Analysis of the National Strategies on the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process

Summary Report prepared by the BFUG Coordination Group on Social Dimension in cooperation with the Centre of Social Policy Studies of the

5.1. History and background

The Bologna Process has been the major impetus to recent reforms in the educational systems of countries in Europe. The social dimension has been an integral part of this Bologna Process since the first ministerial follow-up meeting in Prague in 2001. The social dimension was included in the Prague communiqué at the suggestion of the student representatives at the meeting. In all the subsequent communiqués (Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, and London 2007) this social dimension was recognised as crucial for the success of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In the London Communiqué Ministers confirmed the importance of the social dimension as follows:

> *"Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity."*

After the Bergen ministerial meeting, a Working Group on Social Dimension and Mobility of Staff and Students was set up to take forward the tasks given to the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) for the action line of the social dimension and mobility. Given the considerable differences and challenges in relation to the social dimension of higher education (HE) between the participating countries, this Working Group considered it inappropriate to narrowly define the social dimension, or to suggest a number of detailed actions for all countries to implement. The Working Group proposed instead that each country should develop its own strategies and action plans for the social dimension. In their report the group proposed the following overall objective for the social dimension.

> *"We strive for the societal goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of our populations. We therefore pledge to take action to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity."*

 (Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries, [5], p.8.)

The Working Group proposed that "... by 2009 the countries report to the BFUG on their national strategies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures illustrating their impact. Such a strategy should start with the identification of possible

under-represented groups. All stakeholders should actively participate in and support this work at the national level." (Report [5], p.44).

Each country was asked to report on the national strategies it developed with respect to the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The countries were asked to complete these reports by 1 November 2008. The purpose of the present report is to present a summary of these national reports and to formulate some conclusions. For the purpose of steering the analysis of the national strategies on social dimension, the BFUG decided to establish a Social Dimension Coordination Group in the framework of the Bologna Work programme 2007-2009. This coordination group mandated the Centre of Social Policy Studies of the University of Antwerp for research input and editing of the analysis. The template used for the national reporting is included as Appendix 1 of this report. Appendix 2 lists the members of the Social Dimension Coordination Group.

When reading the national reports, it quickly becomes clear that there is a great variety in the detail, quality and focus of these reports. Some reports contain a careful description of the present situation, a clear explanation and motivation of the various policy measures, and a convincing strategic plan for the future. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that some reports do not contain sufficient information to allow any further analysis. Some countries even stated that there are no specific under-represented groups in their higher education systems. Consequently, they submitted reports which are rather uninformative for the purpose of this analysis. Moreover, for some countries, there was a striking discrepancy between the rather optimistic description and the data on overall participation in HE provided by Eurostat and Eurostudent in their report on Social Dimension and Mobility in the Bologna Process [3].

For this summary report it was therefore impossible to evaluate the various countries' policy measures in terms of effectiveness or appropriateness. The national reports simply do not contain the empirical evidence required for such a comparative evaluation. Moreover, the institutional contexts in which the various countries are operating can differ substantially.

This report has, in general, avoided identifying individual countries. However, countries are identified in the event of a statement which is specific to a particular country, or when an example of good practice is given.

This summary report is structured as follows. In section 2 we identify the groups in society which, in the current situation, are reported to be under-represented in HE in the countries participating in the Bologna Process. Also, for each of these groups, the main obstacles to participative equity in terms of access and completion of studies are discussed. In section 3 we describe various measures taken by the governments to widen the general participation in HE. In section 4 we report the measures which were taken to improve the representation of the under-represented groups identified in section 2. In section 5 we report on the countries' strategies for the future. In a final section we formulate some conclusions.

5.2. Under-represented groups: the current situation

Achieving an equitable HE system, with fair and equal access to all groups in society, is an important policy priority in all the countries participating in the Bologna process. According to this view, each citizen should have access to high quality education, regardless of social or economic background, race, religion or gender.

Several countries report substantial progress over the last decades in the *general* participation rate in HE[1] At the same time, however, these same countries also typically acknowledge that *some groups* in their societies are still under-represented.

Apart from a few countries claiming that there are no under-represented groups in their higher education system, there is considerable agreement among the reporting countries that several or all of the following groups are under-represented:

- Groups with lower socio-economic background,
- (Less educated) immigrants and cultural minorities,
- Students with a disability,
- Non-traditional students (mature students, students with foreign qualifications),
- Female - male students (gender balance).

