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**REPORT OF THE 2012-2015 BFUG WORKING GROUP
ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION AND LIFELONG
LEARNING TO THE BFUG**

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Executive Summary

Background

The social dimension plays an important role in enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA aims to widen overall access and increase participation and completion of underrepresented groups in higher education, according to the diversity of the national populations. In its turn, widening access to quality higher education is viewed as a precondition for societal progress and economic development.

Akin to the social dimension, lifelong learning is accredited for its aim to provide learning opportunities for more diverse student population. The social dimension and lifelong learning are interwoven themes that share such central issues as the provision of appropriate education support, guidance and counseling, student-centred learning, and recognition of prior learning. In the context of the EHEA, access and equity are critical to lifelong learning, and lifelong learning itself is critical to advancing the social dimension of higher education in its integrity.

Taking into account the interlinkages between the two policy areas, in its 2012-2015 work programme the BFUG decided to establish a single Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group (SD&LLL WG).

About the report

The present report, technical in its essence, is prepared by the members of the 2012-2015 BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning (SD&LLL WG) and details the work carried out in the period. The report starts with a brief historical overview of the social dimension and lifelong learning in the Bologna Process, then turns to the synergies and areas of complementarity between the social dimension and lifelong learning in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Furthermore, SD&LLL WG's mandate and membership as well as the achievement of the WG's action plan are introduced. This section also includes the inputs from the four thematic groups (TGs) established under the WG to take further the goals identified in the action plan. In addition, the document provides a report of activities of the Peer Learning for the Social Dimension (PL4SD) project as of November 2014 and puts forward proposals for its future.

Key recommendations

The SD&LLL WG puts forward two main recommendations for adoption by the Ministers in Yerevan in 2015:

i) to endorse **“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”** to support the EHEA countries in the development of a coherent set of policy measures and effective national plans or strategies¹ to ensure greater access to quality higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

ii) to endorse the work of the PL4SD initiative to date through its database and conferences, to note the imminent publication of the initial three peer reviews of EHEA member countries and **to support the continuation of the PL4SD initiative beyond September 2015.**

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

The social dimension entered the Bologna agenda later than most other policy areas in 2001, whereas lifelong learning has been on the Bologna agenda ever since its inception. However, the two issues gained particular prominence in the Prague Communiqué in 2001². Within this Communiqué the social dimension was mainly viewed from the students’ inclusion and student mobility perspective. In the following years social cohesion of student population, and in general, equal access to higher education regardless of gender, ethnicity, social status, etc. became an integral part of the social dimension.

In 2007 in London a comprehensive definition of the social dimension was developed which indicates, “the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”³. In the same year the Ministers also agreed to report on the progress made in this area and in 2009 decided to set measurable targets for “widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups”⁴.

In the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) Ministers reiterated their commitment already expressed in London in 2009 “to step up their efforts towards underrepresented groups

¹ 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.

² Towards the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education, Prague, 19 May 2001;

³ London Communiqué: Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalized world, 18 May 2007;

⁴ 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/Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009.

to develop the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counseling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning”⁵. Moreover, the Ministers took a step forward and encouraged the use of peer learning on the social dimension and further aimed to monitor progress in the area.

With respect to lifelong learning in the Bologna context, for the first time, it was the Prague Communiqué (2001) which signalled that in Europe built on a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities, and the quality of life. The Berlin Communiqué⁶ (2003) emphasised the need to embed lifelong learning within higher education in order to overcome the above-mentioned challenges. The Berlin and succeeding Communiqués⁷ turned to the areas – development of flexible learning pathways, enhancement of recognition of prior learning, establishment of national qualifications framework to encompass the wide range of learning paths, achieving closer cooperation between higher education institutions and external stakeholders including employers – that contribute to the creation of lifelong learning culture in the EHEA. Yet, the concept of lifelong learning was further specified in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009)⁸, which stated “lifelong learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths, including part-time studies, as well as work-based routes”.

In Bucharest (2012), lifelong learning was appreciated as one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market. In this light, the role of higher education institutions was deemed central to transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances.

The 2009-2012 BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension once again recognised the role of the social dimension in enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA and put forward a recommendation to the EHEA Ministers “to reaffirm their commitments and targets for widening overall access and increasing participation and completion of underrepresented groups in higher education, according to the diversity of the national populations, with the aim to reach these targets by 2020”⁹. Akin to the social dimension, lifelong learning is accredited for its aim to provide learning opportunities for more diverse student population. The social dimension and lifelong learning are interwoven themes that share such central issues as the provision of appropriate education support, guidance and counselling, student-centred learning, and recognition

⁵ Bucharest Communiqué: Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, 26-27 April 2012;

⁶ Realising the European Higher Education, Communiqué of the Conference of the Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Berlin, 19 September 2003;

⁷ Bergen 2005, London 2007, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009;

⁸ 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/Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009;

⁹ Report of the 2009-2012 BFUG WG on the Social Dimension, p. 13.

of prior learning. In the context of the EHEA, access and equity are critical to lifelong learning, and lifelong learning itself is critical to advancing the social dimension of higher education in its integrity¹⁰. The link between the two policy areas was also recognised within the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009), which put forward that widening participation should also be achieved through lifelong learning as an integral part of the EHEA education systems.

In Bucharest (2012), the Ministers once again pointed at the role of higher education in solving the difficulties Europe is facing and acknowledged that **widening access** to higher education is a precondition for societal progress and economic development¹¹. In sum, providing quality higher education for all became one of the three main goals to pursue in the EHEA in the period 2012-2015¹².

In many EHEA countries, there are already measures in place to address the under-representation of particular societal groups in higher education, but as the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report highlights “the question remains as to whether national higher education policy gives sufficient priority to these issues”¹³. In the same vein, the analysis of data on HE participation and attainment as shown in the Report indicates that the goal of providing equal chances for all in the EHEA has not yet been achieved. Hence, more concrete measures are required to take this aim forward.

1.2. Current Position: Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning WG’s Mandate and Membership

The current report reflects the activities carried out by the 2012-2015 SD&LLL WG in accordance with its Terms of Reference (see [Appendix 1](#)) as agreed by the BFUG.

During the 2012-2013 timeframe the WG was co-chaired by Brian Power (Ireland) and Karina Ufert (ESU). Starting from the second semester of 2013, Elisabeth Gehrke (ESU), replacing Karina Ufert in the WG, took over a co-chairing position and started to provide assistance in following up on the tasks and activities of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning WG.

18 countries – Armenia, Austria, Belgium/Flemish Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Ukraine and the United Kingdom/Scotland – and 6 organisations – the European Commission (EC), Education International (EI), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), ESU, European University Association (EUA) and PL4SD project are represented in the WG (see [Appendix 3](#)).

¹⁰ Minutes of the 2012-2015 BFUG WG on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning, 17 April 2013, p. 2;

¹¹ Bucharest Communiqué: Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, 26-27 April 2012;

¹² Ibid;

¹³ The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, p.p. 79 and 101.

According to its Terms of Reference for the period 2012-2015, the SD&LLL WG has the following overarching aims:

- To further support the development of the social dimension of higher education at national and the EHEA level through strengthening policies to widen overall access, raising completion rates and targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups.
- To assist the EHEA countries in their work to enhance employability and lifelong learning through improved cooperation with relevant stakeholders.
- To work closely with the sponsoring consortium on the development of the pilot project on peer learning for the social dimension of higher education (PL4SD), with a general oversight mandate to further BFUG social dimension goals.

