

Smile

Giving voice to “migrant background”

SUMMARY REPORT 01.4 | PILLAR 1

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1. Introduction

The foregoing report summarises the main findings and conclusions from the desk research and interviews of the three SMILE-partners - Malta, Spain and Germany – currently working on the pillar “Migrant Background”. It also showcases the results of the Peer Learning Event and the discussions of all SMILE partners. The European dimension will be foregrounded in the last part of the report.

The desk research and the knowledge generated through the peer-learning event signpost a very complex, multifaceted and multi-layered issue of migrant access to Higher Education, characterised by historical legacies, societal norms, institutional traditions, policies and politics that are not always aligned to the principles of diversity, inclusion, equity, fairness, and cohesion. While Europe offers stark contrasts in terms of access, several good practices across Europe provide for pockets of hope and possibility.

2. Main findings of Desk Research and Interviews (Summary of the Three Country Reports)

2.1. MALTA: Conclusions of the Migrant Report

While the report is preliminary in nature, it provides sufficient insights into the complex and multi-layered scenario regarding migrant access to education. While genuine integration is still a long way for many migrants, the country is not low in educational initiatives aimed at providing multiple opportunities to access in education. Based on seven interviews with strategically-located interviewees, the report highlights, albeit in a preliminary way, some of the **barriers to access** (issues external to the education system and structural issues pertinent to the education system) as well as **good practices** (inclusive visions, policies and infrastructures) and **signposts for future action**. Further research, of a qualitative nature, should throw more light on **education institutions’ culture**, determining how access is materialising through the social relations obtaining within individual sites of learning. In addition, the work of **voluntary organisations**, often project-based, intermittent and very uneven in terms of quality, needs to be recognised and studied.

2.2. SPAIN: Conclusions of the Migrant Report

It is important to understand the **access** of students to the university and their achievement at this level **in terms of intersectionality**. The low-income situation, gender, administrative situations, stereotypes that institutions and particulars have on “Migrant Background” students, the migration process and the migratory grief, the lack of a social support network are factors to take into account in the design of coherent and coordinated strategies and policies towards this heterogeneous group. Inclusive strategies and policies could focus, for instance, on early integration programmes (language or bridging programmes), mentoring programmes, psychosocial support, funding priorities where migrants are eligible, etc. In educative terms, the inclusion of sociocultural minorities also implies to review ethnocentric, exclusive and discriminatory social constructs that persist in the curricula and that, sometimes, avoid migrant students feeling part of Higher Education Institutions and developing a sense of belonging.

The external strategy for inclusion of migrants implies the work with key local stakeholders (schools, families, local administrations, NGOs) and is necessary for social and educative inclusion.

The research has found that it is important to **emphasize a model** where cultural diversity is not just an exotic topic but a necessary element in our educational systems. Migrant students have specific and valuable experiences and knowledge regarding cultural diversity, understanding of cultural codes and have the experience and abilities to handle situations in multicultural environments. Moreover, experts highlight that it is **necessary to empower migrant students**, encourage and promote their participation in all decision-making levels. This should help to raise their voices, concerns, proposals, on the institutional agenda.

2.3. GERMANY: Conclusions of the Migrant Report

... on a general level

Intersectionality should be a key principal for collaboration between the three SMILE pillars. **Diversity** could be such a key principal. Other principals should be discussed and described.

... on an expert level

Definitions and terms should be revised and checked. For example the term “Migrant Background” is to be reviewed. The latest scientific discussions and developments within the expert communities should be considered. We have to have in mind that the stakeholders and experts dealing with migrant issues vote nowadays for avoiding the terminus “migration background” and recommend to better use “migrants and their (direct) descendants”.¹

¹ <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/fachkommission-fordert-abschaffung-des-begriffs-migrationshintergrund-101.html>
<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-counts-as-a-migrant-definitions-and-their-consequences/>

3.2. Breakout Room Results of Pillar 1 “Migrant Background”

The main findings (see chapter 2. above) from the research, interviews and reporting of the three countries focusing on Pillar 1 were based on a set of questions which was created during the preparation of the discussion groups. This set of questions was the central focus in the discussion.

Questions and results of the discussion in the breakout rooms:

3.2.1. Group A of Pillar 1 “Migrant Background”

Focus on three key words: **admission**, **retention** and **transition** (from education to quality work).

Questions

1. How is **admission** facilitated for migrants who approach the Higher Education Institutions with multiple challenges, ranging from language to missing certification?
2. What are Higher Education Institutions in your respective country doing to ensure the **retention** of migrant students, once they are admitted into a course programme?
3. What structures exist within your respective institution that help facilitate the **transition** from the Higher Education Institutions into work?

Admission

- Fee waivers,
- Open university courses for migrants (Finland),
- Importance of career guidance or counselling in schools and particular importance of reaching out to schools,
- Open courses, although the difficulty of online only courses can reinforce segregation of students-Special admission offices (Italy) for admission of migrant students.

Retention

- Flexibility,
- Well-being centres/hubs helping immigrants regarding all type of issues including outside the academic scope,
- Particular attention to make sure support doesn't make students dependents,
- Need to make regular support available to migrants rather than setting up dedicated support.