This identification of various under-represented groups in society is consistent with the common interpretation of the notion of equity[2], as applied to educational policies. According to this interpretation, inequalities in educational performance can only be tolerated if they can be explained by differences in individual preferences and efforts. They cannot be tolerated if they are caused by circumstances which are beyond a person's control, and national policies should be aiming at their mitigation. Possible examples of such circumstances are family background, living area, ethnicity, gender or presence of a disability.

We will now identify these under-represented groups in greater detail, and discuss the main obstacles to participative equity faced by these groups.

5.2.a. Groups with a lower socio-economic background

This group consists of students lacking the *financial resources* required for HE studies. The cost of HE studies includes the direct cost of tuition, study materials, living expenses, accommodation and transportation. In addition, HE studies also imply that students and their families forego the income the students could otherwise have earned on the labour market during their studies.

In most countries the total cost of HE is a serious obstacle to participation in HE for at least some individuals or families in society. In these cases, it is not the ability to learn but the ability to pay that determines participation in HE. In some countries tuition fees are very substantial and there may not be any financial support available to help meet

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[1] Various indicators can be found, e.g., in [8].
[2] See Wössmann L. and G. Schütz, 2006 [10], p.3.

them..Also, the lack of affordable student housing, especially in larger university cities, sometimes poses a problem for students entering HE. Some countries (e.g. Belgium-French community, Switzerland) report that students prefer to go to nearby non-university institutes, rather than to more expensive universities. A strong and efficient financial support programme is then essential for diversifying and enlarging the student body entering and completing HE.

The groups in society lacking the financial means required to enter HE are often also groups where factors relating to "*social heritage*" make participation in HE difficult. In many countries the level of education of the parents to a large extent determines the type of education followed by the children. In lower income families HE is often perceived as elitist. Children of these families often follow their parents' educational tradition and choose types of secondary schools from which the transition into HE is difficult. The relevance of social heritage for participation in HE can be very complex and deserves deeper research. Denmark has announced that it will undertake a research project of this kind.

Furthermore, to the extent that the situation of disadvantaged families (in terms of financial status and educational background) influences the performance of their children in primary and secondary schools, this will further complicate their transition into HEIs. For example, a good knowledge of the instruction language is essential in HE and this knowledge is sometimes lacking in these groups. There is ample empirical evidence that early intervention programmes, targeted at children with disadvantaged backgrounds, can significantly increase the equality of educational opportunity[3].

In addition, in the case of admissions procedures for entering HE, these procedures sometimes test specific knowledge rather than general study aptitudes. Given that elitist secondary schools often provide better specific knowledge, admission to HEIs becomes more dependent on previous education, and thus also on the social origin of the applicants. This point is strongly emphasised in the national report of the Czech Republic.

Sometimes the weaker socio-economic groups are concentrated in *geographically isolated, deprived areas*, or in rural areas, as opposed to urban areas. It may also happen that secondary schools in certain regions provide lower quality education, which has a clear impact on their chances for accessing, progressing and completing HE programmes.

Many countries report progress in the participation of students with a lower socio-economic background, but these countries also acknowledge that further improvements are still very desirable.

5.2.b. Less educated immigrants and cultural minorities

Many countries acknowledge that children of less educated immigrants and of cultural minorities are under-represented in HE.

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[3] Several references are given in Wössmann L. and G. Schütz, 2006 [10].

As was the case in the previous group, the obstacles for greater participation in HE have to do with the lack of required financial resources, and the absence of any academic tradition in these families. Moreover, this group often suffers from a lack of social and cultural integration, and often encounters discrimination. Children often perform rather poorly in primary and secondary schools, and they may have an insufficient knowledge of the instruction language and of basic academic skills required to succeed in HE. Moreover, as reported by the Netherlands, if these students do progress to HEIs, they sometimes rather choose studies with a high social status, which is not always an appropriate choice for the individual student concerned.

It is also clear that immigration as such is not a sufficient factor leading to social exclusion. The United Kingdom[4] e.g. reports that for some minority groups the participation in HE is above the national average. On the contrary, immigrants with lower educational levels are particularly vulnerable and are less likely to participate in HE.

