



benelux  
2009

**Social Dimension Coordination Group**  
**Update on activities between BFUG Paris and Prague**  
**4 February 2009**

On 10-11 November 2008 Hungary hosted the only seminar in the context of the Bologna work programme 2007-2009 for the action line social dimension, which took place in Budapest.

The conclusions of this seminar, entitled *Equality in a knowledge-based society – How to widen Opportunities*, are attached in annex to this document.

The seminar reaffirmed among other things that:

- that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility
- the social issue is a horizontal/transversal issue
- equitable high quality primary and secondary education is a prerequisite for equitable high quality higher education.

The coordination group met in Brussels on 19 January 2009 to discuss the provisional version of the analysis, prepared by Prof. W. Pauwels of the Centre of Social Policy Studies of Antwerp University, of the National Strategies on the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process. As agreed by the Ministers in London, this analysis is part of the Bologna stocktaking exercise.

Due to the late arrival of the responses from the Bologna countries – e.g. 2 months after the deadline 6 countries are still missing - the finalisation of the report will still take some time. The draft report will be due for endorsement by the BFUG at its March meeting only.

Nevertheless, some general observations and recommendations could already be formulated by the social dimension coordination group and these observations will feed into the general conclusions of the Bologna Stocktaking, as prepared by the Bologna Stocktaking Working Group.

The preliminary analysis shows clearly that virtually all countries take some action in order to enhance participative equity in their country, but only a minority of the countries have set up monitoring systems for measuring progress on the issue. Still fewer show evidence for an integrated strategy with synergies between government actions and institutional practices, funding arrangements, lifelong learning strategies, recognition of prior learning, cultural and linguistic minority issues, guidance services, communication policy, social policy, anti-discrimination protection, tax system etc.

The coordination group concluded that there is still a long way to go before the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels will reflect the diversity of our populations. Therefore, this objective set for the social dimension at the Ministerial conference in London is still valid, and even more so in the context of globalisation, demographic challenges and the current financial crisis.

For the identification of the underrepresented groups, the countries show consensus on the fact that the following main factors (or a combination of them) lead to underrepresentation: lower socio-economic background, low levels of education, immigration and cultural (ethnic) background, disabilities, age and gender.

According to these factors, underrepresented groups can be identified, although some groups combine different factors and/or are partially overlapping with other groups.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the answers in the national reports to the questions on which measures the Bologna countries have taken (or are about to take) to improve participative equity in the national reports, only provide part of the picture.

In the context of the 2009 Stocktaking exercise, the answers on the national strategies for the social dimension should be read also in the perspective of what countries report on lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning, flexible learning paths and support to mobility and on future challenges for the national higher education system as a whole. It was also striking that the issue of the social dimension of higher education is a very wide topic, which requires integration of national policies on education with other policy areas.

Furthermore, the coordination groups saw a strong need of evidence-based policy making and for collecting and developing sound data and indicators in order to measure progress at national level in view of possible future benchmarking.

The upcoming report of the data collection steering group can therefore be seen as a first step to close this information gap, at least for the aspect of overall participation rates and average educational attainment levels in each country.

***Finally, the coordination group recommends that the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué should reiterate the objectives for participative equity set by the Ministers in London 2007. Based on the outcomes of the analysis of the national strategies, the Ministers should commit themselves to the continue collecting and developing sound data and indicators to facilitate monitoring of progress and evidence-based adjustments of policy-making towards a more inclusive higher education in Europe.***

ANNEX A  
RECOMMENDATIONS  
of the  
Budapest Bologna Seminar

**Higher education is a public good and therefore a public responsibility**

The participants of the Budapest Seminar affirm that higher education is not only the strategy of the individual for social advancement but also a means for advancing the development of European societies as well as ensuring effectiveness of higher education..

In this sense, higher education is both a public good and a public responsibility. This justifies the role of the State in setting up the objectives for higher education but also actively participating in their implementation.

The European Higher Education Area is varied with regard to its institutional frameworks, a variety of regulatory environments and the ratio of public to private funding across institutions. of the public and private funding

In that context, it is important for individual higher education institutions to assume responsibility at institutional level for moving forward and prioritising the social agenda objectives. The Budapest Seminar recommends that this should be done systematically by each institution drawing up a comprehensive access plan and closely monitoring its impact.

Countries involved in the Bologna Process are primarily endeavouring to find answers to the challenges of competitiveness and excellence in the globalised higher education market. However, the liberal minimum, respect for equal treatment and for equality of opportunities, is not sufficient in itself to encourage talented young people with disadvantages, like those brought up in poverty, living with a disability or belonging to ethnic minorities, to get to higher education and to facilitate their social mobility. These students need different forms of support to get into higher education institutions, to be successful in their studies and to be integrated in the labour market. Such efforts will also maximise the benefits of students accessing higher education and the efficiency of both public funding and students' private costs.

