



## **Proposal for a pilot project to promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Europe**

### **0. History of this document**

This document is a re-draft of a paper dated 21 February 2011 and discussed in the BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension on 11 July 2011 and on 4 November 2011. The re-draft is based on the comments made at these meetings and from the Chairs of the Working Group and on suggestions subsequently made by the BFUG at its meeting in Copenhagen on 18/19 January 2012.

### **1. Rationale for a pilot initiative to promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education**

Improving the social dimension of higher education entails focusing on the real needs and the personal circumstances of certain student groups, since these often constitute barriers to entry, participation and successful completion of higher education. Both the recent Ministerial Communiqué from Leuven/ Louvain la Neuve (2009) and the EU Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training agree on this.

The Ministerial Communiqué from 2009 expresses the expectation that Bologna signatory countries "set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade"<sup>1</sup>. In this respect, actors at European and national levels have found that there are multiple actions and measures which can be taken at different levels of an education system in order to attempt improvements in the social dimension. Thus, it is evident that national context is an important determinant of what actions are taken and at what level – although commonalities do exist.<sup>2</sup> In its analysis of strategies and practices coming from efforts to improve the social dimension in European higher education, the Bologna Social Dimension Coordination Group (2007-2009) was able to identify country examples of best practice. However, this working group also concluded that more work was necessary in order to properly assess country strategies and practices in this area. It was this knowledge that led the current Bologna Working Group on the Social Dimension (2009-2012) to explore the possibility of developing an initiative to monitor more accurately the impact of the Social Dimension of Higher Education and in Europe and to promote Peer Learning on the subject among countries in the EHEA.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009

<sup>2</sup> Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009 - Report from working groups appointed by the Bologna Follow-up Group to the Ministerial Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 28-29 April 2009

The EU Council has also highlighted the importance of work in this area. The EU Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training invites member states – with regard to higher education – to undertake the following actions:

- “Promote widened access, for example by strengthening financial support schemes for students and through flexible and diversified learning paths.
- Develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates of higher education, including through strengthening individualised support, guidance and mentoring for students.
- Continue to eliminate barriers to, expand opportunities for, and improve the quality of, learning mobility, including by providing adequate incentives for the mobility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Promote specific programmes for adult students and other non-traditional learners.”<sup>3</sup>

Working towards the above mentioned goals, it is important to provide support for the development of policy measures and activities which work. However, there is a current lack of information, exchange and support on how the set targets could be reached through effective policies and measures on national, regional and institutional levels. This is the gap, which the peer learning initiative aims to fill. While the social dimension has been the subject of many European and international discussions, especially within the Bologna framework, there are only overviews provided on the situation of students (eg. Eurostudent) or on structures (eg. Eurydice) and very little information on the measures that are taken and can lead to improvements for the social dimension. This gap was most recently pointed out by the EUROSTUDENT study (2011, p.206)<sup>4</sup>, which points to the need to provide the framework for fostering mutual learning between countries and between leaders of higher education institutions. The gap is also evident in the latest Bologna Implementation Report, which uses available data from Eurostat, EUROSTUDENT and Eurydice, but lacks information of the effectiveness of policies and practices, which are hard to uncover using existing standardised instruments of data collection (to be published April 2012). The need for such mutual learning will therefore be expressed in the forthcoming Bologna Ministers’ Communiqué (April 2012).

Following discussions based on a first sketch for the initiative on 11 July 2011 in Berlin<sup>5</sup>, the Working Group proposes the establishment of a peer learning initiative as a pilot to run between 2012 and 2015. It would have the overarching purpose of supporting structured and systematic peer learning between countries and institutions in order to lead to measurable improvements in the social dimension of higher education across the European Higher Education Area. It is envisaged that the initiative would be overseen by a project manager who would have the responsibility to report back to the Social Dimension Working Group (or its successor) at specific intervals. The chairs of the Working Group will report back to meetings of the BFUG on progress with the

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<sup>3</sup> Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training 3013th Education, Youth and Culture Council meeting, Brussels, 11 May 2010

<sup>4</sup> Orr, D. /Gwość, C. /Netz, N. (2011): Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe. Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag GmbH & Co. KG.

