

5. Social Dimension

5.1 Introduction

“Social dimension is the means by which we widen access to higher education, ensure it is representative of the diverse society in which it exists, fulfils its responsibility to extend social equality, and that those who enter higher education are supported to achieve and succeed. 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.” (ESU, Policy Paper on Social Dimension, 2015)

“The social dimension was first mentioned in the Bologna Process in 2001, when on the initiative of ESU, “the need [...] to take account of the social dimension” (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education 2001: 3) was acknowledged. A clearer commitment was made at the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005 with the promise to take measures to widen access to higher education (ESU 2012).”

ESU-Bologna With Student Eyes 2015

In 2015, the importance of widening access and participation in higher education to mirror the rich complexity of societies was acknowledged and underlined:

“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. We undertake to widen participation in higher education and support institutions that provide relevant learning activities in appropriate contexts for different types of learners, including lifelong learning. We will improve permeability and articulation between different education sectors. We will enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will provide mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow. We also wish to promote the mobility of teacher education students in view of the important role they will play in educating future generations of Europeans.” (Yerevan Ministerial Conference 2015).

But has this all been translated into reality?

5.2 Main Findings

The Social Dimension as a policy priority

In 2015, according to our National Unions of Students, only 8 out of 36 countries considered the Social Dimension a high priority. In 2018 the Social Dimension is viewed as more or less a high priority by 15 Governments out of 43 (and only for 3 of them as “essential”); in 15 countries out of 43 it is a priority for Higher Education Institutions, in 7 for the Rectors’ Conference (or equivalent institution) and in 11 for the teachers’ trade unions. The data doesn’t look encouraging, and it is even less encouraging that the social dimension is considered as either a low priority or not on the agenda at all in 13 countries. The map (Fig 05-01) shows how much governments consider the social dimension as a priority as seen with student eyes.

