Smile

Giving voice to students with low Social Economic Status

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Contents

ABSTRACT

Educational policies aimed at widening participation into higher education are having an impact on European higher education. This can be detected not only by statistics – such as increasing numbers of diverse students accessing HE - but also in the light of personal experiences in the level of teachers and students. Part of this wider discourse is the pathway of low socio-economic status (SES) students to higher education.

Broader policies for widening participation in the European and national level speak of general aims and goals, but institutional policies and practices set the structures that enable or hinder low SES students making the most of their potential in the academia. In this SMILE-project report we give voice to the teachers and students on low SES students' experiences in higher education through two cases, one in Romania and one in Finland.

The aim of this report is to identify structural barriers and to raise awareness in higher education about low SES students' path in higher education. Based on the cases, we suggest ideas on how to ensure equal treatment of students and how to offer more support to those students who are more in need of assistance than others.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic status (SES) as a concept refers to the position of individuals, families, households, or other aggregates on one or more dimensions of stratification. As a variable in statistical research and surveys, it often includes components such as parental education, parental income, and parental occupational status. In qualitative research, individual student experiences have been studied through means of ethnography and interviews.

Research has detected that low SES students are underrepresented in higher education. Socio-economic status may also affect program choice, or students' conceptions of their ability to achieve academic success in their desired or chosen field of study. Psychological barriers (e.g., emotional distress, identity management issues, negative self-perception, and more damaging forms of motivation) may help to explain their worse academic success. However, low SES students also face concrete challenges in making ends meet in their daily life, or in acquisition of material goods needed for their studies such as projects and laboratory work.

In this report we highlight these structural barriers and experiences with low SES students through case descriptions from Romania and Finland. Before that, we go through the concept of low socio-economic status, and research on the matter.

CONCEPTUALIZATION: WHAT IS MEANT BY LOW SES?

Socio-economic status (SES) refers to the position of individuals, families, households, or other aggregates on one or more dimensions of stratification. These dimensions include income, education, prestige, wealth, or other aspects of standing that members of society deem salient (Bollen, Glanville, and Stecklov 2001, 157). Despite its wide use, the concept of SES is by no means a universally clear one and many variations are used in research.

Most often, the concept of SES is a composite measure consisting of parental education, parental income, and parental occupational status. Furthermore, this is often combined by the possibility for purchase of material goods such as a personal computer or laptop, or by eligibility to services, such as free school meals (Taylor, 2018).

As a concept, socio-economic status is seen as a current standing of an individual. Another concept used in social research is social class, which refers to one's sociocultural background. Compared to SES, social class is seen as more stable, typically remaining more or less static across generations (Jones & Vangle, 2013).

Critique has been presented towards poorly defined use of the concept of SES, or the fact that it is often used as a control variable and less frequently as a variable of main interest in the research. Furthermore, some components have different contents, e.g. occupation is frequently used as a measure of SES in Europe, while in the United States income or education is a more commonly used component in the construct (Braveman, 2006).

Taking into consideration the limitations of the SES as a concept, we cannot deny that some students occupy positions of power and prestige when compared to others, and that a wealth of research has detected linkage between socioeconomic background of students and their attainment and success in the educational system. In addition to that, a number of educational policies have been designed to combat inequality in the education system, and bring to the attention of decision makers and practitioners the need to introduce widening participation and outreach actions to make higher education more accessible to students with diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, a number of researchers have turned attention to the intersections of students' social class, gender, disability and racial/ethnic identities, and analysed how these variables shape access, admission, college experiences and educational outcomes (see e.g. Villa Lever 2020, Vaccaro et. al. 2019, Garcia-Andreu et al. 2020, Rubin 2014).

