

'Stand by Youth'

Students and Graduates
Guidance for Student Advisory Services

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EURASHE



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Introduction

Students are the most vital stakeholders in Education Systems. Putting learners at the centre of any action, strategy and approach within the Higher Education landscape allows the institutions to adapt, react and transform themselves sustainably for future societal challenges. The Paradigm shift towards the Student-Centred approach was visible in the past two decades, and it greatly impacted the current reality. It is reflected not only in the Student-Centred learning delivery but also considering the involvement of students in the decision-making process, flexibilisation of their learning patch, and adaptation of the support systems to reflect their needs better.

The 31st EURASHE Annual Conference¹ titled 'Next Generation PHE: Skills relevance, Inclusion, Digitalisation and Innovation' took place in Brussels on 23 and 24 May 2022 at the EPHEC campus.

This conference tackled the challenges and addressed potential directions for the post-pandemic and how Professional Higher Education (PHE) can contribute as a motor for building back better and together. Among transversal topics related to skills, research and innovation, the event highlighted the occurrence of the European Year of Youth and invited ten students from different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and countries around Europe gave them the space through a dedicated session to discuss their experiences with the pandemic during their studies, and their visions on the way forward on the post-pandemic. It was also the occasion to announce the EURASHE's support of the 'Stand by Youth' initiative of the OECD. The initiative launched on 8 July 2021 aims to support and encourage businesses to help

¹ #EURASHE31

youth through the crisis and beyond by raising awareness, sharing good practices, and hosting events to build a broader coalition of like-minded companies. Under the initiative, companies are invited to participate in a Call to Action, asking them to do more to boost mentoring and training for young people.

EURASHE and its members are recognising the significant role young people in general, and in particular students and graduates, can play in the recovery from the pandemic's adverse effects on the societies and economies of today. Therefore, the involvement of the students in the programme committee, various sessions and panel discussions during the #EURASHE31 was considerable and served as an excellent basis to feed this report. The present information aims to inspire the Student Advisory Services, policymakers, institutional leaders and staff with recommendations, but also considering the already-written guidelines and overviews – to give the reader a set of resources for inspiration.

Main findings from the event

As previously stated, EURASHE deems students and graduates are the engines of the Next Generation of PHE. Hence, the #EURASHE31 held a session dedicated to students that were co-facilitated by Marta Rodrigues, Policy and Project Officer at EURASHE and Roosa Veijola, Policy Advisor at the National Union of University of Applied Sciences Students in Finland SAMOK. The session allowed students to express their experiences, expectations and recommendations on the pandemic and the post-pandemic. The session 'Stand by Youth: Students and Graduates' was designed around the conference's main topics and the preferences expressed on two consultation surveys by the students selected to participate in the discussion.

During the Pandemic, we could have witnessed various approaches taken by individual HEIs in the Education Sector, usually adjusted to a specific regional and national context, type of institution, study areas, and diverse student needs, among other aspects related to the student's life. Nevertheless, we were focused on collecting a further understanding of this reality and grasping student perception and the feeling of what has been missed due to the pandemic. The on-site discussions showed that various student groups had been impacted differently during that time. The first noticeable difference was between the experience of students starting their journey in Higher Education during the pandemic and those who had a chance to meet with their peers beforehand. It was easier to move to the online settings with previous know-how on how the institution operates and to know their peers in real life before moving to remote learning. Secondly, the experience varied in dependence on the profile of the studies. Voices of students enrolled in practically oriented study programmes indicated a higher level of dissatisfaction compared to the programmes, which were more easily carryable through the online tools due to their lecture-based nature.

The on-site group participating in the workshop indicated the areas of 'missed opportunities that the reality of the pandemic has brought to the day-to-day student experience. The indications were related to study experience and social interaction with peers. On social life,

missing in-person contact, establishing new relationships, engaging in community activities and simply living the students' life was mostly referred to. The expectations towards their learning and professional opportunities were mentioned were also diminished. The Practical experiences and opportunity to develop managerial and professional skills and build up the network for future careers were addressed as the missing aspect.

What opportunities do you feel you have missed with the pandemic times?