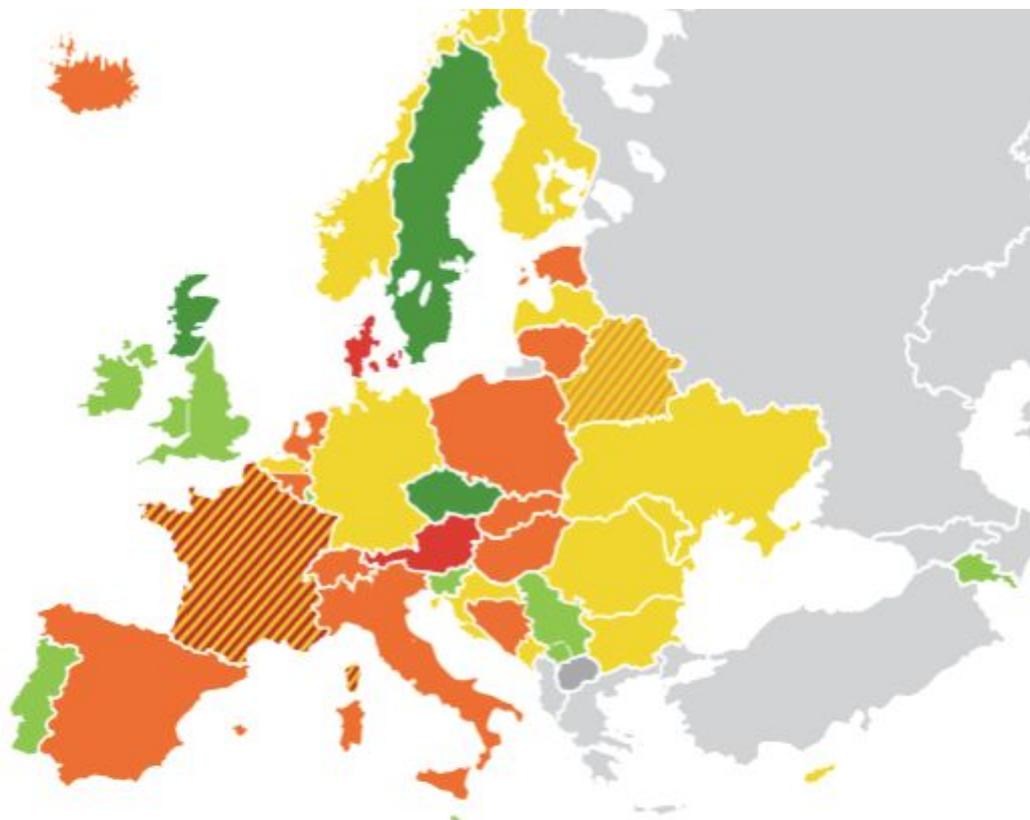


Fig. 5.1: Social Dimension as a policy priority for Governments

- EHEA country with no ESU member
- No information available
- Not a priority
- Low priority
- Somewhat a priority
- High priority
- Essential priority

Fig. 05.1: Social Dimension as a policy priority for Governments

According to our National Unions of Students there seems to have been an improvement in the perception of the importance of the social dimension in higher education among governments and higher education's stakeholders, especially thanks to the efforts of the unions themselves, but a lot of work still needs to be done.

When asked if progress has been made in their countries regarding the social dimension since 2015, the answers of student representatives varied widely. From the depressive "nothing has changed" stated by 7 countries where the Social Dimension has been reported either as a low priority or not a priority (Poland, Iceland, Switzerland, Belgium, Belarus^{1*}, Hungary and Ukraine), to "it got worse" stated by Denmark, to the encouraging data on higher public awareness in 16 countries and the existence of discussion on social dimension strategies in 18 countries. However, even the most positive data does not constitute enough progress from the student perspective.

For example, already in 2015 in Estonia, Serbia, Malta, the United Kingdom, Armenia, Ireland and France, national targets were reported to have been put in place, while in seven more countries developments were underway. Three years later national targets are reported to have been suggested only in 9 additional countries (Portugal, Luxembourg, Romania, Austria, Norway, Moldova, Croatia, Spain and Sweden), which indicates that 27 Countries still lack national targets and even preliminary discussion towards developing them.

In conclusion, there is some indicative trend of improvement in acknowledging the importance of working on the social dimension across Europe, especially thanks to the work of the NUSes that have been fighting for it in various ways, but the overall situation is still absolutely insufficient and this will be further expanded later in this chapter.

Student Support Services

Student Support Services are the concrete means through which the participation and the success of students in higher education is, can and should be ensured. Ideally, students support services should vary from monetary allowances provided to students for their maintenance during their period of study, to the concrete supply of all the services they require from housing to transport from access, to materials, to study facilities (libraries, common areas, etc.); from food and catering, to counselling services and more. To ensure that higher education is accessible and inclusive, student support services should be publicly funded and available for all. Investing in public financing of student support services has

¹ *only by one of the two unions; the other agrees on the lack of important changes, but states that the social dimension is somewhat of a priority in the country.

proven to be a great tool for countries, as the availability of the services diversifies the student body and eventually eliminates inequalities in society, as those students who can access all these services are reported to succeed with better results in their educational path and satisfactory careers, regardless of their initial economic condition.

The reality shows that in the majority of European countries only some of the above mentioned services are taken into account and suffer from underfunding and neglect. The students of ESU's National Students' Unions were asked to identify the support services that lack resources the most, with the three most underfunded reported to be financial support, housing, and mental health/disability support.

Financial support

Student grants and scholarships are still the most common way to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, in the majority of the countries students are only eligible for financial support if their (or, in almost the totality of cases, their families') financial situation meets certain criteria, usually combined with other criteria that relates to the student's individual context. This model is not enough to ensure access and participation in higher education for students of all backgrounds, while the financial support to students is also neglected with the result that it cannot cover the needs of students that they are entitled to on paper, therefore huge numbers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded from education due to the lack of funding that students have continually denounced.

Italy references a prevailing example of such a situation: in the academic year 2016-2017 students that were eligible for a grant, according to criteria that had been highly criticised by the students, numbered 173601 in the whole country. However, only 166160 received their grant often after consistent delays, leaving 7441 students without the financial support they deserved and needed. What is peculiar of the Italian situation, however, is that the student support system is regionally based, with an inefficient contribution from the Government. This creates a situation where in the poorest regions the proportion of students entitled to grants is smaller because the criteria are adjusted to the economic context of the region. As a result of less people enrolling at universities in a given region, they instead opt to study in a different region, where they have more chance to get the support they need.

