- DRAFT -
Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA

Produced by the BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension

Introduction[1]

The 2018 Paris Communique recognized the need to guide member states on how to define and implement policy for the improving the social dimension of the EHEA. This document outlines core principles and guidelines which the BFUG believes are fundamental to the further development of the social dimension in higher education, namely by ensuring that the composition of the student body fairly reflects the diverse social composition of national populations across the EHEA. This document takes as its starting point the definition of the social dimension provided in the 2007 London Communique, but also goes beyond that and seeks to encompass the different dimensions that need to be addressed for a holistic improvement of higher education. Within the new definition adopted by the Advisory Group, social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity and diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities.

The principles and guidelines within this document complement the strategy "Widening Participation for Equity and Growth", which ministers proposed in Yerevan in 2015 as a means to further strengthen the social dimension while concomitantly contributing to increasing quality in HE. The social dimension should connect, through an intersectional approach, the principles of accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion into all laws, policies and practices concerning higher education such that any desiring citizen can access, participate in and complete higher education. With this scope at heart, governments should support the implementation of these PAGs by offering a legal, financial, administrative and informative framework that can initiate processes of implementation at the local level. This framework will promote inclusive strategies, which provide both specific support for vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented students as well as highlight broader measures and policies wherefrom the student population and staff employed at HEIs can mutually benefit.

Increased participation of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education produces wider benefits with respect to decreased social welfare provision, improved health outcomes and increased community involvement. Collectively, these wider benefits sustain cohesive, democratic societies where social justice and social mobility prevail. Graduate qualifications delivered to a wider pool of citizens means better employment prospects, higher earnings premiums and the passing on of an appreciation for the benefits of higher education to the next generation and to their local communities. Beyond reaching the commitments made by the EHEA, taking a holistic and proactive approach to improving the social dimension of HE further serves to accelerate progress in attaining the SDGs.

These PAGs set the course for the next decade of the EHEA for public authorities and higher education institutions to integrate these principles into the core higher education missions: learning and teaching, research, knowledge exchange and outreach, institutional governance

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[1] The AG is still awaiting input from EUROSTUDENT regarding the differentiation between vulnerable, disadvantaged & underrepresented

and management, as well as in the policies for empowering present and future students and university staff. Improving the social dimension by moving beyond widening accessibility clauses and instead focusing on the concept of 'leaving nobody behind' is a crucial step forward when looking to strengthen our societies and democracies. Investing in diverse learning environments should be seen more as an investment, and governments need to shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that the proposed principles and guidelines are consulted, adjusted to national realities and implemented, in order to safeguard a better future for our higher education systems.

Principles

1. **Strengthening the social dimension of higher education and fostering equity and inclusion to reflect the diversity of society is the responsibility of a higher education system as a whole and should be regarded as a continuous commitment. The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level.**

   Guidelines:
   a. Strategic commitment to the social dimension of higher education should be aligned with concrete targets that can either be integrated within existing higher education policies or developed in parallel. These targets should aim at widening access, supporting participation in and completion of studies for all current and future students.
   b. There should be a broad-based dialogue between governments, higher education institutions, student and staff representatives and other key stakeholders, including social partners, non-governmental organisations and people from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Such broad-based dialogue should ensure the creation of inclusive higher education environments that foster equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of the wider community.

2. **Legal regulations should allow and enable higher education institutions to develop their own strategies to fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies.**

   Guidelines:
   a. Legal regulations and administrative rules should allow sufficient flexibility in the design, organisation and delivery of study programmes to reflect the diversity of students' needs. Higher education institutions should be enabled to organise full-time and part-time studies, flexible study modes, blended and distance learning as well as to recognise prior learning (RPL).
   b. Governments should promote recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in higher education, because it has a positive impact on widening access, transition and completion, equity and inclusion, mobility and employability. RPL enables flexible modes of lifelong learning in the entire education sector, including higher education. Implementing RPL will require effective cooperation amongst the higher education system, employers and the wider community and to enable this national qualifications frameworks should

facilitate transparent recognition of learning outcomes and reliable quality assurance procedures.

3. **The inclusiveness of the entire education system should be improved. This holistic approach should create coherent policy measures from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education and throughout lifelong learning. This process should actively engage past, current and future learners.**

   Guidelines:
   a. It is important to create synergies with all education levels and related policy areas (such as finance, employment, health and social welfare, housing, migration etc.) in order to develop policy measures that create an inclusive environment throughout the entire education sector that fosters equity, diversity, and is responsive to the needs of the wider community.
   b. The social dimension policies should not only support current students, but also potential students in their preparation and transition into higher education. Participation in higher education has to be a lifelong option, including for adults who decide to return to or enter higher education at later stages in their lives. An inclusive approach needs to involve wider communities, higher education institutions and other stakeholder groups to co-create pathways to higher education.

