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**Widening Participation for Equity and Growth**

*A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020*

**A Strategy to 2020**

We, as Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), call for the development of effective policies to ensure greater access to, participation in and completion of quality higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are still too many capable students who are excluded from higher education systems because of their socio-economic situation, educational background, insufficient systems of support and guidance and other obstacles.

This strategy is therefore based on our fundamental social dimension policy objective that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations.

We also to commit to further encouraging the development of lifelong learning at national, regional and institutional level to meet the needs of a fast-changing labour market and knowledge-based and learning society to unlock the potential in higher education and ensure the continuous development of competences and to stimulate greater social inclusion, social solidarity and civic engagement.

**Overall objectives**

1. We agree that all member countries in the EHEA will develop national plans or strategies to address participation in higher education which identify underrepresented groups in higher education and outline specific, measurable actions to improve access, participation and completion for those groups, consistent with national approaches.
2. We will continue to engage in, encourage and promote the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to further develop the work initiated in this area with a view to assist EHEA members in elaborating their national plans or strategies for widening participation or reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of their implementation.
3. We support evolving data collection on the social dimension making optimal use of existing data resources across the EHEA to be established with sufficient consistency to enable Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process objectives in this area.
4. We will encourage higher education institutions to continue to develop and expand lifelong learning opportunities in consultation with employers and social partners and we will work towards the development of flexible and transparent progression routes into higher education and the introduction of clear mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning based on a learning-outcomes approach for qualifications and the implementation of qualifications frameworks.
5. We will improve opportunities for flexible learning by encouraging diversification of the way in which learning content is delivered, for instance by adopting student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, by expanding part-time provision, by developing credit-based traineeships, by modularising programmes and distance learning through the use of ICT and by developing quality-assured open educational resources.
6. We recognise the importance of teaching and learning for successful completion and we are committed to ensuring that curriculum, pedagogical methodology, continuous professional development and academic freedom support the work of teachers in best meeting the individual needs of students.
7. We will further facilitate graduates’ employability by developing entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, counselling students and graduates about traineeships and job-seeking (CV writing, skills analysis, job interviews in particular).
8. In order to effectively monitor the implementation of this strategy for the development of the social dimension and lifelong learning and the specific measures it contains, we request the BFUG to report on progress at the next Ministerial Conference in 2018.

**National access plans or strategies**

In pursuing our commitment to widen overall access to, participation in and completion of quality higher education, Ministers in each member country in the EHEA agree to set objectives, follow up with specific actions and collect relevant data. The national access plans or strategies are a national responsibility. However, as Ministers, we commit that they will contain at least the following:

* A commitment to working with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders to identify underrepresented groups and the barriers to access, participation and completion (barriers due, for example, to socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, disability or other reasons, depending on the different situations in individual member countries).
* When the barriers and groups have been defined, we will also work with education and student service providers at all levels and other relevant stakeholders to develop strategies to overcome these barriers and set objectives for underrepresented groups and the elimination of barriers. These objectives will be supported by outlined actions for both the national and institutional level.
* Arrangements for the systematic collection of relevant comparable data, making optimal use of existing resources, to enhance the evidence base for policy development and enable the effective monitoring of the common objectives on access, participation and completion among under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education.

Member countries that have adopted a coherent set of measures that address the key points of a social dimension and life-long learning strategy, albeit through a different approach such as in a wider strategy for higher education, can be considered to follow the European strategy if they meet relevant criteria. If a member country has adopted measures that address barriers for underrepresented groups, is monitoring the effectiveness of its policies on access, participation and completion and has addressed the need for data collection, then this can be considered equivalent to a national plan or strategy.

**Guidelines to assist countries in developing national plans or strategies**

A set of guidelines has been produced to assist countries to meet the challenge of developing or enhancing national plans or strategies according to national systems (see Annex 1).

We encourage member countries to use these guidelines in order to ensure that national plans or strategies are developed using a systematic approach to identifying barriers into and within the higher education system, based on relevant data providing evidence for action.