A report on

INCLUSION AND GUIDANCE STRATEGY
FOR DIGITAL LEARNING

Contents

Chapter 1- INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY STRATEGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

1.1 Motivation

Understanding inclusion and diversity

Inclusion referred initially to people who have been historically excluded due to their race, gender, sexuality, and ability, meanwhile, nowadays the term had evolved receiving a wider meaning. By creating a more inclusive environment the number of people who will feel welcomed and valued will increase significantly. This environment can be created once more people become aware of our unconscious biases and have the openness to learn how to manage them. Inclusion is not just about ensuring a diverse representation and fair opportunities for all. Inclusion is also about creating an environment where students feel valued as unique individuals, where they can express their authentic self, and desire to bring their values to the community. Inclusion represents an action of including or being included within a group or structure.

When referring to higher education institutions (HEI), an inclusive environment refers to creating a supportive environment for all learners, no matter their skills. An inclusive higher education respects people from all socio-economic backgrounds and cultures and can create a more tolerant and understanding society. An inclusive education system can be successful when all its students feel that they are truly part of the university community and when everyone feels valued.

Diversity is recognizing, respecting, and celebrating each other's differences. A diverse environment is one with a wide range of backgrounds and mindsets, which allows for an empowered culture of creativity and innovation. Diverse HEI are considered to be happier, more productive and more competitive.

Certain dimensions of diversity have received particular attention because the groups identified as either under-represented, disadvantaged or vulnerable (or any combination of these three). In terms of gender, there is a clear under-representation of women in academic and leadership positions, while men are often slightly under-represented in the student body. Embracing diversity, when related to those defining themselves as outside the classic binary perception of men and women, or not identifying with their (original) physical sex, is less a question of reflecting demography than of allowing space and recognition for all groups. As awareness about different aspects of diversity has broadened, inclusion has come to mean embracing this diversity and working to make groups identified as 'diverse' an integrated part of the university community.

Inclusion and diversity represent common missions and not separate issues to be tackled before, during, or after a process. When done effectively, inclusion and diversity occur organically, within existing processes.

European policy framework

Acknowledging some of the challenges HEIs are facing nowadays, as is for example the big drop-down rates, national and international projects were developed to find solutions to improve or limit them. Also, to integrate all the directions for sustainable development, significant measures are being taken at all education levels.

With all these actions it was realized that is not enough and special attention should be given to helping students coming from low-SES environments to feel integrated/included and be supported along the education path as they are the most vulnerable ones to create a diverse study environment. On a large scale, inclusive HEI will build a more inclusive culture which will increase engagement and innovation and improve decision-making.

The low-SES background may have particularities in each European country depending on many factors, but at the same time, common directions have been defined by the European Commission to tackle the existing challenges. The challenges students from low-SES environments face are defined as barriers because they make the inclusion process more difficult.

Aim of the strategy

The document's main objective is to assist European countries in strengthening the focus on inclusion in higher education institutions, to introduce an enlarged concept of inclusive education and highlight the areas that need particular attention to promote inclusive education.

This strategy presents also the barriers of the inclusion process which may differ depending on a diverse combination of factors for the considered countries and on the target groups taken into account. Moreover, the strategy tends to promote inclusion and diversity in HEI using improving digital learning skills, and tools and by encouraging positive interaction with people from low-SES backgrounds. This should lead to more inclusive and diverse institutions, equipped to offer opportunities for people no matter their background, origin or education level.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

Students with low socioeconomic status (SES) have fewer opportunities to succeed in university contexts compared to students with high SES due to psychological barriers (e.g. emotional experiences, identity management, self-perception, and motivation), and financial barriers but also because universities tend to produce and reproduce these psychological barriers. Because of these reasons, higher education is far from being a culturally neutral environment for low-SES students. Unfortunately, socioeconomic diversity can be difficult for academic staff to detect in their classes, as students may strive to appear middle-class to self-normalize.

Therefore, the universities should make efforts to facilitate them being, and feeling, connected to the university community. Creating a sense of belonging for low-SES students and also providing opportunities for the families and communities to involve with the institution can help students

succeed. Feeling connected to the university, peers and community, is acknowledged by both low-SES students and stakeholders as essential in their success as students.

Academia should consider a large array of ways to develop active and inclusive teaching methods that will enable engagement, create pathways for success, and create a classroom environment of accessibility. They can also create behavioural protocols in the syllabus that emphasize respect, honesty, and an open-door policy for student concerns. Moreover, as technology can foster connection with marginalized groups, universities should try to help by providing reliable technology, internet access and digital skills to students.

1.2 Beneficiaries

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes define "(young) people with fewer opportunities' as "(young) people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background, or for reasons such as disability or educational difficulties or for any other reason, including a reason that could give rise to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the Programme."

The final beneficiaries of this strategy are students with fewer initial opportunities in life, which put them in a disadvantageous situation compared to their colleagues. The main target groups are teachers, instructors, study and career counsellors, education coordinators, deans and other senior managers involved in HEI. Indirect target groups are teachers, study and career counsellors, students and parents of students in second-cycle educational institutions.

1.3 Challenges / Groups to address towards an inclusive HEI[1 2 3 4 5]

People with disabilities: People with disabilities may experience difficulties in moving, hearing, seeing, communicating or learning. Physical, mental, intellectual or sensory limitations may significantly influence someone's access to higher education. These may limit both students and Staff University to access all the facilities from the community. To respond to some of the limitations, strict regulations have been imposed by the European Union regarding special ramps and signs to ease their movements around the universities. The spaces should be accessible and designed to enable and maximize participation for people with disabilities.

People with severe health problems/diagnosis: Living with a severe health problem is a real burden. 1 in 4 people of working age are estimated to live with long-standing health problems that limit their daily activities. Severe illnesses, chronic diseases or other health problems may prevent people from participating partially or totally in education programs. To overcome this challenge students are encouraged to self-study if this is possible and acceptable by the teaching staff (especially if it refers to a limited period) or to search for HEI which offers 100% online education.

Ethnic and racial minorities: Human race is a group of humankind which have common physical characteristics or social qualities that can vary from one society to another. Current research considers that race is not biologically identifiable and that initial racial categories were based on pseudoscience[6].

Ethnicity refers to a social group to which a person belongs or to which it identifies as a result of a mix of cultural and other factors such as language, religion, ancestry, diet and physical features traditionally associated with race. Ethnicity is considered sometimes as a synonym for race, but they are different concepts. Sometimes it might seem challenging to adapt the curricula or the teaching process to the particularities of each group, but diversity brings innovation and interculturality and may lead to new and improved directions.

Cultural and linguistic differences: Cultural and linguistic barriers appeared due to the different native languages of people who work and study in HEI. The opportunity to move around the world at any moment of someone's life due to different reasons leads to challenges for educators. At the same time, people coming from different backgrounds may find it difficult to communicate specific ideas or to pick up verbal nuances or idioms. To support and deliver the best outcomes for the students, HEI must reflect the community they serve, therefore universities should continue to

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[1] (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, 2021) - https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy

[2] (UNESCO, 2009) - https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000177849

[3] (EUA, 2019) - https://eua.eu/resources/publications/890:diversity,-equity-and-inclusion-in-european-higher-education-institutions-results-from-the-invited-project.html

[4] (Unesco IIEP, 2021) - https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/issue-briefs/improve-learning/socioeconomic-inequalities-and-learning

[5] (Classroom, 2018) - https://classroom.synonym.com/socioeconomic-factors-affecting-education-8240412.html

[6] (Brookings, 2018) - https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/04/27/race-and-gender-biases-appear-in-online-education/

increase the number of employees from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. In time, this can lead to a better understanding and tackling systemic barriers to improve experiences for the entire community. To minimize this challenge university staff have to have the openness to learn more about the students' background, interests and lives outside the university to show appreciation and understanding towards their culture[7].

Socioeconomic status: Socioeconomic status (SES) can influence both students and university staff members. Socioeconomic status refers besides income, to education, financial security, quality of life, opportunities and privileges, subjective perception of social status and social class. SES affects overall human functioning, including our physical and mental health. Research shows that people from low-SES develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES. Low-SES in childhood is correlated to poor cognitive development, language, memory, and socioemotional processing, and consequently poor income and health in adulthood. To reduce the gap, supplementary attention and teaching hours should be provided for these students. Also, in some cases, supplementary financial support represents their motivation to continue their studies, to overcome their initial status and to reach for a different status as adults[8].

People with learning difficulties: Students with learning difficulties find it hard to integrate into a common environment as they need special tools to understand and learn a new subject. Some of them, due to shame, rather hide their problems and struggle to understand and fulfil the requirements. On the other hand, educators are not always prepared to answer their needs. By teaching teachers and academic staff tools and methodologies on how to support such students will lead to a safer environment. In this newly created environment, people with learning disabilities will feel comfortable admitting their limitations and accept personalized, instead of struggling alone.

