

Policy Paper on Social Dimension – BM85

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General remarks about the concept of social dimension in higher education

Making higher education accessible to all has been an everlasting hallmark of student activism and higher education policy. A higher education system which is not accessible multiplies inequalities, instead of reducing them. Lack of access to an inclusive higher education hinders access to prosperity for the individual, but equally to the community and society as a whole, thus ingraining their scope in a wider movement of social justice.

In a world of complexity, challenges that require advanced skills and transitions, higher education gives crucial empowerment and agency for those who pursue it. For students already in higher education, supportive policies are essential to ensure

progress and completion of studies, and their absence turns into higher chances of dropout, mental health issues, dissatisfaction with their studies and possibly lost potential.

Social dimension policies, understood transversally and holistically, are the set of systems and measures in place to ensure everyone can benefit from higher education in an equitable manner. Starting with practices to ensure there are no formal barriers of entry, social dimension developed into a consistent concept of policies that cover access, progress, and completion through the lens of diversity, equity and inclusion and encompassing, apart from specific and proactive inclusivity policies, connections to matters pertaining to funding, institutional strategies, wellbeing policies and so on.

Designing and implementing social dimension policies at national and institutional level, as well as the interest of decision-makers, varies greatly between countries. While usually fairly similar in approach, they are adapted to national and local contexts based on particularities, funding models or historical reasons. Despite having different degrees of success, a truly equitable and inclusive access to quality education is an objective still to be reached everywhere in Europe.

1.2 Social dimension and international developments

At international level, stemming from the commitment to (higher) education as a human right, countries have expressed several objectives to make higher education more inclusive, but these commitments are seldomly monitored and enforced in a consistent manner. According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, higher education should be made accessible to all, 'in particular by the progressive introduction of free education'. Furthermore, the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights remarks that enforcing higher education as a human right requires availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability, all linked to inclusive higher education systems.

The most relevant developments related to the cooperation on social dimension policies came from the Bologna Process/European Higher Education Area, albeit at a later stage in comparison with other policy initiatives and mainly as a result of ESU's advocacy.

Understanding that a truly European higher education area cannot be fostered without putting students and their condition at the centre, in the London Communiqué the ministers committed themselves to social dimension as 'the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all

levels should reflect the diversity of our populations'[1]. This, however, remains an aspiration that is still very far from being achieved. In the Leuven Communiqué, countries agreed to 'set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education to be reached by the end of the next decade', while adopting an EHEA Strategy on equity and growth in 2015 through the Yerevan Communiqué.

Despite several high level commitments and decades of expectations from students, results in many national and international studies show that inequity based on socio-economic status, parental education, gender, country-of-origin, rural background and other factors remains an unacceptable reality in our Higher Education systems, with parental higher education background and income levels still the most accurate predictors of a higher education degree. While improvement has been shown, analysis of this improvement over the last 40 years shows that it could take over 100 years for disadvantaged groups to catch up with their more advantaged peers, should the current rate of improvement be maintained.[2]

In recent years, the Bologna Process went further from simply stating the objective to promote social dimension to agreeing on more detailed policy means and commitments. In the 2020 Rome Communiqué, an 'inclusive EHEA' has been agreed as one of the three overarching objectives to be achieved by 2030, with the first step being the agreement on the first comprehensive set of actions to be taken up, through the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of higher education in the European Higher Education Area ('PAGs').

The PAGs take forward the previous work within the EHEA and add to the definition of social dimension coined through the London Communiqué that social dimension encompasses a desired inclusive environment that fosters equity, diversity and is responsive to the needs of the local communities.

The PAGs are meant to set a foundation that ensures quality higher education is universally accessible, while guidelines have the role to interpret the principles and support their operationalisation in practice, with the public authorities (especially ministries of higher education) called to make sure that the agreed-upon shared ideas are effectively implemented in all EHEA countries. The PAGs are centred around 10 tenets: strategies on social dimension, flexibility, lifelong learning, data, guidance and counselling, funding, staff training and institutional mission, mobility, community engagement and policy dialogue.

While the adoption of the PAGs coincided with the most difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic, the inadequate response or even the lack of any response to properly support students in the aftermath of the pandemic, and even more during the cost of living crisis exacerbated by the energy crises and inflation, driven by the Russian aggression in Ukraine, show that there is still a lot to work on to ensure that the PAGs are fully internalised and transposed into meaningful action at national and institutional levels.

1.3 The concept of Social dimension from ESU's perspective

From students' perspective, social dimension policies should ensure that higher education is accessible and inclusive, allowing for completion of higher education by all individuals, regardless of their status or background. ESU strongly believes that access to higher education is not only a human right but is also fundamental to the functioning of a society.

To ensure that higher education reflects the diversity of society, governmental action entails more than widening accessibility clauses, but rather to steer away from the one size fits all approach and to put emphasis on systems that are able to offer tailored individual support, in an intersectional way, to foster a diverse student population.

While higher education should be free and all students should benefit from universal benefits in order to support access to and completion of higher education, category-based policies for disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented groups should be in place as well. The measures should span from before entry in higher education to after graduation and include both financial and non-financial support, as well as guidance, information, and counselling. Social dimension should move from a paradigm of 'lack of barriers' to one of 'guaranteeing opportunities', by fostering proactive measures at national, institutional and sub institutional levels. Social dimension must commit both to a horizontal coherent set of policies (such as funding, counselling, or promoting health and wellbeing) and touch upon and reinforce with other policy goals and tools, increasing synergies and ensuring best results. This pursuit requires seeing learning and teaching policies, research policies or measures to promote quality of education through a social dimension lens, as such promoting access and quality simultaneously. Furthermore, no successful social dimension overarching strategy can be implemented without sufficient funding: while governments can praise the importance of promoting the inclusivity of higher education, their commitment is commensurate also to the degree to which public resources are directed to this goal.

The value of non-discrimination is part and parcel of this process and is a cornerstone towards achieving comprehensive diversity within the system. Non-discrimination is not the end-goal, however, as mere tolerance should be superseded by a climate of inclusion, mutual care, safety, and diversity, with an intersectional and conscious approach taken with all issues.

At the same time, it needs to be understood that the so-called majority or minority groups are not necessarily actual groups (i.e. fixed entities with identifiable members). The term 'groups' simply signifies dominant categories that are in play in society and that describes ideas allotted to individual people who are believed to fit such labels.[3] It is therefore imperative to walk the fine line between falsely believing that individuals defined into a group all have the same needs and interests, or similarly falsely believing that since individual differences always exist and matter, including voices of people from marginalised groups is futile, unnecessary or impractical. Walking this line, we can move towards creating spaces and institutions which allow all individuals to flourish, and to realise their potential to the fullest.

