

Peer Learning Initiative for the Social Dimension

PL4SD

Learning about policies and practices to improve the Social Dimension in the EHEA

Contents

PROJECT OVERVIEW	3
The Social Dimension in the EHEA.....	3
Objectives of PL4SD	4
Implementation of PL4SD	5
Initiatives and Measures on the Social Dimension.....	5
Stakeholders' Forum	6
Dissemination and accessibility of results	7
DATABASE of measures and interventions in the Social Dimension of Higher Education	8
COUNTRY REVIEWS as an instrument for reflection and improvement.....	10
Schedule	12
The Project Consortium	13
General Project Information.....	13
Contact	13

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Social Dimension in the EHEA

The social dimension is broadly seen in the Bologna Process as a perspective taken on developments in higher education, which strives to assure participative equity. This term refers to the goal that the share of people participating in higher education should reflect the diversity of the general population. This goal was most clearly defined for the Bologna Process in the London Communiqué of 2007, having first been expressed in the Prague Communiqué of 2001. 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. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.”

This is a long-standing goal of modern higher education systems, which aims to assure that educational success is detached from a person's origins. This aim can be morally argued from the standpoint of Rawls' argument for social justice.¹ There is also an effectiveness argument for improving the participation and study conditions of certain groups of students, which was also made in the Leuven Communiqué of 2009. It argues that available talent in Europe should be “maximised” to assure the realisation of a Europe of knowledge:

“In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education.” (emphasis added)

These two arguments provide the basis for efforts on the part of policy makers at national, regional level and leaders and practitioners in educational institutions to improve the social dimension of higher education. Their work is founded on the recognition that a confluence of three factors tend to determine educational success: student ability, material and immaterial (e.g. social and cultural) resources and opportunity. In particular, non-academic factors such as social background and

¹ In Rawls' Original Position (Rawls, J (1971): A theory of justice. Harvard University Press), a purely hypothetical situation constructed to derive principles for a just society, “no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like” (Rawls 1971: 12). Rawls describes this initial situation as “fair” (ibid.). It expresses the belief that no one should suffer (or gain) from circumstances he or she is not liable for, such as having a migrant background or not. Note that this does not mean that there cannot be inequality, but inequalities should not be on the basis of non-responsibility, e.g. being born into a certain family.

aspiration, and study framework conditions (e.g. balance between work and studies) affect participation and success in higher education. Indeed, visible student ability may have been affected by a person's material and immaterial resources at a previous (e.g. secondary) educational level.

For each of these types of hindrance, interventions may be taken, e.g.:

- To raise aspirations of school-leavers to want to enter higher education
- To provide remedial classes for school-leavers who have knowledge gaps and provide second chance routes of entry for adult learners
- To provide more flexible forms of learning in higher education
- To provide material support (such as grants and loans) during the study phase

The problem is that the interventions and measures taken are often not visible on a European (or even national) level and present a gap for further improvement. This has been recognised by the ministers responsible for higher education, who state in the Bucharest Communiqué from 2012:

"We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area".²

PL4SD is adopting this initiative to facilitate peer learning for the Social Dimension in Higher Education.

Objectives of PL4SD

Realising the aim of the Bucharest Communiqué, the **PL4SD** project will...

- ... lead to more **transparency** in current developments, allowing the actors in the field to assess their own performance as well as to **monitor** their progress towards reaching the targets set within the EHEA,
- ... **stimulate international exchange** and debate on policy measures and add more creativity to tackling difficulties within the field of the social dimension in higher education,
- ... enable **peer learning** and ease the implementation of policy measures by other countries, higher education institutions and students' organisations,
- ... structure the information and collect relevant reports and research on the policies at national levels, providing a **solid basis for further research**,
- ... **inform** national and international policy makers and stakeholders in all countries of the EHEA several times during the lifetime of the project about its progress towards these goals.

² All mentioned communiqués can be accessed here: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43>.

Implementation of PL4SD

PL4SD will reach these objectives through a combination of two different approaches. Both will focus on initiatives and measures to foster the social dimension, namely participation, access and equity of underrepresented groups in higher education:

- 1. Online-Database.** The first initiative aims at building up a database containing information on initiatives, measures, interventions and strategies that foster participation, access and equity in higher education. Those range from information campaigns (e.g. careers fairs) to strategies and benchmarks, regulations (e.g. special entrance criteria) and incentives (e.g. financial support). All this information will be fed into a searchable online database that will combine facts about measures and interventions in the 47 different national higher education systems and facilitate contrasting and comparison with each other, to enable peer learning and knowledge exchange throughout the European Higher Education Area.
- 2. Country Reviews.** The second initiative shapes a pilot study that will conduct country reviews in three countries on demand. Various demarcations of administrative and operational responsibilities in an education system (national, regional and institutional, but also sectorial) often result in an incoherence of actions. Country reviews therefore have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the Social Dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist countries in the development of a coherent, comprehensive and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education.

