it harder to follow up for students with children or tight work schedules (FG UCLL 2021).

Specifically, students in PHEIs and in higher vocational training are usually working in a professional job, which means that they have had to combine the pandemic situation with simultaneous studies and work, meaning even more pressure (FG Survey ESU CREUP 2021). At the same time, students who

lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 shutdown might have had more time to engage and take part in council meetings (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

5.3.2 Visibility problems

Visibility problems can be described as a **lack of visibility of results of student engagement and participation**, meaning decisions and changes made thanks to student engagement and participation, proving that it can make a difference and have a positive impact on the student situation. Furthermore, the actual **engagement and participation opportunities as well as activities** offered by student-led organisations must be visible and accessible to students - participation might be more difficult and selective if they are not.

In order to participate, students need to know the possibilities to do so and understand the mechanisms of student participation. Motivation for student engagement might result from a concrete case of dissatisfaction and the concrete will for change (Ditzel et al. 2013, p. 181-182). For students with less concrete cases, it might be harder to see why they should participate in student-led organisations. For example, students might not know any success stories or results of student engagement and participation (IR UCLL 2021). This can be traced back to too little information on the tasks of student representatives and the related fear of not having the right skills for it (IR UCLL 2021). Student participation risks being seen as something which does not really change anything, as ‘a lot of talking, but little action’ (FG UCLL 2021).

Participation might also be facilitated by teachers - or quite the opposite. It is being reported that students have been “discouraged by lecturers to engage in student participation, because time spent on engaging is not spent on studying, which would be in disadvantage of the chance to graduate” (FG UCLL 2021).

COVID-19 focus

Students from DHBW mentioned that due to the COVID-19 shutdown, it has been much harder to draw attention to the local student representation. While in other semesters, the organisation was present at events, at matriculation and introduction week, it has been difficult to reach and motivate students in online formats, this having led to overall lower participation numbers during COVID-19 and even fewer participation of those who have not been engaged in other organisations before and first-semester students in general (PC DHBW 2021).

5.3.3 Identification problems

Identification problems can also be described in different dimensions: it might be harder for students to identify with student-led organisations if they do not **relate to one’s own interests, identity, everyday life and challenges**. Moreover, students might be **intimidated** when they feel they do not have the right skills for joining an organisation and face insecurities of being welcome. The way **students are depicted and portrayed in course and PR materials** on an institutional or course or organisational level might also lead to identification problems if the material paints a stereotyped picture of the student body and does not reflect its diversity.

The UCLL research shows that student participation asks for certain skills to fully comprehend all the information - with not all students having enough confidence to engage in it (IR UCLL 2021).

The identification problem might even be more significant for PHEIs due to students being involved with external partners or employers. For example, students interviewed at DHBW claimed that, due to the dual system, students might feel more like an employee than as a DHBW student (PC DHBW 2021). It is also mentioned that the image of the national student union can reflect on the local student unions - with fewer NTS represented on a national level, they might also feel more reluctant on a local level (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

One a more individual level, there can sometimes be social barriers to fostering friendships between students from different backgrounds. For mature entrants and students from non-traditional backgrounds e.g. students who are the first in their family to attend college, it can be difficult to find things in common from students from more dominant social groups as well as to adapt to academic norms (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). Moreover, motivation to engage might be low if students do not see and perceive engagement as a personal priority (IR UCLL 2021).

5.3.4 Image problems

Closely related to identification problems, student-led organisations might face image problems making it less attractive for some students to join. Student-led organisations might have an image of a place where **political games** take place and where many things are about students' **popularity** - students might feel that they do not fit in or not have enough confidence to join (PC DHBW 2021). Specific roles and positions are attributed through a **selection and election process** which might seem intimidating for some less extrovert students. The image of some student-led organisations related to heavy drinking and partying might put participation in **contrast with academic achievement**. In the UK, the term 'lad culture' has been coined in relation to this problem, placing it firmly in a gender inequality perspective (NSU connect 2021). As the Higher Education Authority puts it, "it may be that engagement practices, as they currently stand, stealthily exclude the poorer, more disadvantaged, more personally burdened or less-confident students. Student engagement in governance demands articulate and confident students, which could lead to isolation and under-engagement and representation from minority groups. It may be that students who do not fit the young, male, white, settled, middle-class, childless profile may need additional support if they are to become full and active members of their learning community" (Higher Education Authority 2016, p. 22–23).

Some students perceive student engagement and participation as a personality feature with an image of very extroverted and self-exposing people getting involved in student representation, this being a regular feature of their curricula (Ditzel et al. 2013, p. 182).

