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TITLE: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area

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Abstract

The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) released a new strategic document “Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA” at the end of 2020, as part of the Rome Ministerial Communique documents. The policy brief explains how this document could help public authorities and higher education institutions further develop social dimension in higher education. He will explain the importance of interconnecting the principles of accessibility, equity, diversity, inclusion, and community engagement for the future development of the social dimension in the EHEA.

It is evident from the new policy initiatives in the EHEA that the period to 2030 has the potential to become an ambitious decade of social dimension in higher education in the EHEA. This vision could become a reality if all EHEA stakeholders succeed in creating a European movement for the social dimension in higher education that combines the top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy making and policy advocacy. In the longer term, the European movement could create an effective framework for the continued progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education in the EHEA.

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Acronyms

BFUG – Bologna Follow-up Group

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

Introduction

One of the three key priorities of the EHEA until 2030 is related to building an inclusive EHEA – the latest 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué stresses that “socially inclusive higher education will remain at the core of the EHEA and will provide opportunities and support for equitable inclusion of individuals from all parts of society”. The 2020 Rome Communiqué takes as a starting point the definition of the social dimension provided in the 2007 London Communiqué, namely that “the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries”. This definition allows the creation of policy levers for identifying underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students in higher education.

The novelty of the 2020 Rome Communiqué is that it goes beyond this definition and has enlarged it by stressing that the 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. It means that public authorities and higher education institutions need to integrate the social dimension principles into the core of their higher education mission: learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge exchange and outreach, institutional governance and management, as well as in the policies for empowering present and future students and higher education staff.

Therefore, improving the social dimension by moving beyond widening accessibility and integrating the social dimension principles in core higher education mission and governance is a crucial step forward in the Rome Communiqué when looking to strengthen inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education. For the first time, the 49 ministers of the EHEA adopted a new forward-looking strategic document, “Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA”, as an annex to the Rome Communiqué (2020). It should help countries in the continuous improvement of social dimension policies and their effective implementation at the national and institutional level. The document defines ten principles for social dimension for the upcoming decade as the basis for conceptualizing different policies for social dimension enhancement. The guidelines are recommendations intended to advise policy makers on how to implement the principles in practice.

The new social dimension principles

The first principle wants to ensure that the social dimension becomes central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level. The social dimension should interconnect the principles of accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion into all laws, policies and practices concerning higher education such that access, participation, progress and completion of higher education depend primarily on students’ abilities, not on their personal characteristics or circumstances beyond their direct influence.

Secondly, it is important to ensure a holistic approach to social dimension aiming to create coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education and throughout lifelong learning. This requires more connectivity between the work of those

responsible for higher education and other ministries and sectors, who can bring about change only in a joint effort.

Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an 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, taking into account the particularities of the national legal frameworks. Adequate capacities to collect, process and use such data to inform and support the social dimension of higher education should be developed.

Public authorities should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions, allowing them to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education.

Higher education institutions need to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body, particularly through improving initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff. Effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students should help widening their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. International mobility programs in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that fosters diversity, equity and inclusion.

Lastly, community engagement should be considered as a process whereby higher education institutions engage with external community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial. Like social dimension policies, community engagement should be embedded in core missions of higher education. Such engagement provides a holistic basis on which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, while enriching their teaching, research and other core functions.

New policy developments and opportunities for the social dimension in the EHEA

It is important that EHEA ministers of higher education have politically committed to the implementation of the principles and guidelines and tasked the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to establish the Working Group for Social Dimension for the period 2021-2024 with three main tasks: (1) developing tools for the implementation of the principles and guidelines, (2) developing a system of monitoring the implementation of the principles and guidelines and (3) organizing peer support activities for social dimension among the EHEA members. This Working Group will continue the highly effective and visionary work of the previous BFUG Advisory Group for Social Dimension 2018-2020, which produced the principles and guidelines. These promising developments should ensure that by the next ministerial conference in 2024 there will be a structured European movement for strengthening the social dimension in higher education.

Building a European movement for the social dimension of higher education

The period to 2030 has the potential to become an ambitious decade of social dimension in higher education in the EHEA. This vision could become a reality if all EHEA stakeholders succeed in creating a European movement for the social dimension in higher education that combines the top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy making and policy advocacy.

From a top-down perspective, it will be important to focus on building capacities of public authorities and higher education institutions for the social dimension enhancement, advocating policy support, data collection on the social and economic conditions of student life, facilitating transnational learning and providing incentives to those who are successful in implementing social dimension principles. The mandate of the BFUG Working Group for Social Dimension 2021-2024 falls under this remit. Since needs related to the social dimension differ depending on the context, each public authority and higher education institution must adopt context-specific interventions for improving the social dimension.

From a bottom-up perspective, it will be important to identify universities committed to the social dimension development, to build a network of institutions committed to the social dimension, and organize capacity building events with them. Social dimension could be fostered by the newly established European Universities alliances in 2019 and 2020, whose mission is dedicated to fostering inclusive higher education. One of the three priorities for action of the European University Association in its vision for 2030 (Universities Without Walls, 2021) relates to the strengthening of universities' civic engagement, where social inclusion, diversity, and equity play important role.

A step forward

A favorable environment for the combination of the top-down and bottom-up initiatives as detailed above can potentially create a European movement for social dimension enhancement. The European movement could create an effective framework for the continued progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education in the EHEA.

For Principles and Guidelines to become a reality, public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders about how the Principles and Guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level. Such policy dialogue should result in fit-for purpose policy measures, respecting institutional autonomy, avoiding any unnecessary administrative burden, and thus enabling tangible progress towards social dimension enhancement in higher education.

References

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