

HERE Study Visit Report

Inclusive mobility: from good intentions to measurable
outcomes

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1. Introduction

1.1 The topic

This HERE study visit was unique in that it took a system approach, demonstrating how Flanders authorities and universities are strategising and tackling the topic of inclusion in internationalisation and mobility in the higher education sector. It considered different higher education institutions within the Flemish policy framework, and also engaged other important actors and organisations that have worked extensively on this topic as of recent. Given that inclusion in mobility is a relatively incipient topic for many systems and universities, the purpose of the event was to look at it from the lense of developping and implementing institutional and national policies and initiatives, as opposed to promoting established good practice.

The study visit was also an occasion to discuss current EU priorities for inclusion and mobility and how they are reflected in the Erasmus+ programme. To this purpose, the results of a SPHERE study on the International Credit Mobility (ICM) strand that was commissioned by the European Commission were presented.

The study assessed whether and to what extent the Erasmus+ definition of “disadvantaged” is reflected and considered in current policies and practices for inclusion in HE in Partner countries.

The event was centred around the questions:

- What does social inclusion mean to universities and university systems? What are the trends in this field in Flanders and how is this affecting university activities, including internationalisation?
- How has the strategy for inclusive mobility been developed in Flanders? How does it relate to Bologna and EU goals? What was the process and who was involved in developing it? How does it respond to the environment/context of the university and of society?
- What are the EU objectives regarding social inclusion and mobility and how does this affect funding programmes, and subsequently how universities view this issue?
- What are the structures and instruments that support or hamper inclusion in mobility in universities? How do data collection, quality assurance, etc. contribute?
- What can Partner countries learn from the Flemish example, both at policy and university level?
- What can be done by different actors (universities in Programme and Partner countries, National Agencies, NEOs, Ministries, European Commission and the EACEA) to make International Credit Mobility (ICM) more inclusive?

1.2 Objectives/Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of the visit were:

- Become aware of and understand better social inclusion in higher education, and how it can be related to national and institutional policy in the area of internationalisation and mobility;
- Understand the process of defining and implementing university strategies for supporting inclusiveness in mobility, and the related structures and approaches needed to implement it (data collection, QA, student diversity offices, etc);
- Be able to contribute to the development and implementation of policies and actions for inclusive mobility and internationalisation, considering work at institutional, national and Bologna Process levels;
- Better promote and use the opportunities offered under the current EU and national mobility programmes, particularly regarding their insistence on inclusion and mobility.

1.3 Attendance

The study visit was attended by 34 HERE from 16 countries. They were mostly from universities, including rectors, vice-rectors and professors. Five HERE ministry representatives attended. On the EU side, colleagues from DG EAC and the EACEA attended, in addition to two representatives of the Flemish Ministry for Education, two representatives of the organisation Support for Higher Education Inclusion in Flanders (SIHO), the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) and directors/vice-rectors of academics and international cooperation from the universities of Ghent, Antwerp and the Free University of Brussels (VUB), which hosted the event.

2. Preparation for the study visit: Pre-survey results

In order to design the event in accordance with participants' needs and interests, participants were invited to respond to a pre-survey. The survey focused on 1) national and institutional strategies for social inclusion and access in the context of higher education, 2) targets and measures that have been defined for inclusion and how they are funded and implemented, 3) experience with the topic of inclusion in internationalisation and relative importance attributed to this issue in Partner countries.

36¹ registered participants responded to the survey and three provided written case studies to supplement this (Case studies have been posted on the event website², as have the complete

¹ Only 34 HERE attended – Two participants could not attend at the last minute.

