



Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

#ACATHINKS

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Inclusion lessons from the youth field



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Tony combines his academic background (Social Psychology, Translation Studies, Webmaster and Copywriter) with his experience in youth work and non-formal education. In 2000, he co-created SALTO Inclusion & Diversity, a resource centre for National Agencies and NGOs in the youth (work) field. He organises training courses, writes publications and supports policy developments to bring more young people with fewer opportunities to the EU programmes for youth.

*Let's start with some good news: this April, the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (I&D Strategy) was published.¹ These implementation guidelines for inclusion and diversity show **that we need to reach out beyond the usual suspects** in the Erasmus+ projects we are managing.*

*This I&D Strategy for 2021-2027 was the result of a cooperation between the European Commission, National Agencies and SALTO resource centres. It draws largely on the previous inclusion strategies for the EU youth programmes. As a project officer working for the **SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion resource centre**², I have had the privilege to be involved in the development and implementation of these inclusion strategies since 2003.*

Based on this rich inclusion and diversity experience, I want to share some insights and ideas from the youth field. With some lateral thinking and adaptation, these ideas can be instrumental for higher education projects too. I hope we can benefit from looking over the hedge and inspire each other across sectors.

WHAT'S IN A WORD: YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

The new I&D Strategy gives a frame for our efforts to reach out to *people with fewer opportunities*. But why such a cumbersome term for this target group of our inclusion efforts? And where does its strange definition come from, that is based on a range of 'barriers'?

Since the first inclusion strategy for the YOUTH programme in 2003, it was clear that the term used back then – *disadvantaged youth* – was stigmatising the young people who we wanted to include in the programme.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity_en

² www.salto-youth.net/inclusion/



By focussing on **the situation they were in or the obstacles they faced** in the I&D Strategy, we wanted to avoid all kinds of blaming and stigmatising, which is how we came to the term '**young people with fewer opportunities,**' and the 7-8 'exclusion factors' that hinder their access to European mobility opportunities:

- Disabilities
- Health conditions
- Educational attainment
- Cultural differences
- Social situation
- Economic limitations
- Geographical disadvantage
- Barriers linked to discrimination (added in the new I&D Strategy)

In the previous definition in the youth field, we also added a **comparative element**: 'fewer opportunities compared to your peers'. This was important because fitting one of the boxes does not automatically put you at a disadvantage compared to your peers. I always like to give the example of the black lesbian woman in a wheelchair, daughter of a millionaire. Even though she fits into some of the categories above, she most likely has less of a struggle than her peers. The bottom line is that there needs to be some professional assessment, rather than a tick box approach.

For each exclusion factor, we gave some examples to clarify what we are talking about, but always added three dots at the end of each list to make sure this definition of *who we want to include* would never exclude any young people that could really benefit from our inclusion support. Also, we were conscious that new exclusion mechanisms could arise over time, for example, mental health (in corona times), digital addiction, filter bubbles (on social media, fake news) etc.

So, who participates most in HE mobilities? In the youth field, it used to be the *white, middle class, well-off, Colgate-smile students living in big cities*. That's exactly why we developed the inclusion strategies, to consciously reach out and support the young people that face the exclusion obstacles. Currently around 30% of EU youth projects involve those target groups.

ADAPTING THE EUROPEAN IDEAS TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT

You probably noticed that the same European opportunities (e.g. mobility projects) are implemented differently in different countries - that is also diversity. The European Commission asks each Erasmus+ National Agency to **draw up their own national action plan for inclusion and diversity**.

Logical, because the exclusion factors can be more or less relevant for different countries. In countries with strongly enforced accessibility guidelines, students with a disability might be relatively independent. If generous national scholarships are in place, there needs to be less focus on economic disadvantage. On the contrary, if some minorities or categories are underrepresented or discriminated, they need an extra push to get on board.

