Providing policy-makers and practitioners with resources to improve the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area

PL4SD

peer learning for the social dimension

Final project report

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1 Introduction

The project *Peer Learning Initiative for the Social Dimension (PL4SD)* was a three-year project (2012-2015) funded by the European Commission through the Lifelong Learning Programme (Erasmus Multilateral projects). The project was driven by the notion of improving the social dimension in higher education through peer learning between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries. The "social dimension" entails looking at various stages of the education system and adopting measures which can help individuals to overcome any barriers or disincentives to access, participate in and complete higher education. The intention is that the share of people participating in higher education should reflect the diversity of the general population. This was most clearly defined for the Bologna Process in the London Communiqué of 2007, having first been expressed in the Prague Communiqué of 2001. The London Communiqué states:

> *"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. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts 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."*[1]

The PL4SD project was set up following the initiative of the 2009-2012 Bologna Social Dimension Working Group, which stressed the importance of peer learning among the stakeholders as a way of improving the social dimension across the EHEA. It was noticed that, although many measures to improve the social dimension are being realized, there is an information gap on what is really happening on a national, regional/local and institutional level. Social dimension measures are often scattered across the portfolios of different ministries and institutions with no broad, systematic overview available. EHEA Ministries responsible for higher education recognized this as a challenge and supported the efforts to develop peer learning on the social dimension, as stated in the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012:

> *"We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area."*

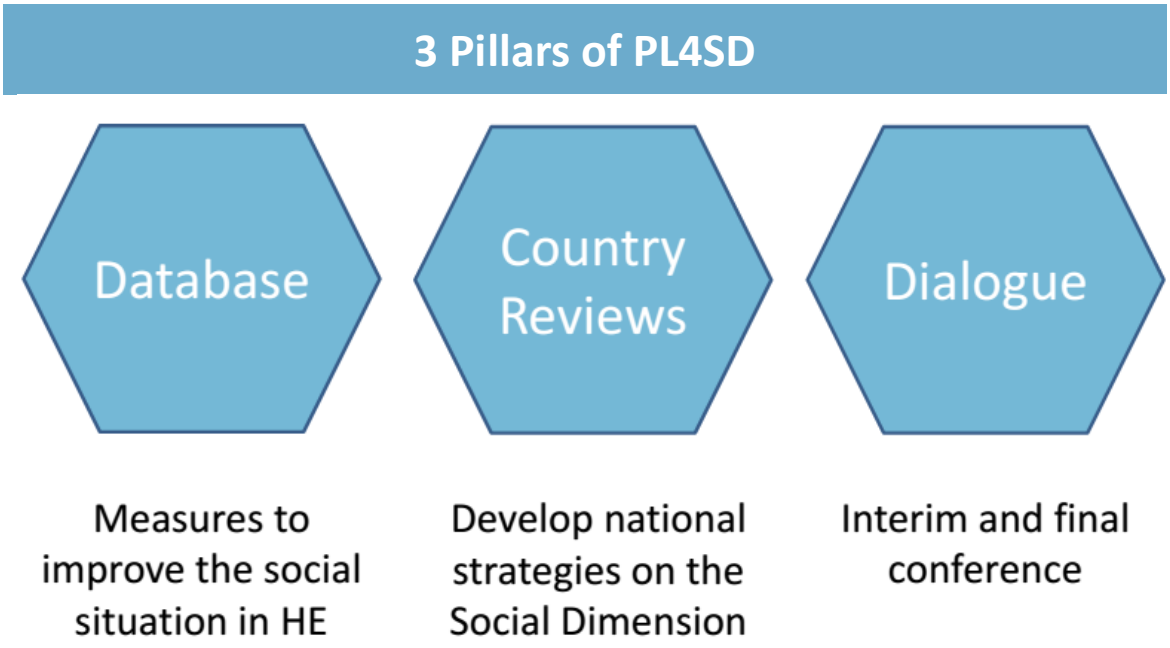
Given this recognition, PL4SD sought to bridge this information gap by systematically collecting data on measures to improve the social dimension, making this data readily accessible and initiating discussion and peer learning on the social dimension among policy-makers and practitioners.

[1] All communiqués mentioned can be accessed at: http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43.

The challenge of fostering peer learning among EHEA countries was approached in the project using three core elements:

- building up and maintaining an **online database** of measures,
- conducting **country reviews** in three selected countries and assisting them in merging their national measures and initiatives into a coherent strategy, and
- stimulating **peer learning** among EHEA stakeholders.

These three elements became the three pillars of PL4SD: **database of measures, country reviews and dialogue through conferences**.



The aim of this report is to present an overview of the achievements of the PL4SD project activities, to encourage policy-makers and stakeholders in higher education to further develop peer learning for the social dimension and to educate policy-makers and stakeholders on the various approaches for addressing the social dimension and the possibilities of peer learning. Based on the PL4SD database (www.pl4sd.eu), this report provides insight into policy measures that have been implemented across the EHEA to address the social dimension, with special attention given to innovative policy measures. As the first pillar of the project, this database is the central tool for peer learning. It provides access to more than 300 measures from 33 countries and 165 research papers and reports on various aspects of the social dimension in higher education as well as brief country profiles on the social dimension for each EHEA country. It also offers users the possibility to comment on the measures in the database and thus initiates communication between various stakeholders.

The three country reviews conducted as part of the project supplied the PL4SD team with detailed information on different national contexts and allowed us to provide general recommendations on how to develop national strategies for the social dimension. In this report, we will focus on what we have learned about the process of discussing, analysing and planning policy measures for the social dimension in different national contexts. Common challenges will be identified and potential solutions and approaches proposed.

Based on the project outcomes and their analysis, we will provide recommendations on how to use peer learning to foster the improvement of the social dimension. The two conferences held during the project formed an important part of this process. They provided the space for researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and other stakeholders to share their knowledge and ideas on how to improve the social dimension across Europe. These conferences were also used to present and discuss the PL4SD project results and to improve them based on the input provided.

Last, but not least, this report should serve as the basis for the further development of peer learning in the social dimension. We believe that there are numerous ways to improve the existing database, to learn from the existing and future country reviews and to encourage discussion and cooperation between countries, ministries, policy researchers, higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders. Following the *Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020*, which EHEA member countries committed to in the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué of 2015, we strongly support the efforts of the BFUG to continue developing and promoting peer learning as a tool for devising new and innovative policy solutions for developing the social dimension in higher education.

2 Policy measures for the social dimension in higher education: The database

One of the core elements of the Peer Learning Initiative for the Social Dimension is the PL4SD database **pl4sd.eu**. It contains:

(a) more than 300 **policy measures** aimed at improving the social dimension in higher education provided by countries and other relevant stakeholders;

(b) brief **country profiles** on the social dimension for each country in the European higher education area (EHEA);

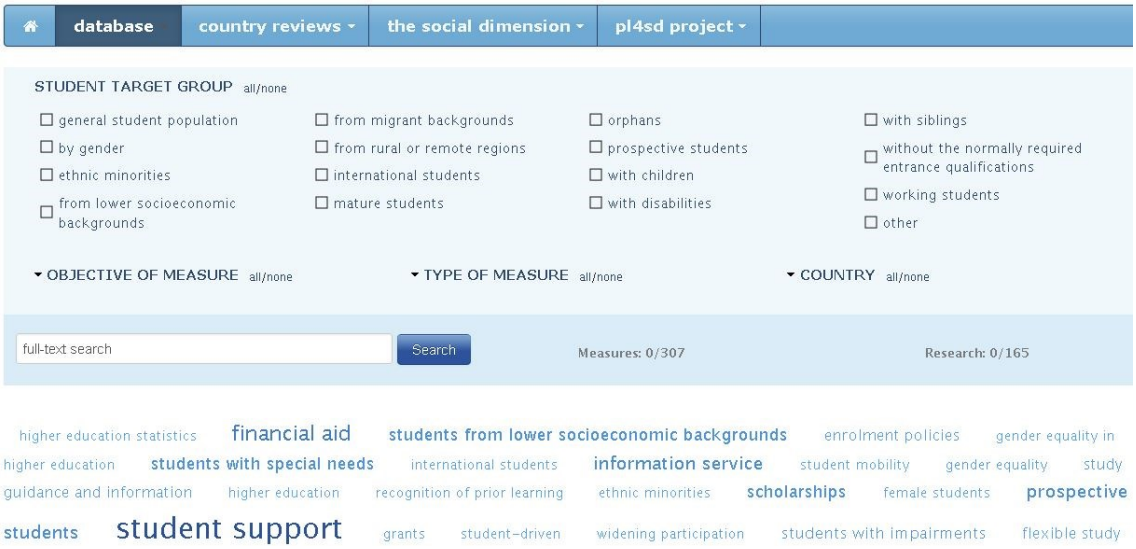
(c) a broad collection of recent **research** on the social dimension.

The database enables peer learning among stakeholders and countries in order to improve the social dimension in higher education. Decision-makers throughout Europe are thus encouraged to start initiatives, measures and strategies that foster participation, access and equity in higher education.

2.1 Development of the database

In order to provide a highly intuitive and user-friendly database structure, a great deal of effort was put into the development of the database design. This included the development of an elaborate analytical grid and a corresponding questionnaire for stakeholders in higher education. These questionnaires were used to collect information on measures or initiatives undertaken by a country, region or organisation/institution. Many **stakeholders were involved** in the development of the database structure (e.g. the Bologna Follow-up Group, BFUG) and provided us with the benefit of their expertise and experience. Both the analytical grid and the questionnaire were revised several times based on the feedback received. This process resulted in a well-structured final version of the web interface. The interface ensures optimal usage for users who know what they are looking for. In addition, it includes elements like a "word cloud" to offer inspiration to users who do not yet know exactly what they are looking for.

Figure 1: PL4SD database search tool



Source: PL4SD database, www.pl4sd.eu

The database includes the following information on each measure: description of the measure; impact; overall assessment; keywords for searching the database; and other information. In addition, each measure is classified in three categories: **(a) target group**, e.g. ethnic minorities, working students; **(b) objective of the measure**, e.g. widening access, lifelong learning; **(c) type of measure**, e.g. student financial support, enrolment policies.