In a nutshell, ensuring access requires proactive measures by states, considerations of policy areas not commonly thought of as related to Higher Education, cultural shifts and shifts in understanding in many fields, and a true commitment by all stakeholders to focus on the Social Dimension as a key priority in the field of Higher Education.

In the next sections of this policy paper, after presenting the wider benefits of education which urge the need to speed up the development of social dimension policies, we will present in more detail each of the components of students' understanding of what social dimension policies comprise of and how each contributes to achieving the end goal.

II. THE HOLISTIC ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education is a firmly established fundamental institution and part of our society, as well as one of the most important mechanisms to steer our way through social, cultural, and economic changes in our societies. It is key to ensuring a prosperous, stable and inclusive society, which makes decisions based on science-based evidence. However, this crucial role is put into jeopardy when higher education is not equally accessible or reflective of the diversity of the society, thus remaining a privilege of those with advantaged backgrounds.

Higher levels of education promote higher social inclusion [4], while also enabling citizens to better understand and make use of their rights, increasing their social,

political, and economical participation. As studies [5] show, people with higher education are more inclined to vote and to take part in public affairs, and in turn higher education should better equip them with active citizenship skills. Ensuring that every person within our society has the opportunity to further their education is not only fundamental to eradicating historically entrenched social inequalities, but also adds value in strengthening democratic societies and sustainable economies.

Having a higher education degree also increases one's life standards and consciousness of health prevention, as evidenced by the increased life expectancy for higher education graduates[6]. While pursuing an academic degree can create mental health issues, especially if adequate measures are not put in place by governments and higher education institutions, higher education graduates report increased wellbeing and can generally cope better with mental health issues[7]. All of this can be partly explained also by higher individual incomes associated with pursuing higher education.[8]

The benefits of higher education are spread widely also by securing diversity within the academic and administrative staff employed in Higher Education Institutions. They should also mirror the diversity in society. This is not only important for enhancing the quality of education and legitimacy of higher education as an institution, but also to ensure a welcoming, comfortable, and inclusive environment for diverse groups of students entering higher education.

The relevant body of research therefore suggests that making higher education fully accessible and free to everyone, beyond representing a universal human right, yields extremely positive outcomes beyond individuals, by representing the best investment in society. Collectively, these wider benefits sustain cohesive, democratic societies where social justice, public good and social mobility prevail.

III. STRATEGIES ON SOCIAL DIMENSION

3.1 Strategies on social dimension in national context

In order to create comprehensive, efficient and exhaustive policies that promote access to quality higher education for all, governments should enact strategies containing policy goals as well as qualitative and quantitative targets on social dimension, as well as regular action plans with concrete timeframes to put them in practice. These strategies and action plans should have sufficient legislative power and legitimacy, as well as accountability measures attached to their implementation.

The whole policy cycle should be marked by a co-creation with stakeholders, especially student unions and students from disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented groups. Given that people from marginalised backgrounds and conditions are often disregarded or lack power, a consistent culture of inclusion has to exist in policy-making. They should be empowered and treated as equal partners from the agenda setting and policy formulation to decision-making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and review.

The strategies and action plans should have dedicated bodies for oversight and implementation, clear division of responsibilities between various structures responsible for the social dimension of higher education, including other sectors of government, as well as adequate, consistent, and dedicated funding to ensure reaching the desired goals.

The promotion of social dimension through governmental policies should include both universal and need-based policies for all students, as well as tailored policies for identified disadvantaged, vulnerable, or underrepresented groups. These policies should be created in a lifelong learning approach and agreement should be pursued with all the relevant decision-makers. As the student life is not impacted exclusively by educational policies, and other circumstances equally impact student living and success, cooperation should be achieved with authorities in charge of finance, employment, health and social welfare, housing, migration and so on.

In order to make best use of the national architecture and frameworks for higher education, the strategies and action plans should divide responsibilities between different levels of public authorities, horizontally and vertically (national, local public authorities and if applicable regional authorities), as well as between public authorities and higher education institutions.

The division of responsibilities between public authorities and higher education institutions should be based on national context and agreed between them, together with stakeholders. When responsibilities for promoting the social dimension of higher education falls under the competence of higher education institutions, public authorities should provide funding and find an adequate balance between regulation and incentives.

Irrespective of the agreed model of shared responsibilities, students should have a legally recognised and enforceable right to inclusive higher education systems and higher education institutions should foster this by their irreplaceable role, as the institutions closest to student life.

Higher education institutions should have in place their own institutional strategies on social dimensions, and the same principles outlined above on their life-cycle and student co-creation should apply. These strategies should go beyond measures related to social dimension seen in a silo and integrate these principles into the core higher education missions: learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge circulation and outreach, institutional governance, and management.

3.2 Strategies on social dimension in international context

European cooperation for enhancing the social dimension of higher education is essential and its role has grown over the time. Under the European scope of cooperation lies the importance of sharing best practices, as well as agreeing on common goals. As European higher education systems become increasingly interconnected, it is even more relevant to guarantee that a student pursuing a degree in any European country benefits from a set of minimum protections. For ESU, this set of universal rights are enshrined in our [Student Rights' Charter](#) and a dedicated chapter focuses on social dimension.

We are appreciating positively the development under way in the Bologna Process and the momentum given to promoting an inclusive EHEA. While EHEA is currently the fora where social dimension is put at the forefront the most, making an inclusive EHEA a reality for all students is still far from sight. Also generally outlined in our [statement on the future of the Bologna Process](#) from BM84, ESU believes that after the ministers will have agreed on indicators for the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines on Social Dimension, a robust monitoring and peer-support system should be put in place. Furthermore, the work in Bologna on social dimension could be pursued with objectives such as supporting evidence-based impact assessment of social dimension policies and fostering links with other policy areas.

Simultaneous developments are taking place in the European Education Area, which the European Union aims to achieve by 2025. One of the actions dedicated towards the creation of EEA is the adoption of an inclusivity framework.

