

No Future for the Social Dimension?

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1 Introduction

The social dimension of the Bologna Process has come to a turning point. In the last fifteen years the social dimension has progressed little in comparison to every other headline area of the Bologna Process, and the member states of the European Higher Education Area (henceforth EHEA) have demonstrated less proactive commitment to developing it. Seven successive ministerial communiqués (2001–2012) have celebrated progress on many fronts, bemoaned uneven developments in others, and largely repeated with more or less nuanced rhetoric the Prague communiqué’s distant goal to “take account of the social dimension of higher education.” Anecdotally, ministers seem to loath to articulate measurable goals in the social dimension or to imply any super-national responsibility for the makeup of their student populations. This article addresses the question of what future there is for the social dimension in the EHEA at the historical development of the social dimension (the past), current implementation of the social dimension (the present), and how it might develop over the coming years (the future).

This article aims to provide a provocative input regarding the future development of the social dimension in the hope of stimulating debate. As a foundation to that, we hope to contribute to an understanding of the historical development and

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current state of the social dimension. The social dimension should be understood, in brief, as the strategies and measures taken to mirror the diversity of society at large within higher education (European Higher Education Area, EHEA 2007). Europe is facing considerable change: increasing mobility within Europe and a growing diversity, or even ‘super-diversity’ (Crul et al. 2013). At the same time, rising inequality (OECD 2014b), and increased risk of poverty and exclusion (European Commission 2013). The demand for a sustainable and efficient social dimension of higher education is still a given, though the motivation to focus on a social dimension might have changed over the years since the concept’s introduction.

1.1 The Past: Historical Development of the Social Dimension

Some time before the Bologna Process began in earnest, the philosophy of the as yet to be named social dimension had already gained some currency in policy discussions. The Council of Europe’s Recommendation on Access to Higher Education defined ‘access’ in the broader sense that the social dimension inherited, i.e. “widening [...] participation in higher education to all sections of society, and [...] ensuring that this participation is effective” (CoE 1998).

The first inclusion of the social dimension in the Bologna process (EHEA 1999) came in the Prague Communiqué (EHEA 2001). There the “Ministers [...] reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process” (EHEA 2001). As stated in the Communiqué, the initial push to include the social dimension on the agenda of the Bologna process came from students (EHEA 2001). Consequently, it is important to analyse the intentions of student representatives involved in the process at that time.

Dr. Manja Klemenčič, Director/Secretary General (1999–2001) of the European Students’ Information Bureau (ESIB), recalls ESIB’s preparation for the Ministerial Summit in Prague where they were to be formally acknowledged as the only organisation representing students involved in Bologna process (Klemenčič 2012), having been excluded among other stakeholder organisations in the Bologna conference. ESIB’s second European Students’ Convention in Gothenburg addressed a wide range of policy concerning the implementation and future of the Bologna process, including the social implications of higher education, mobility, quality assurance and accreditation. The «Student Göteborg Declaration» (ESIB 2001) summarized the key findings of that meeting and was included in the annex of key reports submitted to Ministers alongside other inputs. The declaration highlighted in particular that “although the Bologna Declaration pointed out the basic aspects of the European dimension of higher education, it failed to address the social implications the process has on students [...] and that education should be considered a public good, [...] and there is a [...] need to remove both academic and social, economic and political obstacles [...]”. The Prague Communiqué (EHEA 2001)

directly echoed the Göteborg declaration when it stated: “Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process.”

The context of the time must be taken into consideration here, as ESIB (like many other actors in the education policy sphere) had become much occupied during the 1990s with attempting to contain the influence of the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) trade agreement of 1994 (World Trade Organisation, 1994), which marked the real beginning of the so-called commodification of higher education. GATS directly links education within a legally binding document to the labour market and economic interests. Goals such as the improved recognition of degrees harmonisation of the EHEA are in line with GATS targets: “Member may recognize the education or experience obtained... Such recognition which may be achieved through the harmonization” (GATS 1994). Even access to education has a relation to GATS as “A Member...shall afford adequate opportunity for other interested Members to negotiate their accession...Where a Member accords recognition autonomously, it shall afford adequate opportunity for any other Member...” (GATS 1994).

