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## **SUBJECT: INSPIRE Project – Announcement of Selected Countries for the 2026 Country Reviews on the Social Dimension of Higher education**

Dear BFUG Members,

The Erasmus+ project “INSPIRE – Inclusive National Strategies for the Implementation of EHEA Principles for the Social Dimension” aims to support the implementation of the *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*. These principles were adopted by EHEA ministers in the Rome Communiqué (2020) and further endorsed at the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Tirana (2024). The INSPIRE project will assist the Bologna Follow-up Group’s (BFUG) Thematic Peer Group D on the Social Dimension (TPG-D) and EHEA member states in advancing inclusive and effective social dimension policies in higher education.

The INSPIRE project is coordinated by the European Students’ Union (ESU), and the project partners are the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia, the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) from Croatia, and the Institute for Advanced Studies from Austria. The TPG-D is co-chaired by Latvia, Malta, and ESU. The project will run from September 2025 to September 2028.

On 17 July 2025, the INSPIRE project published a Call for Expressions of Interest for country reviews on the social dimension of higher education and informed BFUG member states of the Call via the EHEA Secretariat on the same date. Country Reviews constitute one of the key activities of the INSPIRE project, and all EHEA member states were eligible to apply until the initial deadline of 15 November 2025.

### **Objectives of the country reviews**

Country Reviews are designed to provide EHEA member states with expert feedback on their social dimension policies and their implementation. The review process is based



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primarily on interviews with national stakeholders, complemented by the analysis of existing data, policy documents, and other relevant reports. A Country Review offers constructive, external expert insights that align closely with each country's objectives, measures, and strategies for enhancing the social dimension of higher education.

Importantly, a Country Review is neither an assessment nor an evaluation, and it does not include any judgments or ratings. Its purpose is to support national efforts by providing non-judgmental, evidence-informed feedback to improve strategies, policies, and practices.

Country Reviews focus on the implementation of the EHEA Framework for the Social Dimension of Higher Education - comprising principles, guidelines, indicators, and descriptors as set out in BFUG documents - in the participating country. The review examines which actors were involved, what priorities and goals were set, how these were implemented, and which challenges were encountered. The process also offers an opportunity to discuss new ideas and approaches with international experts. All Country Reviews are planned to take place in 2026.

### **Outcomes of the Call for Expressions of Interest**

By the initial deadline of 15 November 2025, the INSPIRE project received one expression of interest, submitted on 14 November 2025 by Portugal (Directorate-General for Higher Education, DGES). As the INSPIRE project can fund three Country Reviews, the consortium decided to extend the deadline for submissions until 23 November 2025. The EHEA Secretariat informed BFUG member states of this extension.

Following the extension, four additional expressions of interest were received:

- Austria (Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research)
- Lithuania (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport)
- Greece (Hellenic Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports)
- Romania (Ministry of Education and Research)

In total, five (5) expressions of interest were received: from Portugal, Austria, Lithuania, Greece and Romania.

### **Criteria for the selection of countries for the Country Reviews**

The Call for Expressions of Interest stated that priority would be given to member states that have already been implementing broader measures for the social dimension in higher education for some time. "Broader measures" refer to actions targeting different groups of underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable students (and staff, where applicable), and focusing on access to higher education, progression, and completion.



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The Call also specified that if more than three applications were received, a selection would be made. Priority would be given to countries whose social dimension policies are at a more advanced stage of implementation and that offer lessons transferable to other EHEA members. Regional diversity will also be taken into account. As announced in the Call, the selected countries will be presented at the BFUG Meeting on 15–16 December 2025 in Copenhagen.



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## Selection of countries and explanation of the selection rationale

The INSPIRE project consortium carefully analyzed all five expressions of interest between 24 and 28 November 2025 against the selection criteria outlined in the Call for Expressions of Interest and in line with the project proposal. The consortium concluded that all four

applications were highly valuable and fully suitable for a country review. However, priority was given to those expressions demonstrating a longer track record in implementing broader measures for the social dimension of higher education and to those evidencing a wider range of policies targeting underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable students (and staff, where applicable) across access, progression, and completion.

