**Idea sketch for the establishment of an European Observatory on Social Dimension of Higher Education (EOSDHE)**

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1. **Project rationale**

Improving the social dimension of higher education entails focusing on the real needs and the personal circumstances of certain student groups, since these often constitute barrier to entry, participation and successful completion of higher education. Both the recent Bologna communiqué from Leuven and the EU Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training agree on this. The EU Council invites member states – with regard to higher education – to undertake the following actions:

* “Promote widened access, for example by strengthening financial support schemes for students and through flexible and diversified learning paths.
* Develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates of higher education, including through strengthening individualised support, guidance and mentoring for students.
* Continue to eliminate barriers to, expand opportunities for, and improve the quality of, learning mobility, including by providing adequate incentives for the mobility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
* Promote specific programmes for adult students and other non-traditional learners.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

The Bologna communiqué from 2009 expresses the expectation that Bologna signatory countries to “set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade”.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this, actors at European and national levels have found that there are multiple actions and measures which can be taken at different levels of an education system in order to attempt improvements in the social dimension. Thus, it is evident that national context is an important determinant of what actions are taken and at what level – although commonalities do exist.[[3]](#footnote-3) In its analysis of strategies and practices coming from efforts to improve the social dimension in European higher education, the Bologna Social Dimension Coordination Group (2007-2009) was able identify country examples of best practice. However, it this working group also concluding that more work was necessary in order to properly assess country strategies and practices in this area. It was this knowledge that led the current Bologna Working Group on the Social Dimension (2009-2012) to propose the establishment of European Observatory on the Social Dimension of Higher Education (EOSDHE).

It would have the purpose of supporting a structured and systematic peer learning between countries and institutions in order to lead to improvements in the social dimension in European higher education.

*We in EUROSTUDENT would be very interested in setting up a project to kick-off the work of an Observatory because of our interest in the field of the social dimension and because we know that the policies and measures which are actually implemented in the European countries are a blackbox for our own analyses. At the same time, we see that there is a need for a central, sorting and coordinating point, which could help to give meaning to the term “social dimension in higher education” and this is what the Observatory would be.*

1. **Objectives and activities**

We agree with the ideas already discussed in the Working Group, namely that an Observatory should cover:

1. monitoring relevant aspects of the social dimension implementation across EHEA (i.e. national targets and national action plans on social dimension)
2. collection of good practices and successful stories at national, regional and institutional level (i.e. exchange good practice on how to increase participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, access routes, flexibility of studies)

These tasks could be seen as the passive tasks of the Observatory.

The strategies and practices which are being used throughout the EHEA would be collected and systematically catalogued. They could then be made available on an exclusive or open website, where other actors from other countries or institutions could look up what is available and use it to influence their own policy and practice development. Furthermore, typologies of measures could be developed to facilitate both policy development and systematic evaluations.

In this sense, the Observatory would be supporting the open method of coordination (OMC).

A further type of activity could be added to the two mentioned above. This would be:

1. provision of expert team for the evaluation of national practices in the area of the social dimension of higher education

This active task would see the Observatory as a secretariat, which can organize external reviews of country practices at the behest of these countries. This idea is similar to what the OECD offers in terms of country reviews. If a country has just enacted reforms or would like to evaluate the current situation in its higher education system, it can call on the Observatory to help organize such a review. The secretariat would put together an international team of reviewers, who have experience and knowledge in the area, and would organize the logistics of the review together with a national team of experts. The external partners would then carry out a study visit to the country and formulate a review document.

1. **Scope**

Taking the lead from both the outcomes of the Bologna Social Dimension Coordination Group (2007-2009) and current internal papers and discussions with the Bologna Working Group on the Social Dimension at present (2009-2012), the proposed observatory will collate and catalogue initiatives and measures which have the objective of reducing barriers to higher education entry and of providing a conducive study environment for all students, which can lead to their successful graduation.

It will use a basic typology similar to the one below to systematically collate information on measures and initiatives and prepare then both for peer learning and for analysis.

Table 1: Possible typology for the collation of SD measures

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Measure occurs | *To whom?* |
| *Where?* | **Person** | **Institution** |
|  | All students | Selected students | All higher education institutions  | Selected higher education institutions |
| Before HE entry | 1 | 4 | 7 | 10 |
| At HE entry | 2 | 5 | 8 | 11 |
| During study progress | 3 | 6 | 9 | 12 |

 Examples related to the numbers in the cells above.

* (1) Provision of information for pupils of secondary schooling on higher education (e.g. school liaison officers from universities in England/Wales)
* (2) Provision of different routes into higher education with a more academic or vocational profile (e.g. different BAC’s in France). These might encourage pupils not definite about studying to obtain the entry qualification.
* (3) The provision of special counselling services during the study programme, which also recognise the possible effects of change to personal circumstances on study progress.

All of these initiatives could alternatively be targeted at student groups, which are typically disadvantaged (4, 5, 6). According to various analyses these are usually:

* groups for lower socio-ecoomic backgrounds
* (less educated) immigrants and cultural minorities
* students with a disability
* mature students
* (in some cases) different genders

A further way of supporting students is indirectly via their place of study. An example would be providing extra state funding for study places for students from under-represented groups (8, 9).

This type of cataloguing and sorting initiatives will be a first step towards facilitating peer learning. The third activity above, which envisages country evaluations by expert team is designed to encourage the “virtuous cycle” between systematic analysis and policy improvement.

1. **Funding and start-up project**
* A project could be formulated with the above goals and objectives, which would be funding using the LLP KA4 Valorisation funding stream.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* The project could be organized to run for a duration of 2 or (preferably 3) years.
* Deadline for project submission: 31.3.2011

This project could entail setting up the infrastructure, carrying out tasks 1 (monitoring) and 2 (collection) and for task 3 (review) offering up to 4 countries a free country review, with the costs covered fully by the project.

The project would become sustainable, if the reviews are viewed as so valuable that countries are prepared to pay for them. This may occur within the project’s lifetime or afterwards.

1. **Consortium**

We would like to involve the expertise of people within the EUROSTUDENT Network to set this up:

* Dominic Orr, HIS-Institute for Research on Higher Education and international coordinator for EUROSTUDENT
* Martin Unger, Institute for Higher Studies (HIS), Austria and lead researcher for EUROSTUDENT
* Natia Andguladza, Ilia State University, Georgia, asst. professor and former head of research at the Georgian Ministry of Research

We would also like to involve members of the current working group on the social dimension of higher education.

It would also be important to receive the endorsement of the Bologna Secretariat and the working group for this proposal.

1. Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training 3013th Education, Youth and Culture Council meeting, Brussels, 11 May 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Bologna Process 2020 - The European Higher Education Area in the new decade – Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009 - Report from working groups appointed by the Bologna Follow-up Group to the Ministerial Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 28-29 April 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/llp/doc/call11/fiches/valor1_en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)