One student also mentioned that a fear of a certain **responsibility or long-term commitment** could be another reason for students not getting engaged (IR UCLL 2021, PC DHBW 2021) - and that it's easier to join for students who **have been engaged in other organisations already before** (PC DHBW 2021). Also, there can be a perception that student unions and institutional activities are catered towards younger students which can leave **older entrants feeling isolated** and less willing to engage (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). Another institution states that "student organisations mostly attract 18-year-old generation students with similar interests. Students with children or working students will probably not be engaging in these types of student engagement. People mainly associate them with lots of partying, hazing and drinking, which is definitely not the cup of tea of all students" (FG UCLL 2021). Student associations sometimes have a 'drinking culture' or at least a reputation of it, also suffering from bad perception about inclusivity. The pressure on non-traditional students to succeed weighs heavily, so they often choose to focus solely on academic results (IR UCLL 2021).

Another image issue is that student participation might be seen as something boring by other students (FG UCLL 2021).

5.3.5 Accessibility problems

Finally, accessibility problems might make it harder for some students to engage and participate in different activities on different levels. This might be related to **language barriers**, e.g. for international students, students with hearing impairments, or **mobility barriers**, e.g. for students with limited mobility, who live in another place than they study, who have caretaking responsibilities or physical impairments etc.

Related to language barriers, the unavailability of documents, policies or support in English for international students can be mentioned (FG Survey ESU ISO 2021) as well as the general range of activities and engagement possibilities offered in English or other languages which might make it harder for international students to get involved (e.g. FG Survey ESU VVS 2021), especially in multilingual faculties such as in the Basque Country (IR MU 2021) or in Malta (IR MCAST 2021) - the language barrier being a general one to international students or students with migration background (IR MCAST 2021). Moreover, student participation often comes with its own language or 'jargon', this being a special barrier to cross for international students, students with a migration background but also for first generation students (IR UCLL 2021). Another language barrier presents itself to deaf people who need a sign language interpreter (IR MU 2021).

On a teaching and learning level, for those with disabilities in particular, many of the normal modes of delivery may not be accessible for them – this can be particularly apparent for students who are required to undertake placement as part of their degree and who often face additional barriers to engaging in placement e.g., placement facilities not accessible (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). Accessibility in terms of infrastructure can be a problem in HEIs, making it more difficult for students with physical disabilities to get across campus with enough time, this affecting their participation opportunities (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

Related to mobility problems, DHBW students mention facing specific mobility problems - they might be living closer to their employers than to the DHBW campus and have long journeys to campus (PC DHBW 2021). This might also make it harder for students to make friends and create room for exchange with other students, especially those living, working and studying in different places (FG DHBW 2021).

Mobility problems could also be faced when engaging in regional or national student unions with the necessity to travel. NTS can be more likely to live off-campus and commute to college reducing their exposure to on-campus opportunities. Lots of activities tend to be organised in the evening time when those who commute or have additional caring responsibilities are likely to be unable to attend (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

The dual study mode might also create barriers on another level: students do not apply directly at the HEI but at an employing organisation. This pre-selection process might pose another barrier for non-traditional students to join DHBW as a student, making access to this institution restricted on a structural level (FG DHBW 2021, PC DHBW 2021). Moreover, there is a very low percentage of international students (PC DHBW 2021). Moreover, NTS might have a difficult situation at home, making it harder for them to adjust in higher education and make student representation possibly not a priority (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021).

For students with functional divergence, issues such as not recording lectures, using inaccessible text, not sharing notes in advance of the lecture, have come up as just some of the barriers some students with disabilities face in accessing their education (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

COVID-19 focus

A DHBW student mentioned that the teaching and learning quality during COVID-19 could also depend on students' residences as not all were able to afford accommodation suitable for online studies (PC DHBW 2021) as well as ergonomic workspaces (FG DHBW 2021). This was confirmed by the MCAST Focus Group, mentioning that background noise and raising kids during a pandemic while studying proved a challenge (FG MCAST 2021).

Accessibility issues in terms of infrastructure for students with physical disabilities has become less prominent of an issue in online teaching but will be very apparent when on-campus teaching will be possible again (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

Many non-traditional students faced challenges in relation to Wi-Fi access during the pandemic. This particularly applied to those living in rural areas who did not have access to high-speed/high quality Wi-Fi. This issue was exacerbated where there were others in the household trying to use the internet for work and study (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). In general, online teaching has not always been accessible and barrier-free (FG DHBW 2021). This aspect is also closely related to socio-economic aspects, e.g. students who live with their parents (and siblings) may be more limited in terms of having appropriate study circumstances during lockdowns compared with students who live in student accommodation.

When it comes to student engagement at student councils, USI states that the online provision of these councils helped with accessibility with some meetings also being recorded. However, there are mixed opinions with regards to student engagement in learning mainly due to the inconsistency in academic delivery (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

5.3.6 More general problems and barriers for non-traditional students in PHEIs

NTS might also face more general problems and barriers, making it harder for them to feel really welcome, included and a part of the institution.

