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# Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe

## Introduction

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has set a target at European Level, that the percentage of graduates of member states experiencing a period studying abroad has to reach 20% by 2020. Although the trend for internationalisation is growing and the EHEA has paved the way for large scale student mobility and increased the quality and attractiveness of it, currently statistics across countries in Europe indicate that students with disabilities are still underrepresented in international exchange programmes, further deepening their already disadvantaged position among their peers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

To enhance the social dimension of the Erasmus programme, the Erasmus+ programme introduced new rules in 2014. Among a range of measures to increase accessibility and remove barriers of participation, extra financial support is offered to students with special needs to cover disability related costs such as personal assistants, sign language interpreters, customised living accommodation, etc. According to the European Commission official data, released publicly every year about the Erasmus+ annual results, the part of the student population receiving a special needs financial support is stagnating between 0.11% and 0.18% (European Commission, 2009-2018).

Furthermore, few European countries have implemented strategies to strengthen the social dimension in mobility programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). The Flemish Government (Belgium), has adopted the Action Plan for Mobility [Brains on the Move](#) in 2013. The Action Plan is composed of a broad range of initiatives that contribute to the further realisation of an international oriented, qualitative, higher education in Flanders. The focus lies on the mobility of students. The action plan does not only contain strategies to promote mobility among the Flemish students, but it also creates possibilities to attract foreign students to Flanders. Inclusion is given a central place in the Action Plan. A benchmark was set concerning the mobility of underrepresented groups in higher education, among them students with disabilities. The Flemish Government strives to have 33% of all outgoing students to belong to underrepresented groups. Concrete actions have been taken to promote mobility among these groups. At present, the statistics of the Flemish Community, show that students with disabilities only represent a very small proportion in outward mobility with 0.56% (Flemish Government, 2019).

## EPFIME project

The project [Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe \(EPFIME\)](#) is a 2-year project co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy reform "Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms - 2018-2020" running from May 2019 until May 2021. The project is delivered by the Ministry of Education and Training (Flemish Community/Belgium) and the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education in Flanders (SIHO), in cooperation with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) in Ireland, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA).

During the project, the consortium partners examined in-depth the needs and expectations on inclusive mobility of national authorities, students with disabilities and higher education institutions across Europe, while focusing on

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how national authorities and higher education institutions could collaborate more strongly to ensure the quality and the transferability of support services for both incoming and outgoing students with disabilities in exchange programmes.

Based on the research findings the project partners will develop a multi-use 'inclusive mobility toolbox' that contains not only a policy report with recommendations on how to implement a sustainable framework on inclusive mobility at European/national/ regional/institutional level, but also practical tools. These will include a guideline 'inclusive mobility' to stimulate institutions of higher education to implement a sustainable inclusive mobility strategy, in which the needs of incoming and outgoing students with disabilities are assessed thoroughly and a public interactive and individualised tool/website/mobile application in which all national authorities and institutions of higher education in Europe can easily register their information on funding, regulations, and support services for different types of disabilities in a transparent/uniform way.

## Inclusive mobility: what's in a name?

The [definition of the Inclusive Mobility Alliance](#), a network of 20+ European organisations expert in the fields of Higher Education mobility, Youth mobility and Disability forms the basis for the EPFIME project:

'Inclusive Mobility' means creating adequate conditions to learn, work or volunteer abroad for people with fewer opportunities, by addressing their diverse support needs. It is a needs-based approach to what the individual beneficiary needs to ensure a safe and exciting mobility period abroad. It is important to not generalise needs, needs are specific and the individualised aspect in it is highly important. What the person/beneficiary says they need is what they should receive. It is not only about academic mobility but also about the social aspects that play an important role in the experience abroad and the potential link to connect with the local community. Inclusive Mobility Alliance 2019.