In **three rounds of data collection** between 2013 and 2015, the questionnaire was completed by ministries and other stakeholders (e.g. higher education institutions or student unions). As a result, more than 300 policy measures were included in the database. As the quantity aspect was achieved, a **commenting tool** was developed and promoted in order to ensure the quality and significance of the data. All stakeholders were encouraged to comment on measures already included in the database and add information regarding their actual functioning and effectiveness.

In addition to the policy measures, the database section on **research** on the social dimension was updated regularly by the PL4SD team throughout the project based on desk research. In 2015, brief **country profiles** were also added to the database in order to provide an overview of the social dimension in each EHEA country's higher education system.

2.2 Value of the database: Who profits?

The PL4SD database contains a broad scope of policy measures aimed at improving the social dimension in higher education. Many different stakeholders, including ministries, higher education institutions and national as well as local student unions, from all over Europe contributed their experience. Hence, the collection is very diverse and includes many innovative ideas targeting participation, access and equity in higher education. Due to

its comprehensiveness and variety, the database can serve as **inspiration for all stakeholders** in the EU and beyond who are concerned with the social dimension. Anyone interested in developing measures, initiatives or strategies to foster the social dimension can extract ideas from the database and its broad content. The well-structured search tool serves anyone who is looking for ideas and experiences made by other stakeholders. The database is a solid foundation for **peer learning** among different stakeholders from different countries and with different levels of experience. In particular, higher education policy-makers, higher education institutions and student unions can profit from its content.

2.3 Content of the database

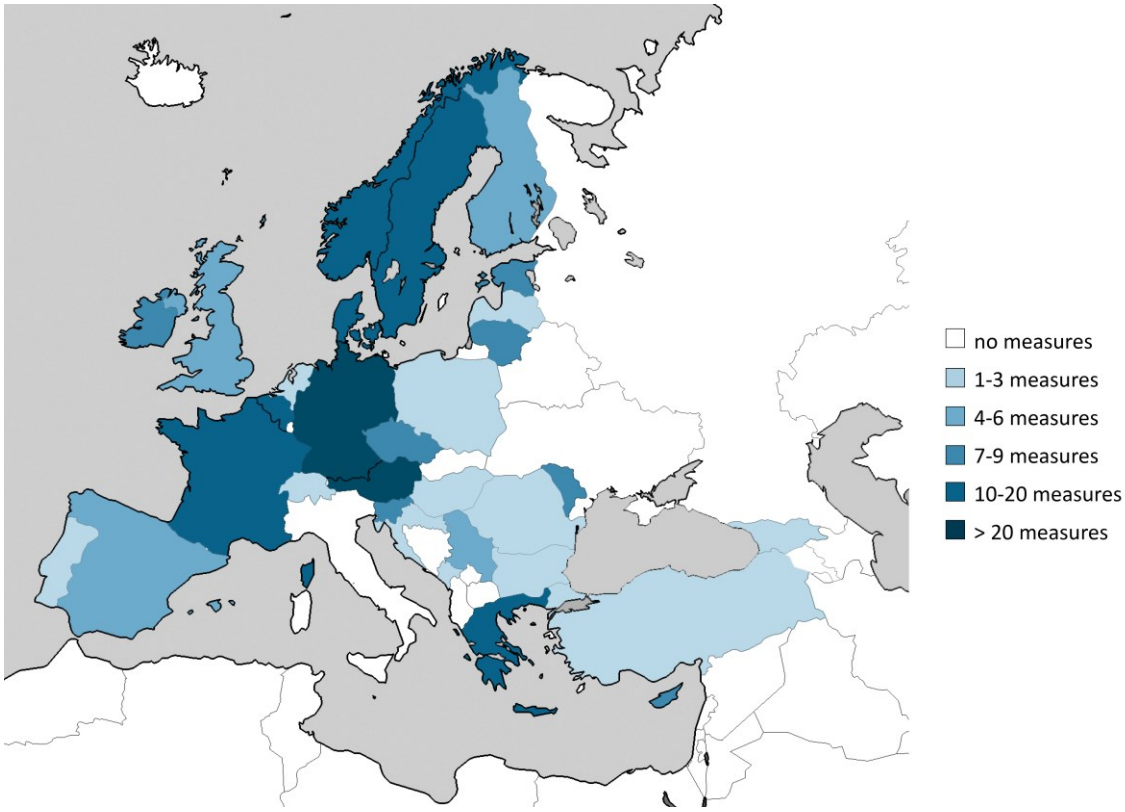
The PL4SD database provides access to a broad range of policy measures and research publications as well as a country profile for each EHEA country.

The database content in numbers	
1	database
3	main categories: objective, target group and type of the measure
8	categories of objectives
11	types of measures
16	target groups
33	participating countries
48	country profiles
165	research publications
307	policy measures

2.3.1 Policy measures

The database contains more than 300 policy measures aimed at improving the social dimension in higher education. These measures were provided by 33 countries in the EHEA. The number of measures included for each country ranges from 1 (e.g. for The Netherlands) to 87 (e.g. for Germany) measures. Countries that supplied information on more than 10 measures are: Austria (11% of all measures), Denmark (6%), France (5%), Germany (28%), Greece (4%), Norway (4%) and Sweden (6%). The map shown in Figure 2 indicates a slight trend with regard to the geographic distribution of measures, namely that more measures are provided by countries in north-west Europe. However, this does not necessarily mean that these countries pursue more extensive social dimension policies than other countries (see Chapter 2.4 for details).

Figure 2: Number of measures provided by country



Source: Own calculations, PL4SD database, www.pl4sd.eu

2.3.2 Country profiles

The policy measures in the database provide a good insight into the many social dimension initiatives across Europe. However, the composition of these measures does not reflect the social dimension policies and strategies of the EHEA member states in a comparable manner. Accordingly, a brief country profile was developed for each EHEA country in order to provide an overview of the social dimension in higher education in the entire Bologna area. These profiles provide information on overall strategies and policies regarding the social dimension, the composition of the student body, as well as tuition fees and student support in the respective country.

2.3.3 Research publications

In addition to policy measures, the PL4SD database provides a wide range of information on research publications regarding the social dimension in higher education and contains both book recommendations as well as journal articles and international reports on this topic. Altogether, it provides access to a collection of 165 research publications. Most of the research publications collected in the database address the general student population (20% of all publications), students with a lower socioeconomic background (16%), students with disabilities (12%), and students from ethnic minorities (11%).

2.4 Trends and patterns

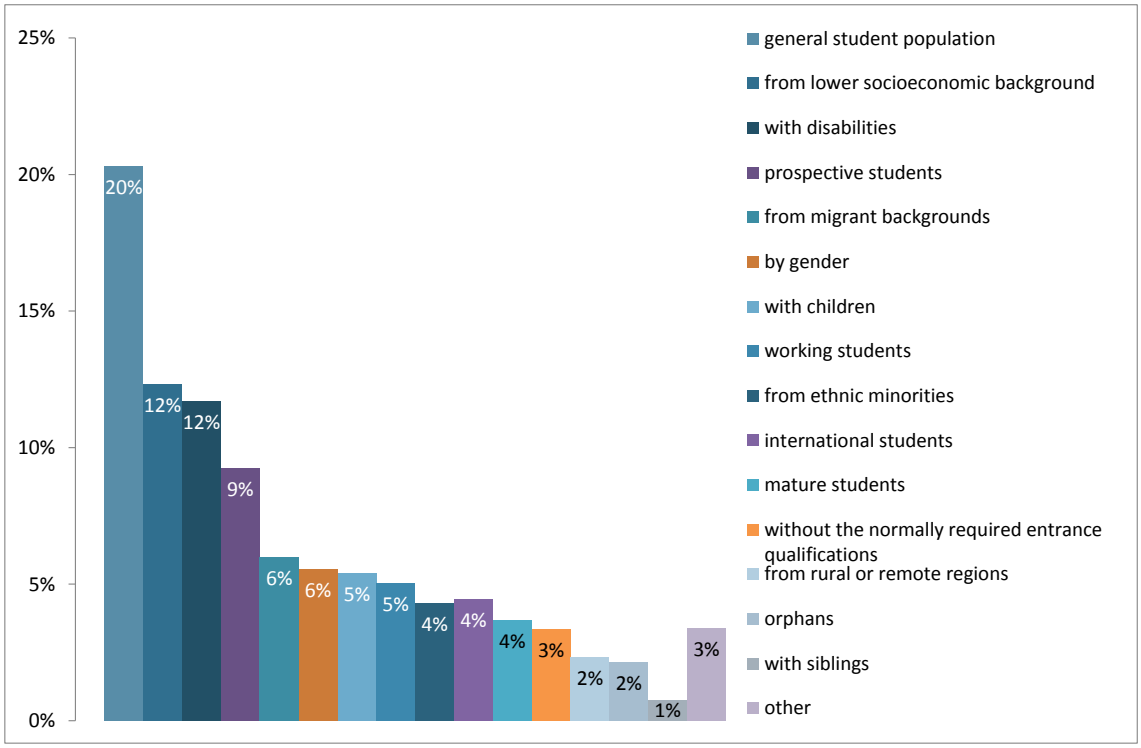
The database contains innovative ideas and should be considered as a broad collection of examples for various social dimension initiatives. However, the measures provided in the database are not necessarily representative for a country's overall social dimension policy. While numerous stakeholders and policy-makers were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire, they were under no obligation to do so. As a result, some stakeholders contributed several measures, while many provided none at all. Thus, the number of measures included for a given country does not necessarily mean that that country has extensive (in the case of a high number) or insufficient (in the case of a low number) strategies in place. In some cases, the absence of measures can also be the result of an absence of problems. Likewise, similar policy measures to those provided by some countries may also exist in others, yet not be defined there as higher education policy. As a result, such measures may not have been submitted for inclusion in the database as they were covered by other policy areas (e.g. support for orphans). In addition, the scope of the measures in the database differs widely and ranges from state scholarship programmes to student welcome days organised by local student unions. This diversity complicates the comparability of measures but has to be seen as essential strength of the database, ensuring that it serves as a fruitful tool for many stakeholders on different levels.