² <https://supporthere.org/brussels2019/>

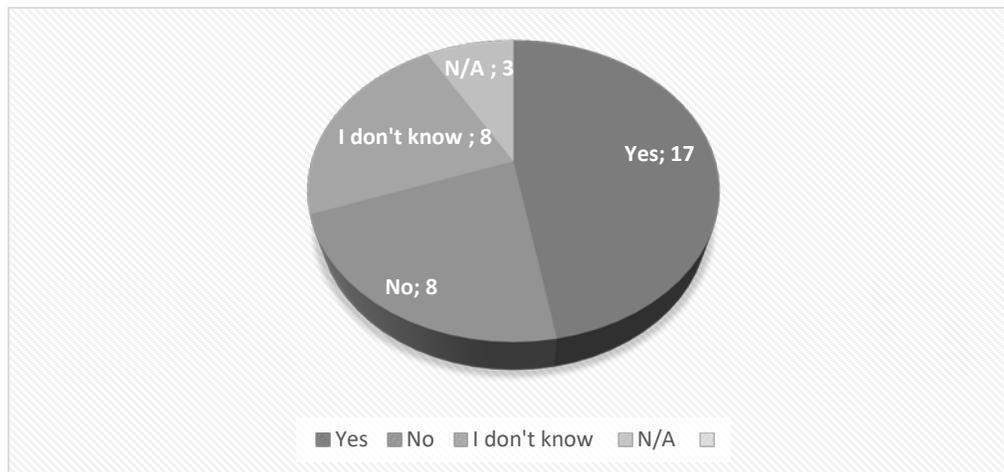
pre-survey results). Seven respondents had directly participated in the ICM study conducted by the SPHERE Team.

2.1 Summary of pre-survey results

The survey provided important information on the background of the participants and their countries:

Participants from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan indicated that their countries had **national strategies for social inclusion** in higher education:

Figure 1: Does your country have a strategy for social inclusion in higher education?



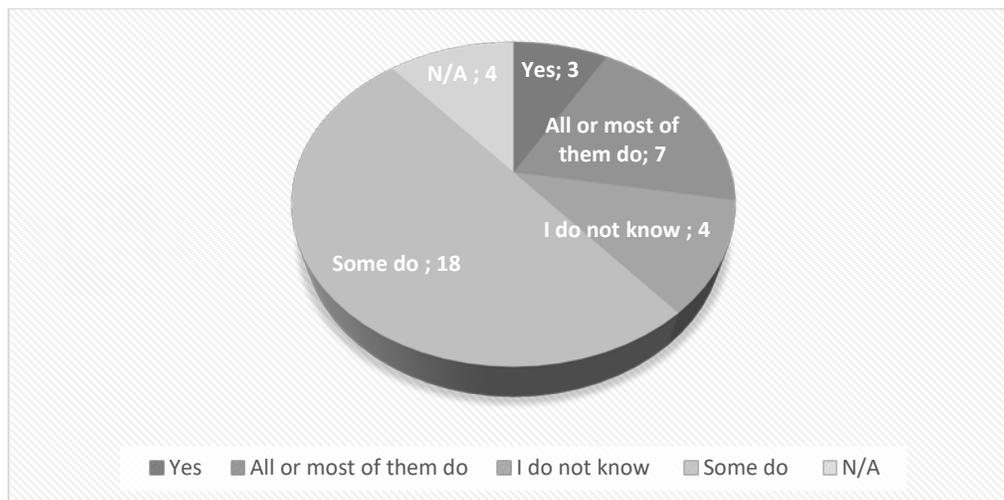
In terms of what and who these strategies target, the **physically disabled were the most frequently mentioned** (in all except two countries that have strategies), followed equally by the economically disadvantaged (eight countries), rural populations (six countries), specific ethnic and linguistic minorities (six countries), socially disadvantaged (six countries) and refugees or displaced persons (six countries).

Nineteen participants indicated that there are national measures, programmes, quotas or incentives to support social inclusion in the HE sector in their countries. Such measures primarily included scholarships and grants, but also:

- Special admission criteria for ethnic minorities (Georgia);
- Financial means to equip the premises of HEI to meet the needs of the physically disabled (Montenegro and Russia);
- Extra financing for some departments of HEI in rural areas of the country (Montenegro)
- Extra financing for teacher education in the language of the Albanian minority (Montenegro);
- Incentivisation via the national accreditation system if the university addresses social inclusion (Jordan).

