NEW CONCEPTS FOR INCLUSIVE MOBILITY

From Underrepresented to Underserved Students

Language shapes perceptions, and inclusive language ensures students feel recognised, engaged, and valued. Shifting from 'underrepresented' to 'underserved' places responsibility on higher education institutions to address the diverse needs of their student body. This subtle yet impactful change highlights the university's role in fostering an inclusive environment for student mobility.

SHIFTING FOCUS: FROM STUDENTS TO INSTITUTIONS

Even small rhetorical shifts can have a significant impact. While "underrepresented" implies passivity or small numbers, "underserved" redirects attention to institutions, highlighting unmet needs that create barriers to mobility. It underscores the responsibility of universities to enhance their services and support systems to better serve these students, changing the narrative and holding institutions accountable for addressing the inequalities that hinder access to mobility opportunities.

BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR MOBILITY

This change in perspective ensures mobility programmes go beyond increasing participation to creating meaningful opportunities for underserved students. Mobility must be accessible and supported at every stage, with resources provided before, during, and after students' time abroad (detailed guidance can be found in the IDEM Guidelines). By adopting the term "underserved", institutions are encouraged to critically assess and adapt their structures and processes, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have equitable access to mobility opportunities.

STARTING POINTS FOR ACTION AND REFLECTION

Who are the underserved students in our institution?
Identify students facing barriers like socio-economic challenges, disabilities, or family responsibilities.

What support mechanisms are in place for underserved students?
Review scholarships, advising, and peer support systems. Are they tailored to these students' needs?

Are we involving underserved students in designing and evaluating mobility programs?
Gather their feedback and ensure their experiences shape program offerings.

Self-Exclusion in Student Mobility

Self-exclusion occurs when students, particularly from underserved backgrounds, choose not to participate in mobility programs because they perceive them as "not for me." This mindset is often shaped by internal barriers such as fear of discrimination, financial concerns, or the belief that they won't belong or find adequate support abroad. Furthermore, a lack of networks, role models, and cultural familiarity with international experiences can reinforce feelings of exclusion.

SHIFTING FOCUS: FROM PASSIVE SUPPORT TO PROACTIVE OUTREACH

Self-exclusion poses a significant challenge because students who perceive mobility as "not for them" often remain invisible to support services, avoiding engagement with mobility-related resources altogether. Institutions must move away from passive support models and adopt a proactive outreach approach. This means actively reaching students rather than waiting for them to seek help. Effective strategies include diversifying communication channels, collaborating with student networks, and ensuring representation. By taking these steps, institutions can dismantle invisible barriers and create an environment where mobility feels accessible and inclusive for every student.

STARTING POINTS FOR ACTION AND REFLECTION

How can we identify self-exclusion among students, particularly underserved ones?
Observe patterns of disengagement, such as lack of participation or inquiries in mobility info sessions.

What strategies encourage students to consider mobility opportunities?
Ensure proactive outreach, like workshops or peer mentoring, targeting at-risk students.

How inclusive are our communications about mobility?
Evaluate if our messages are accessible, relatable and representative of student experiences.

UNSEEN OBSTACLES TO MOBILITY PARTICIPATION

While structural barriers like funding limitations and policy gaps undeniably impact underserved students, psychological and emotional barriers can be just as limiting. Many students entirely disengage from mobility opportunities, assuming they are inaccessible due to perceived challenges or personal limitations. These internalised beliefs can prevent them from even exploring available support structures. Through direct engagement with students during IDEM activities, it became clear that self-exclusion is rarely a purely personal decision. Instead, it is heavily shaped by how institutions present information, provide representation and design support systems.

Psychological Safety in Student Mobility

Psychological safety describes an environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, opinions, and emotions without fear of judgment, ridicule or negative consequences. Emphasising psychological safety in mobility programmes is crucial for making study abroad experiences less intimidating and more enriching, particularly for underserved students. This focus aligns with the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence and relatedness as core drivers of motivation and well-being.

WHY PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MATTERS

Psychological safety significantly impacts decision-making and intersects deeply with multiple dimensions of human psychology and behaviour. When individuals feel secure and accepted, they are empowered to express their authentic selves, allowing their "self at the best" to emerge. This openness fosters collaboration, risk-taking, and personal growth while nurturing a positive self-image and enabling individuals to thrive personally and professionally. Mobility programmes that emphasise psychological safety can expand access and create equitable opportunities where all students can thrive.

SHIFTING FOCUS: EMPOWERMENT AS A PIVOTAL DIMENSION

Mobility programmes often address structural barriers such as accessibility, pedagogical challenges, and financial concerns. While these are essentials, **personal empowerment** is equally critical. Empowerment builds a student's confidence to face challenges and fully engage in mobility experiences. Rooted in the principles of self-efficacy and self-determination, empowerment encourages students to take ownership of their mobility journeys.

When **inclusive structures** (institutional factors like policies, infrastructure, and resource allocation) are combined with personal empowerment, mobility programmes can establish comprehensive support systems that not only reduce self-exclusion but also foster psychological safety and promote equitable participation.

STARTING POINTS FOR ACTION AND REFLECTION

How do we create psychological safety for students in mobility programmes?
Train staff and peers to support diverse needs, fostering a judgment-free and inclusive environment.

How do we empower students and promote belonging during their mobility experiences?
Build confidence and resilience through comprehensive pre-departure support and inclusive peer networks.

How do we gather and act on student feedback regarding safety and inclusion?
Implement surveys, informal check-ins and open feedback channels to assess and improve the student experience.

Read more about IDEM and our Tools on
www.idem-project.eu