Hence, the composition of measures does constitute a representative reflection of a country's social dimension policy. This makes it very difficult to identify trends and patterns based on the database content. Nonetheless, a closer look at the measures provided by various countries does still reveal some interesting trends. However, as explained above, the findings have to be interpreted with caution.

2.4.1 Target groups

The measures provided in the database aim at supporting various target groups. Of the 16 target groups mentioned, most measures address the general student population (20% of all measures; 27 of 33 countries), students from a lower socio-economic background (12%; 26 of 33 countries), students with disabilities (12%; 22 of 33 countries) and prospective students (9%; 17 of 33 countries).

Figure 3: Measures by target group



Source: Own calculations, PL4SD database, www.pl4sd.eu

The database contains a fairly high number (36) of measures that target gender imbalances. However, these 36 measures all stem from only 5 countries in total, i.e. from only a very few countries. Of note here is the fact that all measures aiming at gender equality are from countries in north-west Europe, predominantly the German-speaking countries.

Students with a migrant background are another group mostly targeted through measures contributed by north-western European countries. Likewise, most measures for students without the normally required entrance qualifications also stem from north-west Europe.

Another observation regarding geographical distribution concerns measures targeting orphans and students with siblings. Both these groups are mostly targeted by measures from countries in south-east Europe.

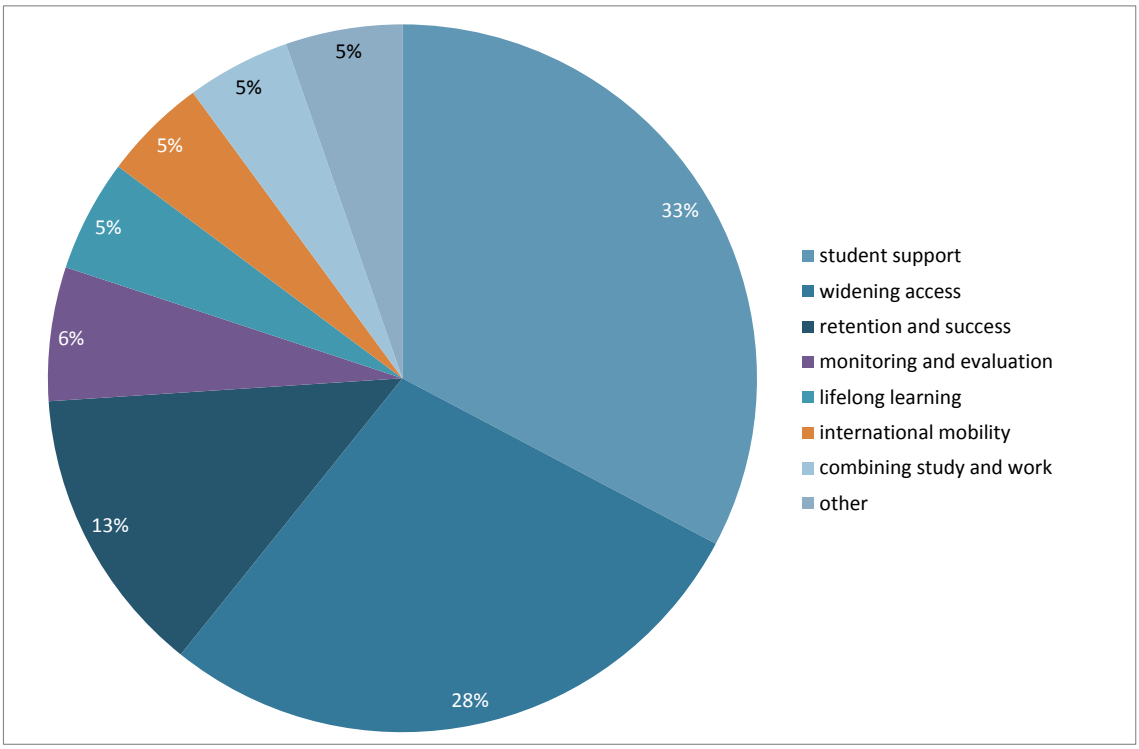
Example from Estonia: "Free studying for young parents"
Target group: students with children

The objective of this measure is to counteract demographic population decline. Furthermore, this measure gives young parents the chance to continue with their studies: universities cannot charge tuition fees to students who are taking care of a child under 7 years of age or a child with a disability.

2.4.2 Objectives of the measures

In addition to the categorisation according to target group, the measures in the database are also structured by objective. A total of 8 categories are used here. A majority of the measures aim at supporting students (33% of all measures; 32 of 33 countries) or widening access to higher education (28%; 28 of 33 countries), followed by the objective of fostering retention and success (13%; 21 of 33 countries).

Figure 4: Measures by objectives



Source: Own calculations, PL4SD database, www.pl4sd.eu

The lowest numbers of measures address the objectives "combining study and work", and "international mobility". In both cases, only 24 such measures (5% of the total number of measures) were submitted to the database.

Looking at the composition of measures by objectives, no clear patterns are noticeable regarding the geographical distribution of measures.

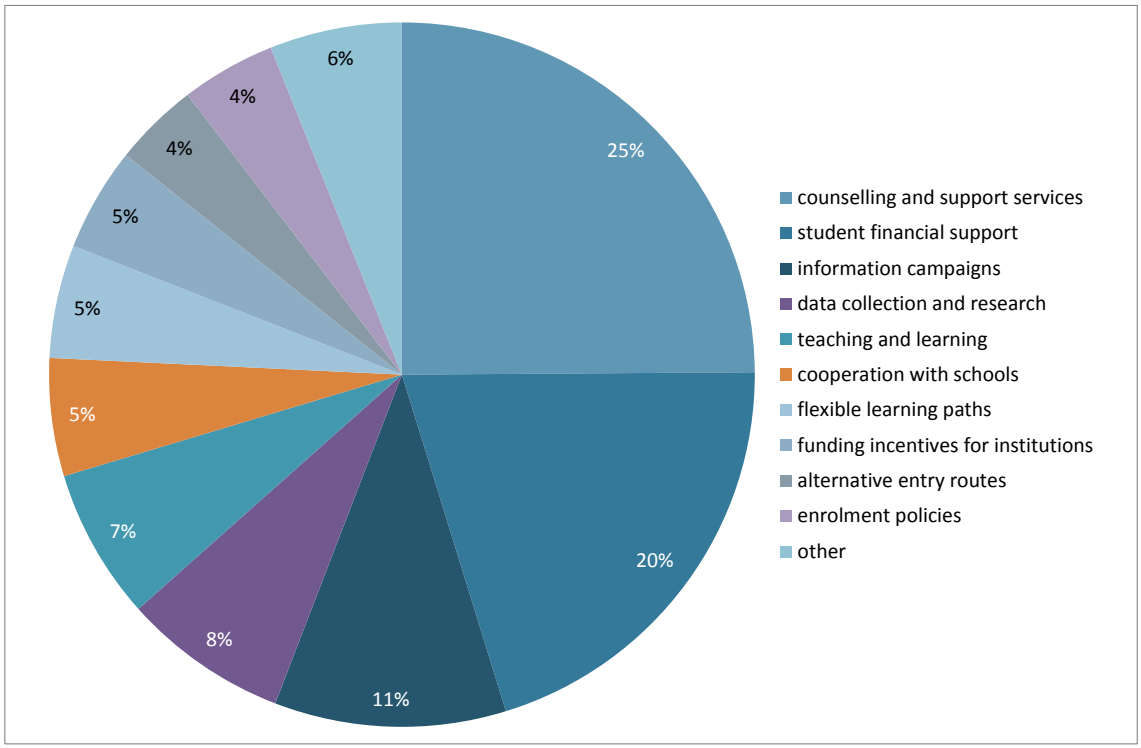
Example from UK: "The FORMULA Project"
Objective: widening access, student support

The project is training adult role models, who have previously returned to learning, to become mentors for those who have not yet taken this step. The idea is that these mentors will be role models for others from deprived areas and backgrounds to encourage them to enhance their opportunities for education and eventual employment. This should result in an uptake in education by this group and an improvement in self-esteem and confidence as they realise that they can develop useful skills and knowledge.

2.4.3 Types of measures

The database is structured into 11 types of policy measures. Most of the measures are in the area of counselling and support services (25%; 22 of 33 countries), student financial support (21%; 30 of 33 countries) and information campaigns (11%; 17 of 33 countries).

Figure 5: Measures by type



Source: Own calculations, PL4SD database, www.pl4sd.eu

Of the types of measures included in the database, the lowest number of countries (9 in total) contributed measures relating to the area of funding incentives for institutions.

A geographical distribution trend is evident with regard to measures in the teaching and learning category. Most of the 13 countries which provided teaching and learning measures (31 in total) are located in north-west Europe.

Example from Austria: "Try studying" Type: counselling and support services, information campaigns
The Austrian students' union offers prospective students the opportunity to see behind the curtain of a study programme they are interested in. Accompanied by a university student, prospective students attend a selected course at the higher education institution of their choice. Each participant can subsequently ask further questions in a personal consultation session. Although the measure primarily targets school pupils, it is also accessible to all other interested persons. "Try studying" aims at decreasing dropout rates by helping prospective students to identify their study programme of choice in the first place.

2.5 Future prospects

The PL4SD database already serves as a broad idea and knowledge pool for policy-makers, higher education practitioners and other stakeholders. It represents a basis for effective peer learning on social dimension policies throughout the EHEA. In order to strengthen the peer learning process and preserve the support for relevant stakeholders tackling national challenges, the database should be further expanded. In particular, more of the stakeholders concerned should be encouraged to comment on existing database measures, thereby enhancing the quality and significance of the data.

The PL4SD database supports stakeholders in fostering access to and participation and equity in higher education. This role should be maintained in future in order to further strengthen peer learning on the social dimension in higher education.

3 Three case studies: The country reviews

The second pillar of the PL4SD initiative are the three detailed country reviews that were carried out as a pilot study to show how countries can benefit from external expert reviews. With the help of the Bologna Secretariat, all Bologna Process member countries were invited to participate in a national expert review of the social dimension of higher education. Three countries, Armenia, Croatia and Lithuania voluntarily accepted this invitation.