For example, during formal meetings with lecturers or student staff, the atmosphere isn't always very inviting or safe "to speak up", meaning that students are not really pushed or supported to actively engage (FG UCLL 2021). There might be social barriers between peers, making students feel unwelcome in class and on campus (FG MCAST 2021). There might also be little sensitivity from teachers' side for NTS. For example, "one of the working students in this focus group says she feels almost no reciprocity with some of her teachers. She is often older than them, but she feels evaluated without dialogue which creates a feeling of hierarchy. There's also not enough attention for the extra workload or lack of flexibility some working students have" (FG UCLL 2021). Teachers do not always recognize and respect that students enter higher education with different backgrounds, responsibilities and needs (FG MCAST 2021). Moreover, students emphasize that participation and appreciation of student voices is a core value that should be felt at the very beginning, meaning in the classroom (FG UCLL 2021). The MU Focus Group confirms that participation is also a culture that needs to be established even in the classroom (FG MU 2021).

COVID-19 focus

Mental health problems may have occurred more often and severely during the COVID-19 shutdown, this affecting all domains of the study experience, including student engagement (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021, FG MCAST 2021).

For teachers, it might be harder to become aware of and react to students' needs, especially for students who need a little extra help or have different impairments (FG MCAST 2021). Moreover, going

to campus might give NTS a better division between school-life and personal-life, making it harder especially for mature students or students who are in an unprivileged or unsafe home situation (FG MCAST 2021).

Many non-traditional students often find it challenging to develop a sense of belonging, particularly in their first year. This can often lead to a sense of isolation and potential retention issues. This was, in many cases, further exacerbated by the pandemic due to a lack of time on-campus which further inhibited their ability to build relationships with staff and fellow students (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). NTS might feel more excluded and find it harder to integrate in online lessons with less opportunity to socialise (FG MCAST 2021). In the MU focus group, participants confirmed that integration was more difficult online and from home and could lead to exclusion. Moreover, peer support structures have been more difficult to keep up (FG MU 2021). The UCLL Focus Group confirmed that some students have lost connection with other students during the COVID-19 shutdown. While this connection has always been challenging for older students or working students, it's now become almost non-existent. With the loss of this connection, a lot of students also lost their motivation and positive mindset. Connecting with fellow students and the motivation to push through hard times appear to be very co-existing (FG UCLL 2021).

When it comes to support structures and advisory services, it has been much harder for them to reach NTS and to know about their challenges according to the DHBW Focus Group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the way to counselling sessions became longer and more inconvenient - for example, the possibility to spontaneously seek a conversation after the lecture has been missing. Moreover, many students are ashamed to go to counselling centres with their problems. The public has the opinion that students should be fine and have no reason to complain. There is a lack of exchange with other students to better assess their own situation and to be able to talk about challenges and problems (FG DHBW 2021).

On the engagement side, ISO reports that student engagement opportunities have slightly increased and that there are some examples of student participation councils being in more direct contact with the university leadership and involved in faster decision-making (FG Survey ESU ISO 2021). USI also reports that using online platforms to engage with students directly has arisen as a plausible method of communication and engagement, with an increase in student engagement at councils as well as lunchtime or 'after work' seminars and workshops, giving students and staff, more learning opportunities separate to their coursework. Overall, the accessibility of meetings and of education has been positive (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). However, it was stated in the MU Focus Group that creating engagement without a previous face-to-face interaction was very difficult (FG MU 2021). At DHBW Focus Group, it was stated that during the COVID-19 shutdowns, only high-performing students participated in extracurricular activities (FG DHBW 2021).



5.4 Potentials and needs analysis

Based on the barriers mentioned in the internal research and the focus groups, different needs could be derived that relate to the various barriers and challenges of non-traditional students in relation to student engagement. Furthermore, the focus groups were also specifically asked for potentials and solutions that could help to shape student engagement in a more inclusive way. In this part of the report, the different needs and potentials are briefly discussed.

| Potential | Related problem area | Level | Responsibility | Structural or cultural |
|---|---|---------------|--|------------------------|
| Different Participation opportunities | Identification Time and finance Accessibility | All Levels | Institutions Student-led Organisations | Structural |
| Visibility of Diversity | Identification | All Levels | Institutions Student-led Organisations | Structural Cultural |
| Support system | Time and finance | Institutional | Institutions | Structural Cultural |
| Contact Points between SO & NTS | Visibility Identification | Institutional | Student-led Organisations Institutions | Structural |
| Network between different levels of Student Organisations | Identification | All Levels | Student-led Organisations | Structural |
| Inform and professionalize teachers for different student needs | Identification | Institutional | Institutions | Cultural |
| Guidelines and policies for and from non-traditional students | Image Identification | All Levels | Student-led Organisations Institutions | Cultural Structural |
| Paying Students / Include Student Engagement in the curricula | Time and finance | Institutional | Institutions | Structural |

Tab. 3: Overview Potentials

5.4.1 Different participation opportunities

One of the greatest potentials identified by the partners and the students in the internal research and the focus groups was the possibility to offer different participation opportunities. This proposal was made especially with regards to time, identification and accessibility problems mentioned by the students. Many student engagement opportunities are very time-consuming and the fear of committing to a long-term engagement is a real barrier for students, especially in a work-intensive PHE environment. Therefore, some of the partners already made a transition to more **short-term, online and thematic engagement options** (IR UCLL 2021).

