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**European Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social
Dimension of Higher Education**

Produced by the BFUG Advisory Group 1 for Social Dimension, 27/10/2019

Introduction

The social dimension of higher education has been fundamental to the Bologna process since its inception. This document outlines core principles and guidelines which the BFUG assumes to have significant impact on further development of the social dimension in higher education, by ensuring that the composition of the student body fairly reflects the diversity of population across the EHEA. This document therefore takes as its starting point the definition of the social dimension provided in the [2007 London Communiqué](#). This definition is widely considered as the most explicit and useful formulation of the social dimension to date. The London communiqué states:

“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,” while stressing the efforts “[...] to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.”

The following principles and guidelines complement the strategy “[Widening Participation for Equity and Growth](#)”, which ministers proposed in Yerevan in 2015 as a means to further strengthen the social dimension in the EHEA. The student body should reflect the diversity of the social composition of the general national populations. If this is not the case, valuable talents will be lost to society. It is therefore an important role for higher education systems to provide equitable opportunities for students from all parts of society to access, participate in and complete higher education, as well as facilitate their transition into the labour market. Governments can facilitate this process by offering a legal and administrative framework within which it can take place. This framework will promote inclusive strategies, which provide both specific support for vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented students as well as highlight broader measures and policies wherefrom the student population as a whole can benefit.

Increased participation of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education produces wider benefits with respect to decreased social welfare provision, lower crime rates, improved health outcomes and increased community involvement. Graduate qualifications delivered to a wider pool of citizens means better employment prospects, higher earnings premiums and the passing on of an appreciation for the benefits of higher education to the next generation and to their local communities.

Principles

- 1. Strengthening the social dimension of higher education and fostering equity and inclusion to reflect the diversity of society is a responsibility of a higher education system as a whole and should be regarded as a long-term commitment. The social**

dimension should be central to higher education strategies at national, regional, local and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level.

Guidelines:

- a. Strategic commitment to the social dimension of higher education should be aligned with concrete targets that can either be integrated within existing higher education policies or developed in parallel. These targets should aim at widening access, supporting participation in and completion of studies for all students.
 - b. There should be a broad-based dialogue between governments, higher education institutions, student representatives and other key stakeholders including social partners, non-governmental organisations and people from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Such dialogue and engagement should inform the design and implementation of social dimension policies in higher education. Student representatives' involvement in this process is especially relevant as it ensures that policies respond to the current and real needs of students.
- 2. Governments should mainstream social dimension, accessibility, equity and inclusion in all aspects of their education systems. This holistic approach should ensure coordination with other ministries and should create coherent policy measures from early childhood, through schooling and into higher education and throughout lifelong learning. This process should engage actively with past, current and future learners.**

Guidelines:

- a. Ministries responsible for higher education should establish coordination and synergies with all education levels and with other relevant ministries across related policy areas (such as finance, employment, health and social welfare, housing, migration etc.) in order to develop policy measures that improve the students experience of higher education.
 - b. The social dimension policies should not only support current students, but also potential students and their preparation and transition from secondary school or employment into higher education. Participation in higher education has to be an option from an early age on as well as later in life, including adults who decide to return or enter higher education. An inclusive approach needs to involve local communities in co-creating pathways to higher education together with higher education institutions and other stakeholder groups.
- 3. Increased diversity of students and staff can lead to improved quality of educational outcomes. This is dependent on adequate support being made available for higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student body.**

Guidelines:

- a. Governments should support and provide adequate means to higher education institutions to improve initial and continuing professional training both for academic and administrative staff, enabling them to work with a diverse student body and staff in a professional and equitable manner.

- b. External quality assurance systems should assess how the social dimension, diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion are considered by internal quality assurance and in the institutional missions at higher education institutions, respecting the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions.
- 4. The availability and use of reliable data is a necessary precondition for the evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Higher education systems should define the purpose and goals of collecting certain types of data and develop the necessary capacities and legal framework to collect, process and use such data to inform and support the social dimension of higher education. This should be complimented by measuring progress towards targets and monitoring the intended and unintended effects of policies accordingly.**

Guidelines:

- a. In order to develop effective policies, governments should commit to the following: regular national data collection on the composition of the student body in access and participation, drop-out and completion of higher education and the identification of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups of students.
 - b. Such data collection should be comparable internationally. This implies that work on categories for administrative data collection that are relevant for the social dimension should be developed at the EHEA level through Eurostudent survey taking account of existing national practices and relevant data collection processes with a view to avoid any unnecessary administrative burden on public administration and higher education institutions.
 - c. Such national data collection exercises could be complemented by surveys, research and analysis, among others by higher education institutions as means to better understand vulnerability, disadvantages, and underrepresentation in education, as well as of transitions of students across the education system.
- 5. Governments should have policies that ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should reach the students in need and be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market.**

Guidelines:

- a. Governments should create conditions that will enable collaboration within public administration and with the wider community that provide the above services.
- b. Within a diverse student body, special attention should be directed towards students with physical and psychological health challenges who should have access to professional help to secure their success in accessing and completing higher education studies.
- c. Governments should also consider setting up ombudsperson institutions that will have the capacity and knowledge to interfere in any conflicts that may arise during accessing or participating in higher education.

