

The role of student counselling for widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education

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Abstract

Making higher education more inclusive is one of the main targets of the Bologna Process. During the last years, national governments set up strategies to widen the access; higher education institutions and stakeholders developed measures to ensure inclusion of learners from diverse backgrounds.

Higher education institutions and stakeholders, such as students' unions, play a crucial role in the development and implementation of strategies. One of the main measures to enable better access to higher education is student counselling. Counselling activities are undertaken by diverse actors with several purposes. It can be provided by universities, stakeholders (as professional associations), psychologists or students' unions. Counselling activities can be provided to a general audience or to specific target groups, which can be an advantage for those who benefit from specific counselling (e.g. for disabled students), but can also be a barrier for those who do not want to out themselves as "disadvantaged".

The paper provides an overview of counselling activities in nine European countries (AT, DE, ES, IT, LI, UK, RO, DK, SLO) from a student's perspective. It will focus on counselling activities provided by students' unions, their cooperation with other counselling providers (e.g. university counselling, financial support, psychologists) and their approach to supporting disadvantaged learners. This includes the use of modern technology (online counselling, Facebook, Skype) to reach out to a wider audience, mentoring and tutoring activities as well as counselling activities for specific groups (e.g. first generation students). The paper will conclude with an analysis of provided measures, their role in widening access to higher education as well as identified gaps.

Keywords: Social Dimension, Students' union, ESU, Counselling, Guidance, Peer Counselling

1. Social dimension as a crucial element of the Bologna Process

Higher education was only available for a small proportion of the population for a long time. While in the 1960s higher education participation was around 10% in most European countries, today raising the proportion of graduates between 30 and 34 years to at least 40% is an European target (European Commission, 2014) and the importance of higher education for economic revival and social cohesion is underlined in many European documents. Recently we can observe higher education following different, even contrary approaches. We notice an increasing commodification of higher education with a focus on competition of European graduates in worldwide economy rather than its social benefits. At the same time, higher education is more and more acknowledged as a vehicle for fostering social mobility and cohesion, also because of high rates of youth unemployment and widening levels of inequality (Riddel & Weedon, 2014).

The social dimension of higher education became an important topic in European higher education policies since the beginning of the 21st century: it was mentioned in different Communiqués following the European Ministerial Conferences and it is often seen as one part of the so called third mission of universities, considering higher education having a role in society aside teaching and research.

Social dimension was mentioned in the Prague Communiqué in 2001 for the first time, in 2007 the London Communiqué reaffirms “the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (London Communiqué, 2007). Later on, one of the goals, the participants of the Ministerial Conference in 2015 in Yerevan agreed on was making the higher education system more inclusive and therefore widening participation in higher education: “We will enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.” (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). This aim shows already the most common interpretation of social dimension, which is that “a state of participative equity should be attained in European higher education” (Eurostudent, 2015). Following the idea of widening access and developing a more inclusive higher education system, underrepresented groups have been in the focus of policies since.

The importance of the issue of social dimension in higher education was raised by the European Students Union for a long time (Vukasovic, 2017). During the economic crisis followed by growing numbers of unemployed youth, other stakeholder organisations, such as the EUA (European University Association) and EI (Education International) promoted stronger advocacy for underrepresented groups in higher education and a more inclusive higher education system. Whereas there is a common sense within all the mentioned Communiqués about social dimension, the stakeholder organisations’ approaches were very different at the beginning. While EUA focused mainly on the equity in mobility programmes at least until 2003, ESU underlined the need to reduce financial obstacles already in its Goteborg Declaration in 2001 (Vukasovic, 2017).

Although the social dimension higher education is discussed now for more than 15 years, student population is still not very diverse in most European countries and disadvantaged groups, as disabled, from lower socio-economic backgrounds or those with care obligations are still underrepresented in higher education (EACEA, 2015). According to the European Students Union report “Bologna with student eyes”, social dimension has only a “more or less high priority” in 8 out of 36 countries. And even in countries with a high priority, no major progress has been made so far. The implementation of national access plans is one of the strategies recently developed in many countries, to be able to identify target groups, develop measures at national and institutional level as well as to monitor the implementation process and its impact (ESU, 2015). The measures developed in many countries differ, but can be summarised following two different approaches. First, there are measures developed,

aiming for widening participation in higher education by general approaches with benefits for the whole student population, while other measures are put in place to widen participation by implementation of specific measures for underrepresented target groups. Nevertheless the Bologna implementation report of 2015 states, that the line between those two groups is not that easy to draw (EHEA 2015).

