



Flemish policies for inclusive student mobility

Internationalisation for all? Wider inclusion in the internationalisation of higher education

On the 21th of February, Flanders Knowledge Area (FKA) and the Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) presented Flemish policies on inclusive student mobility at the conference 'Internationalisation for all? Wider inclusion in the internationalisation of higher education', organised by the Academic Cooperation Association, DAAD Brussels Office, Diku Brussels Office and FKA.

The presentation started with testimonial clips of four students from underrepresented groups that participated in student mobility with a scholarship from the Mobility Action plan 'Brains on the Move'.

Jessica completed a bachelor teaching degree in secondary education, for the subjects English and Art, at Artevelde University College Ghent. Jessica is visually impaired and went to the US, where she attended some courses and did a traineeship as a teacher in a school.



" I went to the William Paterson University in the United States of America. I went to that college because I knew they had an accessibility resource centre. That centre helped me with the most important part: 'mobility', because I had to go from the college to the high school where I was teaching. So they took care of drivers, taxis and *ubers*. They also digitalized books and materials for me. The international experience was really enriching, because it made me a survivor. I also learned about the American culture, American student life, and the language. The people there, were very welcoming and open to my disability. And after a while they didn't look at it. They didn't even care

because they took me into their group, and it was an amazing experience, and I hope other people can do it too.

Caroline is a deaf language signer and a student in Applied Architecture at Howest University College. She went to Washington DC for an internship at the deaf university, in an architectural firm for the deaf worldwide. The architectural firm places its focus on deaf space, which is the adaptation of buildings for the deaf and hard of hearing.



" I chose that internship, because it allowed me to communicate easily in sign language without appealing

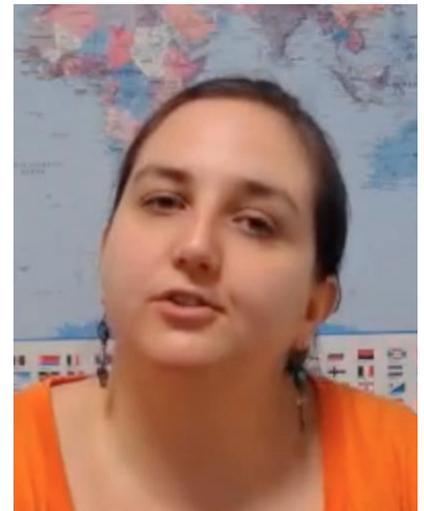
on an interpreter. Thanks to international experiences, I can more easily connect with deaf people from different countries. From the beginning I had a good relationship with people from Denmark, Norway, Japan and the Netherlands. Because of the journey I made, I got to know myself. Before I went abroad, I did not really know who I was. By making the journey alone, you really get to know yourself. Being away from your familiar environment for half a year is totally worth it. It was fantastic to experience the American student life. It was a beautiful journey in my life.-

Noelle completed a Bachelor in Business, with the major Marketing at the Odisee University College in Brussels. Using the scholarship with an extra financial top up for students with an economically disadvantaged background, Noelle went on an exchange to a partner university in India in 2017-2018.



“ In India I studied Corporate Strategy for one month, which actually broadened my view on companies. I also did work for three months in a digital agency. I had the privilege to receive the Flemish Government Grant, which helped me for my apartment and to pay for the Uber, and for the food and for everything. Going to India was an amazing experience. I was able to see and learn what was happening in different parts of the world. People were really kind to me, they were helpful and actually did anything that I wanted to help me, at the university and at the school in Odisee. I would encourage other students who would like to take this opportunity, to go abroad and to also learn what is happening in other parts of the world. And I am grateful for this exchange and also for the Flemish Government grant that I received.

Carolien completed a bachelor degree in ergotherapy at Artevelde University College Ghent. Carolien participated in the joint degree project her Belgian institution set up with partner institutions in Finland and Austria. In addition, she did a traineeship and took part in a group project on Health Promotion in Vienna.



“ I went abroad because I really wanted to go abroad. I had five previous experiences abroad and they triggered me to go and apply for a long-term internship. I ended up in Vienna, which was a really nice and really positive experience. I had to take into account some factors about my disability. For example, I wanted my internship close to my dorm and I wanted to do four days of internship instead of five days. This long-term internship meant a lot to me. I made international friends, I learned a new language. I have a broader view on life, I have more empathy now for

intercultural differences and how to cope with them. And in the end, I learned a lot about my adaptability in new situations.

