Policy Paper on Social Dimension

1. Introduction

Higher Education and the society coexist in an inseparable symbiosis. They affect and influence each other mutually and the social dimension is embedded into both. The Social Dimension defines the composition of the two and at the same time is under the influence by the symbiosis.

The social dimension is certainly not limited to or achieved by solely allocating and distributing financial support, but needs to be understood as all parameters that define an inclusive environment in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and as a consequence in the society at large. These parameters include a big variety of incentives that foster the Higher Education's responsibility to cultural, political, scientific and human development, which must be considered simultaneously as the whole breadth of the social dimension.

Participants in Higher Education are also participants in our society, and thus shape and influence the society directly or indirectly through their education and they way they put it into action. Members of HEIs, meaning the students, the academic and the administrative staff should mirror society at large. As the society throughout Europe is becoming more diverse and is undergoing severe changes the population in HEIs is growing more diverse as well, although not at a pace that reflects the development of society at large.

Even though the access and participation to and in Higher Education has been widened, the inequalities in the society have at the same time increased, hence the developments in the educational sector to foster equality is lacking behind. Social Dimension means to take the needs deriving from this development into account when designing the higher education environment to reach the goal of true participation in higher education by all members of society.

ESU believes that education is a human right and that everyone, no matter political views, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation, gender or social standing, has the right to access and complete higher education in order to unfold their full potential. Therefore the

creation of a sense of belonging within the HEIs is essential. It is key to take individual narratives into account to fully implement the social dimension in the higher education sector.

A healthy and inclusive environment within higher education fosters the personal development needed for each participant to unfold their full potential, according to their possibilities. A full integration and awareness of social dimension concepts leads to conscious citizens that participate in society in an active and reflective manner. As a consequence they contribute to a more democratic, prosperous and inclusive society, making it more equal as a whole.

The social dimension is therefore the underlying but at the same time overarching framework that fosters social mobility and social inclusion.

2. Facets of Social Dimension

In order to sufficiently grasp the whole span of the social dimension it is necessary to keep in mind a set of facets, which combined form the area. This section will outline and discuss some of the concepts and ESU's view on them.

Access to higher education

Higher education must be open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. Access must be free, meaning not only economically free but also free in terms of without barriers. Access should not be considered solely as admission to higher education, but more holistic as the means and mechanisms by which students are supported during their studies. It also includes the possibility to acquire the necessary tools to succeed when leaving higher education.

The key concept behind free access lies in adequately identifying and confronting barriers, which are presented both by higher education systems themselves but also by individual and external factors. It is necessary to identify the mechanisms that would enable those who could, but cannot, participate. The obligation to do so rests both with the state and the institutions in ensuring that higher education is truly accessible for all. Work with the social dimension loses its force and meaning if an equal and good quality basic education is not guaranteed and it is therefore essential that barriers in all levels of the education system are fought. All school students have the same right to be prepared for higher education, disregarding their current school education.

The social dimension, and specifically in this case 'access' can be seen as the means by which those who may be motivated to participate in higher education are enabled to do so, but it is also the conscious work to ensure that those motivations aren't squashed by class structures and preconceived ideas to begin with. Presuming that the individual competencies and the

desire to learn are equally distributed throughout society, it is easy to conclude that there is a long way to go before this is reflected in the higher education population.

Social mobility

For ESU it is essential to facilitate and promote social mobility as the process by which people are enabled to reach their self-estimated full potential, regardless of one's social status, leading to reduced social inequality across all of the society. ESU strongly encourages that higher education is increasingly opened up to currently excluded persons and groups in order to decrease social selectivity in the access to higher education, in order to increase the societal academic rate.

In an age of increased higher education attainment, the social dimension of higher education must recognise that social mobility is enabled and safeguarded by participation in higher education. Higher education can no longer be simply a status-enhancing activity, but needs to be available to all in order to facilitate social mobility.

High levels of participation in higher education supports active democratic participation, and for citizens to truly take possession of their own decision making processes on every level.

True social mobility must, in fact, also occur outside of higher education, also before and after higher education. It goes without saying that people must be enabled to participate, but they must also be shown the means by which they may benefit from the experience and learning granted to them by higher education. ESU strives for true equality in society to make the need of fostering social mobility suspensible.

Affordability

The most obvious potential barrier to participation in higher education is financial. It is not sufficient to say that 'the average person' can afford to access higher education, but rather everyone should be able to. Therefore, individuals must not be faced with any costs to participate during their studies.

