



OUTPUT 8

A Multi-language toolkit: Social Inclusion, Diversity and Identity in Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

Partners on Embrace HE project



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Executive Summary

This document is part of the outputs of the EMBRACE HE project funded by the ERASMUS+ UK Agency and is running 2019-2022, project number KA203-5B5EC153.

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The report produced within the IO8 comprises a multi-language toolkit tackling the manner in which social exclusion that is based on diverse social and personal identities impacts the mental health and wellbeing of higher education students. Whilst doing so, it seeks to present potential solutions and recommendations based on existing examples of good practice, alongside contributing to the higher education community to enhance their approaches and ensure measures that are conducive to social inclusion and diversity at European HEIs. This will be additionally met through introducing valuable and constructive ideas to encourage social inclusion of HE Students regardless of their personal identities thus contributing to the positive impact on student mental health and well-being.

This particular toolkit deals with the social inclusion of the following groups of HE students:

- 1) migrants and refugees;
- 2) students with different physical and/or mental disabilities;
- 3) students of a certain gender identity and/or sexual orientation;
- 4) students of certain ethnicity and/or religious affiliation, and
- 5) students coming from various disadvantaged backgrounds (socio-economically deprived; students who come from rural or remote areas, students who belong to certain age groups, etc.)

The toolkit introduces comprehensive overviews of the state-of-affairs on the European continent when it comes to the impact of social exclusion and/or inclusion, diversity and different social and personal identities of HE students on their mental health and wellbeing. This segment of the toolkit, therefore, introduces the most frequent challenges and obstacles related to students' social inclusion in HE institutions around Europe, the primary origins of the recognised problems, how and why they affect HE students' mental health and wellbeing, and what consequences such problems produce in relation to students' academic achievements, as well as their social lives and carrier development.

Furthermore, the toolkit introduces good and innovative practices, procedures and/or measures applied on various European HE institutions with the aim of supporting and promoting social inclusion of diverse students' groups with specific identities, and thereby positively affect their mental health and wellbeing. For each of the afore-mentioned specific identity there are at least three examples of good practice at various European HE institutions which can further inspire and motivate HE institutions around Europe to apply the same or similar practices and measures, or even take a few steps further in the right direction.

Finally, the toolkit presents a hands-on approach comprising concrete self-reflection tools and/or activities intended for the teaching and non-teaching HE staff with the aim of empowering students' social inclusion, diversity and identity at HE institutions. The afore-mentioned hands-on self-reflection tools include practical recommendations for HE staff how to approach the matter of social inclusion and/or exclusion in their classrooms and their overall practice, how to identify specific issues, situations and challenges, as well as how to seek a proper solution to mitigate and/or solve the problem. The tool comprises a set of generic questions that can help the HE staff create a general ambiance in which diversity will be embraced and respected, and a set of identity-specific questions which can help HE staff address particular problems in relation to a specific identity of a student or a group.

1. Identifying obstacles to social inclusion of **students with migrant/refugee**

status in higher education

This section of the toolkit focuses on the experience of migrants in the higher education sector, specifically examining the situation of asylum seekers and refugees. As the terms refugee and asylum seeker are loaded with negative meanings, in line with current language protocols, this section uses the term ‘forced migrants’, unless specifically writing about policies, for instance, in which the terms asylum seeker and refugee are used and, therefore, are authentic to the terminology in use in those documents.

Social inclusion and ensuring general student wellbeing, is part of the arena of social justice and civic engagement that HEIs want to be seen to be active within (Beneworth 2021). In considering the importance of social inclusion in HE environments, Kilpatrick and Johns (2014) state that in order to maintain a level of sustainability, activities to promote social inclusion must be implemented and occupy a high priority in HE strategy and activities. Academic belonging for students, and skills such as self-motivation, self-efficacy and performance, long promoted as important by HEIs, are vital to fostering a sense of inclusion and security (Allen et al., 2018). Research has also shown that effective inclusion and belonging can protect against the onset of mental health problems (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2019; Scharpf et al., 2020). This is particularly important when considering the high number of migrant youths that are noted to present with symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Spaas et al., 2021).

Whilst mental health concerns are important, wider community wellbeing is too. The UNCHR (2016: 30) explain that highly educated forced migrant students can often become leaders in their communities, are able to campaign for better conditions for their diaspora and to negotiate and bridge gaps between their communities and other groups in societies. In this way they can contribute to peace, security and stability at local, regional and national levels. This level of community cohesion cannot be reached without a proportional number of migrant students receiving tertiary education. The consequence of the lack of access to HE can, therefore, mean entire communities can become excluded

from inclusion in public life/discussion regarding health services, employment and other pivotal areas. Exclusion leads to lack of voice, engagement and wellbeing and ultimately leads to poor mental health and wellbeing.

2. Identifying obstacles to social inclusion of **students of different gender and sexual identity**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2021) affirms that education is a fundamental human right for everyone. However, learning environments in universities are not always inclusive. Women, men, sexual and gender minorities are among the most common group of identities that face various obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in higher education system and lead to social exclusion.