Migrants and refugees: Migrants and refugees face specific problems when arriving in a new country. Besides the cultural challenge that they have to face, there is also the language barrier because rarely they know other languages than their native ones. At the same time, migrants and refugees usually arrive in these situations due to severe problems in their country, which make them emotionally vulnerable. Some of the challenges these people face may refer also to the fact that they might not have documents regarding their education level or their studies are not recognized in the country they arrive in [9].

Providing newcomers with the necessary digital skills will give them a greater sense of autonomy and confidence, leading to independence and a sense of inclusion and belonging. Access to digitalization plays an important role in the emotional well-being of migrant families and migrant communities, including refugees.

Gender and sexual discrimination: Gender and sexual discrimination can occur in all fields and sometimes is done unwillingly, but it has severe consequences. In the current social trend, we should not speak only about him or her, but we should consider more neutral words. Research shows that fewer women than men have access to mobile internet in low and middle-SES environments.

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[7] (School of education, 2020) - https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-students/
[8] (APA, 2017) - https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/education
[9] (SCOA, 2020) - https://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Supporting-the-digital-inclusion-of-new-migrants-and-refugees.pdf

Increasing digital access for women will expand their economic opportunities and a better position in the labour market. Access to digital tools increases the influence of women's organizations and the visibility of women's agendas online. Due to the widespread use of social media and digital platforms, the emergence of technology-facilitated gender-based violence increased significantly. Among the people who are targeted by online violence are: women's and human rights defenders, women in politics and civil society organizations and coalitions, journalists, women with disabilities or belonging to minorities and LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) people[10].

Geographical barriers: Access to a good education is significantly influenced by geographical location. Sometimes living in isolated or rural areas, on islands or areas without roads or public transport makes it impossible to follow an education. If talking about online education, these areas can be reached, but there are some challenges regarding internet quality and connections.

1.4 Priorities and mechanisms for supporting inclusion in HEI[11] [12]

Financial support: Financial challenges are regarded as one of the most important barriers to student success. For example, the costs of study materials and long-distance travelling costs to campus, coupled with the living costs of accommodation, food and study materials can add to a significant amount. These costs put pressure on students to undertake paid employment but also bring a psychological and emotional toll as students feel stress about not only meeting their study costs but passing through the month.

Therefore, there is significant importance of financial assistance for support and stability and students' retention and success. But this financial support can become a heavy burden for universities as costs for supporting full-time low-SES students can be several times higher than medium and high-SES students. Nevertheless, support policy and better arrangements for scholarships to students from low-SES backgrounds will provide a higher likelihood of financial stability for these students, which would, in turn, increase their likelihood of completing their degree.

Mentorship: Mentoring programs are regarded as an effective solution to reducing the achievement gap between the impoverished and their wealthier counterparts as they are effective in bringing positive changes in the lives of those being mentored. Also in HEI, studies have shown that there is an important increase in college completion for students with mentors compared with their un-mentored counterparts, with almost double completion rates.

For universities to offer a positive experience for those involved, especially for a long-term relationship between the mentee and mentor, preparation for matching the personalities of those

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[10] (Brookings, 2018) - https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/04/27/race-and-gender-biases-appear-in-online-education/

[11] (Federation University Australia, 2017) - https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/55_Federation_MarciaDevlin_Accessible_PDF.pdf

[12] (NAO, 2021) - https://www.nao.org.uk/corporate-information/nao-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2021-2025/

involved should be considered. Implementation of mentoring programs should also emphasize to mentors the significance of skill development, network expansion, and a sense of belonging that mentoring can provide to low-SES students to help manage their expectations during the preparation stage. Of equal importance for this type of program should be the understanding of the fact that low-SES students are a very diverse category whose members' needs cannot be generalized. An in-depth understanding of mentees during the preparation and matching stages will ensure that each student's needs, including financial, cultural, family, or health needs can be better addressed.

Evaluation process focused on inclusion and diversity: The evaluation process has been continuously evolving over the years, but how addressing the needs of low-SES students has been less analysed. This is important from a diversity and inclusion point of view, as evaluation done wrong can be exclusionary and further bring disadvantages to already marginalized groups. Ideally, evaluation should be culturally responsive and participatory, with a focus on equity and awareness of systemic biases and inequalities.

Also, understanding different types of people's identities will add a better sense of what is appropriate for an evaluation to measure. The language and tools used and how they are understood by participants are also important. A question to be asked is if the language is empowering or disempowering. For example, calling people 'beneficiaries', 'target groups' or 'service users' may be too cynical or demeaning.

Because it is important to 'work with', rather than 'do things for', people, universities should make their students part of the decision-making process (rather than handing down directions from a higher position), even in the early stages of the educational process. Also, a shift in accountability will not only be respectful to students, but it is likely to make the educational process more effective, impactful, and relevant.

Extracurricular activities: Extracurricular activities provide students with the means of reinforcing the lessons learned inside the classroom, offering the chance to apply academic skills in a real situation context, being thus considered part of a well-rounded education. Participation in these activities will increase students' sense of engagement and attachment to their university, thereby decreasing the probability of school failure and dropping out while also developing a better self-identity, career prospects and social networks.

Therefore, if participation in extracurricular activities can lead to higher success, then the availability of these activities to students of all backgrounds becomes an important issue. Universities should strive to provide a large range of opportunities for an extremely diverse student population.

Maximizing the potential of each individual: The success of students from low-SES backgrounds can be increased if the academia and staff of the university understand and respond to particular circumstances and needs of these students, like being time-poor, balancing competing priorities, interactions between sociocultural and geographical factors on students' lives and family and community views on the value of higher education.

Typical responses include promoting existing support services within universities, empathic support, promoting a fair and respectful environment and flexibility, including through the use of technology.

Building a culture of inclusion: If the universities create an inclusive environment, it will bring a broader perspective to its work, benefit from deeper insights, and deliver better outcomes for stakeholders and the wider public. Having a sense of belonging is one of the most important psychological needs for students to feel connected with the higher education institution and establishing this sense of belonging is crucial to bring the best out of them.

Academia and staff members should encourage an environment where people feel safe to speak up, voice ideas and challenge behaviour while providing opportunities for people to connect, expand their perspectives and break down stereotypes. Universities should support events and celebrations to support a sense of belonging and help all its members expand their knowledge and understanding of the cultures, backgrounds and beliefs of others.

Strengthening the diversity of the group: Developing an inclusive approach to promoting and cultivating talent will help build diversity in higher education institutions. The systemic challenges that can arise in the development of the students should be tackled as soon as possible and Diversity and Inclusion strategies should be included in the core decision-making processes.

Measures to strengthen diversity in academia can include an equitable and fair environment, increased representation of ethnic minorities at all levels of the organization, gender balance in middle and top management positions and support for disabled persons to fully realize their career potential.

Setting clear objectives: Universities should acknowledge that as they progress in creating opportunities for low-SES students, they will need to recognize that their actions and priorities may need to adapt to changes in the wider world and the expectations set by stakeholders. Clear progress measures and a robust approach to accomplish them are needed for its members to remain focused. Some actions can be recommended: publication of annual Diversity and Inclusion reports for wider publication, taking action to obtain regular feedback from students and develop knowledge on the latest best practice and working closely with partner bodies to ensure that the other priorities and mechanisms have remained relevant.

1.5 Digital Learning

Reliable technology was found to positively contribute to the success of students from low-SES backgrounds studying at regional universities. As universities move more and more of their offerings into blended and wholly online modes, the availability of reliable technology becomes an increasingly important factor in student success. This is an effective way to support students and facilitate their success whether it be through granting access to university study through online courses; allowing flexibility in learning and study; enabling timely responses from staff, and fostering connections between staff and students. However, financial issues often played a significant role in determining whether or not students could afford to be connected to the internet.

The value of online learning and teaching: In the modern world students have increasingly diversified needs, expectations and demands. Online education is critical for higher education today and represents an effective way to address students' needs. Digital technologies offer the opportunity to engage students from diverse backgrounds. Online learning uses innovative and flexible technologies. To be considered an efficient tool, digital learning needs to overcome several barriers related to the geographical position of the students, poverty, family and others. Digital technologies have the potential to include and engage students with multiple and complex needs that typically prevent access to traditional university programs. Online learning has increased access and flexibility for students from regional areas and those unable to attend a campus for classes.

Opportunity and choice due to technology: Technology is valuable for students from low-SES backgrounds as it provides opportunities and choices. Without online learning options, some of them would have been excluded from higher education. Students appreciate the opportunity to receive their degrees from online studies. This is mainly the case for those living in remote areas who do not have to limit themselves to the options available in their area.

Digital learning allows students to choose the time and place when they access their educational program and even choose their own pace. In this new system, there is always a support network that is around the student able to assist them when required and to effectively enable them to continue the learning process. Educating through digital tools make the process connected to the world, exchanging information, and updating permanently, being more complex than any book.