5.2.c.   Students with a disability

The group of students with a disability is very heterogeneous, as there are various types of sensory, physical, learning and/or communicative disabilities. Moreover, there is no single recognised definition of disability and no general taxonomy of subsets of disability. Despite this lack of a clear definition, the size of this group of students can be significant. E.g., the Netherlands report that 8% of the student population has some kind of disability.

The obstacles to participation in HE faced by this group are very diverse. They relate, for example, to problems of mobility and of access to buildings, opportunities for housing, the availability of appropriate teaching, learning and examination facilities, etc. There may also be a lack of information for the students in relation to the special arrangements (e.g. specific modalities for assessment) for which they can apply. There appears to be a low awareness among professors about the needs of students with a disability. Finally, several of these obstacles imply extra costs, both for the students involved and for the HEIs.

While some countries make specific provisions to meet the needs of students with disabilities, many others acknowledge that the needs of this group are insufficiently known or taken care of.

5.2.d. Non-traditional students (mature students, students with foreign qualifications)

Mature students

This group mainly consists of mature students who - for various reasons - left the educational system for some time and want to join the system again. If countries want

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[4] We use the term United Kingdom to refer to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has made a separate report.

to prevent these potential students from being confronted with dead-ends in their education and professional careers, opportunities for lifelong learning have to be developed.

This group of students faces many obstacles. First, the combination of studies with a job and with family life limits the time these students can devote to their studies. It also follows that these students are often unable to complete their studies within the usual time period.

Furthermore, these students often do not fulfil the regular admission requirements, necessitating the availability of non-traditional access routes to HE. For example, if these students previously followed vocational training programmes, the move to academic programmes requires bridging courses between vocational education and training and more academic HE programmes. At the same time, these students may have acquired competences and on-the-job experience which are very useful, but this prior informal or non-formal learning is often not formally recognised for the purpose of academic degrees.

Finally, these non-traditional educational trajectories often lead to extra financial expenses. The extra costs associated with childcare are an important example. Part-time study programmes may also imply part-time jobs, so that students have to forego part of their potential income.

As was the case with students with a disability, many countries report that the support given to mature students is still insufficient.

This observation is supported by the recent EURASHE report by A. Timofei [9] that also extensively discusses the existing impediments to the implementation of lifelong learning in the context of the Bologna Process.

Students with foreign qualifications.

This group of non-traditional students consists of students with foreign degrees who want to continue their studies in a particular country. Some countries, e.g., Germany, report that this group of students is significant. These students may lack a sufficient knowledge of the instruction language, and their cultural integration is sometimes limited. They may not get full recognition of credits and/or of experience obtained in the country of prior education. Quite often, this also involves a move from vocational training to academic education. Here again bridging courses are required between vocational and academic programmes.

It should be observed that the foregoing issues not only relate to the social dimension as such, but are closely related to other action lines, like international mobility and recognition of qualifications in which the Bologna Process has still not achieved in full the goals as set out in 1999.

5.2.e. Female versus male students - the gender gap

With respect to the gender gap, the situation can be very different from one country to another. In most countries there used to be a general under-representation of female students in HE. However, several countries report that there is a clear tendency towards a greater equality. Some countries (e.g., Denmark, Belgium-Flemish Community, United Kingdom, Iceland, Latvia, Scotland, Slovenia) even report a general under-representation of male students, especially in the first cycles of higher education.

In most countries gender imbalances persist within specific subject areas. Women are often under-represented in agronomy, engineering and applied sciences, while they are over-represented in educational sciences, humanities and social sciences.

Gender imbalances can be different between students at the bachelor and master level, students at the Ph.D. level, amongst academic staff, and the management of HEIs. Many countries report an under-representation of women at the staff and the management level within HEIs. Some countries report a weak representation of female students in the third and even second cycle of higher education, but this statement cannot be generalised. In some countries, e.g. Estonia, male students are underrepresented in doctoral studies, while they are over-represented in, e.g., Germany and Switzerland.

The circumstances leading to a generalised under-representation of women are well-known. Parents and teachers with traditional views may also influence the choices of future students. There may also be a lack of information in study programmes and professions.

Possible explanations of a general under-representation of male students are less obvious. For example, Estonia refers to the rigid regulations that exclude part-time students from obtaining study loans.

The causes and consequences of unequal gender balances in some study programmes may require more research. Sweden, for example, refers to a current research project, commissioned by the Government, on the impact of the feminisation of teaching staff on the performance of boys in compulsory education.