In terms of whether HEI have specific strategies in place in partner countries, it seems that some do, however this is not a sector-wide phenomenon:

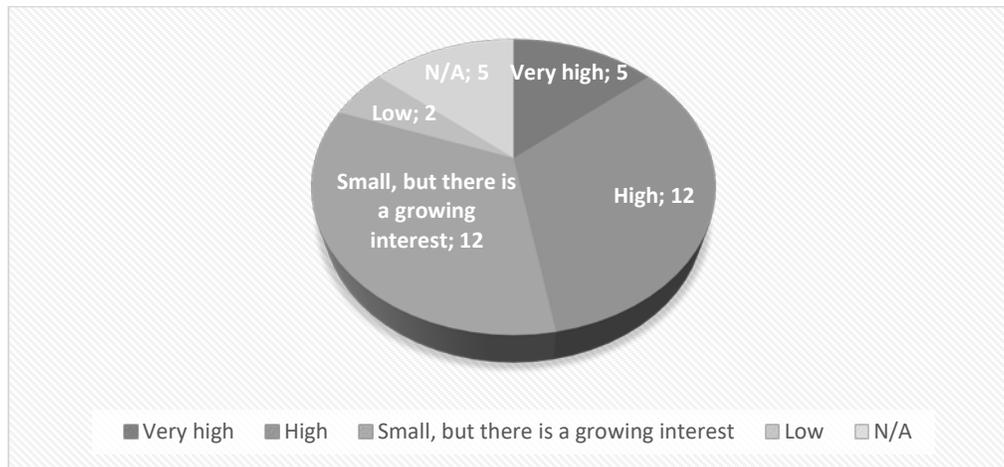
Figure 2: Do HEIs usually have strategies for social inclusion in higher education?



Most participants indicated that of the measures provided by HEI for disadvantaged students, targeted scholarships and financial support were most typical. Only six participants mentioned **special support services** for disadvantaged students. Montenegro and Moldova suggested that there was **'Provision of virtual and/or blended learning facilities' for disadvantaged groups**. Georgia was the only country to mention **'Outreach activities to underrepresented student groups'** and Jordan was the only one to indicate **'Support measures to diversify students that benefit from mobility programmes and international activities'**. Azerbaijan referenced **teacher training for working with disadvantaged groups**.

Specifically, on the topic of **inclusiveness and internationalisation**, participants were asked to rate the perceived importance of this issue for the HE sector in their countries:

Figure 3: Please rate what you perceive to be the importance of focusing on the inclusiveness of internationalisation activities (including mobility) in your country/institution:



This clearly suggests that inclusiveness in internationalisation and mobility is a quite incipient topic in most Partner countries, though potentially gaining traction. Of note, eleven of the participating HERE indicated that **inclusiveness in mobility was specifically monitored** in their institutions.

As far as what the barriers would be for disadvantaged students to participate in mobility, interestingly, 19 participants suggested that beyond financial barriers, **universities do not generally have enough support services or resources to identify, recruit and support disadvantaged students for mobility programmes.**

Finally, participants were asked to cite any specific Erasmus+ or other externally funded projects that have supported social inclusion in higher education in their countries. Projects indicated were:

- The establishment of a Foundation for the Integration of Disabled People into HEIs of Azerbaijan;
- Development and implementation of social dimension strategies in Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through cross-regional peer learning (inclusion);
- EQOPP project (Tempus)- Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Generally spoken, the survey results confirmed some of the results of the ICM study. This extends also to the fact that responses from the same country often do not match, which seems to confirm that policies and practices are not so commonly known, and/or may also be considered and applied at different degrees in the different institutional and organisational contexts of the same system.