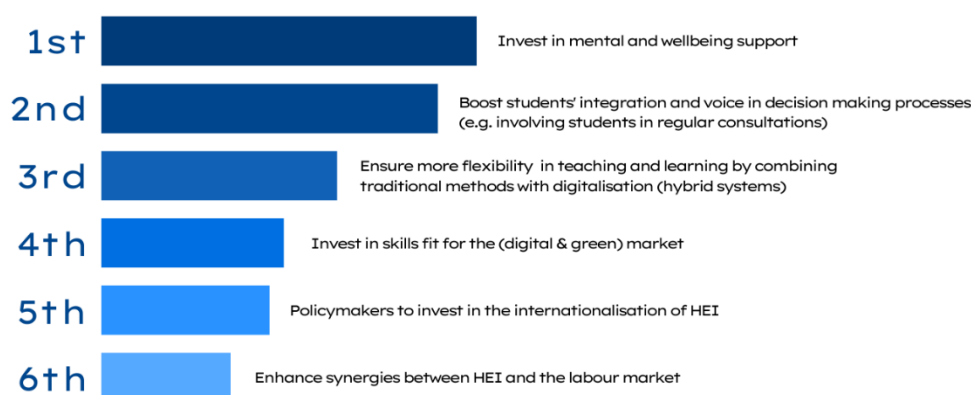
A word cloud of missed opportunities during the pandemic. The words are arranged in a roughly circular pattern. The most prominent words are 'practical experience', 'networking', 'management', 'interaction', 'social', 'joy', 'connection', 'parties', 'trips', 'shared responsibility of', and 'social interaction'. The colors range from light blue to teal.

These missed opportunities directly impacted the overall students' academic life and studies. Unfulfillment of the expectations was accompanied by personal dimension in and feel. However, a unified approach towards students' support needs was hard to define and achieve due to the high diversity of needs and various circumstances in which each individual learned found in.

As a summary of the session, participants had a chance to rate the crucial recommendations for the future, considering student support mechanisms, learning and teaching and other issues according to their importance. The ranked answers show which needs are the most

pressing by the students. To better align yourself as a reader of this summary, it is necessary to recall that the Annual Conference took place in May 2022, after nearly two years of these unusual circumstances.

Which of these recommendations do you consider the most to put further for supporting students in HE in the post-pandemic times?



- Top priority students have pointed out was related to mental health and well-being support. Due to the challenging higher education environment, students are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems during their studies, which was even more highlighted during the pandemic. Students have pointed out, especially, the need for ensuring the presence and support of study psychologists as a standard in Higher Education Institutions and added that mental health support schemes should be a standard item of the HEI strategies.
- Secondly, the need to support students' integration and voice in decision-making processes (e.g., involving students in regular consultations). In many European countries, the formal involvement of students in the decision-making bodies and the

non-formal student engagement in the organisation and the community is a baseline for the democratic functioning of the academic community. However, the break in the day-to-day functioning of the institutions requires a forward-looking mechanism to ensure the continuation and preserve the engagement of future student engagement.

- Right after, the flexibility in teaching and learning by combining traditional methods with digitalisation was addressed. The hybrid learning mode gained momentum during the first months of the pandemic. After this emergency period, it is foreseen that the methods and practices of remote and asynchronous learning, assessment and engagement will become a standard addition to the Learning and teaching strategies. Many participants stated that when the pandemic started, the transition to online learning was fast in many countries. After the emergency pandemic period, many students have felt that flexibility is missing. Students ask for flexible hybrid models to be in place.
- Shaping future learning programmes by Investing in skills that fit the (digital & green) market. During times of uncertainty, financial crisis and recession. It is crucial to support learners in shaping their education paths and skillsets following their desire, as well as the practical application of those skills to achieve the overarching goal of the sustainable green and digital transition, the processes that are of crucial interest for the current and upcoming generations
- As an overarching theme, it has been mentioned that the future increase in the quality and accessibility of student support systems has to come along with sustainable and sufficient funding growth. Policymakers need to steer the investment streams into furthering the internationalisation of HEI and the student needs, which have highlighted themselves during the pandemic.

- Lastly, according to the student's point of view, enhancing the synergies between HEI and the labour market was positioned at the end of the crucial priorities. However, from the discussion, it can be stated that the support systems for finding first-career opportunities, career guidance, and linking the options in the world of work with the students who are seeking the job are contributing significantly to the overall support given to the students by the institutions they are studying in.

Other studies on Higher education and students' life through the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic situation brought back some of the discussions over the topics which were touched upon already beforehand. The support systems for digital learning, students and staff mental health or financial aid mechanisms to ensure equal study opportunities are just a few to be mentioned. For a more thorough overview of the situation, we encourage you to refer to the insightful studies and publications on this topic.

One of the first and most thorough studies was carried out in 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic and led by a team of researchers from the University of Zadar cooperating with the Institute for Development of Education and the European Students' Union (ESU) with the support of the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia. The study aimed to grasp the learners' perception of the situation as a comparison of their personal, economic and learning crises before and after the outbreak. Below you can find just a few examples from the before-mentioned study.

SHIFT FROM OFFLINE TO ONLINE LEARNING

During the early stage of the pandemic, most of the students had the experience of their seminars being held online with the lecturer lecturing in real-time (45,09%), followed by written communication with the lecturer (26,76%). 19,22% reported that their seminars had not been replaced with any online format. What was an unexpected figure, the Workload in the online environment was 50% higher than in prior times.