In this paper we focus on student counselling provided by students' unions as one of the most common measures provided by student unions to empower prospective students and underrepresented groups: Which counselling offers do students' unions have? Which channels do they use, which challenges do they face? And how are they involved in the development of national strategies for social dimension? And after that: Which role do students' unions have in widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education through their counselling activities? This paper provides an insight rather than a broad overview - because the challenges, opportunities, goals and disadvantages students' unions and counsellors meet in the various national contexts diverge strongly.

1.1. Underrepresented groups in European higher education

One of the main challenges within the implementation of measures related to the inclusion of socially and culturally disadvantaged groups of higher education is, that the understanding of underrepresented groups differs by country. Based on the definition used in the Eurostudent survey, we define them as a group which is not represented within the student population as it is in the general population (Gwosć et. al., 2015). Moreover, countries vary to a great extent whether they monitor participation of diverse student groups and the need for additional support. Most countries monitor participation and progress of students based on gender or disability, although disability is not defined the same way in many countries (e.g. if psychological diseases are included or not). In some countries migrants and/or children from migrants are considered as important categories in other countries students with families are targeted (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). From a student's perspective, the main groups underrepresented in higher education include students from low socio-economic background, students with physical disabilities and students with psychosocial disabilities/mental health issues. Other groups mentioned in many European countries include the representation of LGBTQ* students, students with children/dependents, students from immigrant background, students from different ethnic groups, specific gender of students, students with chronic health issues and mature students (ESU, 2015). Eurostudent provides an overview about the educational background of students in the different eurostudent countries. It shows in detail for example, that "underrepresentation of students without higher education background is apparent in almost all EUROSTUDENT countries" (Eurostudent, 2015).

Recently, the inclusion of migrants and refugees in higher education was discussed as an important issue in many European countries because of increasing worldwide mobility bringing more and more international students to European universities. Related to the social dimension, they have to overcome additional barriers and are affected by mechanisms other students don't have to face. "International students face the same life events and stressors as other students, but also additional pressures without the support system from friends and family home. The transition from one academic system to another can be confusing. Adjusting to a foreign culture can bring about a sense of loss in regard to native language, security and the self. Culture shock, loneliness, problems of language proficiency, financial dependency and expectations from the supporting families can increase the likelihood of developing mental health issues." (Rücker, 2015).

The underrepresentation of specific groups does not only tackle higher education participation in general, but also specific elements as the internationalisation of higher education. For example, many disadvantaged student groups are underrepresented in mobility programmes as in the Erasmus+. To achieve higher participation from a more diverse student population in mobility, the Mobility and

Internationalisation Working Group of the Bologna Follow-Up Group recommended in its report to develop a common understanding of underrepresented groups and that each country should analyse the reasons for underrepresentation in depth within the national context (EHEA, 2015). However, groups underrepresented in mobility programmes do not necessarily match the underrepresented groups national higher education systems (Grabher et.al., 2014).

2. Measures to include underrepresented groups in European higher education

Measures to widen participation in higher education have been taken in many European countries, including a number of mainstream-measures aiming for increase of participation as a whole, expecting to increase the participation of underrepresented groups as well as measures targeting specific groups directly. A more mainstream approach is followed in countries aiming for most accessible higher education for the widest range of learners, as for example education free of charge, grant and loan systems and high number of university places. Counselling is considered as one of the measures to wide participation in higher education, together with provision of student facilities (e.g. housing, medical support, childcare). At the same time, many countries implement measures targeting under-represented groups specifically, as for example students with disabilities, students from ethnic minorities or from socially and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds (EACEA, 2015).

Students' disadvantaged background is one of the main reasons for young people not to attend higher education. One reason for that can be explained by social capital theory (Bordieu, 1983), based on the idea that contacts or connections within and between social networks have impact on individuals. For example, families in which students are the first to apply for higher education often can provide less educational resources and support than academic families: they cannot help when deciding for a study programme, nor in case of difficulties with a professor or the question where to apply for grants. Counselors can play an important role for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they can somehow compensate the lack of support other student might have from their family and friends (Pham & Keenan, 2011).

