

BM75 - Budva

Resolution: Anti-Discrimination Statement

Introduction

The student movement strongly condemns all forms of discrimination and structures enabling discrimination. It can never be accepted and needs to be actively countered.

Over the past decade, a lot of improvements have been made in the area of anti-discrimination policies in higher education. However, students still face a completely different reality than what is perceived on paper in many policies, clauses and values of higher education institutions. This is unacceptable and needs to change.

ESU recognises the importance of diversity in higher education and society in general, because diversity enriches the educational and societal experience. The focus now needs to turn towards truly changing the reality of discrimination and discriminative structures in HEIs.

Definition and overview of forms of discrimination

Discrimination is the unfair treatment of a person or a group of persons based on a personal or shared bias (Cambridge Dictionary, s.d.¹). As prejudice is mostly internal to a person, discrimination is acting according to this belief, actively excluding a person or a group of persons. We must bear in mind that all forms of a discrimination result in inequality (Ryff et al., 2003²). When discriminations are supported by a whole system, it is possible to talk about oppression or systemic oppression. On the other hand, someone who is not discriminated against is privileged. Privilege is the lack of disadvantages linked to a specific discrimination in a given community. A person can be more or less privileged. Discriminations can overlap to create new kinds of discriminations (for instance, being a woman and being black), that is why the topics should be tackled from an intersectional point of view.

Discrimination is present in all layers of society and does not stop when entering the classroom. Whilst some forms of discrimination are direct, most of them are indirect and difficult to detect, especially when they are directly embedded in the very basis of the education system and reproduced on a daily basis, creating systemic oppression of certain groups. Some important forms of discrimination are listed below, however this list is not exhaustive and more forms of discrimination take place within higher education institutions.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/discrimination>

² Carol D. Ryff, Corey L. M. Keyes and Diane L. Hughes. (2003). Journal of Health and Social Behavior. Vol. 44 (3). Special Issue: Race, Ethnicity, and Mental Health, p. 275-291

Students are discriminated against on a daily basis because of their religious beliefs (Louis D. Brandeis Center, s.d.). This is the case when, for instance, disrespectful behaviours and verbal or physical violence is exerted towards students because of their beliefs. However, in most countries and institutions, students are also oppressed because of their religious beliefs in indirect ways. Amongst others, the stringent approach in most institutions towards religious holidays which often leads to them not being respected, and students still being asked to attend university. Apart from this, we are still facing instances where students do not have freedom to practice their religion. Students from religious minorities are therefore facing added barriers, because their faith is not taken into account or respected by the system.

Important examples of discrimination bound to religion are anti-semitism and anti-muslim sentiment. ESU hereby adopts the definition of Anti-Semitism as stated by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), that states that Anti-Semitism is a discriminative perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. These forms of discrimination appear in many different ways and are not always easy to unmask. In recent years, students across the world have had to face a number of anti-Semitic and anti-muslim disruptions on campuses. HEIs leaders must make a public pledge that all students will be equally protected from behaviour that violates their rights to freedom of expression and full participation in campus life, prohibit harassment and discrimination, along with a firm commitment to equitable enforcement for all students, regardless of identity, opinion or legally protected status. Students cannot freely express themselves and learn from their professors or each other if they face ongoing and pervasive intolerance, harassment and discrimination. Only once all students are secure in the knowledge that they will be equally protected from hateful, bigoted behaviour can a university guarantee its students freedom of speech and the right to full participation in campus life.

Racism and xenophobia are still also blatantly present in higher education all across Europe. The experiences of non-white students are not understood and ethnic minorities are still stigmatized³. In many countries, students have to pay different tuition fees according to their nationalities, and more often than not, non-European students are the first to suffer the consequences. Recognition of prior-learning is not a given right for students with refugee and migrant background, and in places where it is, the system is still too bureaucratic to actually function. All this is decreasing their chances and opportunities to access higher education in the first place.

Sexism has consequences on how women experience higher education. Misogynistic attacks, both verbal and physical, generate a feeling of unsafety for women and gender minorities in the school environment. Sexual harassment and sexual violence are happening on a daily basis on campuses, often perpetrated by other students or staff members. A lack of proper procedures to deal with these incidents can be considered as the HEIs being

³ See Aminkeng A. Alemanji, *Antiracism Education In and Out of Schools* and Jason Arday Heidi Safia Mirza, *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*

complicit in these attacks. It is of high importance that HEIs implement effective procedures to make victims feel secure to report aggression aimed at themselves. However, if HEIs do have procedures in place, they need to make sure that victims are treated with respect and trust. Women also face other obstacles to their success, such as being considered less competent by fellow students and staff, which can lead to situations where they don't have the same access to programmes or cannot fully experience higher education.

