THREE PILLARS FOR BETTER INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Universities around the world are developing strategies for inclusion. This policy level attempts to strengthen social responsibility in higher education - universities reflect a number of perspectives to promoting equality and non-discrimination in relation to their organizational values. In this paper, we explore inclusion in universities through three perspectives: ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background. Firstly, we present an outline of a European development project addressing these perspectives to form a better understanding of the causes and effects of these social categories to the experiences of students and staff members in universities. Secondly, we reflect on the critical points identified in the project to inform academics about concrete steps for a more inclusive higher education. Thirdly, we discuss what measures can be taken to disseminate and mainstream these findings to the attention of decision makers in higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Equity, diversity and inclusion have become key policy incentives for higher education institutions (HEIs) in the European higher education area. These incentives are highlighted in educational policies of institutions like the European Union, OECD and UNESCO. In order to facilitate change for more inclusive higher education, eucen[7], the European Universities Continuing Education Network, has launched a development project to address these incentives among its own network of higher education institutions.

The SMILE project[8], co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission, addresses three perspectives relevant to equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education: migrant background students, women in leadership in higher education and low socio-economic status students. In the project, we call these perspectives the three pillars for inclusion in higher education (HE). Carried out in universities in six different EU countries with the help of social partners representing the civil society, the project intends to pinpoint the main challenges of each pillar and to understand the experiences of the affected individuals in the aforementioned disadvantaged social categories. With this understanding,

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[7] European university continuing education network: www.eucen.eu
[8] Social Meaning Impact through LLL universities in Europe: https://smile.eucen.eu

the project aims to create tools to help HEIs address the identified problems with the final objective of making universities more aware and inclined to dismantle discriminative structures and act against discriminative approaches in the academic community.

This rationale of the SMILE project is rooted in the Erasmus+ programme key action "Social inclusion and common values", and the sub-programme "Support to Policy Reform". In this framework, the European Commission expects project consortiums to explore policy challenges in Europe and possible solutions or recommendations to better any current matter that needs improvement from policy level and into society. The final objectives of this type of call foresee results (or at least contributions to the current European debate) to be focused and with a useful set of tools and/or results at the end of the funded period. Stemming from this framework, the eucen has offered to take the lead in facilitating change in European universities for a more inclusive higher education for all citizens and stakeholders.

PERSPECTIVES OF ETHNICITY, GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND IN UNDERSTANDING STUDENT AND STAFF EXPERIENCES

A number of research and policy reports indicate that EU countries face similar diversity and inclusion challenges across the HEIs. These reports, like the Education and Training Monitor (2018)[9], highlight an important, yet alarming state of inclusion in the European higher education area. Despite the attention to inclusion present in the HEIs, an overview of policy measures to broaden educational attainment shows that less than half of EU countries set specific targets to support participation of under-represented groups in HE. Hence, research and policy reports emphasize the need for HEIs as research and knowledge centres, in taking responsibility to implement internal transformation, and to incite and lead societal changes in their surrounding environments.

Following these findings, the eucen-initiated SMILE project focuses on social categories of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background in higher education. These categories are explored via a metaphor of three pillars of diversity: migrant background students, women in leadership in HE, and low socio-economic status students. Based on a review of research and policy literature, we identified a research gap in collecting data on experiences of individuals in these social categories with a focus on lifelong learning. Within the topic of ethnicity, evidence of inequities and challenges of minorities in higher education has been reported by the European Students Union (ESU) (ESU, 2016). Furthermore, accounts on gender equality in research and research leadership been shared by the European University Association (EUA). In addition, the European Commission has reported on the conditions of third-country nationals across the EU in terms of employment, education, and social inclusion (Joint Working Group, 2017). The consensus of these aforementioned accounts is that individuals from the above social categories are at risk of facing inequality and discrimination in European HE.

Based on this review of research and policy literature, we identified the need to form a better understanding of the authentic experiences of individuals representing the mentioned social categories, to contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and effects to lifelong learning and career advancement of these social groups.

In order to understand these perspectives, the project established Focus Advisory Groups (FAGs) in universities in six countries. In these FAGs, stakeholders from universities and social partners discussed current challenges and inequities and prepared a report on each pillar to highlight the critical points that need to be addressed. Based on this, the project will

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[9] https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/volume-1-2018-education-andtraining-monitor-country-analysis.pdf

develop a Diversity Audit Model for HEIs to reflect upon and self-assess how diversity is addressed in their institution. The project will also develop a set of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to train HE staff on diversity and inclusion matters. To conclude, the SMILE project will create policy recommendations to make the challenges more visible to policy makers at institutional, national and European levels.