As GATS is an agreement with a focus solely on economics and trade, it can be seen to contradict the social dimension as social needs are not recognised on the same level as economical interest. The very fact that the ministers involved in the Prague communiqué made a clear statement that Higher Education «should be a public good and will remain a public responsibility» (EHEA 2001) is a clear signal, and the social dimension as an element of this non trade-oriented and holistic aspect of the EHEA is more understandable.

The Göteborg Declaration was explicit in asking: “...you, the ministers responsible for higher education, explicitly to write a social dimension into the implementation of the Bologna Declaration.” In the Prague Communiqué it can be seen that this call was heard, though perhaps with an eye to the specifically European dimension of the process. At that point, mobility was the particular focus of the social dimension: “[...] Ministers encouraged the follow-up group to arrange seminars to explore the following areas: [...] the social dimension, with specific attention to obstacles to mobility [...]”. The social dimension within the Prague Communiqué was not seen as an independent action line. Rather, it was much more an aspect which refers to the targets of creating a European dimension within higher education, and as well the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA. The introduction of the social dimension within the Prague Communiqué can be understood as mean to achieve a “lasting employability” and therefore still follows the economic logic of GATS, although the students intended to counterbalance this logic.

The Berlin communiqué (EHEA 2003) made little new ground in relation to the social dimension, merely reasserting the ministers’ commitment to it, while drawing particular attention to gender equality, and (in what will become a recurring theme) drawing attention to the need for more comparable data on the social and economic situation of students.

In a somewhat more declaratory tone, the social dimension was further developed in the Bergen Communiqué (EHEA 2005) where the ministers committed: “[...] to making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background.” This commitment is made more generally to the social dimension of higher education as a whole.

More notably, by delegating a responsibility to the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to collate data on the social and economic situation of students in participating countries, the ministers had set an expectation that, at the following conference in London in 2007, they would be presented a report on the progress towards this goal: “We also charge the Follow-up Group with presenting comparable data [...] on the social and economic situation of students in participating countries as a basis for future stocktaking and reporting in time for the next Ministerial Conference. The future stocktaking will have to take into account the social dimension as defined above.” (EHEA 2007).

The follow-up group delegated the tasks specific to the monitoring and developing of the social dimension to a newly established working group on social dimension and data on mobility of staff and students. The terms of reference for the working group (at least those immediately relevant to the social dimension) were the following:

- to define the concept of social dimension based on the ministerial communiqués of the Bologna Process;
- to present comparable data on the social and economic situation of students in participating countries;
- to prepare proposals as a basis for future stocktaking (European Higher Education Area/Government Offices of Sweden 2007).

The working group’s report to the London conference of 2007 presented several possible actions to foster the embedding of the social dimension in the systems of participating countries, including measures to promote equal opportunities and equal participation, widen access and participation in higher education. The requirement for national action plans for widening participation in higher education was also taken into consideration in the London meeting.

The follow-up group’s own mandate to the working group in 2005 to distil a definition of the social dimension from the pre-existing ministerial communiqués to date finally reached the most widely cited definition we have for the EHEA’s social dimension in the London communiqué: “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, while stressing the efforts [...] to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.” (EHEA 2007).

Among the priorities for the following period until the ministerial conference in 2009, action plans and measures on the social dimension were introduced, as well as the intention (once again) to “[...] develop comparable and reliable indicators

and data to measure progress towards the overall objective for the social dimension and student and staff mobility in all Bologna countries.”

The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (EHEA 2009), adopted in April 2009, emphasises equitable access and completion. A considerable step forward, rhetorically at least, was made in this communiqué, as each Bologna country is urged to: “[...] set **measurable targets** for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education [...]” (authors’ emphasis). Very few members of the EHEA had begun work on the plans by the time of the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference (European Students’ Union ESU 2009).

