The social dimension in the European Higher Education Area

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Introduction

European higher education systems have experienced very deep changes over the last two to three decades. National systems have become "more comparable and compatible" (Bologna Process 1999) but not yet "harmonized" (Bologna Process 1998), governance of higher education institutions has been "modernised" (European Commission 2006) and their mission has been redefined and diversified (EUA 2006). The process of policy making has been shifted on international/European level. These changes put forward also some policy points that are entirely new when compared with previous decades. One of them has been represented by the term *social dimension* and this notion will be in the focus of the present article.

The concept of the social dimension has emerged in the context of the *Bologna Process*. Here, we need first to highlight a few contextual points that are particularly important and sometimes forgotten today.

First of all, the Bologna Process should not be confused with the higher education policy programme as developed by the European Commission: the Bologna process is voluntary multilateral cooperation between competent ministries in the "wider" Europe, i.e. Europe, which is beyond the borders of the European Union member states.

Second, the Bologna Process is a voluntary cooperation of ministries responsible for higher education from 47 European countries; such a character of the process means that the programme items are often left to the interpretation of individual members, especially when it comes to their implementation in each national higher education systems.

Responsibility of the legal regulation of higher education remains both within the EU and in the “wider" Europe at the level of nation-states; arrangements agreed within the Bologna Process is a political and moral rather than a legal obligation.

Third, European higher education stakeholders play an important role within the “Bologna” higher education policy programme, i.e. European organizations and associations like the Council of Europe (a non-EU organization), the European Association of Universities (EUA), the European Students Unions (ESU; formerly ESIB), employers (BUSINESSEUROPE), teachers unions (EI), etc. Stakeholders have the status of consultative members in the bodies of the Bologna Process. We will prove that activities of certain stakeholders, in particular the ESU and the Council of Europe, have been the most important for the formation and development of the concept of the social dimension.

So how did it start?

Social dimension as the “Bologna action line”

The concept of the “social dimension of the higher education” first appeared in the Prague Communiqué (Bologna Process 2001), but had its own prehistory that goes back to the initial conference in Bologna in June of 1999. It was jointly organized by the University of Bologna, the Italian Ministry of Higher Education and Science, both former European university associations (CRE and EUREC/CRUE; soon after the Bologna Declaration was signed they merged into a single current European University Association – EUA) and the European Commission (named the Commission of the European Communities at that time). It was attended by ministerial delegations from EU Member and Associated States of that time plus from Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, further on by delegations from some universities and from two international organizations (UNESCO, Council of Europe) as well as by some recognized experts in higher education.

The presence of academic representatives at the conference was a political confirmation of the autonomy of European universities; in the same hall in which the first conference of the Bologna Process has taken place a decade before signing ceremony at the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988) was organised; this has made a strong symbolic message. At the same time it was also recognition that the fundamental higher education issues can’t be addressed without the involvement of key stakeholders. Participation of stakeholders has thus become one of the principles of the Bologna Process (Zgaga 2012)

and, at least indirectly, one of the constitutive elements of the concept of the social dimension in higher education.

The conference was also attended by a small group of European students – ESIB representatives; however, somewhat unexpectedly. According the original scenario they should not have any active role at the conference. However, students learned that the conference is being prepared and they lobbied strenuously to be able to attend. In recently published memoirs on these events, "an official invitation to participate in the high-level conference to discuss 'the European space for Higher Education' signed by the rector of Bologna University was faxed to the ESIB Secretariat just a month before the event" (Klemenčič 2012, p. 17). For ESIB it was important "how to respond to the Bologna Declaration (of which was a draft already obtained)" (ibid.). Thus, ESIB unexpectedly found itself at the European ministerial podium: the first step towards a systemic and active integration of students as stakeholders in the European higher education policy development was made.

What they wanted to say at the conference is summarized in the Bologna Students Joint Declaration (ESIB 1999).[1] This is a very interesting document which shows that students were familiar with the ideational background of the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999), as well as with some of the background dilemmas and controversies about its content. The document points at several issues which were then at the forefront of discussions. One of them concerns the problem of *access to higher education* which wasn't compromised by the beginnings of the Bologna Process in any way; however, as it has been one of its core principles ESIB had to make this note: "We are firmly committed to a *model of quality education open to the largest number of students*. [...] Therefore, *the declarations must not be a means to install any kind of limitation of the access to higher education*" (ESIB 1999). In addition, the students' declaration radicalized the point which was at the very core of the Bologna Declaration, i.e. the pan-European *mobility*: "In order to build the 'European space of Higher Education', *mobility should become a right for all students*" (ibid.).

