

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

Info sheet
*General information
about the project*

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www.pl4sd.eu



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1 Project Overview

1.1 The social dimension of the EHEA

The project **PEER LEARNING FOR THE SOCIAL DIMENSION (PL4SD)** focuses on collating and cataloguing measures which have the objective of improving the social dimension of higher education. 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 and complete higher education. The goal 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.”

This is a long-standing goal of modern higher education systems, which aims to assure that educational success is detached from a person’s origins. It is repeated in the most recent Bucharest Communiqué of 2012 (p.1). This aim can be morally argued from the standpoint of Rawl’s argument for social justice.¹ There is also an effectiveness argument for improving the participation and study conditions of certain groups of students, which was also made in the Leuven Communiqué of 2009. It argues that available talent in Europe should be “maximised” to assure the realisation of a Europe of knowledge:

“In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education.” (emphasis added)

This argument has been further emphasised in the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012 with reference to the challenges leading on from the economic and financial crisis (p.1). These two arguments – social justice and effectiveness for a Europe of knowledge – provide the basis for efforts on the part of policy makers at national, regional level and leaders and practitioners in educational institutions to improve the social dimension of higher education. Their work is founded on the recognition that a confluence of three factors tend to determine educational success: student ability, material and immaterial (e.g. social and cultural) resources and opportunity. In particular, non-academic factors such as social background and aspiration, and study framework conditions (e.g. balance between work

¹ Rawls, J. (1971): A theory of justice. Harvard University Press.

and studies) affect participation and success in higher education. Indeed, visible student ability may have been affected by a person's material and immaterial resources at a previous (e.g. secondary) educational level.

For each of these types of hindrance, measures may be taken, e.g.:

- To raise aspirations of school-leavers to strive for entering higher education
- To provide remedial classes for school-leavers who have knowledge gaps and provide second chance routes of entry for adult learners
- To provide more flexible forms of learning in higher education
- To provide material support (such as grants and loans) during the study phase

However, there is a huge information gap on what is really happening on a national level and, particularly, in regions and at individual higher education institutions. Nevertheless, there are many measures being realized to improve the social dimension. This has been recognised by the Ministers responsible for higher education, who committed to collect and share data on the social dimension of higher education and to participate in a peer learning process. As stated in the Bucharest Communiqué from 2012:

*“We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area”.*²

The **PL4SD** project will fill the current information gap by collecting such information in a systematic manner and presenting this in an easily accessible database (www.pl4sd.eu). This will help policy experts and practitioners to learn from other countries and other contexts.

1.2 Objectives of PL4SD

Realising the aim of the Bucharest Communiqué, the **PL4SD** project will...

- lead to more **transparency** in current developments, allowing the actors in the field to assess their own performance as well as to **monitor** their progress towards reaching the targets set within the EHEA,
- **stimulate international exchange** and debate on policy measures and add more creativity to tackling difficulties within the field of the social dimension in higher education,
- enable **peer learning** and ease the implementation of policy measures by other countries, higher education institutions and students' organisations,
- structure the information and collect relevant reports and research on the policies at national levels, **providing a solid basis for further research**,
- **inform** national and international policy makers and stakeholders in all countries of the EHEA several times during the lifetime of the project about its progress towards these goals.

² All mentioned communiqués can be accessed here: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43>.

1.3 Implementation of PL4SD

PL4SD will reach these objectives through a combination of two different approaches. Both will focus on measures to foster the social dimension, namely participation, access and equity of underrepresented groups in higher education:

Online database: The first initiative aims at building up a database containing information on measures that foster participation, access and equity in higher education. Those range from information campaigns to regulations (e.g. special entrance criteria). All this information will be fed into a searchable online database that will combine facts about measures in the 47 different national higher education systems and facilitate contrasting and comparison with each other, to enable peer learning and knowledge exchange throughout the European Higher Education Area.

Country reviews: The second initiative shapes a pilot study that will conduct country reviews in three countries on demand. Various demarcations of administrative and operational responsibilities in an education system (national, regional and institutional, but also sectorial) often result in an incoherence of actions. Country reviews therefore have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist countries in the development of a coherent, comprehensive and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education.

PL4SD will stimulate **peer learning** among policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and students who are committed to the improvement of the social dimension of higher education by providing public access to the database and the final reports of the country reviews, by organizing two conferences (spring 2014 and spring 2015) where various measures will be presented and participants can exchange experiences, and by producing a meta-analysis of all reported measures as a final report (autumn 2015).

For more information about the database and the country reviews see page 8 and page 9.