ESU strongly underlines that a European Education Area cannot be achieved without having inclusivity at heart. In this sense, ESU considers that the EU's role is to support and enhance the implementation of the already agreed upon Principles and Guidelines on Social Dimension, not to create parallel structures. In this sense, three measures stand out: the creation of synergies of funding streams between various EU resources (Erasmus+, Cohesion funds, National Recovery and Resilience Plans etc) in order to support the social dimension of higher education, its infrastructure and

students, setting up and promoting the achievement of concrete targets on social dimension, and promoting tools to ensure that EU initiatives within the EEA are themselves inclusive, including inclusive mobility through funds for Erasmus+ that sufficiently cover the need for adequate grants to support the participation of all students, irrespective of the background, in physical mobility opportunities. To assess progress, the proposed Higher Education Observatory should monitor social dimension policies and the student social condition together with stakeholders.

Several initiatives are being rolled out at the level of EEA, especially the creation of European University Alliances. ESU believes that the inclusivity framework should include specific measures in place to support the inclusivity of Alliances, so that all students can take part in their activities. Apart from the topic of access to mobility, this entails making sure that the proposed European degrees do not create two tier systems that transform the European degrees in elitist study programmes. Among the areas which are taken into account in relation to setting up European degrees, ESU believes that the component of social dimension is severely understated. If European degrees are to be created, this will require common admission systems and student support systems that are open to all students. The funding models should not allow for European degrees where higher fees are introduced, or students are not eligible for the same level of financial assistance.

All these elements should be encompassed in a revision of the 2012 Council Conclusions on social dimension, including a minimum set of investments for student support services that could take the form of a Council Recommendation.

IV. SOCIAL DIMENSION AS A TRANSVERSAL POLICY GOAL

The Social Dimension of Higher Education needs to be seen by all stakeholders as a core value and priority in the policy area of Higher Education. Prioritising the Social Dimension is an essential step in creating the kind of society that we students strive for: a society that is equal, intelligent, diverse, safe, prosperous, and sustainable.

While social dimension should apply transversally across higher education architecture, organisation, regulation, and policy, it should itself be broad and offer an intersectional understanding of access. In order to achieve free education for all students, it is not enough to abolish tuition fees, if a lack of available housing, or high rental costs mean that those from disadvantaged backgrounds will be forced to work throughout their studies while not being able to have enough time for study, drop out or avoid HE altogether. Policy making in a way that focuses on access is undoubtedly more difficult and burdensome than the alternative of using one-size-fits-all

measures, but it is essential if we wish to stop excluding people from facets of society meant for everyone.

4.1 Social dimension in recognition

Recognition is a gateway for further studies and access to the labour market. As such, a recognition system which is not inclusive can pose additional barriers to already disadvantaged students. ESU believes that simple, flexible, effective, non-discriminatory and affordable recognition procedures should be in place, as barriers encountered in seeking recognition disincentivize potential students from entering Higher Education. This can also happen when the permeability within flexible learning pathways, including with professional and Vocational education and training (VET) higher education, is not fully in place. It is very important that there is constant communication and collaboration between higher education institutions, national authorities, recognition agencies, student representatives and other stakeholders in order to create more suitable conditions for students. Furthermore, international students can be in a precarious position while seeking recognition in another country, and as such inclusive information provision in multiple languages should be promoted.

Improving recognition procedures is also of crucial importance for including refugees, displaced persons, and people in refugee-like situations in Higher Education. Barriers to providing proof of learning are often encountered if documentary evidence is incoherent or not in hand. Efficient and fair procedures should be in place to comprehensively assess whether these learners fulfil the relevant requirements to access higher education, in accordance with article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Information provision is equally important, while currently only 55% of national authorities publish information related to the recognition of qualifications for refugees, according to the [LRC Monitoring Report](#). Furthermore, national authorities should deploy more digital solutions and databases to support the smooth recognition procedure while using qualifications frameworks with flexibility.

ESU supports the involvement of all the countries within the EHEA in the application of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees [9]. On this line, it is important to recognise the value of self-assessment, as well as to provide individual counselling, allowing the individual to take ownership of the process. It is also important to promote initiatives to facilitate refugees' access to higher education, working with higher education institutions and governments, granting scholarships to refugee and asylum-seeking students with the adhesion of more European countries to the experience of U4Refugees [10] programme, in partnership with UNHCR.

4.2 Students' employment

Students must be able to sustain decent living standards and afford their studies without having to work alongside their full-time programme, as full-time studies are by definition full-time and therefore no employment should be required to sustain them. Similarly, part-time studies should not lead to an ineligibility for financial support, as the potentially related part-time work does not necessarily translate in a financial capacity to sustain studies, and part-time students can also have different responsibilities or disabilities that prevent them from working.

Student employment can raise concerns about the impact on academic achievement due to reduced time available for studies, and the impact on the quality of the student's educational experience, stress levels and mental health and overall completion rates[11].

Financial barriers faced by students through both direct and indirect costs of HE should be removed through social support systems. However, should some students wish to work alongside their studies, particularly if it has a positive impact on their academic achievement or personal development, they should have the flexibility to deal with the disadvantages which they are going to face in the given position. In need-based social support systems for students, laws and practices should be in place to avoid either discouraging students from working in cases when they wish to work (e.g. systems where even minor income from work leads to distinctively lower social benefits) or creating distinctive incentives for students to work during their studies (e.g. systems where working students gain special benefits, either directly or indirectly).

Nevertheless, when students are part of the labour force through student jobs and workplace learning, they should have the same rights as any other employee and student jobs should be aligned with basic labour rights standards, considering students' special status as young individuals that can lead to discrimination as well as exploitation. Workplace learning, especially with regard to internships, has a learning and a working element. Employees need to ensure that the learning element follows the quality standards and learning outcomes of higher education, while the students' rights in workplace learning need to be aligned with the rights of employees, including the ban of unpaid internships and/or proper compensation as well as other labour related issues. Furthermore, higher education institutions should support students in being admitted to internships. When internships are a part of the curriculum, public authorities should have the responsibility to make sure all expenses that occur in relation to the internship are covered.

In addition, it is important that higher education institutions strive to ensure that these compulsory internships offer a concrete opportunity for students to learn new skills and do not result in hours of unvaluable work. Higher education institutions should commit to offering quality internship opportunities and each student must be given the opportunity to choose which internship to undertake and should not be constrained to face a forced choice on the part of the higher education institution.

4.3 Lifelong learning

A higher level of education in our entire societies is the prerequisite for social progress. Thus, lifelong learning opportunities should be accessible to anyone at any point in their life, no matter their economic background. Lifelong learning is also a way to adapt to the changing needs of society and help individuals improve their personal quality of life. Lifelong learning incorporates any formal, informal, and non-formal learning processes that can serve as tools in enabling individuals to achieve their personal and professional ambitions, regardless of one's social status. Lifelong learning is an important factor of upward social mobility, and functions to reduce social inequality across all of society while enhancing the society's knowledge base and skills. Lifelong learning should be integrated in national educational plans, as it is a part of a comprehensive educational policy which covers all students at all times. Though its usefulness in honing professional skills should not be understated, lifelong learning is still primarily an educational responsibility and should not fall under the primary purview of labour planning and policies.

