



17 April 2015

## **Widening Participation for Equity and Growth**

*A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020*

### **A Strategy to 2020**

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) calls for the development of effective policies to ensure greater access to, participation in and completion of quality higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are still too many capable students who are excluded from higher education systems because of their socio-economic situation, educational background, insufficient systems of support and guidance and other obstacles.

This strategy is therefore based on the fundamental social dimension policy objective of the EHEA that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations.

We also commit to further encouraging the development of lifelong learning at national, regional and institutional level to meet the needs of a fast-changing labour market and knowledge-based and learning society to unlock the potential in higher education and ensure the continuous development of competences and to stimulate greater social inclusion, social solidarity and civic engagement.

### **Overall objectives**

1. We agree that all member countries in the EHEA will develop a coherent set of policy measures to address participation in higher education which identify underrepresented groups in higher education and outline specific, measurable actions to improve access, participation and completion for those groups, consistent with national approaches. An effective way of doing this is through national access plans or strategies, for which a set of European guidelines has been developed.
2. We will continue to engage in, encourage and promote the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to further develop the work initiated in this area with a view to assist EHEA members in elaborating their national plans or strategies for widening participation or reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of their implementation.
3. We support evolving data collection on the social dimension making optimal use of existing data resources across the EHEA to be established with sufficient consistency to enable Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process objectives in this area.
4. We will encourage higher education institutions to continue to develop and expand lifelong learning opportunities in consultation with employers and social partners and

we will work towards the development of flexible and transparent progression routes into higher education and the introduction of clear mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning based on a learning-outcomes approach for qualifications and the implementation of qualifications frameworks.

5. We will improve opportunities for flexible learning by encouraging diversification of the way in which learning content is delivered, for instance by adopting student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, by expanding part-time provision, by developing credit-based traineeships, by modularising programmes and distance learning through the use of ICT and by developing quality-assured open educational resources.
6. We recognise the importance of teaching and learning for successful completion and we are committed to ensuring that curriculum, pedagogical methodology, continuous professional development and academic freedom support the work of teachers in best meeting the individual needs of students.
7. We will further facilitate graduates' employability by developing entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, counselling students and graduates about traineeships and job-seeking (CV writing, skills analysis, job interviews in particular).
8. In order to effectively monitor the implementation of this strategy for the development of the social dimension and lifelong learning and the specific measures it contains, we request the BFUG to report on progress at the next Ministerial Conference in 2018.

## **National policies**

In pursuing our commitment to widen overall access to, participation in and completion of quality higher education, each member country in the EHEA agrees to set objectives, follow up with specific actions and collect relevant data. Policies on the social dimension are a national responsibility. They will contain at least the following:

- A commitment to working with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders to identify underrepresented groups and the barriers to access, participation and completion (barriers due, for example, to socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, disability or other reasons, depending on the different situations in individual member countries).
- When the barriers and groups have been defined, we will also work with education and student service providers at all levels and other relevant stakeholders to develop strategies to overcome these barriers and set objectives for underrepresented groups and the elimination of barriers. These objectives will be supported by outlined actions for both the national and institutional level.
- Arrangements for the systematic collection of relevant comparable data, making optimal use of existing resources, to enhance the evidence base for policy development and enable the effective monitoring of the common objectives on access, participation and completion among under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education.

Member countries that have adopted a coherent set of measures that address the key points of a social dimension and life-long learning strategy, albeit through a different approach such as in a wider strategy for higher education, can be considered to follow the European strategy if they meet relevant criteria. If a member country has adopted measures that address barriers for underrepresented groups, is monitoring the effectiveness of its policies on access, participation and completion and has addressed the need for data collection, then this can be considered equivalent to a national plan or strategy.

## **Guidelines to assist countries in developing national plans or strategies**

A set of guidelines has been produced to assist countries that wish to meet the challenge of developing or enhancing national plans or strategies according to national systems<sup>1</sup>.

We encourage member countries to use these guidelines in order to ensure that national plans or strategies are developed using a systematic approach to identifying barriers into and within the higher education system, based on relevant data providing evidence for action.

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<sup>1</sup> The document on guidelines is designed to assist member countries in devising national access plans and is not therefore part of the Strategy to be presented to the EHEA Ministers for adoption on 14-15 May 2015. The document on guidelines is enclosed in the Report of the 2012-2015 BFUG working group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning to the BFUG.