3. Highlights from the study visit discussions

3.1 Higher education inclusion in the Flemish context

The first day of the study visit was primarily dedicated to studying the Flemish context for inclusion in higher education. Valérie Van Hees and Dominique Montagnese of the [Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education \(SIHO\)](#), a centre funded by the Flemish regional government, provided the general context for how inclusion and inclusive was conceptualised and tackled in high education in Flanders. Collaboratively with the ministry, SIHO designs incentives for higher education institutions to realise inclusive HE and helps them to deliver upon their inclusion strategies. Valerie and Dominique distinguished between “Equality, equity and inclusion”: Equality would mean to treat everybody equal, whereas equity would intend to treat everybody according to specific needs and abilities. “Integrated inclusion” was presented as the goal of Flemish organisations and institutions, as this would allow for a culture that recognizes and cherishes diversity and tries to respond to the needs of all individuals. This is predicated on the ‘universal design’ of inclusion strategies that encompass both educational approaches and support services, such as ‘reasonable accommodation’ for students on campus and ‘broad basic care’ (which are part of the higher education law for the region). SIHO focused also on the definition of inclusive mobility and the recommendations of the Inclusive Mobility Alliance, which unites stakeholders in HE, disability and youth. This initiative has recently developed 17 recommendations for inclusive mobility.³ SIHO also highlighted the aims and current status the project ‘Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe (EPFIME), an Erasmus KA3 project that the Flemish Government and SIHO are currently coordinating⁴.

The presentation of SIHO was then complemented by Magalie Soenen and Patrick Willems of the Flemish Government, Department of Education and Training, who provided further details on the Flemish national strategies for inclusive higher education and subsequently for mobility, and the extent to which the two are linked.

Flanders is characterised as a system with open access to higher education (as opposed to selection) and relatively low tuition fees. This in itself has shaped the direction of the inclusion

³ <https://inclusivemobility.eu/ima/booklet>

⁴ <http://www.siho.be/establishing-thought-out-policy-framework-inclusive-mobility-across-europe-epfime>

strategy. As a general principle, just because a system may be open does not mean that the higher education population reflects the diversity of society, an objective to which the Bologna Process has committed⁵.

It was also noted that in Flanders, the dialogue between the government and the HEI is very strong; HERE were generally impressed by how consultative the process was for generating a regional strategy for inclusion.

In terms of mobility, while the Bologna Process and the European Union have set a target for 20 percent mobility, Flanders has gone further; The [‘Brains on the Move’ strategy](#) - which was to a large extent inspired by the Bologna Process⁶, strives for the following:

- Provide all graduating students with the necessary international and intercultural competences;
- 33% of graduates should have a mobility experience;
- 33% of the mobile students should belong to underrepresented groups in higher education (students with study grants, disabled students, working students).

The Inclusion in Mobility strategy (2013)⁷, which is part of Brains on the Move, establishes a number of actions aimed at meeting targets: Extra communication, information and support regarding mobility opportunities, extra scholarships for disadvantaged students and a provision that 25% of scholarships should be provided to the disadvantaged.

Essential to this strategy is identifying and collecting data on disadvantaged groups. As a result of a consultation of all HE stakeholders, a ‘charter’ was agreed between the Flemish HEI and the ministry to collect data on disadvantaged groups upon admission to a HEI. This includes agreed definitions of disadvantaged groups and reporting via a regional HE database, which allows the ministry to aggregate data and assess policy implementation. ‘Disadvantaged backgrounds’ are currently qualified as: 1) Students with a disability, 2) Students with a migration background, 3) Students newcomers, 4) Foreign-language students, 5) Multilingual students, 6) Working students, 7) Grant students, 8) Near-Grant students, 8) Students from a short-educated or medium-skilled environment. While the Strategy for inclusion is well structured and consensual, implementation does entail certain issues: For example, ‘disadvantage’ is not a binary concept and there are levels of gradation. Just because a student might be diagnosed with a social disadvantage does not necessarily mean that he/she needs additional support. This begs the

⁵ London Communiqué (2009): “We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”

⁶ The Yerevan Strategy document towards 2020 commits to the idea that policies on the social dimension area national responsibility. They will contain at least the following: 1) Identify underrepresented groups and the barriers to access, participation and completion, 2) Develop strategies to overcome these barriers and set objectives for underrepresented groups and the elimination of barriers. 3) Generate systematic and comparable data.

⁷<https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/brains-on-the-move-action-plan-for-mobility-2013>

question, which financial or qualitative measures are needed to support underrepresented/groups and how can this be best personalised or graduated according to need.