Drawing upon the BFUG 2012-2015 work plan, the WG has also set a number of objectives to help accomplish its mandate:

- To fulfil the Ministerial commitment to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education by supporting EHEA countries in their work to develop and implement national access plans or strategies.
- To mobilise the cooperation of all relevant actors in pursuing efforts to promote greater access, participation and completion rates in higher education for all students.
- To support the development of common approaches in monitoring the implementation of national access plans by elaborating core indicators that may be used for measuring and monitoring the relevant aspects of the social dimension in higher education.
- To promote the development and implementation of institution-level strategies for widening access, targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups and raising completion rates.
- To address the need for a more supportive environment for teachers, with specific emphasis on emerging pedagogical and didactical requirements to support the needs of a more diverse student population and improve their completion rates, through practical recommendations on implementing student-centered learning (SCL).
- To address aspect of employability by advancing implementation of Bologna reforms and raising awareness on the purpose of those among stakeholders (including employers).
- To support and guide the implementation of a pilot project (PL4SD) to facilitate peer learning on the social dimension of higher education which will assist EHEA countries in developing, implementing and monitoring social dimension policies.

2. 2012-2015 Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning WG: Achievement of the Action Plan

Within the discussion, which followed the 2012 Bucharest Ministerial Conference, there was a clear agreement that a more streamlined structure for the 2012-2015 BFUG work

plan was necessary to allow the BFUG to play its role for strategic policy guidance, while concentrating on key policy issues, and to ensure a close interaction between and better implementation of the interlinked policy areas. To ensure this, the number of working groups was significantly reduced compared to that of the previous years, yet more responsibility and authority was endowed to the four working groups established for this period¹⁴.

Hence, starting its work in the second semester of 2012 the SD&LLL WG has been dealing with the two respective policy issues of higher education. In order to increase the efficiency of its work, an action plan was developed according to the WG's ToR, which detailed the themes for each WG meeting as well as the expected outcomes.

While accomplishing its mandate, the WG served as a platform for peer learning on the practices observed in the EHEA countries in the areas of the social dimension and lifelong learning and aimed at developing a common strategy to take further the implementation of the two policy areas. For this purpose, a sub-group was established to take the work on the strategy further in-between the WG's meetings with the active guidance of the WG Co-Chairs. The strategy was a standing point on the agenda of the WG's meetings and is a result of continuous discussions and consultations among the WG members and their respective countries/organisations.

Furthermore, several major thematic strands were identified under the WG's remit – access, teaching and learning, student supports and services, and lifelong learning and employability - and corresponding thematic groups (TGs) were formulated and given specific tasks as laid out in the WG's action plan (see [Appendix 2](#)).

The SD&LLL WG acted as the PL4SD project's Stakeholders' Forum and had an active participation in advising and "steering" the project. In addition, the WG country representatives assisted their respective Ministries in filling in the social dimension and lifelong learning sections in the 2015 BFUG data collection questionnaire.

2.1. Widening Participation for Equity and Growth - A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020

In many EHEA countries, there are already measures in place to address the under-representation of particular societal groups in higher education, but as the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report highlights "the question remains as to whether national higher education policy gives sufficient priority to these issues"¹⁵. In addition, the analysis of data on HE participation and attainment as shown in the Report indicates that the goal of providing equal chances for all in the EHEA has not yet been achieved.

Hence, acknowledging that more concrete measures are required to take the aim of widening access forward the 2012-2015 BFUG WG on SD&LLL created a strategy to

¹⁴ Reporting on the Bologna Process Implementation WG, Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning WG, Structural Reforms WG, Mobility and Internationalisation WG.

¹⁵ The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, p.p. 79 and 101.

promote the development of effective policies to ensure greater access to quality higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. *Together with the development of national plans or strategies to address participation in higher education, "Widening Participation for Equity and Growth - A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020" deals with setting national targets for underrepresented groups, following up with specific actions.* In order to ensure monitoring of the implementation of this strategy, the BFUG is requested to report on progress at the next Ministerial Conference in 2018.

2.2. TG on Access

TG on Access, composed of the SD&LLL WG's representative of Austria, ESU and PL4SD, was set up to single out initiatives to improve access to quality higher education for underrepresented groups through examining, in particular, the results of the PL4SD project and Expanding Opportunities (ExpandO) project¹⁶ with the overarching aim to develop guidelines for national access plans/strategies.

The 2012 Bologna Process Implementation Report¹⁷, initial results of the PL4SD, ExpandO, and the discussions held at the SD&LLL WG meetings came to evidence that nearly all the EHEA countries are engaged in the improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Across the EHEA there are various mechanisms to financially support students in need, be it in the form of a grant system, support for the families of students, reduction of fees or indirect support through subsidising student canteens, dormitories, transport or health costs. Moreover, all member countries have policies of antidiscrimination and special regulations for underprivileged groups, e.g. students with disabilities. Student counselling and career guidance are also well established in the majority of higher education systems in the EHEA.

However, it became evident that very few member countries had integrated all their measures into a coherent strategy, which would rely from one side upon a systematic approach of identifying barriers into and within the higher education system and from the other side upon relevant data providing evidence for action.

In this light, a set of guidelines were developed (see [Appendix 4](#)) to accompany "Widening Participation for Equity and Growth - A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020". The aim of the guidelines is to assist countries to meet the challenge of developing or enhancing national plans or strategies. These guidelines were developed to provide a "roadmap" for member countries 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.

¹⁶ For more information, please consult the project's website at <http://expandingopportunities.eu/page/project-summary>

¹⁷ The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, pp. 71-101.

2.2. TG on Teaching and Learning

TG on Teaching and Learning (T&L), composed of the WG representatives of Lithuania, Norway, EI, ESU, and EUA, aimed at producing recommendations on T&L, in particular, how T&L can improve completion rates of underrepresented groups and the quality of higher education in general, how it can support mature and/or returning students. Last but not least, the TG looked at the issue of a more supportive environment for teaching staff.

The TG first turned to the mission of education, including higher education, as a human right and a public good, which should be provided for all on the highest possible level, based on intellectual capacity and not on the ability to pay¹⁸. HE should enable graduates to be active and critical members of society and actively participate in the development of modern democracies. In a nutshell, the purpose of education is by no means teaching the students what to think but teaching them how to think and how to respond to the ever-changing needs of the labour market.

The TG recognised that the learning process itself is the interaction between qualified teachers and motivated, engaged students in the classrooms – whether they are physically on a campus or virtual. In addition, attractive study and teaching conditions were deemed vital for a positive learning process. In a NESET report¹⁹ from 2013 students from underrepresented backgrounds were highlighted as being at the greatest risk of dropout, especially students from a lower socioeconomic background. While teaching and learning in general and a student centered learning specifically was highlighted as the key for lessening the risk of dropout.

Teaching and learning activities have as such not been a historical focus of the of the EHEA, however this is changing due to the increased focus on these issues such as in the new proposal for the European Standards and Guidelines as well as the new ECTS users guide. With the increased support for the concept of student centered learning in the structural tools it will be important to follow the implementation to ensure that teaching and learning reforms also benefit the Social Dimension.

Members of the TG would urge the BFUG to consider a general recommendation on teaching and learning both from a structural and social dimension perspective be adopted in the Yerevan communiqué that reflects the increased commitment to teaching and learning reforms. To ensure that success of such an aim, members of the TG recommend countries to support improved learning environments and training for teaching staff. Members of the TG also recommend that teaching and learning reforms be monitored more closely in connection with dropout rates to ensure the impact of subsequent reforms. The successful approaches could be highlighted in the PL4SD database.