The SMILE project consortium is formed by 11 partners from eight different countries and comprises six universities and five associations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as social partners. We foresee that this balance between HEIs and civil society assists in forming a better understanding of the challenges that diversity and inclusion present for both parties (i.e., society and HEIs) and facilitates potential solutions that consider the perspectives of all actors involved.

This approach was stimulated by experiences from another project coordinated by eucen, the HE4u2 project[10], carried out from 2016-2018 to facilitate integration of newcomers and migrant background students specifically after the 2015 refugee crises in Europe. This project aimed to reduce disparities in learning outcomes that affected learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, the results from HE4u2 project provided eucen with a rationale to reflect on the need to continue working in the area of diversity and inclusion in order to improve the current approaches in HEIs. Stocktaking from this previous project encouraged eucen to design an outline for the SMILE project, keeping with the principles of co-creation and engagement, in order to give voice to the experiences of students and staff members to better understand how ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background forms conditions for learning and teaching in universities. As project work was carried out, we became increasingly aware of the notion of intersectionality, and started to examine situations when individuals from overlapping disadvantaged social categories enter higher education, and how these overlapping social categories can create additional challenges and discrimination in academia.

CRITICAL POINTS IN INCLUSION – WHAT STEPS TO TAKE?

As we started to work on the three perspectives for inclusion in higher education, the overlapping nature of disadvantageous social categories to individuals soon became apparent in the accounts collected. As accredited to Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics*, this overlapping nature of unfavourable social categories has been defined in research as intersectionality. In order to pave the way for more inclusive higher education, we must first reflect on the critical points in inclusion identified in the project, and then draw particular attention to the intersectional character of these points.

The Oxford dictionary defines intersectionality as:
> *"the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage"*.
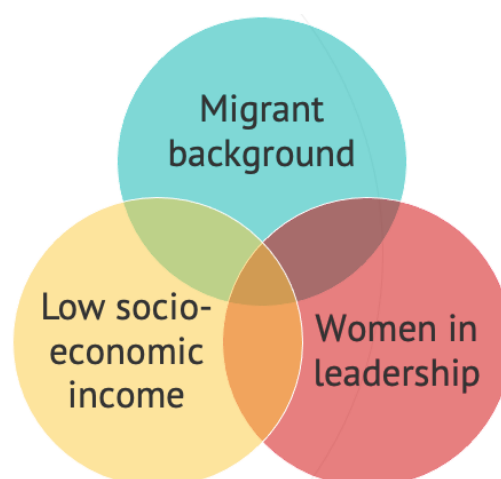

Figure 1. Intersectionality perspectives in the SMILE project

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[10] Integrating Cultural Diversity in Higher Education: https://he4u2.eucen.eu

During the first consultation phase of the project, while talking to the concerned minority groups, the three diversity and inclusion topics were clearly identified as overlapping situations. In practice, academics with a migrant background are less often offered the opportunity to assume managerial roles. If these academics also happen to be female, representation becomes even rarer.

Similarly, low socio-economic income students may include nationals but very often the students with a migrant background have more challenging situations economically. In general, students from migrant backgrounds also receive more pressure from their families to abandon their studies and start working in order to help at home. If they are women, the chances of them finishing their studies are certainly low.

Based on this finding of intersectionality of the disadvantaged social groups, the project advanced into the phase of desk research process. Nine of the SMILE partners were grouped by pillars at the beginning of the project. Two universities and one association worked together in each pillar as shown in *Figure 2*. The structure is not a coincidence, but a considered decision – one university from the north and another from the south of Europe were paired in each pillar to bring different perspectives to each pillar.