For more information about the database and the country reviews see page 8 and page 10.

Initiatives and Measures on the Social Dimension

PL4SD will collate and catalogue interventions, 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. Those range from information campaigns to regulations and incentives (see Table 1).

Table 1: Exemplarily types of interventions for the social dimension in higher education

Type of intervention	Examples
Information campaigns	Campaign targeting parents, who did not attend university themselves, explaining the benefits for their children.
Measures and initiatives	
a. "Sticks" (e.g. regulations and obligations)	Law on HE reserves places for non-traditional students (e.g. first generation students).
b. "Carrots" (e.g. stimuli such as financial support)	Formula-funding used to allocate state grant to HEIs includes indicator on number of non-traditional students.
	Special funding available to HEIs, which offer special support to certain student groups.
	Students from certain backgrounds are provided with scholarships to encourage them to enter HE.
Data for evidence based policy and practice	Annual reports on access strategy and implementation required of all HEIs.
Research and regular evaluations	Quality assurance procedures pay special attention to inclusion strategies and include in the assessment performance benchmarks on access and success of certain student groups.
Partnerships between stakeholders within and outside of institutions of higher education	Employer organization cooperates with HEIs to provide internship opportunities to students from special groups during studies.
Buddy system	To help students from non-traditional backgrounds in higher education (e.g. run by the student union)

Stakeholders' Forum

The Stakeholders' Forum of PL4SD will supervise, support and thereby assure the quality of the project outcomes by commenting on developed tools (e.g. analytical grid, country questionnaires, database), evaluating the milestones achieved, selecting countries to be reviewed and experts for the review. The Forum also assists in contacting the EHEA members and national stakeholders. The Stakeholders' Forum consists of:

- 3 delegates representing countries in the current BFUG working group on the social dimension, who are also responsible for linking with the overall BFUG members
- 3 delegates from relevant European stakeholder organisations: EUA, EURASHE and European Commission

The Stakeholders' Forum will have three meetings throughout the project lifetime, each in spring 2013, 2014 and 2015. At these meetings, the Stakeholders' Forum will evaluate the progress of the project and whether the project milestones have been met so far, including a critical review of the project's outcomes and deliverables.

Dissemination and accessibility of results

The dissemination activities of the project will have the aim of informing all stakeholders outside the project (the primary groups being policy-makers, decision-makers at higher education institutions and students) about the project's goals and its main results. Specifically, the activities will have the aim of:

- Raising awareness about the importance of the social dimension and its monitoring at the European level.
- Providing wide access to the information collected through the project about existing measures aimed at improving the social dimension of participation and success in higher education in different European countries.

Throughout the project lifetime results and updates will be made accessible via:

- The project webpage
- Regularly newsletters (available on the webpage and by subscription)
- Social networking structures
- Project report
- 2 Dissemination Conferences (interim conference: spring 2014, final conference spring2015).

DATABASE of measures and interventions in the Social Dimension of Higher Education

An online database will be set up as the core product of the PL4SD project. This platform provides an easily searchable database, giving access to all kinds of information on the social dimension and policy measures in the field. Information on national strategies, action plans, policy measures and interventions in the field of social dimension will be collated three times throughout the project lifecycle from the ministries responsible for higher education in all 47 Bologna member countries. This information will be processed and transferred into an online database, which will be freely accessible and searchable.

The database will be structured using a “grid” (see below) and publically accessible via internet and searchable for all dimensions of the grid, therefore stimulating peer learning between users in the EHEA. This “grid” will serve as a basis for a questionnaire that will be sent to the responsible ministries of all 47 Bologna states. The questionnaire will be based on data already collected by the BFUG (through Eurydice) in order to prepare the questionnaires individually.

Table 2: The “Grid” as basis for information on national and institutional interventions to improve the social dimension of higher education

What	Name of the measure General description: what is the measure, what is the objective?
For whom	What is the target group (description of which student group(s) and of the size) Target of intervention (Who is the direct beneficiary?)
How	How is the objective reached? What type of intervention (sticks, carrots etc.) How does the student gain the benefit? (application, universal right..)
Why	Why does the measure exist?
By whom	Who is in charge of financing the measure? Who is in charge of implementing it? Who initiated the measure? What is the degree of institutionalization? (mandatory?) How widespread/well-known is the practice Since/ until when is the measure in place/ in effect?
When	When does the measure take effect? (At the entry, during or after the studies) Duration/period of the benefit? (During the semester, study week etc.) Are there time limitations to benefitting?
Where	What is the level of implementation: national, regional, institutional? Is the measure portable within the country, institutions or abroad?
Follow-up	Who was involved in the development of the measure? Was the measure evaluated during and/or after the implementation? Is the measure monitored or re-viewed? What has been the impact of the measure on the target group? Was the objective met? Is there any research or studies done connected to the measure that is available online? Please provide the link.

