

The Future Student Population

Deliverable 3.2.1





# Policy statement

**The Aurora future student population will reflect the diversity of our communities. In working towards this goal, we will develop a deeper awareness and understanding of equality issues for our current and future students and work in inclusive and anti-discriminatory ways.**

# Summary

Work package 3.2 Social Transformation deliverable 1 requires us to ‘Adopt a new definition of our future student population’. To do this, we need to agree the ways in which define our student population. This discussion paper sets out the findings of the working group on the nature of our student population and explains some of the challenges we face in understanding who our students are. The paper offers 12 operational recommendations for future work to enable us to progress to a better understanding of our students, their lived experiences and how we can support all students to succeed. This work will enable us to define our future population.

VREs are asked to approve the three strategic recommendations below.

# Consultation

This policy and recommendations were developed by the working group for 3.2 (Social Transformation) which comprises both staff and students and has been considered by the Vice Rectors Education at the biannual in Innsbruck in May 2022.

# Strategic recommendations

1. Approve and adopt the policy statement above
2. Approve the list of demographic groups listed in table 1
3. Approve the detailed next steps set out in the operational recommendations on a future approach to monitoring the student population and related barriers (detailed in the discussion section).

# Discussion

Understanding our student population is an important step towards being universities engaged in social transformation. By identifying, acknowledging and endeavouring to understand our student population, we enable a dialogue about becoming more socially inclusive.

Demographic categories are useful in many aspects of our work, including:

* Outreach and admissions
* Designing teaching, learning and assessment strategies
* Deciding on the content of our curriculum
* Understanding how best to provide holistic support for students to develop their social agency and cultural capital while at our universities.

To define our future student population, we need to work out a set of definitions that we could apply to our cohorts. There is currently no easy way to collect or analyse data about student demographics across the alliance. This is because data is not collected in systematic and comparable ways. Previous work in this area suggests that some of the categories considered in this report may be useful in understanding the changing demographics.

Demographics are not tidy categories, and we must always remember that a student may identify into more than one category, and also that they may not self-identify into a category that the university thinks they belong in. We need to gather and use the data with caution and sensitivity. The intention is not to homogenise students by groups or make assumptions about shared identities or shared experiences.

To develop a deeper understanding of the diversity of our students, we will focus on defining and understanding our student populations using the groups outlined in the table below.

|  |
| --- |
| Aurora student demographics |
| First in family or first-generation students |
| Older students |
| Sex and Gender |
| Disability – students with physical, sensory or cognitive disability or mental health condition |
| Socio-economic status - either by using indices or by looking at which students are eligible for financial support |
| Race and ethnicity |
| Migration or refugee status |

We will keep this list of demographics under review and consider including other categories in future iterations, for example, gifted and talented students.

**Table 1 – Aurora Alliance student demographic groups**

In defining our future student population, we need to be mindful of the different types and uses of demographic definitions.

* Inclusive demographics
* Demographics to describe under-represented or disadvantaged groups in education
* Characteristics that are legally protected in equality legislation

These different types and uses have overlap, and that overlap differs in each country context, but understanding the context around the demographics is important to planning to address under-representation, discrimination and disadvantage.

# Definitions and operational recommendations

First in family or first generation students

First in family or first generation are students who’s parents don’t hold an undergraduate degree.

This is a metric used to understand student demographics in the USA and the University of Minnesota has a centre for the support of students who self-identify into this group[[1]](#endnote-1). The centre has a range of information and resources to help staff and students understand and navigate the experience of being first generation. Features of that experience might be:

* Whether or not a student’s family actively support them in their academic and personal journey, less access to guidance
* Issues around a sense of belonging and knowledge of a hidden curriculum / hidden expectations of university

It should also be noted that first in family may be an intersectional demographic, with many first generation students coming from groups who may be under-represented or disadvantaged.

Conversely, in the UK a recent report found that ‘first in family’ is not a useful demographic group to identify students who are underrepresented or disadvantaged in higher education[[2]](#endnote-2) The report found that two thirds of students on degree courses in the UK could identify as first generation. This makes it an imprecise measure for identifying students in need of extra support or at risk of being disadvantaged.

