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BRIEF

Key Messages

■ Every Bologna Process participant country has been called upon to set measurable targets for widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education since 2009.

■ Despite the repeated articulation of widening participation in higher education as an objective, a common European definition is not available, making it difficult to assess in a comparative manner whether targets in this policy area have been met.

■ There is a need for extensive data collection and analysis on the basis of micro data in order to fully understand the inequalities in any given higher education system, as well as across national higher education systems.

20 years of the Bologna Process: Achievements and difficulties in tackling the social dimension of student life in Europe

Eva Vögtle

The Bologna Process: Overall objectives and reporting procedures

In 1998, the education ministers of France, Italy, Great Britain, and Germany signed the Sorbonne Declaration with the goal of harmonising the architecture of European higher education systems. This first step was substantiated one year later with the Bologna Declaration (1999), which was adopted by 29 European education ministers and led to the so-called Bologna Process. In 2010, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched which, since the accession of Belarus in 2015, consists of 48 member

states covering 50 higher education systems¹.

The overall objective of the Bologna Process is to enhance the comparability and compatibility of higher education structures by creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). To this end, the introduction of a tiered study system, a common credit transfer system, the promotion of academic mobility, and cooperation in quality assurance were formulated as common goals. At the follow-up conference to the inaugural

¹ Belgium has two distinct higher education systems (Flemish and Walloon) and as for the UK, the Scottish system is regarded as distinct from the other British higher education systems.

Author



Dr. Eva Maria Vögtle
voegtle@dzhw.eu

Eva Vögtle is situated in the research area Governance in Higher Education and Science. In addition to her involvement in the EUROSTUDENT project and her function as the lead researcher in a project investigating higher education governance and its comparability across the German Länder, she coordinates the DZHW research cluster "Mobility of the Highly Skilled".

meeting, European education ministers already agreed on additional goals, such as stressing the concept of the social dimension in higher education (Prague Communiqué 2001). And since then, the European ministers of education have continuously reaffirmed the importance of the social dimension within the Bologna Process.

The Prague Conference in 2001 marked an important turning point for the Bologna Process as this *de jure* intergovernmental process incorporated supranational actors, in this case the European Commission, and installed the Bologna Follow-Up group (BFUG).

The BFUG, as the main governance body monitoring and assisting the Bologna Process, with the Berlin Summit in 2003, was assigned to monitor the participating states' progress in implementing the agreed upon measures by the next conference in so called 'Stocktaking Reports', now known as 'Bologna Process Implementation Reports'. Since then, several external experts have been involved in the provision and data analyses for these reports. The reporting procedure was refined at the Bergen conference (2005) and at the London conference in 2007. The ministers recognised the need to improve the availability of data on both mobility and the social dimension across all the participating countries in the Bologna Process (London Communiqué 2007). The European Commission (Eurostat), along with Eurydice², and EURO-STUDENT (see Infobox) were therefore asked to develop comparable and reliable indicators and data to measure progress towards the overall objective of improving the social dimension, student, and staff mobility in all Bologna countries.

Monitoring the Social Dimension

Since 2009, each individual EHEA member country has been called upon to set measurable targets for widening participation of underrepresented groups and to provide adequate conditions for the completion of their studies so that by 2020, the student body within higher education reflects the diversity of Europe's populations (Leuven /Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009). Is it possible, at this point, one year before the deadline, to assess whether EHEA members will reach this goal?

The social dimension of higher education has been on the agenda of the Bologna Process since 2001 and since then, the need for more comparable data on the social and economic situation of students (Berlin Communiqué 2003) has been emphasised. In 2005, a more detailed description of the social dimension was provided: measures taken by governments should assure that students from all backgrounds are represented in higher education to the same extent as they are represented in society as a whole, for instance by providing students from socially disadvantaged groups with guidance and counselling services (Bergen Communiqué 2005). At the following conference, a commitment to more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to wider participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity was made (London Communiqué 2007). Two years later, an improved international mobility participation rate for diverse student groups (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009) was set as an objective. In 2015, a commitment to make higher education socially more inclusive was inscribed in the Yerevan Communiqué which also announced the implementation of the EHEA social dimension strategy (Salmi 2018). With the latest Communiqué, ministers committed to improve access and completion for under-represented and vulnerable groups

² Eurydice is a network of 42 national units based in all 38 countries of the Erasmus+ programme. Its task is to explain how these European education systems work and how they are organised. For more information, please refer to https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/home_en.

and mandated the BFUG to take this issue forward until the next EHEA Ministerial conference (Paris Communiqué 2018).