Following the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference, the BFUG delegated its work on the social dimension to a more narrowly defined «social dimension working group» for the next three years. In contrast to the terms of reference of ‘the working group of social dimension and data on the mobility of staff and students in participating countries’ (EHEA 2005), the terms of reference for the newly established ‘social dimension working group’ were more specific. The mandate was aiming to provide (note, the mandate this time is directly to the working group) comparable information on practices and data on the implementation of the social dimension—identifying and analysing obstacles to HE, analysing actions taken to increase levels of equity, and analysing strategies of widening access to HE.

The Budapest-Vienna declaration (EHEA 2010) from the 2010 special conference of ministers to officially mark the launch of the EHEA was a very short, stock-taking document. The ministers acknowledged that the social dimension was a key element of the process, but committed to no more than increasing their “efforts on the social dimension in order to provide equal opportunities to quality education, paying particular attention to underrepresented groups.” (EHEA 2010).

Perhaps unfortunately, and despite a considerable broadening of scope since the first mention of the social dimension, the Bucharest Communiqué’s (EHEA 2012a) focus was much narrower, as it mainly focused on the relation between the social dimension and the needs of the labour market. Ministers agreed yet again to adopt national measures to widen participation in higher education, as well as reduce inequalities, ensure flexible learning paths (with a particular new focus on lifelong learning), counselling and guidance, as well as introducing voluntary peer learning in the social dimension, a measure aimed at improving the processes around the development and implementation of National Action Plans for the social dimension, lead in reality by the European Commission-funded PL4SD project (EHEA 2012a).

1.2 The Present: How Is the Social Dimension Being Implemented?

The 2015 Ministerial Conference and Policy Forum in Yerevan will be accompanied by the publication of new stakeholder and ministerial reports on the implementation of the Bologna process and the development of the EHEA. Although

unavailable to us at the time of writing, it is obvious that some challenges to the implementation of the social dimension remain and will be highlighted once again. In comparison with other working areas of the EHEA, e.g. the development of quality assurance, the social dimension is developing quite slowly. Or in the words of the Eurydice report of 2011 ‘the social dimension has not generally become a significant driver for higher education policy’ (Eurydice 2011).

This does not imply that there were no achievements with regards to the social dimension; the peer learning initiative PL4SD (peer learning for the social dimension), for example, is a significant step. The social dimension seems to remain an intimidating concept—it was six years between the Prague Communiqué and the first arguably workable definition of the concept in the London Communiqué—and it is here that some barriers towards the increasing influence of the social dimension on EHEA policy may be rooted. Furthermore, the motivation for a social dimension to pan-European higher education policy may have changed over the years. In the beginning, the social dimension could have been understood as a process to counterbalance the consequences of the original Bologna Declaration (EHEA 1999), which mainly focused on structural unification and competitiveness, and to ensure that the social needs of the student population are recognised. However, this changed with the Bucharest Communiqué when the social dimension appeared to have been altered to serve macro-economic considerations and the demands of the labour market.

The EHEA is quite a diverse collection of countries, especially with regards to employment and social situations (e.g. European Commission 2013). This raises the question if there can be something called ‘the’ social dimension, as this would imply that a single social reality exists in the breadth of EHEA member countries. Here lies perhaps the cause of one of the major challenges of the implementation of the social dimension in the past years. The Bologna process could be hallmarked by a dedicated striving towards unity and structural interchangeability under every other headline of the process—local conditions, differences and needs were hardly recognised. This of course made it difficult to achieve comparable outcomes. In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (EHEA 2009) the ministers agreed to develop national action plans, which for the first time encouraged them to think about their own national and local demands and opportunities. However, this agreement was not taken up by all of the countries as an opportunity to define a social dimension in their own countries. To date, only nine countries have produced such strategies, though some concrete policy targets exist in supporting or related measures in other countries (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice 2014).

Returning to the definition of the social dimension presented in the London Communiqué, some questions need to be raised:

- Who is entering higher education, but much more importantly who is *not* entering higher education?
- What does “the diversity of our populations” or, in other words Europe’s diversity which should be reflected in higher education, look like?