Other measures identified recently to enable students with low socio-economic background to participate in higher education is the introduction of alternative access routes, also mentioned in the 2012s Bucharest Communiqué. In many countries the regular entry routes are defined by formalized qualifications such as a higher education entrance degrees or have access regulations as exams or scoring based on school grades. While these regulations are considered a barrier for disadvantaged groups, many countries aim for providing alternative entrance routes, aiming for compensation of the imbalance between over- and under-represented groups. Also recognition of prior learning is considered as an important tool to widen participation in higher education.

Drop-outs from higher education have a number of reasons, which might include psychological reasons, wrong choices of study programme, lack of financial resources. However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop-out. For example in case of socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, students risk to drop out might be higher because of a lack of support from their families.

Counselling is one of the measures to reduce drop-out in many countries. Other measures include additional financing or social support groups as well as student-centered teaching and learning approaches (ESU, 2015). Reducing dropout and increasing completion rates in higher education is mentioned in one of the key strategies within the EHEA. Guidance of students, also when deciding for their study programme is considered an effective tool to reduce dropouts. Students' expectations, commitment to the content of the programme as well as awareness on the realities of the programme often differ from reality and lead to little satisfaction and often drop-outs. Having the right image and realistic expectations is crucial to the probability of completing higher education successfully (Warps,

2012). Counselling and guidance activities as career choice activities, visiting of future study programmes or matching activities support these choices (Mittendorf et.al., 2017). Thus, better informed students have more realistic expectations for their studies and are more satisfied with their choice, because their expectations correspond to their experiences (Blüthmann, 2012). This is why counselling is such important in the decision making process - not only for underrepresented groups, but for them even more. Higher satisfaction means a higher chance to conclude the studies and therefore a lower rate of dropping out (Blüthmann, 2012).

2.1. Student counselling as a key measure to widen access to higher education

Counselling and guidance activities for students and prospective are provided by diverse actors in Europe. There are many areas of counselling identified, such as educational guidance, career guidance, disability/equal opportunity guidance. While educational and career guidance is widely accepted and used by many students, services as psychological counselling differs by country and also age of students. In countries, where students enter university at a younger age (eg. USA, UK, Ireland), psychological counselling is considered as a responsibility to take for young people. In countries, where students traditionally enter university at older age, they are regarded as adults and expected to take care of themselves, (Rücker, 2015) thus psychological counselling is often not provided for all students although there is a high number of students with psychological diseases.

The way counselling is organised, the level of competence and qualifications of counsellor differ greatly from sector to sector, from institution to institution and from country to country (Rücker, 2015). While in some countries, it is an obligation for universities to provide counselling, in other countries many private associations or NGO provide counselling to students, especially in countries with high demands to access higher education. In other cases organisations aiming for support of specific student groups and/or disadvantaged or underrepresented groups provide specific counselling. This often does not include only provision of information, but also support in difficult situations (e.g. where students are affected by harassment) as well as provision of a peer-network. These activities are for example provided for females in STEM programmes, students of older age, LGBTI students or students with children.

In many countries counselling and guidance is provided by students' unions. However, the approaches of students' unions differ as well as the way of provision. In most cases counselling activities by students' unions are based on the concept of peer counselling. Students providing guidance for other students or prospective students has many advantages, which includes that counselling is provided at eye level. All involved live in a similar environment, often even the same study programme. They experience similar difficulties and challenges and counselling often includes an exchange of good practices on how to overcome these. At the same time, peer counselling comes with difficulties: many of the counsellors are volunteers and provide their services in their free time. Thus, the quality of counselling is diverse and based on the individual's engagement in learning e.g. about legal backgrounds and other counselling opportunities. In many cases, the students' union provides trainings and/or documents and information materials to overcome this issue. Another challenge is the lack of professional counsellors and/or supervisors. Not all questions can be answered within peer counselling alone. A network of professionals who can support students is important, but often not possible because counselling activities often lack funding. In some cases students unions are able to provide funding for legal or psychologist professionals who can support student counsellors or students if required.

Another challenge for students' unions is, that they do not only aim for solving one students issue, but for a political solution of problems for many students. Thus, provision of counselling is often an area of conflict with making political use out of the problems identified during counselling activities (Wilhelm, 2013).