Generally, it was mentioned that collecting data upon admissions has helped Flemish universities to get a better understanding of the number disadvantaged students, and to better respond to their specific needs. As this strategy has been in place since 2013, Flanders has generated five years of comparable data on this issue, which is fairly unique in the EHEA. At present, the statistics show that 21,2% mobilities are attributed to underrepresented groups (min. 10 credits abroad), yet only 0,14% of students enrolled receive special support for mobility.

Considered for inclusive mobility are currently only students who are disabled, or recipients of government grants. But government and institutions look into ways of extending this to other groups of disadvantaged students.

3.2 Institutional strategies in Flanders

A panel discussion was held with Flemish universities - Ghent University and University of Antwerp – to assess their specific strategies and approaches to inclusion in general, inclusion in internationalisation and mobility, and the impact of the Flemish regional strategy on how they manage these issues. Comments made by the panelists included:

- At UGhent, the current focus is on increasing the study success of students from diverse backgrounds (as opposed to just attracting and admitting them). Certain underrepresented groups tend to not perform as well. Emphasis is put on support mechanisms for study success: Specific support offices are in place both for general services and target group-oriented services. This includes one-on-one support and coaching. UGhent also asks for information on what students are studying and what their needs may be for going abroad, in terms of their academic background.
- Panelists agreed that the common registration process in Flanders has allowed the generation of comparable data on disadvantaged students and a common approach to classifying them. After 5 years of experience, Flemish universities can now track study success to a much greater extent.
- ‘Self-identification’ of students with disability also seems to have improved greatly; The procedures are fairly simple. Students do not always need to disclose the details of their disadvantage or the exact nature of it. Rather, they indicate the facilities and type of support they need.
- It was generally felt that while ‘Internationalisation at Home’ measures were key to providing more access to internationalisation, this should not be an excuse or a ‘Plan B’ for rendering mobility more inclusive. This said, summer schools can be an important ‘first step’ (short term mobility can be a good ‘first exposure’) to generating interest in mobility and reducing apprehension, as are study visits to a partner university.

- ‘Getting the word out’ was also stressed as essential to generating more diverse participation in mobility: Student organisations are key partners in this as they may target directly certain student groups. Clear information on the steps needed to go abroad are also very important. One challenge at Ghent is getting students to apply. Ironically, financing is not the problem (not all mobility grants are allocated). In addition, the large majority of disadvantaged students that are identified for mobility already receive social grants from the Flemish Community.

3.3 EU objectives for inclusive mobility and EU funding programmes

The second day of the event turned to the EU level, where participants were presented with the current EU objectives for social inclusion, which would decidedly impact the EU funding programmes for higher education going forward.

Irene Sabio Gallego, DG EAC, European Commission, provided a general presentation of the EC’s inclusion goals in higher education, addressing specifically the priorities for inclusion in mobility. Reference was made to an upcoming “Strategy for inclusion and diversity for Erasmus and the EU Solidarity Corps (2021 – 2027)” which would tackle all education levels and apply to cooperation within Europe and beyond Europe. This strategy would maintain the present categories for underrepresented groups that the EC identifies in the Erasmus+ programme, while seeking to harmonise terminology with Member States and support national strategies for social inclusion. In terms of the funding programmes, ideas are already being generated for the Erasmus programme and ICM post 2020. This may include targets for HEI for the selection of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, an increase in organisational support funds for HEI, shorter term mobility options and streamlining good practice in covering costs for disadvantaged students. Mention was also made of updating the Erasmus Charter to focus more on inclusion and promoting the creation of more national support offices for universities on social inclusion (such as SIHO).

In the run-up to the new generation of EU mobility programmes, several European level projects are already underway to tackle inclusion in mobility in a more coordinated way. Valérie Van Hees, SIHO and the ESN representative Wim Gabriels mentioned the [‘Inclusive mobility Alliance’](#), which unites stakeholders in HE, disability and youth. This initiative has recently developed 17 recommendations for inclusive mobility. The [EPFIME project](#)⁸ on implementing a sustainable framework for inclusive mobility is also underway; It has developed a self-assessment tool for national authorities and an online platform for all countries in the EHEA.