As employment habits are prone to rather rapid changes and, in tandem, changes in society emphasise the importance of personal development as a continuous process, HE systems should promote lifelong learning as a means to achieving universal access and dynamic learning environments. Flexible learning paths and the recognition of prior learning are indispensable tools in the proper function of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning can also promote learning about democratic and social values across all of society.

While lifelong learning is important, it's just as important that the possibility of lifelong learning doesn't become an excuse to downplay the importance and funding of education earlier in life. It's still very important to ensure both the education of young people who want to enter higher education institutions and also offering the possibility to go back to education later in life.

Furthermore, there should also be an interdependence between the higher education sector and their wider social communities through open dialogue and community

engagement from higher education institutions that allow societal partners to support new learning pathways for the wider community to participate in higher education systems.

One of the tools that are currently being promoted as a means to upskilling and reskilling through lifelong learning are microcredentials. However, as an OECD paper [12] observes, microcredentials will not support social dimension and inclusion of diverse students in higher education if this policy goal is not accompanied by concrete measures. On the contrary, microcredentials can lead to further inequality especially in the case where they lead to commodification through increased tuition fees or when the student support systems are not accessible to learners enrolled in microcredentials. It is important to ensure that microcredentials do not become a fee-based degree or a new fee-based entry pathway to higher education.

4.4 An inclusive learning environment

A safe learning environment free from discrimination for all enables everyone, but especially marginalised groups to act and research freely and ensures academic freedom. The learning environment plays a crucial role in quality education. Students need accessible physical and digital infrastructure. The learning environment includes, but is not limited to buildings, virtual learning environments and digital tools. The learning environment must be safe, accessible, sustainable and of good quality. There should be accessible and gender-neutral toilets available. The learning environment should be based on the principles of universal design in order to be as inclusive as possible. Where universal design is not sufficient, individual adaptations must be made to remove barriers for students who require them. Students should not have to prove their disabilities with formal diagnosis and should only have to submit their request for adaptations once.

There must be designated rooms on campus that are quiet rooms available for rest and retreat from stimuli.

Many students are forced into choosing a gender that does not match their identity. When enrolling and in higher education systems there must be several options for gender, this must be easy for students themselves to change whenever necessary. This allows for them to feel included and helps avoid discrimination and misgendering. Additionally higher education information systems, where legally possible, must provide options for students to choose and change their name and pronouns—used on their student identity card, learning platforms and internal communication such as e-mail address freely.

To ensure safety for all students there must be anti-discrimination, anti-harassment and gender-based violence policies in place. The whole higher education community must be aware of these policies, receive training and follow them. All higher education institutions must have reporting systems for unacceptable behaviour or undesirable conditions in the learning environment. There must be clear procedures for reporting and disciplinary measures, both online and in- person. It must be possible to report both anonymously and confidentially.

There needs to be training to ensure staff and students recognise harassment and discrimination. Staff need to be trained to support students. There must be a victim centred approach to resolution of reports and the safety of the victim(s). Reports must be handled in a timely manner with a clearly communicated timeline, and sanctions should be proportionate, whilst focusing on prevention. Reporting should be handled by an independent third party such as an independent counselling centre, which can be financed by the higher education institution and operates irrespective of the higher education institution by offering free services by qualified and serves as a contact point for students encountering discrimination and harassment. Data on the number and nature of reports, must be made available for quality assurance and transparency. This will allow for targeted approaches to improving the learning environment. Students must be insured while they are on campus and taking part in any activities related to their course.

4.5 Social dimension in quality assurance processes

ESU believes that quality assurance processes are an important tool for supporting social dimension policies in higher education. Analysis[13] from ESU suggests that several national systems already integrate elements related to social dimension in their criteria: this can happen either through distinct criteria on social dimension or transversally in criteria linked to learning and teaching or institutional management. According to the results from various stakeholders, areas such as 'increasing completion rates', 'access for students with disabilities', 'psychological counselling and wellbeing' and 'antidiscrimination policies' are part of most quality assurance systems, while other policies, such as 'institutional strategy on social dimension', 'monitoring concrete targets on social dimension' and 'data collection of social dimension' having a lower take up.

While different systems can put attributes related to monitoring or enhancing social dimension policies to different public bodies, we believe that quality assurance has a key role to play. This follows different logics: one of appropriateness – quality assurance, based on its procedures, is fit to monitor social dimension, one of

normativity – inclusive higher education is part of the political vision of a quality higher education, and one of consequences – the results of using quality assurance for promoting social dimension can yield positive benefits.

The Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in EHEA, one of the most successful initiatives of European cooperation in higher education, already include elements related to social dimension. Nevertheless, ESU strongly supports expanding its coverage. At national level, all stakeholders should be engaged in agreeing on which indicators related to social dimension are most relevant to be included in national quality assurance frameworks, based on priorities and context.

Finally, the quality assurance processes should be themselves inclusive, supporting the participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented students in student representation and experts as part of expert panels.

V. FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS AND STUDY OFFER

Study programmes should be designed to be responsive to the diverse needs of students that have to reconcile studying with other commitments, such as work, family life, student representation or being a caregiver. Besides the need for flexible forms of programme delivery, teaching methods should also be sensitive to and accommodate the diverse learning styles of mature students and students with diverse backgrounds such as through recognition and utilisation of their prior experience and use of multidisciplinary approaches to learning. Designing flexible learning paths to enable people to enter or return to higher education without the need to interrupt their personal, professional, or social pathways or student representative mandate is beneficial to their career progress and self-development, and a key factor in facilitating broader upward social mobility.

5.1 Admission systems

The admission system at higher education institutions should contribute to greater social mobility and should not solely be based on grade average, entrance exams, motivation letters and standardised testing, which can be in favour of students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds. ESU calls for higher education institutions to use more diverse methods of admissions that cater for people from diverse educational backgrounds. The admissions procedures should themselves be inclusive of the needs of various students, such as those with disabilities, low socio-economic backgrounds, and free of costs for every student.

In a pursuit of the freedom to learn, the number of admission places should be increased regionally and nationally in alignment with adequate funding and a commitment to providing quality education. While capacity requirements which limit the number of admission places through regulatory frameworks can be in place in order to ensure the quality of education (such as staff ratios), the governments should invest in increasing the capacity and infrastructure to ensure that all those who desire to pursue a higher education degree, irrespective of the study field, can do so.