All of these are relevant perspectives for the SMILE project and are reflected in the various outcomes of the project.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In this Summary report of findings, we rely on the researchers' (e.g. Heaslip et al. 2020) argument that by asking "how and why" questions we can identify challenges and introduce improvements in the design of outreach activities addressing individual experiences alongside the above mentioned structural barriers. Before that, we briefly represent the theoretical framework on the connections and causality of socio-economic status and higher education from a number of perspectives: choice of program and enrolment, study success and graduation and employability. Consequently, in this report we address the authentic, personal experiences of students and teachers of socio-economic status and the impact this may have on studies and employment in higher education.

Choice of program and enrolment in HE

Despite the massification of higher education, social inequality in higher education outcomes still persists (Vandelannote & Demanet, 2021, p. 169). Policy makers speak of consensus on a view that tertiary level participation and achievement should not be affected by ' … factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability', but when looking at the level of practice, students from low socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds enrol less in higher education, and they are underrepresented in academic bachelor programs (OECD 2008b, 14, 2014).

However, research has also detected that the educational policies aimed at widening participation into higher education are having an impact with increasing numbers of diverse students accessing HE. (Heaslip et al. 2020). Even with this promising trend, students from higher socio-economic and majority backgrounds are more at ease with higher education enrolment and program choice while their fellows from underprivileged backgrounds continue to be less likely to participate and succeed in higher education (Nikula, 2018).

Study success

The connection or causality between parents' socio-economic status and success in higher education has been debated. In a recent study in Finland, researchers did not find the university students' parents' socio-economic status to be statistically significantly related to the progress of the studies or the academic success (Jokimies, 2017). In this study, the researcher examined whether there was a relation between university students' epistemic

beliefs, conceptions of learning, socioeconomic background and academic achievements during their first years at the university. However, another study confirmed that there is a strong connection between the socio-economic background of parents and the cultural capital and strategic knowledge of students, enabling them to make better informed choices about the field of study or choice of the academic program (Saari et al. 2015). In the following we elaborate how socio-economic status as background may open or close doors for higher education.

It is known that secondary schools' socioeconomic composition is at least partly responsible for this social inequality. (Vandelannote & Demanet, 2021) Furthermore, research has demonstrated that in addition to lower enrolment in higher education, disadvantaged students are also less likely to attend the more prestigious programs. This is explained by the fact that they attended secondary schools with low socioeconomic composition (Palardy 2015; Sackett et al. 2009). Hence, the socio-economic status of parents is connected with the patterns of attainment in higher education between parents and children.

For mature students (of age beyond 21 years) it may be difficult to combine study while sustaining their adult life. Often married and with children, mature students need to juggle between study, family responsibilities, and work to the extent their employers need. In these circumstances low SES students face the studies and social environment unfitting to their needs. (Busher & James, 2020). Furthermore, combined with other structural causes like gender and ethnicity, mature students may find their age a factor that makes them underprivileged in social situations in higher education compared to those who enter HE in their earlier years and who come with more favourable backgrounds.

In addition, research in psychology points out that low (SES) students experience psychological barriers (e.g., emotional distress, identity management issues, negative self-perception, and more damaging forms of motivation) that may help to explain their worse academic outcomes (e.g., taking fewer classes and experiencing higher drop-out rates). Furthermore, in their academic life low SES students have a lower sense of belonging to college than high SES students. (Jury et al. 2019.)

Graduation and employability

Family background influences students' perceptions of themselves as students, learners and future professionals. Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds have lower self-efficacy beliefs than their counterparts. Self-efficacy can be defined as students' beliefs in their capabilities to reach certain goals, like educational achievement or attainment in certain educational programs (Bandura 1986). This may be extended to perceptions of

future careers and employability. Hence, research suggests that low SES students' lower level of self-efficacy is an internalization of social inequalities. (Vandelannote & Demanet, 2021). Following this line of argument, students with low socio-economic status background are less likely to set themselves ambitious goals and are more likely to not be determined to fulfil their goals. These perceptions of students may speak of experiences of not seeing oneself as a "learner" and feeling that "higher education is not for them".