3.4 Inclusion in the ICM: A study of Partner countries in the EU Neighbourhood

⁸ Enhancing a thought-out policy and framework on inclusive mobility throughout Europe: <https://esn.org/epfime>

The study visit was also an occasion to present and discuss in depth the results of a study that the SPHERE conducted on inclusion in ICM in Partner Countries in the Southern Mediterranean, Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership. The SPHERE Team revised the three most recent years of NEO monitoring reports and ran online surveys of NEOs and National Agencies in the Programme Countries, as well as previously and currently mobile students. This was complemented by Skype interviews and interviews with a sample of HERE and staff in International Relations Offices.

The legal definitions of disadvantage in Partner Countries were also examined, to see how far they matched the specifications in the E+ Programme Guide. In terms of results:

- In general, there was a wide variation in law and practice when it comes to ‘disadvantage’ and it seems that no country is completely aligned with the Erasmus+ definition.
- One general observation is that the selection of students for E+ mobility pays little regard to disadvantage.
- There is nevertheless widespread awareness that, among other obstacles, many students have difficulty in self-funding the initial cost of visas, travel and insurance, particularly when visas can only be obtained outside their home country.
- The SPHERE Team also addressed the Organisational Support that the E+ programme allows, which can cover some of these additional costs that HEI have in identifying and selecting disadvantaged students for mobility. It seems that Partner Country HEI are not generally aware of its existence and hence it is not applied. This has led to the conclusion that the E+ principles and mechanisms which are designed to widen access to mobility for the disadvantaged in the Partner Countries are not at present being fully exploited or having an effect.

Not all participants had dealt directly with the mechanics of the ICM, however many comments and reflections were made during the discussion. In first instance, participants reflected on the obstacles for inclusive mobility, as per their own experience. This included:

- Lack of a sufficient number of partnerships through which HEI could explore inclusive mobility arrangements;
- Absence of adequate infrastructure in partner universities which could accommodate students with certain needs;
- Inappropriate foreign language level of the disadvantaged student; some participants questioned whether certain disadvantaged students would be prepared to go abroad;
- Selection of disadvantaged students for mobility remains an informal and unsystematic process; Many HEI do not have the capacity or resources to professionalise this. Many HEI also lack adequate internationalisation strategies;
- Difficulty in identifying students, particularly when there is some stigma in being labeled as ‘disadvantaged’. It was commented that beyond physical disability, self-identification is complicated and sensitive. This is particularly true for those from a low socio-economic status;

- ‘Self-identification’ can also be fraught with semantic issues; Sometimes the language and categorization around disadvantage may not be clear;
- It was also commented that the line between low-income and those only slightly above excludes some students who still do not have the means to be mobile.
- In countries where there is no national approach, with a large private sector (such as Lebanon), there are no consensually agreed categories for disadvantage and support for this relies exclusively on private or international funding, which may create a scattered and uncoordinated national picture.
- Concern was expressed about falsified documents showing disability, especially in countries with high corruption levels. Procedures for validation and control are needed.

3.5 HERE and Partner countries: Ways forward

The HERE brainstormed a number of possible ways forward in for their inclusion agendas in their respective countries and institutions, especially when it comes to inclusion in internationalisation and mobility.

Three presentations from HERE participants painted a fairly positive picture of slow but noteworthy progress regarding inclusion agendas, often propelled by EU project funding:

- Nigir Abbaszade of the Azerbaijan State University of Pedagogies stressed that as there are already obstacles for mobility (lack of international university partnerships, difficulty in managing EU funds for mobility), it is difficult to push for increased attention to inclusion in mobility at this stage. She argued that comprehensive inclusion policies with a legal precedent need to be in place in first instance, supported by teacher training for diverse classrooms, to help raise awareness for and implement such policies. A new EU funded initiative in Azerbaijan will directly address teacher training for diversity and disadvantaged students.
- Olena Kozievska, Ukraine Parliament’s Committee for Science and Education, indicated that while the Ukraine has a lack of comparable data on the social dimension in the context of the Bologna Process, and few channels for information on mobility of students with disabilities, an E+ project on student mobility in Ukraine and Serbia (MILETUS) was helping to develop national policy measures to ensure inclusion in mobility.
- Zlatan Buljko from the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, Bosnia and Herzegovina presented advances with the INCLUSION project, targeted at Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Amongst the deliverables is a benchmarking tool for HEI to review their adherence to the social dimension strategy of the Bologna Process as well as the development of ‘master plans’ for inclusive education at the university level.