In parallel with the work carried out by each pillar, eucen and ESU also conducted transversal research on global pieces of literature from European organisations and official European papers discussing diversity and inclusion. These were identified and shared with the consortium.
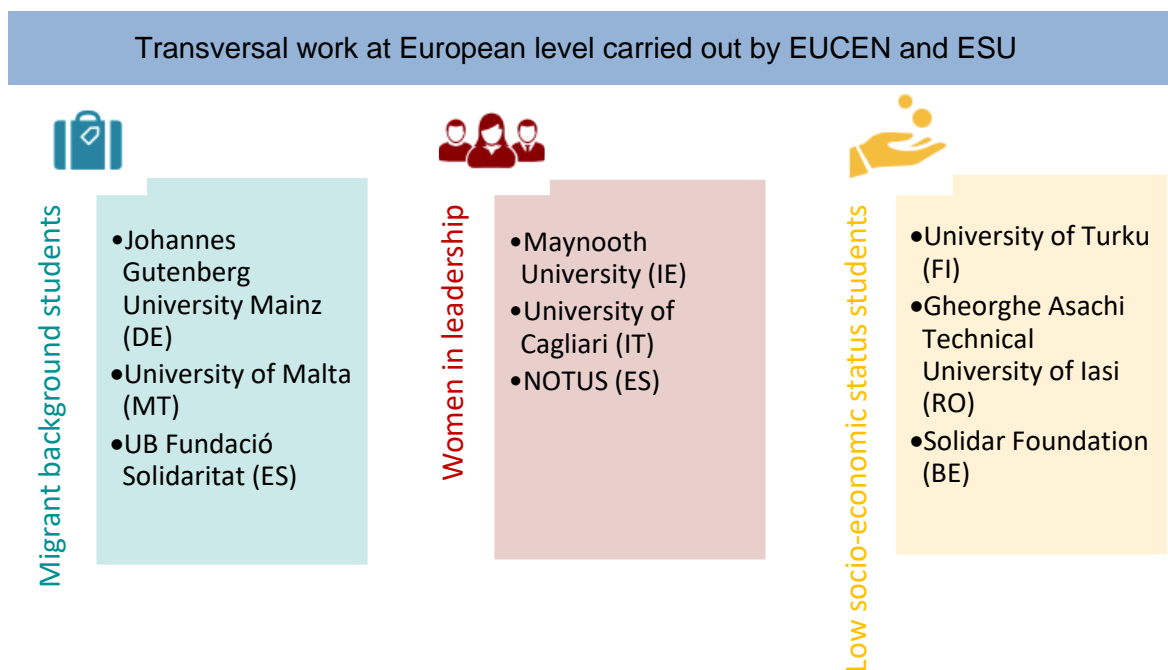

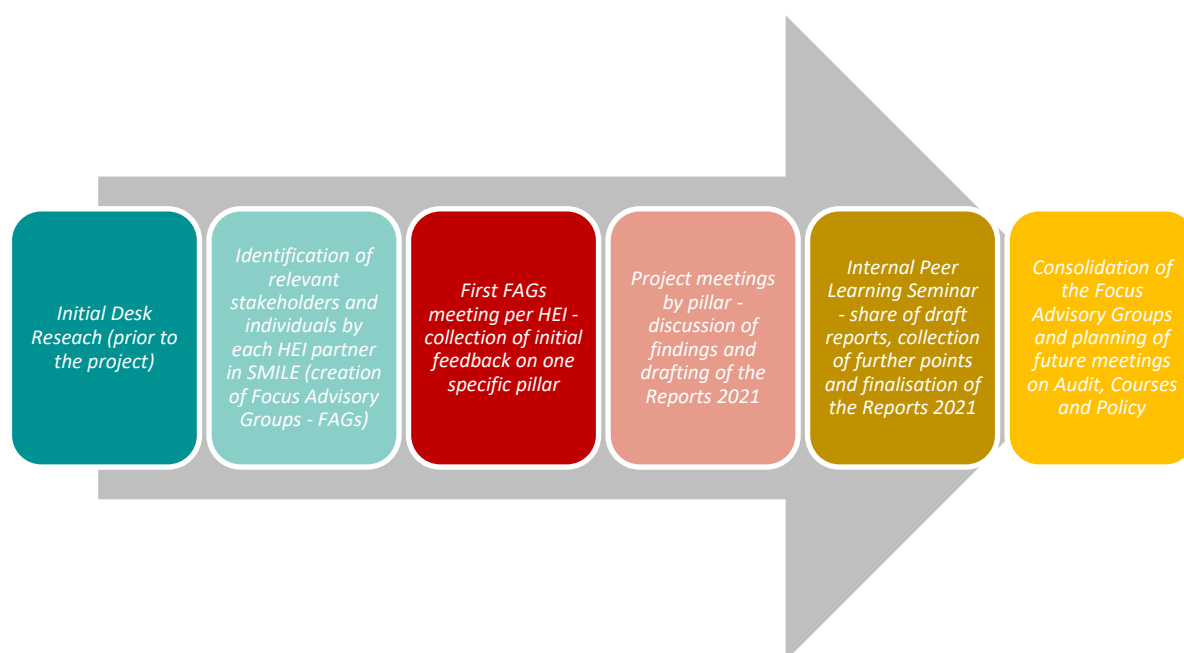*Figure 2. Distribution of project partners per Pillars of inclusion.*

Figure 3. Desk research process and external consultation in the SMILE project

Each partner identified local/regional individuals or associations that, somehow, could represent the minority group of their pillar. These identified groups became their "Focus Advisory Groups". The SMILE partners have consolidated discussion environments with these groups and consulted with them on different aspects of the project.