¹⁸ EI/ETUCE, Quality Assurance in Higher education, Brussels, March 2014, revised after debate in HERSC

¹⁹ NESET report on Dropout and completion in Higher Education in Europe;
<http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/HE%20Drop%20out%20AR%20Final.pdf>

2.3. TG on Student Supports and Services

SD&LLL WG representatives of Armenia, Croatia, Germany, and ESU formed the TG on Student Supports and Services. The TG pointed at the crucial role of student support services or social infrastructure – allocation of financial aid, student housing, dining, and counselling services in the social, psychological and career/training fields – for the success of students in higher education.

Given the complexity of social infrastructure, the TG aimed to provide recommendations at different levels, which would be suitable for all systems in the EHEA. For this purpose four topic areas were identified: providing guidance/counselling and networking opportunities for future employment; developing and implementing support structure for underrepresented groups; exploring and creating adequate support mechanisms for mature students; and conducting more focused research on the importance of social infrastructure based on regularly and systematically collected data.

It was acknowledged that a stronger cooperation towards a more inclusive and student-needs-based social infrastructure was indispensable and there was an urgent need to develop a concept of how the social infrastructure could be fostered at the EHEA level.

2.4. TG on Lifelong Learning and Employability

The TG on lifelong learning and Employability, composed of ESU and EURASHE representatives in the WG, recognised that any decisive progress in lifelong learning should involve a change in paradigm, i.e. lifelong learning should no longer be considered as an aim in itself but be apprehended as an integral part of the social responsibility of higher education institutions: duty to the student body to train/retrain in order to improve its employability; duty to the world of work to provide well trained responsive individuals for employment; duty to society to allow all individuals to be active members of society.

Put it differently, it was highlighted that higher education should exist within the whole continuum of lifelong learning, from basic education to advanced research as the needs of Europe's populations develop over time and targeted actions are required aimed at widening the participation of mature students in higher education. For this purpose, formal and informal barriers to study for mature students should be eliminated through, inter alia, Recognition of Prior Learning and incentives for both students and higher education institutions to engage with one another throughout adult life. *Finally, the TG pointed at the need to develop a guidelines document to assist the EHEA countries in their efforts to integrate lifelong learning in higher education systems, institutions, and society for the upcoming 2015-2018 period.*

3. Peer Learning for the Social Dimension (PL4SD) Project

The PL4SD project goes back to an initiative of the forgoing 2009-2012 Social Dimension Working Group, which concluded its report with "...the need to develop a Pilot initiative to

promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education". The project as such was set up by a consortium led by the Institute of Advanced Studies (IHS) in Vienna. Partners are the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW) in Hannover, the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in Zagreb and the ESU. The project receives funding from the Lifelong-Learning Programme of the European Commission from 1.10.2012 – 30.9.2015.

PL4SD is an initiative to foster peer learning for the social dimension in higher education. It aims at increasing transparency and comprehensiveness of different national approaches in this field for other countries within the EHEA and to encourage them to learn from each other about practices and policies that are undertaken to enhance the social dimension in higher education. The challenge of fostering peer learning among 47 EHEA countries is approached by three core elements of the project: i) building up and maintaining an online database of measures, ii) conducting country reviews in three countries on demand, assisting them in merging national measures and initiatives into a coherent strategy, and iii) stimulating peer-learning among stakeholders of the EHEA.

3.1. PL4SD database

The PL4SD-database of measures in the frame of the social dimension of higher education is accessible online (www.pl4sd.eu) and currently contains 311 measures from 33 countries plus 155 research papers/reports on the topic (March 2015). PL4SD invested a lot of effort to make the database as user friendly as possible, i.e. in terms of facilitating the search facility. This is a big challenge, most of all because the database should also accommodate users who want to use it for inspiration and therefore do not know what they are looking for concretely. Hence, PL4SD developed an "analytical grid" for this purpose and discussed it with the members of the SD&LLL WG who also pre-tested it. After the first round of data collection, the grid was revised again, leading to a three-way search interface for the database. This enables users to a) filter search results by choosing several categories (target groups, types and objectives of the measures as well as country), b) to start a free text search or c) using a tag cloud based on the full text of all measures entered (see [Figure 1](#)). This interface has again been tested by the participants of the PL4SD interim conference in the form of structured interviews and revised once more after that.

[Table 1](#) provides an overview of the measures in the database as of March 2015. Most of the measures address the general student population, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or prospective students. The greatest proportion of measures are those with objectives relating to widening access and student support and these deal principally with counselling/ support services or student financial support.

Individual measures in the database are presented in a coherent structure, including some background information, a link to a webpage (if available), keywords, contact information, a description of the measure, the impact of the measure and an overall (self) assessment of the measure by the author. Each database entry can be read online, easily printed out or downloaded (pdf).

Meanwhile, PL4SD enhanced the database further: Comments and questions can now be placed by any user below each measure. The author of the measure receives each comment via email and can readily reply to it. The debate is then publicly visible in the database. This is designed to turn the whole instrument into a more dialogical one instead of only reading about the measures as a one-way communication.

Further measures can be sent to the database at any time (the questionnaire is available on the webpage²⁰). The (provisionally) last round of data collection is planned for 2015. Potential users of the database are continuously informed of updates by the PL4SD newsletter (can be subscribed on the webpage), emailings sent out by the Bologna Secretariat and several European stakeholder organisations such as the ESU, EUA, EURASHE or presentations of PL4SD at various international events.

3.2. PL4SD country reviews

The second part of the project is a pilot study conducting detailed expert analysis in three countries on demand. These PL4SD country reviews have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist participating countries in the development of a coherent and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education. In this sense, they can be seen as a preparatory exercise for developing a national strategy on the social dimension, as proposed by the SD&LLL WG.

With the assistance of the Bologna Secretariat, all member states of the Bologna Process have been invited to conduct this pilot study with PL4SD. Lithuania, Armenia and Croatia applied formally and have been chosen for the country reviews with the agreement of the SD&LLL WG (functioning as the stakeholders' forum of PL4SD). Romania may join as a fourth (and not budgeted) country for a review in 2015.

The country reviews started with a background report covering basic facts of the country, the higher education system and the social situation of students. The team for each site-visit consisted of three external experts who were selected based on their wide-ranging experience in the assessment of national higher education systems and their understanding of social dimension issues (senior scientists in the field of international higher education, senior experts on European higher education from an institutional or policy making perspective and former representatives of ESU) together with four experts from PL4SD. The site-visits took place on five consecutive days, which were fully packed with around 30 sessions (interviews/ focus groups, discussions). The review team interviewed between 80 to over 100 individuals, separately or in groups, in each country. Final reports including recommendations are sent to the national Ministries for comments. After a revision of all documents, the background report, the final expert report and the response of the national Ministry form together the PL4SD country report, which is published on www.pl4sd.eu.

²⁰For more details, please consult the Project's official website at http://www.pl4sd.eu/download/PL4SD_Questionnaire.pdf

3.3. Peer-Learning

To further stimulate peer learning on the social dimension among the member countries of the EHEA, PL4SD has organised two conferences. The first, the "interim" conference took place in spring 2014, when the database went online. The target group for this conference were mainly policy makers. Nearly 70 representatives of ministries and stakeholder organisations (e.g. rectors' conferences, student unions) and researchers/practitioners from 23 member states of the EHEA participated in the conference. Representatives from Armenia, Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom presented measures entered in the PL4SD database. They were structured around four streams, namely access for underrepresented groups, students with disabilities, counselling and guidance for prospective students and examples of national action plans for the social dimension. These presentations served as an input for vivid and fruitful discussions among the participants. All presentations are available on the PL4SD website and a conference report has been published. Participants also evaluated the conference with a short questionnaire.

