

Chapter A1

Foreword



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In Tirana 2024, Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reconfirmed the importance of “building an inclusive EHEA by 2030” and committed to “the improvement of data collection, through participation in related initiatives, such as EUROSTUDENT” in the Tirana Communiqué.

This shows the importance of the EUROSTUDENT project and its comparative report ‘Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe’ as a data source.

To strengthen the social dimension, the ‘Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA’ were adopted in the Rome Communiqué 2020, an important step towards an inclusive EHEA by 2030. In order to support the implementation of social dimension strategies and measures the EHEA Ministers, at the Conference in Tirana in May 2024, also endorsed the document ‘Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA’, a toolbox approach for countries. This is the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA.

The social dimension of higher education is an important driving force in terms of high-quality education, science, and research and has been so for the last two decades. While the Prague Communiqué (2001) already mentioned the social dimension, the London Communiqué (2007) was first to clearly state that “the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”. EUROSTUDENT has helped to establish a complete picture of the European higher education landscape concerning social and economic conditions for students all over Europe, with a total of 25 countries of the EHEA participating in the eighth round of the survey. Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe may differ in many ways due to differences in higher education systems, but, as the results show, there are a lot of common challenges across countries.

Equal access to (higher) education is key to overcoming the challenges of our time, and EUROSTUDENT promotes social and economic fairness by offering a database of students’ living conditions, as well as their socio-economic characteristics. EUROSTUDENT has come a long way from eight countries in the first edition to now 25 countries who share a core questionnaire to deliver comparable data. EUROSTUDENT not only developed the questionnaire and the survey data but has induced improvement in administrative data in many countries as well. Additionally, EUROSTUDENT piloted the collection of micro data in the sixth round and can now offer a EUROSTUDENT Scientific Use File for more than 20 countries stored in the research data centre at the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW). Austria

has explored micro data, looking further into motives of students with delayed entrance into higher education. The comparison resulted in a [report](#) for Austria, Lithuania, and Romania.

Austria has joined EUROSTUDENT from the very beginning, has been in the Steering Board for a few rounds now as well, and is looking forward to having the final conference held in Vienna on July 10th and 11th 2024. International comparison is an important step in the development of national policies for the social dimension, as it can be a starting point and a source of good practices.

After Yerevan 2015, when EHEA Ministers committed to developing national strategies, access plans, or other measures promoting the social dimension, Austria developed the ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education’, which uses the national student social survey as a database for its quantitative targets and refers to EUROSTUDENT data for international comparison. The ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education’, published and launched with higher education stakeholders, has been followed up with annual networking conferences, addressing the most pressing topics for the social dimension, e.g. ‘Studyability’, ‘Transition from school to higher education’, ‘COVID-effects on vulnerable student groups’, ‘Results of the interim evaluation’, and ‘Social Dimension and SDGs’ (Sustainable Development Goals). The interim evaluation showed that quantitative progress is slow, but that there are qualitative developments at higher education institutions (HEIs). Generally, mainstreaming the social dimension is a slow process, which needs a broad basis of stakeholders to promote its further progress. Before possibly relaunching the ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension’ up to 2035, we have to find out more about the factors supporting the implementation of measures improving the social dimension and also about the hindrances.

Complementary to the implementation of the ‘National Strategy on the Social Dimension’, Austria promotes social dimension mainstreaming through different measures on the policy level. The social dimension is part of the steering documents, such as the ‘Austrian National Development Plan for Public Universities 2025–2030’, the ‘Higher Education Plan 2030’ and the ‘Development and Financing Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences’. The ‘Development Plan for University Colleges of Teacher Education’ refers specifically to diversity and student-centred learning. The social dimension is also central to the ‘National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020–2030’, where financial support for under-represented student groups as well as improved statistical data are addressed. The promotion of the social dimension is furthermore incentivised by retaining 0.5 % of the public universities’ global budgets in case the universities do not implement measures to support the social dimension of higher education.

Despite all the references in steering documents and the financial incentive, there is still a so-called ‘implementation gap’, meaning that very often there are no real systemic changes because they are normally the result of a very resource-intensive process. Instead, there is a large number of small-scale measures without a strategic framework overarching them.

We will take the results of EUROSTUDENT 8 as depicted in the Synopsis of Indicators as a basis for renewed efforts towards the implementation of our existing strategy, having in mind the 'Principles and Guidelines'. For the evaluation and most likely relaunch of the Strategy, we hope to make full use of the data shown here, in the national report, and in the 'Indicators and Descriptors'. In order to close the 'implementation gap' with regard to the social dimension, Austria will continue to take part in international peer learning initiatives and will, of course, be part of EUROSTUDENT 9.

The policy considerations at the end of each chapter of the Synopsis will be a starting point for evaluating existing measures and possibly re-developing policy measures.

I wish the readers of the Synopsis many interesting insights into student life throughout Europe, and I do hope there are many policy considerations we can take on board as policymakers.

EUROSTUDENT 8 provides us with four very relevant topical modules, to be considered immediately when deriving higher education policy measures and I am already looking forward to the next round of EUROSTUDENT in which Austria will certainly take part.



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