Students left Bologna with complete success, and in the expectation that ESIB will be officially invited to the next conference as a recognized consultative member. The next conference was held in May 2001 in Prague. ESIB was actively involved in it and made every effort to make the "social dimension" a new item on the list of the official Bologna "action lines". Just before the summit in Prague, the European students gathered in the Swedish Göteborg and adopted their own Declaration, which had a significant impact on the decisions of the later Ministerial conference. One of the student representatives

[1] From the author's personal archive. Two pages document with the ESIB logo and dated "Bologna, 19th June 1999". The document is almost completely forgotten in the discussion of the Bologna Process.

present at the time, Manja Klemenčič, published recently an article with a table which compares the "direct citations from ESIB's Student Göteborg Declaration [ESIB 2001a] and Prague ministerial Communiqué"; she found "ample examples of direct 'uploading' of ESIB's Positions into the Prague Communiqué" (Klemenčič 2012, p. 26), such as (ibid., p. 27):

Student Göteborg Declaration	***Prague Communiqué***
"Although the Bologna Declaration pointed out the basic aspect of European dimension of h[igher] e[ducation], it failed to address the social implications the process has on students."	"Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna Process."
"[...] we ask you, the ministers responsible for higher education, explicitly to write a social dimension into the implementation of the Bologna Declaration and to preserve higher education as a public good."	"[...] Ministers encouraged the Follow-up Group to arrange seminars to explore the following areas: [...] the social dimension, with special attention to obstacles to mobility, and [...] student involvement."

The concept of the social dimension was recorded for the first time in an official Bologna document in the above quoted two sentences; they are located on the third page of the Prague Communiqué (Bologna Process 2001). Entirely at its beginning there is another one, which was also the result of student lobbying and significantly influenced the subsequent debates and positions within the Bologna Process: Ministers "supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility". Thus the conceptual framework was laid which allowed that the social dimension was placed among the fundamental objectives of the Bologna Process.

Developing the Social Dimension of the EHEA

The inclusion of the social dimension on the list of the Bologna objectives was definitely a result of the efforts of European student organizations, but, of course, they were not isolated in these efforts: some countries (in particular Nordic) actively supported it since the beginning; on the other hand, important supporters can be also found among consultative members, in particular the Council of Europe and Education International. However, a long discussion was necessary that the vague concept of "social dimension" got a more precise content.

In this discussion an episode associated with the negotiation on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) was particularly important. In the early 2000s, the

negotiation made the discussion on internationalization and future of higher education very hot (Knight 2006) in worldwide context. The GATS is one of the main agreements of the WTO; it was created in 1995 and its core aim is to promote trade liberalization of all kind of services, including education. In 2001, a new negotiation round began (Doha Round) but the process was generally carried out fairly opaque. The very idea of "liberalization of educational services" as well as the non-transparency of the process aroused numerous protests around the world. In Europe the case overlapped with the just born Bologna Process and was strongly echoed within and without the Process (Huisman and van der Wende 2004).

The debate on such a broad question, such as the *purposes of higher education* (Zgaga 2012, p. 25), was at the time much in the foreground of the Bologna Process; when preparing substantial reforms this has always been the case. Positions around this issue varied and it was possible to notice, on the one hand, a trend which reduced the purposes of higher education in its *economic* function (e.g. the European Commission; OECD, World Bank) and, on the other hand, a trend that advocated "the full range of purposes" (e.g. the Council of Europe). Among the Bologna consultative members ESIB was the one who responded very early and in a rather radical way as follows:

"Students should be regarded as a core part of higher education, not as consumers that purchase a product. To view higher education as a commodity is to undermine the social role that all levels of education confer to both the students and society. We are strongly concerned with the process of commodification of higher education as evidenced by the negotiations on the General Agreement of Trade in Services. Education is a human right and human rights can never be tradable." (ESIB 2001b)