The information collated from the ministries will be further enriched by asking national stakeholders to add own initiatives and to comment on the impacts of the measures collated after every round of data collection. This multi-step approach will contribute to creating a holistic view on national interventions and strategies in the social dimension. In addition, the co-ordinators will contribute current scientific literature concerning the social dimension in higher education to the database. This will be done by continuously screening for publications (books, journal articles, reports, etc.).

The database will be presented to a broader public at a conference in spring 2014 and spring 2015 and promoted through the Bologna Secretariat, the Stakeholders' Forum and the PL4SD project newsletter.

COUNTRY REVIEWS as an instrument for reflection and improvement

The second part of the project is a pilot study, conducting detailed expert studies in three countries on demand. Country reviews have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist countries in the development of a coherent, comprehensive and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education. This result will be achieved through close collaboration between the external reviewers (who will be recruited specifically for the country to be reviewed) and the national policy-makers and stakeholders involved in the country review.

The review is not solely an impact assessment, but will focus more on process evaluation. This will enable it to evaluate and support interventions, which have only just begun or are being implemented at present only at institutional or regional level, although they have the potential for being scaled up to national implementation.

The country reviews will facilitate the formulation of a comprehensive strategy on national level, which both recognizes the individual context factors of the individual country being reviewed and the need for common concepts in a national strategy, which are comparable to those in other countries' national strategies. Meeting this second condition of comparability of concepts will facilitate policy learning between countries.

The review will identify good practices and possibilities for improvements. It is particularly expected that improvements can be achieved through the adoption of a more coherent, 'joined-up' strategy for the social dimension, which cuts across, but recognises administrative and organizational divisions of responsibility.

The Process

The first round of data collation in the first phase of the project (2013) will provide important data on interventions for improving the social dimension of higher education from countries within the European Higher Education Area, which the project coordinators will analyse. This work will provide a substantial foundation for the country reviews. It will also be used to provide guidelines for effective strategies for the social dimension in higher education. The PL4SD members conducting the country reviews will closely collaborate with a national team of experts in the field in order to capture the national situation in the most efficient way, sustaining a high quality standard.

The steps of the country review and the respective tasks of the coordinators and the national team are shown in Table 3.

Costs

The costs of the preparatory work of the international project coordinators and of the visiting external reviewers will be borne by the project budget. The costs of preparing a national self-report and supporting the incidental costs of the one week country visit by the external reviewers will be borne by the national country being reviewed.

Country reviews will be offered under these conditions to a maximum of three countries, which are signatory states of the Bologna Agreement, in 2013.

Table 3: Process of country reviews

Phase	PL4SD coordinators	National team for country review
Invitation	The coordinators will invite 3 countries for review starting from 2013. The suggestion and selection process will be coordinated with the BFUG and the working group on the social dimension.	3 countries commit to assisting review through self-report and support leading up to and during the one week visit of the external reviewers.
Self-report	The coordinators provide a report template with guiding questions to the national team.	The national team work on a 20-30 page national self-report.
External reviewers	The coordinators will suggest 4 external reviewers for the national review. They are likely to cover different perspectives on higher education (e.g. policy maker, HEI representative, researcher and student representative per team). The suggestion for the reviewers will be discussed and concluded with the Stakeholders' Forum.	The external reviewers will be agreed with the national team.
Visit	Review in country lasting 5 working days. On the last day, the international expert team discusses first results and recommendations with the national policy-makers involved in the review.	National team assists with the logistics and coordination of the visit.
Review report	A draft of the review report is written by the coordinators and disseminated for feedback to the external reviewers for revision and completion.	Draft report with recommendations is provided to the national team with a possibility for comments and corrections. Review report finalized and published.

Schedule

2012	autumn	Start of the project
		Developing grid of data base
2013	spring	1 st meeting of stakeholders forum
		1 st survey among Ministries
	autumn	Background report of 1 st country review
		Going public of database
		1 st survey among national stakeholders
		1 st country visit
		1 st country review
2014	winter	Background report of 2 nd country review
		2 nd meeting of stakeholders forum
	spring	Interim conference (national stakeholders)
		2 nd country visit
		2 nd survey among Ministries
	summer	Conference report
		2 nd country review
		Background report of 3 rd country review
	autumn	2 nd survey among national stakeholders
		3 rd country visit
2015	winter	3 rd country report
		3 rd meeting of stakeholders forum
	spring	Analytical report of project (analysing the documented measures and country reviews)
		Final conference (public, scientific community, media)
		3 rd survey among Ministries
	summer	Conference report
		3 rd survey among national stakeholders
	autumn	Final report to EACEA

The Project Consortium

The project consortium consists of the following partners:



Austria: Institute for Advanced Studies
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Martin Unger
Andrea Laimer
Petra Wejwar



Croatia: Institute for the Development of
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General Project Information

Please visit www.pl4sd.eu for further information and regularly updates on the project.

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