- What are the barriers for successful completion of studies? And what are the factors playing a role to achieve graduation?
- Is the diversity really represented in all three cycles?

These are the most basic questions which can be raised on the basis of the definition of the social dimension. However, this is just the basis, and the target defined within the London Communiqué (EHEA 2007) is both ambitious and nebulous. Some of the questions, e.g. who is entering higher education, can be answered with the data regularly provided by Eurostudent and the Eurydice reports. Others are still tricky to answer and lead to the constant repetition (arguably postponement) of the target to collect more and/or improved data in the ministerial communiqués (EHEA 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012b).

The EHEA defines the social dimension as a pure aspect of higher education ‘... entering, participating in and completing higher education...’ (EHEA 2007) while OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) publications like ‘Education at a Glance’ (OECD 2014a, b) and ‘PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do’ (OECD 2012b) could be used to argue that the social dimension starts in early childhood education and not just with the admission to higher education. To really ensure that the ‘student body ...reflect the diversity of our populations’ (EHEA 2007) it is therefore exactly this wider approach which is needed. Another question related to this is whether the social dimension stops after graduation. This question seems to have been answered definitively, though perhaps unintentionally in the negative, as after the last ministerial conference in Bucharest Lifelong Learning was added to the BFUG working group on social dimension. “Lifelong learning” itself, however, is yet another problematic term badly in need of at least a London-style definition.

The social dimension as it is currently defined goes beyond the competences of ministries responsible for higher education; it also overlaps with the competences of ministries responsible, for example, for finance, social affairs, work and primary-secondary education. However, these ministries were never included in the debates on the nature of the social dimension and how it can be successfully implemented. This is troublesome as many aspects of the social dimension so far elaborated overlap with other areas of competence within state bureaucracies (particularly social welfare). Core responsibilities of higher education ministries, like the design of curricula, learning and teaching environment, pedagogical approaches, as well as teacher education, have so far had a very minor role with regards to the social dimension.

Another barrier for the social dimension is the individual commitment of the countries. While it was relatively easy for northern and western European countries to present their “achievements”, mostly pre-existing or entirely unrelated to requirements of the Bologna Process, it was relatively difficult for Southern and Eastern countries to catch-up with their peers. With certain exceptions—Slovenia and Croatia in particular—countries in the south and east often did and do not have the financial capacities to invest significantly into under-represented groups in higher education. Students and their representatives can be seen as the group with

the highest commitment towards the social dimension, a term which they not only invented (EHEA 2001), but also constantly asked for its further development (e.g. ESIB 2003, 2005, 2007; ESU 2009, 2012).

The often repeated demand for more data (EHEA 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012a) is ambivalent, as on the one hand an evidence-based policy making can be appreciated, but on the other hand demands for more thorough data-collection can be also used as an excuse to either implement new, unrelated, policies or to abdicate responsibility in this area altogether. Implementing new data-collection regulations does not in itself constitute progress on social dimension issues. What is needed to validate the claim for more and new data is a clear idea what this data should be used for and which questions need to be answered. This is not a new view on the data problem, as already prior to the 2012 ministerial conference in Bucharest the concept of an observatory for the social dimension was discussed, which then became the PL4SD initiative. More troubling than the lack of data from many countries is the mutual intelligibility of that data which is available. One easy example is the term “disability” which is defined in many widely varying ways across the EHEA, if at all (Eurydice 2011).

Although peer learning might be a good opportunity to help individual countries to develop national action plans and to re-assess their data, it alone does not solve the above mentioned problems.

1.3 The Future: How Might the Social Dimension Be Developed?

Despite the social dimension’s present difficulties, there remain opportunities for it to be lifted out of its lowly situation. This section presents a considered and intentionally provocative wish-list of some opportunities which ought to be considered in a discussion on the social dimension’s place in the Bologna process.

