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Peer Learning Activity on Social Dimension in Higher Education

Brussels, 24th (afternoon) and 25th February 2020

The aim of the PLA

Primarily, this Peer Learning Activity (PLA) aims to explore the broad definition of the Social Dimension of Higher Education. In this regard, the PLA will enable discussion between participants of various national backgrounds, particularly about the way the Social Dimension is mainstreamed through higher education policies and action plans in different countries. The second aim of the PLA is to address the specific challenges linked to the monitoring of Social Dimension and the key role played by data collection in this context. A closer look will be taken at the potential role and challenges of micro-data collection, especially when it comes to privacy and potential misuse of the data collected.

Background

Since the commencement of the Bologna Process in 1999, the Social Dimension of Higher Education began gaining relevance as a measure of how the student body reflects the diversity in the general population, particularly in the ability of non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, participate in and complete quality higher education.¹ Following the appointment of working and advisory groups from the first follow up meeting in 2001, commitment towards improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education has remained a top institutional and ministerial priority, as outlined in the most recent Paris Communiqué in 2018.

Given that the term “Social Dimension” was formally recognised only 20 years ago, its definition and practical translation and implementation into and through policies within Higher Education Institutions was mostly open to the interpretation and will of governing states and institutions. This situation enables specific challenges to be addressed by national ministries and institutions setting goals and strategies relevant to their national context. However, the lack of harmonisation in goals and indicators between countries makes it somewhat problematic to monitor the progress made on the Social Dimension of Higher Education at the EHEA level.

While it is within the remit of ministries and institutions to mainstream the concept of Social Dimension into policies and actions, further commitment to addressing the inequalities and

¹ Bologna Process/EHEA. (2015). 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.



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barriers that potential students face in accessing higher education systems is required in order to ensure that the work of the Bologna Process leaves no student behind when devising and implementing “*policies that encourage and support HE institutions to fulfill their social responsibility and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society*”.² With this commitment, harmonisation of the diverse terminologies relevant to the Social Dimension within the EHEA, including but not limited to terms such as equitability, social inclusion, recognition of prior learning, affordability, integration and student wellbeing is the first step in building common grounds to measure and evaluate institutional and national policies and practices.

The subject of monitoring the Social Dimension of Higher Education is strongly linked to the aforementioned broad definition of the Social Dimension. Setting common guidelines, indicators and benchmarks are key factors for the Bologna process to begin monitoring the implementation of reforms, actions, plans and initiatives related to the Social Dimension in a harmonised way.

In this regard, data collection is key to developing appropriate policies as it can provide a more accurate and representative understanding of the current dynamics in terms of social inclusion, participation and completion in the higher education system of a given country or area. Indeed, it provides the grounds to identify underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, evaluate the situation and build a persistent monitoring system that can be used in the long term.

Monitoring the social dimension in a Higher Education system implies having access to personal information on the students enrolled, such as gender, date of birth, nationality, place of residence, study programme, but also data that can be considered as more sensitive such as information on the parents of the student, professional status, potential disability, language minority... Macro and micro data collection and handling within the field of Higher Education must therefore be warranted to safeguard the privacy and anonymous character of students. The collection of more subjective data on the manner that each student assesses the condition in which they undertake their study programme must also be considered a significant investigative tool.

Currently, the situation of data collection differs extensively between the EHEA, depending on each country's laws and culture. While a multitude of challenges arise when discussing the process of data collection and the use of micro data to monitor the Social Dimension, the safety, anonymity and privacy of the students is of paramount importance that must not be sacrificed for the sake of systems and procedures.

² Bologna Process/EHEA. (2018). Paris Communiqué



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Focus of the PLA

The Peer Learning Activity will bring together experts and representatives from countries in order to take a closer look at the challenges stemming from the differences in the definition of the Social Dimension and the varying terminologies, as well as understanding the typologies existing in the way the Social Dimension is treated, especially at policy and monitoring level, keeping in mind the influence this has on the perception of the field within the Bologna Process. The PLA will also tackle the topic of data collection and the use of micro data when assessing social inclusion and equity, focusing on the challenges that can arise in terms of privacy, data protection, ethical use and compliance with each state's own regulations on the matter. Ultimately the event will provide the space for discussion, debate, and sharing of experiences and best practices in order to build on the work done during previous Peer Learning Activities and the overall progress made in the field of Social Dimension within the Bologna Process.

In preparation for this PLA, we kindly ask you to provide us with short paragraphs explaining your country/organisations' perspectives to the following questions:

- What are the **challenges** and **opportunities** that your organisation/ institution/ ministry sees in defining and monitoring the Social Dimension of Higher Education in policy and practice?
- What potential **barriers** and **solutions** does your organisation/ institution/ ministry foresee at the EHEA level in moving towards a unified/consensual/harmonised definition of Social Dimension?
- What kind of good practices can your organisation/ institution/ ministry share in terms of data collection? How are they linked to good practices in the field of social inclusion in general?
- Does your organisation/institution/ministry use micro data to monitor the Social Dimension of Higher Education? What are the **opportunities** and **challenges** that you have experienced or that you foresee in processing micro data?