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Report of the Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension

Report prepared by Robert Napier (ESU) and Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Croatia)

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I. Finalizing of the document “Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA”

The Advisory Group on Social Dimension (AG1 on SD) is co-chaired by Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Croatia) and Robert Napier (the European Students’ Union – ESU). 17 other members and stakeholders are part of this advisory group, and these are: Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, EI/ETUCE, EUA, European Commission, EUROSTUDENT, Germany, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom and United Kingdom (Scotland). The group had a total of five meetings between February 2019 and February 2020, and used a multitude of online tools to continue the dialogue and work going in between meetings. In order to inspire better discussions, the group also welcomed a number of guest speakers during the meetings, which helped identify key issues related to social dimension in higher education and develop them accordingly within the Principles and Guidelines.

From its first meeting which was held in Zagreb in February 2019, the Advisory Group decided to focus most of its energy on creating a concrete set of Principles and Guidelines, which are short, concise and can bring about a real change within this field. Before starting to work on this document, we discussed and agreed that the **definition of social dimension (SD) should combine the definitions used in the London 2007 and the Yerevan 2015 Communiqué, but also should aim to go beyond this.** Within the revised 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 AG1 SD kept in mind the common understanding that social dimension goes beyond identifying vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups of students and that social dimension principles should be integrated into the core higher education functions, which include among others Learning and Teaching, Research, Knowledge Exchange and Outreach, Institutional Governance and Management and Policies for Empowering Students and Staff.

For this reason, the AG1 SD is proposing a forward-looking strategic document for higher education development, Principles and Guidelines, which we are proposing to be annexed to the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué, with a clear commitment to its full implementation over the upcoming decade. Since this document has been widely consulted, not just within the AG1 SD but also within the BFUG at large, we believe it is time to have a clear political commitment from the EHEA ministers to truly improve the social dimensionS of higher education. The document aims to define ten principles for social dimension in higher education

for upcoming decade of the Bologna process 2020-2030. Each principle is also accompanied with a set of guidelines that explain the implementation process.

Without entering into the merits of each of the Principles and Guidelines, the following aims led the AG1 SD in the process of creation of the Principles and Guidelines. One of the primary aims of the work of the AG1 SD is to ensure that the social dimension becomes central to higher education strategies at national, regional, local and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level. Secondly, through the Principles and Guidelines we want to ensure a holistic approach to social dimension which will aim to create coherent policy measures from early childhood, through schooling and into higher education and throughout lifelong learning. This will mean more connectivity between the work of those responsible for higher education and other ministries and departments, which only together can bring about a tangible change.

Through the adoption and implementation of these Principles and Guidelines, we also want to ensure that public authorities continue to support higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student body, particularly through continuing professional training for both academic and administrative staff. It is ineffective advocating to achieve the definition adopted in the London Communique on social dimension, unless efforts are made in this regard.

Data collection is also central to the improvement of social dimension. Whilst understanding the restrictions imposed by national laws, higher education systems should define goals of collecting certain types of data and to develop the necessary capacities to collect, process and use such data to support the social dimension policy. The Principles and Guidelines also put emphasis on the need of ensuring effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students as well as on establishing a strategic framework for higher education funding which promotes social dimension. Mobility programs in higher education should be structured in a way that foster diversity, equity and inclusion. Also, community and civic engagement in higher education should be used to promote social dimensions in higher education.

Legal regulations or policy documents 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. Lastly, public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level.

In the upcoming period to the ministerial conference in Rome, the AG1 SD is going to organize a Peer-learning Activity for Social Dimension (PLA) in Brussels (date will be confirmed later), under the auspices of the ESU and financed through the Erasmus+ project SIDERAL. The aim of this PLA is to exchange best practices in the implementation of social dimension policies between different EHEA member states – we are glad to invite the EHEA countries to register for this PLA.

The AG1 SD has also proposed to the BFUG Secretariat to organize a workshop “The Social Dimension within the Bologna Process: Achievements & Challenges Ahead” in the framework of the Global Summit on Higher Education in Rome in June 2020. The goal of the workshop

is to present the new strategic document “Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA” and explain how countries could improve social dimension policies by implementing the document Principles and Guidelines.

II. Recommendations for the development of social dimension in the period 2020-2023

It is also important to note that during the last meeting of the AG1 SD held in Copenhagen in February 2020, the group spent a substantial time on improving the introductory part and introducing a short glossary to the Principles and Guidelines. The glossary is intended to highlight the differences in terminology between three different terms used within the document, namely, underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students. The definitions of these terminologies are not to be understood as legal definitions but rather are intended as explanatory definitions used in relation to the contents of the Principles and Guidelines. The group also managed to streamline the structure of the document, with shorter, more concise principles and similar wording styles for the guidelines .

As we have now entered the very final stages of consultation for our proposed document, Principles and Guidelines, which we hope will be annexed to the communique and adopted by ministers for implementation, the current AG1 SD would also like to make recommendations for the BFUG 2020-2023 working period. It is essential to bear in mind that the adoption of Principles and Guidelines should only be seen as the beginning of a journey to holistically improve the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA. The proposed document should not be seen as a checklist, but rather as an instrument which can help bring about concrete and tangible change over the next decade and beyond. In order to be able to do this, **it is crucial that the BFUG enables the establishment and work of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension in the next BFUG Operational program 2020-2023.** The main objective for the new mandate of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension should be (a) developing a system of monitoring of the Principles and Guidelines and (b) defining indicators and benchmarks for the principles for SD.

In the meantime, in order to avoid the scenario of having no improvement over the next three years, while the indicators and monitoring mechanisms are being developed, we suggest that the Peer Support Groups (PSG) are broadened to incorporate the topic of social dimension. Despite having a very short time frame to operate within, the current PSGs have been successful in helping countries support each other. The social dimension requires more peer support at this point, as we still see significant discrepancies in the level of policy development and implementation within the EHEA. The current AG1 SD suggests that this is done in parallel to Thematic Country Reviews for the Social Dimension, because it could ensure that the relevant areas for peer support are identified and acted upon.

Lastly, the AG1 SD recommends to organize a seminar or conference on social dimension at the end of the next Bologna cycle with the aim of discussing progress in social dimension in the EHEA. The AG1 SD hopes that by holding such a conference, countries and stakeholders alike will be able to come together and analyse the impact of the work done on the social dimension, which will further enhance the development of this important policy.