In the first phase of the SMILE project, each partner working with a Focus Advisory Group planned one or several meetings. This allowed them to collect general feedback regarding the challenges of the pillar they were working on – challenges of the group, ways society are already helping them, ways HEIs are involved in their needs, etc. Partners collected all the feedback and compared the answers from the different contributors within their pillar.

The project also organised an internal Peer Learning Seminar to discuss and contrast findings with the other members of the consortium. All partners were invited to reflect on the three pillars during one preparatory week, send comments, watch videos and read interesting articles. Furthermore, draft reports were presented during the seminar. Both the feedback collected during the Focus Advisory Groups and the discussions carried out during the Peer Learning Seminar were the basis for the writing of the SMILE Reports that can be found on the project website[11]. The three reports (one for each pillar) collect the different contributions and offer a short conclusion.

The other social partners (i.e., eucen and ESU) did a more global study, identifying European cases, approaches and examples both from university environments and from the point of view of students and their perspective. Based on this stocktaking of the state-of-the-art of inclusion in higher education institutions, the project will next create a diversity audit model, create CPD courses and create a set of policy recommendations and an action plan for policy makers at institutional, national and global levels. The authors think that these steps are relevant for inclusion of social groups representing ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background, and the individuals who identify with the overlapping nature of those categories within their own life experiences.

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[11] http://smile.eucen.eu/about-smile/

DISCUSSION

Dissemination of the aforementioned inclusion activities and tools is crucial in making inclusion a reality in European higher education. In order to disseminate and mainstream these outputs, the SMILE project is producing open source materials, licensed under the attribution 4.0 international (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence). The design and format of the materials will allow adaptation and transformation as needed. This means that any institution will be able to use or adapt the materials to their particular needs and benefit from the experience of those who have already used the original version.

Furthermore, eucen promotes the SMILE project through a global media approach, making use of a dedicated "Inclusive Europe" channel, available on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, which also publishes a periodical newsletter focusing on diversity and inclusion. This open approach is intended to highlight the topic and reach the highest number of people possible. Access to the Inclusive Europe social media is possible through LinkedIn[12], Facebook[13], Twitter[14] and a dedicated Newsletter[15].

Dissemination and mainstreaming actions depend, however, on how the project outputs are aligned to institutional strategies with respect to equality, inclusion and non-discrimination. Most EU countries have national policies covering equality and diversity at different levels. Similarly, universities have numerous competing demands on their capacity to develop strategies to implement the wide range of policy changes required in current global circumstances, especially the social issues raised by a changing economy, demographics, and growing inequality, in particular. This means that HEIs may be at different states or positions in developing diversity and inclusion policies in Europe. The biggest challenge is to establish a diversity-oriented university culture that perceives diversity as an opportunity for enrichment while also dealing with heterogeneity. This approach requires transversal work in designing structures, proposals, instruments and measures for various groups of students and staff members. It involves reflections and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders.

The SMILE project intends to facilitate this process for HEIs, taking into consideration existing tools and developing new tools, accompanying HEIs interested in going that extra mile in the promotion of genuine commitment, and support for the implementation of diversity and inclusion approaches.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we reviewed a framework of three perspectives in facilitating equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education: migrant background students, women in leadership in higher education, and low socio-economic status students. In the context of an Erasmus+ development project, eucen included the perspectives of both students and staff members to explore experiences of individuals and groups in these particular social categories. As the project work unfolded, it became evident that intersectionality would provide a more focussed lens for examining organizational policies and processes. With this lens, the project consortium was able to observe how the sense of belonging and inclusion may be further deteriorated in the intersections of these social categories, hence exposing the already disadvantaged individuals and groups to experiences of further discrimination in academia.

In conclusion, ethnicity, social class and gender are still drivers for advantage or disadvantage in education, and purposeful strategies need to be taken into use in higher

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[12] https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13929176/
[13] https://www.facebook.com/inclusive.eu
[14] https://twitter.com/EuropeInclusive
[15] https://mailchi.mp/26b889688d7b/inclusive-europe

education to enhance equity, diversity and inclusion.

Awareness raising and call for action are key in facilitating inclusion. However, in our analysis of the actions proposed by the project, a more clear alignment to institutional strategies is suggested. Increased coherence within the strategies may establish a common ground for the development of diversity-oriented university culture. In such a culture, questions of intersectionality can also be addressed. The tools developed by the project enable universities to carry out audits, build a genuine understanding of the responsiveness and relevance of their current diversity policies and practices, and plan the implementation of further strategies to improve present inclusive approaches.

Acknowledgement

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