Technology allowing flexibility and life management: The value of online options is particularly high for those with disabilities or health issues which have limited their ability to travel to and attend on-campus classes. Another important advantage of online education is having materials uploaded and accessible to students anytime/anywhere. This enabled the flexibility students needed to manage their multiple responsibilities, balance work and study, and not necessarily have to travel long distances.

The timeliness and relevance of online resources and responses represents an important aspect to be taken into account for advantages when discussing digital learning, for both students and academic.

Technology challenges: Challenges differ for students that study entirely online from those who are only partially online. The students that are only online face a higher risk of isolation than those who also attend classes physically. The educators are responsible for "bringing the campus to the student's home". This is not an easy job.

Although nine out of 10 low-income families have Internet access at home, most of them have a poor Internet connection. Another problem when accessing online lectures is the used device. Many students coming from low-SES backgrounds have only a smartphone to use and no tablet or laptop. The limited access to technology and the internet represents a real challenge students in low-SES face. The limitations can come on one hand from the geographical position, areas where the Internet network has a poor connection, and on the other hand from financial issues.

Families with numerous children studying online may face similar problems because the Internet connection needs to be shared between every member. The students who want to study online, but

do not have an internet connection had to find public spaces with free internet connection. In these places, the noise can disturb the educational process.

Some universities ensured access for disadvantaged students to computers with an internet connection, offering them the opportunity to study at their own pace. At the same time, the teaching staff and support staff are informed about the limited access to technology of students.

The enduring value of face-to-face learning: Face-to-face learning still remains an important experience for students enrolled in higher education institutions. The connection and the human interaction that students feel in face-to-face teaching cannot yet be reproduced in the digital experience. The face-to-face learning process can be improved by adding digital connections such as online meetings, instead of impersonal emails.

1.6 Positive experience [13]

There is a great number of experiences and good practices identified by the European Commission, already shared through online platforms. The following resources can provide insight into practices, materials and documentation on the topic of inclusion:

Erasmus+ Project Results platform[14] – access to all funded Erasmus+ projects searchable by topic, year, country, etc. with the possibility to identify good practice projects on inclusion and their results;

SALTO Inclusion & Diversity[15] – training, publications or resources for international youth work with participants with fewer opportunities Strategic Partnership on Inclusion – a consortium of National Agencies who developed a strategic approach in the field of youth to reach out and involve target groups in the different countries;

EPALE[16] – open community in adult learning across Europe with a thematic section on learner support (i.e. barriers, social inclusion, disabilities);

School education Gateway[17] – Europe's online platform for school education which includes a Toolkit on promoting inclusive education;

European Solidarity Corps project results database[18] – provides access to all funded European Solidarity Corps projects;

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[13] (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, 2021) - https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy

[14] (Erasmus+, 2023) - https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects

[15] (Salto, 2023) - https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/

[16] (Epale, 2023) - https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en

[17] (SchoolEducationGateway, 2023) - https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/index.htm

[18] (European Solidarity Corps, 2023) - https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/projects/

Eurodesk[19] – European network of information providers about different kinds of learning mobility for young people and those who work with them. Eurodesk has an 'opportunity finder' and feeds the European Youth Portal.

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[19] (Eurodesk, 2023) - https://eurodesk.eu/

Chapter 2- CAREER GUIDANCE CONCEPTS

2.1   Introduction

Career guidance (ref. UNESCO)[20] encompasses a wide range of services and programs that help people of all ages make informed decisions about their career paths. The goal of career guidance is to help identify their strengths, interests, talents, and ambitions, explore potential career options, and develop the skills and knowledge needed to achieve their career goals.

Going into the detail

Career Guidance[21] describes the services which assist people to manage their careers and to make the educational, training and occupational choices that are right for them. It helps people to reflect on their knowledge about who and where they are to who they might become within the labour market.

Effective career information and guidance systems are key to making lifelong learning a reality for all. They can help make the best use of human resources in the labour market and education, enabling a better match between people's skills and interests and the job and learning opportunities available. They are important elements of the active labour market and welfare-to-work policies.

How and where?

Guidance is provided to people in a wide range of settings: schools and training centres, tertiary and higher education institutions; employment services and career guidance centres; workplaces, trade unions and professional bodies as well as in local community settings. Career guidance is delivered face-to-face, by telephone and online.

Why is it important?

Effective career guidance helps individuals to reach their potential, economies become more efficient and societies become fairer. It provides people with personalised, impartial and timely information and support to make informed decisions about their lives. It nurtures human talent to power innovation, creativity and competitiveness. It helps to implement lifelong approaches to learning and active approaches to labour market engagement and transition. As the working world becomes increasingly complex, career guidance is becoming ever more important to individuals, employers and to society.

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[20](UNESCO 2019) - https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371414

[21] https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness/Investing%20in%20Career%20Guidance_en.pdf
   https://www.oecd.org/education/career
   (Cedefop, ILO, OECD, 2022), https://www.etf.europa.eu/
   https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-11/KIESE%202022%20Final.pdf

With rapidly changing job markets and advancements in technology, individuals must be prepared to adapt to new opportunities and challenges throughout their careers. Effective career guidance can help individuals ultimately leading to greater job satisfaction and success.

Here are some reasons22 why the need for effective career guidance is greater than ever:

Changing labour market: The job market is constantly evolving, and many traditional career paths are being disrupted by new technologies and changing business models. Effective career guidance can help individuals identify emerging opportunities and equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the jobs of the future.

Increasing career options: As the job market expands, more career options are available than ever, although people often think otherwise.

Importance of lifelong learning: In today's fast-paced world, individuals must be prepared to learn new skills and adapt to new challenges throughout their careers. Effective career guidance can help individuals identify opportunities for continuous learning and development, ensuring that they remain competitive in the job market.

Personalized orientation: Each individual has unique strengths, interests, and career goals. Effective career guidance can help people identify their strengths and align them with career paths that are personally satisfying and rewarding.

In general, effective career guidance is critical to enable people to navigate the rapidly changing job market and find satisfying careers that are aligned with their strengths and interests.

2.2   Career guidance activities 23

Career guidance involves a range of connected activities, including the provision of career information, personalised guidance/counselling, skills assessment, engaging with the world of work and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills.

Some common career guidance activities include:

- **Career assessments**: These assessments help individuals identify their strengths, interests, and personality traits, which can provide insight into potential career paths that align with their abilities and preferences.
- **Job shadowing**: This activity involves following someone in a specific job or career for a day or a few hours to better understand the day-to-day tasks, challenges, and responsibilities associated with the role.

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[22] https://www.brainwonders.in/blog/why-career-guidance-is-important-for-student
[23] (Career guidance - 2018) https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/etf-search?kw=career+guidance+assessment
https://www.oecd.org

- **Informational interviews**: Individuals can reach out to professionals in fields they are interested in to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding of the industry, job requirements, and potential career paths.
- **Mentorship**: Career guides can provide guidance, support, and advice to individuals who are seeking to develop their careers. They can help individuals navigate challenges, identify opportunities, and provide and care for networking contacts.
- **Professional events**: webinars and workshops help individuals develop skills and knowledge that are relevant to their chosen field.

Overall, career guidance activities can help individuals gain clarity about their career goals and identify strategies for achieving them. Career guidance is a continuous process throughout life.

How Youth decision-making is changing

They make more decisions than in the past because they stay longer in education, but the increasing dynamism of the labour market, the rapidly changing demand for skills, and the increasing diversification and fragmentation of education and training supply make decision-making more difficult.

Their career aspirations are often limited, unrealistic, and distorted by the social context for this reason what they think about their future careers makes a difference in what happens to them in adulthood. They often have limited awareness of their potential and needs and have limited access to unbiased information about learning and funding opportunities, and they become demotivated toward education and training.

In some countries, not knowing the career guidance advantages or having a stereotypical model about education and career paths, which generates a lack of skills, contributes to disengagement and dropping out of school.

Participation in some career guidance activities, such as short internships for career exploration, is commonly linked to the social status of students, with the risk of inequitable outcomes. This is because internships are not equally accessible to all students. Studies have shown that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to secure prestigious internships than their less advantaged peers. This is partly because these students often have better access to personal networks and professional contacts, which can help them secure internships.

The unequal access to internships can have several consequences, such as:

- it can perpetuate social inequalities in the labour market, as students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to secure desirable jobs after graduation.
- it can limit the career exploration opportunities of students from less advantaged backgrounds, as they may have fewer opportunities to gain work experience and build their professional networks.
- it can undermine the overall diversity of the workforce, as students from diverse backgrounds may not have equal access to internships that can lead to successful careers.

Adult people experience.

Technological advances are driving massive changes in the labour market – old jobs and skills are disappearing or radically changing and new jobs and skills are emerging. Re-skilling and upskilling are increasingly seen as integral parts of working life.