Sexual and gender minorities experience a range of unique health disparities, and overall face a disproportionately high burden of mental health issues. In a systematic review, Ploderl and Tremblay (2015) reported elevated mental health problems for sexual minority individuals compared to heterosexual counterparts. Being part of a sexual minority appears to increase the risk of depression, anxiety, suicide attempts or suicides, and substance use problems and addiction. All sexual minority subgroups were at increased risk, but bisexual individuals have higher levels of mental health problems. Another review showed that transgender have higher rates of depression, suicidality and self-harm, and eating disorders when compared with their peers. The review has demonstrated increased rates of psychiatric morbidity among transgender youth (Connolly et al., 2016). Although visibility and activism have contributed to the advancement of sexual and gender minorities rights, stigma, discrimination, and hate crimes of these populations persist and negatively affect mental wellbeing (Meyer, 2015).

Sexual and gender minorities have become more visible due to the fact that members of this community have been identifying as a part of this group at a younger age than before. Students are now going into higher education institutions being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity as opposed to coming out after graduating from these institutions (Cegler, 2012).

The fact that young prospective students are part of the LGBT+ community has now become a factor that universities need to take into consideration while discussing the social inclusion issues.

3. Identifying obstacles to social inclusion of **students with sensory disability and motoric disability**

Creating inclusive classroom environments means promoting a sense of belonging by cultivating relationships grounded in trust (Abdelmaaboud, Polo Peña & Mahrous, 2021; Miller, Williams, & Silberstein, 2019). According to the Gilmour (2021), adopting a pedagogy of kindness, where instructors show authentic investment in students' success, humanize themselves by sharing their experiences and worlds, and convey positive regard for students, facilitates teaching-learning success. Research in the Netherlands by Snijders et al. (2021) and Leenknecht et al. (2019) concludes that building positive relationships in the classrooms and communities assists the process of engagement in academic and non-academic activities. Hughes (2020) reinforces that relationship building is crucial for the students' sense of safety, voice, and participation. Hughes and Spanner (2019) in "The University Mental Health Charter" describe how compassionate leadership and whole-university frameworks of support bolster students from diverse backgrounds well-being and flourishing.

The three core elements of culturally relevant teaching are:

1. Student learning: focuses on intellectual development, academic success, the ability to problem-solve and reason using one's values and beliefs.
2. Cultural competence: spotlights the developing students' cultural competence to assist students in developing positive ethnic and social identities, and
3. Critical Consciousness: supporting students to identify, deliberate, tackle real-world problems and develop capacities to recognize and critique societal inequalities. This requires engaging students' cultural communities and connecting course learning with their prior experiences,

cultural knowledge, values, and interests.

Hence, HE instructors need to build on their students' personal and cultural experiences and their culture's prior knowledge. By doing this, classroom practices are more justice-oriented and reflect the social context of their students and the community and are mindful of students' diverse needs (Pilotti, & Almubarak, 2021; Pilotti et al., 2019).

4. Identifying obstacles to social inclusion of **students of different race, ethnicity and religion**

HE students of various ethnicities and religions are under-represented in HEIs. According to Baltà, Olmedo-Torre and Peña (2020), in the US and Europe there are large differences in university enrolment rates and academic performance according to ethnicity and place of birth. In terms of religion, the position of HE institutions has changed throughout history, with HE institutions initially being highly religious, whereas today they are more secular institutions (Aune & Stevenson, 2016). In Bullivant's (2018) survey covering some European countries, it was shown that the majority of young adults have no religious affiliation. However, those who were affiliated were mainly Christian and Protestant, whereby Muslims, Jews and other non-Christian religions were less represented. Consequently, non-Christian religions are underrepresented in European HE.

The low participation rates of these groups in HE is the result of a variety of factors including acculturation processes, their minority status and therefore numerical inferiority, socio-economic difficulties and at the structural level how diversity and participation policies function within HE institutions. EU countries dispose of an HE Inclusion Policy, where measures and actions take place in relation to three branches:

- a) access,
- b) retention/completion and,
- c) employability.

However, the main challenges persist as follows: the development of specific strategies to upgrade diversity, enhance recognition of prior learning, acknowledge employability rates in disadvantaged students and improve monitoring of diversity rates (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2016). Therefore, there is a strong need to reinforce support services which encourage social inclusion and provide academic, spiritual, economic, social and psychological support within HE minority students. Some of the main challenges related to religion and ethnicity that students face in HE, include social exclusion, dropout, poor academic performance, racism, religious discrimination, economic problems, lack of academic and psychological support, beyond others (Gholami, 2021; Arday, 2018; Espinosa, et al., 2019; Graham & Boyd, 2011; Allen & Wolniak, 2019).

4. Identifying obstacles to social inclusion of **students of socio-economic deprivation/remote and rural environments and age**

Partner countries participating in this particular project come from different socioeconomic contexts and backgrounds and each situation, whether it be strictly related to higher education or observed from a wider social perspective, needs to be perceived from a country-specific context.

Generally speaking, all partner countries encounter various issues relating to the accessibility of higher education for students who come from unfavourable socio-economic background, but also for those who live in remote areas and who have enrolled for higher education later than expected. Some of the partner countries struggled with the afore-mentioned issues even before the infamous global economic crisis, but for most countries the issues became even more conspicuous after this global event. In addition to leaving a significant negative impact on students as main beneficiaries of higher education, higher education institutions also face various challenges relating to the quality of education, the number of students applying for different scientific fields and profiles, the loss of public funding, etc.

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