Renilde Knevels, policy officer internationalisation at Flanders Knowledge Area (VLUHR) presented national policies for inclusive mobility in Flanders, and focused on how the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, the national agencies (VLUHR, Flanders Knowledge Area and EPOS), the Support Centre for Higher Education (SIHO) and the higher education institutions (HEIs) all cooperate to realise inclusive mobility.

Brains on the Move

The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training developed and funds the Action plan 'Brain on the Move'. The Action plan contains various scholarship actions, and is run by the Flanders Knowledge Area (VLUHR). Inclusion is given a central place in the action plan.

“ The aim is that 33% of the mobile students should come from underrepresented groups by 2020.

Therefore, a 25% rule is used in the selections of all actions for outgoing mobility. This rule means that at least 25% of the grants have to be awarded to students from under-represented groups. At this moment these groups are defined as students with disabilities, students from an economically disadvantaged background and working students.

The implication of the 25% rule is that, in order to use the full budget that is available for mobility actions, there have to be enough applications from students from under-represented groups. So the opportunities of all students and the opportunities of students of underrepresented groups are connected with each other. This forces the higher education institutions to identify these groups of students and stimulate them to apply for a mobility grant. Once selected, these students also receive a top up of 200 EUR per month.

Positive impact

HEIs in Flanders value this measure. Hilde Nijs, International Mobility Programmes Manager at KU Leuven testifies:

“ The 25% rule is a simple but effective rule that forces higher education

institutions to deal with the issues of underrepresented groups.

In 2016-2017, 51% of the scholarships in Flanders were granted to students of underrepresented groups. In 2017-2018 the percentage reached 46%.

Monitoring underrepresented groups

The 25% rule is now limited to three target groups, as only the validated data of these underrepresented groups are available in the Database of the Flemish Government.

The Flemish Ministry of Education and training, HEIs, national agencies and SIHO use a broader definition of underrepresented groups. In 2017, all universities and university colleges for applied sciences, agreed to register and to monitor students from underrepresented groups in a uniform way. Appointments are recorded in the Charter 'Underrepresented Groups'.

The aim of the charter is to monitor the participation, the flow and the outflow of underrepresented groups at Flemish level. Target groups in the charter are students with disabilities, students with a migration background, new entrants, scholarship (and almost scholarship) students, working students, foreign language students,

multilingual students, and students from a short-educated or middle-skilled environment.

The uniform data, collected with consent from students, are collected since 2018-2019 and will be registered with respect to privacy and ownership of data in the database DHO 2.0. This registration systems allows the monitoring of students of underrepresented groups in all mobility programmes. It also allows to extend, if needed, the current 25% rule to other target groups.

Access and preparatory visits

EPOS, the Flemish Erasmus+ National Agency, implements extra supports measures for students with disabilities in Erasmus exchange programmes. The first measure is the reimbursement of special needs costs during the mobility for students with disabilities. The second measure is funding for preparatory visits to the student mobility destination and, if needed, for a trusted person/coach to accompany the student on this preparatory visit. In 2019, EPOS invests 10.000 euro in the preparatory visits.

Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education

To support the Ministry of Education and Training and the higher education institutions in Flanders with

the implementation of the UN Convention, the Flemish Government founded in 2009 the Flemish Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO).

The core responsibility of SIHO is providing information, guidelines, support and expertise to the HEIs, the Ministry of Education and Training and national agencies. Next to support, SIHO is drafting and following up policy recommendations on inclusive higher education at the national and the European level.

SIHO is partner of the inclusive mobility alliance of the Erasmus Student Network.

Policy advice on international mobility

Based on a survey of SIHO on the needs of HEIs, the Flemish Education Council published a policy advice on international mobility for students with disabilities in March 2018.

At the national and the European level, attention is asked for the registration and monitoring of underrepresented groups, transparent information on regulations and funding, and international agreements on the transfer of support services.

Recommendations for institutions focus mainly on qualitative measures to support incoming

international mobility students with disabilities.

Valérie Van Hees, coordinator of SIHO, formulated the Flemish recommendations to make mobility programmes more inclusive during the panel discussion. These recommendations were linked to the experiences in the testimonials.

Promoting outward mobility

Although ‘internationalisation at home’ and ‘virtual mobility’ can be useful concepts to reach an increased interest in mobility and a greater understanding of the value of internationalisation and intercultural competences, they should never be seen as a means to reduce demands regarding the number and/or accessibility of outgoing mobility programmes for students of underrepresented groups.

