



WP5.2.1.1 : Report and reflection paper on the benefits of inverting the dissemination of knowledge and best practices that traditionally runs from North to South and from West to East in the case of university inclusion and equality policies

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1. Introduction

Among its ambitious goals, EUTOPIA 2050 project set out its outreach programme of bi-directional knowledge production and circulation and capacity building with and in the Western Balkans universities. The responsibility of the project has been to share its achievements with non-EUTOPIA universities, particularly those in the Western Balkans. While Slovenia and Croatia are members of the European Union (the EU), the other countries are at various stages of the accession processes. From this perspective, the ambition of the EUTOPIA2050 project has been to help in this process, especially in the adaptation of the higher education and research area to the EU standards. At the same time, the EUTOPIA2050 member universities, with the exception of the University of Ljubljana, have not been well-informed about the situation at the universities of this region. Therefore, the flow of information and exchange of experiences has gone both ways and has been beneficial for both sides.

The Western Balkans region has been considered as less developed in comparison to the majority of the EU member states. In this respect, and because of the accession process, this region has been described as de-privileged, marginal or excluded. Through our activities, we have added a regional inclusion dimension to the EUTOPIA2050's WP5, which has been otherwise focused on social inclusion dimensions. In parallel, the focus on social inclusion issues has represented a refreshment and update for the regional universities which are generally facing other development problems.

2. EUTOPIA2050: WP5.2 activities

The project EUTOPIA2050 has been carried out under unfavourable conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic all the time except for the last few months of the project's lifetime. This situation has had an impact on the course of project activities and its results. All the activities have turned from real on-site to virtual on-line. Out of eight planned workshops during the project, only the last one has been organised on-site with the physical presence of participants. This situation particularly influenced mobility, which turned contacts between experts of EUTOPIA and Western Balkans universities into virtual ones. The established contacts were rather short and superficial without a possibility for detailed exchange of views, information, and experiences, and without real possibilities for spillover effects, such as agreements on common activities in the fields of education and research. It should be taken into account that the culture of this region particularly nurtures personal relations which were originally planned for in the case that the workshops would have been organised on-site.

Nonetheless, the described situation enhanced an important learning process in which all the participants have turned to the on-line communication, particularly meetings, learning how to use new communication technology and how to organise on-line events. One of the obvious results has been the awareness that meetings, webinars and other on-line activities should be well-prepared in advance, well-documented and well-led, as well as that they should be short and concise. In this situation, all of the participants, regardless of being members of the EUTOPIA alliance or the Western Balkans institutions have found themselves in a similar position. No major differences with respect to the speed of learning and effective utilisation of new technology have been observed. The interuniversity campus space composed of the EUTOPIA and Western Balkans universities has remained virtual, however.

The EUTOPIA2050 project has contributed to the interuniversity campus space in two ways. First, at each of the organised workshops at least two participants from the Western Balkans universities contributed actively as invited speakers. All the major universities have contributed their speakers except those from Albania. On the EUTOPIA side, the speakers from two to three member universities contributed to each workshop. Other participants from EUTOPIA and Western Balkans universities participated in bigger numbers – 20 -35 at each workshop. Among the participants, there were top university managers (vice-rectors) and experts from the relevant fields (depending on the topic of each workshop). Some of them followed practically all workshops. Second, at each workshop there was a time slot reserved for the participation of students, where students from the Western Balkans and from EUTOPIA universities met virtually and spoke to the other participants about their experiences, relating to the topic at hand (e.g. participating in co-creation, inclusion at their respective universities, etc.). This way, our project has strengthened the links among the Western Balkans universities, as well as between them and the EUTOPIA ones.

The interuniversity community could have been much stronger if we were able to realize original plans according to which on-site workshops were planned in different Western Balkans cities and were to last for two days each. The values of in-person contact are particularly important in the Western Balkans culture, the lack of which made significant impact on the communication beyond the needs of the workshops.

The content of the workshops has been composed of the core university topics: research (how to make high quality project applications for international funds and how to manage research projects), education (how to design study programmes), university autonomy, internationalisation, social inclusion function of universities, project writing, academic research and plans for further cooperation among regional universities.

During our events, EUTOPIA experts presented relevant EUTOPIA2050 project plans and results already achieved, as well as their professional experiences beyond the project at their institutions. Western Balkans experts also shared their practical experiences and views on the discussed issues. In addition to the bilateral flow of information and knowledge, at each workshop there was at least one external expert from an EU or USA university or a relevant EU institution. Apart from experts, students participating at the workshops were giving comments on the discussed topics from their perspective, such as the involvement of students in the research work, the participation of students in the study programme design, their experiences with the universities' inclusion and internationalisation policies and practices, etc. Speakers presented several cases and answered questions posed by participants. Speakers provided their presentations in advance. These were shared with all the participants after the workshops were finished.

Since this outreach activity has been placed in the wider university social inclusion area each workshop addressed this issue also. For instance, how to assure equal participation of women in the research, how to enable students with special needs full participation in the study programmes, how to provide opportunities of international mobility to students from weak economic backgrounds. The fifth workshop was particularly devoted to social inclusion function of the universities. The EUTOPIA experts presented some of the project results and the Western Balkans shared their experiences with the inclusion issues.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we estimate that the major goals of this activity have been achieved. The awareness about the social inclusion function of universities among the Western Balkans participants have risen. EUTOPIA participants have become aware that regional inclusion issues are of equal importance as social ones. New approaches to research and education developed within EUTOPIA universities as a result of this project have been shared with the Western Balkans universities. The information and awareness about the state of the art in the fields of research, education, place making, internationalisation, autonomy and social inclusion has been increased at both sides.

This activity undoubtedly raised the ambitions of the Western Balkans universities to continue their reforms and adaptation to the EU higher education and research areas. It enhanced their ambitions for mutual collaboration in the region also. This has been strongly confirmed at the last workshop which was organised on-site at the University of Belgrade. Last but not least, on the basis of gained experiences collaboration with the Western Balkans region has been planned for in the second phase pilot project of the European Universities initiative: EUTOPIA MORE.

Due to the Covid-19 forced virtualisation of the project, we could not realize all the planned mobility visits physically. Instead, they were done virtually. This is also the reason for weak joint knowledge production. The original plan was to initiate several expert groups composed of EUTOPIA and Western Balkans experts that would start creating joint project applications and study programmes. However, short, weak and superficial contacts did not allow to make such steps forward. Another difficulty was how to reach and motivate potential participants of the workshops. Several attempts were made in this direction. The best seemed to be organisation of the workshop during the EUTOPIA week which enabled workshop participants to follow other events as well and which enabled more EUTOPIA experts to join the workshops. We believe that the attendance would be much higher in case of on-site workshops.