The PL4SD country reviews aim at providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the reviews is to assist the analysed country in the development of a coherent and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education. When taken together, the reviews also serve to inform other EHEA countries on the challenges faced in the reviewed countries and on the measures they have implemented to enhance the social dimension of higher education. Thus, country reviews can also be seen as a tool for peer learning.

The three countries which voluntarily participated in the reviews should be seen as role models for countries which wish to look at their education system – and especially their higher education system – from the perspective of improving the social dimension of higher education. Both the project participants and the ministries involved are convinced that this type of review can lead to overall improvements in access to and delivery of higher education in the 21st century.

In coordination with the ministries responsible for higher education in the reviewed countries, the PL4SD team developed a framework for the review and agreed the terms of reference. The review process itself was split into three phases:

- (1) the preparation phase: setting up the external review team and drafting the background report;
- (2) the implementation phase: developing the schedule for the site visit and the on-site review (5 days);
- (3) the final phase: drafting and finalising the review report

Each country review was conducted by an international review team made up of four members of the PL4SD consortium and three external experts, who were selected based on their wide-ranging experience in the assessment of national higher education systems and their understanding of social dimension issues. Collectively, their knowledge and experience enables them to sympathise with and comprehend the perspectives of policy-makers, higher education institution (HEI) representatives, researchers and students. The external experts were nominated by the PL4SD consortium and mandated by the Stakeholders' Forum (made up of members of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group of the Bologna Process, 2012-2015).

3.1 The three countries

Armenia, Croatia and Lithuania, the three countries which participated in the pilot country reviews, are diverse in their social, economic, cultural and political backgrounds. Thus, the review process in each of the countries faced different contexts and different challenges. Although the framework of the review and the topics covered were the same, the reviewers had to be sensitive to and aware of the specific national circumstances that had shaped the development of the higher education systems in the countries analysed.

Table 1: Student body in the reviewed countries

	Armenia	Croatia	Lithuania
Education background – share of students with fathers without HE degree	27%	65%	57%
Mean age	21 years	23 years	24 years
Female students	55%	56%	58%
Enrolment in Bachelor/Master programmes	83% / 12%	64% / 21%	85% / 14%
Students living with parents	82%	50%	35%
Very serious or serious financial difficulties	31%	38%	40%
Employment rate during term time (students living with parents/not living with parents)	25% / 18%	45% / 43%	23% /21%

Source: EUROSTUDENT V data.

Nonetheless, all three countries have shown interest in promoting the social dimension of higher education as a component that can contribute to the development of the higher education system on the whole. The review teams were pleased with the response and support received both from the national ministries and from the other institutions and stakeholders they met and interviewed during the on-site country visits. During these visits, the review team held discussions with ministry officials, student representatives, researchers, HEI representatives and various higher education (HE) agencies in each country. Interviews were also held with NGOs and the employment service (Croatia), with the employers' union, international organisations, representatives from secondary education, members of the opposition party (Armenia), and with a special needs education organisation (Lithuania). Between 60 and 100 individuals were interviewed per country, either individually or in groups.

Prior to the country visit, a background report was prepared. This report included basic information and facts about the country, its higher education system and the social conditions of student life. After the visit, a final report, which included the review team's recommendations, was sent to the respective national ministry for comment. After a revision of all documents, the background report, the final expert report and the response of the national ministry together form the PL4SD country report. All three country reports are published on http://www.pl4sd.eu/index.php/country-reviews/reports-by-country.

3.1.1 Common challenges and recommendations

As mentioned above, the higher education systems in the reviewed countries have developed in different social, economic and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the reviews did uncover common challenges regarding the social dimension and some overarching issues, which will be discussed in this chapter.

All three review countries stem from the group of transitional countries that have been undergoing significant economic and social changes in the last two decades, These changes have also affected their higher education systems. Likewise, all three countries are members of the Bologna Process, which not only brings out similarities between reviewed countries, but also establishes a connection to other EHEA members and a basis for peer learning from the country reviews. Examples of peer learning can already be seen in the existing country reviews. For instance, guidelines for Croatian HEIs for supporting disabled students were suggested to Armenian HEIs as part of the model for creating inclusion strategies for underrepresented groups. There are also examples in the reviews of universities which are implementing measures for the inclusion of specific underrepresented groups. Other HEIs have the opportunity to learn from these practices and improve the progression of these groups in their institution.

3.1.1.1 Data collection

The systematic collection of data in higher education in general, and on the social dimension in particular, is frequently mentioned as a challenge. This varies from country to country but is the overarching issue that hinders evidence-based policy-making in some areas. For example, the lack of reliable data for Croatia is noted, specifically with regard to the amount and type of support that students receive. A lack of data was also noticed in Armenia, with an emphasis here on data relating to the social background of the students. In Lithuania, the review team recommended that priority be given to the development of IT systems that track the performance and retention of all students in higher education. In general, providing reliable data through an easily accessible centralised information system is a prerequisite for all countries in order to enhance policy-making.

3.1.1.2 Merit- vs. need-based support

The criteria for receiving public student support is another overarching issue that is also somewhat controversial. Assessing merit – the students' achievements before and during their studies – is deeply rooted in all three countries reviewed as the primary – and sometimes even sole – criteria for receiving public support, a fact that at times causes resistance towards more need-based student support. In Lithuania, for example, even the need-based support system is circumscribed by performance criteria requirements for retention of a grant. The situation is similar in Armenia, where the merit criteria mean that most of the student support is awarded to students who could have afforded to go to university even without this support. In Croatia, due to the small number of grants available, merit criteria prevail even if it is combined with the need criteria (although it is worth noting that there is a shift here towards a need-based system of national student support).

It is important to point out that reviewers are not against assessing and rewarding the academic achievements of students. Such incentives are important for supporting high quality education. On the other hand, providing direct financial support to those groups of students who cannot afford the costs of higher education is of utmost importance for improving social inclusion and the social dimension of higher education and, therefore, should be assigned priority.

3.1.1.3 Inequalities in pre-tertiary education

It is not surprising that one of the common challenges lies in dealing with inequalities in higher education before people get to that stage in their academic career. Socio-economic disadvantages are created much earlier, not only in the countries reviewed. Pre-tertiary education is therefore mentioned in the recommendations for improvement in all of the reviews. Favouring merit over social criteria is also an issue here because access to higher education is, in most cases, granted on the basis of prior school achievements. This is especially applicable in the case of access to state-funded higher education.

In Armenia, one major problem is that private tutoring has become the rule for more affluent pupils and is no longer just an exception for those with problems in learning. Private tutoring is thus a major obstacle to ensuring that all pupils have an equal chance of access to higher education, and more needs to be invested in the country's high schools to better prepare pupils for the national tests. This issue is less dramatic in Croatia and Lithuania, but socio-economic differences that determine success at secondary school success and entrance to higher education are also easily detectable in these two countries. Differences in the quality of education between schools in different regions (i.e. rural vs. urban areas) are visible in both countries as well as stratification through different secondary education tracks with different education outcomes (e.g. vocational vs. general education schools in Croatia).

Recommendations for tackling these challenges can be grouped into two approaches. The first such approach is to invest more in the quality of pre-tertiary education, placing a special focus on equity and intervention strategies to reduce the gap in performance between underrepresented and privileged groups. The second is to ensure that there are more alternative routes for access to higher education for disadvantaged groups and for pupils graduating from vocational schools. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

3.1.1.4 Alternative entry routes to higher education

The lack of alternative routes for entry into higher education is a frequently mentioned issue. In Armenia, for instance, there is a complete lack of alternative routes for those pupils who do not do well in the central examination. In Croatia, although the recently introduced State Matura provides at least formal equality, it also creates barriers for those who finished secondary education before it was introduced. Educational pathways (school) and family socio-economic background also affect qualification results. The development of alternative entry routes could help to tackle these issues. This recommendation is also valid for Lithuania, where alternative entry routes could be used as an incentive for

underrepresented groups. Second chance and alternative entry routes can be considered as a response to the socio-economic barriers that result in lower achievements in primary and secondary education and which, in turn, prevent access to higher education.

3.1.1.5 Social situation of students

Basic data on the student body in the reviewed countries (Table 1) shows that all three have a high ratio of students with very serious or serious financial difficulties (Armenia 31%, Croatia 38% and Lithuania 40%.) While this reflects the general economic situation in these countries, it also has implications for higher education policies, especially in the area of student support. One recommendation is for all three countries to improve the support provided to students both in terms of the award criteria (see above) and in terms of amounts awarded. The funding of higher education is likewise a challenge in all countries where balancing between increase in fees and public funding of HEIs is a sensitive topic. In general, more public funding for the higher education system would be welcomed. The introduction of target-based funding of HEIs, e.g. for improving the social dimension through student support and other measures, might be part of the solution. Such programmes could channel public funds and, at the same time, increase the interest in the social dimension on the part of the HEIs.

3.1.1.6 National targets for underrepresented groups

Defining national underrepresented groups is the first step in creating strategies for inclusion and tackling inequalities. All of the reviewed countries have identified these groups and included them in their strategy documents and legislation. What is lacking is the next step: setting clear national targets and benchmarks to be achieved in defined time periods. Both Lithuania and Armenia were encouraged by the review team to set these targets as a clear indication of direction in the development and implementation of new policies. This type of benchmarking is necessary for creating and evaluating policy measures.

3.1.1.7 Division between vocational and academic education paths

One common trait of the reviewed countries is the lack of flexibility in changing education paths, specifically with regard to permeability between vocational education and academic higher education. Differentiation between general education and vocational schools at secondary level generates different opportunities for continuing higher education. In Croatia, the State Matura favours general education, and studying at vocational higher education institutions is financially more strenuous. In Armenia, only 10% of the student intake at HEIs can come from vocational colleges. In Lithuania, the reviewers also noted that there is little opportunity for students to change from the vocational to the academic education path. Accordingly, recognising the importance and value of vocational education for the local economy is important for the development of this form of education. Likewise, the countries reviewed should develop alternative routes for entry into academic higher education. This would not only provide additional opportunities for entry into higher education for students who underachieve for socio-economic reasons, it would also

strengthen the lifelong learning process which, given the demographic trends (especially in Lithuania), will be of great importance for the sustainability of higher education.