Transition

- Orientation offices in IT with strong links to companies,
- Top up courses financed for migrants,
- Sensibility to the real needs in outreach programmes.

3.2.2. Group B of Pillar 1 “Migrant Background”

Questions

1. What strategies and policies do you think institutions can adopt in order to reduce or eliminate the (re)production of **social inequalities** and **privilege structures** that can marginalize and invisibilise ethnic minorities within the university?
2. How universities and the rest of the educational system (primary and secondary levels) can overcome the “**hidden curriculum**” and **non-inclusive pedagogies** that are some of the factors that prevent (low income) migrant and refugee students’ educational inclusion and success?
3. Impacts of social, educational, economic, ... situations are different for men and women. How the **gender** perspective can be useful in order to think and act to reduce the vulnerabilities of women students with migrant/refugee background at the University and after their studies (in the labour market)?

The discussion was on how admission can be facilitated for migrants who approach the HE institution with multiple challenges, ranging from language to missing certification.

Key elements

- Complexity and diversity of migrants’ movements, situations and conditions: the concept of migrant is not one and unique. It is always moving on.
- Need to involve migrants and to make their voices heard,
- Importance of the process of democratisation and strong cooperation with NGOs,
- Need to train staff,
- Need to make policy adoption easier,
- Gender is key for migrants: intersectionality approach,
- Higher Education Institutions need to develop their access as mainstream- Social investment into education and support to civil society organisations- University as a social transformation actor (research),
- Need to remove barriers for employment.

HE institutions in our respective country are doing the following to ensure the retention of migrant students, once they are admitted into a course programme.

- The presence of Anglo-Saxon references in universities needs to be changed through training in order to introduce new cultural references in curricula promoting cultural diversity.
- Need to build guidelines that can help teachers to overcome stereotypes, use proper language.
- Unconscious bias and quotas were mentioned.
- Gender perspective: as a Trojan horse that allows to speak about intersectionality.
- Understanding of the fact that other people can think in different ways due to their experience and cultural backgrounds is key.

3.2.3. Group C of Pillar 1 “Migrant Background”

Questions

1. What do the Higher Education Institutions offer to ensure **intercultural learning**?
2. What kind of **approaches / methods of intercultural learning** for the class room and for non-academics do you know?
3. Do you work with the Critical Incident Method, Story Telling or other methods in Learning groups / Intercultural Trainings to **“Give Migrants Voice”**?

Discussion on **access** to Higher Education. Identification of specific strategies to favour access to Higher Education:

- Addressing the needs of students at policy level with involvement of all stakeholders, recognising the important role of Higher Education Institutions and student associations,
- Making visible possibilities and information is the most accessible way,
- Financial support,
- Evaluation and monitoring,
- RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), guidance on RPL and its inclusion in policy debates,
- Involving families and creating a sense of community to show the benefits of academic studies,
- Allowing students to work while studying,
- Guidance and individualised support for newcomers directly with students’ associations.

Partners pointed out some **examples of practices**: welcome days, summer schools for migrant in secondary schools, open universities offering courses for a low cost; and highlighted co-creation as a key feature.

According to the group, **financial issues** are crucial and need to be addressed primarily. Admission can be facilitated by welcome days (although language is a strong barrier in Finland and Romania), tandem systems via digital apps to bring students together and create communities, intercultural trainings.

3.3. External Evaluation Observations

Diversities of:

- Disciplinary backgrounds,
- Different histories of migration in partner countries, but also of practices, and knowledges,
- Local contexts: role of local governments, willingness of universities.

This is a strength, but also a challenge as it brings a risk of misunderstanding or superficial understanding. This issue needs to be addressed, for example by always precisising the perspective, agreement on a common language and define a taxonomy, etc.

Complexity due to several factors (individual, economic, political, institutional, etc):

- Lack of reference points for migrants,
- Break with original environment,
- Stigmatisation.

The question should not be simplified but rather embraced in its complexity. We shouldn't take for granted that the journey to university is worthwhile: why is it worthwhile? Invitation to reflect on: How to address this diversity and complexity?

4. Expansion to European Level

4.1. Monitoring and Evaluation at EU Level

The European Union and its Higher Education Institutions are committed to the principles of **diversity, inclusion, equity, fairness** and **cohesion**. The current reception crisis is also a crisis in the European Human Rights and the humanitarian management system. It takes place at the borders of the European Union and the mishandling of disagreements between Member States with regard giving a home, location or relocation to people waiting at the borders, is sending out an overarching message that goes against these five principles. Member States should accomplish their responsibilities as signatories of human rights international treaties and European Human Rights laws. These political failings mirror themselves in structural misgivings in migrant access to any kind of education. Higher Education Institutions claim high ethical standards and must therefore continue to play a central role in critical thinking and social fairness, research and dissemination of knowledge that holds the European Union and its Member States accountable for political decisions that spread privilege and opportunities for a dignified life to particular members of society but not to others.