However, a coherent definition of socially disadvantaged groups and underrepresented groups has not been provided in the Communiqués. One concept used in numerous studies on the topic is student parents' economic status, as it influences the educational attainment across generations in different countries (European Commission 2017; Pfeffer and Hällsten 2012; Torche and Costa-Ribeiro 2012; Wightman and Danziger 2014). Students whose parents are not financially well-off face more challenges in their pursuit to participate in higher education. These students engage in paid jobs more often and to a greater extent in order to be able to study compared to their better-off peers (DZHW 2018; Masevičiūtė et al. 2018). Another concept frequently used to identify underrepresented groups is the distinction between students with and without higher education background, i.e. students whose parents' educational attainment does not exceed upper secondary education. The latter group has been the focus of extensive research since parental education has long been shown to be related to educational attainment. For instance, EUROSTUDENT findings clearly show that such 'first generation students' are underrepresented in all participant countries. Furthermore, even within higher education, this group of students shows different study choices and living conditions compared to their peers with academic background (DZHW 2018).

According to the latest Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2018, p.213), to reduce these inequalities, all EHEA³ members have identified disadvantaged groups and have designed at least one measure supporting the retention and completion of students from under-represented

groups. Some EHEA countries go beyond this by setting targets and quantitative objectives regarding the entry and/or participation of specific under-represented groups and systematically collect and monitor information on students' drop-out and completion (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2018). Nevertheless, a comparative assessment, whether social dimension targets have been met, is difficult since there is no universal, European definition of under-represented groups available.

Existing, cross-nationally comparable data does give some insights into the situation of students in the EHEA. For instance, EUROSTUDENT provides data that allows the comparison of the students' own and their parents' financial situation, students' educational background as well as their study and living conditions, such as housing situation, and the need to engage in gainful employment alongside studies (see Figure 1). Results of the most recent round of EUROSTUDENT⁴ show that in some aspects of student life, the student populations are quite similar across countries while in others, the variation across the 28 participating countries⁵ is quite substantial. Large variation exists with regard to students' age: in the countries with the youngest student populations (Albania and Georgia), students are 22 years old on average, whereas the average age in the Nordic countries Iceland, Finland, and Norway is at least 28 years. Relatedly, the living situations are different: living with parents is the most common housing form in 64 % of participating countries, but living with partners and/or children, with others, or alone, is more common in countries with older students.

⁴ Please refer to <https://www.eurostudent.eu/publications> for comparative reports based on the data gathered within EUROSTUDENT VI (2016-2018).

⁵ Participating countries of the 6th round of EUROSTUDENT are Albania, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Sweden; Slovenia, Slovakia, and Turkey.

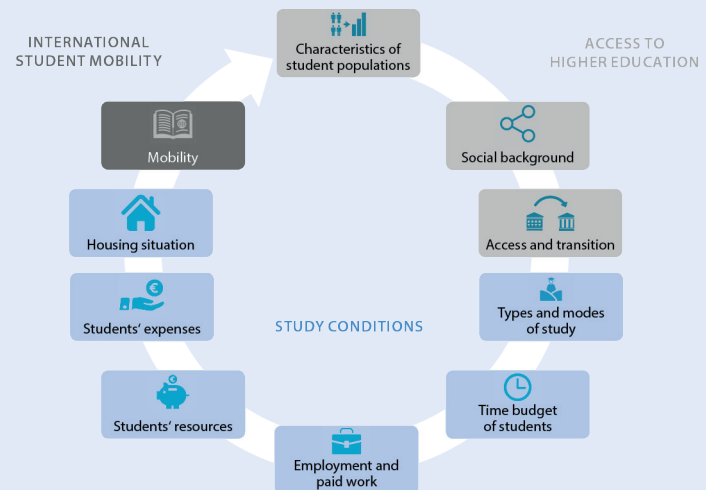
³ Except for the Holy See.

About EUROSTUDENT

EUROSTUDENT is a project that since a first pilot study in 1994 collates comparable data on the social dimension of European higher education. The project consists of a network of national partners in each participating country which is co-ordinated by a team made up of a consortium with currently seven member organisations¹. EUROSTUDENT topics cover all aspects of student life: access to higher education, studying, living, and working conditions during studies, mobility experiences, as well as students' own assessments of their situation (see Figure 1). EUROSTUDENT data allow distinguishing all results for different "focus groups", e.g., students without higher education background, students with impairments, students in paid jobs, etc., thus allowing a differentiated analysis and comparison of the social and economic conditions of students' lives between European countries, as well as within each country. For those EHEA countries participating (see Figure 2). EUROSTUDENT, among other technical experts, provides data on the social dimension of higher education to the Bologna Process Implementation Report. Main outputs of the project are comparative reports, an open access database of all the indicators collected within the project, focused thematic reviews and short reports focusing on specific topics.