Research affirms that:

- people are working longer and moving between countries more frequently.
- some job losers have fallen into situations of long-term unemployment and inactivity, being demotivated, with outdated skills and weak knowledge of learning options.
- new forms and ways of working mean that individuals are increasingly responsible for their education.

How career guidance empowers[24] **people**

Providing information and resources: Career guidance can provide people with access to a wide range of information and resources on education and training opportunities, labour market trends, and job requirements.

Developing skills and competencies: Career guidance can help people develop a range of skills and competencies, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork, that are essential for success in the workplace.

Support career transitions: Career guidance can provide people with support and guidance during career transitions, making use of well-trained professionals who provide relevant and impartial information and counselling.

European surveys[25] **show most adults recognise that:**

- career guidance is useful for finding and choosing suitable jobs, courses, and other opportunities, but fewer than one in three people ever use a career guidance service.
- individuals with lower levels of qualifications are much less likely to use career guidance – but are more likely to need it because their jobs are at greater risk.

The role of employers

Employer involvement enriches career guidance. When working people collaborate with schools and other education and training providers, they help students and job seekers better understand the world of work in all its varieties. It provides access to useful experiences and to reliable new information that can broaden and deepen people's career aspirations.

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[24] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu
[25] (ETF – CEDEFOP, 2018) https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/etf
https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/surveys/poll-on-career-guidance.htm

Employer engagement activities offer learners direct exposure to the world of work. These include: taking volunteers to schools to enhance learning, career talks, CV workshops, mock interviews, job fairs, job shadowing, internships, mentoring, business competitions, and job promotion.

Effective employer engagement is authentic, frequent, personalized, varied, integrated into career education, and started in elementary school.

It can be particularly effective in challenging all forms of stereotypes about occupations.

2.3   Opportunities [26] in the next future

As technology continues to advance and transform the job market, digital skills are becoming increasingly important in many occupations. Career guidance can play an important role in helping people identify and pursue digital skills opportunities by assessing their current skills. It can identify areas for development and provide advice and guidance on relevant training programs. From this perspective, career guidance can also help people develop a growth mindset, which is essential for lifelong learning and adaptation in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Career guidance can help people understand the current and future demand for digital skills in their field and identify areas where they need to upgrade or retrain.

People can identify digital skills training programs and other opportunities to develop their skills. These may include online courses, workshops, boot camps, and certifications. Career guidance professionals can provide advice and guidance on the most effective training programs relevant to a particular individual's career goals.

In addition, career guidance can help people understand the importance of continuous learning and adapting to new technologies and digital trends.

There is a need for further development of this type of support for future skills in 'career guidance, identifying methods to analyse skills needs and promote lifelong learning. EU policy emphasizes that skills are critical for sustainable competitiveness, adaptability, and ensuring social equity. This is central to the European Skills Agenda, focusing on lifelong learning (upskilling and reskilling) and investment in sustainable recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as addressing the challenges of the digitization of the world of work and the green economy.

The gig economy and remote work are rapidly growing trends in today's job market and often require digital skills. In the gig economy, people work as independent contractors, freelancers or consultants, often using digital platforms to find jobs and communicate with clients. Remote work, on the other

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[26] https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/opportunities/careers
Careers I Digital Skills and Jobs Platform (europa.eu)

hand, involves working for a company or organization from a location other than the company's physical office.

Both of these trends offer opportunities to pursue non-traditional career paths that require digital skills. There are beginning to be many remote work opportunities for companies or organizations that have distributed teams.

Career guidance can play a key role in helping people navigate these non-traditional career paths and identify opportunities to use their digital skills. This may involve counselling on how to find work in the Gig economy or how to transition to working remotely.

Career guidance can help people navigate these paths by providing advice on how to find jobs and develop digital, interpersonal, and social skills for success.

The European Union[27] has developed and continues with several initiatives and policies aimed at promoting career guidance and improving access to career services across the region. For example, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN)[28] was established to promote the development and implementation of high-quality career guidance services throughout Europe. The EU has also launched several funding programs to support the development of career guidance services and promote mobility and employment opportunities for European citizens.

Overall, European career guidance aims to provide individuals with the information, resources, and support they need to make informed decisions about their education, training, and career paths, and to help them achieve their full potential in the workforce.

WHAT THE EUROPEAN POLLS29 **ARE TELLING US?**

There are several surveys available that can provide valuable insights into career guidance in Europe. Here are a few examples:

European Skills Index: This survey is conducted by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop). It measures the level of skills development in different European countries and provides insight into the labour market trends and the demand for specific skills. This information can help you identify the most in-demand careers and the skills you need to develop to succeed in those careers.

European Graduate Survey: This survey is conducted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). It collects data on the employment and career paths of recent graduates from European universities. This information can help you understand the job prospects and career opportunities available to graduates in your field of study.

Eurograduate Labour Market Survey: This survey is conducted by the European Commission and provides information on the labour market situation of recent graduates in different European

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[27] https://op.europa.eu
[28] http://www.elgpn.eu
[29] https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/surveys/poll-on-career-guidance.htm

countries. It includes data on employment rates, job satisfaction, and earnings. This information can help you make informed decisions about your career path.

European Social Survey: This survey is conducted by a consortium of European universities and research institutions. It collects data on a wide range of social issues, including education, employment, and career development. This information can help you understand the broader social and economic factors that influence career opportunities in Europe.

2.4   Case studies across Europe

SPAIN

In Spain, the government has implemented a national career guidance strategy aimed at promoting lifelong learning and career development. The program, called "Orienta-T," offers personalized guidance to individuals at all stages of their careers, from students to retirees. The program includes workshops, individual coaching, and online resources.

It carried out a project named "Blended media mentoring to tackle Early School Leaving"[30].   The starting point was an analysis of 10 complex highly secondary schools in the Barcelona surroundings to know what the real situations and which factors were were contributing to early living. It involved the educational community of different schools such as leadership members, teachers and young people with a wider range from 12 to 20 years old belonging to vet[31] studies and baccalaureate.

Key findings and risk factors were:

- personal challenges i.e.: low self-esteem, negative academic culture perceptions, and irregular school transitions.
- difficult family circumstances.
- Social relationships.

Guidance strategies in concrete have been put in place were personalized plans and blending media mentoring in a face-to-face modality. In the first step, there was a tutor, mentor or teacher by 3 or more students, and a professional guide involved to facilitate the transition to others and alternative educational concepts. As a first step, students 16-18 years old have been monitored during the 2020/2021 academic year.

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[30](Barcelona 2019) - https://www.orienta4yel.eu/reports
[31] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/early-leaving-from-vet

In the second step, there was the evaluation of the real impact of guidance programs in this educational context. According to the young participants, the result of such strategies had a positive impact on respecting the improvement of their self-confidence and self-esteem. Young people and teachers said that after the application of the new academic strategies based on career guidance, academic performance and achievement has improved. They found guidance a very comfortable and secure space to build relations as well.

FRANCE

In France, the government has implemented a range of career guidance services through the National Employment Agency (Pôle emploi). The agency offers individual counselling, group workshops, and online resources to help individuals navigate the job market and find employment. In addition, the agency offers specialized services for individuals with disabilities and other barriers to employment.

TZCLD[32] Territory Zero is a French government initiative[33] that aims to address long-term unemployment in areas that are experiencing economic difficulties and to solve it through methodological and organizational innovation. The initiative was launched in 2018 and targets 300,000 people in 1,300 "territorial collectivities" across France.

The program is designed to provide support to long-term unemployed individuals by offering them training, mentoring, and access to job opportunities. It also focuses on improving the infrastructure and attractiveness of the targeted areas to attract businesses and create job opportunities.

We have a specific case study, in one region of France.

In the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, located in the Parisian suburbs, the unemployment rate is significantly higher than the national average. To address this issue, the local government has partnered with Territory Zero to launch a program called "Seine-Saint-Denis Empl'itude."

The program aims to provide support to long-term unemployed individuals by offering them personalized coaching and training to develop skills that are in demand by local employers. Participants in the program also receive financial support and access to job opportunities. The unemployed create their jobs based on their know-how, wishes and the needs of the area. The jobs created must not compete with the activities of "traditional" businesses.

Additionally, the program seeks to improve the attractiveness of Seine-Saint-Denis to businesses by promoting the strengths of the local economy and infrastructure. The goal is to create new job opportunities and stimulate economic growth in the region.

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[32] zero long-term unemployed territory

[33] France 2016 - https://www.co-val.eu/case-studies/blog/project/zero-long-term-unemployed-territory-tzcld

Overall, Territory Zero is an initiative that seeks to tackle the issue of long-term unemployment in France by providing targeted support to individuals and improving the economic prospects of disadvantaged areas.