Thus, the "GATS issue" was not associated only with the liberalization of services as understood by WTO and the ministers of economy (at least some of the ministers of education had a different opinion on this, but were excluded from participation in the negotiations and were initially even not sufficiently informed about the issue); it also interfered with the very philosophy of European higher education reforms. The problem sharpened in the winter of 2002–2003 when the first draft of the Berlin Communiqué was drafting; the topic was coming increasingly to the fore of a broader debate on (public) higher education. In mid-February 2003 a "Bologna Follow-up Seminar"[2] was organized in Athens under the heading "Exploring the Social Dimensions of the European Higher Education Area", and just before it a regular meeting of the BFUG was also planned. The seminar focused on three issues: (1) the social dimension of the EHEA, (2) higher

[2] Under this name a series of seminars envisaged in work plans for a period between two Ministerial Conferences have been continuously organized since 2000.

education as a public good and (3) higher education in the GATS negotiations (Bologna Process, 2003b).

According to the minutes of the meeting, the topic entered the agenda of the BFUG a day before the seminar. The Commission representative started calming: “Part of the Commission’s information was devoted to the GATS negotiations, which were at that point in the stage of requests. [...] It was explained that the positions taken cannot be completely open since negotiations are currently taking place. [...] It was stressed though, that there is no intention or reason to go any further with offers.” However, “ESIB noted that the Bologna Process seems to become more and more associated with the Lisbon targets and expressed its worry that the Bologna Process may be reduced to a mere instrument to reach these targets, which are mainly an economic agenda.” (Bologna Process 2003a)

Next day, the seminar started in a similar tone. In general, participants of the seminar reaffirmed that the main objective driving the creation of the EHEA should be based on academic values and cooperation between different countries and regions of the world. The announcement of the European Commission – which was made at the seminar – to not include public education in their negotiation proposal for the ongoing GATS negotiation was assessed as a positive development. In conclusions, they agreed that “the European ministers of education have to insert a joint statement on GATS in their next communiqué” (Bologna Process 2003b).

The GATS brought an issue in the discussion which interfered with the very philosophy of European higher education reforms. Per Nyborg (at the time Chairman of the Committee for Higher Education and Research of the Council of Europe; later, from 2003 to 2005, Head of the Bologna Secretariat in Oslo) recapitulated the debate expressing the following dilemma: “Can the Bologna Process based on co-operation and GATS based on competition co-exist in the sector of higher education?” His answer was: “GATS may tempt any government to take its national responsibility for higher education lighter, as higher education more easily may be considered to be a *private good. That is not a European approach and it should not become one*.” (Nyborg 2003)

In the next (Berlin) Communiqué any direct observations on the GATS can’t be found, but already in the preamble the ministers openly reaffirmed “the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process”. They continued as follows:

“*The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area,* aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national

and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. *They emphasise that in international academic co-operation and exchanges, academic values should prevail*" (Bologna Process 2003c).

The polemics surrounding the GATS were episodic in nature and has weakened since 2005, but the debate on the social dimension has remained high on the agenda and repeatedly found in the texts of ministerial communiqués, e.g.: "The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA" (Bologna Process 2005); Ministers reaffirmed "the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background" and engaged "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" (Bologna Process 2007a); they stressed the need to "emphasize the social characteristics of higher education and [...] to provide equal opportunities to quality education" (Bologna Process 2009a), etc.

The question of the social dimension of higher education within the Bologna Process has thus become an issue of importance that all the players are aware of. It is true that this issue was brought in the process of European reforms by students and it is probably also true that without them it would not have received so featured place in shaping of European and national policies. Notwithstanding all this it is an issue that has been discussed in the broad European higher education policy forum and has a much broader meaning.

Fundamental reforms, as engendered by the Bologna Process, typically concern the fundamental dichotomies of the time. On the one hand actors are faced with the dictate of contemporary global (economic) *competitiveness*, while on the other hand they are aware of the principle of *public good*, which particularly in the European tradition can't be easily given up. On the one hand, "in a changing world, there will be a continuing need to adapt our higher education systems, to ensure that the EHEA remains competitive and can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation" (Bologna Process 2007a); on the other, there is a continuing need to "increase our efforts on the social dimension in order to provide equal opportunities to quality education, paying particular attention to underrepresented groups" (Bologna Process 2010).