However there remains a huge gap between those who should receive financial assistance and those who actually benefit, for example, in the academic year 2016-2017, Sicily only managed to pay out 12984 grants out of the 15984 it was supposed to finance. In more affluent regions, like Emilia Romagna or Lombardia, the number of students is much higher, especially as they attract students from other regions due to more access to financial support. These regions also manage to pay out almost all of these grants (Emilia Romagna

paying 19023 out of 19023 in 2016-2017 and Lombardia 18394 out of 18436). This does not just have a negative effect on the lives of students, but is also nurturing an ineffective model of unbalanced forced mobility within the country, which is depressing the overall growth of Italy, creating even more inequalities and problems.

Housing

In 2015 housing was specified by students as the number one problem, while in 2018 it remains one of the most problematic access needs of students. The right to housing for students can be ensured in many different ways, from building more quality student dorms to ensuring access to private sector contracts. “Apartments in cities with universities are virtually unaffordable to students” was denoted in 2015, and the situation hasn’t changed since then, especially in capital cities. The right to housing with good conditions is a fundamental right of students, especially in higher education, when they are no longer minors and are seeking space not only to study but also to focus on their own academic and personal growth. Too often, instead, students are forced to continue living with their parents while studying, while being falsely accused of being “too attached” to their families, especially in the Mediterranean countries, when in reality they really cannot afford other housing solutions. This is also evidenced by the latest EUROSTUDENT 2018 publication.

Mental Health Support and Disability Services

Mental Health issues are often ignored or stigmatised by society, therefore it comes as no surprise to discover that mental health support is among those services that most often lack resources in higher education. Students demand more attention on this issue and for services to be supported in identifying, understanding, and taking care of students who suffer from mental health difficulties, so that they are able to fulfill their studies in good conditions and with all the support required.

Similarly, students with disabilities and students with chronic illnesses are left out of the higher education system, which will be explored in more depth later, due to the lack of resources to meet all individual needs.

In general, although 13 countries are increasing student support services, which may seem like a good sign, our member National Unions report that additional investments are still not enough to cover the needs of the students concerned, especially as in many cases small increases are outweighed by much bigger cuts to other services. Moreover, the student support services needed by students are still more than those recognised and funded by Governments and responsible institutions. ESU would like to emphasize that what is lacking in the majority of countries is the recognition of the students’ social status, therefore students are not treated as individuals entitled to certain rights related to their personal

choice of enrolling in higher education, but instead they are counted as part of their family or household unit and viewed as a burden on society.

Student retention

As explained previously, the right to education is not only the right to access education, but the right to successfully progress through the educational experience, being equipped with all necessary means to succeed. This means as well that student dropout needs to be prevented with concrete and proactive measures.

Sadly, only 14 countries out of 43 have dropouts prevention measures in place at the national level, 21 have something at the institutional or faculty level and only 16 have measures at the program level.

Just like in 2015, the most popular measure appears to be counselling (in 22 cases out of 29 National Unions reporting on measures in their countries), followed by additional financial support (17 cases), social support groups (16) and flexible learning paths. But the students' unions claim that in most cases those measures are not enough or are effective only in theory.

Half of the unions (20 out of 41 respondents) say that they are dissatisfied and 7 are very dissatisfied with the dropout prevention measures and only 4 are satisfied with them. The map below (fig 04 - 02) visualises the high level of dissatisfaction throughout Europe.

