

Social Dimension of Higher Education: what role and what perception for our institutions?

Eva Fernandez de Labastida, (Unibasq, Spain)

Source: ECA (2019): ECA Barometer, European Consortium for Accreditation. Available at http://ecahe.eu/assets/uploads/2019/11/ECA_Barometer_3.0.pdf

Social Dimension of Higher Education: what role and what perception for our institutions?

The objective of the paper is to outline the approach to social dimension in higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through an overview of the way it has been addressed in the different higher education Ministers' Communiqués. In addition, the way it has been approached in the Basque University System linking it to social responsibility and with the support of the Basque Government will be highlighted.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Social Dimension

The Ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA reiterated their commitment at the 2018 Bologna Ministerial Conference in Paris to strengthen the social dimension of higher education and further national strategies. The concept of the social dimension of higher education is not new. In fact, is one of the overarching topics within the Bologna Process and has already been on the agenda now for nearly 20 years. The main objective is

to increase equity and inclusion in higher education by removing barriers in access. The goal of the social dimension, which was first mentioned in the Prague Communiqué in 2001 has been developed through the years and its evolution can be seen through the different higher education Ministers' Communiqués.

In the Prague Communiqué¹ (2001) the "...Ministers reaffirmed the need, recalled by students to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process...".

Afterwards, 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 (Bergen Communiqué, 2005²). With the London Communiqué³ (2007), it was agreed a common definition for the objective of the social dimension:

¹ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2001_Prague_Communique_English_553442.pdf

² http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2005_Bergen_Communique_english_580520.pdf

³ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf



“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”

and the Ministers also stressed

“the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background”.

Further on, Ministers further agreed in setting national strategies and policies, including action plans and reports on their progress at the next ministerial meeting. It was also recommended to work towards defining comparable data and indicators for the social dimension of higher education”. Later, the Ministers committed further on to

“...set measurable targets to widen participation of under-represented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade...”

(the Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009⁴). In Bucharest, the Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the social dimension in higher education and thus to working towards the goal that

“the student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations”

and agreed to

“step up [their] efforts towards underrepresented groups through developing the social dimension of higher educa-

⁴ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Leuven_Louvain_la_Neuve_Communique_April_2009_595061.pdf

tion, reducing inequalities and providing adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning”

(the Bucharest Communiqué⁵, 2012). Following this last communiqué, the PL4SD, Peer Learning for the Social Dimension⁶ was introduced which focused on supporting the process of international exchange and learning of good practices on the area of the social dimension. The social dimension was also an important part of the Yerevan Ministerial Conference⁷ (2015) reflecting on the progress made so far and looking forward to 2020. The ministers committed themselves

“to make our higher education more socially inclusive by implementing the EHEA social dimension strategy.”

and defined some priorities in a renewed vision for the European Higher Education Area regarding the social dimension:

“Making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as our populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes.”

They also agreed to undertake to widen participation in higher education and support institutions that provide relevant learning activities in appropriate contexts

⁵ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf

⁶ <http://www.ehea.info/pid34436/social-dimension.html>

⁷ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/YerevanCommuniqueFinal_613707.pdf



for different types of learners, including lifelong learning, improving permeability and articulation between different education sectors as well as enhancing the social dimension of higher education, improving gender balance and widening opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To do so mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas will be provided, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow. In the Yerevan Communiqué, there was also a wish to promote the mobility of teacher education students in view of the important role they will play in educating future generations of Europeans.

Finally, in the Paris Communiqué⁸ (2018), ministers recognised that “[...] further effort is required to strengthen the social dimension of higher education. In order to meet our commitment that the student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations, we will improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups. Therefore, we mandate the BFUG to take this issue forward by the next EHEA Ministerial conference.”

The Ministers also agreed to develop a common understanding of the concept

⁸ http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf

of social dimension within the Bologna Follow-Up Group⁹ (BFUG) and a dedicated Advisory group on Social dimension¹⁰. As such the Ministers agreed to develop proposed principles and guidelines for the social dimension of HE within the EHEA and to have them submitted to the 2020 Ministerial Conference for adoption, through the BFUG. Other objectives agreed at the Paris Ministerial Conference aim at gathering and examining of the data on good practices regarding social dimension, drawing on previously agreed commitments and existing data, exploring the scope of the EHEA cooperation to strengthen the social dimension of HE as well as start working on Peer Learning Activities within the social dimension area. The main aim of the Advisory group on Social dimension is to develop the future “Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension” as established in its work plan¹¹ and vision and SWOT¹². This advisory group had its first meeting at the beginning of 2019 and plans to have the document ready for the 2020 Ministerial Conference. Some of the issues already discussed are the current state of play of

⁹ <http://ehea.info/page-work-plan-2018-2020>

¹⁰ <http://ehea.info/page-Advisory-Group-1>

¹¹ http://ehea.info/Upload/AG_1_SD_Workplan_2019-2020.pdf

¹² http://ehea.info/Upload/AG_1_SD_Vision_SWOT.pdf



the social dimension in the EHEA¹³ which concluded that even if there is a recognized importance of the social dimension in HE for enhancing social inclusion and social cohesion in EHEA policy papers, the question remains regarding the priority given to these policies as very few countries have national strategies already developed; even if the majority of countries have some targets related to widening participation in HE, there is no reference to specific under-represented groups and even if there is an increase in the data collection regarding the composition of the student body and on policies to enhance the social dimension, not all the systems monitor the same data or have specific information regarding under-represented groups in a systematic way. In their second meeting, they approached, among some other topics like Data collection for the social dimension¹⁴, the links between social dimension and quality assurance¹⁵ highlighting that fostering social dimension

could be improved if there is a national strategy or programme aimed to do so, or if it is embedded in the national HE quality assurance model or if there are institutional policies and mechanisms aimed at enhancing the social dimension. Regarding the embedment of social dimension in the national HE quality assurance model, it concluded that the inclusion of elements of social dimension in the external evaluation procedures and QA standards and criteria, would set up a framework towards continuously motivating HEIs to enhance their social dimension involving all the stakeholders in fostering social dimension at the institutional level.