<sup>5</sup> See the minutes of this meeting.

establishment, operation and outcomes of the initiative as appropriate. Furthermore, a small working group drawn from Social Dimension Working Group representatives would follow closely the developments of the initiative with a general oversight mandate to further BFUG social dimension goals in the frame of the initiative according to the ministerial commitments.

As the issue of the Social Dimension is a wide and overarching theme, the initiative would be placed in the broader framework of the Bologna Process. As such, the consultation of other Bologna Process working areas which tackle issues connected to widening access, progress and completion of studies (i.e. **learning outcomes, ECTS, diploma supplement and the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, mobility** and the **portability of student grants and loans**) would be envisaged.

## **2. Objectives and activities**

In accordance with the tasks already formulated in the Working Group's terms of reference, the initiative to promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education should fulfil the following objectives in a structured and transparent way:

- 1. Monitor relevant aspects of the implementation of initiatives related to the social dimension across EHEA (i.e. national targets and national action plans on social dimension).**
- 2. Examine and compare how EHEA countries collect and analyse data on the social dimension of higher education.**
- 3. Facilitate peer learning by collecting good practices and successful examples of "what works" at national, regional and institutional level (i.e. exchange good practice on how to increase participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, access routes, flexibility of studies).**

The strategies and practices which are being used throughout the EHEA would be collected and systematically catalogued. They would then be made available on an open website, where other actors from various countries or institutions could look up what is available and use it to inform their own development of policy and practice.

An examination of how countries collect and analyse their own data on inequalities of participation in higher education is fundamental to understanding their strategies and practices in addressing the social dimension. Significant scope for policy development will arise from examining how individual countries establish their data gathering procedures to set targets and monitor progress.

Furthermore, typologies of measures could be developed to facilitate both policy development and systematic evaluations. In this sense, the initiative would actively promote progress on the social dimension of higher education by providing a structured and systematic opportunity for peer learning between countries and institutions along the lines of the open method of coordination (OMC) used frequently by the EU Commission. Also, the work of the initiative will take account of the reviews on areas of

relevance to the social dimension of higher education undertaken in EHEA countries as part of the follow-up of various Council of Europe Conventions and treaties<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the fulfilment of the three important objectives detailed above, a fourth, more innovative and dynamic element is proposed, which would facilitate action on the part of the Bologna Process countries in a direct manner.

#### **4. Provide the facility for the evaluation of national practices in the area of the social dimension of higher education by international peers on request.**

This task would see external reviews of country practices being undertaken under the auspices of the initiative at the behest of these countries. If a country has just enacted reforms or would like to evaluate the current situation in its higher education system, the project structure could be central in organising such a review. The project management team would put together an international panel of reviewers, who have experience and knowledge in the area, and would organise the logistics of the review together with a national team of experts. The international review panel would then work with a group of local stakeholders to carry out a study visit to the country and formulate a review document.

The Working Group considers all four objectives to be critical to the implementation of an effective initiative to promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education. At the same time, it recognises that time and resources will be necessary to adequately elaborate and execute the proposed objectives. Furthermore, it will be necessary to test the acceptance and utility of the country reviews. It is for this reason that the Working Group proposes the introduction of a pilot initiative between the two Ministerial meetings in 2012 and 2015 with the prospect of some third party funding. In this pilot phase, between three and five countries would be invited to participate in country reviews. It is envisaged that these countries would have a strong interest in the area of the social dimension and would, therefore, provide constructive and informative models for policy learning across the EHEA.

### **3. Coordination of the Pilot Initiative**

It is proposed that general oversight of the pilot initiative to promote Peer Learning on the Social Dimension of Higher Education will be undertaken on behalf of the BFUG by the Social Dimension Working Group (or its successor) and that project delivery will be the responsibility of a project manager working as part of the EUROSTUDENT coordination team (as already offered by EUROSTUDENT under the pre-condition that it does indeed continue into a fifth round between 2012 and 2015). In addition, a consultative Stakeholders' Forum, with representatives of students, universities, national ministries and other relevant interests will be constituted at the start of project. Some stakeholders have already expressed concrete interest in being members of this consultative forum.