3.1.2 Country specifics

Although the reviews identified major common challenges and issues which can be approached with similar solutions, each country also has its own specifics. Even when we talk about similarities between countries, we must bear in mind that the context in which the common challenges take shape are different. The three reviews made recommendations for each country on what to do to improve their higher education system, and the common points identified have been described above. Based on these recommendations, common strategic approaches can be adopted. However, the actual national strategies, actions plans and policy measures deployed will ultimately depend on the specifics of the situation in each individual country.

Each of the countries reviewed faces its own challenges and was also provided with specific recommendations that only apply to that country. In the following sections, we will sketch out these specifics. However, since the ultimate aim of this report is to describe the results of the PL4SD project as a whole, the details of each national context have been kept deliberately brief. For those who are interested, the country reviews and country background reports are available on the PL4SD website.

3.1.2.1 Armenia

The Armenian higher education system is characterised by high costs of studying. Tuition fee rates for the majority of students lie between 350 and 700 euros per semester, and only around 22% of all student places are non-fee-paying. Expenditure on student support is low, and most grants are awarded on the basis of merit. Nonetheless, education is very important in Armenia from a cultural perspective, and the participation rate (37% in 2011) is high despite the financial constraints. HE is generally underfunded (only 20% of the income of public universities comes from state support), and the Armenian diaspora plays a crucial role in financing study costs. There are national policies in place that are aimed at reducing inequalities (income-based criteria) with the goal of increasing the participation of underrepresented groups. These are still in the early stages of development, and it is recommended that Armenia continues its policy improvements through Erasmus+ and Tempus projects in order to improve data gathering, develop a less fragmented student support system, increase the sustainability of the HE funding system and develop an integrated strategy to decrease demand of private tutoring in high schools.

The list below details the specific recommendations made by the review team and which were not mentioned in the previous section. The review team recommended Armenia to:

- collect data in anticipation of key policy questions using existing data collection practices and surveys to collect additional data;
- develop a less fragmented student support system based on identified needs rather than on demonstrated ability;

- include indirect support for accommodation, transport, counselling and other student services in the student support system;
- recognise the sustainability and effectiveness of the higher education funding system from the perspective of the HEIs and the students;
- cultivate cultural understanding and positive recognition of differences in terms of gender, identity (sexual, political and religious) and belonging (socio-economic background) in order to improve the social dimension of student life.

3.1.2.2 Croatia

In Croatia, there is a new "linear" tuition fee model in place. In this model, the fee amount is dependent on study progress. All first-year full-time students are exempt from fees. In general, expenditure on student support is low (12% of total HE expenditure), and the greater part of this expenditure is invested in indirect financial support. Underrepresented groups in HE in Croatia include students with a lower socio-economic status (SES) and mature students, while students following professional/vocational courses face more adverse study conditions. The differentiation between general and vocational schools generates different opportunities for moving on to higher education. The country review indicated that a lack of transparency with regard to the financial support system and the provision of merit-based rather than need-based support put students with a lower SES at a disadvantage. It was recommended that Croatia create a more unified system of data collection and that it shift from indirect to direct financial support and from merit-based to need-based financial support. It was also recommended that the country review the State Matura examination and the effects of the pre-tertiary education on inequalities in HE.

The list below details the specific recommendations made by the review team and which were not mentioned in the previous section. The review team recommended Croatia to:

- create a more unified system of data collection;
- conduct frequent small-scale research to uncover whether the intended effects of broad national strategies are really occurring or if unintended effects are emerging;
- develop partnerships and peer learning between university centres with developed student support services and local and vocational HEIs which do not have such support systems in place;
- provide greater and timely direct financial support through state scholarships;
- recognise and support the key role which universities of applied sciences and regional HEIs play for the social dimension;
- review the impacts of the State Matura examination;
- continue to reform student support from an indirect to a direct support system;
- see the social dimension as an evaluative framework of the overall performance of Croatian higher education.

3.1.2.3 Lithuania

The Lithuanian education system is highly stratified and merit based, starting with secondary education and continuing in HE. Although the system is transparent and fair in

terms of merit, it is questionable whether it offers equal opportunities. The review team recommended that Lithuania re-examine the merit-only based system of state funding and that it include the social dimension in its HE policies (including targeted funding, reserved places at HEI's for certain target groups and alternative access routes). The cost of studying is among the highest in Europe, while income levels are amongst the lowest. Tuition fees are determined by the HEIs and range from 1000 to 5,300 euros per year. 56% of university students had to pay tuition fees in 2012.

The list below details the specific recommendations made by the review team and which were not mentioned in the previous section. The review team recommended Lithuania to:

- include all stakeholders in the discussions on the social dimension and its national policy objectives;
- introduce targeted funding to improve access of underrepresented groups by offering reserved places and/or alternative entry routes;
- offer financial incentives for HEIs to develop innovative support programmes to boost the performance and retention of disadvantaged students;
- use alternative entry routes to tackle the issue of the declining student base;
- broaden the understanding of the underrepresented groups and develop proactive strategies at institutional level.

3.1.3 Country responses to reviews

In the period after the country reviews, the three countries had the possibility to act upon the recommendations, i.e. to reject or to try to implement some (or all) of them. At the final project conference in February 2015 in Vienna, representatives of the national ministries responsible for the higher education in the review countries had the opportunity to discuss the findings of the reviews and provide feedback on their current policy activities. In general, their feedback was positive. Both the representatives of the ministries and the members of the review teams voiced their satisfaction with the review process and the good mutual cooperation. Many of the findings of the reviews had already been taken seriously, and policy measures developed to apply the recommendations.

In Armenia, the social dimension in higher education is regarded as a policy priority, and the PL4SD report was a part of the country's efforts to improve it. The ministry accepted the recommendations made by the review team and had indeed already realised some of them: a tertiary education information system has been launched and will be made publicly available, an assessment of the social needs of students had been conducted in 2014, Armenia intends to continue participating in the EUROSTUDNET survey, and a revision of secondary school curricula (financed by the World Bank) will be implemented in the period from 2015-2019. Strong attention will be given to the social dimension within the "*National Strategy for Education Development 2016-2025*".

In Croatia, the findings from the PL4SD review will be useful for the future and it was noted that they were in line with the national "Strategy for Education, Science and Technology". It was stressed that the social dimension is seen as an important evaluative

tool of the overall performance of Croatian HEIs. The implementation of several projects funded through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and aiming at the social dimension is currently underway. In addition, the social dimension is being strengthened through pilot schemes for funding HEIs through programme agreements. Croatia also plans to continue to participate in the EUROSTUDENT survey. The country's new national grant scheme is based on need not merit, while grants based on achievements are awarded by the HEIs themselves. Perhaps the most important joint impact of both the PL4SD country review and the EUROSTUDENT survey was the recognition of the social dimension as an important policy topic. This has led to the forming of the *National working group for the enhancing of the social dimension in higher education*, which will play important role in monitoring and developing the social dimension in Croatian higher education in the future.

In the response from Lithuania, it was stated that although the merit-based system is functional to a point and hard to change, widening the participation of socially excluded groups is stipulated in the country's law on HE and support for underrepresented groups and is delivered in accordance with national social policy through a number of national and regional institutions. The PL4SD project provided a useful external review that was needed to improve the understanding of the social dimension issues and is considered a good starting point for further developments (e.g. a strategy with goals on the social dimension is planned by the end of the 2015).

3.2 Lessons Learned from the country reviews

The country reviews were not intended to be read as reviews of the accomplishments of the individual countries, but as general insights into different contexts that can stimulate and inspire policies and measures directed towards the social dimension in higher education. Accordingly, there is as much to learn from the process of conducting the reviews as there is from their content.

A lot of recommendations referred to changes or policies that the ministries intended to do anyway. It is important to find a way to communicate this point to all of the stakeholders and to include them in the policy-making process. Many measures that affect the social dimension of higher education are scattered across different ministries or ministerial sectors and sometimes go unnoticed or are not consistently planned. There is a lack of common understanding of what constitutes the social dimension, and better communication among the stakeholders is one way to remedy that.

Preparing the country background report was a valuable exercise and provided the review team with insights not only on the national social and economic contexts, but also on the state of the country's higher education in general and the social dimension in particular. Thus, the review teams observed that if national groups were the ones who were to prepare such background reports in future, they would be more aware of the issues present. Including major national stakeholders, especially the government and HEI representatives, in the preparation of the background report might have positive effects on raising awareness of the importance of the social dimension.

One major lesson learned from the country reviews that could be beneficial for all EHEA countries is that there are many similarities between countries, even among those that are very different in their social, economic, political and cultural aspects. Examples of good practice could be found in each of the reviewed countries along with ways of implementing and adjusting these practices in other contexts.

Additionally, a country review has at least limited effects on the country's dedication to improving the social dimension. It seems that participating in the review process and collaborating with the review team raises awareness of the issues and inspires both learning and further efforts to bring about change through new policies. Of course, these remarks must be taken with caution because more time needs to pass before we can actually evaluate the real and long-term effects of the reviews.

