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Equal access and opportunities in higher education: Reality or just nice phrases?

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The need of data collection is a problem that is already going on for several years in the social dimension of the Bologna Process. Little has been done in this action line of the Bologna Process, and every time the lack of comparable data and data in general is pinned down as being the reason for this. At the same time, little to no action is undertaken to collect the necessary data. Due to this, the social dimension has become a box full of empty promises and nice phrases.

Now, the time has come to fill this data gap. We are on the brink of the next ten years of the Bologna Process. So far, it has been a more instrumental process. Now is the time to shift to content, and by that I don't mean that we have to harmonise the curricula. The fact that the next ministerial conference after Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009 will be only one year later, instead of two, gives us a chance to act, and to act fast. If we set concrete actions in April next year, we will be able to have the first results and to make the first evaluations only one year later. Like this, we can give the social dimension the attention and the work it needs and it deserves.

In filling this data gap, there are two questions that need to be answered first. The first one is what problems students and possible students encounter in the access to, participating in and completing higher education. The second question consists of research in which measures governments are taking to support their students in doing this: financial support, social services, such as housing, transportation, food provision, medical care and sport facilities and guidance and counseling.

We recognize the important work the Eurostudent survey is doing in filling this data gap, but it is not the Messiah. Not every country in the Bologna Process is participating in this survey, and it only provides us with data on the socio-economic background of students.

First of all, we need data on all the countries in the European Higher Education Area.

As second, we don't only need data on the socio-economic background of students, but also on the parental, educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds of their parents; their language spoken at home; the marital status of their parents; the contribution of their parents to their finances; the effect of their financial situation on their stress levels and mental health; estimated expenses; workload; the amount of persons dependant of students and available student services.

Thirdly, we need data on which underrepresented groups there are, such as students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, students with children and gender related underrepresented groups; in which number they are underrepresented; why they are underrepresented and which measures we have and which we need to act on this.

And fourthly, we need regular study cost surveys, to adapt study financing systems to up-to-date numbers.

To conclude, I would like to ask Mr. Orr: Is this possible within the Eurostudent survey, or do we need something else and something new?