Especially during the COVID-19 shutdown, many student-led organisations had to use **online platforms** for their regular meetings and mentioned that the increased use of online platforms helps to open opportunities to a broader range of students for whom on-campus activities may not have been as accessible. Flexible approaches to engagement can help to ensure that all demographics have access to engagement opportunities within Higher Education (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). The idea of student-led organisations to pursue a **blended system** where half of the meetings are online is one direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic - not only regarding student engagement but also for regular lectures (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021, PC DHBW 2021). Additionally, physical accessibility barriers for students can be reduced with the possibility of online engagement (FG MU 2021). Moreover, the exchange with students especially on a national and international level can be simplified by online meetings. As an example, online meetings can be very useful for organising focus groups with students, limiting accessibility issues with regards to transport, finances etc. (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). Nevertheless, while members of student-led organisations were in agreement that online interaction mixed with in-person, social opportunities would be desirable, they also agreed that online engagement can never fully replace in-person engagement, mainly because student engagement thrives on social interaction between students (FG Survey ESU USI 2021, PC DHBW 2021).

Another participation opportunity mentioned in regard to identification and time problems of NTS was short-term engagement, or short-term engagement with a thematic focus. Some organisations have already established **short-term** engagement opportunities (e.g. project-based participation or organising a certain event) and **thematic** engagement opportunities (e.g. projects about sustainability or a 'decolonized book club'), preferably both. This is a big transition from the more traditional, long-term, integral and non-specific work of student councils and associations and needs a systematic and cultural change from the side of the institution but also from the student-led organisations (IR UCLL 2021). Especially with regard to NTS, thematic engagement was considered a good way to introduce students to participation within institutions. NTS might have very specific needs that can be expressed through thematic engagement opportunities, e.g. LGBTQIA+ projects. Institutions and student-led organisations can proactively ask students to join for a specific and thematic 'project' in addition to more traditional ways of student participation and representation (IR UCLL 2021, FG MU 2021, FG DHBW 2021).

5.4.2 Visibility of diversity without stigmatisation

The self-identification as a non-traditional student can already constitute a barrier for many students because the term has a negative connotation (FG DHBW 2021, FG UCLL 2021). As we have stated before, the term 'non-traditional student' means first and foremost that the student differs from the average student on the basis of various diversity characteristics and should in no case be immediately assessed as a disadvantage. Consequently, one aim of this project is to achieve the normalisation of diversity within PHE through the integration of NTS into policy-making processes. For this to happen, however, the visibility of NTS as integral members of the PHE community must be strengthened. This starts with **adapting promotional materials** for the institution but also for student-led organisations to appeal to more than just the stereotypical student (FG DHBW 2021). Furthermore, **special positions or quotas** can help to strengthen the representation of diversity characters on boards and committees. Some student-led organisations already established specific positions in student councils and specific roles for non-traditional students e.g. Mature Students Officer to increase their visibility as members of the student body (FG Survey ESU USI 2021). Another example is the European Student Union, which ensures that 50% or more of their committee positions are filled by women (Higher Education Authority 2016, S.23). As is usually the case with the introduction of quotas, such measures are often temporary until the new, more diverse constellations are perceived as the norm.

5.4.3 Support system for non-traditional students

In order to increase student engagement of non-traditional students, the overall strategy must be to adequately support students who face particular challenges during their studies. This **support system** can consist of financial support but also counselling services (FG MU 2021, FG DHBW 2021). For this purpose, permanent **counselling instances** must be available at every campus in order to facilitate access to counselling services for students (FG DHBW 2021, IR MCAST 2021). Access services and departments in PHE Institutions have a role to support NTS with space, information and resources to give them the opportunity to successfully navigate through their studies. The existence of these departments and services acknowledges the extra difficulties these groups of students face in accessing and participating in education. They can act as a support network and a resource for referring to other services such as Careers services, Academic Skills services, Counselling services (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

In addition, **coaching and mentoring formats** should be proactively offered to all students on a regular basis in order to prevent the stigmatisation of non-traditional students. Counselling should be the norm and not the exception in order to identify problems of students during their studies at an early stage and to find appropriate measures (FG DHBW 2021). Coaching and mentoring should also be extended to specific support for student engagement activities and thus beyond the more traditional study-oriented coaching and mentoring formats, this being one of the most effective ways for supporting student engagement in general.

Child care centres can also support students with caretaking responsibilities to spend more time on their studies but also to set up extracurricular activities such as participation in student-led organisations (IR UCLL 2021).