For the second conference, PL4SD has joined forces with EUROSTUDENT. This conference on the "social dimension of Higher Education" took place at the end of February 2015 and brought together around 240 persons from 40 countries working in policy, research and praxis (www.socialdimension-he.eu). Highlights of the conference were the release of the fifth EUROSTUDENT report, a discussion of the PL4SD country reviews and the Strategy on the social dimension as proposed by the SD&LLL WG. A call for contribution attracted several presentations from outside of PL4SD and EUROSTUDENT that were complemented by presentations of measures delivered to the PL4SD database and results from EUROSTUDENT. Altogether, the programme consisted of several tracks focussing on national strategies, access, special student groups, mobility, student support and funding, study and work, expectations and student assessments as well as retention and success. More than 50 presentations, several keynotes, three workshops and a final panel on political outcomes took place. Between all these programme points was enough space to exchange experiences and discuss issues of the social dimension. Participant feedback was outstanding positive, with the international atmosphere and the presence of policy makers, researchers and practitioners were found to be particularly stimulating. Presentations, a conference report and even a video about the conference will be soon available at www.pl4sd.eu.

3.4. Added value applicable to the Bologna Process

For the social dimension of the EHEA, PL4SD should be regarded as complementary to the Bologna Process Implementation Report (EURYDICE) and the EUROSTUDENT report. The latter two provide a quantitative overview whereas PL4SD adds concrete measures to the picture and supports the development of national strategies for the social dimension through the country reviews and in the future also through its analytical reports.

When looking on the PL4SD database, it becomes obvious that every EHEA country is to some extent engaged in the social dimension, but with different emphases. Moreover, only very few countries have so far developed a coherent plan on how to overcome certain (not to talk about all) barriers for underrepresented groups in higher education. Most of the countries implemented a broad variety of very different measures, however, it seems that those measures are very seldom evaluated and their impact is mostly unknown. That is even true for large programmes of student support like grants or indirect financial support like subsidies for student canteens. That observation is in conjunction with the proposed strategy on the social dimension to be adopted by Ministers at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference and has led to the recommendation that countries should set up an inclusive process to develop a coherent national strategy.

However, it is also very obvious that all higher education systems face similar problems in regard to the social dimension and – especially because the effectiveness of the measures implemented on national level is mostly unknown – it makes a lot of sense to learn from neighbouring countries' experiences. There is no best and no worst country, but a wide range of different measures hardly anyone has an overview of, because they are implemented by a variety of different actors including the state, the higher education institutions and different stakeholder organisations. Taken together however, these measures form the social dimension policy of a country – which in many cases becomes visible in its full variety for the first time in the PL4SD database. In this sense, the PL4SD database is also a starting point for an inventory at national level as recommended by the SD&LLL WG in its Guidelines for developing a national strategy.

Following from that, key players in the social dimension are local practitioners. They develop a lot of concrete measures themselves, they have to implement the measures developed elsewhere (e.g. in a ministry), they face the immediate impact of a measure, and they might well have the best insight on what is needed, what works and what should be improved. Therefore, an exchange of experiences among those local practitioners is very much needed and has the potential to be very fruitful. PL4SD is the first peer-learning platform to foster this kind of exchange, either online through its database or face-to-face through its conferences. In that sense, PL4SD could also be a model for peer-learning in other fields of the Bologna Process.

3.5. Future of PL4SD

PL4SD is a project funded by the Lifelong-Learning Programme of the European Commission. It will formally last until the end of September 2015. After the PL4SD conference in February, a third round of data collection for the PL4SD database will take place. If the budget allows, a fourth country review is also intended for spring 2015. However, most of the work will be devoted to an analytical analysis of the measures entered into the PL4SD database. That is the programme for the near future.

In the long run, the future of PL4SD depends on the funding available. The database will be maintained and accessible without any external resources. However, one important issue should be resolved to improve the usability of the database: qualitative information

about the measures and even more their impact should be added. As [Table 1](#) has shown, there are for example already 145 measures on widening access. They are presented in the database one after the other in an equal manner and therefore it is not easy to distinguish best practice or a model that might potentially be adapted to different national circumstances. So far, the database is a great source for stimulating ideas for measures in other contexts. Nevertheless, information on “what really works” has been rarely entered by the authors of the measures. Such qualitative information must be added to reduce the complexity of more than 100 measures on one topic to make the database even more user-friendly. It’s obvious on the other hand that the PL4SD team cannot and will not be in a position to judge the effectiveness of the measures. The recently-implemented commenting tool should add to these efforts, but in the end, only those who provided the measure or representatives of the target group of that measure who have assessed its impact can really judge its effectiveness. To include this kind of information is one of the future challenges of PL4SD.

The country reviews proved to be very fruitful and should also continue, but may have to be funded by the participating countries in the future. However, based on the experiences from the pilot reviews, some points should be changed for future reviews: Firstly, the background reports should be written by experts from the country to be reviewed. That will reduce overall costs and enhance the quality of the report not least because documents and data published in national language can be integrated more easily. Secondly, the size of the review team could either be smaller or should split more often into two groups during the site visit to meet with even more different stakeholders as the social dimension is a very broad field that involves many issues, bodies and interest groups. Thirdly, if more country reviews are conducted, a mode of disseminating the results to other countries must be found. For the time being, the review reports are published on the PL4SD website and were discussed at the final conference. However, a broader means of communication will further enhance peer-learning among EHEA member countries. In addition, after several reviews have been done, a synthesis report on how to overcome common obstacles observed during the reviews should be produced.

The social dimension is one of the areas of the Bologna Process on which, despite considerable input over the last number of years, it has been difficult to make tangible progress. The establishment of PL4SD has, for the first time, provided a critical resource to facilitate concrete developments in this policy area and the methodology of peer learning (including peer review) has been central to engaging member countries in a very real exploration of how widening participation in higher education might be achieved within their systems. Taken together, the Strategy and Guidelines being put forward by the Working Group seek to develop a roadmap to assist member countries to navigate what may be unfamiliar terrain or to systematise existing initiatives into a coherent national plan with clear national objectives.

Through the database and peer learning, PL4SD is raising awareness of the different kinds of measures that can bring these plans to reality and providing concrete examples that practitioners or policy makers can adapt to their national circumstances. Through peer review, PL4SD is assisting member countries to examine in detail their national

provision in this area and create the foundations for a coherent and effective national plan. A future synthesis of peer reviews should also be hugely beneficial in identifying common challenges and effective approaches across different member countries.

Therefore, notwithstanding that the future funding of the project is a matter for decision by the EU Commission in the framework of its Erasmus+ programme, the SD&LLL WG is strongly recommending endorsement of the work of the PL4SD initiative to date and support for its continuation beyond September 2015.

Conclusions

Quality higher education provision and lifelong learning are regarded as being central to enhancing employability and increasing competitiveness in addition to furthering personal and professional development and motivating social solidarity and civic engagement. However, not all students who would benefit from higher education or lifelong learning opportunities are enabled to participate at this level arising from social, cultural or economic barriers or due to insufficient systems of support. Therefore, it is critical to focus on securing more equitable access to, participation in and completion of higher education for both social and economic reasons.