GREECE

The "Back to Work Project"[34] was conceived so that local employment agencies in Europe could better facilitate the matching process between competencies relevant to the labour market and the prior competencies and achievements of both unemployed people and migrants faced with the prospect of unemployment. The aim of the project, which ended in December 2012, was to develop and support mechanisms for recognizing and validating the real competencies of workers, as well as to enable counsellors in local employment offices to use these mechanisms more widely and in a personalized way.

Validation of skills acquired in nonformal, and informal settings is a means of shortening the period of unemployment and promoting transition into employment. The "Back to Work" project has built on innovative practices developed in previous European Union projects.

In Greece, the OAED[35] is the public employment agency (PES) that provides services to migrants and the unemployed for their reintegration into the labour market. Counselling services provided by the agency include counselling, career guidance, job search counselling, and counselling for entrepreneurial ventures. The unemployed and immigrants can go to OAED to develop career plans together with employment counsellors. OAED counsellors develop an individual profile (including previous studies, work experience, etc.) for the unemployed and immigrants, taking into consideration their respective career aspirations. The resulting personal career plan includes suggestions for further training and possible future job positions.

As a partner in the "Back to Work" project[36], Greece developed mechanisms for recognizing and validating the prior skills of counsellors working in local employment agencies so that counsellors can better facilitate the transition of immigrants and the unemployed into the labour market.

Another project objective was to develop useful and easily applicable counselling instruments to help counsellors facilitate the validation of prior learning of migrants and the unemployed and to match these outcomes with opportunities in the labour market.

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[34] (European Union, 2011)
[35] Organization for Employment of the Workforce
[36] https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/rva/greece

The second case study[37] of The "Back to Work" project[38] in Greece is an initiative aimed at addressing the high levels of unemployment in the country, particularly among young people. The project is funded by the European Union's European Social Fund and the Greek government and was launched in 2017.

The project provides training and support to unemployed individuals, helping them to develop new skills and find employment opportunities. The program targets three main groups: unemployed individuals aged 29 and under, long-term unemployed individuals aged 30 and over, and women who have left the workforce to care for children.

One successful case study of the "Back to Work" project involves a young woman named Maria who had been unemployed for over a year. Maria was interested in pursuing a career in the hospitality industry but lacked the necessary skills and experience.

Through the "Back to Work" program, Maria received training in customer service, food preparation, and hygiene standards. She also received support in job searching, resume building, and interview skills. With the help of the program, Maria was able to secure a job as a server at a local restaurant, which allowed her to gain experience in the industry and build her skills further.

Maria credits the "Back to Work" program with helping her to build her confidence and providing her with the skills she needed to enter the workforce. She is now able to support herself financially and has a clear path for her future career goals.

Overall, the "Back to Work" project in Greece is a successful example of how targeted training and support can help address high unemployment levels and provide individuals with the skills they need to enter the workforce.

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[37] Career Counselling and Guidance in Greece - January 2017 – Michael Kassotakis report
[38] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326456045_Career_Counseling_and_Guidance_in_Greece

FINLAND

Ohjaamo is a one-stop-shop program[39] in Finland that offers comprehensive career guidance services to young people aged 15 to 29 who are not currently in education or employment, a governmental initiative implemented to make the country's education system integrated and inclusive. The program is designed to provide guidance to students throughout their academic careers, as well as to adults who are looking to make career transitions. With access to a range of resources and support the program helps them make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. The program is called "Ohjaamo," which means "guidance centre" in English.

The program is delivered through a network of physical centres located throughout Finland, as well as through online platforms. Each centre is staffed by trained professionals who provide one-on-one career counselling and guidance, as well as access to group workshops, seminars, individual counselling and other resources.

The services[40] offered by Ohjaamo include:

Career counselling and guidance: Ohjaamo provides one-on-one career counselling and guidance to help individuals identify their strengths, interests, and career goals.

Education and training information: The program provides information about different education and training options, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and university programs.

Job search support: Ohjaamo helps individuals to prepare for job interviews, write resumes and cover letters, and search for job openings.

Entrepreneurship support: The program provides information and support to individuals interested in starting their businesses, including business planning and funding advice.

Health and wellbeing support: Ohjaamo offers support for mental and physical health, including access to healthcare professionals and mental health counselling.

A successful case study of the Ohjaamo program concerns a young woman named Aino who was struggling to decide her career path. Aino had recently finished high school and did not know what to do next. She had considered a few different options, including studying in a college or entering the workforce, but felt overwhelmed by the decision-making process.

Through the Ohjaamo program, Aino was able to access one-on-one career counselling and guidance from a qualified professional. She was also able to attend workshops and seminars on various topics related to education and career planning, including information on different industries, job prospects, and required skills.

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[39] https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/content/what-ohjaamo
[40] Ohjaamo One-stop guidance center | www.tampere.fi
4_InnoVal-case-studies_FINLAND_Support-Services-for-Youth-Ohjaamo.pdf (inno-val.eu)

With the help of the program, Aino was able to identify her strengths and interests, which helped her narrow down her career options. She eventually decided to major in nursing and was able to find a program that suited her needs and interests.

Aino credits the Ohjaamo program with helping her make an informed decision about her career path and providing her with the support she needed to achieve her goals. She was also able to graduate.

Overall, the Ohjaamo program in Finland is a successful example of how comprehensive career guidance can help people make informed decisions about their education and career paths. By providing access to a range of resources and support, the program helps ensure that young people are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their chosen careers.

These stories demonstrate the importance of effective career guidance services in helping individuals make informed decisions about their careers and achieve their goals. By providing personalized guidance and support, European countries are helping individuals to succeed in the rapidly changing job market.

Overall, the Ohjaamo program in Finland helps to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their chosen careers.

Counselling services in Ohjaamo

By analysing the different case studies in the European countries mentioned, it is clear that there is a willingness of the career guidance system to work for the inclusion of disadvantaged population groups, due to economic, social or a certain path in professional life.

Chapter 3: CAREER AND EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE FOR LOW-SES STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1   Introduction: global and European context

Understanding the importance of Career & University Guidance for students nowadays is vital considering the impact they will have on our future society and future generations. However, access to higher education (HE) and valid professional guidance are not always a possibility for everyone. There are large inequalities between certain members of student society around the globe concerning access to educational paths, financial and economic instability, disability issues and socio-familial situations and contexts. These topics are a global phenomenon; a problem that affects most continents, countries, and cities – in both MEDCs (more economically developed countries) and LEDCs (more economically developed countries).[41]

Access to Higher Education and more specifically to the development of skills that are necessary for effective employability and professional training is a topic that should be addressed and discussed on different levels (local, national, international, and institutional). The scope of this research report, conducted with the use of Desk-Research across Europe, is to help understand and define a strategy to approach this issue, comprehend how to best recognise certain mechanisms that are being perpetuated in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), and above all by providing examples of how to overcome and implement initiatives and strategies to battle this inequality that has increasingly been rising, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, which startled the international scene in 2020 and continues to have repercussions to this day.

Before analysing and identifying practices and strategies that can help contrast the rise of inequality within HE, and more specifically the obstacles to achieving success in education and accessing early careers, it is certainly important to understand that inequalities take on a lot of different forms and characteristics. However, the main target of this research report is a specific demographic of students and more specifically low-SES (low socioeconomic status) students who are currently enrolled in HE and are either struggling to continue or thinking about abandoning their studies for lack of resources or other motivations connected to their status.

Setting the HE scene after Covid-19

According to a report published by Eurostat in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in the number of students enrolled in tertiary education in the European Union. In 2020, there were 1.5% fewer students enrolled in tertiary education compared to the previous year.[42]

Moreover, a study conducted by the European Student Union (ESU) in 2021 found that the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on low-income students in Europe. The study found that 44% of

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[41] Chmielewski, A. K. (2019). The Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap, 1964 to 2015. American Sociological Review, 84(3), 517–544. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419847165

[42] Eurostat. (2021). Tertiary education statistics. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics

low-income students reported that they had experienced financial difficulties due to the pandemic, compared to 31% of other students.[43] The ESU study also found that the pandemic had led to an increase in the number of students considering dropping out of HE. Among low-income students, 19% reported that they were considering dropping out, compared to 11% of other students.[44]

Finally, a survey conducted by the European University Association (EUA) in 2021 found that the pandemic had led to a significant increase in the use of digital learning tools in HEIs across Europe. Nevertheless, the survey also stated that access to these tools was not equitable, with low-income students and those from rural areas reporting lower levels of access.[45]

Overall, what this data shows is how low-SES students enrolled in HE since Covid-19 have experienced financial difficulties and access to educational material and other services that have been digitalised compared to their high-SES counterparts. To an extent, this also means that they require proactive support and practical guidance on behalf of their universities, and local governing bodies, to contrast the disadvantaged environment or context they are currently facing compared to their high-SES fellow students. However, before delving deeper into the practical and strategic support that these students require, it is fundamental to define the term low-SES and outline the specific difficulties that these students are facing.