## Research activities

To examine the needs and expectations on inclusive mobility of national authorities, students with disabilities and higher education institutions across Europe, a number of research methodologies were employed during the first year of the project:

**Desk research** was conducted to take stock of mobility data and the knowledge base in relation to the topic of international mobility and students with disabilities and inform various project tasks, including questionnaire design. The review undertook a scoping of literature from a broad range of countries and disciplines. It included academic articles and studies from numerous different sources including websites and higher education disability organisations. It also considered literature written on general study abroad experiences by students in higher education and paid attention to any literature and recommendations which specifically refers to the mobility of students with disabilities.

**Large-scale surveys were launched**, collecting data through online questionnaires from multiple target groups: students with disabilities, higher education institutions and Ministries of Education. **The first set of questions** dealt

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with background variables on the students, higher education institutions and ministries respectively. **The second section** dealt with policies, strategies and support services on disabilities. **The third section** focused on policies, strategies, and challenges and enablers on international mobility towards students with disabilities. **A fourth section** examined expectations on the [platform inclusivemobility.eu](https://platform.inclusivemobility.eu). Each survey ended with comments and questions about the follow-up. The student questionnaire was constructed to investigate the experiences of students with disabilities who participated in mobility programmes, as well as students who had not yet participated in mobility programmes. A different set of questions was developed to examine the barriers experienced by students who had not yet participated in mobility programmes.

The researchers followed up with four focus group sessions to investigate the experiences of the current [MappED! platform](https://mapp.edi.eu) and to explore the needs and expectations regarding the development of the [platform inclusivemobility.eu](https://platform.inclusivemobility.eu).

## First glimpse of key findings surveys

The surveys reached 1134 students with disabilities, 114 higher education institutions and 23 Ministries of Education across EHEA. The focus groups reached 27 participants in total, representing students with disabilities, university staff, policymakers and representatives of national and European organisations from the field of mobility, disability, youth and higher education.

In this article, a first glimpse of key findings of the three surveys is shared.

### Key findings - student surveys

- Information provision on study abroad for students with disabilities is lacking. Too many students still don't know that extra support and supplementary grants are available. A large proportion of students with disabilities don't think that Erasmus+ or other mobility abroad programmes are also open to them.
- Similar to their peers, the main motivators for students with disabilities to take part in mobility are the opportunity to live abroad, to improve and widen career prospects in the future, to expand the social network, and to learn different language practices and teaching.
- Expected financial burdens, separation from partners, children, friends, and problems with finding adequate and accessible accommodation in the host country, are important factors for not engaging in an international mobility programme.
- The planning and preparation for an international exchange programme takes more time for students with disabilities when compared to their fellow students.
- The key criteria for choosing a host institution to study at widely depends on accessibility criteria (city, learning, transport, housing and campus), which are currently not easily found.
- Students with disabilities participate quite often in short term placements and value the flexibility of short duration periods.
- Although the overall satisfaction regarding the covering of financial expenses via grants is positive, students with disabilities indicate challenges about the difficult eligibility criteria and inaccessible application process.
- Most students experience similar or better support conditions at host institutions during the mobility period, whilst one quarter of the students experienced better conditions at the home institution. When asked in which areas the host institution supported them most during the mobility period, the five most cited options were support from staff during the international exchange period, consultation about their needs and preferences, accessibility of academic life, accessibility of learning materials and the availability of

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accessible housing facilities

- International mobility exchanges have comparable advantages for students with disabilities in terms of higher academic achievement, increased language skills, personal confidence, and personal development. In addition, students with disabilities testified about a more normalised self-perception, making them feel more similar to their peers.

### Key findings - higher education surveys

- Inclusion measures or regulations, as well as data collection and targets, which can ensure inclusive mobility towards students with disabilities **are almost non-existent at the institutional level.**
- Some higher education institutions already actively encourage students with disabilities to go abroad but only limited higher education institutions seem to be actively encouraging students with disabilities to come to their institutions.
- International relations officers and inclusion officers are often not aware of the challenges faced by international students.
- The lack of communication and collaboration between inclusion officers, international officers and other support services are an important barrier in supporting international students with disabilities effectively.
- A sustainable strategy at an institutional level to ensure inclusive mobility for students with disabilities is almost non-existent. The lack of communication and collaboration between inclusion officers, international officers and other support services is an important barrier in supporting international students with disabilities effectively. As a result higher education institutions often come up with ad hoc solutions for both incoming and outgoing students with disabilities. Within a strategic approach, roles and responsibilities at the institutional level should be clearly defined.
- Pre visits at the host institution before the placement takes place have proven to have an important positive impact on reassuring both the student and the staff in charge of the placement, greatly reducing doubts and fears.