1.4 Measures on the social dimension

PL4SD will collate and catalogue measures which have the objective of reducing barriers to higher education entry and of providing a conducive study environment for all students, which can lead to their successful graduation. Those range from information campaigns to regulations and incentives (see Table 1).

Table 1: Examples of measures for improving the social dimension in higher education

Type of measure	Examples
Information campaigns	Campaign targeting parents, who did not attend university themselves, explaining the benefits for their children.
Regulations	Law on higher education reserves places for non-traditional students (e.g. first generation students).
Measures targeted at:	
Higher education institutions	Provision of affordable accommodation and meal services, financial aid, counselling services, services to students with disabilities, services to students with children, support to international students
	Formula-funding used to allocate state grant to higher education institutions includes indicator on number of non-traditional students.
	Special funding available to higher education institutions, which offer special support to certain student groups.
Individuals	Students from certain backgrounds are provided with scholarships to encourage them to enter higher education.
	Grants or loans to alleviate financing of study (general or targeted to lower income groups), advising and support services for students.
	Student buddy system: To help students from non-traditional backgrounds in higher education (e.g. run by the student union)
Intermediary institutions	Provision of affordable accommodation and meal services, financial aid, counselling services, services to students with disabilities, services to students with children, support to international students
Data for evidence-based policy and practice	Annual reports on access strategy and implementation required of all higher education institutions.
Research and regular evaluations	Quality assurance procedures pay special attention to inclusion strategies and include in the assessment performance benchmarks on access and success of certain student groups.
Partnerships between stakeholders within and outside of institutions of higher education	Employer organisation cooperates with higher education institutions to provide internship opportunities to students from special underrepresented groups during studies.

1.5 Stakeholders' Forum

The Stakeholders' Forum of **PL4SD** will supervise, support and thereby assure the quality of the project outcomes by commenting on developed tools (e.g. questionnaire, country reviews, database), evaluating the milestones achieved, selecting countries to be reviewed and experts for the review. The forum also assists in contacting the EHEA members and national stakeholders.

PL4SD cooperates very closely with the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group (SD-WG) of the Bologna Process, therefore the WG takes over the tasks of the Stakeholders' Forum. Hence, members of the Stakeholders' Forum are the members of the SD-WG, namely country delegates, EUA, EURASHE, EI, ESU, and the European Commission.

The Stakeholders' Forum will have 1-2 meetings throughout the project lifetime, at least in spring 2013, 2014 (interim conference in February) and 2015 (final conference in February). At these meetings, the Stakeholders' Forum will evaluate the progress of the project and whether the project milestones have been met so far, including a critical review of the project's outcomes and deliverables.

1.6 Dissemination and accessibility of results

The dissemination activities of the project will have the aim of informing all stakeholders outside the project (the primary groups being policy-makers, decision-makers at higher education institutions and students) about the project's goals and its main results. Specifically, the activities will have the aim of:

- Raising awareness about the importance of the social dimension and its monitoring at the European level.
- Providing wide access to the information collected through the project about existing measures aimed at improving the social dimension of participation and success in higher education in different European countries.

Throughout the project lifetime results and updates will be made accessible via:

- The project webpage
- Regularly newsletters (available on the webpage and by subscription)
- Project report
- Two dissemination conferences (interim conference: February 2014, final conference: February 2015).

2 DATABASE of measures in the frame of the social dimension of higher education

An online database will be set up as the core product of the **PL4SD** project. This platform provides an easily searchable database, giving access to all kinds of information on the social dimension and policy measures in the field. Information on national strategies, action plans and policy measures in the field of social dimension will be collated three times throughout the project lifecycle from the ministries responsible for higher education in all 47 Bologna member countries. This information will be processed and transferred into an online database, which will be freely accessible and searchable, therefore stimulating peer learning between users in the EHEA.

Table 2: Structure of the questionnaire as basis for information on measures to improve the social dimension of higher education

Section of the questionnaire	Content
Background information (respondent information & country)	Some background information is needed to be able to contact the respondent in case there is need for clarification of the information reported.
Basic information about the measure	The basic information about the measure includes e.g. the name of the measure, a link to further information and a categorisation of the measure.
Description of the measure	This section serves to describe the measure, including the challenge the measure was meant to meet, the objective and the target group(s) of the measure.
Impact of the measure	This part helps describing the outcome and impact of the measure and asks for monitoring/evaluations.
Overall assessment	This section serves to describe the prospects of the measure in the future.
Keywords	This part serves to provide some keywords describing the measure, its objective and target population(s).
Other information [optional]	In the last section it is possible to add any further information about the measure.