5.3. General measures to widen access to HE

In this section we report on policy measures which, in principle, affect all students equally, independently of whether these students belong to an under-represented group or not. Policy measures which are specifically intended for under-represented groups are reported in section 4.

5.3.a. Student participation in the governance of HEIs

Student participation in the governance of HEIs has always been an important issue in the Bologna Process. In the Berlin communiqué (2003) ministers state that "*...students*

are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place throughout the European Higher Education Area. They also call on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance." A report on the extent and the impact of higher education governance reform in Europe has been carried out by the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies for the European Commission in 2006, dealing with the question in detail. See reference [1].

Several countries report that, in their countries, students are entitled to participate in the governance of HEIs. In these countries this representation of students in governing bodies is often underpinned by legislation. Most countries report that students also participate in internal quality assurance processes at institutional level.

5. 3.b. Provision of information and of guidance, counselling and tutoring services

The provision of information and the counselling of the students, at all stages of their educational trajectories, are important ingredients of the social dimension in HEIs. These services can help students to make appropriate choices for their study careers. They can improve student performance and reduce the level of dropout.

The provision of information starts in secondary schools. An example of good practice in the provision of information for students in secondary education is the "student-checker" service in Austria, established by the Ministry. Students in the last two years of their secondary school are educated about the added value of a HE qualification to one's career opportunities, and receive counselling to make sure that they make an informed choice before enrolling in a HE programme.

A second example of good practice is the Aimhigher programme in the United Kingdom. This programme brings together universities, colleges and schools in partnership, providing opportunities and experiences for learners which help to widen their horizons, develop talents, increase motivation and maximise potential. It also helps students to apply for an institution that best suits their potential. Many countries also organise information fairs and conferences were students from secondary school meet representatives of HEIs.

According to the 2007 report/recommendations of the Bologna Working Group on Social Dimension and Mobility of Staff and Students, information on admission and study grants should be simple, transparent, and easily accessible. Information on admission procedures should include the rules applied with respect to (1) application, eligibility and exemptions from eligibility requirements, (2) how decisions on admission and exemptions from eligibility requirements are taken, and (3) rules on how to appeal.

In order to ensure a close follow-up of each student, several countries have introduced individual education plans in the form of agreements between HEIs and individual

students. In this way the student's study path, credit accumulation and time of graduation are closely monitored.

Some countries make a special effort to help first generation students to make the transition from secondary school to HE, e.g., by setting up tutoring systems for this target public. They also organise courses for first-year students to develop their basic academic skills, and to help them acquire development tools and working methods to succeed in HE. Individual counselling is especially important for first generation students with poor results at the end of the first semester (Belgium-French Community). Guidance is equally important for enhancing graduates' opportunities on the labour market.

In some countries HEIs are required to spend up to a minimum proportion of government funding on activities designed for first generation students.

All these efforts should result in greater student retention and completion rates. In some countries (e.g., Belgium-Flemish community) the government's HEI funding to a large extent depends on the number of graduating students, not on the number of incoming students. Similarly, in the United Kingdom[5], HEIs are penalised financially if students drop out without obtaining any credits.

5.3.c. Provision of social support services to students

The great majority of countries report that the HEIs provide subsidised accommodation to students, and help students to find appropriate housing. Students often also benefit from subsidised transportation, meals, health care, and study material. From the reports, it is not always clear to what extent these services are also open to foreign students.

In many countries students unions are also financially supported. Some countries also report that they subsidise students' leisure and cultural activities.

5. 4. Measures to increase participation of under-represented groups

We first discuss measures which affect all under-represented groups. We then report on measures which are intended for specific groups.

A. Measures affecting all under-represented groups

A.1. Anti-discrimination legislation

Several countries have taken legislative initiatives and have approved anti-discrimination laws, often by incorporating international (European) agreements in their national legislation. These laws typically prohibit discrimination in general. In

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[5] We use the term United Kingdom to refer to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has made a separate report.

some countries these laws are specifically intended to prohibit any discrimination by HEIs. E.g., in Sweden the Act of Equal Treatment of Students in Higher Education prohibits discrimination, and stipulates that the HEIs have to implement purposeful measures to actively promote equal rights for students and applicants, irrespective of their sex, ethnicity, religion or other creed, sSeveral references are given in Wössmann L. and G. Schütz, 2006 [10].exual orientation or functional disabilities. Similar anti-discrimination legislation is reported by Croatia, France, Montenegro and Romania.