4 Peer learning in practice: The conferences

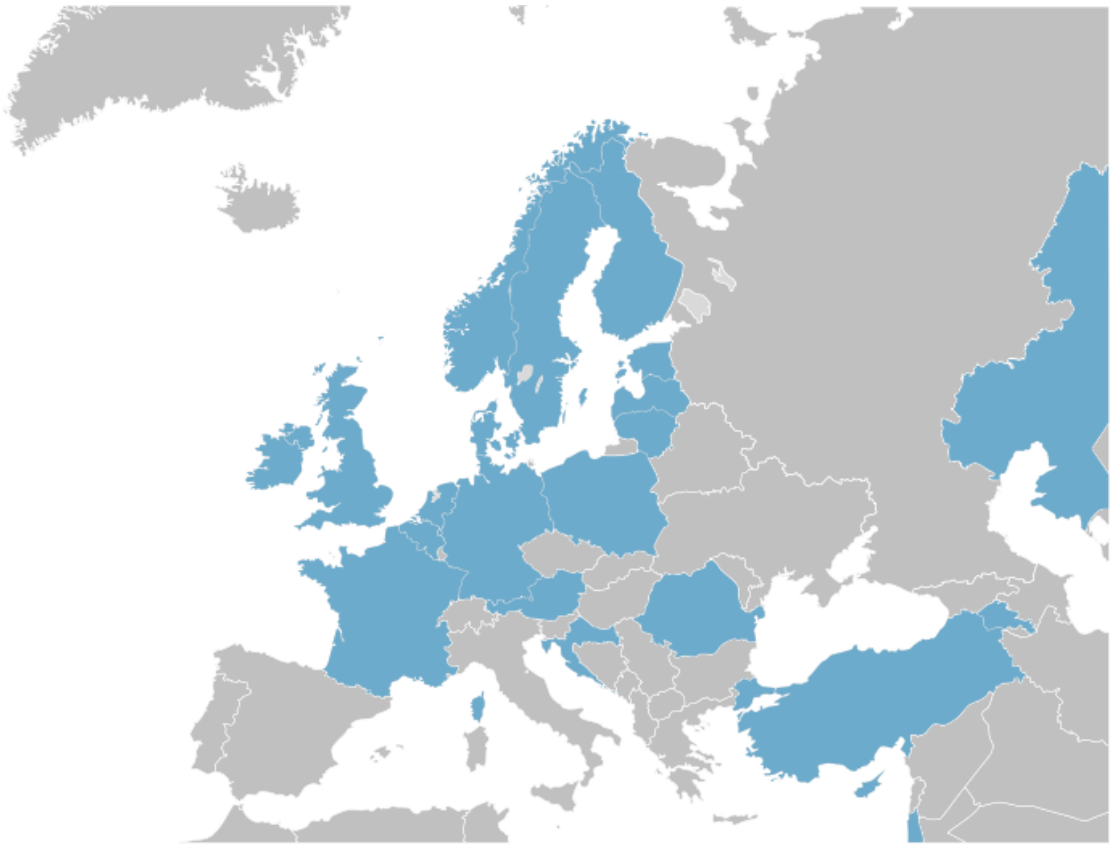
An important part of the PL4SD project were the conferences held in Vienna during the project. Referring to these as the "third pillar" of PL4SD is not an exaggeration: they were a true platform for peer learning in practice between the various stakeholders. Researchers, practitioners and representatives of students, ministries and higher education institutions all shared their views on various aspects of the social dimension in higher education at these conferences. These different perspectives were beneficial in two ways. First, they steered the further development of the project, giving valuable feedback on the activities that were being carried out. Second, they provided the participants with an opportunity to hear about the various initiatives and measures for social dimension that have been implemented or are planned for implementation in the near future in different EHEA countries. The sharing of such information and practices is crucial for stimulating policy changes in different settings and offers the participants an opportunity to learn from each other's experiences (both positive and negative).

4.1 PL4SD Conference on Peer Learning on the Social Dimension in the EHEA

A two-day conference on peer learning on the social dimension in the EHEA was held in Vienna in April 2014 and brought together nearly 70 representatives of ministries, stakeholder organisations, researchers, students, and practitioners. The conference was designed as a platform for peer learning and networking, exchange of experiences and learning from other countries on how to improve the social dimension of students in the EHEA. It was targeted primarily at representatives of the ministries responsible for higher education in EHEA countries as well as at stakeholder organisations and higher education institutions. Since it took place immediately prior to the BFUG meeting on the social dimension in Vienna, almost all participants at the BFUG also attended the PL4SD conference as well.

The conference was attended by a very international audience, with participants coming from 23 countries in the EHEA as well as several European-level institutions (e.g. EURASHE, ESU).

Figure 6: EHEA countries represented at the PL4SD conference 2014



Source: commons.wikimedia.org. Countries represented: Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom.

At the conference the PL4SD database was officially launched and presented to the participants, who had the chance to explore the database and provide feedback on it. This enabled the PL4SD team to further improve the functionality and usability of the database. At the time of the conference, the database contained 230 measures from 25 different countries.

The conference focussed on four different topics, each representing an area in which measures for the social dimension are undertaken in many countries. The four conference topics were as follows:

- Access to higher education for underrepresented groups
- Ways of improving the situation of students with disabilities
- Counselling and guidance for prospective students
- Policies and action plans towards enhancing the social dimension

These topics were derived from a variety of measures that had been reported and incorporated into the database in the first round of data collection in 2013. The first criterion used in the selection of measures to be presented at the conference was geographic variety. The second – and more important – selection criterion was to present examples that were in some way outstanding in terms of creativity in tackling difficulties or cooperation between different bodies, institutions or levels of administration.

The conference was a great success and clearly fulfilled its goal of encouraging peer learning, knowledge exchange and networking. The feedback from and vivid discussions with many participants confirms this success. Hence, the essential goals of the project could be realised in a discursive setting in which awareness of the added value of the PL4SD project could also be raised.

The conference is documented on the PL4SD website.

4.2 The Social Dimension in European Higher Education – Joint Conference of PL4SD and EUROSTUDENT

The second conference was also the final conference of the PL4SD project and was held in April 2015 in Vienna. For this occasion, PL4SD joined forces with the EUROSTUDENT network. This meant that the conference attracted additional participants who were interested in the topic of the social dimension. Also, many results and analyses of EUROSTUDENT data were presented at the conference alongside other policy and research papers. More than 200 policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders from all over Europe participated and actively contributed to a peer learning process on the social dimension. A strong focus was placed at the conference on networking and the exchange of knowledge and experiences on the social dimension in higher education.

Within the framework of the conference, EUROSTUDENT V and PL4SD results were presented as well as a broad range of recent research on the social dimension. Reports from the conference sessions are available at www.pl4sd.eu.

The conference topics were organised around nine thematic tracks:

- Towards a national strategy
- Access
- Special student groups
- Mobility
- Student support & funding
- Study and work
- Expectations and student assessments
- Retention & success
- The EUROSTUDENT network

The second conference also provided an opportunity to present the country reviews that had been carried out as part of the PL4SD project. In the thematic track "Towards a national strategy", the country reviews for Armenia, Croatia and Lithuania were presented and discussed. Members of the review team, both external experts and PL4SD project team members, presented the findings, while representatives of the national ministries in charge of higher education in the respective countries gave presentations on the review process from their perspective. This provided a good opportunity to demonstrate first-hand what impact the reviews had had on the national policy-makers and which measures had been accepted and implemented. Supplemented by comments from and a lively discussion with other participants, including countries interested in participating in a review themselves, this was again an excellent peer learning experience for everyone involved.

A comprehensive conference report including all presentation files is available on the project website.

5 Contribution of PL4SD to the social dimension in the EHEA

This chapter provides a brief overview of the development of the social dimension in the European Higher Education Area and the impact PL4SD has had on these developments. It also examines future prospects in this policy field both on the international and national level and concludes with the lessons learned from the PL4SD project.

5.1 Development of the social dimension in the EHEA

The concept of the "social dimension" formally appeared for the first time in the Bologna Process in the Prague Communiqué of 2001, where it was referred to as the need *"to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process"* (EHEA 2001, for a good overview of the history of the social dimension in the EHEA see also F. Kaiser et al. 2015). In the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the social dimension and lamented the lack of comparable data. They did so again in the Bergen Communiqué of 2005, in which they also called for comparable data from the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) for the next stocktaking report due in 2007. The BFUG set up a working group in order to define the social dimension, present comparable data and prepare proposals as a basis for future stocktaking (EHEA, Government Office of Sweden 2007). This first social dimension working group presented a report to the 2007 Ministerial Summit in London, which included proposals for general measures to enhance the widening of access, equal participation and completion in the higher education systems of the Bologna process. The concept of the social dimension and the demand for national action plans, both proposed by the working group, were mentioned in the London Communiqué (2007):

> *"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. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts 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. (…) [W]e will report on our national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness. We will invite all stakeholders to participate in, and support this work, at the national level." (EHEA 2007)*

This broad view of the social dimension has been used since that point as the definition of the social dimension within the Bologna Process. The 2010 Budapest-Vienna ministerial conference served primarily to launch the EHEA, and its communiqué provided a short stocktake of achievements within the Bologna process. The social dimension was listed as a key element of the process, but no further developments were described. The Bucharest Communiqué of 2012 reaffirmed again: *"The student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We will step up our efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and*

provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning." However, it also continued with a new recommendation: *"We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area."* (EHEA 2012) On the basis of this recommendation (and the previous work carried out by the 2010-12 working group for the social dimension), the PL4SD project proposal was submitted to and ultimately funded by the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme.

Table 2: Timeline for the development of the social dimension in the EHEA

	2001	2003	2005	2007
Document	Student Gothenburg Declaration and Prague Communiqué	Berlin Communiqué	Bergen Communiqué	London Communiqué
Results	Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process	Need for more comparable data mentioned	Working group on social dimension and data on mobility of staff and students formed	Definition of SD Requirement for national action plans on SD

	2009	2012a	2012b	2015
Document	Leuven Communiqué	Bucharest Communiqué	Start of the PL4SD project funded by the European Commission	Yerevan Communiqué
Results	Countries urged to set measurable targets for widening participation of underrepresented groups in HE Working group on social dimension was formed	Introduction of voluntary peer learning in the social dimension		Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020