The question is therefore whether *competitiveness* and the *public good* are compatible at all: "Is it consistent to proclaim at the same time [...] the international competitiveness of higher education and its being a 'public responsibility' and a 'public good'? Or does

competitiveness entail that higher education eventually becomes a marketable service?" (Hackl 2001, p. 115). The question is harder than it looks at first glance. Among other things, it requires careful consideration of the principles on which educational reforms should be based. In this regard, European students insist: "No person should be confronted by any barrier to higher education, and it is a societal responsibility to make sure that everyone has actual equal access to higher education" (ESU 2012). In this field, therefore, we can identify the fundamental questions and dilemmas that European higher education policy meets also in the second decade of the Bologna Process.

After reviewing the development of the concept of the social dimension it is now the time to look at how this Bologna principle has been realized in practice

Taking stock on the social dimension: How countries are doing?

We have already mentioned that the concept of the social dimension is rather vague and that without a more precise treatment it allows many and different interpretations. Within the Bologna Process, the "official" definition was agreed only in London in 2007: "We [the ministers] 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" (Bologna Process 2007a). They also agreed to "report on our national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness" and to "invite all stakeholders to participate in, and support this work, at the national level" (ibid). However, only at the next ministerial meeting in Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve, the participating countries promised to "set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education" (Bologna Process 2009a).

Since the end of the last decade a few research reports have been published which, among other things, monitor the state of the social dimension across the EHEA. These reports are quite diverse: by methodology, by their focus as well as by the countries included in surveys. In part, these reports were written within the bodies of the Bologna Process, in part they were specially commissioned by the European Commission and some of them were part of the wider European research projects. In the continuation, we will briefly look at some of them and at some most relevant outcomes. Let us mention at this point that the EHEA coordination body monitors good practices in social dimension implementation in a special catalogue[3] which is published at their official website and is currently acquainted with cases from 10 countries (among them also from Croatia).

[3] See http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=244 (25 April 2015).

The oldest – methodologically not exactly flawless – report was published in 2007, just before the London Ministerial Conference; it was prepared by the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility (Bologna Process 2007b). The task of the group was therefore not only in addressing the social dimension, but also in checking the availability of data on European mobility. The second part of the report is entirely devoted to the social dimension; here it deals with the definition which the ministers later included in their Communiqué and we already stated above. The report further asks how to transform political commitments into actions and stresses that the "concept of social dimension needs to be turned into an *overall objective* and *actions that will deliver these commitments* and lead us to the objective" (ibid., p. 14). It argues that the basis for the social dimension is the *question of equal opportunities* and exclusion of any discrimination.

On this basis, the working group proposed the following objective for the social dimension: "We strive for the societal goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of our populations. We therefore pledge to take action to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity" (ibid.). In this part, the group also dealt with some technical issues concerning gathering data on the social dimension. We see, therefore, that at this stage yet quite basic questions were on the agenda.

Two years later, BFUG published the first so-called Stocktaking Report (Bologna Process 2009b); it touched on the social dimension, albeit in a rather marginal way. The main purpose of this report was to show the progress of each country in the implementation of the objectives of the Process; the data on which the report backs were collected through self-evaluation reports of the national ministries. The Report on the Social Dimension of the Bologna Process is actually a kind of appendix to this publication (ibid., pp. 123-140); it does not provide a review of achievements of individual countries in this area (obviously it was too early), but still deals with more general issues. At first, it addresses under-represented groups in higher education (e.g. a lower socio-economic background, immigrants and cultural minorities, students with a disability, non-traditional students, the gender gap, etc.); it also presents – but not systematically – some experiences of individual countries. Further on, the report deals with policy measures to widen access to higher education and in particularly to increase participation of under-represented groups. This report ends with drafting some strategies for the future. The report warned ministers that there is "a strong need of evidence-based policy making and for collecting and developing sound data and indicators in order to measure progress at national level with a view to possible future benchmarking" (ibid., p. 139).

In its conclusion, this report commented the Eurostat and Eurostudent "upcoming" (at that time) survey on social dimension and mobility in the Bologna Process as "the first step to close this information gap, gap, at least from the perspective of overall participation rates and average educational attainment levels in each country" (ibid.). Indeed, this was the first report, which presented some transparent data on the basis of rather convincing methodology. The study (Eurostat and Eurostudent 2009) was a result of a promise of Ministers at the London Conference to "develop comparable and reliable indicators and data to measure progress" (Bologna Process 2007a) in this field.
The survey focused to four main indicators: widening access, study framework (e.g. expenditure, income, students support, etc.), mobility and effective outcomes (i.e., educational attainment, employability, etc.). The published report contains profiles of all countries participating in the Bologna Process and presents a range of statistical data for each of the four indicators, but certain data for some countries are missing. Today, these statistical data (from the first half and the middle of the 2000s) are mostly no longer relevant and therefore we do not enter details; the importance of this publication lies primarily in the fact that "things started to move".