A.2. Regulating and monitoring agencies

Several countries report that for many HEIs efforts to improve access are still not fully part of the mainstream activities and strategies of these institutions. Governments can then assist HEIs in their work to attract and support students from under-represented groups by setting up regulating and monitoring agencies, thus safeguarding fair access to HE to under-represented groups.

Examples of these are the Office of Fair Access in the United Kingdom, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland and the Wider Access Regional Fora in Scotland. These agencies approve and monitor agreements in which individual institutions set out the measures they will put in place to safeguard fair access to HE for low income and other under-represented groups. They also encourage flexible delivery opportunities.

Similar individual access plans, formulating measurable objectives on widening participation in HE, also exist in Sweden.

A.3. Government financial support

Governments can give HEIs financial incentives to take action to widen access. Incentives can be given in terms of extra funding to meet additional costs incurred by actions taken by institutions to widen access from under-represented groups. This funding is intended to develop the necessary infrastructure and programmes of action which support wider access for people with a disability, mature students, people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and refugee communities, etc.

The aforementioned extra funding is linked to special projects aimed at increasing participation. Sometimes this extra funding is directly linked to the number of students from under-represented groups enrolled in each institution. In the Flemish community in Belgium the "Widening Access Incentive Fund" provides financial incentives to HEIs, taking into account the success rate of the students with disadvantaged background.

Finally, governments also provide special grants directly to disadvantaged students. See section 5.4.B.

A.4. Statistical and research evidence

Any policy intended to widen access and to improve completion rates for particular groups in society should be supported by statistical and research evidence. Some

countries report that they have sufficient evidence and research on which to base their policies. Several other countries report that they have insufficient or even no evidence.

Many countries report that they have created - or plan to create - a student data base, giving detailed information on the social situation of students. In some cases (e.g., Ireland) this is based on information gathered by the HEIs themselves. Several countries also plan to conduct regular student surveys.

Some countries (e.g., Scotland) produce annual reports on the success of widening policies, giving performance indicators of HEIs.

Data collection and research is typically done by a National Statistical Service, the Ministry of Education, or by a special agency. Student organisations can also be involved in conducting surveys. Several countries report that they have benefited from their participation in the Eurostudent Surveys on the Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe [4].

In some countries (e.g., Finland) Student Unions also conduct research in cooperation with the government.

Finally, it should be observed that some countries mention privacy or data protection problems when collecting data on the financial situation of students, their ethnic roots, possible disabilities, etc.

B. Measures intended for specific under-represented groups

In this section we report on measures which are intended to increase the participation of specific under-represented groups.

B.1. Groups with a lower socio-economic background.

The availability of adequate funding is essential to allow students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate in HE. Before discussing various instruments which can be used to improve the availability of funding, there is a fundamental issue which has to be clarified. Across Europe we can distinguish two opposite views when defining the financial strength of a student.

Most countries perceive a student as still a dependent, requiring maintenance, taken care of by his or her family. The need for financial aid is then determined by the financial situation of the student's family. Other countries perceive a student as an individual, independent of her/his family.

In the latter view the financial aid given by the government should in principle be the same for each individual student, independent of the parents' or the family's financial situation. This latter view is held, e.g., by Sweden, Denmark and Finland. In the Czech Republic the introduction of a generic study grant is an important element in that country's strategic plan for the future. More research could be done concerning the relationship between the prevalence of one of these two extreme views, and the degree of participative equity.

There are various types of *indirect measures* from which students can benefit financially. The first type consists of tax exemptions for parents with children in HEIs, exemptions from income tax on amounts spent on education and training, and family allowances which are continued till the end of the studies, usually limited to a certain age.

A second type of indirect measure refers to support for student housing and food services, transportation subsidies and health insurance. These subsidies are sometimes paid directly by the government and sometimes also by HEIs.

Most countries also provide *direct support and assistance measures* for students in the form of grants and/or loans. In fact, the availability of adequate funding through grants and loans is crucial, especially for students with a lower economic background. Almost all countries have worked out a variety of such financial measures. Systems of financial grants for students fall into three different categories: (1) grants can be merit based; (2) they can be based on the income of the family maintaining the student (means tested basis); and (3) grants can be generic. Countries which treat students as financially dependent on their parents typically have a combination of (1) and (2). Countries which treat students as financially independent persons usually have generic grants.