**Recommendation:**

1. **Despite the concerns expressed in the paper published in the UK, this demographic characteristic is useful to an understanding of the student population as a possible contributor to intersectional disadvantage. The Alliance should use this demographic in understanding our student population.**

Older students

This demographic describes a group of students who do not start their university education straight after or shortly after they leave school. Typically, they may enter the workplace first. The category may also apply to students starting postgraduate study with a long gap after an undergraduate experience.

In the UK, the university regulator The Office for Students defines this category as those starting their undergraduate degree aged 21 or older[[3]](#endnote-3). In other countries, funding restrictions may also impact on participation in higher education, for example in the Czech Republic, state funding for undergraduate study stops at age 26, so students are unlikely to participate after this age. In addition, the age at which students finish compulsory schooling differs from country to country, for example in The Netherlands, the age at which students leave their pre-university education varies according to the type of provision they attend.

**Recommendation:**

1. **It would be difficult to define an age at which a student would be defined as in an ‘older’ age group of university starters, but it might be possible to identify that group by considering their time out of full time education before starting their studies. We recommend work is undertaken to understand this group in the Alliance.**

Sex and gender

A person’s sex is defined by their biology but their gender is defined by societal norms and personal dispositions. Comparing national statistics agencies there are a variety of approaches, for example in the Czech Republic data is on the sex of individuals[[4]](#endnote-4) whereas in the UK there is a stronger focus on developing an approach to statistical policy that includes transgender and non binary people[[5]](#endnote-5) . Universities should respect a person’s right to self-define their gender and always collect data about this using more than two categories, with an option to identify as female, male, non-binary, transgender and the right to self-define.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal[[6]](#endnote-6) 5 is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. This is driven by global inequalities in female access to education, rights and disadvantages in work and pay. The United Nations is campaigning to have better data and information to underpin action on this disadvantage[[7]](#endnote-7)

The source of these disadvantages may be hard to identify in the Aurora Alliance, as participation levels in higher education vary significantly between countries. In OECD data[[8]](#endnote-8) gathered in 2020, on average 20% of the female population of OECD countries aged between 25 and 64 held a university degree, while for men it was 16.5%. Participation was higher in the USA (26.2% for women and 23.7% for men), than in France (12.9% for women and 9.1% for men) and Spain (13.2% for women and 8.2% for men). However in all these examples, the proportion of women holding a degree was higher than men. It is important to take into account, however, that there are some significant differences[[9]](#endnote-9) between subjects and women may remain under-represented in some subjects.

**Recommendations:**

1. **Data should be collected about gender using more than two categories**
2. **Presumptions about the nature and causes of gender related disadvantage should be avoided, and a focus given to potential under-representation and disadvantage from all groups.**
3. **More work should be undertaken to understand gender differences between subjects or disciplines in Alliance Universities.**

Disability – students with physical, sensory or cognitive disability or mental health condition

Definitions of disability are complex. The term covers a range of both acute and chronic conditions and the ways in which universities respond vary between conditions. Some disabilities are visible and some are invisible. In collecting data about this, universities should consider the detail that is needed to enable the provision of both inclusive practice and specific support for students. This means that information is broad categories is sufficient for management information. These might include:

* A specific cognitive learning disability such as dyslexia
* A social or communication condition such as Autism
* A physical disability
* A sensory disability
* A mental health condition
* A long standing / chronic illness such as epilepsy

The Aurora Alliance should note that students with disabilities are less likely to participate in study abroad and other mobility experiences. In 2019, Universities UK found that 7% of students with a disability participated, compared to 8% of students without a disability*[[10]](#endnote-10)*.

Students may disclose more detail of their diagnosis and needs as part of the process of support, but this need not become part of the management information.

In the sphere of mental health, it is important in developing a dialogue within Aurora Alliance to draw a distinction between general wellbeing issues and those with medically diagnosed mental health conditions. Although students who are experiencing short term challenges in their mental wellbeing may need support this is likely to differ from students with diagnosed medical conditions.