The same lack of efficient procedures and support system is existent when it comes to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. Besides this, students' extracurricular activities often do not include LGBTQ+ students, not necessarily because they are upfront rejected, but because of the content, the behaviour or the language used within. Gender-diverse students face even more barriers as higher education institutions do not always recognize their gender nor use their chosen name. When procedures exist, they are not created in a respectful way, as trans students often have to justify themselves and are forced to disclose private information. This constitutes yet another barrier within the education system. Furthermore, transgender and gender-diverse students also face discomfort and a higher risk to their safety in a school environment where gendered bathrooms, dressing rooms, showers etc. are without alternatives.

Access to higher education for people with disabilities is severely lacking. Furthermore, when entering HEIs their needs are not met. For example through lack of an interpreter, inaccessible buildings, unadapted teaching methods and learning material, and other crucial needs. Mobility programmes are also designed in a way that makes them very hard to access for students with disabilities through for example non-flexible length, lack of adequate financial support, and difficult access to health care.

Mental health is another aspect of a student's life, that the academic system does not take into consideration. Students also suffer from mental health disorders, but still too few of them receive adequate treatment. Moreover, invisible disabilities are often overlooked and not taken as serious as visible disabilities. Stigma concerning mental health is still causing barriers with the understanding the equal importance as that of physical health. Therefore, students with mental health issues and/or invisible disabilities often do not receive much-needed adjustments and/or aid through support structures, needed to help them to successfully complete their education.

Socio-economic status is still one of the most pervasive factors of discrimination in society, with impact on health, housing, and even life expectancy. While education is a major factor determining a person's future socio-economic prospects, the reverse is also true. An individual from a disadvantaged socio-economic background will have on average 20% worse academic results than an individual from an advantaged background (OECD, 2017⁴).

⁴ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2017). Understanding the socio-economic divide in Europe. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Jury et al. (2017⁵) found that low SES-students in higher education face significant psychological barriers that can lead to a deprivation of the academic career, for instance, higher dropout rate. Socio-economic status is often ignored by HEIs, some courses expect students to invest large sums of money for the learning material, as well as for tuition fees⁶. Furthermore, mobility is strongly impeded for students in more financially precarious situations. The financial situation of students also influences their living conditions (i.e. housing) and can also oblige them to take on a full time or part time job⁷, which is likely to influence their studies in a negative way. Moreover, the support systems vary from country to country, and the amount of money allocated to student financial support is not rising⁸.

Conclusion

It is therefore evident that whilst many higher education institutions are widening their accessibility clauses and highlighting anti-discrimination values as part of their core values, the system itself is still not designed to reflect the diversity within society at large. ESU condemns the fact that many systems and processes are still designed to unfairly advantage students who fall within certain 'norms'. This in itself is a clear sign of discrimination which lies at the basis of our higher education systems.

ESU wants to ensure that all students are on a level playing field- and this requires more than simply introducing anti-discriminatory policies or widening access. The current access and completion criteria are biased since they do not recognize the breadth and diversity of the student population and does not ensure equal access to successful outcomes for all students alike.

At all levels of educations, but in particular, in higher education, there are entrenched practices which are reinforcing inequities, and that is leading to vastly different outcomes for vulnerable students.

It is ESU's responsibility to step up and advocate for more equity within the system. Our systems are currently failing potential students who will give direction to our future and we simply cannot allow this to happen. ESU, therefore, proposes that all institutions start working towards reaching equitable environments, that truly fight all forms of discrimination at their core- only this will give us a fair and equal situation for all in the long term.

⁵ Jury, M; Smeding, A.; Stephens, N. M; Nelson, J. E.; Aelenei, C.; Darnon, C. (2017). 'The Experience of Low-SES Students in Higher Education: Psychological Barriers to Success and Interventions to Reduce Social-Class Inequality', *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 73, No. 1, pp. 23-41.

⁶ Eurostudent VI 2016-2018

⁷ 1 out 3 students on average in countries participating in the study also have a job in addition to their studies (Eurostudent, 2018)

⁸ ESU (2018), *Bologna with students eyes*