Another support option that should be expanded, especially in PHE institutions with fixed theory and practice phases such as the DHBW, is the possibility to take a semester off, to extend studies or to postpone examinations in order to offer students more flexibility and the possibility to react to sudden changes in their environment without having to neglect their studies (FG DHBW 2021, FG Survey ESU USI 2021, PC DHBW 2021).

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

One of the reasons students engage within student-led organisations in the beginning of their studies is to connect with other students and to increase their social network. Student events organized by student-led organisations are one of the main contact points between the organisation members and the students. They help to get in touch with the students and the events make the work of the student-led organisation tangible (PC DHBW 2021). Especially during COVID-19, physical meetings have not been possible and students have been overcharged with non-filtered, non-personal communication messages (FG UCLL 2021). Many student-led organisations but also institutions see an increased need in giving students physical 'points of contact' and to organise more social activities aimed especially at non-traditional students e.g. an inclusive large event (FG UCLL 2021, FG MCAST 2021). The accessibility of events organised by student-led organisations should be expanded in order to create different thematic spaces in which students can get to know each other. This is not primarily about recruiting new members but about creating confidence and proximity between students and student-led

organisations and presenting them as a network within the institution. In addition to that, students are more encouraged to participate when activities are being organised by their peers rather than by the educational institution itself (FG MCAST 2021). The initiative to organise such events needs to come from the student-led organisations, but the universities need to create the space and remove systematic barriers for student-led organisations to easily organise such events (FG MU 2021).

Another way of getting in touch with students in general and NTS more specifically is to establish Social Media channels, to disseminate information and to also collect feedback on students' well-being, this being a very low-threshold point of contact between student-led organisations and NTS (PC DHBW 2021).

5.4.5 Impact of student-led organisations within the institution

It's important to establish structures within an institution that allow interaction between students and that allow them to organise themselves to **unify their actions** (FG Survey ESU USI 2021, FG MU 2021). Furthermore, **the power of student-led organisations** within the PHEI should be increased. For instance, the Flemish Parliament voted a rule upon the request of one NUS that stated that during the pandemic student representatives had to be consulted within every decision concerning their situation (IR UCLL 2021). Many other higher education institutions already have a good policy on student engagement, for example there are institutions that have a specific statute for student representatives that allows them to postpone deadlines, exams or even to postpone their studies for a specific period to dedicate themselves fully to student engagement activities (generally in combination with a scholarship or other form of payment through the HEI). However, this system is much more common in academic universities than in PHEIs. (FG Survey ESU VVS 2021, IR DHBW 2021). But also, on a national and international level, the impact of student representation and the cooperation with Governmental Departments and Officials is important for students registered with Professional Higher Education to ensure their needs are being met (FG survey ESU USI 2021).

5.4.6 Network between different levels of student-led organisations

Student engagement operates at various levels, ranging from course representatives to student representatives present on boards and making policy decisions within the institutions. NTS tend to have more direct contact with the lower levels of student engagement e.g. the student representatives on course level. One way to represent the interests of non-traditional students without their direct participation is to network the different levels of student engagement more closely and to strengthen the exchange between course, faculty and institution levels (PC DHBW 2021, IR MU 2021). This networking already seems to work well in some cases, especially between local and national levels, where national student unions regularly liaise with the institutional student-led organisations (FG ESU 2021).

5.4.7 Inform and professionalize teachers for different student needs

Professors, teachers or lecturers as the most direct institutional contact are very crucial for the inclusion of NTS in PHE institutions. Often, professors also act as intermediaries between students and the respective institutional support structures. In order to be able to respond to the special needs of the students, lecturers should, if possible, be **made aware of students' needs** prior to their first lectures (FG MCAST 2021). To ensure that this initial process of getting to know each other is not perceived as a hurdle by the students because they fear stigmatisation from the teaching side, it is important to **train the professors** specifically to handle these complex situations. The aim should be to create a welcoming (class) community despite the different profiles (FG UCLL 2021, IR MCAST 2021), this asking for teacher training in inclusive teaching strategies. In dual systems, the industry partners should also be regularly informed by the higher education institution about the inclusion of NTS, as in these systems often only half of the contact with the student is established through the educational institution and the other half through the industry partners (PC DHBW 2021, FG DHBW 2021).

5.4.8 Guidelines and policies for and from non-traditional students

One often used and effective way of the involvement of NTS is the creation and implementation of **policies and guidelines for and from non-traditional students**. This can also include non-traditional students quality committees that vote on previous resolutions of student-led organisations and assess them for inclusivity (IR UCLL 2021). USI, for example, has created Advisory Groups, chaired by the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship. These Advisory Groups are for specific, targeted cohorts of students to participate in ensuring the breadth and scope of USI's work is considerate of the many different perspectives and issues within higher education. This includes students with impairments, students with migration background, international students, students with caretaking responsibilities, mature students and LGBTQIA+ students (FG Survey ESU USI 2021).