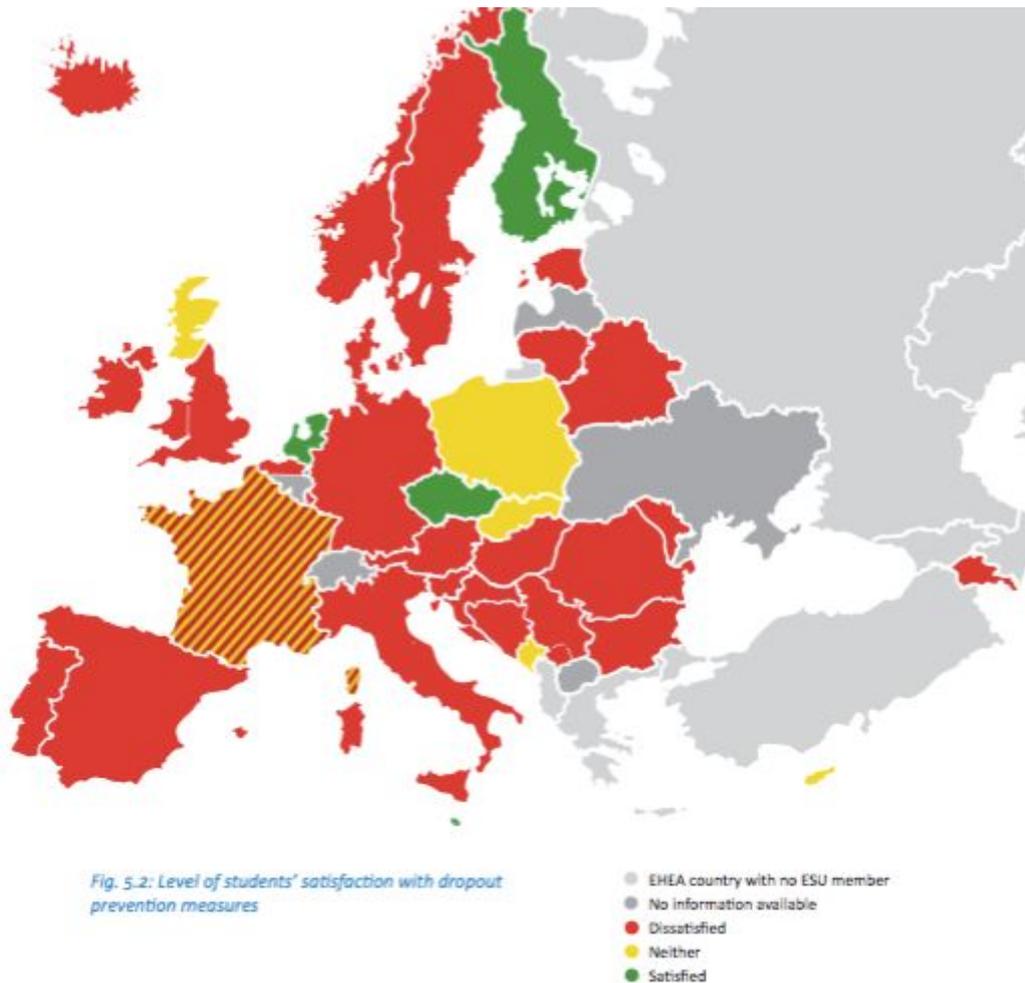


Fig. 05.2: Level of students' satisfaction with dropout prevention measures

As already stated in 2015, it is of utmost importance to understand the reasons behind student dropout, therefore the lack of data on this problem creates an obstacle to creating solutions and putting in place effective measures. “The low number of countries utilising tracking of students is a particular concern. In some cases it is reported that no reasons for dropout are identified, as the capacity of the authorities to identify the causes is limited by very poor, or because of nonexistent data collection [...] We stress again that incomplete or insufficient data can exaggerate certain problems, or hide other issues that may be the very basis of the problem.” (ESU, Bologna With Student Eyes 2015)

In the past three years nothing has changed in terms of the tracking of students to prevent their dropout, with answers from students indicating that, even more than before, especially after years of widespread economic crisis, the students that are left out of education and more likely to drop out, are those from poor socio-economic backgrounds; yet, as shown denoted previously, there is no substantial incremental change in the measures to support their inclusion and success.