Parutis and Howson (2020) note that most employability support is given to all students, and special needs of low SES students are not catered for. Employability support is being embedded within the curriculum or through institution-wide offices, services and extracurricular activities. However, students differ on how they engage in these activities. Parutis and Howson suggest (2020, p. 374), that it is important to understand how students from different backgrounds experience and utilise such support. High SES students are more equipped to utilise such activities to improve their employability, as low SES students are not customary to harvest learnings from such offerings.

Regarding employability, established networks and social status of parents may improve the standing of their children in the labour market. However, social and cultural capital is relevant in the context of application, meaning that when transferring to another context or branch, students may not benefit from the existing networks of their parents. Therefore, the educational achievements and occupational status of parents may support only students who remain in the same context or branch as their parents (Vanttaja, 2000).

Preparing students for the labour market is one of the key functions of HE. Due to the location, parents and their students may experience different access to schooling and employment. Furthermore, employers search for workers that are local and meet the criteria for specific skill sets. Therefore researchers (e.g. Reyes et al. 2019) suggest that individuals who function within local labour markets are less likely to have a postsecondary education.

Geography of opportunity means that individuals' opportunities—educational and occupational—are influenced by geography. Such place-based opportunities facilitate, for example, college attendance and student success (Hirschl & Smith, 2020). Hence, geography of opportunity refers to an idea that persons situated in different spaces have access to different local opportunity structures. As presented by Galster and Killen (1995), this theoretical framework suggests that physical space influences the decisions youths make when choosing an academic career or a vocational route (Galster and Killen 1995; Sharkey and Galster 2017).

In their research, Hirschl & Smith (2020) argue that neoliberal regimes may favour policies that make schools compete to cultivate human capital over policies that directly impact disadvantaged individuals' material conditions. In higher education, universities in capital or rural areas may face different kinds of student populations. Socio-economic status of families and students may vary greatly even between regions and municipalities.

In the following section, we analyse the impact of low socio-economic status on studies in higher education through the lens of student and teacher lived experiences. We compare two cases, one from Romania and one from Finland, and examine student educational trajectories and investigate how socio-economic inequalities are experienced by students and teachers, ranging from education attainment, entry requirements for different subjects of study and recruitment or selection criteria to universities in the two countries. By this comparison, we seek evidence of the existence of structural inequalities in higher education attainment and suggest interventions to mitigate these structural inequalities.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Case Romania (TUIASI)

In the Romanian case, the following findings were made from the data collected via questionnaires and interviews.

There are many particular situations, in universities or high schools, which are successfully solved, but not always known by the entire academic community.

Infrastructure: At TUIASI, students' educational activity is often supported by professors willing to help them in their spare time (by email, phone or online meetings). Representatives of academic and administrative community have been involved in supporting students with lower SES background, putting at their disposal equipment, computers or other electronic devices to finalise their thesis or other practical projects for various subjects. Students with lower SES background are part of the target group for some projects in which the university is a beneficiary or a coordinator, as ROSE projects; students with economic issues and students with various physical disabilities were involved in projects of social inclusion carried out by the university/school. These projects, which promoted the inclusion in the labour market and the employability of young students with fewer opportunities, were paying special attention to the transition from education to the labour market. One of the main goals of these projects was to help students improve their self-confidence and to support them to get to the next level of their personal growth.

Other examples mentioned were about activities of supporting students with excellent academic results, but with lower income, students who were constantly helped to carry out their diploma project, never dependent on means, only conditioned by skills/knowledge acquired during the attendance of the study programme.

The counsellors from TUIASI Counselling Centre and the teaching staff from TUIASI Department of Teacher Training were involved in improving not only educational achievements of low-SES students, but also their personal development, through individual and in-group counselling meetings.

Sense of belonging: For example, a student with depression, being at risk of dropping out (because of missing classes for a long time) was helped by one professor, before and after medical diagnosis, by talking to him in private, being supportive and expressing concern about the situation, presenting the situation to other professors, too. Being listened to carefully and receiving the validation of his feelings, the student made up for the practical classes and had the opportunity to successfully pass the exams.