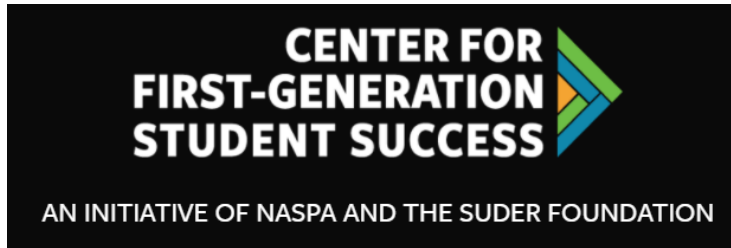
5.4.9 Paying Students / Include student engagement in the curricula

Another possibility to increase student engagement for non-traditional students and help them to fit their studies and the time for student engagement into their schedule is to **integrate student engagement as an optional choice or mandatory element into the curricula**. When choosing the mandatory 'elective choice course' student participants should be able to choose 'student participation' and use these study hours to improve their skills and follow intervision sessions with other student participants (IR UCLL 2021). In addition to giving credits for student engagement, some institutions have started to **pay students to work on campus** or for their involvement in quality, management and governance processes. In this way, these students have fewer financial problems and can blur the line between staff and student-led organisation members (Higher Education Authority 2016, p. 23). E.g. in the UK, it's common that the certain positions in the university student union are full time for a year, paid by the student union or (indirectly) the university. Typically, students pause their studies during that year so they can dedicate the entire year on their student engagement work.

6 Good practices

In order to meet the needs of the diverse student body, Professional Higher Education institutions 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 national or international level. In the following we would like to present a few good practice examples for making NTS engage with their institutions and student-led organisations. The examples have been tagged with various hashtags that indicate the target group, the topic and the engagement level.

6.1 Initiative: Center for First Generation Student Success



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #FirstGenerationStudent #GroupAwareness #Connection #InternationalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

Centre for First-Generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA (the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession) and The Suder Foundation, is the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students. The Center for First-generation Student Success responds to ongoing and emerging policy issues that intersect with first-generation college student identities.

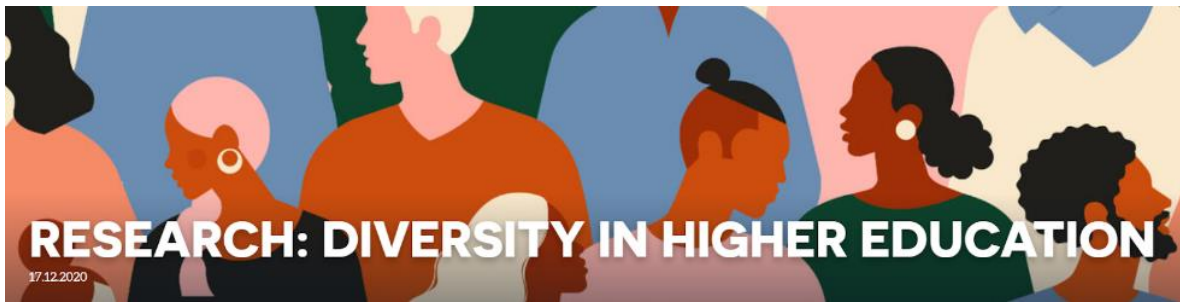
Target group

- First generation students

Activities

- Build engaged communities across higher education that foster, recognize, and celebrate excellence in serving first-generation student success
- Develop and promote scholarly research and data-informed practice as the primary clearinghouse for post-secondary education to advance first-generation student persistence and completion
- Create innovative programmes, drive evidence-based solutions, and provide professional development opportunities designed to drive systemic, scalable impact in improving first-generation student success
- Be a catalyst and thought leader for advancing critical first-generation student success conversations through national convenings, advocacy, and policy influence

6.2 The Board of Inspiration



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #MulticulturalBackground #InstitutionalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

All the involved students have a multicultural background and together with researchers of UCLL they identified 10 barriers for students with multicultural backgrounds in higher education. With their testimonials and input we try to tackle these challenges.

Target group

- Students with multicultural backgrounds

Activities

- Identify barriers for students with multicultural background in higher education

6.3 A-Crew

[URL](#)

Hashtags: #NonTraditionalStudents #InstitutionalLevel #GroupAwareness

Short description - What is it about?

Students with a “non-traditional story” (first generation students, students with a multicultural background, LGBTQIA + students, etc.) are engaged as student ambassadors and role models, known as the A-crew. They talk with (soon-to-be) students and/or their parents about their own experience, e.g. at secondary schools, information events at community centres, mosques, etc.

Target group

- All young people who are interested in studying
- especially young people with diversity characteristics

Activities

- As an ambassador you tell about your obstacles, your motivations, your pleasant experiences but also less pleasant moments. In this way you give the students a concrete view of student life.

6.4 Summer Start

[URL](#)

Hashtags: #FirstGenerationStudents #InstitutionalLevel #GroupAwareness

Short description - What is it about?