### Key findings from Ministries' surveys

- In the same vein as higher education institutions, inclusion measures or regulations, as well as data collection and targets, to ensure inclusive mobility for students with disabilities are almost non-existent at the national level.
- Only half of the countries surveyed provide specific information on mobility for students with disabilities. Many Ministries rely on their higher education institutions to do so and there seem to be few national initiatives on promoting mobility towards students with disabilities.
- No country actively tries to attract students with disabilities within their country, while few countries have declared actively encouraging students with disabilities to engage in an outgoing placement abroad.
- Research on the impact of mobility abroad for students with disabilities is limited and almost non-existent.
- The lack of uniform definition of disabilities, the lack of transferability of grants and support services as well as the lack of additional mobility grants are the main barriers in other mobility programmes (non-Erasmus+) and have a strong impact on student participation and on higher education institutions, who feel responsible for the student.
- A large number of countries do not provide any additional mobility grants or support services for students with disabilities coming to their country on a placement.

### Next steps

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Based on the research results, the consortium is working on:

- **A research report and policy booklet** with recommendations for different stakeholders. The booklet will also include a first European Framework for Inclusive Mobility that will provide concrete guidance and action points for the different stakeholders involved in creating inclusive placements.
- **A Guideline on Inclusive Mobility** will support higher education institutions to implement a sustainable inclusive mobility strategy at the institutional level.
- **A self-assessment tool** for national authorities, higher education institutions and national agencies which will enable them to monitor policies on Inclusive Mobility around Europe and compare their own policies, to see easily where they stand.
- **An online platform** called [inclusivemobility.eu](https://inclusivemobility.eu) where everything is to be found about Inclusive Mobility for national authorities, practitioners, and students with disabilities. Connected to the existing [MappED! platform](#), national authorities will be able to register their information on regulations, policies, and support services.

Not only will this meet the expressed needs of students with a disability by making reliable information available; it will also facilitate stakeholders in Europe to collaborate more strongly to assure the transferability of support services for students with disabilities. Both these outcomes are aimed at stimulating an increase of students with disabilities participating in international exchange programmes.

The policy booklet and research report will be launched in autumn 2020, while the other deliverables will be launched at the dissemination conference in Brussels at the beginning of 2021. Follow the project activities on [inclusivemobility.eu](https://inclusivemobility.eu).

# EPFIME

[inclusivemobility.eu](https://inclusivemobility.eu)

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



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Valérie Van Hees is the Coordinator of the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO, Belgium) and has accumulated over 19 years of experience in the field of policy and services on social inclusion in higher education, mainly focusing on students with a disability. At SIHO, she forms a bridge between policy and practice on a daily basis, being a point of contact for both the Flemish Government and higher education staff. Valérie coordinates the inclusive mobility project 'Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe' (EPFIME).

The Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) is a collaboration between the Flemish Government and all Flemish Higher Education Institutions. SIHO serves both policy makers and institutions in the development and implementation of inclusion and equity measures for inclusive higher education.



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Dominique Montagnese is an expert on Inclusive Mobility for the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO, Belgium). He has been working with international mobility programmes for more than ten years and with social inclusion in mobility for more than six years. He is the initiator of several projects linking disability and Erasmus+ mobilities, such as MapAbility, MappED! and the Inclusive Mobility Alliance which he currently chairs. Dominique contributes to the current development of the platform [inclusivemobility.eu](#), which will be the platform for inclusive mobility across the European Higher Education Area.