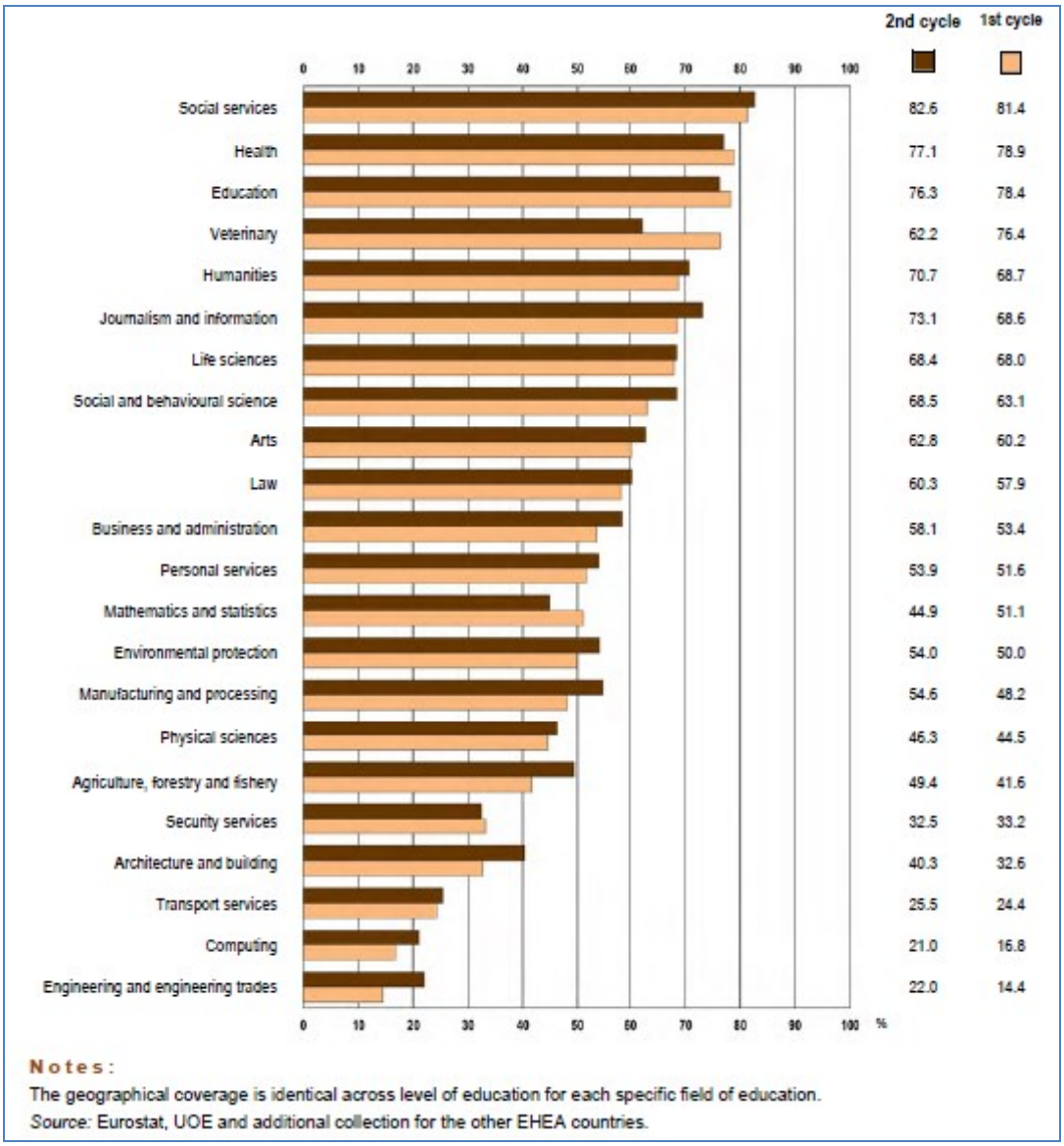
In general, it has to be noted that little progress has been made in concrete international policy terms since the first mention of the social dimension in the 2001 Communiqué. Ireland published a first national access plan for the years 2005-2007, i.e. before the report of the first social dimension working group recommended such plans, provided guidelines on how to develop such a plan and listed examples of the kinds of measures that could be included in such a plan. No other EHEA country has yet published a formal action plan on equal access (and completion) or a national strategy on the social dimension in higher education. However, a few countries have enhanced their measures relating to fair access, gender equality and access for students with disabilities or from ethnic minorities in different ways, notably the UK, Finland, Estonia, Romania and Croatia (Eurydice 2015).

5.2 Defining the social dimension and underrepresented groups: A challenge

Observers like Westerheijden (2010), Holford 2014, Riddell and Weedon (2014), and Kaiser et al. (2015) claim that the lack of concrete indicators or measurable and internationally comparable targets is one reason for the mere rhetoric rather than active engagement of countries and policy-makers towards the social dimension. However, the number of countries participating in the EUROSTUDENT surveys has increased significantly over the last ten years, and the information available in the EUROSTUDENT database now covers more potentially underrepresented groups and is far more differentiated with regard to the heterogeneous student population in the EHEA (see www.eurostudent.eu). Also, the Bologna implementation report (Eurydice 2015) provides more administrative data and data from BFUG surveys regarding policy implementation in the Bologna member states than was available 15 years ago. Hence, data collection has greatly improved, but has not yet done so to an adequate extent.

The social dimension as such is too complex, student populations differ too broadly between countries, and underrepresented groups are too diverse to set quantitative targets for the whole EHEA – this seems, at least, to be the common opinion within the "Bologna community". Yet countries across the entire EHEA face similar challenges at least in some areas of the social dimension. For example, there is a gender imbalance in the student populations of nearly all countries (mostly in favour of female students), and administrative data to monitor this trend is available. The gender imbalance is even broader in some fields of study – and there is again no lack of data here – as documented by the Bologna Implementation Report 2015, which also differentiates between the 1st and 2nd cycles (see Figure 7):

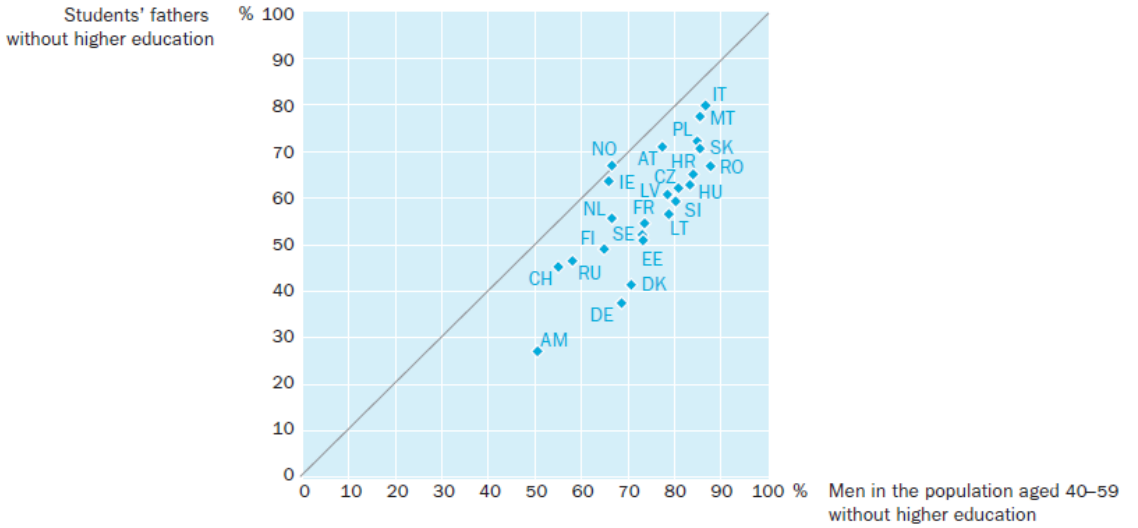
Figure 7: Median share of women among enrolled students in Bologna structures by field of education and level of Bologna structure (first and second cycles), 2011/12



Source: Eurydice 2015.

Another example of a challenge facing nearly all EHEA countries is the fact that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented in the student population (see Figure 8). While the actual level of underrepresentation might only be known for those countries which participate in EUROSTUDENT or similar surveys, there is data available for all EU Member States and some other countries on the level of educational attainment by educational background. This data at least shows whether students from lower socio-economic background might be underrepresented (a trend that is indeed visible in all countries on which data is available, see EURYDICE 2015, p 115).

Figure 8: Representation of students without a higher education background (based on fathers' educational attainment)



Data source: *Educational attainment of students' fathers: EUROSTUDENT V, D.2. Educational attainment of men aged 40–59 in the population: AT, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, RO, SE, SI, SK: Labour Force Survey in the respective survey year. AM: Caucasus Barometer 2013. RU: National Census of Russia 2010.* ***No population data:*** *BA, GE, ME, RS, UA.*
EUROSTUDENT question(s): *6.1 What is the highest level of education your father and mother have obtained?*[indicated separately]
Notes: *The graph compares the share of students' fathers who have not attained higher education with the corresponding share of 40–59 year-old men in the national population (AM, RU: 40–60 year-olds). Shares of equal size result in a position on the diagonal (index value = 1). An index value of 1 indicates that there are exactly as many students from non-HE backgrounds as would be expected based on the distribution of educational attainment in the population. Values over 1 indicate overrepresentation of this group and lie above the diagonal, values below 1 and below the diagonal indicate underrepresentation.*
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *DE, GE, IT.*

Source: EUROSTUDENT 2015.

For other groups of potentially underrepresented students, such as students with disabilities, students from a migrant background, students from ethnic minorities, or students from rural areas, the situation can be more complex, not least because no common definition exists for certain groups. Accordingly, it is difficult to set unified policy objectives and quantitative targets for the entire EHEA for these areas of the social dimension. Nonetheless, most people would agree that parental background and gender are two of the fundamental aspects that need to be looked at when it comes to implementing measures to improve the social dimension of students – as called for in the various ministerial Communiqués of the Bologna process. Lack of data is certainly not a barrier in these areas.

5.3 Future prospects: Developing coherent national social dimension polices

The existence of sufficient data on the social dimension is an important first step, but not the only prerequisite for developing successful social dimension policies. We also have to ensure that the different relevant stakeholders are included in the process of creating and implementing such policies. The social dimension in higher education is not only an issue for ministers responsible for higher education. Instead, it involves many policy areas, including, in particular, (pre-)primary, secondary and also adult education policy as well as social policy, labour market policy, family, youth and gender policy, and so on. Any policy to improve the social dimension of students must therefore by default take other (national/regional/local) policies into account. The first Bologna social dimension working group already took this into account in 2007, as did the EHEA ministers through the London Communiqué. On an international level, the EHEA member states have already agreed on common, very broadly defined goals, as illustrated by the statement in the London Communiqué that *"the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations."* (EHEA 2007). However, in a second step, countries must be encouraged to analyse their student population on a national level (and, moreover, to examine who is not participating in higher education), to identify underrepresented groups, to set concrete quantitative targets and to develop measures to overcome such underrepresentation. Such a process should involve all stakeholders (including representatives of different policy areas, in particular school level education) and could be designated as a national action plan or strategy or the like.

