

Workshop 2: Social dimension and criteria of quality

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The workshop mainly focussed on the necessity and possibility of including the Social Dimension in processes of Quality Assurance, but also focussed on what good quality means in terms of the Social Dimension.

The discussion concentrated on four main questions which will be presented hereafter.

Question 1: should the social dimension be included in processes of QA?

The Social dimension is an important part of higher education. We can only speak about good quality education if also the Social Dimension is of good quality. Therefore processes of Quality Assurance simply must include the social dimension

Of course we have to take into account the different levels and different forms of QA that exist (internal & external, evaluations, accreditation, audits). But on all these levels and in all these forms the quality of the Social Dimension should be included.

In that way QA can help improving the Social Dimension, encouragement of good practises and pointing out questionable practises.

Question 2: Who should be concerned with a Social Dimension of good Quality HE?

The EHEA as a whole is responsible. Different levels can be distinguished within the field of HE, where a broad range of actors are involved, which leads to multiple prerequisites for HE, multiple desired goals, outcomes and results of the education process. And since the Social Dimension is (or: should be) an integral part of HE, we should keep a broad view when developing, assessing and improving it.

This is not the right moment to elaborate this in much detail; more explanation can amongst others be found in the papers of Marek Frankowicz, who was one of the experts in the workshop.

But very briefly:

Basically, the different levels involved are the level of the state, the HEI, the study field and the society. Actors are inter alia ministries, universities, teachers and students, representatives of the labour market. All these actors on the different levels have different responsibilities and different ways in which it is organised. For example, grants are mainly a national responsibility, study facilities that of an individual university. The responsibilities are linked to the multiple prerequisites, purposes and goals of HE that come from the different levels and actors involved. Prerequisites for HE can be equal opportunities for all, a specific desired profile of students, co-operation with external

stakeholders etc. Different purposes of HE are personal development, preparation for the labour market with a long-term perspective, preparation for life as an active citizen in a democratic society and improvement of an advanced knowledge base in society. All of this has influence on comprehensiveness of the Social Dimension as well as that of Quality Assurance.

Question 3: Which types of criteria should be set? How can Quality Assurance take the Social Dimension into account?

First of all, given its broad scope - in the BP context it is being referred to as an 'overarching or transversal action line' - it's not always clear what we mean by Social Dimension.

A suggestion could be that: *"The Social Dimension includes all provisions needed for having equal access, progress & completion of Higher Education (i.e. first, second, third cycle)."*

'Equal' means equal and fair treatment of all students, just being able to enter HE is not enough if there are obstacles to a normal progress through the education process and if many students drop out before completion.

For example:

- You can have good libraries but are they open for students when they have to study?
- Are classrooms reachable for students with disabilities?
- Doesn't a student have to take 5 exams at the same moment?

With other words, is it reasonable to assume that all students that are enrolled should be able to finish their studies in the time that stands for it?

What this concretely means in reality depends partly on the specific characteristics, circumstances and purposes of a Higher Education Institute or programme, of a country and also of an individual student. Countries have different cultures and (financial) possibilities, universities are located in a specific social environment, often serve different groups in society. Some study programmes are more open to underrepresented, 'fragile' groups. And lastly, students are different, with different needs. They can come from different social & economic backgrounds, can be migrants, mobile student, may have disabilities, etc.

All in all, it's not desirable to define a limited list of concrete criteria/standards for social dimension. That's always too limited.

Also more information and knowledge is needed on social dimension provisions in different countries.

Instead of setting very tight minimal criteria for the Social Dimension, there is a need to define concrete 'aspects' of the overarching Bologna action line social dimension that

should be guaranteed in every country, every HEI within the EHEA. For example, one aspect is sufficient financial support for all students, but the actual amount is dependent on the specific study & living costs in a country/region.

Without having had a real brainstorm about it, some aspects that are mentioned during the Workshop were:

- study facilities
 - living conditions
 - financial possibilities (grants/loans, need to working besides study?, tuition fees)
 - participation of underrepresented groups (gender, disabilities, migrants, economic background)
 - grants/loans (portable!)
 - Health services
 - housing
 - Counselling (academic, legal and social).
 - information
 - access systems
 - drop outs/support to help them
 - participation of students in elections and democratic life within HEI
 - representation of students in governing bodies
- etc.

While we should respect the diversity of countries, HEIs, programmes and students, it can't be stressed enough that this diversity must not, must never, be used as an excuse to not fully implement the Social Dimension and to improve social circumstances.

On the same time, action is needed to overcome some of the undesired diversity. For example, to improve some of the inequalities between different countries, serious European scale programmes are needed, comparable with those that exist for example in the field of agriculture.

In the current European HE reality, there often seems to be a clash between Quality and equality. Social dimension can provide framework for these two, form a bridge between quality and equality. Diversity of students and groups of students must be taken into account, with extra attention to underrepresented or 'fragile' groups.

The participants in the workshop agreed that *the social dimension can form a good link between good Quality education & equality.*

Question 4: How we look at students in QA?

Quality is a common responsibility for teachers and students. Students as key stakeholders should have influence on all levels and thus also be included in all levels of

QA. They should be involved in giving input about quality, via evaluations, but also be co-decision makers in all governing bodies. Student participation should even be a quality indicator as such and thus also part of QA processes.

Important to note is that student participation should not only officially exist, but also be enabled by the HE community. It should be facilitated, possible for all students to be able to participate in student unions, but also to be active in the broader society. This includes financial possibilities for students to be active besides their studies (e.g. flexible grants), availability of other facilities within the HEI for student activism, flexibility within the curriculum for making it possible to spend time on these activities (e.g. possibility to postpone exams).

General recommendation derived from the workshop

Quality assurance mechanisms, both internal and external, must integrate the social dimension including all aspects of living and studying conditions and relate to the multiple outcomes and long-term results of Higher Education.