Many countries applying income based study grants use highly developed schemes linking the size of the scholarship with the financial situation (ability to pay) of the student. Special rates of maintenance grants exist for the most economically disadvantaged students. Scholarships are granted by the government, by the HEIs, or by non-profit organisations.

In most countries loans are granted on non-commercial terms. These loans are often guaranteed by the state.

Scholarships are sometimes intended to be used for specific types of expenditure. Accommodation scholarships are an example. Some countries also provide scholarships for student mobility within the Erasmus programme in addition to EC grants.

Many countries also partially or totally reimburse tuition fees. In some countries there are no tuition fees. Another way of assisting students is through the availability of part-time jobs for students. Some countries reserve budget financed study places for students with high academic performance.

In section 5. 2.a. we stated that people with a lower social-economic background are sometimes concentrated in isolated, deprived areas. To stimulate access from these regions these countries have taken several correcting measures.

- Several countries have developed a network of HEIs across the country, ensuring easy access into HE in all regions of the country. Several of these countries also encourage distance learning and e-learning.

- In Romania scholarships are granted to students from rural areas who promise to return to their home community for some period after graduation.

B.2. Less educated immigrants and cultural minorities.

Many countries provide financial support for these groups. Their governments pay tuition fees, or provide scholarships, loans or special grants for specific minorities.

Many countries offer extra language training, and create opportunities to improve the students' cultural integration.

Several countries have launched affirmative action programmes.

Parents are often urged to send their children to school from an early age, or to attend pre-school education. Some countries also offer full first cycle programs in the languages of significant minorities.

B.3. Students with a disability

To stimulate access by this group of students governments often provide extra grants or exemption from tuition fees.

Governments also often provide extra funding to HEIs admitting students with disabilities. They also often provide additional funding for expenses related to the support needed by disabled students. Many countries have improved the accessibility of buildings.

In Hungary students with a disability are awarded additional entrance points for their admission to HE. The HEIs also receive supplementary funding for each student with a disability they admit. This funding has to be used for special equipment and services for these students. In Sweden HEIs have to spend a minimum proportion of government funding on disabled students. In Norway all HEIs are required to have action plans to ensure equal access for students with a disability. Other countries reserve a specific number of places for candidates with a disability

Several countries have taken legislative initiatives to approve laws forbidding any discrimination of persons with a disability.

Several countries offer special learning assistance for disabled students, and make special examination provisions. Some countries, like e.g. the Netherlands, support a national Expertise Centre, which offers advice to students and HEIs on specific issues and practical problems

The extent to which students with a disability can and do participate in international mobility schemes remains an open question.

B.4. Non-traditional students (mature students, students with foreign qualifications)

All countries are strongly committed to supporting lifelong learning for all citizens. They aim to enable mature students - often with work and family commitments - to improve their personal development, to acquire new skills in order to progress in their career or in order to reintegrate into the labour market. As stated in section 5.2.d., this group of

students requires flexible arrangements for admission and procedures for recognition of programmes, and rules for recognising prior learning. They also need more flexible learning paths and delivery methods. Studying in such a non-traditional way also often involves extra costs, both for the students and for the HEIs.

Flexible learning paths can also support linguistic minorities, students with a disability, and students with foreign qualifications. Non-traditional students can often benefit from extra support to finance their studies. They are given the opportunity to receive supplementary loans for additional costs in connection with their studies. Students with children are offered extra assistance with child care, or receive extra child allowance.

Statistics showing the effects of measures creating opportunities for flexible learning paths are typically not available. Some countries, however, can offer success stories. In Sweden, for example, the percentage of non-traditional students coming from a less favourable social background has risen from 18 percent to 25 percent between the academic years 1993/94 and 2007/07. However, there are also indications that the trend towards widened participation is less significant in recent years. Portugal also reports a significant increase in the number of students after the start of a new more flexible access regime.

B.5. Gender discrimination

In order to correct any gender imbalances, many countries have launched equal opportunity or affirmative action programmes. In some countries, e.g. Sweden, such actions can be legally enforced.

Better information or promotion campaigns on study programmes and employment opportunities are examples of other possible measures. Access to affordable childcare of good quality has also been instigated to prevent gender discrimination.