Jointly with these admissions procedures, orientation and re-orientation processes should be present in the processes of admission to higher education. These procedures help students evaluate their strengths, weaknesses and interests so they can freely choose their preferred field of study and allow students to get support if they wish to change their field of study.

5.2 Early-stage interventions

Early-stage interventions are those actions designed to support learners to access higher education before the moment of admission, spanning from school level education to the point of entry in higher education.

There should be a fostering of greater understanding about how Higher Education systems (and education systems overall) feed into inequality, exclusion, disadvantage, and polarisation within societies. Research should delve into prospective students' reasoning on whether to enter higher education, what field to study in, what type of education to seek, and other such concerns. These choices, and the student's freedom, or lack thereof, in making them, greatly affect their future as well as the society at large.

Early-stage interventions are a key mechanism to achieve the goal of widening access and participation in Higher Education. From an early age on, such as already in primary and secondary education systems and based on research, both direct and implicit barriers to enable the access to Higher Education must be removed, along with cultural and social barriers restricting access and choice for students. This also applies to prospective mature students, and those on different education paths.

The early-stage interventions should be coupled with measures on entry, such as guidance programmes, academic goal setting, tutoring, first year transition programs, learning communities and other such mechanisms.

5.3 Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning is particularly relevant for those students that do not possess formal qualifications or certificates, yet they developed skills through non-formal means. For both admission and progression in higher education, recognition of prior learning (RPL) supports a more diverse body of students entering and progressing through higher education. In order to achieve these goals, regulation should be in place to enforce RPL, while resources should be dedicated to train the staff for this process. RPL should be flexible and fair, while ensuring that information is widely available to students.

5.4 Social dimension in student centred learning

Student centred approaches in learning and teaching play a crucial role in creating inclusive higher education systems responsive to the diverse needs of all students. A strong connection between student centred learning (SCL) and the social dimension of higher education should be reflected in the creation of flexible learning pathways, as well as curricula design, and innovative pedagogical methods. All three should strive to meet the individual needs and goals of students, based on mutual respect between student and teacher in the learning context. A mindset of co-creation between students and teachers enhances trust in the system and supports learners' motivation.

This way, the expectations and objectives of each student become an important part of any learning process, enabling students to have individualised learning paths, study at different paces and in different situations in life. In order to support SCL, universal design must be an inherent practice in processes ranging from compiling study materials to designing infrastructure. SCL is fundamental to establishing inclusive practices within higher education institutions. Besides actively engaging students within their academic communities and fostering the values of active citizenship and democratic participation, SCL can also lead to a significantly higher quality of education and improve student retention rates in higher education institutions[14].

One essential part of student-centred learning is the assessments. While they should be based on the learning outcomes, adaptations should be put in place to ensure they are inclusive for all students, irrespective of their special needs. Fostering the mental health of students, as well as the error culture in higher education, means that no

punitive measures, such as limiting social financial aid, should be in place for failing assessments or prolongation of studies beyond the expected normal duration.

Elements related to inclusivity should be part of any teaching and other relevant programmes in higher education institutions, as developing related skills for students who later become teachers in schools is equally important for reducing inequality in lifelong learning and society.

The digital environment poses new challenges for both student-centred learning and digitalisation. The digital transition should leave no one behind and students who lack either the equipment, the software, or the skills to navigate through the digital learning space should be fully supported, while also ensuring that the digital applications are themselves inclusive. With the surge of Artificial Intelligence, guaranteeing that the tools used in higher education are free of biases and discrimination is of utmost priority. If the higher education institution decides to use specific software for certain courses, be it normal programmes or those involving AI, these tools must be provided to all students free of charge and if a student also faces problems accessing technology instruments and the Internet to use them, the higher education institution must cover this expense as well or offer adequate alternatives free of charge.

5.5 Curriculum

In order to reflect the diversity of voices and experiences in society students should have access to a diverse curriculum. They should be made aware of materials created by a diverse range of people. This must include, but is not limited to gender diversity, Disabled people, LGBT+, ethnic minorities, neurodiversity, migrants, indigenous people. An educational system that has a diverse curriculum, and which embeds learning about the principles of and understandings of liberation within it, will help ensure our teaching and learning is reflective of its learners, meaning they can identify with what they are learning.

5.6 Language

With a more diverse population of prospective and active students, stemming from the effects of demographic changes, migration and a concurrent push to include currently underrepresented groups in higher education, it is crucial that language barriers restricting access to education, culture and social life, as well as inclusion be addressed and overcome[15]. Higher education institutions must reflect social diversity by fostering multicultural and multilingual learning environments aimed at facilitating the inclusion of students from all backgrounds. The language requirements

in admission systems should not be a barrier to students wishing to enter higher education. Students must be offered comprehensive, free, effective, and accessible language learning programmes. These must be available to all domestic and foreign individuals, including refugees, displaced persons and people with refugee-like status who require such support, to ensure sufficient proficiency in the language(s) studies are conducted in, in order to facilitate their entry to higher education.

In the admission process there must be recognition for prior learning of the language requirements if they exist. In addition, sufficient language support during studies should be available to the student throughout their studies and integrating progressively advancing language studies into the curriculum should be a key consideration, including language skills related to the study field of the programme while keeping in mind to not overwhelm the students with many language courses on top of their studies. This also must be offered to students who are embarking on mobility to support their transition to another country.

In the process of increasing internationalisation, the English language has gained an important role within higher education[16]. However, the right of students to learn, to study and to be taught in the national language(s) must be firmly protected and supported with the required financial and organisational resources. Furthermore, the rights of minority language students, as well as prospective students with minority language backgrounds, need to be protected in HE systems. Degrees and programmes offered in regional, or minority languages shouldn't be restricted, sufficient financial means should be available to support these, and they must be subject to the same quality standards as others.

VII. FAIR & SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR STAFF

Keeping in mind the importance of staff who are employed in higher education institutions, irrespective of the type of contract or their status, we should fully acknowledge the necessity for fair and supportive work environments. A good working environment promotes good health and wellbeing. This allows and encourages staff to grow, develop and foster access to quality education and inclusive environments. We must recognize that staff working conditions directly relate to student learning conditions. This also applies to students who are engaged in employment within their institutions. Issues such as precarity, low pay, attacks on pensions and gender, ethnic, and other minority pay gaps are affecting staff and thus impact the learning and teaching process. Recognising these issues, staff must be paid an equitable, living wage for their work. As the society and HE is changing rapidly, mechanisms should be

in place to analyse the needs of staff and to ensure proper training for staff, to equip them with sufficient resources and qualifications as well as teaching, language, multicultural and interpersonal skills. In addition, good working conditions in higher education institutions will help to foster the diversity among the staff members because vulnerable groups are in many situations less likely to take the risk of pursuing a career in academia. This would again have a positive effect on the diversity of students.