In the Bucharest Communiqué, Ministers acknowledged that widening access to higher education was a precondition for societal progress and economic development and agreed to adopt national measures to widen overall access to quality higher education in pursuing the overarching Bologna Process objective that the student body entering and graduating from higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations.

However, the 2014 Eurydice report on the Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability²¹ observes that, although the priority of the social dimension of higher education is emphasised in such policy documents and countries have made clear commitments to develop national plans or strategies and set measurable targets, only nine countries have actually defined attainment targets for specified groups to date.

In addition, the Eurydice report observes that there is still considerable work to be done in the area of measuring progress on the social dimension. It was observed that practices in this area vary considerably and the report concludes that, "...There is therefore a long way to go before a convincing, evidence-based, European-wide picture of progress in widening access is possible to obtain...".

In light of the Ministerial commitment at Bucharest to adopt national measures and the difficulties identified in making practical and tangible progress in this area, the Working Group, in pursuing its terms of reference, worked on elaborating a strategy to support the member countries in the development of effective policies to ensure greater access to

²¹ Report on the Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability: Eurydice (2014)

quality higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Together with the development of a coherent set of policy measures and national plans or strategies²² to address participation in higher education, “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*” deals with setting national targets for underrepresented groups, following up with specific actions and collecting relevant data. The BFUG is requested to consider the strategy for adoption by Ministers at the Yerevan meeting.

Critically, the strategy is accompanied by a set of guidelines, which have been produced to assist countries to meet the challenge of developing or enhancing national plans or strategies. These guidelines have been developed to provide a “roadmap” for member countries 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.

Through its database and peer learning activities, the PL4SD project is raising awareness of the different kinds of measures that can bring these plans to reality and providing concrete examples that practitioners or policy makers can adapt to their national circumstances. Through peer review, PL4SD is assisting member countries to examine in detail their national provision in this area and create the foundations for coherent and effective national plans.

The establishment of the PL4SD project has provided a critical resource to drive real progress in relation to the social dimension in the EHEA and the methodology of peer learning (including peer review) has been central to engaging member countries in a very real exploration of how widening participation in higher education might be achieved within their systems.

Between the development of the Strategy and guidelines and the establishment of the PL4SD database and conduct of peer reviews, it is reasonable to conclude that significant real progress has been made in this policy area over the period since the mandate of the Working Group was given at the Bucharest conference. The Working Group has concluded that it would not be possible to have made such substantial and concrete progress in this difficult policy area without the dedicated resource of PL4SD or in the absence of mobilising the methodology of peer learning.

The Working Group wishes to acknowledge that its deliberations also benefitted from co-operation with the “Expanding Opportunities” project (which hosted one of the WG

²² EHEA 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.

meetings) and from interaction with a range of networks and other contributors at the thematic sections of its meetings.

Recommendations

We request the Ministers at the Yerevan conference to adopt the document “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*”.

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 to Ministers on progress at the next Ministerial Conference in 2018.

We recommend endorsement of the work of the PL4SD initiative to date through its database and conferences, note the imminent publication of the initial three peer reviews of EHEA member countries and request Ministerial support for the continuation of the initiative beyond September 2015.

We note the important exploratory work carried out by the Working Group’s thematic sub-groups on the themes of access, teaching and learning, student supports and services and lifelong learning and employability and propose that the recommendations made by these sub-groups be brought forward under the terms of reference of the Working Group mandated by Ministers to follow up with this policy area.

We would encourage the BFUG to consider a general recommendation for teaching and learning from both a structural and social dimension perspective in the Yerevan communiqué.

We recommend further development of the interaction with initiatives and networks relevant to the work on the social dimension of higher education and lifelong learning.

Acronyms

BFUG – Bologna Follow-Up Group

DZHW – German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies, Hannover

EC – European Commission

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

EI – Education International

ESU – European Students’ Union

EUA – European University Association

ExpandO – Expanding Opportunities project

IDE – Institute for the Development of Education, Zagreb

PL4SD – Peer Learning for the Social Dimension project

SCL – student-centred learning

SD&LLL WG – Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group

TG – thematic group

T&L – teaching and learning

Figures and Tables

1. Figure 1: Screenshot of the search interface of the PL4SD database
2. Table 1: Overview of measures in the PL4SD database (as of March 2015)

Figure 1

Screenshot of the search interface of the PL4SD database

The screenshot shows the PL4SD database search interface. At the top left is the PL4SD logo with the tagline 'peer learning for the social dimension'. To the right is the A A A logo and the Lifelong Learning Programme logo. Below the navigation bar, there are four filter sections:

- STUDENT TARGET GROUP** (all/none):
 - general student population
 - by gender
 - ethnic minorities
 - from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
 - from migrant backgrounds
 - from rural or remote regions
 - international students
 - mature students
 - orphans
 - prospective students
 - with children
 - with disabilities
 - with siblings
 - without the normally required entrance qualifications
 - working students
 - other
- OBJECTIVE OF MEASURE** (all/none):
 - widening access
 - retention and success
 - combining study and work
 - lifelong learning
 - international mobility
 - monitoring and evaluation
 - student support
 - other
- TYPE OF MEASURE** (all/none):
 - student financial support
 - funding incentives for institutions
 - counselling and support services
 - teaching and learning
 - information campaigns
 - enrolment policies
 - alternative entry routes
 - flexible learning paths
 - cooperation with schools
 - data collection and research
 - other
- COUNTRY** (all/none):
 - EU countries
 - non-EU countries
 - filter results by countries
 - no country filters set

Below the filters is a search bar with the text 'full-text search' and a 'Search' button. To the right of the search bar, it shows 'Measures: 0/292' and 'Research: 0/139'. Below the search bar is a list of search results, including 'student funding', 'students with special needs', 'scholarships', 'student mobility', 'student support', 'widening participation', 'disabled students', 'financial aid', 'flexible study', 'students from migrant backgrounds', 'study guidance and information', 'fair access', 'students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds', 'mentoring', 'grants', 'counselling service', 'equal access to higher education', 'disability', 'alternative entry routes', 'students with impairments', 'work and study', 'enrolment policies', 'information service', 'gender equality', 'student counselling', 'study and family', 'counselling', 'access to higher education', 'widening access', 'guidance', 'prospective students', 'higher education', 'students with disabilities', 'higher education statistics', 'female students', 'gender equality in higher education', 'recognition of prior learning', 'international students'.

At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with links for 'share', 'newsletter', 'contact', and 'terms of use'. Below the footer are logos for the Institut für Höhere Studien (Vienna), Institut für neue Lernwege (Institute for the Development of Education), DZHW (Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung), and esu.

Source: www.pl4sd.eu (as of 11.11.2014).

Table 1**Overview of measures in the PL4SD database (as of March 2015)**

STUDENT TARGET GROUP	#	%	OBJECTIVE OF MEASURE	#	%
general student population	130	42%	widening access	145	47%
by gender	37	12%	retention and success	70	23%
ethnic minorities	29	9%	combining study and work	24	8%
from lower socioeconomic backgrounds	82	26%	lifelong learning	26	8%
from migrant backgrounds	39	13%	international mobility	24	8%
from rural or remote regions	15	5%	monitoring and evaluation	31	10%
international students	29	9%	student support	167	54%
mature students	24	8%	Other	28	9%
orphans	14	5%			
prospective students	60	19%	TYPE OF MEASURE	#	%
with children	35	11%	student financial support	94	30%
with disabilities	77	25%	funding incentives for institutions	22	7%
with siblings	5	2%	counselling and support services	115	37%
without the normally required entrance qualifications	22	7%	teaching and learning	32	10%
working students	33	11%	information campaigns	49	16%
other	24	8%	enrolment policies	20	6%
			alternative entry routes	18	6%
			flexible learning paths	24	8%
REGION	#	%	cooperation with schools	25	8%
EU countries	279	90%	data collection and research	35	11%
Non-EU-countries	32	10%	Other	28	9%

Note: A measure can be allocated to more than one category.