**The social dimension is transversal**

The participants of the Budapest Seminar are convinced that the social dimension of the Bologna Process is not an isolated aspect of the Process or a subsequent attribute in the Bologna vocabulary, but it is a transversal dimension which ought to permeate every single component of the Bologna Process. It means that with all actions taken in the Bologna Process, the effect on the social dimension should be kept in mind. Actions that may harm the social dimension should not be taken. Instead, all actions taken should help improve the social dimension of our higher education.

This can however not be used to postpone concrete action in the field of social dimension. Concrete actions need to be taken to bring the social dimension to the next level.

In the new phase of the Bologna Process, beyond 2010, the discourse on and the implementation of the social dimension must receive an increased priority on the agenda of the Bologna countries. The argument for strengthening the social dimension of the Bologna Process is based on the traditional values of European societies, like equality of opportunity and social justice, as well as on the interests of European economy. A good quality human resource is a key prerequisite of every competitive economy and taking into consideration the labour market situation of most European countries, considerable additional labour force capacity can be leveraged by providing learning and upskilling opportunities for those from disadvantaged groups. We believe that competitiveness, excellence and solidarity are not contradictory, but mutually reinforcing. We propose that all of the Bologna countries should develop comprehensive, complex and systematic

strategies (including national action plans) to be adopted and coordinated at a governmental level, in order to make the efforts of various stakeholders converge. Such strategies should be focused on every aspect of the Process of higher education, namely, they should promote equal access to higher education, equal chance in international mobility during the studies as the cost barrier of mobility is directly linked to the social-economic background of the students, ensure the successful accomplishment of the studies of all students, especially those from disadvantaged groups, and facilitate their smooth transition into the labour market/employment.

Good quality, equitable higher education requires good, equitable primary and secondary education

Higher education is not a separate element of the education system; the basis of equal access and high performance lies in the successful functioning and quality of primary and secondary education. Moreover, the social dimension of higher education is affected by and effects chances of lifelong learning. For the success of the social dimension of the Bologna Process it is necessary to intensify the coordination between the different levels of the education system, with the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders. This should influence policy development and higher education practice. This however does not mean that higher education has no responsibility to fight existing inequalities. Many barriers to higher education remain, keeping potential students from entering higher education. These barriers should be tackled by governments and higher education institutions.

#### The importance of data collection and analysis

There are various good data collection practices both on national levels and European level, based on administrative data sets, surveys and strategic information. Efforts should be continued to participate in the data collection activities with a focus on the *use* of these data having the potential to act as the catalyst for national debates. However, new data collecting efforts facilitate, but are not a prerequisite for social dimension strategies and measures.

The analyses show that the number of students in higher education has increased dramatically in some countries. However, this increase does not automatically result in a growing diversity of the socio-demographic and ethnic composition of the student body; it doesn't reflect yet the diversity of our societies. The changing structure of European societies generates new challenges for higher education institutions. In particular, the changing age composition of the students requires special attention in terms of pedagogical methods, new means of social support and the flexibility of learning pathways.

#### Measuring progress

University rankings do not provide an accurate view on the quality of the institution or program; they rather seem to address the needs of various user groups. These include prospective students (who need information, but this role seems to be the less developed), higher education institutions (that regard rankings as marketing tools) and decision makers. Social aspects are not taken into account in existing rankings.

Rankings essentially measure the reputation or perceived quality of output of higher education, while more indicators are needed reflecting upon the added value of the educational process. The latter would be more closely related to the social effect but relevant indicators are mostly not available and, more importantly, there seems to be no consensus as to how the social aspect of the educational process should be measured in the context of ranking.

The relevant indicators of the social dimension of higher education systems need to be worked out and a monitoring system needs to be implemented to measure the societal effect of the existing practices and of potential policy changes. Furthermore, as the social dimension has a strong link to the quality of education, indicators on the social dimension should be included in quality assurance systems.

#### Intensifying access to information and dissemination

The stakeholders concerned are probably aware of the shift of European higher education towards the Bologna objectives. However, there is less knowledge about the social dimension of the Bologna Process even among students, teaching staff and higher education managers. It would be advisable to launch an information campaign targeting the social dimension of the Bologna Process including its objectives, significance and implementation, as well as the creation of a broad and clear understanding of the social dimension of the Bologna Process.

Being brought up in a disadvantaged situation results not only in the lack of necessary financial resources, but also in the lack of social and cultural capital, involving the lack of information as well. Taking this fact into consideration, it would be worth strengthening guidance and counselling services and developing a specific internet site or a specific section of the international Bologna homepage with more detailed information on the social dimension of the Bologna Process and, on the national Bologna homepages, with all the necessary practical information for students (e.g. grants, student loans, mobility, special treatment for disabled students). The link to this homepage should be published on the homepage of every higher education institution.