In one student group, one teacher opened a discussion of the situation of low SES students with an example of a rural student commuting daily into urban areas to the university (she could not afford the accommodation in the student dormitory) to develop empathy and support from her colleagues. The effect was that she has been better integrated in the student group.

Financing the studies and living: The representatives of a faculty from another local university mentioned that there were many situations when the management of the faculty supports students with low-SES background, employed at the same time, to increase their income.

Iași Chamber of Commerce and Industry not only does not exclude students based on socio-economic status, but also grants discounts for low-SES students, or unemployed persons, or collective enrolment. The course programmes are also flexible, taking first into consideration the interest of the participants.

During the pandemic period, in the context of online classes we encountered a situation when a professor facilitated the academic performance of a student from a family with economic issues. The student was allowed to hand over the projects by accessing and using his friend's computer.

There also have been situations (at the Faculty of Architecture), when students with socio-economic issues could not participate in all preliminary steps to the final projects, which involved large expenditures for drawing and modelling materials. That led to the unwanted situation of the impossibility to finalise the annual project in good conditions. To prevent these situations, a number of teachers conducted additional sessions with these students, thus facilitating the completion of the project. Moreover, at the same faculty, each year students from disadvantaged groups receive the assistance of a Tutor, an experienced teacher, to whom students can address questions and ask for help in solving problems that arise during the academic year. There is also a decision at the university level regarding the additional examination periods for undergraduate and master's degree studies, designed to support students who had encountered difficulties in passing certain subjects during the previous years.

Personalized instruction and guidance: Another example was about a student helped by a local NGO during the high-school period and who continued to be helped during the university period by his teachers. The results were so impressive, boosting his self-esteem, increasing his motivation and leading to improving his academic performance in other subjects, too. Today, this student is a doctoral student at a university in Germany. Another case was a shy student sharing a great passion for Mathematical Analysis, initially excluded by his fellow students, because of his origin, a disadvantaged socio-economic group. Due to

his professor's support and to repeated words of encouragement which had the potential to energize, inspire, and motivate him, the student managed to increase self-confidence and today he is an assistant professor.

Some examples of **exclusionary situations** were also mentioned: when a teacher humiliated a student because of his modest clothes; or situations concerning students with low-SES background who usually have a job from the first year of study and often have difficulties in participating in all academic activities, which are necessary in order to learn and understand the subjects in the curriculum. But generally, these cases are often understood by the administrative or academic staff. A situation was also mentioned when one teacher did not provide additional counselling and training for students from rural areas (they had done less/no math, physics, programming) although those students had requested it.

Emotional stress: Low-SES students can face particular difficulties at school. They suffer from high levels of financial stress as they struggle to support themselves. There have been situations at school when some of them did not find understanding regarding the real reasons for their absenteeism from the seminars, projects and laboratories. They were in the situation to pay for the classes they had to make up for, a fact which contributed to school dropout. Sometimes they are mocked by their fellow students, and they feel excluded.

Organizational Culture: Representatives of student associations mentioned that most of the time, low-SES students face a problem when teachers ask students to perform activities that involve some costs and students have financial difficulties to even print materials, to make the drawings for certain subjects or to use certain software not working on the PC or laptops they own.

The representative of a high-school partner mentioned an exclusionary situation, referring to some activities carried out during the "School Otherwise" Week, when one of the teachers failed to organize things, and thus two of the students with financial problems could not join their classmates. On the other hand, low-SES students are usually financed by the high-school partners in order to participate in competitions, all the technical and legal aspects being taken care of by coaches and teachers.

Case Finland

In the Finnish case, the following findings were made from hearing the teachers and students on the topic of SES.

Even though university studies are free of charge in Finland, and students enjoy social support mechanisms for housing, living and subsidized meals, there are a number of groups who fall between these support mechanisms or find them inadequate. These include for example the international students, especially from outside the EU countries, who have to find work or support from their parents to cover their costs during their study. In Finland there is no part-time status for studies. However, many students take part-time jobs to make ends meet.