Participants in higher education must be allowed to focus their energy entirely on the learning experience. Therefore, all countries should have a sufficient, accessible and parent-independent grant system that enables students to focus on their studies without having to work to supplement their living costs. Social support must be offered without prejudice, without any financial or motivational barrier to accessing it, or stigma associated with benefiting from it.

ESU believes that the provision of loan schemes for the support of students is a useless measure and ignores the fact that not only students, but in a broader perspective also the society at large

benefits from education as the public good it should be. Students must be provided with a framework that enables them to focus on their studies at whatever pace they choose. This also means that financial support of students needs to be fully portable and accessible wherever the student decides to study both nationally, internationally and whether studying at campus or at distance.

Lifelong learning

Higher education should be accessible to people at any point in their life in order to allow for improved quality of life, as well as a way to cope with changes in the society. As employment habits are prone to rather rapid changes, the availability of lifelong learning is increasingly important. Moreover, changes in society emphasises the importance of personal development and active citizenship in democratic societies to be a continuous process in which higher education plays a big role.

Institutions and systems must be prepared to react to the changing needs of learners in a comprehensive and systematic way. The educational system needs to be designed in order to avoid dead ends and to ensure that acquired skills and knowledge maintain their value, and helps provide smooth transition between education levels and cycles in respect to individual learning paths. It is important that the concept of lifelong learning is incorporated into the overall framework for higher education and not treated as a separate issue with separate solutions. Accordingly ESU calls for equal rights and entitlement to, for example state provided financial support and student accommodation for everyone, regardless of age.

Early stage interventions

To reach the target of an increased level of persons with academic studies, it is crucial that higher education is not only seen as something desirable, but also as something achievable. It is therefore important to reflect the diverse group that is already studying today, by improving the picture we paint of students, combined with changes in the approaches to make HEIs accessible. There needs to be an active approach to empower persons to take up studies from all backgrounds, both from an early age to the mature population. This responsibility lies both within the institutions of basic education, within the current student population, the communication of the HEIs and the authorities.

Equality and Equity

ESU has always fought for equality, as the state of being equal, especially in rights, status, and opportunities. When true equality is reached, meaning that everyone has the same resources,

the same rights and opportunities, no differentiation is needed anymore because all individuals have the same starting point and the same paths open.

ESU believes that in order to reach this state of higher education environment and society equity is one of the key concepts to reach that. Equity discloses and tackles the structural differences that limit individuals to unfold their individual potential. Equity strives for fairness in order to achieve the same possibilities for everyone thus treating everyone different and provide support tailored to the individual needs.

Equity must be practised every day in order to reach the long-term goal of equality.

In higher education the conceptions of equality and equity are highly relevant as education is key to personal development. Equity needs to be fostered at all levels and in all points of time while being part of higher education with the means to become a natural part of it. ESU fights for the recognition of individual pathways throughout higher education and therefore needed-tailored incentives need to be in place to achieve equality at least within higher education.

Diversity

The society is diverse and therefore higher education must be prepared to operate in a diverse context. Within higher education diversity should be fostered and encouraged actively, recognising and acknowledging that different people require different means of working, which is ultimately of benefit to everyone involved.

Diversity should not only be thought of by means of demographic mirroring, but rather in a holistic manner recognising that the inclusion of the entire population in the higher education system enriches the academic environment with a broad range of perspectives and experiences that helps to enhance the quality of education.

Specific tools will need to be deployed to enable this as a process, but these tools must be adaptive, flexible and tolerant to changes, lest they become inherently oppressive to the diversity agenda.

Active anti-discrimination measures

It is the responsibility of higher education systems, institutions and individuals within these, to acknowledge, and actively recognise and confront discrimination whenever it occurs. There are many tools, which can be used to encourage a truly open, diverse, and accepting context in higher education, and these are as diverse themselves as the many grounds of discrimination that exist now, or will in the future. This list must include among others homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, ageism, classism, hate speech and xenophobia.

Self-identification is the power of an individual to define themselves amongst others, to have the possibility to say who they are and what they stand for without being bound by other people's labels, norms and constraints.

There is often a lack of diversity in decision-making processes within systems and institutions. It is the obligation of the system and the institution to make these processes as open and democratic as possible, and through whatever appropriate measure to encourage the greatest possible diversity in decision-making processes. In short, ESU encourages the greatest respect for diversity within the democratisation of higher education.

Affirmative action is a means to achieve equality by a programme of proactive measures. Positive discrimination is a process that seeks to temporarily redress a specific inequality by focussing on the rights of a discriminated group within society. These two can be understood only as a short-term measure, and must be pan-systematic, not simply enacted and abandoned in place once.