The diverse types of counseling provided by the students unions makes it difficult to compare them in terms of effectiveness also because little data is available. But results from Germany and Austria tend to show that counseling activities from student unions are helpful to the students. In a representative study in Germany 74 percent of the students who took advantage of student union counseling activities perceived it as useful (Ortenburger, 2013). In the nationwide Social Survey 2015 in Austria two out of the top three rated counseling activities are provided by the Austrian Students' Union. Besides counseling activities mentoring and tutoring by peers is also a common activity by students union. As there is no data on the specific mentoring programs, they are seen as successful measure to prevent drop outs as Cullen wrote “[...] a number of studies suggest that institutions that adopt peer and mentoring support programmes have lower rates of drop out.” (Cullen 2013)

3. What kind of counselling is provided by students’ unions in Europe?

To learn about different approaches on student counselling provision in Europe, nine countries were selected for in depth analysis to identify current practices in student counselling by students’ unions based on geographical diversity. The data was gathered by an online survey sent to the national students’ unions of the respective countries (see appendix), desk research and follow-up telephone interviews with student representatives in the nine countries analysed.

Students’ unions follow diverse approaches regarding counselling activities. While some unions consider the provision of counselling as one of their major tasks, others are not involved in counselling activities at all. The approach followed by the students’ unions is influenced by the traditional self-understanding of the students’ union. Some unions consider themselves more as a political actor in the academic and/or the public sphere, others consider the provision of services to students as their core activity. Counselling activities are also a question of resources. Many students’ unions do not have financial resources to provide counselling to students by for example hiring professionals. Other students’ unions dedicate their staff resources to other issues, as they are considered more urgent. For example, in the UK, counselling is more provided by universities, while the students’ union's focus more on academic representation and raising awareness on issues as student welfare and the support for student groups that experience discrimination as women, black students, disabled student and LGBT+ students. Another reason for students’ unions not to engage in student counselling is also the political environment. For example, with the ongoing crisis in Spain, the students’ unions’ focus is on the struggle against raising tuition fees and financial cuts to scholarships, although counselling activities are considered important in the future.

But also unions who provide counselling activities struggle with the resources available. For example in Italy, counselling is mainly provided by student volunteers while there is a lack of resources for the organisation of counselling, as paid staff or counselling offices. In Germany and Austria, the expansion of psychological student counselling was identified as not satisfactory at the moment. In total 3 of the students’ unions in the nine countries analysed do not provide student counselling due to reasons described. Six unions provide counselling activities.

Table 1: Students Union Involvement in Student Counselling

Involved in student counselling	Not involved in student counselling
Lithuanian National Union of Students (Lithuania)	CREUP (Spain)
fzs (Germany)	National Union of Students in the United Kingdom (UK)

UDU - Unione degli Universitari (Italy)	DSF (Denmark)
Austrian Students' Union (Austria)	
SSU (Slovenia)	
ANOSR (Romania)	

Source: Online survey; n=9

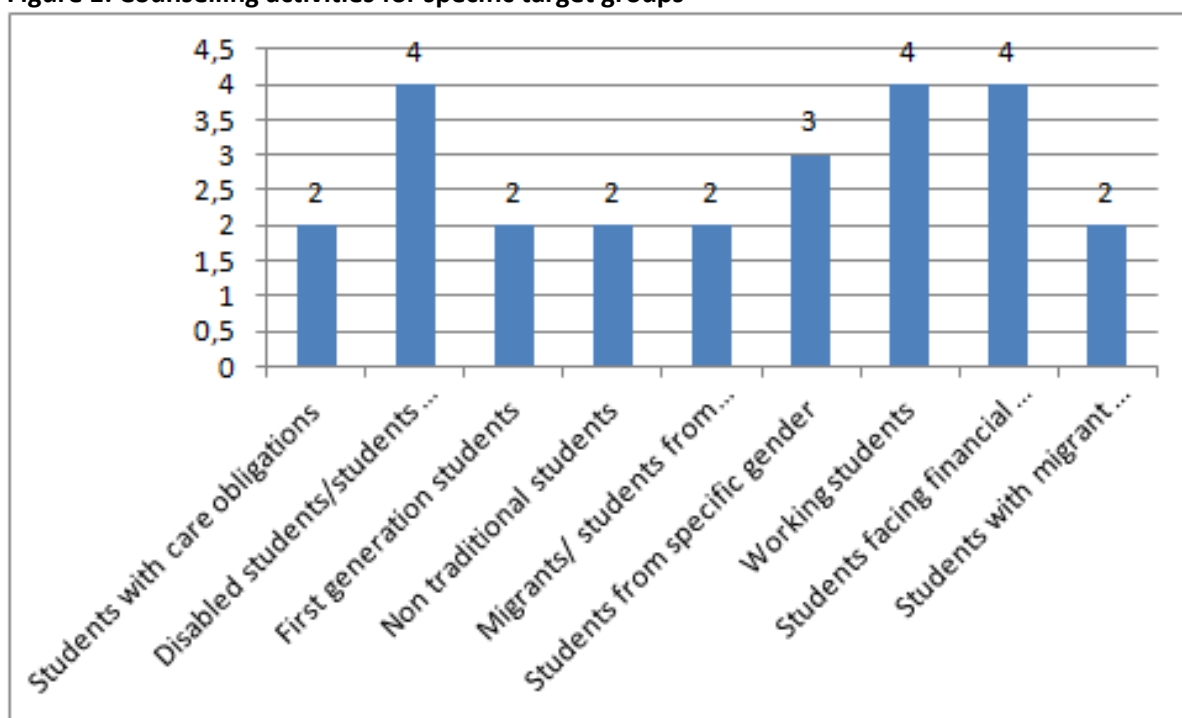
Counselling activities provided by the students' unions vary. The Lithuanian students' union provides general counselling for individual students, which might reach from student loans and scholarships to the quality of student housing. The German students' union is only counselling few individual cases at national level, which are specifically brought to their attention, while the main counselling activities are provided by the unions at institutional level. The fzs (Germany) provides specific counselling to students who have problems to find a study place matching their preferences because of restricted access. A specific website was developed to enable the exchange of study places among students.

