Social Dimension – Improving access to and participation in Higher Education

What is the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process?

The social dimension within the scope of the Bologna Process includes all measures taken by countries forming part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to provide quality higher education accessible to all. This entails ensuring appropriate conditions to address obstacles that might impede the successful participation of students from different social and economic backgrounds, such as their studying and living conditions, guidance and counselling, financial support, and student participation in higher education governance.

Why is the Social Dimension of importance?

The social dimension is a pillar for quality, attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. Creating equal opportunities for all students fosters social cohesion, reduces inequalities and raises levels of competences, which in turn benefits society as a whole. This improves the social and economic condition of students and creates a knowledge based society based on social justice.

On an individual level, the social dimension ensures equal opportunities for personal development and preparation for employment. Especially with the growing requirements for qualified graduates, and with the employment access and progression opportunities that favour higher education graduates, individuals should benefit from more equitable studying conditions. Measures that reinforce the social dimension could play a significant role in enabling students from different backgrounds to further their studies.

How did the Social Dimension Action Line develop in the Bologna Process?

The Social Dimension was first introduced in Prague in 2001 by the students’ representatives. It was discussed in relation to education provision at home and in relation to mobility. This topic was mentioned in all the following ministerial meetings.

In Bergen, 2005, the social dimension was described as an integral part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. With the London Communiqué of 2007, ministers agreed on setting national strategies and action plans and to set indicators and collect comparable data on the social dimension of Higher Education.

In Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve, in 2009, ministers committed further on to "...set measureable targets to widen participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade...”

In Bucharest, 2012, measures for widening access were discussed such as reducing inequalities and providing adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning. It was also agreed to promote structured peer learning activities to assist EHEA countries in developing and implementing their social dimension policies.
What is the Bologna Process target for the Social Dimension?

In the London Communiqué of May 2007, ministers affirmed “the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations.” However, given the diversity in the composition of the countries forming part of the EHEA, no exact definition of the social dimension was agreed upon, nor detailed actions for all countries to follow.

Instead, it was recommended that each country develops its own strategy and action plan for the social dimension. General guidelines were set by the Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020 to assist countries in developing their own action plans. This strategy emphasized the importance of collecting comparable and reliable data on students, widening participation, identifying underrepresented groups of students, undertaking peer learning activities between countries of the EHEA, and designing adequate teaching and delivery methods to cater for the needs of all students.

What is the state of implementation of the Social Dimension in Malta?

Policy approaches to widening access and participation exist in Malta and target the overall participation as well as underrepresented groups. Such initiatives are in the form of financial incentives, alternative access routes and the possibility to recognize informal and non formal prior education.

![Figure 1: National policy approaches to widening participation in higher education, 2013/14](image.png)

Source: BFUG Questionnaire, EHEA 2015 Implementation Report
What measures promote the Social Dimension?¹

Equal opportunities for access, participation and completion

- Anti-discrimination legislation covering Higher Education
- Fair and transparent admission rules

Widened access to and participation in Higher Education

- Outreach programs for underrepresented groups
- Flexible delivery of Higher Education and flexible learning paths
- Recognition of prior learning

Enhanced completion rates and education quality

- Provision of academic services (guidance, study resources, teaching and learning methods, retention measures such as flexible delivery, etc.)
- Provision of social services (Counselling, targeted support for students with special needs and non traditional students)

Student participation in the governance of Higher Education

- Measures to ensure student participation in higher education governance
- Student evaluations of courses, programmes and institutions

Finances to start and complete Higher Education

- Appropriate and coordinated national financial support systems
- Targeted support for disadvantaged groups

Monitoring

- Systemic and periodic collection of data about student backgrounds
- Employability and graduate tracer studies

¹ Key issues for the European Higher Education Area – Social Dimension and Mobility; Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries (2007)
**Further Information**

Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020:


For key indicators on the social dimension:


For the proposed structure and topics for the national strategies:


For more background information and the detailed recommendations:


Report of the 2012-2015 BFUG working group on the social dimension and lifelong learning:


Website of the Eurostudent project aimed at collecting comparable data on the social and economic conditions of student life: http://www.eurostudent.eu/

The Reports of the Eurostudent National Student Surveys carried out in Malta:
http://www.ncfhe.org.mt/content/home-downloads-eurostudent/50659330/