**Recommendation:**

1. **Data about disability should to be collected to enable universities to provide adequate support for students to succeed in their studies.**
2. **The Alliance should support the development of good mental wellbeing for staff and students, while acknowledging that for students with mental illness, general support may not be sufficient to enable the student to succeed.**

Socio-economic status

Data about socio-economic status differs between the counties of the Aurora Alliance and there is no ‘one definition’ that would enable us to collect consistent data about this. In addition, the higher education policy of national or regional governments will also define the impact of a student’s socio-economic status on their ability to study. The level of fees and eligibility for maintenance loans available to students also impacts inclusion from a socio-economic point of view. For example in Iceland, there are no fees for home students, but there is a registration fee of 75,000ISK (about 520 Euros), students can also apply for a loan to cover living expenses[[11]](#endnote-11). In The Netherlands, the statutory fee for a year of study is 2,209 Euros[[12]](#endnote-12). In the England, fees vary with a top limit of £9,250 (11,000 Euros) per year for home undergraduate students, but this can be borrowed in addition to maintenance loans to help students with the cost of living for students from low-income backgrounds[[13]](#endnote-13)

There are two options for developing a better understanding of the socio-economic status of our students. The first option is to use data we hold about the proportion of students who access financial support such as maintenance loans or bursaries. Although socio-economic status is not a demographic characteristic protected by law, the availability of financial support for higher education students in most Alliance countries is an example of where national policy has an impact on economic disadvantage. In the UK this is known as the Socio-economic duty[[14]](#endnote-14)

The second option is to monitor the number of students who come to the university from deprived areas, identified by national indices, for example the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which identifies areas by a number of socio economic factors[[15]](#endnote-15). This data is also useful to support outreach activities.

**Recommendations:**

1. **Collect data about students in receipt of financial support – this is also useful to know for purposes like student mobility**
2. **Understand intersectionality better through further work to understand student identities and lived experiences.**
3. **Develop a better alliance wide understanding of educational and social policy to widen access to higher education**

Race and ethnicity

In some alliance countries, for example in France, information specifically about race is not collected at all[[16]](#endnote-16). However, in the UK, data about race and ethnicity is central to the regulation of higher education[[17]](#endnote-17). These differences are significant and make taking an alliance wide approach difficult. Due to the impact of historical colonialism, some countries had, or indeed still include, territories outside Europe where the majority population is non-white. This is one of the reasons that multi-racial communities are the norm in Europe. Despite this, societal division along racial lines and racism remains too common. For the Alliance, understanding the lived experiences of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is a priority if we wish to be actively anti-racist in our work.

The language used to define race and ethnicity is often contentious. Some terms that have been in common use historically are now considered unacceptable and offensive and many terms are sensitive in some countries. For example it is common to use the term ‘students of colour’ in the United States, but this term has connotations of a racial slur in the UK and is not always considered acceptable. In the UK, a general term that has been in use for several years is ‘black, Asian and minority ethnic students’, often abbreviated to BAME. However, this term is sometimes regarded as white-centric. Generally speaking, where data about ethnicity is collected, the terms should be discussed and agreed with representatives of the groups concerned.

**Recommendation**

1. **Where data is collected about race and ethnicity, the language used should be discussed and agreed with representatives of the student concerned.**

Migration or refugee status

In The Netherlands, data is collected about ‘western’ and ‘non-western’ immigrants[[18]](#endnote-18) by the national statistics agency. The agency publishes statistics about the participation of students from different migrant backgrounds in education[[19]](#endnote-19). This could be used to identify gaps in participation between the different migrant groups in that country. Similar data is available for the Czech Republic[[20]](#endnote-20), and possibly other alliance countries.

In a policy briefing looking at Germany, a study found that differences outcomes between migrant and non-migrant students were significant and more needed to be done to support migrants in education. The report suggests that this is to the benefit of both individuals and to improve integration and the economy.[[21]](#endnote-21)

**Recommendation**

1. **The Alliance should take steps to understand how students from migrant backgrounds are represented in their population and understand the lived experiences of these students.**

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