ESU will continue to oppose all attempts to limit freedom of speech and expression within societies or higher education systems, which we view as impacting participation in higher education or the society as a whole in a negative way.

Locally defined minorities

The concept of Locally Defined Minorities (LDMs) is key to get a better understanding of what underrepresentation means in a local context, and to what extent this is related with the historical, cultural, political and geographical context of a region. Majority and minority groups are not only determined by numbers per se, but by power relationships that determine access to resources such as educational opportunities. Temporally and spatially bound contexts are shifting the perceptions of which individuals belong to majority or minority groups. Locally defined minorities are thus situational and not static groups that are determined by time (historical period) and space (locality).

From a policy perspective this means that one cannot simply determine and fix binaries between powerful and powerless groups for these divisions change over time and are context bound. Therefore, one has to incessantly reflect on current and historical evolvements to re-define LDMs and, as such, the fundamental conceptualisations that shape policies and their impact on social inclusion. Reflection in the form of frequent self-evaluations is thus key to policymaking and implementation geared towards social inclusion of LDMs.

Student centred learning

It is crucial to understand that student centred learning is of highest importance to create a higher education system that is inclusive to all students. The connection between a high quality student centred learning experience and the social dimension needs to be reflected in all curricula design as well as in the creation of flexible learning pathways. It is therefore crucial that the social dimension is not considered to be handled only outside the classrooms, when in fact the most important is the respect to individual needs of students based in mutual respect between student and teacher in the learning situation. In consequence ESU calls for the development of pedagogical approaches that strive for inclusion and an on-going discussion within the teacher community of how to implement this throughout the education system.

The paradigm shift changing the mindset to an equal classroom environment is crucial, meaning that everyone in the room is a teacher and a learner at the same time. The role of a teacher is to serve as a guide through the learning experience, while the narrative of each individual becomes relevant to the learning process. The education also needs to have a good flexibility for students to be able to study at different paces and in different situations in life, therefore operating within formal structures while allowing individual flexibility within learning experience.

Accessibility

Learning environments need to be inclusive to all persons. One area that needs improvement is the accessibility to the physical facilities, but improving accessibility to the lectures and literature needed for studying should also be of utmost priority. Students with disabilities need to be catered for in an appropriate way and ESU stresses that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to ensure that everyone no matter what disability can participate in the same full manner.

Campuses and learning situations should be accessible to every student, and experiences show that this is an issue that requires increased attention, in particular when renovating older universities. It is important to keep in mind that many people only consider visible handicaps as disabilities, but it is absolutely imperative that we cover all types of disabilities, including motoric, auditive and visual disabilities, as well as chronic illness, learning disorders and mental health problems, with our policies and strategies.

Student support services

Support services are necessary, and should always be accessible and developed with both future and current student population in mind. Some of the support services that we expect to be offered are: study counselling, support for students with disabilities, support in

understanding the academic context, physical and psychological medical support, and student housing and subsidised meals. Student support services need to be administered not on a one fits all principle, but rather be adaptive to the needs of the individual student.

Support during the studies and completion rates

As mentioned already in this paper, access to higher education also includes the possibility to complete the education up until the level you personally wish for. Access to fair and accurate information about the studies themselves, the expected learning outcomes, as well as opportunities and possibilities following graduation is one integral part of helping students make informed choices from the beginning. Students should never be, or feel, forced to complete a certain study or programme, and the education systems must be flexible in this sense. However, at the same time it is important to emphasise that every student involuntarily dropping out should be viewed as a failure of the education system. It is a pity both for the individual, but also for the society that misses an opportunity to have another educated and conscious citizen. ESU stresses the importance to provide continuous guidance and other support mechanisms for students to achieve their goals.

Active citizenship and democratic development

The belief that an educated population has the possibility to take an active part in the formation of a democratic and inclusive society is at the core of higher education. This is why it is of utmost importance that the generic skills such as a reflective and critical thinking is acquired and practiced when attending higher education. Citizenship education should also strive to instil respect for human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability that empower learners to be responsible global citizens and take part in inter-cultural dialogue.

Science and society

Higher education and the outcomes of it should be accessible to the society, both in terms of free access to results, but also through active communication between the society at large and academia. It is important that HEIs collaborate with the surrounding society in terms of societal projects, but perhaps also even more importantly in ongoing academic discussion on how to improve the democratic development, reacting to and informing both cultural and societal life.

Students in the society

Students should always be regarded as full members of society, and should have the possibility to interact with the general community on equal terms. For this to be possible improvement of the economic situation of students is one major factor, but the picture we paint of what a student is also has an impact. This is something we should always have to keep in mind when communicating the diversity of the students.