Since the Bologna Process solemnly declared that the European Higher Education Area is established (2010), research into these issues have visibly strengthened. Over the last five years several new reports were published dealing with the social dimension of the EHEA and with the achievements of individual countries. First of all, there is a series of Eurydice surveys (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2010, 2011, 2014). On the other hand, the Eurostudent surveys (Orr 2011; Hauschildt 2015) have also contributed very important, methodologically sophisticated and detailed insights. Last but not least, some other reports were also published, which sometimes approach the issue from specific angles; an example can be found in an independent report authored for the European Commission and entitled "Education inequality across EU regions" (Ballas et al. 2012). One of the key findings of this study was: "Despite commitments by EU Member States to promote equity in education and training, major geographic disparities persist in educational opportunities and outcomes, *across* but also *within* EU Member States and regions". Therefore, with the "discovery" and political recognition of the "social dimension of higher education" the task was not accomplished; on the contrary, it has only just begun – for both policy makers and researchers.

We will look into some particularly interesting findings of the two most recently (2014, 2015) published studies.

The Eurydice report on „access, retention and employability" (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2014) relates to the "social dimension" as an action line of the Bologna Process primarily in relation to the (equitable) access to higher education during

the period of its "mass" respectively "universal" stage (Trow 2005), as well as to the education process (flexible pathways) and results (retention, employment). It doesn't cover all countries of the Bologna Process but members of the European Union as well as Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway and Turkey. Statistical sources are fairly fresh: the academic year 2012/13.

The report notes "that there is still a great deal of progress to be made" (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2014, p. 9) and first of all, it draws attention to the issue of data collection: "Practice regarding which characteristics of the student body are monitored and at what stage in the higher education process varies considerably" across countries. It is clear that European countries don't need only to harmonize their higher education systems (i.e., to make them "more comparable and compatible"), but also to *unify research methodologies, without which systematic monitoring of progress is hardly possible*. This is a problem that is not unique to monitoring the social dimension; it is a general problem. It has been repeatedly pointed out also in e.g. monitoring graduate careers and employment (Orr 2011; Hauschildt 2015). The results of the Bologna Process, therefore, raise important and major issues also to researchers and not only to policy-makers. Many countries collect comprehensive statistical data and support specific research projects; while the approaches and definitions are often quite different. Today so popular attempts to "rank" countries against one of the indicators would be, under these conditions, strongly questionable from the research point of view as well as politically counterproductive.

The proof "that there is still a great deal of progress to be made" also concerns higher education practices across European countries. First of all, we must bear in mind the above mentioned definition of the social dimension: "the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations" (Bologna Process 2007a). This question is first linked to the issue of *access* to education and then to the quality of the *process* and effective *outcomes*. This understanding is older than the Bologna Process; an almost two decade old recommendation from the Council of Europe (1998) is clear on this: access policy is "a policy that aims both at the widening of participation in higher education to all sections of society, and at ensuring that this participation is effective (that is, in conditions which ensure that personal effort will lead to successful completion)."

The report shows that there are "only nine countries with defined attainment targets for specified groups" and they "vary considerably" across countries: e.g., in Belgium (Flemish community) it focuses on students whose parents do not hold a higher education qualification; in Finland on increasing male participation and reduction of gender differences; in Lithuania on increasing female participation and reduction of gender

differences; in Malta on increasing a share of adults participating in lifelong learning, etc. (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2014, p. 16).

Europe is varied even in respect of the right to admission. The report classifies countries into three groups: those in which right to admission is guaranteed in all or most study fields (minority), to those in which it is guaranteed in some study fields and to those in which the right to admission is not guaranteed. However, the report stresses that "the distinction between open access and selective systems is not clear cut. […] In other words, formally there is a guaranteed right, but in practice there is selection" (ibid., p. 20). In such an arrangement social marginal groups are probably the most vulnerable. This is particularly evident on the issue "what paths are actually taken in order to gain admission to higher education" (ibid., p. 21). In most countries more than one entry route exists but in many of them there is no official monitoring of entering students.