In Italy, Slovenia and Austria counselling provided by the students' unions is diverse and covers a number of activities. This includes counselling of prospective students on entering the university and deciding for a study programme. The Austrian students' union provides counselling for prospective students also in schools and organises a peer-counselling programme, where prospective students join a student to visit a lectures and can ask questions afterwards. The Italian students' union organise guided tours by their local unions, who explain the university to new students with a focus on local specifics, services offered by universities and unions as well as student rights. Also the Slovenian students' union (SSU) attends higher education fairs, it offers information on a website and via email. The Italian and the Austrian union both offer regular counselling at national and local level on diverse issues. The Austrian union also provides online counselling by a chat programme as well as counselling for specific topics as accessibility and barrier-free education, social affairs, foreign students and higher education regulations. In Romania the students' union (ANOSR) was actively involved in the development of the methodology provided by Counseling and Career Orientation Centers, which was adopted in October 2014 by Order of the Ministry of Education. These measures were, nonetheless, not put practice – according to the union, due to inadequate funding.

Students unions do not only provide general counselling, but also counselling for specific target groups, underrepresented in higher education. The target groups approached differ by country. While most target disabled students and students with mental diseases, working students and students facing financial difficulties, care obligations and gender issues are not tackled by all unions specifically. Target groups as first generation students, non-traditional students, migrants and students from developing countries, or students with migrant background are provided with specific counselling in half of the unions analysed.

Three students' unions (Lithuania, Denmark and Austria) also reported to provide mentoring and tutoring to (prospective) students. This is organised and implemented by local students' unions who organise the mentoring programmes and match the mentors with prospective and/or first year students.

Figure 1: Counselling activities for specific target groups



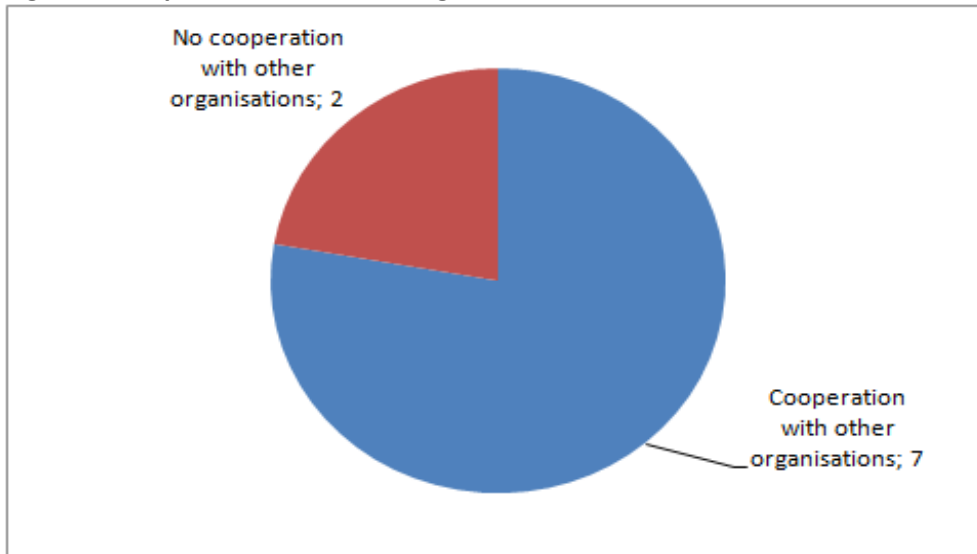
Source: Online survey; n=9

Many students' union cooperate with other organisations to provide counselling to students, especially when it comes to specific issues as housing, law or working students.