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<sup>6</sup> Such as: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

#### 4. Scope

Taking the lead from both the outcomes of the Bologna Social Dimension Coordination Group (2007-2009) and current internal papers and discussions with the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension (2009-2012), the proposed pilot initiative will collate and catalogue initiatives and measures which have the objective of reducing barriers to higher education entry and of providing a conducive study environment for all students, which can lead to their successful graduation.

In fact, the Working Group on the Social Dimension has already begun to systematically collate information on measures and initiatives in a simple typology, which could become the basis for the cataloguing activities of the initiative – see Table 1.

**Table 1: First typology for the collation of measures and initiatives concerning the social dimension**

Measure occurs	<i>To which level are the initiatives targeted?</i>	
<i>Where?</i>	<b>At individual level</b>	<b>At institutional level</b>
<b>Before HE entry</b>		
<b>At HE entry</b>		
<b>During study progress</b>		

Following an initiative by the Working Group to commence the collection of good practice, a first matrix of measures is already growing according to this basic typology (see Annex to this paper).<sup>7</sup> This type of cataloguing and sorting will be a first step towards achieving peer learning. Facilitating evaluation of measures and initiatives through analyses (objective 3) is the second step. The country reviews (objective 4), which envisage country evaluations by an expert team, are designed to encourage the “virtuous cycle” between systematic analysis and policy improvement.

#### 5. Funding and start-up project

While it is not impossible to start work on the implementation of objectives 1, 2 and 3 within the framework of the Social Dimension Working Group (or its successor), substantial secretarial, research and analytical tasks must be executed to progress work in these areas and this will require funding. The testing phase of objective 4 will require a budget to enable initial country reviews to be carried out and reports to be written within the scope of the project.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=244>

The Social Dimension Working Group has discussed with EUROSTUDENT and the EU Commission the possibility of funding the pilot project for an initial period of 2 years through the EU Lifelong Learning Programme's KA4 Valorisation funding stream<sup>8</sup> or Erasmus centralised action, multilateral projects and priority 2 – Social Dimension<sup>9</sup>. A project proposal to this effect will be submitted to the EU Lifelong Learning Programme on 2 February 2012.

The decision on following-up the Peer Learning initiative after 2015 would be taken at the next Ministerial Meeting on the basis of the contribution of the project in improving the social dimension of higher education.

## **6. Annexes:**

This proposal is accompanied by the Annex "Catalogue of good practices in Social Dimension implementation in Higher Education"

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<sup>8</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/llp/doc/call11/fiches/valor1\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/llp/doc/call11/fiches/valor1_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/erasmus/erasmus\\_multilateral\\_projects\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/erasmus/erasmus_multilateral_projects_en.php)

**Catalogue of good practices in Social Dimension implementation in Higher Education**

Measures occur	At individual level	At institutional level
<b>Before HE Entry</b>	<p><b><u>Scotland (SHEP)</u></b>                      Scottish programme aimed at providing support and guidance of underrepresented groups in society raise the aspiration of pupils to progress into higher education. It also offers practical assistance to prospective students to support the actual transition.</p>	<p><b><u>Scotland (Access to High Demand Professions)</u></b>                      The Access to High Demand Professions programme provides a contextualised admission scheme for those coming from disadvantage backgrounds. The programme attempts to support talented pupils to acquire the necessary experience to be successful within highly selective universities and later enter into high demands professions (such as Medicine, Law, Dentistry etc.).</p>
	<p><b><u>Scotland (SWAP)</u></b>                      The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) provides independent advice to adults who may have missed out on higher or further education first time round and provides them with access courses which can lead to guaranteed places in colleges or universities.</p>	<p><b><u>Belgium (Flemish Community)</u></b>                      The Flemish Community in Belgium provides incentives to institutions for improving access and participation of students coming from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in society.</p>
	<p><b><u>France (The active guidance policy)</u></b>                      This policy is based on a scheme for information and active guidance: in their final year of secondary school before their <i>Baccalauréat</i>, all pupils who plan to go on studying at university can benefit from a guidance assistance provided by institutions, combined with advice and recommendations, to enable them to make an informed choice.</p>	<p><b><u>UK/England</u></b>                      The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is an independent, non-departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07. HEFCE has delivered a Widening Participation allocation to institutions since 1999-2000 as part of the block teaching grant. Currently this has two main elements, widening access (WA), improving retention (IR), as well as a further stream for widening access and supporting provision for disabled students.</p>