Many unions underlined how the difficult economic situation has ultimately led to a necessity for finding a job while studying, which is dramatically affecting the quality of their studies, which can result in the drop out from education. This happens because in the majority of the countries there is no real possibility of studying part-time to better combine employment with studying. In Croatia, the part-time admission option exists on paper but not in reality as the individual flexibility required is not guaranteed, while the problem is made worse by the fact that enrolling on a part-time basis has a tuition fee implication, while enrolling full time has not, so that students with lower socio-economic background who failed the test for their preferred course enroll part-time as a second option and their situation worsens.

ESU stresses that having the opportunity to enroll in part-time study is a right for every student which should ideally be a free choice and not an obligation due to other pressurising factors.

Underrepresented groups

When questioned on how underrepresented groups of students are defined in their countries, in 2015 a majority of the responding unions (28 out of 39 respondents from 36 countries) mentioned students from a low socio-economic background; in 2018, 26 out of 43 respondents still consider students from a low socio-economic background as the biggest underrepresented group in higher education, together with students with physical disabilities (same rate: 26 out of 43). Students with psychosocial disabilities and/or mental health issues are considered underrepresented by 19 unions, followed by students with children (18), students from different ethnic groups (18), students with chronic health issues (18), mature students - who started their education older than 25 (16). Twenty unions stated that students from an immigrant background are underrepresented, however it is important to highlight the lack of available data: 11 unions, in fact, state that there is no data. The same applies to LGBTQ* students: 27 unions claim they have no data and 10 state that they are an underrepresented group.

In total, 29 out of 42 respondents stated that there is no national policy or plan for defining underrepresented groups. Only the unions from Portugal, Ireland, United Kingdom and Croatia, have been able to provide some good examples of measures put in place, and they all rely on the analysis of society and the student body to identify the target groups and implement tailored strategies for their support. Almost 50% of the respondents (20 out of 43) state that there is no adequate data available on the social conditions of students and the participation of different groups, with 13 of them also adding that there has been no effort in collecting such data since 2015.

Similarly to the above described issues with national access plans and dropout prevention, there is no student tracking system and therefore the much needed data to understand who is being excluded from higher education and how to ensure their inclusion and success. Worrying, with this data not available, it also appears that there is no interest in collecting or exploring the need for it further.

As already stated in 2015, besides data collection, action needs to be taken to increase the participation of underrepresented groups. The student body and the academic community as a whole are very far from mirroring the rich and complex composition of our societies. On the contrary, cut to funds for education and the lack of resources and attention given to it results in a more elitist higher education, contributing to the growing inequalities of society, while losing a huge human capital that is crucial for peer learning.

5.3 Conclusions and considerations for the future

We need to acknowledge that the situation hasn't changed much from 2015. Despite the social dimension becoming recognised as an issue of crucial importance and one that is a core action point for Bologna, then it must be clearly stated when there has not been prioritisation or relevant steps taken.

From the students' answers it can be observed that there has been a small increment of public attention to the topic of the social dimension but no substantial measures put in place. After years of cuts to student support services and economic stagnation in EHEA countries, there is an increasing number of students who require financial help to succeed in their studies, and it is crucial that countries begin or reinstate substantial investment in student support services, in accordance with the views of students' unions. Student representatives are the very people who can lead the way to effective and much-needed measures that meet the needs and expectations of students themselves, whose opinion is, after all, the most important one when seeking to make positive change.

It is also very important that Governments and higher education institutions start collecting data on underrepresented groups in order to tackle their inclusion.

5.4 Recommendations

- Similarly to what has already been outlined three years ago in the previous edition of this publication, despite numerous commitments to treat the social dimension as a policy priority, this is still far from reality in the majority of the European Countries. Concrete measures need to be put in place in order to mirror the diversity of the European population in its Higher Education system.

- What is required to reach full representation of the diversity in our society is a holistic approach towards inclusion in higher education, with the multitude of barriers towards active participation in Higher education identified and removed.
- A concrete measure that urgently needs to be put in place in order to define underrepresented groups, and better understand how to foster their inclusion, is student tracking.
- National Access Plans are needed to ensure full participation of all members of society in the Higher education system.
- As the right to education is not only the right to access it but the right to fully participate in it, and get the most out of it to fulfill one's personal growth within society, tailored dropout prevention measures are urgently needed to be put in place.

5.5 References

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