In the last years, several EU funded projects have addressed the topic of social dimension and how to improve it, as the IDEAS project¹⁶ (Effective Approaches to Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education), where by identifying effective and efficient approaches to improve the social dimension in higher education, examples of good practice with proven quantitative and qualitative successes are presented; while some other have

¹³ http://ehea.info/Upload/AG_1_SD_Current_State_of_Play_for_SD_in_the_EHEA.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.ehea.info/Upload/AG_1_SD_2_Data_Collection.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.ehea.info/Upload/AG_1_SD_2_Link_SD_Quality_Assurance.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.equityideas.eu/>



dealt with social responsibility (UNIBILITY - University Meets Social Responsibility project¹⁷) aiming at strengthening the relationships of universities with their local communities. Specifically, the project developed strategies how universities can increase their social responsibility actively on student and researcher level. Lately, the INVITED (Strategies towards Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Universities¹⁸) project led by EUA aims to support universities in developing strategies towards equity, diversity and inclusion. It also seeks to promote dialogue between stakeholders at the system level in order to ensure that regulatory and funding frameworks empower universities to fulfil their social responsibility.

Application and examples of the Basque HE and QA system

If we narrow the focus to the Basque University System and addressing the need to develop specific national or even regional strategies to foster the social

dimension of higher education, we find the experience of the Basque Government which funded through some institutional agreements in the framework of the four-year university plans specific actions regarding among other social responsibility related activities and fostered the social dimension of the three institutions of the Basque University System since 2011. These institutional agreements, signed between the Basque Government and each of the universities in the Basque University System, have as a main purpose to mobilize universities for the achievement of the specific objectives established in the regional University Plan. Unibasq has reviewed the indicators and the activities done and made a report for the Basque Government since 2008. The main outcomes regarding social responsibility in the period from 2011 to 2018 are:

- Elaboration of equality plans
- Elaboration of strategic plans regarding sustainability
- Improvement of the environmental management
- Improvement of the accessibility to infrastructures
- Development of communication plans
- Efficient economic resources management

¹⁷ <https://www.postgraduatecenter.at/en/life-long-learning-projects/university-extension/finished-projects/university-meets-social-responsibility-unibility/about-unibility/>

¹⁸ <https://eua.eu/101-projects/737-invited.html>



(analytic accountancy, e-administration...)

- Development of actions to improve the employability of graduates
- Agreements with organizations of social nature

For example, the three universities are involved in the development of gender equality plans. In fact, the public university of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) has already approved its 3rd Equality plan (2019-2022), has created a specific department on equality and, as an evolution, it is planning to include a gender equality subject in all its Bachelor degrees¹⁹. In the case of the University of Deusto, it has a dedicated web page regarding all the initiatives and activities related with university social responsibility, including equality, inclusion, social justice, environment and health²⁰.

The next university plan for the 2019-2022 period²¹ is a share effort between the Basque Government and the three

¹⁹ <https://www.ehu.eus/es/web/berdintasuna-direccionparalaigualdad/aurkespena>

²⁰ <https://www.deusto.es/cs/Satellite/deusto/en/university-social-responsibility?cambiodioma=si>

²¹ http://www.euskadi.eus/contenidos/informacion/uni_planes_universitarios/es_def/adjuntos/Plan_del_Sistema_Universitario_2019-2022_cast.pdf

Basque higher education institutions, including an integral strategic planning. Regarding the social dimension, the Basque Government is totally engaged with the UN 2030 agenda and the UNESCO Global goals for sustainable development mainly through the following six priorities:

- Inclusive education
- Gender equality
- Economic growth and employability
- Infrastructures and innovation
- Reducing the inequality
- Alliances and development cooperation

More in detail, the new university plan establishes a specific “University community line” with the following focus on:

- Fostering gender equality
- Extending the use of the Basque language
- Equity

Some questions for reflection regarding the topic:

- In a growing age of marketization and competition among HEIs, is the social dimension a priority for our institutions?
- How is the social dimension related with social responsibility ²²as a broader term and

²² In the ISO 26000 guidelines on social responsibility established by the International Organisation for Standardisation, SR is defined as follows: “the responsibility of an organisation for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the envi-



with the so-called “third mission” of higher education?

- How can HEIs embed the UNESCO Global goals for sustainable development (SDGs)? Regarding the inclusion of the UNESCO SDGs in higher education, in addition to the individual initiatives developed in each institution, there are some global initiatives to guide the institutions on how to start like the “Getting started with the SDGs in Universities – A guide for universities, higher education institutions, and the academic sector”²³, which provides

ronment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that:

- contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society;
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders;
- is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour;
- is integrated throughout the organisation and practiced in its relationships.” <https://www.iso.org/iso-26000-social-responsibility.html>

²³ <http://ap-unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/Univer->

general tools and guidance including mapping already in place activities; engaging with stakeholders and leadership; capacity building; identifying priorities, opportunities and gaps; integrating, implementing and embedding the SDGs within university strategies, policies and plans; monitoring, reviewing and eventually reporting and communicating their actions on the SFGs. Moreover, even if incipient some initiatives for the external review of these actions into a general institutional evaluation framework are being developed like the INQAAHE funded project on “Sustainability & Quality in Higher Education” led by ACPUA (Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education) and AQUA (Quality Agency of Andorra), which developed a set of indicators on compliance with the SDG in the institutional evaluation.

[sity-SDG-Guide_web.pdf](#)