1.3.1 Re-definition of the Social Dimension

As noted earlier, the existing definition of the social dimension (EHEA 2007) is insufficiently concrete. A revised definition of the social dimension is required, one which is clearer in its focus, and what needs to be covered in the future. This kind of revised definition should also deal with the fact that the social dimension is both an underlying process linked to nearly all activities of the EHEA, and a separate thematic tract with its own specific activities. The EHEA should define a clear framework for the social dimension followed by an action plan how this should be achieved. It also needs to enable national states and local institutions to fit their own local needs and demands into a larger European framework.

Such a European framework for the social dimension would take a form reminiscent of, but subtly different from, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area. This is a non-binding set of ideals that all members of the EHEA commit to, with the contribution and expertise of the consultative organisations included to reach at least a lowest common denominator that all countries can agree to aim for. Over time, this floor can be slowly lifted, in much the same way as the ministers have increased their joint demands on each other over time. Simultaneously, a series of ‘end-targets’ for the members to aim towards should be agreed, ensuring that all member states have something to work on, and allowing those who are already well advanced to provide examples of peer learning to their colleagues slightly behind in the process, in much the same as the advisory group of the European qualifications framework operates. National access plans of each country (see below) would then be of interest to, and subject to a measure of scrutiny by every member of the EHEA.

1.4 National Actions Plans for Access and Widening Participation

Although this idea was already presented in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué, the development of these plans still has potential. At first the process of designing such an action plan provides insight into what the social dimension in a certain context means. An evaluation of the status quo in each country should take place either prior to or in conjunction with the setting of targets. A by-product of such a process would be a clarification of which data is in fact already available, though perhaps not used for this purpose.

These plans are only sensible if they set clear targets. These targets need to be measurable and achievable in a reasonable amount of time. It does not improve the social dimension if these plans do not provide a self-critical assessment, clear political targeting, or are not evidence-based. Furthermore, it is crucial that these plans are regularly revised, taking into account the successes or failures of the targets in previous iterations of them in an honest and self-critical way.

1.5 Integration of Local Contexts

In addition to a re-definition of the social dimension on the European level, national ministries need to develop working definitions of the social dimension based on local needs and demands. These national definitions should still follow the European framework, but also set their own clear targets to ensure progress in the social dimension in the individual member states of the EHEA. A national definition should also reflect on the responsibility of higher education institutions.

Of course a definition of the social dimension alone does not lead to progress or change, which is why the definitions should be linked to action plans as described above.

1.6 Reform the Working Group on Social Dimension (and Lifelong Learning)

The Bologna Follow-up working group on the social dimension and lifelong learning for the years 2012–2015, or in short BFUG WG on SD and LLL, follows a similar structure to the BFUG and utilises the European Commission's Open Method of Coordination. This method's suitability to ensure progress is questionable as it includes only ministries and the E4 [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Students' Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)]. Among the excluded groups are individual higher education institutions, networks created to improve access and social mobility (e.g. the European Access Network), as well as researchers. As the working group is responsible to the follow-up group itself, it might be sensible to elaborate on the opportunity to include more non-ministerial experts within the working group. This could be an alternative or accompanying concept for the idea described below of an observatory. This more diversified group might well be able to find new innovative approaches to implement the social dimension, while being inclusive towards all stakeholder groups and it would enable experts who have a daily relationship with the social dimension to participate.

1.7 Connecting the Social Dimension

As described above, the social dimension is also an underlying process which can be linked to all other working areas of the EHEA. But this inherent link is currently merely implicit. To make the connections more obvious and to ensure stronger contributions towards the social dimension, all working groups should be mandated by the follow-up group to set their own sub-targets and recommendations for the social implications of their area of competence.

1.8 Targets for Data Collection

A re-defined EHEA framework for the social dimension, national working definitions and strategies for how the implementation should take place would make it easier to set clear demands towards researchers for a more focused data collection.