First generation students often struggle with low self-esteem and insecurities while starting higher education. By organising a (optional) Summer Start, UCLL gives them a head start by introducing them to teachers, fellow students, student services, etc. After this Summer Start, they can engage in a longer participatory project to keep in touch with each other and provide UCLL with 'inside-information' about barriers they experience throughout their learning experience.

Target group

- First generation Students

Activities

- The students meet fellow students, teachers and student counsellors and will work with them in various workshops.

6.5 Spectrum



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #GenderIdentity #SexualOrientation #GroupAwareness #InstitutionalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

Spectrum is a student-driven organisation that brings LGBTQIA+ students (and their allies) together. They share their coming out stories, organise chat-sessions and educate fellow students and UCLL staff on challenges for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Target group

- Members of the LGBTQIA+ community

Activities

- create a home where everyone is welcome, regardless of gender, sex, sexual preference, origin, education, educational institution
- provide input on the differences in gender and sexuality, pointing out the correct terminology.
- organise events for members and fellow students

6.6 Corporate Social Responsibility



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #EncourageParticipation #AllStudents #InstitutionalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

CSR – Community Social Responsibility - an initiative throughout MCAST that awards 2 credits for participating in inter-intra skills workshop and doing 20 hours of voluntary work to give something back to the community. This programme should help to develop and cultivate skills, attitudes and values for the real world and empower young and adult learners to become active citizens and be employable in a dynamic democratic society and economy.

Target group

- All Students

Activities

- MCAST students have had the opportunity to carry out community work through various areas such as the environment, culture, education, sports, social care, among others.

6.7 Diversity 4 Equality



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #NationalLevel #SocialEntrepreneurship #AllStudents

Short description - What is it about?

The Diversity 4 Equality student initiative aims to be a cross-cultural community of impact entrepreneurs that fosters the development of socio-business initiatives that promote inclusive development and contribute to reducing social inequality or environmental impact. Creating positive impact in our communities is what unites us and the shared purpose of reducing inequality gaps is what activates us as social entrepreneurs under the motto "mind the gap".

Target group

- All Students
- Communities in other countries

Activities

- create programmes based on accessible, open and understandable methodologies so that anyone who wants to can be an entrepreneur and create social impact
- Avant-garde transformation method based on learning through creation
- Transformational process through boot camps, mentoring and acceleration for winning teams of hosted challenges on the African and American continent

6.8 Wellbeing Hub

[URL](#)

Hashtags: #SupportService #AllStudents #InstitutionalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

Support Services within MCAST including Counselling and Career Guidance services

Target group

- All Students

Activities

MCAST provides services for students who need support. These Services include:

- Therapy Service
- Addiction-related issues
- Mental Health Services
- Nutritional Advice
- Tobacco Cessation Support
- Sexual Health Services

6.9 Learning Support Unit

[URL](#)

Hashtags: #InstitutionalLevel #LearningDifficulties #SupportService

Short description - What is it about?

LSU (Learning Support Unit) within MCAST provides extra-support for students with learning difficulties, including an EQF level 1 Award in Vocational Skills that helps students with learning disabilities or learning difficulties consolidate the skills necessary to gain and maintain employment or to further their education. The course includes basic training for the students to secure employment with lessons in Hospitality, Office Skills, and Production and Retail, as well as Key Skills such as Maltese, English, Mathematics, PSHE, IT, and Daily Living and Community Skills.

Target group

- Students with learning difficulties
- Student with impairments

Activities

- consider different teaching and learning strategies to help you acquire the basic skills in line with the set Key Skills syllabi, from the foundation programmes to higher level courses
- Support during foundation level courses
- Extra support in courses at other levels

6.10 I Belong



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #NationalLevel #Refugees #MigrationBackground #SupportService

Short description - What is it about?

I Belong Programme supports third country nationals and refugees in improving their language skills and knowledge of the Maltese history and culture, to ultimately complete the minimum requirement for a long-term residence status.

Target group

- Refugees
- Students with Migration Background

Activities

Offers the following courses:

- Stage 1: Pre-Integration Certificate
 - Maltese language for integration (MQF Level 1) - 20 hours
 - English language for integration (MQF Level 1) - 20 hours
 - Cultural orientation* (MQF Level 1) – 20 hours
- Stage 2: Integration Certificate (one of the requirements for Long-Term Residence Status)
 - Maltese language for integration (MQF Level 2) - 50 hours
 - Cultural orientation (MQF Level 2) - 120 hours

6.11 TEFCE Toolbox for Community Engagement in HE



[URL](#)

Hashtag: #SelfAssessment #Guidelines #InternationalLevel #AllStudents #Institutions

Short description - What is it about?

The objective of the TEFCE project is to develop innovative and feasible policy tools at the university and European level for supporting, monitoring and assessing the community engagement of higher education institutions.