The information collated from the ministries will be further enriched by asking national stakeholders to add own initiatives and to comment on the impacts of the measures collated after every round of data collection. This multi-step approach will contribute to creating a holistic view on national measures in the social dimension. In addition, the coordinators will contribute current scientific literature concerning the social dimension in higher education to the database. This will be done by continuously screening for publications (books, journal articles, reports, etc.).

The database will be presented to a broader public at conferences in February 2014 and February 2015 and promoted through the Bologna Secretariat, the SD-WG and the **PL4SD** project newsletter.

3 COUNTRY REVIEWS as an instrument for reflection and improvement

The second part of the project is a pilot study, conducting detailed expert studies in three countries on demand. Country reviews have the aim of 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 review is to assist countries in the development of a coherent, comprehensive and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education. This result will be achieved through close collaboration between the external reviewers (who will be recruited specifically for the country to be reviewed) and the national policy-makers and stakeholders involved in the country review.

The review is not solely an impact assessment, but will focus more on process evaluation. This will enable it to evaluate and support measures, which have only just begun or are being implemented at present only at institutional or regional level, although they have the potential for being scaled up to national implementation.

The country reviews will facilitate the formulation of a comprehensive strategy on national level, which both recognises the individual context factors of the individual country being reviewed and the need for common concepts in a national strategy, which are comparable to those in other countries' national strategies. Meeting this second condition of comparability of concepts will facilitate policy learning between countries.

The review will identify good practices and possibilities for improvements. It is particularly expected that improvements can be achieved through the adoption of a more coherent, “joined-up” strategy for the social dimension, which cuts across, but recognises administrative and organisational divisions of responsibility.

The Process

The first round of data collation in the first phase of the project (2013) will provide important data on measures for improving the social dimension of higher education from countries within the European Higher Education Area, which the project coordinators will analyse. This work will provide a substantial foundation for the country reviews. It will also be used to provide guidelines for effective strategies for the social dimension in higher education. The **PL4SD** members conducting the country reviews will closely collaborate with a team of experts in the field in order to capture the national situation in the most efficient way, sustaining a high quality standard.

The steps of the country review and the respective tasks of the coordinators and the national team are shown in Table 3.

Costs

The costs of the preparatory work of the international project coordinators and of the visiting external reviewers will be borne by the project budget. The costs of preparing a national self-report and supporting the incidental costs of the one week country visit by the external reviewers will be borne by the national country being reviewed.

Country reviews will be offered under these conditions to a maximum of three countries, which are signatory states of the Bologna Agreement, in 2013.

Table 3: Process of country reviews

Phase	PL4SD coordinators	National team for country review
Invitation	The coordinators will invite 3 countries for review starting from 2013. The suggestion and selection process will be coordinated with the BFUG and the working group on the social dimension.	3 countries commit to assisting review through self-report and support leading up to and during the one week visit of the external reviewers.
Self-report	The coordinators provide a report template with guiding questions to the national team.	The national team work on a 25-50 page national self-report.
External reviewers	The coordinators will suggest 4 external reviewers for the national review. They are likely to cover different perspectives on higher education (e.g. policy maker, HEI representative, researcher and student representative per team). The suggestion for the reviewers will be discussed and concluded with the Stakeholders' Forum.	The external reviewers will be agreed with the national team.
Visit	Review in country lasting 5 working days. On the last day, the international expert team discusses first results and recommendations with the national policy-makers involved in the review.	National team assists with the logistics and coordination of the visit.
Review-report	A draft of the review-report is written by the coordinators and disseminated for feedback to the external reviewers for revision and completion.	Draft report with recommendations is provided to the national team with a possibility for comments and corrections. Review-report finalised and published.

4 Schedule

2012	autumn	Start of the project	
		Developing questionnaire for database	
2013	spring	1 st meeting of Stakeholders' Forum	
		1 st survey among Ministries	
	autumn	Self-report of 1 st country review	
		Going public of database	
		1 st survey among national stakeholders	
		1 st country visit	
		1 st country review	
2014	winter	Self-report of 2 nd country review	
	spring	2 nd meeting of Stakeholders' Forum	
		Interim conference (Ministries and stakeholders) in February	
		2 nd country visit	
		2 nd survey among Ministries	
		Conference report	
	summer	2 nd country review	
		Self-report of 3 rd country review	
	autumn	2 nd survey among national stakeholders	
		3 rd country visit	
		3 rd country report	
	2015	winter	3 rd meeting of Stakeholders' Forum
		spring	Analytical report of project (analysing the documented measures and country reviews)
Final conference (Ministries, stakeholders, public, scientific community, media) in February			
3 rd survey among Ministries			
Conference report			
summer		3 rd survey among national stakeholders	
autumn		Final report to EACEA	