As the overall aim of the social dimension is to reflect the diversity within the EHEA (2007), it is necessary to evaluate the diversity of the populations and not just to focus on those parts of the population which are entering higher education. Most of the so far presented data is solely from inside higher education, but not from outside where the potential for participation lies. In other words, it is hardly possible at the moment to say what the actual needs of underrepresented groups are, as long as they have not entered higher education. This might also lead to the necessity of analyzing the school population at multiple age-levels in order to determine who is underrepresented and what their needs are. Another data deficiency is evidence about what policies actually work and why. Although not all measurements which have succeeded elsewhere can be transferred successfully into other contexts, the sort of co-operation and knowledge sharing described above would still provide a basis for ideas and trials.

1.9 Monitoring, Advising and Peer Learning

To really achieve a successful implementation of the social dimension and generate equality as an outcome, monitoring, advising and peer learning among member states should be improved. So far the actual monitoring is primarily done by the member countries of the EHEA itself on themselves. Of course publications like Eurostudent and Eurydice reports play a useful role in summarising data; however these reports do not have the task of political monitoring, and it would not be suitable for them to acquire such a responsibility. Before the PL4SD initiative was finally agreed by the ministers in 2012, the idea of a European Observatory for the Social Dimension was discussed. This idea—to have a centralised organ, which collects and interprets data on the development of the social dimension, while at the same time providing countries with recommendations on what and how to improve, should not be left buried without consideration. The benefit of such a European organ—whatever its form—would be that the responsibility for data collection, recommendations and promotion of actions would no longer depend on the subjective interest of the EHEA members. This could significantly improve the objectivity and transparency of the social dimension within the EHEA. Such a coordinated tracking of the development of the social dimension might stimulate member countries to become more pro-active and to consider their current approaches. It also has the potential to simplify the work of improving the social dimension, as member states could be pointed to success stories of peers. Beyond the shared targets and aspirations, the EHEA is also facing shared challenges, so to have a more structured and unified approach might be a sensible way to go forward. Of course, external monitoring might face a certain resistance of states, but the opportunity to use the externally gathered information might be used to create EU funding and support lines and this might balance the resistance to a certain degree. However, the monitoring ideas show also that the EHEA is not independent from the general ideas how the EU and its associates will develop in the future. The

creation of a truly existing EHEA requires also the existence of shared bodies for implementation and monitoring.

1.10 Learning and Teaching

Pedagogical approaches towards a more inclusive teaching and learning environment and enabling higher education institutions to deal with a greater diversity have not yet played a prominent role. This is not to imply that there should or could be a “European Pedagogy”, but pedagogical approaches are potentially an important tool to deal with diversity and the recognition of the potential and a debate about it could lead to a re-thinking of how learning and teaching takes place—even on institutional levels where this work is actually required. To the extent pedagogical approaches have at all played a role in the process to date, it has been through the concept of Student-Centred Learning (SCL) (e.g. EHEA 2012b). SCL is not a clear concept as it argues for focus on the learner, while the process of how the actual learning and teaching should take place and what kind of resources are needed are left entirely unexamined. The SCL approach is a step forward and on a European level a realistic target. However, for institutions and those who actually teach this policy, commitment needs to be supported by the development and dissemination of clearer and more structured pedagogical methods and approaches. A promising approach could be to have a look how other countries with a diverse population, e.g. the United States of America or Canada, are dealing with diversity in education. While they should not be copied without critique, some of these concepts, like inclusive excellence (Baumann et al. 2005; Milem et al. 2005) or inclusive pedagogy (Tuitt 2003) could be used as a basis to develop European pedagogical concepts in a more inclusive manner for a more diverse student population. Pedagogical approaches have the potential to play a larger role within the social dimension. They clearly belong to the competence of higher education, they provide an active opportunity to deal with, and not only identify diversity and its (assumed) needs and they are not necessarily related to higher financial commitments.