This means there needs to be opportunities for all students that wish for it to live integrated in the city, thus not on campus, and that they should have the possibility to participate in cultural activities, and engage in associations and groups that are not only for students.

3. The roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders

Students

Students must be considered as active partners in the academia and as such take responsibility not only of their own learning but also for engaging in the decision making and governance of HEIs. Students must have the possibility to act as change agents, challenging the assumptive systems and reimagining and redesigning the world in which they want to live. Students need to be aware of their special responsibility as the only status group within higher education that truly advocates for the social dimension.

Students have a vital obligation to the generations coming after them, and must act to ensure that the higher education system they leave behind is more inclusive and socially just than the one they entered.

ESU and Student organisations

As the primary representative of students in Europe, ESU has the first obligation to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the European level initiatives and strategies in the social dimension. ESU should also assist the national member unions in evaluating the systems on national level when asked to do so.

As the collective voice of students we need to be proactive and creative in suggesting and reevaluating the existing concepts and methods, making sure that we do not only duplicate what has been done before but critically examine our policy continuously. ESU has a responsibility to always ask for good examples from its members that in turn need to provide ESU with relevant examples of successful measures and approaches.

ESU also has the obligation to function as a role model in all its operations and to exemplify how it is possible to create an inclusive environment, both within its internal structures and when organising events. This means that we need to work proactively to ensure that our organisation

reflects the diversity of student populations. To reach good results in this work it is important to provide support for our members to work within their organizations to become more inclusive.

Higher education institutions and their joint fora

While the responsibility of setting national targets and policies rests with the overarching national higher education systems, the responsibility for the implementation of most of the day-to-day processes, within which the success of the social dimension rests, lies with the institutions. This responsibility includes provision of services, development and implementation of tools, inclusive administration and decision making processes, education of teachers in non-discrimination and inclusive learning as well as the responsibility for a physically accessible campus.

True diversity does not only take into account the students, but also the staff at the institution, and the institution has the responsibility to ensure that its staff also reflect the diversity in society and are given good working conditions with the possibility to make their voices heard. It is also important that professional education for teachers and professors includes awareness of how to avoid any kind of discrimination and instead enables teachers to foster an inclusive learning environment and to offer examination methods that are suitable to different students the same chances of success.

The institutions are furthermore the stakeholder with a responsibility to ensure engagement between the academia and the surrounding society.

National policy

National policy makers have the core responsibility to value higher education as a long-term project required for improvement of the society. As the primary designers of higher education systems it is imperative that national policy makers create long term strategies and processes to ensure that the social dimension is a priority and a continuous process within their higher education systems.

ESU stresses, that governments must take action to ensure the development and implementation of national access plans. There is a strong need to ensure that European policy is adopted and implemented in a way that takes into account the national context. Furthermore, national policy makers have the responsibility to identify locally defined minorities and work for their inclusion.

Cooperation with the different stakeholders in the national context is essential to find the best approaches to a better policy on social dimension, and the responsibility to create arenas favourable for such cooperation lies heavily on national authorities. The HEIs should also be properly supported in the process of implementing measures on institutional level.

European Higher Education Area, the Bologna process and the European Union

Higher education is increasingly an area of cooperation between different states both within and outside Europe. The social dimension should be ensured at the highest level by sharing of experience and best practices and also by setting common goals and targets within the Bologna process. These efforts should be encouraged and sustained by support on the EU level. The European Commission must recognise the importance of the social dimension and reflect that in country specific recommendations to the member states.

As a collective of the entire higher education community in geographical europe, the EHEA must assist members states in setting, monitoring and achieving goals in relation to the social dimension. At the highest level, the EHEA must conduct data analysis and collection for the promotion and development of the social dimension in the different levels of European higher education system. Furthermore, EHEA must implement the adopted social dimension strategy and assist member states in designing and implementing national access plans to ensure a widened participation.

It is necessary that the EHEA and the EU ensure that the social dimension is implemented at every level and to develop the most effective and democratic mechanisms to monitor and implement this.

UNESCO and international organisations

International organisations, like UNESCO, the World Bank and OECD, are increasingly influencing national education systems with their analysis and recommendations. In doing so it is important that they respect the contextual nature of education and the implications that social dimension has on it. With their large capacity within data collection and role as lead agency on Sustainable Development Goal 4, we specifically call for UNESCO to support the development of more meaningful indicators on the social dimension and global citizenship, something which will be important in comparing and discussing the achievement of targets.