Target group

- Higher Education Institutions and staff
- Students involved in community engagement

Activities

- provides a framework for universities to undertake a learning journey to discover the range of ways in which their staff, students and external communities cooperate,
- to determine the level of mutual benefits achieved through this engagement and to discuss in a participative way how community engagement can be further improved
- provides instructions to increase community engagement

6.12 Platform for Student Ideas and opinions

[URL](#)

Hashtag: #ParticipationOpportunities #AllStudents #NationalLevel

Short description - What is it about?

In Flanders you can find some examples of (internal) digital / online platforms for students (often inspired by local governments) that try to make it as easy as possible for all students to bring up new ideas and give their opinion on new projects. A known downside is that these platforms are expensive (production and maintenance) and mostly reach already highly involved students. Most platforms connected to a PHE institution have been taken offline, but local governments often use these platforms.

Target group

- Students

Activities

- Improving opportunities for students to get involved

6.13 NUS Tackling Lad Culture



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #Guidelines #InternationalLevel #Genderequality #Institutions

Short description - What is it about?

NUS Women's student campaigners network supports, organises and facilitates conversations on issues affecting disabled students at a local, national and international level. The network is open to all who self-define as women, including (if they wish) those with complex gender identities which include 'woman', and those who experience oppression as women. The NUS Tackling Lad Culture Hub aims to provide information about the NUS Women's campaign work on tackling Lad Culture and resources for students' unions who want to create their own local strategy to tackle Lad Culture.

Target group

- Institutions
- Student Unions

Activities

- Development of a benchmark tool to aim students' unions and institutions work together to create an effective joint strategy to tackle lad culture
- Development of a strategy guideline to tackle lad culture
- Launch of the #StandByMe consultation in April 2016
- Development of Training Modules

6.14 Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimensions of Higher Education in the EHEA



[URL](#)

Hashtags: #Guidelines #InternationalLevel #InclusivityInHE #Institutions #PublicAuthorities

Short description - What is it about?

The first paneuropean document that should help countries and HEIs to work effectively on strengthening the social dimension in HE, providing a holistic perspective on how to strengthen student engagement and inclusion through main higher education missions: learning and teaching, research, 3rd mission.

Target group

- Institutions
- Public authorities
- Policy makers

Activities

- Provides Guidelines for Institutions, policy and public authorities



7 Conclusion

The InclusiPHE project aims at making Professional Higher Education more inclusive and student engagement more open to all students. In a first step, a broad research has been conducted in order to better understand the characteristics of non-traditional students and the barriers and challenges they face in higher education. Some potentials and good practices have already been identified - and the next InclusiPHE steps will be to address them. For this purpose, the InclusiPHE consortium will set up Strategies and Guidelines for Inclusive Student Engagement in PHE institutions and Student-led Organisations and develop an online toolkit and training resources for Inclusive Student Engagement.

The research undertaken has included many stakeholder perspectives and also included the voices of (non-traditional) students themselves in semi-structured internal research conducted and several focus groups and interviews. This has left the research team with a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers NTS are facing in PHEs, but also with positive input to build upon.

In general, barriers to student engagement, in particular for non-traditional students, are related to the following steps that a student needs to take in order to be able to fully participate:

- Receiving or finding information about (formal) opportunities for engagement
- The process of (formal or informal) selection or election for specific roles/positions
- Having sufficient means to take part in student engagement, (e.g. time besides studies and other obligations like care for children or relatives), money to support this (i.e. instead of paid work)
- Guidance, training and support both in terms of gaining the practical knowledge and skills required as well as encouragements, boosts to self-confidence, 'role models', etc.

The research has also shown that our main mission is not to clearly identify what a non-traditional student is or is not, as this also depends on contextual factors and many aspects concerning internal and external factors of the student situation. We must recognize the risk of reducing non-traditional students to one characteristic that might or might not become a problem for them - the risk of tokenism and stigmatising students. The non-traditional student can be identified as someone who belongs to at least one of the three groups of underrepresented students, disadvantaged students or vulnerable students. We use the following definition:

In the InclusiPHE project context, every student who does not feel like an integral part of the student and institutional community and/or who, due to their specific circumstances, does not have the opportunity to get involved in student engagement during their studies is a non-traditional student, even if only to a small extent.

Overall, we've opted for an approach of diversity where it is also the students to decide how they identify. However, we must clearly identify and name barriers and challenges that students might be facing in professional higher education that might prevent them from feeling welcome and accepted - and from succeeding. Getting to know our students and the challenges they are struggling with is crucial - and so are solutions for getting in touch with them, of getting to know them, of receiving feedback from them - and of making them engage. This also means to rethink ways of engaging - and of showing what engagement is and means.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a large impact on all students' lives and study experience, sometimes affecting NTS even more. It has created new barriers to inclusive student engagement and to inclusive

studying on a more general level - but it has also shown some new potentials and good practices. Our task will be to learn from this real-life experiment and to listen to students in order to support them with all additional problems and barriers they may have faced - and to make all students succeed in their study journey.

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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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