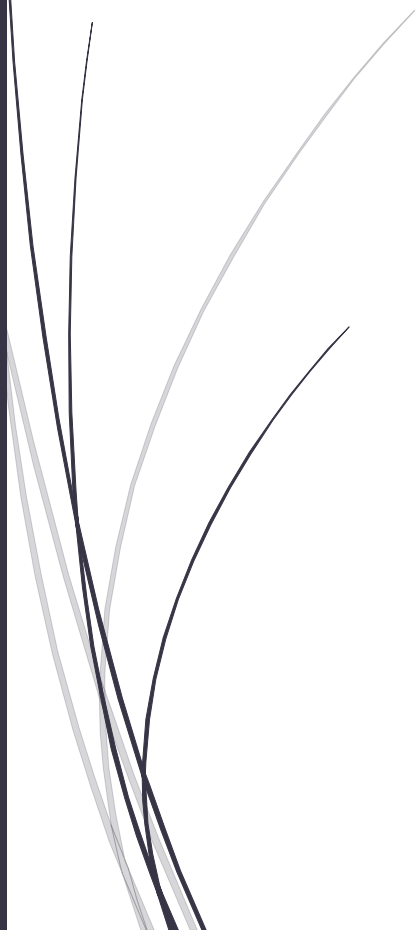![u-multirank — Universities compared. Your way.]

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# Guidelines for Developing Social Inclusion Indicators at Higher Education Institutions

*How to develop relevant and internationally comparable indicators?*

# PREFACE

Between 2020 and 2022, the U-Multirank team held discussions with a diverse group of higher education stakeholders to identify promising social inclusion indicators for the following U-Multirank editions. As a result of these discussions, a clear need emerged to develop guidelines for social inclusion indicators at the institutional level. Such guidelines would not aim to propose specific indicators but rather find common ground across a diverse group of stakeholders and bring challenges associated with indicator development and operationalisation to the forefront. The experts and stakeholders consulted included policymakers, practitioners, and student representatives. Their qualitative feedback was complemented by insights from a survey sent to U-Multirank participants to assess the feasibility of the most promising indicators. These insights are used to develop the guidelines presented in this document. The insights were collected and integrated by Frans Kaiser and Anete Veidemane.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Rationale

Higher education institutions (HEIs) can make a substantial difference in attaining inclusive societies aligned with the ambitions of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) on the Social Dimension (see paragraph 3 for definition). Internationally comparable yet locally relevant indicators on the social dimension can support HEIs to:

(i)     establish a baseline and measure progress over time
(ii)    provide a comparison with other institutions in a contextualised manner
(iii)   identify effective institutional policies to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
(iv)    discover the blind spots in social dimension monitoring mechanisms

We[1] see indicator development as an aspect of the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of evidence-based social inclusion policies. Hence, the rationale for developing indicators should focus on (i) improvement and institutional learning while (ii) enabling a fair and contextualised comparison. Stimulating competition without understanding the context of various institutions is not a very productive rationale. Hence, building on stakeholder consultations and professional observations, we provide suggestions for developing such indicators.

In this document, we follow the definition of social dimension used in the BFUG's 'Principles & Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA'.[2] Social Dimension "encompasses creation of inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity […]" (p.23) where "the composition of the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society […]" (p. 23). We refer to underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable student groups as defined in the BFUG principles & guidelines (p.30). In this document, we do not yet address indicators linked to the needs of local communities and limit our focus to the EHEA countries as proposed by the guidelines above.

We refer to diversity, inclusion, and equity as three interlinked but distinct concepts defined in the INVITED[3] report, published by the European University Association (EUA).

- Diversity, is a multi-dimensional concept that often refers to, but is not limited to, under-represented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable groups.
- Equity, is rooted in the idea of fairness and equal opportunity and includes needs-based support to address relative disadvantages amongst groups.
- Inclusion, aims to attain a social profile that corresponds to the society at large. In addition, inclusion may also refer to a perceived 'sense of belonging'.[4]

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[1] The U-Multirank project in collaboration with experts and co-authors of this paper (see Table 1)
[2] Bologna Process. (2020). Advisory group 1 on social dimension final report. Italian BFUG Secretariat. https://ehea2020rome.it/storage/uploads/0479534b-a889-4fd9-9d15-64b49e6ee768/AG1_Social_Dimension_Final_Report.pdf
[3] Claeys-Kulik, A.-L., Jørgensen, T. E., & Stöber, H. (2019). Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions: Results from the INVITED project. European University Association. https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf
[4] Tinto, V. (2022). Increasing student persistence: Wanting and doing. In *Student Support Services* (pp. 53-70). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 56-57. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-5852-5_33

## 2. GUIDELINES

### Social dimension indicators - from outreach to outcomes

I.  **While the social dimension is occasionally associated with higher education access, it is important to recognise that authentic social dimension indicators should cover the entire higher education pipeline, including adjacent stages.**
    - The set of indicators on the social dimension should address all five stages of the educational pipeline: outreach, access, participation/progress (including induction), success, and outcomes of HE (see Figure 1).
    - The set of indicators across the pipeline should address both (i) the diversity of the staff and student body and (ii) inclusion policies.
    - The set of indicators across the entire pipeline supports the principle of equity – people need tailored support at all stages to account for their different entry points. Hence, the indicators should consider a needs-based approach in consultation with stakeholders.

| Outreach | Access | Participation | Success | Outcomes |

Figure 1: Stages of social inclusion in higher education

II.  **Both outreach and the admission process remain essential to attract a diverse student body.**
    - The pathway from secondary school to HEIs, including outreach, admission and induction processes, should be reflected in the indicators, including for students with a delayed transition.
    - Outreach, admission, and induction policies should address and support underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students.