Appendices

1. Terms of Reference of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group
2. Action Plan of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group
3. List of members of the SD&LLL WG

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group

Name of the working group Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning
Contact person (Co-Chairs) Elisabeth Gehrke – ESU (elisabeth@esu-online.org) Brian Power – Ireland (brian_power@education.gov.ie)
Composition Armenia, Austria, Belgium/Flemish Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, United Kingdom, Ukraine, EC, EI, EUA, EURASHE, PL4SD.
Reference to the Bucharest Communiqué (With reference to the sections of the Communiqué on “Providing quality higher education for all”, “Enhancing employability to serve Europe’s needs” and “Setting out priorities for 2012-2015”) In the Bucharest Communiqué, in undertaking to provide quality higher education for all, EHEA Ministers observed, “...widening access to higher education is a precondition for societal progress and economic development. We agree to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education. We will work to raise completion rates and ensure timely progression in higher education in all EHEA countries...” Ministers also re-confirmed the declared objective of the social dimension as already outlined at the London and Leuven/Lovain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqués – that the student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations. Ministers also agreed to step up their efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior

learning.

In setting out the specific priorities for 2012-2015, the Ministers committed to strengthening policies of widening overall access and raising completion rates, including measures targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups. The Ministers also undertook to develop a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing by 2013 in countries which request it and initiate a pilot project to promote peer learning on the social dimension of higher education.

The Ministers further committed to enhance the employability and personal and professional development of graduates throughout their careers. In that regard, they asserted that lifelong learning (LLL) is one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market, and acknowledged that higher education institutions play a central role in transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances.

Overarching aims of the working group

- To further support the development of the social dimension of higher education at national and the EHEA level through strengthening policies to widen overall access, raising completion rates and targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups;
- To assist the EHEA countries in their work to enhance employability and lifelong learning through improved cooperation with relevant stakeholders;
- To work closely with the sponsoring consortium on the development of the pilot project on peer learning for the social dimension of higher education (PL4SD), with a general oversight mandate to further BFUG social dimension goals.

Objectives of the working group

- **To mobilise the cooperation of all relevant actors** in pursuing efforts to promote greater access, participation and completion rates in higher education for all students.
- To fulfil the Ministerial commitment to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education **by supporting EHEA countries in their work to develop and implement** national access plans or strategies.
- To support the development of common approaches in monitoring the implementation of national access plans **by elaborating core indicators** that may be used for measuring and monitoring the relevant aspects of the social dimension in higher education.
- **To promote the development and implementation of institution-level strategies** for widening access, targeting the increased participation

of underrepresented groups and raising completion rates.

- To support and guide the implementation of a pilot project (PL4SD) **to facilitate peer learning** on the social dimension of higher education which will assist EHEA countries in developing, implementing and monitoring social dimension policies.
- To **contribute to the development of structured peer review processes** across EHEA countries and institutions
- To address the need for a more supportive environment for teachers, with specific emphasis on emerging pedagogical and didactical requirements to support the needs of a more diverse student population and improve their completion rates, through **practical recommendations on implementing student-centred learning (SCL)**.
- To address aspect of employability by **advancing implementation of Bologna reforms and raising awareness on the purpose of those among stakeholders** (including employers).
- To help to **identify and set priorities for peer learning and peer review activities** concerning the areas of the social dimension and lifelong learning.

Reporting

Minutes of working group meetings will be made available to the BFUG on the protected part of the website (by the Bologna Secretariat). Bologna Secretariat, at the request of the WG Chairs, may circulate relevant updates to the WG members by email.

The BFUG should also receive regular reports and updates from the working group.

To ensure good communication with the BFUG as a whole and for the necessary consultations, progress reports should be submitted at least two weeks before each BFUG meeting.

Meeting Schedule

First meeting Brussels, 13 December 2012

Second meeting Dublin, 17 April 2013

Third meeting Ghent, 13-14 November 2013

Fourth meeting Vienna, 3-4 April 2014

Fifth meeting Brussels, 23-24 September 2014

Sixth meeting Brussels, 3 March 2015

Liaison with other WGs and networks

- Reporting on the Implementation of the Bologna Process WG
- 'Structural Reforms' WG
- NESSIE
- RPL Network

Additional remarks

In addition to the objectives above, the working group will also set out a number of explicit tasks, which will contribute to accomplishing its mandate. These will be specific activities designed to realise the objectives set out above in the context of the overarching aims identified by EHEA Ministers in the Bucharest Communiqué. They will also take into consideration the recommendations of the 2012 report of the social dimension working group and the social dimension chapter of the 2012 report on the Implementation of the Bologna Process.

Appendix 2

Action Plan of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group

Timeframe	Theme of the meeting	Expected outcomes	Expert organisations to be invited
2013 I half 17 April WG meeting in Dublin	Theme of the meeting: Lifelong learning and its role in supporting the social dimension and better skills policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding on implementing lifelong learning policies in EHEA • Identifying barriers to LLL and policy measures/ practices on the European, national and institutional level to address those barriers • Demonstrations of good practice in designing and implementing LLL policies on the national and institutional level (FLLEX project, EUA University Charter) • Agreeing on the indicators with regard to SD&LLL to be reflected in Bologna implementation report (good practice example – Irish National Access Office) • Better understanding of the activities of the Structural working group and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EURASHE (FLLEX project and the outcomes of RPL conference) • EUA to present LLL Charter • Irish example of good practice (National Access Office)

		RPL network and its relation to core objectives of SD&LLL working group.	
		On the agenda	Expert organisations to be invited
<p>2013 II half</p> <p>Optional ExpandO conference followed by a 2-day meeting</p> <p>13-14 November WG meeting in Ghent</p>	<p>Day 1: Thematic in-depth session: Teaching, learning and supportive environments.</p> <p>Day 2: Internal work day incl. follow up of thematic strands</p>	<p>Day 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefing on the latest developments and findings with regards to quality teaching on the European level (High-level working group on Excellence in teaching, ESG revision process) Discuss what recommendations could already be made. Give clear input to on-going research processes and projects <p>Day 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree on the new action plan including the work of the ad-hoc groups and the co-chairs. Decide on ad-hoc group members Get updated on current developments in the thematic streams Update on what will be in Erasmus+ and Horizon2020 relating to the work of the group. Get update from and give recommendations to PL4SD 	<p>Day 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representatives from the high-level group on excellence in teaching representative WG member, working on the institutional level Principal investigator (Marie Clarke) from the EI-project on a more supportive environment for staff EI and ESU on Student-centred learning toolkit and its promotion <p>Day 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DG-Research (LLL)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DG-Education • PL4SD • ExpandO
<p>2014 I half</p> <p>PL4SD interim-conference followed by 2-day meeting</p> <p>3-4 April WG meeting in Austria</p>	<p>Day 1: Thematic in-depth session on access to higher education</p> <p>Day 2: Internal work day, strategy discussion and follow up of the thematic strands</p>	<p>Day 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PL4SD presents their current material on access • Report from World Congress on Access to Post-Secondary education • Review of progress on implementing national plans/strategies for the social dimension • Discuss the national and institutional responsibility for widening access (quality of teaching, student support services) • Ad-hoc group on access presents proposal for national access plan guidelines. <p>Day 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up the work from the ad-hoc groups and the co-chairs. • Get update on the current developments in the thematic streams • Discuss the European framework (strategy) on Social dimension and LLL • Discuss and agree on the structure and core indicators for the European framework on Social dimension and LLL (draft framework will be prepared by co-chairs before the meeting and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PL4SD representatives • Country representative taking part in peer-review via PL4SD • European Access Network • Irish Ministry

