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Social dimension - the lost dimension?

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Good afternoon to you all. First of all I would like to state how honoured ESU is to be invited to this Bologna Process seminar on Social Dimension, and for being allowed to contribute to the sessions. It means extremely much, as the Social Dimension is for ESU and students, the most important part of the Bologna Process.

The European Students' Union, ESU, is the umbrella organisation of 49 national unions of students from 38 countries, and through these members represents over 11 million students. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level, towards all relevant bodies.

The red thread in ESU's work, is pressing for equal opportunities in higher education. Higher education that is accessible, equitable, and free of charge. Higher Education should not be considered as a servant of a country's economy, but as an important actor in a knowledge based society. Most importantly, higher education is intrinsically linked with human rights. The right to higher education is a human right, but not a privilege, and higher education is a fundamental means of promoting all human rights.

ESU plays an important role in the implementation of the Bologna Process, f.ex. by participating in the Bologna Follow up Group, where ESU has active representatives in the board, and all working groups. From the beginning of the process, ESU has been pressing for inclusion of a social dimension as a top priority.

The Social dimension is highly important, as still too many capable students are excluded from the higher education system due to their background, insufficient student support systems or other barriers. It was therefore a great achievement for

ESU, in Prague 2001, when the ministers agreed upon the students' suggestions to include the social dimension as an integral part of the Bologna Process.

However, although there have been promises made, and although the importance of the Social Dimension has been stated in several communiqués since in Prague, not very much has happened, and the Social Dimension has more or less been forgotten, ignored or left aside, during the implementation of the Bologna Process. It is certainly the lost or forgotten dimension of the Bologna Process.

ESU believes the Social Dimension of higher education to be the fundamental cornerstone of the entire reform agenda. ESU promotes the democratisation of Higher Education, so that everyone will be able to access and succeed in Higher Education regardless of their background, and strongly believes that all discrimination is equally objectionable. Furthermore, education is the main instrument for emancipation, instead of embedding the existing inequalities present in our society.

The overall goal from the London Communiqué of May 2007, “that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” (London Communiqué of May 2007) must be the guiding element for defining the future objectives and must be the indicator for monitoring the effects and the success of the reforms introduced.

Through the Bergen and London Communiqués, ministers reaffirmed the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background and promised to continue their 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. ESU supports the definition given to the social dimension in London and believes the governments should strive for participative equity in higher education.

ESU therefore heavily regrets the fact that the promises made by the ministers have been violated in many countries. Education funding and financial support for students has become the biggest area of concern for our member unions. Across the EHEA we see tuition fees being introduced or where they exist already, raised in value. Furthermore there are constant calls for a marketisation of education to substitute for absent public funding for institutions. These moves are contradictory to

the ministers' intentions of "students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background." (London Communiqué of May 2007).

The fear of debt and student hardship, especially in the context of the current economic climate, is a huge deterrent to entering Higher Education, especially for lower socio-economic backgrounds. Yet despite exactly this group being targeted in the 2005 Bergen Communiqué's text on the social dimension, we continue to see little progress towards suitable student financial support systems. Despite the importance being given to the social dimension, their commitments remain vague.

One of the main obstacles to accessing and completing higher education is the question of finances. The financial situation of the students has a great impact on the student's ability to study, and excludes many of the society's groups from participating in higher education. This great barrier has to be removed, in order to ensure the diversity within higher education. Student loans and grants systems ensure possibilities for those who come from lower income families. However, in most cases, student loans and grants don't cover the actual living cost of students, forcing them to take on a part time, or even a full time job aside their studies, often resulting in students either not finishing their studies on time, or dropping out of higher education. Since the introduction of the Social Dimension in the Bologna Process, very few countries have increased study loans and grants, or taken other measures to improve the poor financial situation of students. In many countries the financial situation has been worsened, due to the introduction of tuition fees, or raising the amounts of existing tuition fees, without increasing the availability of loans and grants.

ESU strongly feels that the argument of disciplining students by burdening them financially is superficial and not worth any serious consideration. The reasons for students' delays in completing their studies are various. They are often due to the necessity of having to work alongside their studies, and other reasons closely connected to their social situation. Tuition fees negatively affect poorer students, while those from a financially well-off background will still be able to afford irresponsible behaviour. Fees have also showed discriminatory effects in the context of people who suffer discrimination. The social dimension in the Bologna Process, calls for higher education being more accessible and equitable, but with the

introduction or increasing of tuition fees, countries are taking a step back, and not at all increasing equity within higher education. As the financial barrier is one of the main obstacles to accessing higher education, tuition fees are far from increasing the participation of underrepresented groups, and countries are taking a step away from the goal of the ministers, that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations.

Tuition fees are a danger to the social dimension within higher education, and not the only danger that currently is decreasing the social conditions and diversity of higher education.

In the year 2000 the European Union, through the Lisbon strategy, set the aims of becoming 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. In the centre of this strategy, is the reformation of the Higher Education area, by encouraging and shaping changes in the legislation in order to give higher education institutions the conditions to fully achieve 'excellence' in education and attract the most talented students and researchers.

There is strong evidence that student's educational attainment is strongly influenced by their cultural and socio-economic background. Thus advocating selection procedures which are supposed to concentrate resources on the more talented students is in itself a policy which opposes the principal of social mobility and a decrease of equity in higher education. Moreover, considering that students peers are a major source of learning, and a way to improve equality in higher education, separating different levels of perceived talents must be avoided. School and higher education systems which are separating students with 'supposedly' different level of abilities are, in fact, leading to a lack of flexibility, and to students from lower socio-economic background getting in the lower levels courses. Rather, each student should be able to enjoy individual attention, respect and guidance from their teachers in a diversified context. In this light, ESU is against the development of so-called 'elite' programmes and excellence centres, which focus on a small number of individuals and institutions that are considered talents or of high quality.

As previously stated there remain many barriers to education, including

admission policies based solely on prior academic achievement and extra-curricular activity; in-accessible curricula, materials and estates and a lack of appropriate information available to first generation students. Yet so far the social dimension action line has failed to stimulate a debate on how the EHEA can work to remove these barriers after 2010.

If we are to create a European Higher Education Area that is attractive and of high quality, it is of vast importance that the barriers are removed, and equal opportunities are ensured to all those that wish to seek higher education. In some countries no work has been done concerning the social dimension, and in other countries the barriers to accessing higher education have been set higher and the obstacles increased. That clearly shows that despite the promises and goals set in the previous communiqués, the social dimension seems to be lost and forgotten within the implementation of the bologna process. That is a fact ESU regrets, and calls for Ministers and government to bring those promises back from the back of their minds, and respond to the call from students and society to make higher education accessible and equitable, so that it really reflects the diversity of our populations.