5.5. Strategies for the future

In the introductory section of this summary report the huge variation in the quality of the national reports was mentioned. This observation is especially true for the sections of the reports relating to Part III of the template "Process towards a more inclusive HE system (Strategy for the future)", which is the basis for this section. Some countries very convincingly summarise their strategies for the future, while other countries provide hardly any information.

Concerning policy objectives, further improvements in access to HE for under-represented groups remains a policy priority for most countries. As specific situations vary widely between countries, they often have different more specific policy priorities, requiring the use of specific instruments to achieve these objectives.

Many countries want to give special attention to one or more groups which are under-represented in terms of access to HE. Cultural minorities and students with a disability are frequently mentioned.

For many countries the further development of flexible learning paths is crucial. This instrument is essential for lifelong learning,   and it also a necessary ingredient in policies which try to improve the access of many under-represented groups. Again, the reader is referred to the complementary report by A. Timofei [9].

Other countries want to expand and to refine their system of student grants, or the funding rules of the universities. Many countries also stress the need to focus on the upper secondary education level as a key area for success in HE.

Any long-term strategy for educational policies must be based on reliable data and sound research. It must also incorporate the expected needs of the labour market[6], the immigration policy, and the general budgetary policy constraints. All stakeholders should also be involved. Moreover, given that education is a policy area in which radical changes cannot be expected in the short run, targets, instruments and budgets should be defined several years in advance.

Several countries have defined exactly such fully integrated policies. A good example of such an integrated approach is Ireland's National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013. See reference [7]. The following citation from that country's national report is very illustrative. "Ireland has achieved an unprecedented expansion in educational opportunities over the last four decades and has now reached entry rates to HE in excess of 55 per cent. Assessment of future skills needs in the National Skills Strategy predict that entry rates to higher education should reach 72 per cent by 2020. The over-arching single goal of the Widening Access strand is to develop initiatives to underpin the concept of lifelong learning and to improve access rates to third level from designated under represented groups, in order to achieve the envisaged rates of participation in HE" (p. 38).

Clearly, a close monitoring and measuring of progress is essential. In this respect many countries rely on yearly reports and on statistical data. Several countries report that Eurostudent IV will be very helpful.

In most countries the authority responsible for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of national strategies is the Ministry of Education. There is also typically a Council of HE in which all stakeholders (students, employers, government and HEIs) are represented.

5.6. Concluding remarks and recommendations of the social dimension coordination group

The main conclusion of this report is that, in general, the social dimension is an important element of the higher education policy of the countries participating in the Bologna Process. At the same time, it is also clear that the group of reporting countries is very diverse and heterogeneous. Some countries have recently experienced significant changes in their political regimes. The institutional contexts in which

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[6] See also the interesting document [2].

governments operate, the challenges they face and the instruments that are available to them are extremely diverse.

To further support and speed up the social dimension of the Bologna Process the working group has formulated a number of recommendations.

The analysis shows clearly that virtually all countries take some action in order to enhance participative equity in their country, but only a minority of the countries has set up monitoring systems for measuring progress on the issue. Still fewer show evidence for an integrated strategy with synergies between government actions and institutional practices, funding arrangements, lifelong learning strategies, recognition of prior learning, cultural and linguistic minority issues, guidance services, communication policy, social policy, anti-discrimination protection, tax system etc.

The coordination group concluded that there is still a long way to go before the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels will reflect the diversity of our populations. Therefore, this objective set for the social dimension at the Ministerial conference in London is still valid, and even more so in the context of globalisation, demographic challenges and the current financial crisis.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the answers in the national reports to the questions on which measures the Bologna countries have taken (or are about to take) to improve participative equity in the national reports, only provide part of the picture.

In the context of the 2009 Stocktaking exercise, the answers on the national strategies for the social dimension should be read also in the context of what countries report on lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning, flexible learning paths and support to mobility and on future challenges for the national higher education system as a whole.

It was also striking that the issue of the social dimension of higher education is a very wide topic, which requires integration of national policies on education with other policy areas.

1. Evidence-based policy making and the development of performance indicators

The coordination group saw a strong need of evidence-based policy making and for collecting and developing sound data and indicators in order to measure progress at national level with a view to possible future benchmarking.