A learning and teaching agenda informed by the social dimension will not relate solely to pedagogical practice but also to curriculum design and teacher education. Neither of these areas is covered by the social dimension of the EHEA so far. The question for teacher education with regards to the Social Dimension is: “what knowledge do teachers and lecturers need in order to actively develop the potential in their classroom or lecture hall and to be inclusive towards a diverse group of learners?” The development of an inclusion component within the teachers’ education could clearly be done on a European level to the benefit of all members of the European Higher Education Area. Inclusivity and diversity in the design of curricula, as well as the development of learning outcomes, can also be implemented as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

1.11 Social Infrastructure

The development of social infrastructure around higher education is a necessary pre-condition for a successful social dimension. Although it would seem obvious that housing and food are basic requirements for students to be able to focus on their studies, in reality the current social infrastructure is rather complex and inadequate. The member unions of the European Students' Union identify significant problems with the availability and quality of student services overall. To choose but one example, the 2012 edition of Bologna with Students' Eyes (ESU 2012), 22 out of 32 National Unions of Students report dissatisfaction with availability and/or quality of student housing (ESU 2012). With regards to the Communiqués (e.g. EHEA 2005 or 2007), a commitment to provide adequate living conditions for students is given. However, these did not lead to a unified action or setting of commonly agreed targets. One obvious issue here is the purely national competence to work in this area and the lack of any means to influence higher education social infrastructures at the European Level. Agreeing to action on a European level will be difficult. However, this debate provides also the opportunity to discuss how far bodies such as the European Social Fund might be able to provide support.

1.12 Widening Participation Through Early Inclusion in Higher Education

In the past decade, the concept of Science and Society activities and Children's Universities has grown all over Europe with an actual participation of 530,000 children per year (Gary and Iber 2014, May). So far, just 16 % of Children's Universities name widening participation and awareness-raising as a goal for their activities (Gary and Iber 2014, May). EU projects like 'SiS Catalyst: Children as change agents for science and society' and the European Children's University Network can be seen as drivers to increase the targeting towards social inclusion: 'Opportunities for systemic change leading to more inclusive higher education will be unleashed through Children's Universities and other new approaches' (SiS Catalyst 2014). This illustrates the potential that Children's Universities and other Science and Society activities could offer the social dimension. Early contacts with children before social segregation begins to impact or overwhelm children's ambitions might help improve access to higher education among groups which are missing or underrepresented in the current student population of the EHEA.

1.13 Engaging All Stakeholders

In the Berlin Communiqué (EHEA 2003) higher education ministers emphasized that 'they appreciate the co-operation and commitment of all partners— ... and

other stakeholders...'. In the London Communiqué (EHEA 2007), they stated that 'Similarly, we will report on our national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness. We will invite all stakeholders to participate in, and support this work, at the national level.' Indeed the involvement of students, trades union, employers' federations and higher education institutions has developed considerably over the last few years. However, other governmental stakeholders, who were never present at the ministerial meetings of the EHEA, but nevertheless have a major impact on the implementation of the social dimension, remain outside the process. As argued above, the social dimension is a politically overlapping concept and it would be sensible to include other ministries responsible for social affairs, financing and employment, at least in the preparation of EHEA conferences or in the policy forums.

1.14 Bottom-Up Approach

The Bologna Process was in large parts a politically top-down process, which was not always appreciated by higher education institutions, higher education staff or students. Within the area of the social dimension, especially, it is important to include all relevant stakeholders so that they may provide their input and assist in defining their own responsibilities. Large parts of the social dimension do actually take place at the level of individual institutions or in the teacher/lecturer-student interaction. Therefore, their opinions, ideas and needs should be reflected to really ensure that a committed implementation takes place.

1.15 Avoiding Ongoing Risks to Students

Just as the social dimension begins prior to a student's admission to higher education, it also extends beyond graduation. The efforts of the EHEA to improve the employability of students (e.g. EHEA 2007, 2012b) are thus a step in the right direction. However, this does not mean that the purpose of higher education or education in general is to train solely for the labour market. Achieving social mobility through (higher) education is also related to the employability of a person. Acutely underrepresented groups have higher risk awareness (Callender and Jackson 2005) than their peers and need therefore a manageable risk and a maximum of security. Improved job prospects are a key part of that.