		<p><b><u>Spain (International Campus of Excellence Program)</u></b></p> <p>The Ministry of Education and some of the Autonomous Communities have a number of outreach programs towards secondary school students from under-privileged groups aiming at increasing their access to information about academic and professional careers, boosting their motivation and aspirations to pursue tertiary level studies, and improve their academic preparation.</p>
<b>At HE Entry</b>	<p><b><u>Ireland (HEAR)</u></b></p> <p>The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a third level admission scheme for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. All school leavers who meet all the eligibility criteria can compete for a quota of places (usually 5%) in the participating institutions.</p>	
	<p><b><u>Spain</u></b></p> <p>Spain has set an Action Plan for the development of the Roma population for 2010-2012. The plan aims to create awareness of Roma people's situation within the framework of the education systems and to support Roma children's access and prolongation of study in higher education. Furthermore the Ministry of Education has established a partnership with two foundations (ONCE and Repsol) to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities in tertiary education.</p>	
<b>During Study Progress</b>	<p><b><u>Germany</u></b></p> <p>Student Services and Student Affairs in Germany (such as study financing, students' accommodation, meals, counselling, childcare services, etc) are designed to enable access to higher education institutions, ensure</p>	<p><b><u>Norway (Universell)</u></b></p> <p>The Norwegian national coordinator of accessibility in higher education ("Universal") aims to promote better learning environments for students with disabilities and to provide advice and follow-up on the Learning Environment Committees at the higher education</p>

	retention and study success.	institutions.
	<p><b><u>Ireland (DARE)</u></b> Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a college and university admission scheme in Ireland, which offers a number of places to school leavers with disabilities.</p>	<p><b><u>Poland (DARE)</u></b> <b>The Disability Support Service at the Jagiellonian University (UJ) in Cracow, Poland</b>, has been providing students with assistive technologies, counselling and educational support since 1999. The Service provides specialised support to student with mobility disabilities, blind and partially sighted students, deaf and hard of hearing, students with mental health problems and those with special learning difficulties.</p>
	<p><b><u>England (NSP)</u></b> The NSP is a government programme designed to benefit individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they enter higher education from autumn 2012.</p>	
	<p><b><u>France</u></b> The social criteria-based grants are the main element of the French student support scheme. They are granted according to the social situation of the student.</p>	
<b>Measures in other sectors of higher education:</b>		
<b>Improving the equity dimension at the HE system level:</b>	<p><b><u>Croatia</u></b> Croatia's Tempus project entitled "Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher Education in Croatia" (2009-2012) focuses on the financial aspect of equitable access to higher education. The project collects data on social background and living conditions of students and on drafts policy guidelines to enhance the equity dimension and transparency of the HE funding and student financial aid system in Croatia.</p>	
	<p><b><u>Spain</u></b> The Ministry of Education has launched an agency ("University Centre for Grants, Financial Aid and University Performance") responsible for analyzing the impact of grants and financial aids to students and for providing advice on ways to improve the social dimension in tertiary education.</p>	

<b>Improving employability</b>	<p><b><u>Scotland</u></b>  Development of work placement projects (Education into Enterprise, E-Placements Scotland, Third Sector Internships Scotland, Embedding Work Placements in Taught Masters Programmes) and support in matters of employability.</p> <p>· <b><u>Case studies</u></b></p>
	<p><b><u>Spain</u></b>  The Faro Global Programme aim is to help students in their last year of study to find jobs throughout a paid internship opportunity in companies of European Union member countries, the USA, Canada and some Asian countries.</p>