### Social dimension indicators – embedded in CPD

**III. Continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for staff on DEI topics are essential to attain an inclusive learning environment, and should be reflected in DEI indicators.**

- Without sufficient knowledge and competencies on DEI topics, the staff may not be able to create an inclusive learning environment and attain HEI's DEI aspirations. This is particularly important as the diversity of the student and staff body is likely to increase in the future. CPD opportunities on DEI should be offered to all staff members at HEIs.

## Reference groups selected mindfully

IV. **Social dimension can be expressed in multiple manners by using indicators based on different reference groups. The reference group selection should be fit for purpose, and the choices made should be transparent.**

- We see three options in reference groups for student and staff diversity indicators: (i) reference to local or regional population; (ii) reference to the type of university profile and specialisation (e.g., technical universities, teacher colleges). (iii) Reference to the cohort/class. Each approach has advantages and drawbacks.
  - Reference to the local region can help to ensure that HEIs take proactive steps to enhance social inclusion in local society. This approach is aligned with the BFUG principles and guidelines on the social dimension. Yet data must be obtained outside HEIs and require comparable regional units.
  - Reference to the educational field or discipline enables comparison to HEIs with similar profiles, such as technical universities, business schools, and teacher training colleges. However, such an approach requires field-normalised indicators.
  - Reference to the cohort/class provides a more accurate cross-sectional comparison across peers and does not require external data for reference groups. Yet it does not reflect the characteristics of the local population.
- Irrespective of the reference group used, data collection practices and indicators should permit the granularisation of data to support comparison and research.

## Indicators of policies aimed at enhancing the social dimension

V. **Policies that aim to enhance the social dimension can show the active steps an institution is taking. These steps should be measured, but limitations need to be acknowledged.**

- Social inclusion policies should be accessible for all, while tailored programs can be available for certain (underrepresented, vulnerable, disadvantaged) groups. Since the needs of those affected can vary over time, it is important to regularly review the used indicators while keeping core indicators consistent to enable comparison over time.
- The effectiveness of all social inclusion policies needs to be evaluated, comparing results between various groups at the level of students and staff. Representatives from the underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups should be involved in the assessment process.
- In the short term, when HEIs are just starting to embed social inclusion in their processes, it may be helpful to use indicators on the active steps the HEI is taking. These indicators need to consider differences in the level of resources available to institutions to avoid stigmatising less endowed HEIs.
- In the medium to long term, the focus should be on measuring the effectiveness of social inclusion policies rather than the number of activities.

**VI. Financial factors, particularly students' ability to access funding to cover their tuition and living costs (housing, food, study materials), should be addressed within the set of indicators.**

- Student financial support is often provided by the state rather than HEIs. Yet students' ability to access higher education depends heavily on the availability of financial resources. Therefore, social inclusion indicators need to be contextualised, reflecting the actual affordability to students. In such indicators, both study fees and living costs should be considered (e.g., by providing contextualised filters/indicators on tuition levels and grant schemes at the national level).
- While financial support (grants, loans) is often the state's responsibility, HEIs' initiative to provide universal or needs-based scholarships, affordable housing and meals to students signals their efforts to become more inclusive and should be reflected in the indicator set.
- Indicators on financial support mechanisms such as grants and student loans should be clearly differentiated since these mechanisms support students in a different manner.

## Social inclusion should become part of the fabric of the institution

**VII. A wide variety of services and infrastructure projects at HEIs may benefit from monitoring social dimension aspects.**

- International mobility entails a social dimension since privileged students and staff are more likely to participate in mobility programs. Mobility programs should become more inclusive by attracting students and staff from underrepresented groups and enabling them to successfully participate in the process by providing appropriate resources.
- A key service to promote the social dimension is counselling (academic & psychological). Free and accessible counselling is fundamental to ensuring an inclusive environment. Such indicators should assess both the access to such services (e.g., ratio of councillors to students) and student satisfaction.
- Non-binary gender classification should be increasingly acknowledged at higher education institutions. This may include gender-neutral bathrooms in a physical environment or gender-neutral greetings on digital platforms.
- HEIs should investigate if they have facilities and tools that support students and staff with physical disabilities or special learning difficulties (e.g., are physical facilities easily accessible, learning materials clear, options for audio materials, transcripts etc.).