This links also to the affordability of higher education and its social responsibility. The EHEA should draw its conclusions from the developments in the United States, where the students' costs for higher education are growing to crisis levels, while the income situation of academics is stagnating or even decreasing (Kamenetz 2013). Although not all members of the EHEA charge tuition fees, already the daily

living costs for studying create financial risk for students. Higher education and higher education policy makers are not in the situation that they can set up financial demands towards students, as they are not able to predict the future employment development of, e.g. academics.

2 Discussion

Despite its large number of problems, the evolution of the social dimension has provided positive developments. The progress made with regards to the affordability and portability of loans and grants, identification of some underrepresented groups and the commitment to improve access to higher education and completion rates, as well as the collection of data can be seen as a success. It is not so much the Communiqués or the ministerial meetings which are problematic for the social dimension, but rather that political promises have often not been followed by political action back home in the ministers' own countries, in order to really achieve what was agreed during the meetings.

The social dimension is a rather complex area of work within the European Higher Education Area as it allows several interpretations of even the basic definition provided in the London Communiqué (2007). The real challenge for the future of the social dimension is the gap between the political promises made in the Communiqués and the actions actually taken to fulfil these promises. There are not many opportunities for stakeholders—excluding voting against or demonstrating against—to encourage legislators to be more active with regards to the social dimension. Investment in and commitment towards a social dimension will not provide short-term benefits and the retention of benefits might go well beyond legislative periods of government. In the long term, the commitment to a social dimension is a pre-condition to achieving the original intentions of the Bologna Process—competitiveness and attractiveness. The so-called European dimension (EHEA 1999) itself is innately linked with the social dimension; OECD data shows us a tight correlation between democratic participation, perceived (in-)equality, and educational status (OECD 2012a).

One step which we hope will be taken after the next ministerial conference is the development of lower-level targets towards overarching goal of mirroring the composition of society within higher education (EHEA 2007). Breaking down the end-goal to smaller increments would not only make it easier to begin to work on the implementation of the social dimension, but also make partial achievements more visible. Furthermore, it would provide ministries, higher education institutions, and all other relevant stakeholders the time to adjust to a more diverse student population and to learn to be able to serve this population. The time for adaptation is not infinite, as more and more areas of Europe will be diversified, or in some cases minorities will be the new majorities—as Crul et al. (2013) reports it is already the case for some cities like Amsterdam. The EHEA should urgently find strategies to adapt to this change.

Another decision which needs to be taken after the conference in 2015 is how the diversity of member countries within the EHEA can be reflected while at the same time providing a framework which ensures an ongoing improvement and development towards the successful mirroring. This is challenging because, as noted earlier, financial capacities with the EHEA are not equally distributed, which raises the question of what opportunities the European Union has to balance these differences in capacities.

Not everything with respect to the social dimension can be related to additional funding, like teachers' education or new pedagogical approaches. These are opportunities which should be reflected much more strongly as part of the social dimension. Here, the opportunities for innovation and new 'European' developments are considerable.

Looking beyond the traditional cohort of students will be helpful. The approach of linking children to higher education and research via children's universities might provide a potential to reach those who drop out of the education system before admission to higher education is even in question. Likewise, the existence of formal higher education as one of many elements within the continuum of lifelong learning—neither subservient to nor responsible for it—should be acknowledged by ministers, and the aspect of lifelong learning that is relevant to higher education should be defined.

Although we acknowledge the risk that the claim for more data is an excuse to stand still, we at the same time acknowledge that there is a demand for more and more comparable data. This is caused on the one hand by the fact that societies and societal needs change over time. But on the other hand, many interventions, like the impact of new pedagogical approaches or children's universities, are not or at least are insufficiently scientifically investigated. Data is a basis for policy making, but policy makers need to be clear on which data are required, and balance this collection with concrete, visible, actions.

This article asserts that the social dimension is linked to nearly every action line of the Bologna Process, and many outside of its scope both on the European and local levels. But the problem area that remains at the end of this discussion is far more philosophical: What is the society we want to live in in the future, and what does higher education need to provide in order to create this society? This is a question that requires more debate than it has received to date.

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