- 6. Governments should establish a strategic framework for higher education funding which promotes and incentivises diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education and provides sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions enabling them to build adequate capacity in the field of the social dimension of higher education. Student financial support systems should aim to be universally applicable to all students and where this is not feasible they should be particularly responsive to students who demonstrate the need for financial support. Student financial support systems should make higher education affordable for all students and they should ensure opportunities for equitable access and equitable success in higher education.**

Guidelines:

- a. The funding system of higher education institutions should facilitate the attainment of strategic objectives related to the social dimension of higher education; it should be sustainable and effective in providing solutions towards demonstrated students' needs.
 - b. The student financial support systems should cover both the direct costs of study (fees and study materials) and the indirect costs (accommodation, which is becoming increasingly problematic for students across the EHEA due to the increased costs of housing, living costs, transportation costs, etc.).
- 7. Citizens in our societies are increasingly exposed to diversity of many kinds, such as different cultures, identities and political opinions. This results in a greater need to learn how to navigate through diversity and to create inclusive and cohesive societies, through formal, informal and non-formal educational activities. Modern societies and political systems rely on the inclusion and active participation of citizens in the democratic process and public life regardless of their background or individual circumstances.**

Guidelines:

- a. Participating in cross-border mobility programmes can contribute to develop a sense of shared citizenship and to foster a greater involvement in society. Higher education institutions should ensure equal access for all to the learning opportunities offered by national and international learning and training mobility programmes and actively address obstacles to access and mobility. Diversity of all kinds should be promoted as a valuable source of learning. Social mobility projects in higher education should emphasise diversity, equity and social inclusion, either by directly involving people with fewer opportunities, or focussing on inclusion and diversity issues.
- b. Governments should promote recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in higher education (RPL), because it has a positive impact on widening access, progress and completion, equity and inclusion, mobility and employability. RPL enables flexible modes of learning in the entire education sector, including higher education, and in the lifelong perspective. Implementing RPL will require effective cooperation within the higher education system, with employers and the wider community. National qualifications frameworks should facilitate transparent recognition of learning outcomes and reliable quality assurance procedures.

- 8. The higher education sector should demonstrate how it delivers public benefits through community engagement. Community engagement in higher education refers to mutually beneficial partnerships between higher education institutions and their wider communities to address societal needs. This can take place through activities such as teaching and learning, research and knowledge exchange activities. Policies for fostering diversity, enhancing accessibility, equity and inclusion in higher education could be more beneficial if they are co-created with the wider communities.**

Guidelines:

- a. There should be a broad-based dialogue between governments, higher education institutions and their wider communities, which includes local authorities, cultural organisations, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens, to address societal needs.
 - b. A framework for community engagement in higher education could support higher education institutions in strengthening and institutionalising their cooperation with their wider communities.
- 9. Governments should ensure that legal regulations allow and enable all higher education institutions to work effectively to improve the social dimension policies, in particular fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies.**

Guidelines:

- a. Legal regulations and administrative rules in place should allow sufficient flexibility in the design, organisation and delivery of study programmes reflecting the diversity of students' needs. Higher education institutions should be able to organize full-time and part-time studies, flexible study modes, blended and distance learning as well as to recognize prior learning.
 - b. Arrangements between the state and higher education institutions should reflect the importance of objectives related to the social dimension of higher education. Higher education institutions should be rewarded to meet agreed targets in widening access, increasing participation in and completion of higher education studies, in particular in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented students. Such rewards should motivate higher education institutions, incentivize positive results and should not have regressive elements if targets are not met.
- 10. Governments should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level in order to ensure fit-for purpose policy measures, which respect institutional autonomy, avoid any unnecessary administrative burden, and thus enable concrete progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.**

Guidelines:

- a. Organisation of national level policy dialogue and systematic consultations on these European principles and guidelines during the next Bologna cycle 2020-

2024. The EHEA ministers shall be informed about outcomes of these consultations at the next ministerial meeting after 2020 in Rome.

- b. Use of the Bologna peer support system to facilitate exchange among Bologna member countries about how to organise such stakeholder consultation processes and develop policies to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

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