DIGITAL SKILLS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Other figures showed that only 41% of learners stated that they always had a good internet connection, 37% mentioned the availability of a quiet place to study, and only 31,9% said they

Had suitable learning materials. The institutional transition to emergency digital learning provision was also related to previous advancements in the area. Similarly, when it comes to individuals possessing different levels of digital skills. This applies to both learners and teachers.

JOB LOSS AND MARKET SITUATION

The aspect which requires further research is the changing Economic situation of students and institutions. The crisis has led to a high figure of student job loss, primarily those based on temporary conditions. Permanent job loss was stated by 12,2% of respondents, and temporary job loss counted for 28,9%. When we look at this in correlation with tuition fees - in many cases, those have remained unchanged (75%), 13,8% stated that they introduced flexible payment plans)

THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LEARNERS

During the isolation combined with the often witnessed increase of students' workload in digital format, learners often faced issues such as a sense of isolation, loneliness and lack of motivation. Based on the BFUG survey, Nearly 13% of students reported mental health problems. Most respondents pointed out that close family members or friends were the main support network. 7% of students said they were being left out without support. It is necessary to carry out a lesson for the future, develop an awareness of mental health problems students may face, and develop support systems across the sector.

Transversal topics considering students' involvement and its impact on the Quality of Student Services and valuable resources

The session's outcomes indicate the pressing issues that have appeared or strengthened its relevance even more during the pandemic. To dive more deeply into different aspects of student involvement and students' support systems, we encourage the readers of this guide to look through the suggested references, guides and studies the various stakeholders have conducted. In addition to the results of the session organised within the EURASHE's Annual Conference, we wish to share with the potential readers of this guideline the other resources which have contributed significantly to mapping the situation and put more light on the case of the pandemic. Among those reading, this guide are Higher Education Policymakers, the management and staff of Higher Education Institutions, and Student organisations. We encourage you to look into the ['Student life during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown – Europe-wide insights'](#) publication for a thorough overview of the sector's situation.

STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

To ensure constant improvement and adequate services for the student needs, it is necessary to ensure that one of the fundamental values, as defined in the Communiqués of the European Higher Education Area, namely participation of students and staff in higher education governance, is a reality. The student participation in the decision-making processes and STUPS

STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

An existing model allows Higher Education institutions to monitor and improve their operation and is embedded into the modern European Higher Education Area as a standard. We are referring to the Quality Assurance systems, which formally allow all education stakeholders to

participate in the enhancement and improvement-oriented processes. Students' involvement in all institutional Quality Assurance processes, decision-making bodies and committees is crucial to reflect on the matters of their interest. Students must be allowed to provide invaluable feedback on the learning process that serves as a basis for Quality Assurance and should have the opportunity to raise their concerns and propose changes for the programme development, learning and teaching, and student support services. For more thorough guidelines for Stakeholders' involvement in Quality Assurance, we encourage you to visit the [Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities](#) project webpage and refer to the study and guidelines conducted.

THE STRIVE FOR INCLUSION

Another helpful resource has been developed within the InclusiPHE project, which aimed to connect the social dimension of HE with another fundamental pillar of the EHEA – student engagement – and has as the main objective to contribute to creating a more inclusive environment at PHEIs, by creating sets of interventions aimed at increasing PHE student-specific target groups engagement in the life of their academic institution.

Students' needs must be considered when designing the strategies for their engagement in the HEIs. They must feel welcomed and understand that their voices are being heard at the institutional level. To that end, it is relevant to understand the challenges and barriers students face and the existing models and patterns within student engagement at PHE institutions. The identification of good practices and innovative strategies for a more inclusive student engagement of PHE-specific target groups, as well as the development of a student-led system for creating more inclusive PHEIs and student organisations, are being done under the InclusiPHE project and will bring both an overview of what has been done at EU level for student engagement and some approaches to enhance it.

Next year, the project will generate a Capacity building toolkit and training for inclusive student engagement that aims at providing the tools and equipping HE staff to promote a safe and inclusive student environment.

To know more about the student's needs in the context of their HE institutions, check the [Mapping Report on Needs assessment for student engagement of non-traditional students in PHE!](#)

Recommendations for the Support services

Based on the session's outcomes during the #EURASHE31 conference and the overview of the other papers, the following recommendations can be proposed for higher education institutions and their management and support services.

- To map out the existing current support systems structure and re-verify it against the needs of the student's community
- Consult the student representatives within the institution on the needs and functioning of the support system policy at the institution
- Ensure that the internal procedures on Quality assurance include the students' opinion on the student services enhancement
- Secure the stable investment for the student support systems, especially in the circumstances of potential economic recession
- Establish and prioritise the mental health support systems within the institutions
- Look through the existing student support schemes and revise them against the actual living costs taking into consideration the current economic situation
- Provide assistance for students regarding the flexibilisation and tailoring their curricula
- Offer students flexible ways to study (hybrid model) in light of their situation.

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