		<p>sent to the WG)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get update from and give recommendations to PL4SD; note longer session with PL4SD. • Examine the experience of the peer reviews and how such practice can be encouraged more widely in the Bologna process – presentation of at least one national system, which went through review 	
<p>2014 II half 23-24 September WG meeting in Brussels followed by an optional policy seminar "ET2020: Social Inclusion and Higher Education"</p>	<p>Day 1: Thematic strand on student supports and services</p> <p>Day 2: Internal work day, strategy and final report discussion as well as follow up of the thematic strands</p>	<p>Day 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the contribution of the social dimension for the competitiveness of the EHEA (speedy completion, comparative degrees, mobility) by supporting students with financial aid, social and counselling services, and guaranteeing the social infrastructure of student life • Discuss alternative access routes, and continued support throughout studies by adequate services. • Address the considerable inequalities in the provision of non-academic student support services in the EHEA, and come up with recommendations on covering gaps and strengthening the social infrastructure for higher education. <p>Day 2:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student services institutions from different countries • Researchers on the social dimension • Good practices in the provision of student services • European Council for Student Affairs • Eurostudent Network • National Associations for Student Services (e.g. DSW, CNOUS, ANDISU etc.) • National student association

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up the work from the ad-hoc groups and the co-chairs. • Get update on the current developments in the thematic streams • Get update from PL4SD on policy recommendations. Discuss the final recommendations based on PL4SD • Adopt the final proposal for the European framework (strategy) on Social dimension and LLL 	
<p>2015 I half</p> <p>3 March WG meeting</p>	<p>Theme of the meeting: Future of Social dimension and LLL in the Bologna process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amend the WG's final report based on the feedback from the BFUG • Adopt recommendation on the future of PL4SD • Discuss the issues that have not been tackled but that potentially should be tackled. • Performing evaluation exercise for the working group: working methods, satisfaction with accomplished tasks, recommendations for future steering/structure • Agreeing, whether WG suggest a prolongation of the mandate 	
<p>Ministerial Conference May 2015</p>		<p>Decision on the working priorities for 2015-2018</p>	

Appendix 3

List of members of the SD&LLL WG 2012-2015

No.	Country/organisation	Name
1.	Ireland	Brian Power Co-Chair of the SD&LLL WG
2.	ESU	Elisabeth Gehrke Co-Chair of the SD&LLL WG
3.	Armenia	Zhanna Andreasyan
4.	Austria	Helga Posset
5.	Belgium/Flemish Community	Noël Vercruysse
6.	Belgium/Flemish Community	Patrick Willems
7.	Croatia	Marina Crnčić Sokol
8.	Croatia	Tomislav Vodička
9.	Cyprus	Stelios Christophides
10.	Denmark	Ditte Mesick
11.	Denmark	Annemarie Otteslev
12.	European Commission	Maria Gylfadottir
13.	European Commission	Mads Gravas
14.	European Commission	Mette Moerk Andersen
15.	Education International	Jens Vraa-Jensen
16.	European Students' Union	Aengus Ó Maoláin
17.	European Students' Union	Florian Kaiser
18.	European Students' Union	Michael Frederiksen
19.	European Students' Union	Tiago Estêvão Martins
20.	European University Association	Michael Gaebel
21.	European University Association	Jonna Korhonen
22.	EURASHE	Stéphane Lauwick
23.	Finland	Birgitta Vuorinen
24.	France	Alexandra Gaudé
25.	France	Hélène Lagier
26.	Germany	Achim Meyer auf der Heyde
27.	Germany	Achim Weber
28.	Hungary	Márton Beke

29.	Latvia	Daiga Ivsina
30.	Lithuania	Inga Milisiunaite
31.	Norway	Gro Beate Vige
32.	PL4SD	Martin Unger
33.	United Kingdom	Andrea M. Nolan
34.	United Kingdom	John Storan
35.	BFUG Secretariat	Gayane Harutyunyan
36.	BFUG Secretariat	Sahakanush Sargsyan

Appendix 4

Guidelines to assist countries in developing national plans or strategies for access, participation and completion in higher education

Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to assist the EHEA member countries in developing a national plan or strategy for access, participation and completion in higher education with the overall goal of developing the social dimension as agreed by the Ministers in the 2007 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. We therefore continue our 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."

These guidelines accompany the Strategy to be presented for adoption by Ministers on 14-15 May 2015 in Yerevan.

Although many member countries of the EHEA

- are engaged in the development of the social dimension to achieve greater equity of access, participation and completion in their higher education systems,
- have mechanisms to financially support students in need (be it in the form of a grant/loan system, support for the families of students, reduction of fees or indirect support e.g. through subsidising student canteens, dormitories, transport or health costs),
- have rules or laws against discrimination and special regulations for certain underrepresented groups like students with disabilities,
- have established some student counselling and/or career guidance services,

there needs to be much greater progress in the social dimension if the EHEA is to achieve the overall goal outlined above.

Moreover, only a few member countries have integrated all of their measures into a coherent strategy based on a systematic approach of identifying barriers into and within the higher education system and based on relevant data providing evidence for action. This is precisely the aim of the new strategy on the social dimension (2015), namely to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of the implemented measures designed to meet the EHEA goal in the area of the social dimension.

Introduction

It is clear that the situation is very different across the member countries of the EHEA. Therefore, these guidelines are broadly framed and should be adapted to national circumstances. Moreover, the guidelines describe just the first iteration of a process that should be repeated regularly. In addition, it has to be acknowledged that the social

dimension is a very wide field and that steps taken to improve the social situation of students will sometimes take a long time to show effect. Hence, in the first round, the focus should be on the implementation of the process and analysis of the current situation. However, because it is a long-term process, it is important to commence implementation as soon as possible.

Guidelines

In the guidelines, the following steps are recommended:

1. Set up a coherent and inclusive process.
2. Set general objectives.
3. Analyse the current position. A) student population B) existing measures
4. Identify data gaps and ways to overcome them.
5. Identify barriers to access, participation and completion in higher education.
6. Contrast existing measures with identified barriers.
7. Develop strategies to overcome these barriers.
8. Implement a follow-up process and set specific targets.
9. Restart the process.

1. Set up a coherent and inclusive process.

Countries should set up an inclusive process to develop their national plans or strategies. "Inclusive" in this instance means to involve higher education institutions, student representatives and all other relevant stakeholders, but also to consult with the pre-tertiary education system (schools, vocational education). Such a broad consultation is needed because the social dimension is not only a task for policy or the Ministry of Higher Education, but for all interests involved across the continuum of education. Therefore, an advisory structure or consultation mechanism involving representatives of these interests should be central to the development of the process.

Secondly, the process should work with, or better, be embedded into the existing systems of quality assurance, data collection and transparency tools in order to mainstream the social dimension into ongoing work.