Furthermore, training should be made available to staff both in initial and continuous professional development so that they are able to play their part in implementing social dimension policies and fostering inclusive approaches. These facilities should be free and higher education institutions should also allocate time and resources for the staff to attend.

VIII. STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Free student support systems must be available to all but take into consideration students in marginalised groups. ESU demands that higher education should be free for all students. The affordability of higher education is often mentioned when discussing the social dimension of higher education, especially from the point of view of accessibility and completion of studies. However, affordability needs to be understood as a broad concept, containing all sorts of financial and material aspects of education. These aspects, or costs, can be divided into two categories: direct costs and indirect costs.

1. Direct costs and tuition fees

The direct costs include everything that is directly linked to the programme chosen by the student: tuition fees, books, tools, and materials necessary for class work or practical learning experiences, exams and research, among others. The direct costs also span over the digital equipment and software needed to fulfil the responsibilities in relation to the study programme and, if applicable, to attend classes.

According to the most recent Eurostudent data[17], in 2019 (before the covid and inflation crises, which put additional strain on students) more than 1 in 4 students had financial difficulties. In this regard, support systems must be established in order to help less advantaged students to cover their tuition fees, buy materials needed, or mitigate other costs. These are the support systems that are often the most talked

about when tackling financial accessibility. They are much needed – having to pay tuition or other administrative fees, such as registration fees, or purchase a number of books at the beginning of a semester can become a barrier for less privileged students, for example from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In order to enable everyone to study, it is essential that systems are set to help them cover these direct costs.

2. Direct costs: Grants and loans

It is crucial to reaffirm that eliminating tuition fees is the simplest and best way to improve the accessibility of higher education and ESU stands strongly in favour of this being the goal of every higher education system. This is also in line with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by most European states, and derives from higher education being a human right.

Keeping this in mind, even systems with no tuition fees often place financial burdens on students through indirect or hidden costs. In any case, removing all tuition fees is not the final step towards having an inclusive HE system and countries should provide enough financial support for students to be able to sustain themselves and compensate for the direct and indirect costs of studying.

Grants should be the main solution set by states to support students. They should be sufficient to enable students from any background to undertake and complete their study programme in the best conditions possible. While ESU supports the implementation of universal-based grants, accessible by all students, when due to various reasons universal-based grants cannot be provided, it is crucial that countries offer need-based grants with no merit-based strings attached. While we acknowledge the diversity of models of financing, any funding model must ensure that disadvantaged students are supported to access higher education without barriers.

These grants should also reflect costs of living in the location of study and the amount should be increased at least by inflation rate and regularly updated to ensure they are keeping up with increased costs. The grants should take into account the cost of living, but also all relevant associated costs to higher education, including indirect ones if those are not already covered through other means (e.g. subsidies) for students. Student groups with additional fixed costs (e.g. students with caring obligations, students with children, disabled students) need to have additional financial support through additional grants or similar systems. In any case students' grant systems should not interfere with other social benefit systems, leading to deprive the student of an effective financial support totally or partially regarding a particular issue.

Furthermore, there should not be any differentiation between fees for domestic students and international students, which only leads to discrimination and downward trends of internationalisation and all its associated benefits. In order to support lifelong learning, covering also second degrees should be promoted as much as possible.

In some countries, loan systems are designed to support direct or indirect costs for students. Despite the financial support given by the government, for example zero-interest loans, flexible repayments or cap on instalments based on income and statute of limitations, studies [18] suggest that students from poverty backgrounds tend to not take loans due to debt aversion, thus the system failing those in need. Furthermore, they point out that loan bearers have less financial wellbeing across lifetime or worse capacity for saving or owning a house, thus undermining education's capacity to promote social mobility. In countries which introduced loan systems to replace grants, studies [19] show that they do not adequately target the disadvantaged groups, they increase employment along with studies, including for precarious income, and students tend to choose shorter, cheaper study programmes. A student loan system is broken if it leaves students with debt that is only manageable to those with stable financial situations, or those coming from a wealthy background.

ESU is strongly in favour of the establishment of grant systems therefore excluding loan systems, as loan systems only reflect a failure by the state to provide a sufficient grant system and public services. Comprehensive grant systems are the way to effectively support students because it does not create a debt for those who are already the most in need of financial support.

If a student loan system is in use, the focus of its development should be on improving risk protection so that the system provides real protection for taking a loan. The best way to do this is through interest protection, fixed interest rates, payment moratoriums and interest allowance provided by the state.

Grants do not only guarantee more accessibility to higher education, they also enable students to have more chances of completing their studies, as they lessen the likelihood of having to work an excessive amount of hours to earn enough money to sustain a decent living standard.

Whether through grants, free or subsidised services, or any combination of these, states must ensure that students from any background are able to undertake and complete their studies. ESU also maintains a strong position that loan systems are not a replacement, nor should they be considered an alternative to the obligations of the states to provide comprehensive study grants. Student support mechanisms, such as

grants, should not be given based on performance criteria, such as academic merits, but should be applied universally or at least need-based. Automatic enrolment and opt-out systems need to be preferred to prevent placing undue burdens on students. Guidance needs to be provided to ensure that all are treated equally and can access the same amount of support if eligible and available.

3. Indirect costs: Housing, transport and meals

The indirect costs of higher education are less often mentioned than the direct ones. Less visible at first glance, they can prove to be one of the many barriers to higher education. The most important indirect costs are housing, transportation and meals.

Housing is a human right. Adequate housing must provide more than four walls and a roof. As [evidenced](#) by Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a number of conditions must be met before particular forms of shelter can be considered to constitute “adequate housing.

Regarding student housing, four principles must guide policy aimed at it: affordability, accessibility, quality, and sustainability. States and higher education institutions must make sure that anyone who wishes to study in Higher Education has access to an affordable place to live.

This can be achieved through designated student housing, but in cases where that isn't sufficient, policies and systems must be in place to ensure affordability in the rental market. Support for housing can be offered both through grants for students or indirect means of covering the costs (e.g. subsidising student housing).