The PL4SD project went a step further: It started from the assumption (based on the stocktaking reports of the Bologna process) that every country has already implemented measures to improve the social dimension of its students. Such measures include national policies (like grants and loans or student support systems like dormitories and canteens) and legislative acts. But they also include measures initiated (and operated) by individual higher education institutions, student associations or other stakeholder groups. Moreover, not all these measures are costly; some may even be based on voluntary work, thereby counteracting the frequently voiced fear (or excuse?) from policy-makers that the social dimension is a very expensive field. While it is highly unlikely that one person or body will be aware of all the measures that are in place in a given country, it is very likely that many students, higher education institutions and policy-makers across the EHEA could profit greatly from learning about the experiences made with these measures – hence the need for Peer Learning for the Social Dimension (PL4SD).

The collection of measures for the PL4SD database enabled such an exchange of experiences, and the PL4SD conferences stimulated even more learning between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. However, the PL4SD (pilot) country reviews followed a different approach: they didn't focus in the first instance on international learning (with the exception of the experience of the international experts), but on learning and exchange on a national level. The mere fact that the PL4SD project asked so many different stakeholders to participate in interviews about the social dimension caused many

institutions and organisations to realise for the first time that they could be a stakeholder in this process and that they can contribute something valuable to the improvement of the social dimension in higher education. This proved to be the case, for example, with labour market agencies or organisations responsible for quality assurance or recognition in higher education. While the policy-makers were indeed aware beforehand of several of the issues raised by the country reviews, these issues were usually approached individually (if at all) and were not considered in a coherent manner and with the involvement of all the stakeholders that could improve the process. Moreover, there is (unavoidably?) a lack of knowledge and understanding not only between the policy and the institutional levels but also between the policy/institutional levels and students.

This, in essence, is the reason why the *process* of developing a national approach is so important and why starting such a process already constitutes a big step towards improving the social dimension. Such a process should in fact also be repeated on a regional, local or institutional level: while there are clearly nationwide issues that must be addressed with a coherent policy for the whole country, in the frame of the social dimension no two regions or institutions will have either the same student population or the same problems. In that sense, country reviews by external experts are a good way of starting a national process to improve the social dimension. Another helpful first step towards a coherent national strategy would be the development of a national inventory of concrete measures (i.e. a national PL4SD-like collection of measures).

During the PL4SD project lifetime, the Bologna process also progressed. The social dimension working group 2012-2015 proposed *"A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020"* with the title *"Widening Participation for Equity and Growth"* (EHEA 2015b), which ministers committed to implementing in all EHEA countries in the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué (EHEA 2015a). At the core of this strategy lies the objective *"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."* (EHEA 2015b)

The experiences gained with the PL4SD project contributed to the development of the social dimension strategy and the aforementioned guidelines for the development of national access plans or strategies through its close co-operation with the Bologna working group on the social dimension (which functioned as the PL4SD stakeholder forum). However, the country delegates in the Bologna working group also formulated a second objective to which ministers likewise committed in the social dimension strategy, too: *"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."* (EHEA 2015b)

Hence, nearly 10 years after the London Communiqué had recommended the development of national strategies for the social dimension, there is now a second window of opportunity.[2] Moreover, it would seem that while the first attempt was carried mainly by countries in northern and western Europe, this time countries from eastern and southern Europe are also engaged (twice as many countries now have delegates on the social dimension working group than was the case 10 years ago). After the massive and rapid expansion of their higher education systems and subsequent sharp decline due to demographic reasons, many member states in the south and east of the EHEA are currently in a phase of consolidating their higher education systems. In the period after 1990, many of them followed very meritocratic approaches to admission procedures and student support in the higher education sector, neglecting the structural disadvantages of certain groups (e.g. as a consequence of parental background, weaker schools in rural areas or disability). This currently seems to be changing and is being facilitated by a decreasing number of students for the limited number of higher education study places (and grants) available. The three countries which participated in the PL4SD country reviews, Lithuania, Armenia and Croatia, are good examples of this.

5.4 Lessons learned from PL4SD

Some of the lessons learned from the PL4SD project may help to facilitate the implementation of the Bologna strategy for the social dimension and the development of national action plans as well as to stimulate further peer learning activities within and between EHEA member countries:

- Collecting written examples of concrete measures for the PL4SD database is hard work. While people were quite willing to talk about their measures at the PL4SD conferences, it took a great deal of effort to persuade them to complete the PL4SD questionnaire and contribute to the database. Unfortunately, however, only a limited number of people can attend workshops or conferences, while an internet-based database is, in contrast, accessible to many. Hence, there is a trade-off between the quantity (and quality) of the reporting on measures and the number of recipients. In an ideal scenario, both ways of communicating can be incorporated.
- The access to the information on the measures in the database is useful for a broad audience. However, hardly any of these measures (including the "big ones" like, e.g., grant systems) have ever been evaluated. Hence, the impact of most of the measures is unknown. Accordingly, such a collection of measures should be expanded to include quality criteria, an aspect which can only be obtained from neutral evaluations or standardised reviews of the measures. Ultimately, the goal here

[2] Austria, for instance, has in the meantime announced that it will develop a national strategy on the social dimension in 2016 and that it will involve many stakeholder organisations in the strategy development process. In preparation for this, the ministry commissioned a study at a research institute (not connected to PL4SD) to collect details of measures implemented at higher education institutions to improve the social situation of students. Ultimately, this process will establish a national inventory of measures, just like the PL4SD database does on an international level.

should be to enhance the database and transform it from a list of measures into a collection of proven good practices.

- PL4SD received outstanding positive feedback for its final conference because of the mixture of participants (researchers, policy-makers, practitioners). Yet even though everyone who attended enjoyed this "mix of cultures", it is never easy to convince all spheres to enrol for such an event. To address this, the final PL4SD conference was specifically scheduled to coincide with the final conference of EUROSTUDENT V, thereby ensuring the presentation of a lot of fresh data and making the conference more attractive for researchers as well.
- In its core sense, the social dimension takes place in the classroom or lecture theatre. That's why the local and institutional level is so important and the involvement of students is central to any process for improving the social dimension. Peer learning about the social dimension must therefore be stimulated first and foremost between institutions, i.e. between practitioners – be it on a national or an international level.
- While it cannot, of course, be left out, an alternative forum for exchange might be more suitable when it comes to national policy, where collecting ideas for measures is less important than, for instance, the concrete rules of a grant system. The sharing of evaluation results and measured impacts would be very useful here, but the availability of such results is limited. The most fruitful form of learning in the national policy context would be to learn about measures that did not work in other countries or systems – and why they did not work – in order to prevent similar negative experiences in other countries. To achieve this requires open minds, not evaluations.
- The PL4SD country reviews also unveiled a lack of common understanding in the participating countries of what constitutes the social dimension. Given that the social dimension was not yet formulated as a clear action line (like the implementation of the diploma supplement or the bachelor/master structure), this observation does not come as a big surprise. However, better communication among the stakeholders is clearly one way to remedy this situation.
- Nonetheless, the PL4SD country reviews confirmed some of the assumptions that had led to the project in the first place: Examples of good practice could be found in each of the reviewed countries along with ways of implementing and adjusting these practices in other contexts.
- Wherever possible, countries should therefore invite external experts to conduct a similar review – be it as a start for a coherent national policy on the social dimension or to obtain feedback during such a process. However, unlike in the PL4SD project, the background reports describing the status quo in the country should be prepared by national experts in order to include the national perspective.

6 Plans for the future of PL4SD

The funding for PL4SD ended in 2015 and therefore the project team cannot undertake further project activities for the time being. However, the project partners will ensure that those project services that do not incur additional costs will still be available in future.

The website will stay online at least for several years after PL4SD has ended. Thus, all project results and information will be available for future use. Particularly the database of policy measures can serve as important instrument for policy makers and other stakeholders even after the end of the project. In addition, the project team will update the database in case additional measures are submitted and also will keep moderating the commenting section of the database. However, right now there are no resources available to further develop, promote, or extend the database after the project's lifetime. Nevertheless, the database will serve as an idea pool regarding higher education policy and on concrete actions taken to improve the situation of students all over Europe. National ministries and other stakeholders can still use this collection of ideas and good practice examples as inspiration for developing measures or policies aimed at improving the social dimension in higher education.

Also, the project team is currently looking for further funding opportunities in order to make the launching of a PL4SD follow-up project possible. Particularly in the last project phase the consortium developed ideas on how to shape such a project, including the following:

- Due to the outstanding positive feedback for the PL4SD conferences there are considerations on establishing **a series of conferences on the social dimension** in higher education within the next years, based on the experiences gained within the final conference of PL4SD. With such conferences, the objective of enabling face to face peer learning including practitioners, researchers, and policy makers could be further targeted. In addition, it is very likely that members of the PL4SD consortium will still be invited to international events to present results from PL4SD.
- The country reviews were another project element that gained a lot of positive attention. The reviews were designed as pilot studies and proofed to be very fruitful for the participating countries. Therefore the project team aims at a **continuation of the country reviews** in case of a potential follow-up funding on European level. Another possibility currently explored by the project team is to encourage national ministries to invite a review team and to provide funding for an external country review. In that case, the members of PL4SD gladly will be available for conducting such additional country reviews. Due to numerous positive reactions on the country reviews among many stakeholders the project team is confident that other countries can be encouraged to participate as well.
- Another idea on potential follow-up activities is to **further enhance the database**. Based on the knowledge of the PL4SD at the close of the project, the Consortium members agree that the database is useful, especially because it gives a good first view of what is being done in higher education with the aim of improving the social

dimension. At the same time, the members see that the database is uneven, with only few or no measures reported by some countries, and with some of those countries/regions only reporting on standard measures (e.g. the provision of student loans). In the future, it would be necessary to take a more hand-on approach to the critical collection and evaluation of measures being used across Europe – perhaps in conjunction with an expansion of the Country Reviews.

The realisation of these ideas depends on further funding. However, many stakeholders including the BFUG strongly expressed their interest in prolonging PL4SD because of its importance in the field of the social dimension. Therefore the project partners are confident that in near future an opportunity will arise that will allow the PL4SD team to continue and further enhance its work. All partners involved in the project remain motivated to further strengthen peer learning for the social dimension in higher education.

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