Infrastructure: There might be issues for example with connectivity to internet or use of mobile devices. These might be taken for granted but some students may need to go to spots with free Wi-Fi to be able to study. It might be expected to have video on while in online classes, but this may be based on the expectation that everybody has a laptop with a webcam. These questions are not actively thought of.

Sense of belonging: to be included in a certain group one may need to be dressed in a certain way or have gadgets/technology to feel included or have access to groups.

Social responsibilities: students might have social responsibilities of taking care of parents, or children, and there are no support functions for this.

Gender-based job circumstances: There could also be gender-based patterns of employment, e.g. female students may work in service sector jobs, where working hours can include evenings or weekends. This may affect their possibility to study compared to those jobs which male students get employed at.

International students: in order to make ends meet or have the necessary socio-economic base to live and study in Finland, students need to find employment, often in low paid jobs, e.g. cleaning cruise line ships or offices, and this can have an impact on their studies.

Organizational Culture: there are still comments that socio-economic (or structures, being marginalized) issues are not the responsibility of universities, that they focus on delivering teaching and such matters are a responsibility of other parties. However, e.g. international students may not have access to such services that those with nationality.

SOLUTIONS

In our data collection, we identified both macro, meso and micro level solutions for advancing low SES student attainment and positive experiences in higher education.

Macro level

According to the GATE (Gaining Access to Higher Education)[1] project international comparison between Finland, Sweden, Ireland and the United Kingdom, countries have both similar and varying policy programs for widening participation and equal access to higher education. Within this macro level solutions, similar policy actions fall in the category of guidance with information, including collecting statistics, creating national evaluation frameworks, and carrying out evaluations.

In addition to these universal policy actions, countries may use specific follow-up systems (the UK and Ireland) or use targeted marketing for ethnic minorities (Sweden) to advance widening participation in higher education. In addition, countries use finance models to stimulate intake of underrepresented groups in higher education. Furthermore, legislation in the countries may support widening participation through laws on equality.

Meso level

Academic course structure: In the Romanian case, representatives of Iasi County Scholar Inspectorate proposed some measures that could contribute to making the low-SES students feel more included: developing educational offers adapted to the students' particularities; conducting workshops to improve their inclusion; offering more incentives to employers who hire graduates with low-SES; ensuring a better synchronization of the educational offers with the labour market.

Extra-curricular activities: furthermore, the teaching staff at TUIASI, managers and experts in ROSE projects, consider that extra-curricular activities have an essential role in the process of low-SES students' inclusion. These activities should be focused on the socio-emotional relationship between students, which represents the most difficult obstacle to socio-economic inclusion. Social integration has the potential of becoming the crucial factor in this process. From an institutional point of view, the measures that the university should adopt in relation to students with economic issues, could include: the increasing of the support offered to extra-curricular activities; a better coordination with these activities' organizers (often represented by student leagues and associations) to identify their specific needs.

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[1] https://sites.utu.fi/gate/en/

<u>Infrastructure:</u> Often, one of the disadvantages that students with a vulnerable socio-economic status face is the lack of access to the infrastructure specific to the field of study. This access involves financial efforts that exceed their financial capacity. A solution is to develop a formal framework which would permit our students to access the technical infrastructure from the laboratories without being strictly limited to teaching activities and without requiring the attendance of a teacher willing to allocate hours of their own time to support them. As a concrete example, in the field of electronics there are countless projects, student competitions, etc., and students need various components, measuring devices, computer systems, software, which they certainly cannot buy, but these devices exist in laboratories.

Furthermore, in the Romanian case representatives of student associations considered that if the students benefited from workspaces equipped with state-of-the-art devices, this would help them fulfil in due time the tasks received from their teachers.