There are **two important principles** for these national priorities:

- **Communicate your priorities clearly**: be transparent and at the same time show that you want to be more inclusive, this also encourages people from your target groups to apply despite the fact that they thought the opportunity was perhaps not meant for them.
- **Do not exclude**: it is ok to focus on some profiles, but if students/young people from other target groups want to participate in the programme, your priorities should not be a reason to discourage them from applying nor to reject their application.

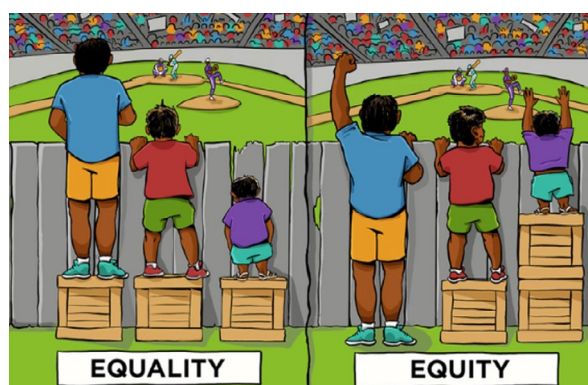


How to draw up your own inclusion and diversity strategy? The SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion & Diversity resource centre has been training the youth colleagues for the Erasmus+ and Solidarity Corps National Agencies on how to develop their own strategies. We also developed a practical manual and a series of podcasts on how to do this, available from www.salto-youth.net/ShapingInclusion/

EQUITY VERSUS EQUALITY, THE ROAD TO INCLUSION

I had the pleasure to participate in some meetings with the formal education part of Erasmus+ (as SALTO Inclusion & Diversity focusses on youth and non-formal education). When explaining all the extra efforts we do in the youth (work) sector to get specific target groups on board, some HE colleagues exclaimed that all this *pampering and favouritism* was not fair. 'The rules have to be equal for all.'

It is important **not to confuse equality and equity**. You probably have seen the cartoon of three persons of different heights behind the fence, trying to watch a baseball game. If you treat them all equally i.e. give them the same crate to stand on, the shortest person still cannot see over the fence. For the three persons to have access to equal opportunities, they need support adapted to their situation. That means that tall people don't need a crate to look over the fence, but short people might need two. That's equity.



“Interaction Institute for Social Change”
Artist: Angus Maguire.

Of course, the application procedure and assessment criteria are the same for all (the fence, as it were), but National Agencies and sending organisations can do a lot to support young people with fewer opportunities and put in an extra “crate” or two so that their candidacy can be successful. In the youth field, we also train the assessors to be inclusion sensitive and **to apply the principle of proportionality**. If a person with fewer opportunities would benefit proportionally more from an international project than a student with regular opportunities, then priority is given to the young person with fewer opportunities.

Do young people with fewer opportunities benefit more from international projects? Yes, they do!

The RAY research consortium³ annually assesses the impact of Erasmus+ youth projects on participants and leaders. The findings of [one report \(2015\)](#) demonstrate that when contrasting this impact between young people with fewer opportunities and ‘well-off’ young people, the first group gained more competences and orientation in life compared to the second.

³ www.researchyouth.net



REACHING OUT TO YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

If you want to get students facing specific barriers on board, you can't just tell that you are open to all and wait for those groups to apply. We tried this passive approach in the youth field, but failed. It became clear that it takes conscious efforts to make specific groups interested, and support them to participate in mobility projects. With that in mind, here are a few tips from 20 years of experience (in the youth field):

- **Go where the (young) people with fewer opportunities are.** Use the places/channels they are using - e.g. social media, NGO's, self-organisations, cultural centres, student clubs.
- **Use images they identify with.** For example, do you have pictures with a person with a disability, from different minorities, in different social situations?
- **Communicate from their perspective.** Of course, Erasmus+ is primarily an educational programme, but also show the social side of it, the fun, the discovery, what they will get out of it.
- **Use peers and cultural ambassadors.** A message comes across better if they hear it from someone of the same age, community or background. Work with returnees from the target group to explain the experience in their terms and answer their questions and doubts.
- **Nothing about them without them.** This slogan comes from disability work, where all too many activities are done for or to them, instead of with them. But this is valid for all groups. We notice that projects are more successful if the young people can help shape them instead of just buying into some ready-made offer. The space for active involvement of Erasmus students is probably concentrated around their studies.
- **Work on expectations and obstacles.** It takes some guts to go abroad for a longer period of time, especially if you are facing challenges in life. A preparation process with a trusted person is vital to get expectations right and to tackle obstacles proactively.
- **Non-formal works best.** The closer you are to the target group, the better you can guide a young person towards an international project. Hence the benefit of working with peers or using informal methods or settings.