The Lithuanian students' union often cooperates with youth organisations. The German students' union works with tenants' unions in housing issues, cooperates with higher education groups of the federal trade union (DGB) or local lawyers associations. The UK students' union works with the Child Poverty Action group to produce a yearly advice book on student finance and cooperates with other organisations providing advice and guidance to students, in order to exchange good practices and the impact of legislation on students. The Italian students' union collaborates with the high school students union (Rete degli Studenti Medi) to provide counselling to high school students during their last year. They also work with the trade union (CGIL) to support working students as well as they cooperate closely with LGBT organisations (e.g. Arcigay).

The Austrian students union cooperates with the Ministry of Science, which is funding counselling activities for prospective students. Other cooperation takes place by exchange of experiences and best practices with the federal Psychological Counselling Service, the department for study grants and higher education institutions. Two unions (SSU in Slovenia and ANOSR in Romania) cooperate with representative bodies: SSU reported cooperation depending on the target groups, whereas ANOSR cooperates and meets regularly with the Youth Council of Romania and the National Council of Students. ANOSR and ÖH (Austria) have cooperations with the responsible ministry and other institutions, which offer student counseling.

Figure 2: Cooperation with other organisations

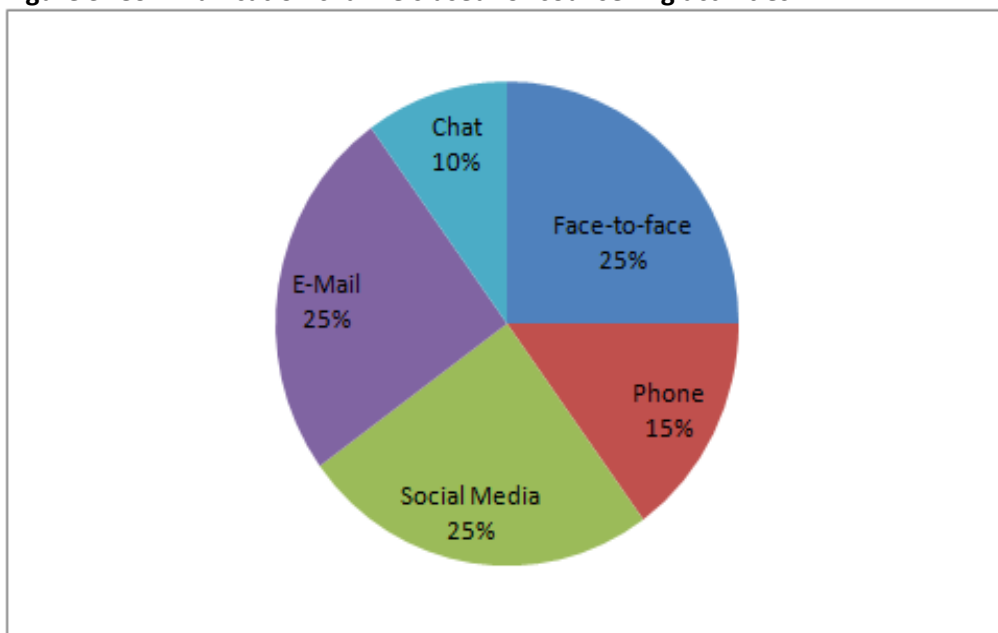


Source: Online survey; n=9

Students' unions describe, that most counselling activities take place regularly face-to-face, via phone and by e-mail. Face-to face counselling is considered the most useful way, as students often feel more comfortable by meeting a peer-counsellor and problems can be discussed in more detail. E-Mail and social media conversation is also often used to arrange a face-to face meeting or to direct students to the best counsellor in case of specific questions.

The use of social media in student counselling was mentioned by all unions. Social media is considered an additional way of counselling, for example using the Facebook chat. One Union reports the growing use of virtual communication (so email or social media). Also other chat programs are listed such as Whatsapp or Telegram. They are considered helpful to provide quick, informal counselling for some questions or to schedule face-to face meetings.