Based on these considerations, we are pleased to inform you that the following three countries have been selected for the INSPIRE Country Reviews in 2026:

- **Lithuania** – Lithuania has been developing and implementing a systemic approach to the social dimension since 2014, with notable progress in recent years. Its strategic approach to the social dimension of higher education, adopted in 2023, provides a comprehensive and coherent framework addressing multiple groups of underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable students. The country is currently advancing from strategic planning to implementation and monitoring, making this an opportune moment for a review to support further consolidation of measures.
- **Austria** – Austria adopted its national strategy for the social dimension in higher education in 2017 and subsequently conducted an interim evaluation (2021) and a final evaluation (2025). The country is preparing a relaunch of the strategy in 2026. This long-standing, structured, and continuously evaluated policy framework provides a rich basis for peer feedback. Austria also implements a broad range of measures targeting access, retention, completion, and institutional support structures, illustrating the maturity of its social dimension policies.
- **Portugal** – Portugal has implemented an extensive set of measures since 2017 aimed at improving equity in access, student support and academic success. As outlined in its expression of interest, Portugal is currently undertaking a significant reform of its grant-awarding system for socio-economically disadvantaged students, accompanied by complementary measures such as expanded access pathways, programs to reduce dropout rates, mental health initiatives, and targeted support for students with disabilities. The breadth of these reforms, coupled with their ongoing development, makes Portugal particularly well positioned to benefit from and contribute to a peer review at this stage.

## Note on Greece



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The consortium wishes to emphasize that it was a difficult decision not to include Greece among the three selected countries. Greece has demonstrated a clear commitment to strengthening the social dimension of higher education, including measures introduced since 2021 through partnership agreements with higher education institutions, and - more comprehensively- the substantial focus on students with disabilities since 2024. The forthcoming National Action Plan 2026 of the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs

and Sports identifies the social dimension as a central priority, with a dedicated National Strategy for the Social Dimension in Higher Education planned for adoption by the end of 2026.

These developments reflect a dynamic and promising policy landscape. However, compared with the selected countries, Greece's systemic social dimension measures are more recent, and the forthcoming national strategy is still under development. In applying the selection

criteria, which prioritize countries with a longer-standing and more extensively implemented set of broader measures, the consortium selected the three countries above.

We would like to stress that Greece submitted a very strong and well-prepared application. Should an opportunity arise in the future to conduct additional reviews beyond the three foreseen in the INSPIRE project, the consortium would warmly welcome the possibility to include Greece.

### **Note on Romania**

Romania also submitted a very strong and comprehensive application, demonstrating that the country is highly suitable for a Country Review. Romania has been implementing a broad and coherent set of social dimension measures for several years, comparable in scope and maturity to those presented by Portugal. As outlined in its expression of interest, Romania has developed extensive national scholarship schemes for students from disadvantaged groups, targeted programs such as *First Student in the Family* and the National Program for Reducing University Dropout, dedicated support for students with disabilities, psychological and counselling services, and measures promoting access, retention, and successful completion. Additional initiatives focus on improving data-informed governance, enhancing institutional support structures, and strengthening inclusive education services in line with European frameworks.

The consortium carefully considered Romania's application and recognizes the country's significant progress and longstanding commitment to advancing the social dimension of higher education. However, when applying the selection criteria - including the need to ensure geographical balance among the selected countries - the consortium concluded that the combination of Portugal (Southwest Europe), Austria (Central Europe), and Lithuania (Northeast Europe) offered the widest geographical representation within the three available review slots. This decision does not reflect any limitation in Romania's suitability; rather, it stems from the need to ensure regional diversity among the selected cases. Romania



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remains a highly relevant and promising candidate for any future opportunities to conduct additional reviews beyond the three foreseen within the INSPIRE project.

### **Concluding remarks**

The INSPIRE project will contact the designated liaison persons in the respective public authorities of the three selected countries to agree on the dates of the Country Reviews, which are planned to take place throughout 2026. The project team will coordinate all subsequent steps, including preparatory meetings, information requirements, and logistical arrangements.

Following the completion of the three Country Reviews, the INSPIRE project will report back to the BFUG on the main findings and outcomes, with the aim of contributing to shared learning and supporting the further development of social dimension policies across the EHEA.

Thank you for your cooperation and continued commitment to strengthening the social dimension of higher education.

Yours sincerely,

European Students' Union (ESU), on behalf of the INSPIRE project  
Arno Schrooyen, Vice-President