The report notes that "about half of the European higher education systems" (ibid., p. 22) *alternative entry routes* to help widening access (e.g. recognition of prior learning; bridging courses) but, again, their monitoring is still weak and inconsistent in comparative aspect. This practice is most prevalent in the north and the west of Europe. Within the Bologna Process several seminars have been organized on this topic already in the middle of the previous decade; however, it seems that the practice in most countries is changing slowly. When it comes to groups that are under-represented in higher education, the provision of *guidance service* is especially important. At this point the report gives "reasons for optimism. Across Europe, it is the norm to find academic advice being provided free of charge to all school and higher education students" (ibid., p. 23). Some gaps were identified only in a few countries of South-Eastern Europe (the majority of countries from this region are not included in the survey): Montenegro explains that their services are located in higher education institutions only, and not in schools for upper secondary school students. In contrast, Croatian and Romanian students may find academic guidance services at school level, but will not find them in higher education institutions" (ibid., p. 24).

Attention of this report is directed also to some specific aspects of access to education, for example the age. It notes that measures to influence the time at which prospective students choose to begin their higher education studies "are, however, rather infrequent" (ibid., p. 24). In addition, higher education systems differ again at this point: sometimes measures are identified which encourage candidates to enrol at later time (e.g. Germany; the aim is "to broaden their horizons"), while others are encouraging candidates to enter education as soon as possible (Nordic countries). Many countries enforce indirect measures that "may also have an impact on reducing the time to graduation" (ibid.). The report also provides for a surprise: despite the pan-European rhetoric, it has identified

"only two countries, Ireland and the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland), have established a system where funding is deliberately used as an incentive to higher education institutions to widen participation" (ibid.).

So far, the most recent study on "Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe" (Hauschildt 2015) is slightly different: it is presented as a "synopsis of indicators" which is the result of *Eurostudent V* research project (2012–2015). The study deals with "EUROSTUDENT countries" – altogether 29 European countries (19 of them are EU member states; Croatia is included) and including, for example, Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, also in this case the report doesn't deal with all countries of the EHEA which also indicates the *difficulties in data collection and unification of research approaches* across 47 countries. A systematic and complete review of the implementation of the "social dimension" in the European Higher Education Area is therefore still missing. Nevertheless, this report also provides some important insights. Chapter 4 is devoted to characteristics of national student populations and, therefore, for us particularly interesting.

The report finds students in the EUROSTUDENT countries *relatively young*: "more than two out of three students are under the age of 25" while the share of older students "varies greatly between countries" (ibid., p. 63). Similarly, "the share of students with children is very different across [...] countries. [...] In two thirds of [...] countries, no more than 10% of students have children. The highest share of students with children can be found in Norway, Sweden, and Estonia, where at least 20% of students have at least one child. In the Czech Republic, Germany, Russia, Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Italy, and Georgia, this share is less than 5%" (ibid., p. 64). This is one of the groups which should be specifically addressed by policies in the context of the social dimension. Of course, countries should address this issue also in the context of their demographic policy.

When it comes to gender balance, the report notes that "in almost all countries, the majority of students are women" (only Germany and Ireland below 50 %). And more: "From Bachelor to Master programmes, the share of females increases at least slightly in two thirds of the countries" (ibid., p. 65). However, the subject depends heavily on gender and therefore certain areas of study are in the "female" (e.g. humanities) or "male" (e.g. engineering) domination. On the other hand, in a number of countries the share of women is higher at universities as opposed to non-universities: almost one fifth higher in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, France, Croatia, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, and Ukraine (ibid, p. 66). Of course, there are considerable differences between countries that are subject to specific cultural contexts. Here we are faced with another point at which "the student body" does not reflect "the diversity of our populations".

The survey was specifically focused on the migrant population; in two thirds of countries "the share of 2nd generation migrants does not exceed 10 %" while the highest shares were identified in Switzerland, Montenegro, Germany, Estonia, Croatia, and Ukraine where "at least 15% of students were born in the country of survey, but have at least one parent born abroad" (ibid.). The lowest share of 2nd generation migrants was identified in Romania, Hungary, Finland, Poland, and Georgia (2 % of students). Even here the report identifies a special group which should get more attention from higher education policy.