3.2   Definition and Characteristics of low-SES students

The term "low-SES" is an acronym for "low socioeconomic status," which is used to describe individuals or families who have limited financial resources and that may face challenges related to poverty[46]. The exact origin of the term is not certain, as it has been used in various research fields over time. However, the use of the term "low socioeconomic status" in the context of education research and policy can be traced back to at least the 1960s and 1970s, when scholars began to study the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement.[47] The term "low-SES students" likely emerged as a way to refer to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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[43]European Commission. (2020). NESET report 4/2020: Supporting the social dimension of higher education: From concept to practice. https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NESET-AR4-2020_Full-Report.pdf

[44] Ibid.

[45] European University Association. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on European higher education: Volume 1: Short-term responses and the impact on teaching and learning. https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/the%20impact%20of%20covid-19%20on%20european%20higher%20education.pdf

[46] E. Jensen, Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2010), 3.

[47] Reardon, S. F. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances (pp. 91-116). Russell Sage Foundation.

It's worth noting that there are alternative terms used to refer to similar populations, such as "economically disadvantaged," "low-income," or "at-risk" students, and the use of these terms can vary depending on the context and the field.

Low-SES students are those who come from families with a low socioeconomic status, which typically includes lower levels of income, education, and occupation. It is difficult to identify a universal set of characteristics that define low-socioeconomic status (SES) students, as there is significant diversity within and across countries.[48] However, some common characteristics that may be associated with low-SES students include:

> **Limited access to resources:** Students from low-SES backgrounds may have limited access to resources such as high-quality schools, educational materials, technology, and extracurricular activities.[49]

> **Financial constraints:** Students from low-SES backgrounds may face financial constraints that impact their ability to fully participate in educational opportunities, such as paying for school supplies, transportation, or fees for extracurricular activities.[50]

> **Poor health and nutrition:** low-SES students may be more likely to experience a lack of access to health and nutrition, which in turn can negatively impact their educational outcomes.[51]

> **Taking time off their studies:** The financial constraints faced by low-SES students means that many of them must **work** while they study to maintain themselves or other members of their family including children or elderly or disabled members of their family.[52]

> **Higher risk of social exclusion:** Students from low-SES backgrounds may be at higher risk of social exclusion due to factors such as ethnicity, migration status, or disability. This can further exacerbate educational disparities and limit opportunities for academic success.[53]

It's important to note that these characteristics are not universal and may vary depending on the specific country or region within Europe, as well as individual factors such as family structure, immigration status, and economic conditions. Additionally, it is important to avoid stereotyping or making assumptions about individuals based on their SES background, as there is significant diversity and individual variation within all socioeconomic groups. However, there is evidence in existing

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[48] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f7986824-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f7986824-en#sbox-II.2.1

[49]OECD (2018), "A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility", OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/b5fd1b8f-en.pdf?expires=1679851369&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=C643F5D561D1F8406EB4485E75374EF8

[50] https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20221026151656703

[51] https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/social-determinant-of-health-education-is-crucial/

[52] Chytrý, V.; Kubiatko, M.; Šindelářová, R.; Medová, J. Socioeconomic Status of University Students as a Limiting Factor for Various Forms of Distance Education during COVID-19 Measures. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 5898. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14105898

[53] Schaeper, H. (2020). The European Commission's education policy and social exclusion: A critical assessment. European Journal of Education, 55(2), 183-196

literature and research that can help us understand the definition and difficulties that low-SES students may face. Identifying the characteristics and issues they face is fundamental as it then makes it easier to address and tailor good practices and strategies to address these topics.

3.3   Examples and real-life data that show what obstacles low-SES students face

"Individuals from low-SES backgrounds are those who grow up in families with limited economic resources and fewer educational opportunities than their peers from higher-SES backgrounds".[54] The European Commission, in its report entitled "Opening up education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new technologies and open educational resources" (2013, p.20), defined low-SES students as *"those from families with low levels of income and/or with parents who have low levels of education"*. [55]

Recent research has highlighted the importance of addressing resource inequities in education, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have found that students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to lack access to high-quality educational resources such as technology, broadband internet, and private study spaces. For example, a report by UNESCO stated that: *"students in economic distress are more likely to have poor or no internet access - because they cannot afford the cost of a laptop/computer or the internet connection or because they live in regions or neighbourhoods with low connectivity. For instance, according to the UNESCO Chair in Population, Migrations and Development at the Sapienza University of Rome, in Italy, about 25% of families do not have a broadband connection and among them, 20.6% are in Trentino – in the north - and 35.7% in Calabria – in the south of Italy"*[56]. This goes to show the difficulties that low-SES students face from a technological point of view and as a consequence, how this affects their access to education and academic success.

Furthermore, according to a report by the European Parliament, students from low-income families are more likely to face financial barriers to educational participation, including tuition fees, travel costs, and living expenses.[57] This can limit their access to higher education and other opportunities that require financial resources such as, for example, starting an unpaid internship or participating in an international mobility scheme abroad such as the Erasmus Study Program, which would allow them to develop international and multicultural skills to help them integrate a global job market in their future career.

Access to financial resources can also lead to poor health and nutrition conditions, which can then have an impact on the well-being of low-SES students. In fact, according to research conducted by

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[54] Munoz, M. A., Burgos, D., & Rodriguez, C. (2016). Low socioeconomic status and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. Psychology in the Schools, 53(2), 153-175.

[55] European Commission. (2013). Opening up education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new technologies and open educational resources. Retrieved from

[56] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/universities-tackle-impact-covid-19-disadvantaged-students

[57] European Parliament. (2018). Eradicating poverty through education. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/626059/IPOL_STU(2018)626059_EN.pdf .

Tulane University, people from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience health problems such as malnutrition, obesity, and mental health challenges which can negatively impact their educational outcomes and limit their future opportunities. [58]

Financial difficulties are not the only discriminants in these situations, other factors such as disabilities or socio-familial situations, ethnic background or immigration status can also greatly contribute to the success (or unsuccess) and integration of low-SES students in HE and the professional sector. As cited in the European Journal of Education, low-SES students in Europe *"are more likely to face social exclusion due to factors such as ethnicity, immigrant background, and disability, and therefore, tend to have less access to educational opportunities, which in turn can negatively impact their academic outcomes".*[59]

For example, when it comes to disability, "*disability and poverty are mutually reinforcing phenomena, with people with disabilities more likely to be poor, and people living in poverty more likely to experience disability.*" (Cullinan & Mont, 2011, p. 2224).[60] Furthermore, as Parry & Hayden from the Higher Education Policy Institute (2013) discuss, "*disabled students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have more limited access to support services due to financial constraints, may be more likely to attend lower-quality schools and thus have less preparation for higher education, and may be less likely to have access to cultural capital or social networks that can help them navigate the higher education system.*" [61] (Parry & Hayden, 2013, p. 22).

Lastly, as discussed in the Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research in 2017, "*low socio-economic status is a factor that may exacerbate the impact of disability on educational opportunities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may have less access to resources and support.*" (Kallio, Nieminen, & Räisänen, 2017, p. 59). They continue by asserting that "to *promote inclusive education, it is necessary to provide disabled students with access to the support services and accommodations they need to participate fully in higher education, regardless of their socio-economic background.*" (Kallio, Nieminen, & Räisänen, 2017, p. 59). [62]

This all means that social exclusion and disability coupled with low-SES conditions, provide a strong barrier to success for students attending HE or who are thinking about enrolling in HE as the context they are living in may not favour or encourage them to continue with their academic career by enrolling in an HEI. This, in turn, may arguably lead to a reduced integration into university life and also to what comes after University in the professional sector.

Now that it has been possible to see what specific contexts and situations can be indicative of low SES and how this may affect their academic and future success in life, it is now time to turn our

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[58] https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/social-determinant-of-health-education-is-crucial/

[59] Schaeper, H. (2020). The European Commission's education policy and social exclusion: A critical assessment. European Journal of Education, 55(2), 183-196.

[60] Cullinan, C., & Mont, D. (2011). Disability and poverty in developing countries: A multidimensional study. World Development, 39(4), 2224-2233.

[61] Parry, M., & Hayden, M. (2013). Disabled students in higher education: Experiences and outcomes. Higher Education Policy Institute.

[62] Kallio, J., Nieminen, M., & Räisänen, T. (2017). Disability and social class in higher education in Finland. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19(1), 51-62. doi: 10.1080/15017419.2015.1133622

attention to the impact that Covid-19 has had on this situation, as it has certainly aided in creating larger rifts and gaps for many students.

3.4   The impact that Covid-19 has had on low-SES students

There has been growing concern among educators and policymakers about the impact of COVID-19 on low-SES students' approach to university and several topics have been addressed such as access to technology, financial concerns, mental health, and support services. These are all aspects that already greatly affect low-SES students, therefore with the coming of Covid-19, these have certainly exacerbated existing inequalities.