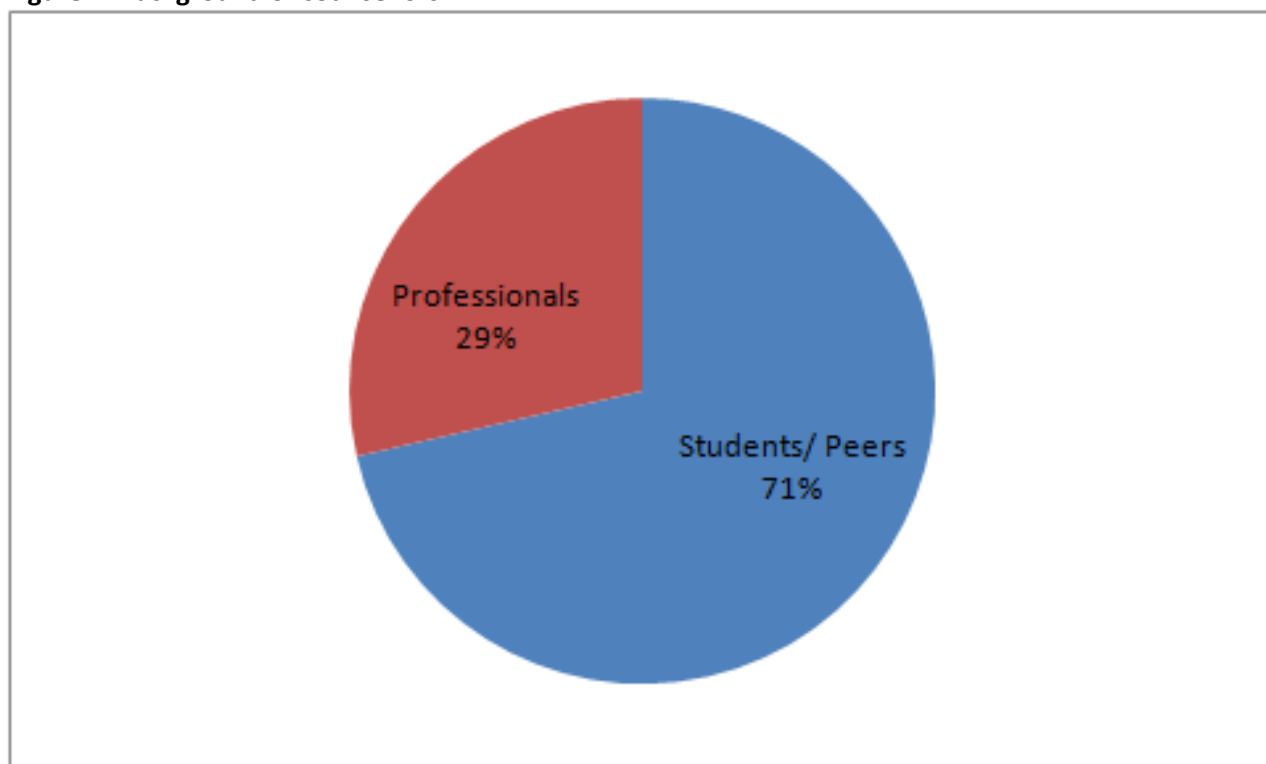
Figure 3: Communication channels used for counselling activities



Source: Online survey; n=9

Individuals providing counselling to students have diverse backgrounds, however in most cases, counselling is provided by student peers. This is considered helpful by many students' unions, as peer counselling lowers the barrier to ask "silly" questions and counsellors know the living and studying situation from their own experience. However, some students' unions also employ professional counsellors. When it comes to legal issues, professional with a background in law, often specialised in higher education law, are employed. In some cases professional counsellors, as educational counsellors with a background in social sciences or psychologists are employed, for example to support prospective students in the selection process of study programme or to support students in psychological crisis.

Figure 4: Background of counsellors



Source: Online survey; n=9

Counselling is provided mostly on regular basis. There are daily or specified opening hours (e.g. 2-3 times a week). In two cases it was specified, that counselling is available on non-regularly basis, upon demand of students.

4. Students' involvement in the development of national strategies for the social dimension

The social dimension of higher education is considered of different importance in the European countries. Within the survey "Bologna with student eyes", students' unions considered the social dimension as a high priority only in eight countries (out of 36 Bologna countries) and many reported, that they feel as students where the only stakeholder with interest to take action in the field of social dimension.