<u>Inclusion:</u> Other measures to improve the inclusion of students with low socio-economic status mentioned are: the student union should offer targeted services to those low-SES students, e.g. monthly individual discussions in order to identify the problems that each one faces; compulsory psychological counselling for first-year bachelor students in order to help them in identifying and overcoming problems that arise due to inferiority complexes, low self-esteem etc.; providing each dormitory with a room equipped with computers where access should be a priority for those with economic issues; the involvement of the student leagues in achieving good relations between all students.

The student's guide (a presentation material for the first-year students) should include more information about extracurricular activities, working groups, social volunteering, and details about the coordinators of the ongoing projects dedicated to students. The involvement of low-ES students in social projects or in extracurricular technical projects could contribute to the enhancement of their self-confidence.

Other measures mentioned are: a continuous development of educational programmes to stimulate and attract students with low-SES background; motivational training to increase their self-confidence; more activities to increase communication, networking, integration in academic environment; a better media coverage of student associations' activity and a greater visibility of the institution's educational offer in the rural area; individual counselling; peer tutoring; co-operative learning; mediation services; support for employment after graduation; achieving the academic tasks (homework, projects, student scientific papers etc.) by working in 3 to 5-student teams (including students with economic issues); the students' inclusion (especially those in the first year of study) in counselling programs, led by specialized staff (or teams of psychologists, teachers, students) to identify

the problems faced by students; a larger involvement of students in volunteer activities, which facilitate their networking with colleagues; more volunteering projects which would involve low-SES students and other students with higher SES backgrounds; a larger involvement of low-SES students in student associations and leagues' activities could lead to strengthening relationship between students and enhancing the sense of belonging and social inclusion; a specific academic monitoring, in order to notice low-SES students' academic progress over a period of time. Thus, teachers could compare the performance of low-SES students to that of their classmates and could identify those students who are struggling or underachieving.

Continuing with the Finnish experience, teachers saw that socio-economic questions need to be included in the university pedagogical training for teachers so that teachers raise awareness to these questions. Otherwise, strategies for equality and inclusiveness will have no impact in the culture of the HEI.

Furthermore, it was noticed that certain issues are not being discussed, e.g. claiming that "learning difficulties are not problem among higher education students", whereas in fact there are problems with mental health or difficulties with cognition/attention also in this population. In the universities there is a culture of seeing HE students as able, strong and self-directed.

In addition, the connection between internationality and equality was reflected. Universities emphasize internationality. This involves attracting both international staff and students. At the same time what internationality entails is not problematized and discussed on large scale. A lot of work is yet to be done to accommodate international students and staff. The perspective of migrant background could be further discussed if it is framed inside the discourse of internationality. This perspective could be further reflected in the Equality plan of the university.

Equality is a crucial perspective for staff development and recruiting. The law on equal treatment is a fundamental value. By now, gender equality and accessibility have been in focus when equal treatment has been discussed. However, the issue of migration is becoming more relevant in the discussions at the universities. At the moment this topic is monitored in the level of statistics, e.g. gender balance in recruiting to studies. Racism has been raised as a topic that has not been given enough value in the past.

Socioeconomic status is surprisingly seldom discussed in higher education. Therefore, researchers have raised attention to observations of strong correlation between family background and recruitment to study paths in higher education.

Micro level

If we consider that one of the main challenges of low-SES students is related to their conceptions of learning and teaching, or self-efficacy, the measures consist in supporting them in making more efforts to overcome their current circumstances and to establish more ambitious goals for their lives, while assisting the students in how to achieve them. In this respect, the measures regard intensifying moral, civic, health, financial education activities. However, as regards the counselling activity, due to the "inflation" of such activities lately, made on the basis of standardized and impersonal questionnaires, young people are bored and reluctant to such activities. Such activities should be individualized and continued over a long period of time.