Low-SES students may face challenges accessing technology and the internet, which can be essential for online learning. This can put them at a disadvantage compared to their higher-SES peers. In fact, from a recent report by the European Commission on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Europe we can identify the following quotation: "*Disadvantaged students are more likely to face barriers related to digital access and technical skills, and therefore more likely to experience disruption to their studies due to the shift to online learning*" (European Commission, 2021, p. 18).[63]

Furthermore, many low-SES students rely on part-time work or financial aid to cover their expenses while attending university. However, the pandemic has caused many job losses and financial hardships, which may make it difficult for these students to continue their studies. This important topic was addressed by the European University Association in 2021, as they stated that "*low-income students have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, as many of them depend on part-time work to finance their studies and living expenses. Lockdowns and other measures to contain the virus have led to a significant reduction in employment opportunities, which may make it more difficult for these students to cover their costs and complete their studies*" (European University Association, 2021, p. 15).[64]

Concerning mental health, the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of students in general, but low-SES students have become particularly vulnerable. They may be dealing with additional stressors such as caring for family members, financial strain, and housing insecurity, which can exacerbate existing mental health issues or create new ones. This was illustrated clearly by the European University Association in 2021, where it was mentioned that it is important to address these issues and make sure these students have access to the resources they need to cope with these challenges and succeed academically.[65]

This last example takes us to a very important topic when discussing and debating these factors, which is the idea of creating and implementing support services such as tutoring, mentoring, and

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[63] European Commission. (2021). The European Higher Education Area in 2025: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[64] European University Association. (2021). COVID-19: Higher Education Challenges and Responses. Brussels: European University Association.

[65] European University Association, "COVID-19 and European Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities", 2021

counselling to succeed in University, which low-SES students may heavily rely and depend on to continue and succeed in their academic path. The pandemic has disrupted these services making it more difficult for students to get the help they need. A report by the European Students' Union (2020) highlighted the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of university students across Europe and called for increased investment in mental health support services. The report also emphasized the need for universities to provide targeted support for vulnerable students, such as those with pre-existing mental health conditions or those from marginalized backgrounds.[66]

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities in higher education, particularly for low-SES students. Universities and policymakers need to address these challenges and provide additional support to ensure that these students can continue their studies and succeed in their chosen careers.

3.5   What initiatives are being taken by Universities in Europe to combat these issues?

It becomes important to address the effective interventions and support measures, which should be implemented for low-SES students enrolled in Higher Education. Among some of the most important ones we could identify, the following areas are all fundamental and should be at the forefront of HEI strategies to provide direct and effective support for low-SES students:

- **Financial support**: scholarships, grants, and emergency funds.
- **Academic support**: tutoring, academic advising, and peer mentoring.
- **Psychosocial support**: peer support groups and counselling services
- **Career guidance:** internships, networking opportunities, and special career fairs

Therefore, if we consider the above-mentioned areas that could help support low-SES students in a university setting, we should analyse and refer to different initiatives in European Universities so that we can understand how to create a valid response in countries or places where such support systems have not yet been implemented.

Fortunately, there are many examples from which we can choose even though as has been shown, the impact of Covid-19 has made it very evident that there needs to be more accessible support for low-SES students – especially since many of the difficulties that have arisen since Covid-19 are still very much present in HE today. The examples illustrated in the sections that follow have been identified and selected by conducting a desk-research; they are from different Universities in Europe that are offering or have been offering ad hoc support for people from low-SES backgrounds.

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[66]ESU. (2022). A Comparative Analysis of Mental Health among Higher Education Students through the perspective of National Unions of Students across Europe. https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/A-Comparative-Analysis-of-Mental-Health-among-Higher-Education-Students-through-the-perspective-of-National-Unions-of-Students-across-Europe-1.pdf

Financial Support

We should begin with the financial aspect, as it can be considered the aggravating factor for many low-SES students. Therefore, the importance of financial support systems becomes vital to ensure student access and success in their HE path. Whether we are talking about scholarships, grants or emergency funds, many Universities out there support their students and provide active financial aid. For example, the *University of Padua* in Italy – offers several scholarships to support students including part-time job opportunities[67]; opportunities for refugees and people fleeing from war and economic hardship[68] and they also have a specific section of their website dedicated to partial or total fee waivers for low-income students. [69]

A similar initiative can be seen with the Lund University Hardship Scholarship, which can be awarded to students of the University "*whose financial situation has changed dramatically since they started their studies at Lund University*".[70] These specific funds for economic hardship were initiated as a response for students who were encountering financial hardship and struggling to manage their tuition fee payments for example due to problems arising from the Covid-19 pandemic or other unexpected occurrences during their studies.

There are also organisations and institutions in place that collaborate with universities to support students. For example, the ASVA Student Union in Amsterdam, which is the biggest student organisation in Amsterdam that represents the interests of both *UvA* and *AUAS* students and which collaborates with the Executive Boards of the two Universities, proactively helps and supports students during their studies. The participation fee is extremely accessible (€15 for the first year and then €12,50 for every following year[71]) with this fee, however, students can benefit from initiatives such as accessible transportation through their legal cheap bike scheme, or access to training from the ASVA Academy, which includes specific courses – such as learning how to master *Photoshop* to improve digital skills – and they even include services for legal help for troubles that students may have with landlords or issues that may arise during their educational career[72]. Moreover, they also provide financial support for basic needs such as grocery shopping and access to dentist appointments with discounts[73]. All these initiatives, clearly take the students' well-being into account at 360° offering support to ensure that they may be able to focus on their studies without having to worry about funding or suffering from financial stress.

The *University of Lisbon* is yet another great example of social inclusivity and providing support to the students of their university who require extra financial help. They have a whole autonomous department of their University called *Sasulisboa* (Serviços de Ação Social da Universidade de Lisboa

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[67] https://www.unipd.it/en/part-time-job-opportunities

[68] https://www.unipd.it/en/scholarships-international-students

[69] https://www.unipd.it/en/fee-waivers

[70] https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/current-students/financial-matters/scholarships-current-students/lund-university-hardship-scholarship

[71] https://asva.nl/en/signup/

[72] https://asva.nl/en/services/

[73] https://asva.nl/en/membership-discount/

- Social Services of the *University of Lisbon*), which aims to proactively support its students with social action policies following the strategy driven by the University's Governing Bodies.[74]

They offer a "*social conscience scholarship*" for "students enrolled in courses of 1st cycle, 2nd cycle and Integrated Masters of the University who, during the academic year, are in a situation of proven economic insufficiency. This support aims to "*combat school drop-out and failure, and also to contribute to the acquisition of socially useful transversal skills, through the granting of extraordinary support for the suppression of food, housing, and gratuities needs, among others*"[75].
Furthermore, they have "extraordinary accommodation support" for housing for displaced higher education students who are beneficiaries of a family allowance but who are not "social action grant holders"[76].

Lastly, the *University of Warsaw* provides significant scholarships for its students and some of them specifically target and aid low-income students. One of them is the "*scholarship for people with disabilities*"[77] but also the Social Scholarship if you have refugee status, or if you are a migrant worker with EU membership status, which includes the family of the potential scholarship holder [78]. This kind of support may be vital for low-SES students coming from a migrant or refugee context who also have a family to support or are caretakers for family members.

As mentioned throughout this paper, financial support is not the only kind of support, which can make a difference concerning access to education and future opportunities for low-SES students. Many Universities have implemented support mechanisms concerning academic processes.

Academic Support

A very noteworthy initiative was conducted by the *University of Padua*, back in December 2021, when they created resources for students with learning disabilities on their website, in collaboration with *Arqus*, the European University Alliance. They created a digital guide entitled "*Is digital inclusion possible? Hints and tricks for creating accessible digital content".[79]*Initiatives like this one are important because if teaching has become more digital since Covid-19, then images, words, webpage layouts, fonts, sounds and event subtitles on audio-visual materials are even more of critical importance for students who struggle or who do not have the same access to learning material.

Similarly, *The University of Hamburg*, in Germany, created a digital guide, which included recommendations and regulations for people balancing studies and family life, which was created in response to the Covid pandemic to help all students complete their coursework and exams, especially with digital courses which, in the case of some students, created "insurmountable *hurdles*

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[74] https://www.ulisboa.pt/en/info/student-support-services-0

[75] https://www.sas.ulisboa.pt/social-cosncience

[76] https://www.sas.ulisboa.pt/extraordinary-accommodation-support

[77] https://welcome.uw.edu.pl/scholarship-for-international-students-of-the-university-of-warsaw/

[78] https://welcome.uw.edu.pl/scholarship-for-international-students-of-the-university-of-warsaw/

[79]https://www.unipd.it/en/sites/en.unipd.it/files/Hints%20and%20tricks%20for%20creating%20accessible%20digital%20contents%20.pdf

for students in special circumstances"[80]. The guide was created as a handout for teaching members of staff, and it explained the different hurdles students may be facing with Synchronous online lectures or seminars; Inaccessible academic documents; Completing coursework in virtual teams; Learning videos/films and podcasts. For each of these areas, they outline the specific target persona who may be affected by their condition or situation and then offered insight into how they could help these students access the material despite their situation.