The report further states that in about three quarters of countries, "no more than 5 % of all students report that any health impairments they may have presents a (quite) big obstacle" (ibid., p. 67). Somewhat higher shares (between 6% and 13%) were registered in the Netherlands, France, Lithuania, Ireland, Denmark, and Austria. Low shares in most of other countries therefore raise a question of whether or not this group of (potential) students is poor cared. The report also states that only few students indicated that they had mobility impairments (up to 3 % in some countries). Learning disabilities are also not common among students: "only in a quarter of all countries does the share of students with a learning disability exceed 3%: Netherlands, Ireland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Czech Republic" (ibid., p. 68). These data are likely to be linked with the ways of how such (potential) students are identified and treated in individual higher education systems.

Authors of the report conclude this chapter with the following comment: "Any policy measures at the national or institutional level should be designed with this diversity in mind in order to make sure that no students group is inadvertently excluded. Also, awareness of this diversity within the student population should be fostered among students themselves" (ibid., p. 69). This comment draws attention to the difference between (policy) rhetoric and practice, but it also alerts us to the importance of equity and equality in (higher) education. Within a perspective of the social dimension both policy makers and researchers should address this issue very seriously.

Conclusion: addressing equity in higher education

Promoting equity in education has been one of the primary aims of contemporary educational policies. Within higher education policies this aim has a particular context. At least in Europe – as well as other developed world regions – a "universal" participation in primary and secondary education was achieved already during the 20th century and does not present an issue on the equity agenda any more. It is still an issue in relation to *quality* education, but not in terms of *participation*.

By contrast, higher education – despite its gradual transition from the "elite" through "mass" to "universal" education (Trow 2005) – is still *directly* linked to participation as a "measure" of achieving equity and equality. Today, policy makers are still trying "to design effective measures to redress these disparities" (Ballas et al. 2012, p. 13) and there is for sure a lot of work to improve monitoring and measuring them. Researchers and policy makers definitely need sound data to discuss the phenomenon and provide effective measures. However, measuring makes sense – and is possible only – when the key concepts are clearly defined. These final comments aim at questioning *the concepts*: that is, our existing approaches (or a paradigm) how to achieve equity in education.

A claim has been developed in our times that an increase of participation in education is directly linked to the growth of equal opportunities. There are arguments and data which support this claim. Yet, the "linear" relationship between participation in education and equity has become unquestionable, a "dogma". And this might be a problem. While the higher education has expanded massively, on the other hand, social inequalities have also increased. According to a recently published UK report on "living standards in 2020" we can expect "both more highly skilled jobs at the top and more low skilled jobs at the bottom, while jobs in mid-level occupations are in decline". (Brewer et al. 2012, p. iii) With other words: higher education will remain an instrument of vertical social mobility - but further increase in numbers of students in higher education will not contribute to social equity. It will rather contribute to an increase in numbers of mismatched graduates as well as numbers of graduates in "less attractive" – and less paid – professions.

Research data show that the expansion of students in higher education has been predominantly achieved with young people from higher and middle social classes. During the last half of the century it became the norm that also middle class youth "must" enter universities and colleges; cultural ambitions raised substantially. Of course, in absolute figures the number of students from lower social backgrounds has also increased but it hasn't increased as steep as in the other cases. This fact has convinced policy makers that more policy attention should be paid to students from lower social groups. However, this statement poses a long series of difficult and even unpleasant questions.

In conclusion, we touched specifically only on one. "Higher participation in higher education we achieve – more equitable our societies are." Is it so simple? We know that distribution of students among disciplines reflects inequalities in societies; elitism perpetuates through means of differentiation of higher education. There is a wide range of higher education profiles – from medicine and law to nursing and social work. So much with regard to horizontal differentiation; but there is also a vertical one: e.g. "world class" vs. "peripheral" universities. Therefore, higher participation alone does not make

societies more equitable. The ambitions of today's researchers and policy makers should target higher.

Ignoring the role of education in societies is an equal fault as if we exaggerate it. Education is not all-powerful magic wand – even in the "knowledge economies" it is not. The proper functioning of the education, an important social subsystem, depends on proper functioning of other social subsystems. Education systems should definitely play their role in society and in assuring equality of educational opportunities; however, education is today for individuals from "underrepresented groups" first a question of unequal social and cultural capital and only than a question of lacking finances. In many of our societies there are instruments that help students to get necessary money (grants, loans etc.) but very few instruments have been developed so far which help students compensating their lack of social and cultural capital.

This is the point that requires higher ambitions – from researchers and policy makers.

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