The European Union was, is and will continue to be defined by peoples in flux, passing through, settling down and moving on. The multicultural identity that defines the geopolitical region must continue to be brought to the foreground, engaged with, dissected, valued and revalued. The Higher Education Institutions of the region must commit to further unified, if also highly diverse, investigations into the hidden curriculum of non-inclusive pedagogies and disseminate knowledge of and best practice around the decolonisation of practices of student and staff admission and curriculum design across faculties and departments.

4.2. Visibility of Financial Help at EU Level

Country specific reports on facilitating migrant access to education, particularly higher education, unanimously highlight the importance of financial support. Facilitating migrant admission to and retention within higher education institutions, as well as providing specialised support during the period of transition to the job market, require, amongst other things, fee waivers, open courses, career guidance and wellbeing centres. Training academic and non-academic staff within Higher Education Institutions in working with and thinking through multicultural and diverse practices (intersectionality), which support, facilitate and even increase migrant access to education, such as optimal use of inclusive, stereotype-free language, is an ongoing project that also requires substantial financial investment. Higher Education Institutions of the European Union require a one stop shop bringing together all available funding opportunities, which facilitate migrant access to education across the European Union but also at national, regional and local levels.

The administrative complexities of access to financial help for Higher Education Institutions and their students is a principal barrier in migrant access to education and

maybe mitigated via the work of one stop shop services. Such a model of cooperation between Higher Education Institutions and the particular areas that deal with this administration (i.e. renewal of documents) would further contribute to the decolonisation of discriminatory practices, which hinder access to education for the vulnerable.

4.3. Visibility of Best Practice Hybrid Models at EU Level

Higher Education Institutions of the European Union must co-create, co-manage and co-fund outreach programmes in the field of migrant education together with voluntary organisations, and regional and local government entities, particularly host and home institutions to migrant populations, such as refugees and asylum seekers. Whilst the journey to university may not be feasible or worthwhile for all individuals of a diverse and multicultural community, Higher Education Institutions are highly specialised and safe hubs that bring together expert thinkers, creators, educators, humanists, pedagogues and linguists, which play a fundamental role in the field of migrant access to any kind of education. Best practices of hybrid programmes co-led by Higher Education Institutions and voluntary organisations and/or regional and local government reception entities exist, bear fruit and constitute a productive model for the immediate present and future. The involvement of voluntary organisations and regional and local government entities offer Higher Education Institutions the community space for translating knowledge into social impact whilst the latter bring further expertise to the home terrains of voluntary organisations and migrant reception entities. Higher Education Institutions of the European Union must bring together best practices in this hybrid model field, disseminate knowledge about them and put them to practice.

5. Conclusion

“Migrant” and “Migrant Background” are, before anything else, social, political, cultural and moving categories and “migrants” are not a homogenous group. Nationality, race, gender, class and other factors determine and diversify personal experience. The impact of the category “Migrant” or “Migrant Background” on the person identifying, perceived or classified as such, is in constant flux and is likely to shift over time depending on changes in legal status, work experience, language acquisition, access to the welfare state, family reunification and familiarity with the administrative, educational, cultural, health and transport systems of the host country. Any person falling under the category “migrant” and “Migrant Background” will nevertheless long continue to be affected by racist policies, border regimes and structural discrimination.

To mitigate the impact of rigid categorisation whilst achieving the desired results in the field of migrant access to higher education, any action must have at its core a “by migrant for migrant” approach. And all actions are to be embedded within (if there is) the HEI’s Third Mission. The transactions of power and privilege implied in the terms “giving voice” and “empowerment”, who is giving power to whom where, why and for which reasons, are elements which must be examined and foregrounded in direct conversation with impacted communities. This means that identifying barriers in “migrant” access to higher education, locating good practices in “migrant” access to higher education and identifying future avenues, are fields of action that must have self-organised migrant groups in leading roles. Higher Education Institutions have amongst the strongest platforms, networks and resources for identifying barriers to access (hidden curricula, exclusionary pedagogies, institutional linguicism, no recognition of prior learning) that must be shared with persons falling under the category “Migrant” and “Migrant Background” rather than speak on their behalf. Higher Education Institutions are willing to contribute to common goals (like the Agenda Goals 2030 for sustainability for example) and most of them regard the inclusion of people with “Migrant Background” as part of their mission statement or Third Mission.

6. References on “Migration Background and Higher Education Institutions” in general

European Commission: Higher Education for Migrants and Refugees (last accessed on 15.06.2021)

https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/higher-education-for-migrants-and-refugees_en

European Commission: Education and Migrants (last accessed on 20.06.2021)

https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/education-and-migrants_en

European Commission: Integrating Asylum Seekers and Refugees into Higher Education in Europe (Eurydice Report) (last accessed 15.06.2021)

https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/232_en_migrants_he-1.pdf

JRC Reports, Social Inclusion Policies in Higher Education: Evidence from the EU (2019)

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5687748d-c7b0-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>

Detourbe, M.A. (Ed.) (2017). Inclusion through Access to Higher Education. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

<file:///C:/Users/Carmel%20Borg/Downloads/inclusion-through-access-to-higher-education.pdf>

Country-specific detailed literature lists are available in the individual country reports.