Moreover, the *Università di Bologna*, in Italy participated in an event called TICKET - Transnational Intercultural Competence through Knowledge Exchange and Training, which aimed to address the increasing diversity of HE by helping educators and teaching staff in enhancing their Intercultural Competence (IC) to tackle discrimination, segregation and racism by equipping staff with skills to help them engage with under-represented and disadvantaged students such as BME, LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities. [81] This can be interpreted as a proactive initiative to contrast the social, ethnic and disability-related exclusion that low-SES students may have to deal with during their studies and therefore, having educators and HE teaching staff who are more aware of these students certainly makes the learning environment more inclusive and welcoming.

Lastly, another example of academic initiatives can be seen by the *University of Catalunya* and the importance they have given to digital training for their teaching staff since Covid19 hit in 2020. Their main claim is that it is not sufficient to invest in digital technologies, because for them it is fundamental and normal for a University environment to have access to such instruments; what is vital for them is having a pedagogical body that also knows how to use them and engage their students in a meaningful learning process.[82] This is also incredibly important, as it cannot be taken for granted that students have access to technology but at the same time, it also addresses the important topic that knowledge-holders such as HE professors may not be able to transfer their knowledge or engage in academic debate with their students because of their lack of digital skills. The problem is that this creates a vicious cycle of misinformation and misguided knowledge transfer, which hinders student success and academic achievement and therefore limits their future opportunities.

Career Guidance Initiatives

Career Guidance is a huge part of University academic paths and processes, as it provides support to students during their University lives and prepares them for what is to come in their future. Some Universities have dedicated part of their approach to career guidance to supporting students with disabilities - who often form part of the low-SES student community as previously mentioned in the report - and their access to the professional sector. Initiatives include special career guidance and networking initiatives. For example, regarding professional opportunities for students with disabilities, the *Université Sorbonne de Paris* provides services for career success, such as proactive support in contacting companies, expert advice and interviews practice and they also aid students

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[80]https://www.uni-hamburg.de/studieren-mit-behinderung/infos-lehrende/downloads/handout-for-teachers-online-courses-with-students-in-special-circumstances.pdf

[81] https://www.unibo.it/en/international/european-projects-of-education-and-training/ticket-transnational-intercultural-competence-through-knowledge-exchange-and-training

[82] https://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/news/actualitat/2022/233-training-digital-teachers-university.html

with disabilities in obtaining recognition of the status of "disabled worker" to help them access the job market [83].

Other initiatives include specific career and recruitment fairs aimed at supporting students with disabilities. For example, *UCL Career Fairs* – "Early Access for Students with Disabilities" is a moment specifically aimed at allowing students with disabilities or long-term health conditions, the possibility to visit the fairs before they get busy[84], therefore, helping disadvantaged students who may struggle during peak visiting times at large events, where conditions may become chaotic and stressful. Further still, the *Virtual Career Fair for People with Disabilities*, organised by *Gwynedd Mercy University* is another example of how Career Service departments can facilitate access to student-company encounters even for people with mobility issues or other special needs in this case using the power of technology and digital tools to guarantee access to career opportunities for all students.[85]

In Italy, instead, the *Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata"*, back in November 2022, organised the Diversity Day (which was kickstarted in 2007), which is dedicated to the insertion and job inclusion of people with disabilities and belonging to protected categories ex L. 68/99 (a specific category of people recognised by the Italian law, who are certified disability-holders). The event is organised by Value People, Andel and Jobadvisor in cooperation with CARIS (the University of Rome Tor Vergata Commission for the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders). [86]

A similar initiative was held by the *Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca* in Milan, Italy; they also held a Diversity Day 2022, dedicated to students and graduates with disabilities, which also included a moment where students and recruiters shared a moment of discussion regarding the difficulties that both encounter when dealing with selection processes, recruiting and job hunting[87]. Moments like these are important because they show students how recruiters or talent acquisition people may respond and struggle with identifying and finding the right people for their companies; it creates an environment of shared responsibility that may provide the necessary insight for both to improve their hiring and selection processes to be more inclusive and effective.

Psycho-Social Support

Low-SES students are often psychologically more fragile and require support also from a professional point of view.[88] In fact, most Universities offer psychological and counselling support to their students.

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[83] https://sciences.sorbonne-universite.fr/en/campus-life/health-wellness/disability-resources

[84] https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-careers/2019/09/25/ucl-careers-fairs-2019-early-access-for-students-with-disabilities/

[85] https://www.gmercyu.edu/griffins-den/events/2022/11/virtual-career-fair-for-people-with-disabilities

[86] http://placement.uniroma2.it/2022/11/18/23-novembre-2022-luniversita-degli-studi-di-roma-tor-vergata-ospita-la-nuova-edizione-del-diversity-day/

[87] https://www.unimib.it/sites/default/files/2022-06/Diversityday2022_programma.pdf

[88] https://www.nicolemstephens.com/uploads/3/9/5/9/39596235/13_stephens_the_experience_of_low-ses_students_in_higher_education_psychological_barriers_to_success_and_interventions_to_reduce_social_class_inequality.pdf

For example, to help students stay healthy not only from a mental health point of view but also from general physical well-being, the psychologists at the *SUMPPS* (Université Sorbonne de Paris) can visit students with disabilities free of charge (even without appointments) for different general support services such as medical advice and certificates, general consultations and sports medicine, contraception and gynaecology, speech therapy assessments, nutrition and foot reflexology, vaccinations, and other initiatives.[89] Even the *Central European University* offers confidential student psychological counselling services, with a focus on lots of different topics including lack of motivation or direction, concentration difficulties, low confidence or self-esteem, homesickness or loneliness, eating or body image issues, grief or bereavement, bullying, anxiety, stress, panic attacks, perfectionism, obsessions/compulsions, depression or mood difficulties, self-harm, addiction or substance use, relationship issues, traumatic experiences, concerns that may result from racial, cultural, personal, sexual or gender identity issues in both their Vienna Campus and their Budapest site[90]. The wide range of support initiatives is vital because trauma or situations of discomfort may take on a lot of different forms depending on the students and their personal history, therefore providing a wide range of options, helps students identify the specific support they may require and potentially improve or mitigate the conditions that may hinder their academic and future career.

There are also examples of support programs for people who need to look after their families as they are studying, such as single parents or carers. *The University of Hamburg*, for example, has a Family Office to help their students who are also parents or carers with recommendations and concrete support while they are studying there. The website is fundamental as it provides useful information about where to look and how to access funding and services not only in the University but also in the City of Hamburg. For example, they provide students and other members of the university's community (workers and teaching staff) services for childcare – some of them identified in the "Flexible Childcare" section of their website, which includes services such as the Casper playgroups, family rooms for last-minute childcare activities, or even weekend childcare services for children aged 0 to 6 and also the Weekend day-care at the KinderCampus[91]. A similar initiative was also kickstarted by the *University of Lisbon*, where they also created spaces within the university to provide child support services to the academic community during business days and working hours.[92]

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[89] https://sciences.sorbonne-universite.fr/en/campus-life/health-wellness/disability-resources
[90] https://www.ceu.edu/psychological-counselling
[91] https://www.uni-hamburg.de/en/familienbuero/kinderbetreuung.html
[92] https://www.sas.ulisboa.pt/child-support-unit

3.6   Conclusions

Overall, what can be seen from the previously mentioned information and data, is that there are certainly a lot of potential difficulties and hurdles that low-SES students may encounter during their studies in HEIs, the ones analysed here include aspects such as financial problems, psycho-physical issues (including both mental health and physical/learning disabilities) and social and ethnic exclusion. All these aspects contribute to and affect academic success and even the rate of academic abandonment for many low-SES students who cannot continue with their studies if they do not receive the correct support during their academic career.

This is precisely why support systems implemented by HEIs become so vitally important to low-SES students, whether they are struggling with financial, social or health issues during their studies. What has been shown in this brief research is that many Universities in Europe have provided some form of initiative or project implementation to support these students. The areas that were identified and that should be addressed in future implementation strategies by other Universities are the following: *Financial support, Academic support, Psycho-social support* and *Career guidance*.

To conclude, in a post-Covid19 society, where many low-SES Higher Education students struggle with financial well-being, health issues and access to resources and technology, Universities should guarantee and provide different forms of support systems and initiatives, which can help ensure that all enrolled students have access to the same opportunities to succeed not only in their academic path but also after University as they begin to define their professional working life.

Credits

Contact

https://sites.utu.fi/dig2inc/

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