States have an obligation to actively ensure that enough affordable, accessible, and quality housing is available. Alternative forms of deliberate (co-)living, such as flat-sharing or intergenerational co-living should be legally framed. When considering availability, the variety of housing should also be kept in mind, to ensure access to higher education for people with varying needs. This affects especially those students with accessibility requirements, since regular rental markets are often unable to meet their needs, and they often face discrimination and exclusion.

Similarly, both short-term and recurrent temporary housing needs to be available for mobile students, students travelling between campuses for studies, and students with other such needs. Finally, the quality and environmental sustainability of the housing

is of utmost importance. Any housing meant for students needs to provide facilities needed to sustain a decent life, be up to high construction standards, universally designed, properly heated, clean and with adequate facilities. Students should not be forced out of their student housing at any point during the length of their study period. Ideally, there should also be a buffer period after the studies have ended and during the summer/outside of term time. In all situations, there should be a notice period for the termination for any tenancy.

Students, including those from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds must be meaningfully included in decision making over design of student housing and infrastructure for student use, as well as policy making within the same field. States need to work proactively to guarantee a legal environment that prevents discrimination, fraudulent practices, and exploitation of students seeking housing.

Access to housing has to be free from any discrimination, unnecessary hassle, and struggles. Special protections must be in place for prospective students who are at a higher risk of encountering racism, xenophobia, ableism, queerphobia, LGBTQ+phobia and exclusion due to their background or accessibility requirements. Everyone starting their studies or moving anywhere to study should feel secure in their access to housing.

Another indirect cost of education, and a potential obstacle to access to higher education, is transportation. Free, accessible, sustainable and efficient transport options must exist for students, to ensure equal access to Higher Education. Public transportation needs to be free for students regardless of their age. Accessibility requirements must be an essential concern in the design of transport networks and infrastructure. Transport must be accessible to all, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or having specific needs such as those with disabilities or caring responsibilities.

Access to quality food and nutrition is another human right that has distinct applications for student life. Governments and higher education institutions should support students to afford nutritious food, inclusive for various dietary requirements. This can be done through measures such as including the costs of meals in the calculation of grants, subsidising student canteens or offering student discounts.

Finally, increasing the diversity of the higher education system means more adult learners, as well as students with caring responsibilities access higher education. Pursuing a degree should not be limited by the capacity to financially support these responsibilities, and dedicated policy measures, support systems and funding incentives should be in place for these students.

4. Indirect costs: access to cultural activities and opportunities

The right to freely participate in cultural life was recognised by UNESCO with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and then confirmed in 1966 with the Council of Europe's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Access to cultural activities and opportunities is fundamental to promoting student participation and social cohesion. The higher education institution life of each student should not only focus on studying and attending lectures but should give everyone the opportunity to participate in cultural activities, both in financial and time terms. This includes, but is not limited to, participation in the cultural and social events promoted within higher education institutions, the possibility of visiting museums and other places of cultural interest, going to the cinema, theatre, or a concert.

It is of paramount importance that each state is committed to providing equal and free access to these educational opportunities for both students studying in that country and students coming from abroad. When organising these activities, it is also crucial to consider accessibility for all students.

In the promotion of cultural activities, in higher education institution cities and especially within higher education institutions, a fundamental role is played by student associations. Each state must commit itself so that all higher education institutions can give student associations the possibility and the necessary funds to promote cultural activities, according to the interests of the different associations, as long as they are respectful of everyone's background and do not promote anti-democratic sentiments.

The higher education institutions must undertake to make their spaces open to the organisation of these cultural events, whether they are conferences or gatherings to animate the university facilities and must support the student associations in their realisation.

Finally, in order for all students to enrich their higher education experience with cultural activities, higher education institutions should strive to encourage student participation in these activities. Specifically, leisure time has to be taken into account when designing the different learning opportunities.

5. Counseling and guidance services

Governments and higher education institutions have a shared role in ensuring that proper policies are in place to secure the availability of accurate, timely, qualitative, accessible, reliable, and effective information, counselling and guidance about

prospects in higher education for potential and enrolled students in order to increase their access, participation in and completion of higher education studies.[20]

The diversity of prospective students' backgrounds needs to be fully understood and taken into account by Higher Education Institutions, especially when communicating about their programmes, in order to include as many potential students as possible and maximise the likelihood of completion. Accurate and student-friendly guidance and information when considering entering or continuing in HE will lead to students being able to choose what type of higher education, as well as what programme would suit them best. Those responsible for delivering student guidance should have the possibility to be trained accordingly, in order to ensure their services are adequate to the needs of a diverse student population.

When entering higher education, different types of counselling and guidance should be available to students, but especially psychological, academic and career counselling. These types of counselling should be adapted to various student needs and groups and have coordination at institution level. There should be constant communication between the organisers of these services, mentors/tutors for students and other structures with the higher education institutions, in order to support synergy of actions and improved strategies, learning environments and wellbeing of students.

6. Contact points and information provision

Sufficient information on the available support systems must be provided – students must not be restricted from accessing these due to non-accessible administrative paths, too long bureaucratic delays or due to the lack of awareness of the existence of such systems where they actually exist. Higher education institutions should provide points of contact for students for all related matters related to student life and inclusivity policies, serving as a one-stop shop that can then direct students to dedicated departments and support them in their requests.

6. Specific services and adaptations for underrepresented students

Support services should be available and accessible to all students; however some students may require targeted support to ensure their success in higher education. All students deserve a sense of belonging in the higher education community. Some students may find the transition into higher education challenging. We need to ensure that they have smooth transitions within higher education.

Adult learners, refugee learners and many other categories of underrepresented students have different needs that the policies of higher education institutions need to be adapted to. Some student groups such as Disabled students and students with caring responsibilities may have higher costs. Spending on specialist disability-related products and services that are essential and often costly; and include vital specialist equipment, mobility aids, car or home adaptations, medicines and therapies and others which are all expensive. They have to spend more on everyday things, there are often fewer accessible rooms available in student accommodation and it often comes at a higher cost. They are reliant on paying more for transport as often public transport isn't accessible. Student support such as grants should cover these. They should not be at a disadvantage to disabled students. Disabled students should be able to participate in all aspects of student life. They are often excluded from activities non-disabled students take part in.

Students in need of assistive technology, educational aids should receive these free of charge. This includes glasses and optical health. There should be support and information about the availability and how to use these.

In order to ensure the compatibility of higher education with care responsibilities, it is essential that special support services are provided for these students. There needs to be provisions such as childcare facilities and flexibility in learning pathways.

IX. HEALTH POLICIES

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition[21].