Thirdly, the process should focus on national circumstances and needs but should also be open to learning from external experiences, including those of other member countries of the EHEA. The database and country reviews of the PL4SD project (pl4sd.eu) provide an important starting point as well as the information and experience gained from participation in the Eurostudent project or in other data collection exercises.

2. Set general objectives.

The overall goal of the process is stated in the London Communiqué as quoted above. However, the national advisory or consultation structure should agree on short-term (3-4 years) and long-term (10-15 years) national objectives. Objective setting should take place as early as possible in the process to set a baseline against which future progress can be measured and to streamline the next steps according to the general objectives. However, these general objectives should be based on broad agreement among the stakeholders to ensure strong commitment and buy-in to the process by all stakeholder groups.

3. Analyse the current position.

This step involves the analysis of two different but critical elements:

A) an analysis of the student population entering, participating in and completing higher education and

B) cataloguing the existing measures designed to promote the social dimension.

3A) The analysis of the student population should focus particularly on groups of students that may be underrepresented in entering, participating in or completing higher education or that are likely to be disadvantaged due, for example, to socio-economic status, age (at entrance and completion), gender, disability, ethnic background, nationality, migration background, regional background, or having dependents (caring for children or relatives).

Proper definitions are needed to describe these groups. However, in some instances, common definitions are used that have been set out for completely different purposes (like the definition of disability as a concept of reduced working capacity). Careful consideration should therefore be given to whether such “common” definitions are appropriate for the situation in higher education.

Nevertheless, such analysis is already done in many member countries, but it often takes into account only the aggregated level of the whole higher education system. To provide evidence for the different situations of students, a deeper examination of the system is needed. Therefore, the analysis should at least differentiate between regions, types of higher education institutions, types of study programmes, fields of study and full-time, part-time or distance learning students. Wherever possible, the analysis should take into account the composition of the general population in the relevant student age categories.

3B) The catalogue of implemented measures should comprise measures undertaken by government, public institutions, education providers and other relevant stakeholders. It should not only focus on financial support for students (be it direct or indirect support) but also on student services as for example guidance, counselling and mentoring initiatives.

4. Identify data gaps and ways to overcome them.

It is very likely that nearly all member countries will face data gaps when trying to describe their student population in the detailed manner described above. However, these data gaps should be taken into account and ways to close these gaps should be considered for the future. Sometimes this may be done through enhanced official reporting by the higher education institutions (to the respective ministry or statistical office); in other cases only student surveys may be able to provide the required data.

5. Identify barriers to access, participation and completion in higher education.

This is the most ambitious stage of the whole process. Once the detailed composition of the student population has been compared to the general population, certain groups can be identified as being underrepresented either in the whole higher education system or in certain sub-areas of the system. However, it is not an easy task to identify the barriers that prevent them accessing, participating in or completing higher education. Usually, the barriers are multidimensional and therefore appear sometimes vague, unclear and difficult to designate.

Nevertheless, a lot of progress has been achieved in recent years in international research identifying these barriers in a systematic way (see annex). Factors influencing access to,

participation in and completion of higher education are plentiful and not all of them are related to financial considerations as the public discourse might suggest. Moreover, some member countries and some higher education institutions have established designated access offices or specialised departments with responsibility for widening participation.

In addition to research, there is also experience available that could be used to assist in identifying these barriers but must be adapted to national circumstances. In any case, just like the description of the student population, the identification of barriers should also be done for different groups of students, in different regions, at different types of higher education institutions and at different stages of the students study career.

6. Contrast existing measures with identified barriers.

The following kinds of questions should be discussed within step six:

- Do the measures catalogued in Step three address the identified barriers in a comprehensive way?
- Are these measures effective, at least in the long-run?
- If the measures being taken are effective, why do the barriers continue to exist?
- What additional actions/initiatives are needed to overcome them?

Where appropriate, existing measures should be evaluated. For example, systems of financial support for students are in place in nearly all member countries, but usually insufficient is known about their effectiveness and impact.

7. Develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

Barriers to participation in higher education and educational disadvantage arise from a wide range of issues impacting across the life-cycle of the student as outlined at Step three above. Therefore, this is not only a task for the Ministry responsible for higher education. Some consideration should be given to the steps that need to be taken at other points on the education continuum and by actors in other sectors to support students in pursuing lifelong learning and in accessing, participating in and completing higher education.

Strategies to overcome the barriers to effective participation in higher education may include:

- Provision for the development of proactive strategies at institutional level, including lifelong learning and outreach activities, provision of information on educational and labour market-related opportunities and outcomes, guidance on appropriate course choice and skills acquisition and other supports.
- Develop transparent progression routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education based on the implementation of national qualifications frameworks linked to the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA.
- Support the development and implementation of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning. This includes measures to increase opportunities for flexible learning through diversifying modes of delivery of learning content, including through part-time provision, modularisation of programmes and distance learning through the use of ICTs and open education resources, while recognising and addressing the risks of a widening digital divide.

- Address the overall structure of institutional funding, fees and student financial supports. What is the impact on the participation of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education and how can financial supports best be targeted to achieve national objectives for access, participation and completion?

Base your national strategy on research and groundwork already done previously or in other countries (see list of resources below) and in accordance with the national objectives set in Step two.

8. Implement a follow-up process and set specific targets.

To become effective, the national strategy must also include a procedure for a follow-up process assigning concrete tasks to be fulfilled and specific targets to be achieved within defined timeframes and identifying clearly who is responsible for implementation. The specific targets should ideally be quantifiable to facilitate their evaluation. Therefore:

- Prioritise the tasks
- Set specific targets
- Set a timeline for each task and target
- Define responsibilities for the implementation of each task
- Set up a quantitative and qualitative monitoring processes
- Evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of implemented measures
- Discuss results with the steering group and representatives of identified underrepresented groups

Again, international models for such a process are listed below (see list of resources below).

9. Restart the process

Annex: Resources

The report from the 2005-07 working group on the social dimension already provided a lot of hints on how to develop a national strategy resp. action plan: "Key issues for the European Higher Education Area – Social Dimension and Mobility", Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries. May 2007. Page 14f + Annex 2
<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Socialdimensionandmobilityreport.pdf>

Ireland was among the first countries to implement an action plan on access. Meanwhile, Ireland is working on its third edition. There is a lot of material (plans, evaluation, conference proceedings, data, and publications) available on the homepage of the national access office:
<http://www.heai.ie/en/policy/national-access-office>

Other Literature:

Callender C. (2011), Hidden Barriers to Higher Education. NESET Symposium Report
<http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/claire-callender-symposium-report-NESET-2011-WKSHP-2-hidden-barriers-to-higher-education.pdf>

European University Association: Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths (TRACKIT): <http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/building-the-european-higher-education-area/projects/tracking-learners-and-graduates-progression-paths.aspx>

The Higher Education Academy: What works? Student retention and success change programme: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/widening-access-programmes-archive/what-works>

Quinn J. (2013), Drop-Out and completion in higher education in Europe among students from underrepresented groups. NESET-Report:
<http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/HE Drop out AR Final.pdf>

Net-Resources

The following homepages provide also a lot of material with relation to the social dimension:

- NESSE-Network (<http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/relevant-european-research/nesse/activities/reports>)
- NESET-Network (<http://www.nesetweb.eu/>)
- EUROSTUDENT (<http://www.eurostudent.eu/>)
- PL4SD (<http://www.pl4sd.eu/>)
- EURYDICE (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php)

In addition, EUROSTAT and the EUROPEAN COMMISSION are currently commissioning projects on drop-outs, retention and study-success. They should be published in 2015/16.