4. **Governments should provide adequate support for higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures.**

   Guidelines:
   a. Governments should support and provide adequate means to higher education institutions to improve initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff to enable them to work professionally and equitably with a diverse student body and staff.
   b. Whenever possible, external quality assurance systems should address how the social dimension, diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion are reflected within the institutional missions of higher education institutions, whilst respecting the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions.

5. **Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Higher education systems should define the purpose and goals of collecting certain types of data, taking into account the particularities of the national legal frameworks. Adequate capacities to collect, process and use such data to inform and support the social dimension of higher education should be developed. This should be complimented by measuring progress towards targets and monitoring the impact of policies accordingly.**

   Guidelines:
   a. In order to develop effective policies continuous national data collection should be organised. In accordance with national regulations such data collection should provide information on the composition of the student body, access and participation, drop-out and completion of higher education, including the

transition to the labour market after completion of studies, and allow for the identification of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

b. Such data collection should ideally be comparable internationally. This implies that work on categories for administrative data collection that are relevant for the social dimension should be developed at the EHEA level through Eurostudent and Eurograduate surveys. With the aim to rationalize the process and avoid administrative burden on public administration and higher education institutions, this development should take account of existing national practices and relevant data collection processes.

c. Such national data collection exercises could, where relevant and necessary, be complemented by higher education institutions undertaking additional surveys, research and analysis to better understand vulnerability, disadvantages, and underrepresentation in education, as well as transitions of students across the education system.

6. **Governments should have policies that ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should reach the students in need and be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market.**

   Guidelines:
   a. Governments should create conditions that enable collaboration between different public institutions that provide counselling and guidance services together with higher education institutions in order to create synergies and omit duplication of similar services. These services should uphold the principles of clarity and user-friendliness, because end users must be capable to understand them easily.
   b. Within a diverse student body, special attention should be directed towards students with physical and psychological health challenges. These students should have access to professional support to secure their success in accessing and completing higher education studies. Special focus should be placed on prevention of psychological challenges caused by the organisation of study and students' living conditions.
   c. Governments should also consider setting up ombudsperson-type institutions that will have the capacity and knowledge to mediate any conflicts, particularly related to equity issues that may arise during accessing or participating in higher education, or conflicts that hinder the completion of studies.

7. **Governments should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions enabling them to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education. Mechanisms for achieving these targets should not impose economic punishments to higher education institutions.**

   Guidelines:
   a. Higher education funding systems should facilitate the attainment of strategic objectives related to the social dimension of higher education. Higher education institutions should be supported and rewarded for meeting agreed targets in

widening access, increasing participation in and completion of higher education studies, in particular in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

b. The public student financial support systems should be primarily needs-based and should make higher education affordable for all students, foster access to and provide opportunities for success in higher education. They should cover both the direct costs of study (fees and study materials) and the indirect costs (e.g. accommodation, which is becoming increasingly problematic for students across the EHEA due to the increased housing, living, and transportation costs, etc.).

8. **Higher education operates in an increasingly international context and an international experience through learning mobility improves the quality of learning outcomes in higher education. Mobility programs in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that foster diversity, equity and inclusion and should particularly foster participation of students and staff from vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds.**

    Guidelines:
    a. Governments and higher education institutions should ensure equal access for all to the learning opportunities offered by national and international learning and training mobility programmes and actively address obstacles to mobility for vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented groups of students and staff.
    b. Besides further support to physical mobility, governments and higher education institutions should facilitate the use of ICT to support blended mobility and to foster internationalisation at home by embedding international online cooperation into courses. Blended mobility is the combination of a period of physical mobility and a period of online learning. Such online cooperation can be used to extend the learning outcomes and enhance the impact of physical mobility, for example by bringing together a more diverse group of participants, or to offer a broader range of mobility options.

9. **Community and civic engagement in higher education can be a useful instrument to promote diversity, equity and inclusion. Community engagement in higher education should be considered as a process whereby higher education institutions engage with external community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial.**

    Guidelines:
    a. Like social dimension policies, community engagement should be embedded in core missions of higher education. It should engage with teaching and learning, research, service and knowledge exchange, students and staff and management of higher education institutions. Such engagement provides a holistic basis on which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, while enriching their teaching, research and other core functions.
    b. Community stakeholders (e.g. local authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses, citizens) should be able to meaningfully influence and inform decisions made by higher education actors

through open dialogue. This will enable genuine university-community partnerships, which can effectively address social and democratic challenges.

10. **Governments should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level in order to ensure fit-for purpose policy measures, which respect institutional autonomy, avoid any unnecessary administrative burden, and thus enable concrete progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.**

Guidelines:
   a. Within the scope of the above principles and guidelines, peer support and exchange of good practices are crucial among EHEA countries in order to facilitate progress towards the inclusiveness of higher education systems.
   b. These principles and guidelines are not to be seen as a checklist, but rather as the basis for continuous improvement of policies and their effective implementation at national and institutional level.