Another solution regards the scholarships. Most of the solutions provided consist in: ensuring social scholarships to a large number of beneficiaries (disadvantaged students); ensuring social scholarships to those lower SES students with recognised activity and attendance at courses; the possibility of awarding low-SES students with merit-based scholarships, even when they also receive the social scholarship. The students are highly motivated to learn without being forced in the end to choose just one of the two scholarships; ensuring scholarships awarded by the companies, in addition to the social ones. This measure exists within some faculties, only for those students with great academic performance. It would be also necessary to have a mass approach, for students with average academic results, in terms of financial support or by providing them with the necessary equipment in the teaching-learning process (laptop, internet subscription), by supporting them with accommodation fees or by financing meals at the canteen of the institution.

Ensuring access to social services (free accommodation in the institution dormitories for the entire period of studies, free daily food at the student canteen, free trips/camps during holidays, etc.); a better communication process at the university/faculty level could help the students exposed to exclusion to fully benefit from their rights and make progress on their own active inclusion; facilitating part-time work contracts during holidays, thus encouraging the formal employment of young people are other measures proposed.

The university/faculty should list tutors (academic staff, counsellors, specialised staff) to increase the direct communication with students. In this way, low-SES students could experience a better level of empathetic understanding from the representatives of staff who are available and approachable, make time to meet them and respond compassionately to difficult circumstances, by listening to them. Students will be able to share things with them, which will increase their self-confidence.

When reflecting the situation of the low SES students in higher education, it should be kept in mind that their situation or circumstances have developed over time. For some, challenges date back to primary school. There may be many situations where low SES students haven't had access to quality education, in a consistent manner with appropriate material resources and human resources necessary to create development opportunities. Hence, low SES students may be less likely to succeed than their peers with a better financial status or a better social situation. To overcome these challenges in the background, possible measures to improve student's inclusion could include e.g. the following:

- national after-school programmes or remedial programmes even in the primary school years;
- national programmes for schools and universities for the acquisition of electronic devices, to facilitate low-SES students access to information;
- programmes for study loans, a funding possibility for students seeking assistance in financing their student life, which would allow, especially in the case of students with economic issues, for them to continue their studies;
- funding training programmes, free of charge for students with low SES background; part-time jobs inside the university,
- accommodation in the educational institution dormitories (for free or for smaller fees),
- electronic equipment for those students.

As the low-SES students may face some psychological barriers in higher education, they can benefit from specialised counselling to help them to become aware of their own needs and resources and to increase their self-esteem and the desire of self-improvement. This could be carried out e.g. through a mentoring program or alumni activities, with presentations of cases where individuals from low SES backgrounds have managed to overcome the obstacles. Mentoring can be great way to increase motivation and feelings of self-efficacy, along with sharing awareness of the mechanisms and opportunities that could help them.

CONCLUSIONS

Universities have responded to the widening participation agenda in different ways. Slowly the doors to the academia start to open also to students with low socio-economic status background. What came as an interesting observation in the interviews was that changes in the student intake result to more diversified needs of support in student services. Once again, staff members should not problematize these needs but rather see them as an impact of a strategic mission to give access to higher education to student groups beyond the customary privileged backgrounds.

Regarding the social sphere of the higher education institution, our research brought to attention that there are issues like struggles of socio-economic balance in life, and there should be a safe environment where these topics can be discussed or guidance may be made available, without stigma. This understanding should be shared by the entire academic community.

Awareness raising is important not just in social and behavioural sciences but for all fields of study. In some disciplines issues of human relations and sense of belonging might be more upfront than in other disciplines. Making a change requires certain steps, including first creating awareness of low SES students' needs and experiences, and then secondly developing inclusive pedagogy in the classroom in their own environment. Hence, if the challenges are not recognized in the first place, it is unlikely that solutions will occur in the future. For example, it is crucial to define and make etiquette or good behaviour known in a course, to facilitate feelings of inclusion, and to raise awareness on which behaviours are not allowed in a social setting.

In conclusion, staff members are starting to recognize diversity. This is a sign of change and of the fact that widening participation policies at universities have resulted in a more diverse student body. There should be awareness raising events for management and staff about the need of adopting new policies and practices at the institution to cater for these new groups of students and support their inclusion and equality.

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