Studying or placement abroad improves student engagement, confidence, linguistic-, problem solving- and creative skills, learning outcomes and professional competences. The impact is even magnified for students from underrepresented groups. This is why it is important to promote the benefits of outward mobility through national and European campaigns, while also focusing on taking measures to eliminate current barriers.

“ Jessica’s international experience was valued when applying for a job.

Short mobility options

Students from under-represented groups often have greater difficulty accessing longer-term mobility experiences (e.g. additional caring responsibilities, part-time employment commitments, limited financial means, (mental) health issues) and are more likely to choose short-term mobility options than their peers. As such, short mobility options should be a prominent component in the new Erasmus programme.

This measure should also have a positive impact on the participation of students of underrepresented groups in long-term mobility programmes, as research indicates that many students who undertake short placements later participate in semester and year-long programmes.

“ Carolien had five short previous experiences abroad and those gave her the confidence to apply for a long-term internship.

“ The two project weeks prepared Caroline for her

long-term internship in the US.

Targeted mobility grants

Financial barriers are cited as the most significant obstacle for going abroad for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities and working students. To ensure equal access to mobility programmes, targeted mobility grants towards underrepresented students are necessary. The grants should be based on actual regional living costs. The grants should also take all access costs into account (incl. pre-visits, interpreters etc.). Flexibility in calculation and pre-financing are also of paramount importance for students with disabilities.

“ If Caroline would not have gone to a deaf university in US, the top up would not have been sufficient to cover the access costs as fees for sign interpreters vary across the world.

“ An internship and looking after yourself abroad is quite challenging and often underestimated. This may lead to physical problems, resulting in unexpected medical costs and support

needs. Flexibility for these costs and peer support as provided by the Erasmus Student Network are of paramount importance.

Transfer of grants and support services

Higher education institutions and national authorities experience problems with information and the availability of information on regulations, funding and support services between countries in Europe.

“ For the project weeks, no international sign interpreters were available in the host countries. As such, a Flemish sign interpreter joined Caroline to Denmark. This was not evident for both the sign interpreter and for Caroline. The HEI had also to bear the costs for flights, accommodation and subsistence of the interpreter into account.

As such, there is a need for a public, accessible, interactive and individualized application on inclusive mobility in which all national authorities and institutions of higher education in Europe can easily register their information on funds, regulations, and available support services for different types of disabilities

in a transparent and uniform way. Thereby, we recommend to elaborate MappED! from the Erasmus Student Network. This not only allows to valorise the information already collected from HEIs and National agencies across Europe, but would also facilitate stakeholders in Europe to collaborate more strongly and to assure the transferability of support services for students with disabilities.

Disabilities legislations are spread over different ministries and are not yet fully adapted to the international mobility context. Flanders for example, is working on an adaptation of the legislation of reimbursement access costs for sign interpreters. There should be an overall EU level agreement that allows governments to make mutual agreements on flexible transfer of grants and support services for access needs.

Support services before, during and after the mobility period

Students from under-represented groups may require extra levels of support before, during and after the mobility period. A lack of available and qualitative support before, during and after the mobility period, is currently discouraging many of them to take part in mobility programmes.

Support in the application administration procedures, booking accommodations, specific language courses, mobility training, applying for reasonable adjustments, mental health and medical support services, access to peer support networks, and reintegration support are just some examples of support services that should be realised.

At this moment, for example, deaf students have no qualitative opportunities to learn the sign language of the host country.

“ Carolien had to learn the American sign language using YouTube.

Students with a visual impairments mention the lack of support and time to learn to navigate in the new country.

“ ICC training camps in which mobility, communication and computers skills are trained, are important as they give students more confidence to start in HEI and act as a teaser for participation in student mobility programmes.

Reintegration support may not

be underestimated as students with disabilities may experience at home that other parts of the world are more tailored to their needs.

“ Taxis were arranged for journeys, on the campus doors opened automatically for wheelchair users and there was standard magnification software for visually impaired people. If I did not want to take my exam in the examination room, I could do so without problems in the service center, where everything was already digitized. What is in its infancy in Europe, is already integrated there. In that sense, Jessica testifies, Europe can learn a lot from the US.

Click to read [the testimonials of Flemish students on their ICC summer camp](#).

Check out [the testimonials of Flemish students for the ACA-conference](#).

Flanders is committed to support inclusive mobility, and you? Check out [the recommendations of the Inclusive mobility alliance](#) of the Erasmus Student Network.