In the youth sector of Erasmus+, 18 National Agencies are working together in a Strategic Partnership for Inclusion to reach out to specific target groups: Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), rural youth and young people with a disability. Based on their experimental work, SALTO Inclusion & Diversity developed a '[Cookbook for Inclusion](#)' (2018) for National Agencies on how to attract new groups, how to overcome obstacles, how to do more with limited resources, and much more.

WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T?

Over the years, there have been many projects in the youth field that consciously included diverse young people facing a variety of exclusion factors. So why not learn from them? We gathered the organisers of these good practices around the table to discuss what worked well for them, but also what didn't and what could have helped in solving those challenges. We **extracted the learning and success factors** from all those previous projects and wrote them down in a series of 'research publications' - research in the sense of desk research, information gathering and analysis.

With these publications, organisations planning to involve the same target groups can get a head start and build on other people's successes and mistakes. So far, we have focussed on 'Inclusion through employability' (how non-formal learning can contribute to young people's chances on the labour market), 'Urban solutions' (projects with young people in difficult urban areas) and 'On Track' (giving young people in NEET situations direction in their lives again). You can download them from www.salto-youth.net/whatworks/



When going through the conclusions of the aforementioned publications, there are some lessons relevant for Higher Education projects too:

- It takes more time and effort to get specific target groups on board. Foresee the necessary human and financial resources to do so. In the youth field, NAs offer extra project consultations, coaching (to co-develop the project) and 'ambassadors' from different target groups.
- Not everybody is independent. There can be a need for mentoring (social support) during the project abroad. In the youth sector, we sometimes send a young person with fewer opportunities together with a mainstream volunteer for mutual support.
- Go for a holistic approach. Look beyond the young person as a student. Social, cultural and economic issues might prevent the young people from going abroad. With some creativity and cooperation with other stakeholders, these obstacles can be overcome.
- One step on a pathway. A mobility project is just a step on a longer pathway; there should be a process that prepares the young person to go on an international adventure. But just the same there should be sufficient reintegration and follow-up support when coming back home.

A FINAL MESSAGE

I participated in an Erasmus exchange in Chemnitz in 1992. I have fond memories of that semester, but at that time, we just received 'funding'. The exchange did not involve a fully-fledged 'project' with preparation, support or follow-up, simply because these aspects were not being considered at the time. A person with fewer opportunities would have been lost.

So, if you want to have more inclusion and diversity in HE mobilities, you need to **make it a clear priority**, including green light and the support of your superiors. Determine which student profiles you want to get on board, and put the efforts and resources where your proverbial mouth is.

It was a long struggle in the youth field to reach more inclusion and diversity amongst participants, but we managed. I hope our experience can inspire you to make your ID efforts run smoothly. And by the way, the European Commission is also planning to create a SALTO Inclusion & Diversity resource centre for Education and Training, so more specific HE inclusion support is on its way. I wish you good luck!

Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights is a new "ACA Think Pieces" series launched in March 2021. Each contribution in this series will explore the multi-faceted nature of inclusion from a different international education perspective, including, for example: concrete advice regarding developing strategic inclusion plans for inclusive higher education mobility, how to measure progress on inclusion-related goals, practical examples of data collection to enhance diversity, synergies of excellent inclusion practices from the Erasmus+ youth sector relevant for higher education, etc. Articles will be authored by expert colleagues in internationalisation of higher education and inclusion, and will be published electronically on ACA's website towards the end of each month from March until the end of 2021.