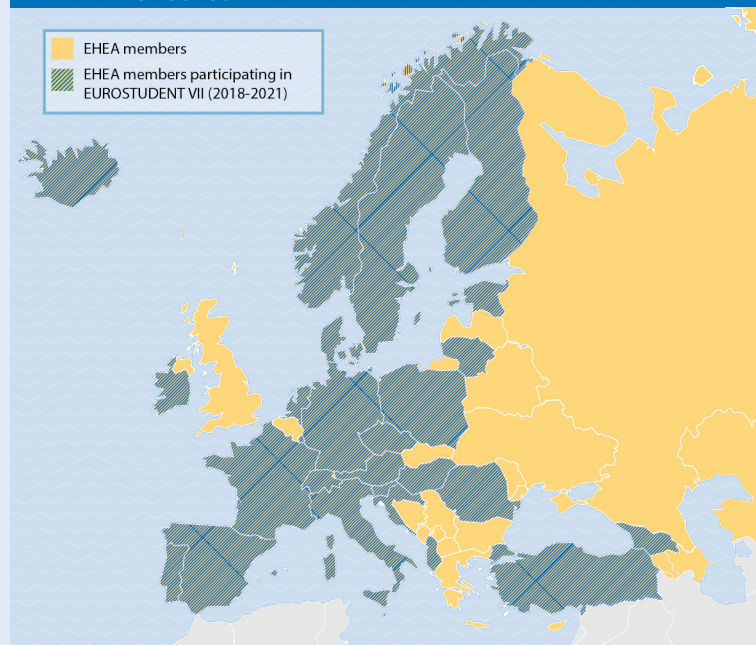
¹ Please refer to www.eurostudent.eu for more information

Figure 1: Topics covered by EUROSTUDENT



Source (DZHW 2018)

Figure 2: The EHEA and current EHEA members participating in EUROSTUDENT



Source (DZHW 2018)

Students' families also play different roles with regard to the financing of students: while, on average, 82 % of students receive some financial support from the family or partner, the share of this support in students' total budgets and, thus, students' reliance on this income source in comparison to others, e.g. public sources, varies between 15 % in Norway and 88 % in Serbia. The need to engage in paid work seems to be highly dependent on the main income source of students and on the financial status of students' parents. Across EUROSTUDENT VI countries, on average, slightly more than half of all students combine studies and a paid job – either during the whole lecture period or from time to time during term-time.

More of a marathon than a sprint: Implementation of Bologna goals

The Bologna Process' success is visible in the mere fact that it has grown from the original four countries in 1998 to 48 EHEA members today. During the first years, the Bologna Process was characterised by a constant move towards expansion; this holds true for the number of participating countries and stakeholders as well as for the included higher education policy issues.

Some of the goals of the Bologna Process represent tangible measures, while others are mere statements of intention. The Bologna Process and later on the EHEA have combined and concentrated highly discussed higher education policies. Thus, what, indeed, is unique about the Bologna Process is that it bundles higher education policies perceived as best practices and structures how they should be implemented. In essence, the structure and the content of the Bologna Process aim at an integrative higher education model and in a fully implemented EHEA, higher education systems would be comparable and compatible (Vögtle 2019). However, the EHEA still remains a patchwork system,

covering 50 different higher education systems⁶ that have adopted similar structural reforms at the macro-level (BFUG-Working group 2 2018), but lack coherence at the lower levels. This holds true especially for topics such as the social dimension, which cannot be tackled by merely re-structuring study programmes and degrees, but need strong, further commitment and measures specifically targeting those groups that are currently underrepresented in the higher education systems of EHEA countries.

Even for countries with relatively equal participation rates across groups in higher education, the question remains "access to what" (Marginson 2016)? Do the types of higher education institutions and options more often frequented by students without higher education background provide them with the same results and outcomes (Salmi and Bassett 2014) than those of their peers with an academic background? If certain groups are shown to be concentrated in less prestigious higher education institutions, to interrupt or fail to complete their courses, then equal access to higher education is clearly only part of the picture. The role of earlier educational choices or situations (e.g. tracking in secondary schools) in determining the pool of possible entrants into higher education cannot be over-emphasised, since these selection processes restrict the number of possible entrants to higher education by creating inequalities in the attainment of entry qualifications. Similarly, the growing number of refugees around the world creates new groups that may not find it easy to access higher education in their respective host countries. All of this emphasises the need for extensive data collection (and equally, analysis on the basis of micro data) in order to fully understand the inequalities in any given system (see Atherton 2016), as well as across national higher education systems.

⁶ See Footnote¹.

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German Centre for Higher Education Research
and Science Studies (DZHW)

Lange Laube 12 | 30159 Hannover | Germany | www.dzhw.eu

Phone.: +49 511 450670-0 | Fax: +49 511 450670-960 | info@dzhw.eu

Management board: Prof. Dr. Monika Jungbauer-Gans, Karen Schlüter

Chairman of the supervisory board: Ministerialdirigent Peter Greisler

Registration court: Amtsgericht Hannover | B 210251

Responsible for editing: Dr. Eva Maria Vögtle

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