Since the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), countries are encouraged to develop national access plans to wide participation in higher education. In 2015, access plans were successfully implemented in 2 countries, 6 were struggling with proper implementation of action plans, ten countries were debating

implementation of an action plan and 13 countries did not debate it up to then (ESU, 2015). However, it seems as several countries started to work on the implementation of a strategy to wide participation in higher education since then.

Nearly all students' unions interviewed for this analysis with one exception are involved in the development of a national strategy for the social dimension in their country. The development of national strategies for widening access in higher education differs by country. While some countries have strategies already implemented, others are at the beginning of the process towards a strategy.

The involvement of students in the process to develop a strategy for widening access differs by country. However, in most countries, students' unions are critical about the outcomes and not satisfied with the measures described in the strategy.

In Lithuania, no strategy about the social dimension is in place yet, but there are ongoing working groups involving the students' union. The Spanish students' union is participating in the consultation process, but has a critical perspective on the process and is not satisfied with the results yet. In Germany, the students' union is involved in related working groups and the legislative procedures, however due to the German structure of regional responsibility for education, no national strategy is in place. Also in the UK, there are regional differences, however, all four administrations have been focused on policies relating to the student dimension and as a national representative organisation the students' union is consulted on and has an input into proposed legislation on widening access. The students union is involved in commissions and implementation groups of access plans and is very active in identifying barriers to different student groups and raising awareness on the social dimension. Also in Italy the students' union is involved in the process to develop the national strategy on the social dimension as a consultant body. However, the students' union is not satisfied with their involvement in process so far. Also the Austrian students' union is not satisfied with the outcomes of the process to develop a strategy for widening access to higher education. They were involved in the process of development within several workshops, but do not consider their recommendations adequately represented in the final outcome. The Slovenian students' union is fairly satisfied with the outcome of its involvement - the union reports to be part of all task forces and to participate in negotiations reminding the others about the importance of social dimension. In Romania the students' union started to campaign for social dimension issues in 2016, demanding public funding and other goals for higher education development for the election cycle 2016-2020. As a result of ANOSRs' commitment, the student scholarship fund increased by 142% between January and March 2017 and the students benefit from free transport on the railway throughout the year, with all types of trains. ANOSR has requested specific increases for different budget chapters such as basic funding for scholarships, investment funds in higher education, subsidy for transport or canteens, etc. The only students' union which is not actively involved in the development of national strategies regarding social dimension is the Danish one.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of students union involvement in student counselling and guidance activities identifies a number of good practices to reach out for underrepresented groups in higher education. Counselling and guidance are considered of highly importance when it comes to widening access to higher education and support for disadvantaged students.

Students' unions are well aware of the social dimension in higher education and aim to provide services and engage in policy making to achieve a more diverse student population, which includes negotiations with responsible stakeholders and policy makers and, on the other hand, also campaigning and lobbying. However, the approaches to get involved differ by students' union. While some unions consider the provision of counselling and guidance as one of the main pillars to support disadvantaged

students on their way to higher education and successful completion of their study, other unions are more active in policy making and consider counselling mainly as a responsibility of universities and other organisations.

For those students' unions involved in counselling and guidance activities, the peer learning approach has proven specific relevance. The contact at eye level as well as the communication tools used (e.g. social media, chat, e-mail) reduces barriers for (prospective) students. Especially in cases, where counsellors are also role models from underrepresented groups, the peer counselling is effective, as counsellors and students share similar experiences.

However, students' unions also identify challenges when it comes to peer counselling activities. For example many of them lack of necessary resources and funding to provide adequate counselling involving professional supervisors or professional counsellors. Moreover, sometimes they lack from infrastructure and professional training. Another point mentioned by students' unions as well as literature is the lack of data on underrepresented groups in higher education. At the same time some students' unions face restrictions and reforms such as stricter study plans with less individual choices and flexibility, reforms which link grants to a certain study progress and similar issues.

The role of counselling activities for widening access and creating an inclusive higher education system as well as to reduce drop-outs from higher education was mentioned by several documents and authors. Following the Ministerial Communiqués from recent Ministerial Conferences, many countries aim for the implementation of a strategy for the social dimension or national access plans. While students unions are involved in the development of these strategies, many of them are not satisfied with the process and/or its outcomes yet, although it will be a crucial point for the successful further implementation of the Bologna Process aiming for a more diverse student population.

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