In response, the HERE mentioned a number of important areas for policy development going forward:

- It was recognized that comprehensive national strategies for social inclusion are a lever, however each system should consider how to build that strategy in cooperation with universities and stakeholders, so that can have direct impact on university practice and also on monitoring.
- Participants questioned whether quotas for disadvantaged students were the most effective way forward. In Jordan, there are four categories for disadvantaged students. These students are allocated 40 percent of the seats in public universities, which sometimes excludes other students of high merit.
- Linking social inclusion strategies to the teaching and learning agenda is an important approach: teaching to diverse classrooms and sensitizing teaching staff on the different types of disadvantaged students and their potential needs is an important step beyond simply ensuring access of disadvantaged students.
- It was suggested that accreditation criteria should examine inclusiveness. The extent to which accreditation and quality assurance also address internationalisation could include parameters around inclusiveness in mobility.
- Institutional networks (national and international) related to social inclusion create an important peer-learning community. EU projects can facilitate this.
- Participants agreed that more emphasis by the EU on social inclusion strategies as a criterion for participation in ICM could have a positive impact in shaping national discourse on this topic, provided there is flexibility to adapt the definitions and categories of disadvantage to national and local realities.

4. Conclusions, take-aways and recommendations

For the final session of the study visit, the HERE discussed lessons learned and take-aways:

- Many of the existing national policies for disadvantage/social inclusion in Partner countries are not sufficient. They highlight some disadvantaged groups (such as those with physical disability or economically disadvantaged) but need updating, and also often systematic consideration and implementation in the HE context. While HEI may receive some scholarship support for certain groups, more structural measures (social inclusion strategy development, teaching training, capacity to manage diversity, student services, etc) are not necessarily funded.
- Access to internationalisation and mobility is also a key component of the inclusion agenda and should be reflected in internationalisation strategies and targets. The EU policies and programmes for mobility and capacity building going forward can be important in drawing attention to this. The Flemish case is a clear example of how government, government agencies/organisations and HEI can work together collaboratively to define objectives for both inclusion and mobility and develop a comprehensive approach to monitoring. The Flemish case has been directly influenced by

the Bologna Process (social dimension and mobility targets). Its success can be attributed to the small size of the system, the trust and collaborative spirit between institutions and ministry, and the proactive usage of international projects and networks to develop tools that support institutions and policy makers to refine and implement their strategies.

- Measuring the impact of social inclusion policies is essential, which is dependent upon defining clear categories for disadvantage and identifying a nationally and contextually appropriate way of generating that data. The Flemish case, whereby the charter on disadvantaged student categories and data collection upon admission was agreed consensually, is an interesting example.
- Data and privacy issues may hinder the institution's ability to measure target groups. This must be considered when designing policies and indicators. 'Self-identification' of disadvantage is also a concern. Promoting mobility opportunities to certain disadvantaged groups is essential, as is making the self-identification process as clear and private as possible.
- The SPHERE Study on social inclusion in ICM has demonstrated some of the limitations of the current EU requirements for including socially disadvantaged students in credit mobility. Based on the study, most universities in Partner countries a) have difficulty identifying students, given that they may not have comparative categories for disadvantage nor a means of identifying such students, b) worry about stigma associated with self-identification, c) do not have appropriate resources in the international office for identifying and supporting such students, d) do not have adequate international partnerships through which they are comfortable exchanging students with disadvantage, and e) do not use or are not aware of the Support Costs the EU makes available to this effect. The SPHERE Study is an important basis for improving the EU mobility programmes in the next round of the ICM.