Students often live in uncertainty due to their lack of financial security. This uncertainty takes its toll on mental and physical health, with both being essential to succeeding in one's studies. Good health and wellbeing, whether mental or physical, should not be a luxury but a right. Students deserve good quality free healthcare and must have access to the health care that they need, without engaging any anticipated costs.

Thus, access to comprehensive and adequate health care is required. It is important that, when students make use of these support systems, their confidentiality is always guaranteed, except in cases where the medical practitioner is required by law to breach confidentiality. It is up to the states, but also to the higher education institutions to provide adequate support in this regard. Higher education institutions have a

responsibility for their students' mental health. The learning and teaching styles and assessment have an impact on students' health. It is an environment which is new to many in a time in their lives with a lot of changes and developments. There is a lot of pressure to succeed in the competitive environment and students are worried about other burdens in their lives. In most cases, higher education is designed for neurotypical people without taking into account the diversity of experiences and conditions, and can all be substantial barriers to access, transition and completion. This has the effect of systematically excluding many from less privileged backgrounds and conditions, or making success in higher education harder to achieve.

Mental health

General mental health problems and mental illnesses are prevalent among students across Europe. The higher education institutions and governments must acknowledge that learning and living conditions as well as the economic situation of students are central causes of this problem. Effective social policies, affordable housing schemes, and access to student financing along with curricula and examination methods that reduce psychological stress are important ways to prevent ill mental health. Low-threshold psychological counselling has to be made available free of charge to all students who need it. Counselling facilities need to have sufficient capacities to guarantee timely access. Additionally, as the prevalence of mental health problems amongst students is higher than in the general population, mental health services in cities and regions with a high student population need to be able to increase their capacities accordingly.

Stigma attached to mental health conditions remains a barrier to understanding and receiving support. To this day, societal stigma remains arguably the most prominent barrier to an individual accessing support for mental health difficulties. We must engage actively in breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health in order to ensure those who need help feel comfortable reaching out, ultimately improving accessibility to mental health supports. Students whose identities are intersecting axes of inequality must receive targeted support from services.

Another important factor for students' mental health is their work-life balance. Students need to be motivated and stimulated by their study material. At the same time, burnouts and living in a constant rush for deadlines will take its toll on the students. For this reason, institutions should assess the workload of their degree and how it affects students' work life balance.

There needs to be funding for students to have spaces and resources for extracurricular activities, which the student can participate in in their free time and which form the basis of their interaction to the rest of the student community. These allow for students to find a sense of belonging which can combat loneliness and prevent mental ill health. Students should have enough time available to be able to participate in such activities if they so wish.

Lastly, it is vital that information provision about mental health is present at all institutions. This includes both substantive information (for example about suicide prevention, stress, or anxiety) and procedural information (for example about possible trust-persons, study advisors or healthcare professionals). In addition, teaching staff need to be educated on this topic and on their responsibilities (for example in signalling problems, referring students to the right place).

Physical health

1. Physical activity

Students should be have access to physical activity and as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the “higher education institutions (should) provide supportive and safe spaces and facilities for all students to spend their free time actively”. [22]

Physical activity offers significant benefits for both physical and mental health, leading to enhance learning and teaching. Not only can it prevent and manage many diseases and health conditions, like for instance reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, it can also encourage social contact between students, contributing to social integration. Therefore, students should have the free time and means to participate in line with the guidelines.

2. End period poverty for students

Menstruation can be a barrier to free and accessible education. There is still a lot of stigma attached to menstruating, this can have a lasting impact on students' lives and wellbeing. We need to work towards breaking down this stigma and normalize menstruation, by providing necessary information and encouraging the dialogue on menstruation as well as its consequences and daily repercussion. Furthermore, having a period should not limit participation in daily life or education. There needs to be flexibility for students who are menstruating as many experience symptoms that impact on their studies and daily life. Many students across Europe cannot afford to

buy period products, being able to access period products is fundamental to equality and dignity. Period products should therefore be made free for students. All toilets must have disposal for period products.

3. Students sexual health

Sexual health is fundamental for the overall health and wellbeing of students. Sexual health requires a positive approach to sexuality and sexual relationships. Students must have the possibility to have safe sexual experiences. They must be able to live in an environment that affirms and promotes sexual health. Students must have access to free sexual health care, it must be free from discrimination and coercion. Students should have access to good quality information about sex and sexuality. There must also be information and training on consent and preventing sexual violence. There must be sexual health support services available and accessible to all students.

4. Dental health

Oral health and hygiene is often seen as a separate part of the healthcare system. Dental healthcare is often expensive and therefore a cost that students postpone. As such the dental healthcare should be covered by the healthcare systems.

X. RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION

To ensure the greatest possible social impact of measures designed to broaden the accessibility of higher education, policy-making must rely on high quality research that involves the participation of representatives of affected populations in the process. Thorough research must be conducted to explore what is keeping people from varying backgrounds and conditions from accessing, transitioning within, or completing higher education as well as on the impact and efficiency of the measures proposed or put in place to address the barriers.

To be able to meet the objectives laid out in this paper, countries need to have a very clear understanding of what constitutes the underrepresented, disadvantaged and minority groups within their respective societies.

Furthermore, research should help policy makers understand what disadvantaged, underrepresented and vulnerable groups consist of and best tailored measures for these categories in an intersectional approach.

However, the potential effects that social research can have on vulnerable populations must always be taken into account. Care should be taken to avoid essentializing social groups. The development of methodologies of data collection should involve the participation of people from varying backgrounds to provide feedback on practices of categorization based on group identity.

Furthermore, careful attention has to be paid to the security of every individual data, this means to ensure proper data protection and to anonymize collected data. This is of special importance when it comes to the safeguarding of minorities and groups that are discriminated against and it should generally be the ethical foundation of research and data protection. Security of data and participation of representatives of the various groups in the design of research would also increase trust in sharing experiences.

The data collection exercises at both national and institutional level should be regular, in order to ensure comparability and evidence trends and be followed-up by meaningful actions. Databases should be made interoperable in order to support both research and access to public services.

Data on available advice, support, funding and regulations for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, as well as the results of research should be public and accessible.

It is crucial that governments invest in systematic data collection and take part in internationally recognised research projects, such as Eurostudent, which offer an indispensable and comparable knowledge base on the student condition at European level from which measures can be designed by policy makers at all levels.

Annexed statements:

- [Statement on Housing and Transportation](#)
- [Mental Health Charter](#)
- [Statement on quality and fair Internships](#)
- Statement on neurodivergent students
- [Statement on anti-discrimination](#)
- [Statement on the experiences and rights of LGBT+ students](#)

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