The upcoming report of Eurostat and Eurostudent on Social Dimension and Mobility in the Bologna Process can therefore be seen as a first step to close this information gap, at least from the perspective of overall participation rates and average educational attainment levels in each country.

2. Students with a disability

From the national reports it is clear that achieving equality of opportunity for students with a disability remains an important challenge. The Social Dimension Coordination Group recommends that governments and HEIs commit themselves to giving more

attention to this group of students. This is also a recommendation expressed at the international seminar in Bruges on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. See [6].

 A necessary first step is to agree on a set of data, giving information on the size and the composition of this group of students.

Countries should then report regularly on the progress they are making.

3. Provision of social support services for students.

For the daily life of the students, social support services are crucial. It is, therefore, essential to obtain more information on the quality of the provision of these services. For the moment this information is very limited.

General recommendation

The coordination group recommends that the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué should reiterate the objectives for participative equity set by the Ministers in London 2007. Based on the outcomes of the analysis of the national strategies on the social dimension, the Ministers should commit themselves to continue collecting and developing sound data and indicators to facilitate monitoring of progress and evidence-based adjustments of policy-making towards a more inclusive higher education in Europe.

References

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[2] COM(2008) 868, *New Skills for New Jobs, Anticipating and Matching Labour Market and Skills Needs*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 16.12.2008.

[3] Eurostat & Eurostudent, *Social Dimension and Mobility in the Bologna Process*, Draft version, 6 February 2009.

[4] Eurostat, *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe, Synopsis of Indicators, Final Report, Eurostat III*, 2005 – 2008.

[5] *Key Issues for the European Higher Education Area – Social Dimension and Mobility*, Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries, May 2007, Regeringskansliet, Government Offices of Sweden.

[6] Memorandum of the International Seminar *From Bologna to Bruges and far beyond: Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, Bruges, 1-4 December 2008.

[7] *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education,* Published by the National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education, Higher Education Authority, Dublin, July 2008.

[8] OECD, 2008, *Education at a Glance 2008, OECD Indicators*.

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[10] Wössmann L. and G. Schütz, 2006, *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems*, Report for the European Commission prepared by the European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE), April 2006

This summary report is based on the national reports submitted for the Bologna Stocktaking 2009 exercise, especially on Part II on the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process, received from Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium-Flemish community, Belgium- French community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, , Estonia, Finland, France, FYROMacedonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, , Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Scotland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom (England, Wales, Northern_Ireland), UK (Scotland), Ukraine.

Template for National Strategies on the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process

I   Definition of the Social Dimension in the London Communiqué.

"We strive for the social goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of our populations. We therefore pledge to take action to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity".

II   AS IS SITUATION (Current state of affairs).

1. Which groups in society are still underrepresented in your national higher education system? What are the main obstacles to participative equity in terms of access and successful completion of studies?

2. Please describe what measures your government is taking to increase the representation of groups identified in the question above. Please refer to the possible actions listed in the Bologna Working Group report on the Social Dimension and Mobility.

3. Describe what measures are being taken by the Government to help students complete their studies without obstacles related to their social or economic background. Again, please refer to the possible actions listed in the Bologna Working Group report on the Social Dimension and Mobility. Please indicate whether the measures apply to all students or only to certain levels or types of higher education institutions.

4. Does your country have statistical and/or other research evidence at its disposal to underpin the identification of underrepresented groups and the main obstacles to participative equity (see Q1). If yes, please specify. Or are regular student surveys organised with the aim of providing data concerning the social dimension?

III   PROCESS TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM (strategy for the future).

5. How do you plan to tackle the challenges identified under Q 1 in the near future (2008 – 2010)?

    (a) Which concrete goals do you want to achieve?

    (b) What actions are planned for the different target groups identified above to assist them to overcome obstacles to access, participation and completion of studies by students? Please refer to Annex B and to the suggested approach

outlined in the 2007 report from the Bologna Process Working Group on the Social Dimension and Mobility.

(c) Is there a specific budget for these measures for underrepresented groups? If so, please provide details.

(d) Is there a timeline for action? If yes, provide details.

6. What arrangements are planned for monitoring progress towards more equitable access, participation and success?

IV Information on the National responsibility for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the national Strategies.

Please indicate which authority or other party is responsible for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the national strategy and describe the way in which the various stakeholders are involved. Did your country designate (a) contact point(s) for the national strategy? If so, please add the coordinates of the national contact point(s).

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