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MACEDONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AGAINST THE PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES ON EQUITY, INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY: SOCIAL DIMENSION OF BOLOGNA

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Abstract

Social dimension of the Bologna process has continuously attracted attention of high-level discussions in the EU and EHEA and refers to policies and measures that aim to foster equity, inclusion, and diversity within higher education institutions (HEIs). The goal of this paper is to examine the existing national HE policies in the Republic of North Macedonia against the principles and guidelines (P&Gs) for the promotion of equality and inclusiveness in HE developed by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) and adopted at the Ministerial Conference in Rome in 2020. The research data collection includes the available data from 2020/2021 as a reference year, while the analysis investigates the existing top-level strategy documents, law and bylaws and the country report data from the Bologna Implementation Report 2020. The paper provides an overview of the key findings on how far these policies are aligned with the P&Gs in addressing the social dimension. It also summarizes how the Macedonian HE system with 12 points fare in terms of the 38 basic and 10 scoreboard indicators developed to serve monitoring of these principals. At the end the paper discusses what the key challenges along the way are and provides conclusions and recommendations for improvement.

Keywords: equity, inclusion, higher education policies, social dimension

INTRODUCTION

Social dimension of the Bologna process has continuously attracted attention of high-level discussions in the EU and EHEA and refers to policies and measures that aim to foster equity, inclusion, and diversity within higher education institutions (HEIs). First clear definition and aspirational objective of social dimension policy was adopted in 2007 in London Communique, providing that the “student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” (Bologna Process 2007a).

At the Ministerial Conference in Rome, Italy in November, 2020, based on the proposals from the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) for monitoring the social dimension, 10 principles and guidelines (P&Gs) for the promotion of equality and inclusiveness in higher education were adopted. Recognizing that “increased participation of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education produces wider benefits with respect to decreased social welfare provision, improved health outcomes and increased community involvement” Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020) proposed a definition of these groups of students, and set out these principles to call public authorities and HEIs for strengthening the social dimension of HE (PanchenkoLj. et al, 2022).

The principles are considered "high level statements" that do not specify if and when specific measures and actions should be taken, but suggest steps that should be taken to improve the social dimension of higher education. In fact, these principles indicate that the need for universal changes related to access, progression and completion of higher education together with other systemic measures/changes can create more favorable conditions for attracting a more diverse student body to higher education in general, especially vulnerable, disadvantaged and students from underrepresented groups. These P&Gs have been translated into indicators that will serve to monitor the progress of the signatory states of the Bologna Declaration in the implementation of the social dimension of Bologna and will be an integral part of the Bologna implementation reports. These indicators will be subject to further modification and improvement in the coming period.

The goal of this paper is to examine the existing national HE policies in the Republic of North Macedonia against the P&Gs for the promotion of equality and inclusiveness in HE and to provide the key findings on how far these policies are aligned with the P&Gs in addressing the social dimension.

The research data collection includes the available data from 2020/2021 as a reference year for the purpose of comparability with the other countries included in the research (EU countries and candidate countries for EU membership) and therefore, the latter changes have not been considered. The analysis investigates the existing top-level strategy documents, law and bylaws and for most of the indicators, the responses and country data presented in the latest available Bologna Implementation Report 2020 were also used. At the end the paper summarizes how the Macedonian HE system with 12 points fare in terms of the 38 basic and 10 scoreboard indicators developed to serve to monitoring of these principals i.e. how the Macedonian HE system fare in terms of how many of the particular P&Gs are being currently implemented. The document should serve policy makers, higher education policies and other stakeholders in higher education.

HOW ARE WE DOING? SUMMARY & DISCUSSION ON THE KEY FINDINGS

This section provides an overview of the top-level policies across all principles and summarizes the key findings against 10 composite scoreboard indicators.

The first principle provides that “**social dimension should be central to HE strategies** at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level”. The Republic of North Macedonia has a set of different policy documents that tackles different aspects of equity and inclusion in the education sector, but very few of them address explicit measures for HE. There is no separate HE strategy which focuses exclusively on social dimension, equity, inclusion or diversity, however the National Education Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2025 has a component of social dimension and equity, inclusion and diversity that generally targets ALL students regardless of their characteristics. The strategy has identified 2 main objectives and 2 measurable targets related to inclusion and equity in HE: 1) All universities/HEIs buildings fully adapted to the educational needs of students with special educational needs by 2020 and 2) Fully refurbished university dormitories in all cities

with at least 50 % of all living places (units) in total by 2025. This strategy was a product of wide consultations and dialogue with national and international experts, stakeholders and working groups.

AKVO/AQHE (Agency for Quality in Higher Education of the Republic of North Macedonia) was not required to monitor the existence of the available policies of HEIs on social dimension, equity, inclusion or diversity in HE. Macedonian HE scores 3 of 4 against the first principle.

As for the second principle, the top-level policies in HE suggest very low **flexibility**, i.e. inflexibility of the Macedonian HE system (0 of 4 scoreboard indicators) in terms of enabling “HEIs to develop strategies to fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies”.

Macedonian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have academic freedom in defining the rules for studying, forms and types of teaching and education activity (Article 8 of Law on HE, Official Gazette 82/2018 and the university statutes), and have a possibility for provision of blended and distance learning studies. Part time study option is allowed to students under conditions prescribed with the study programs and the university Rulebook(s), where the character of the study program allows that (at some HEIs).

There are no possibilities to access in HE without formal qualifications (upper secondary level school certificate) on the basis of the recognition of non-formal and/or informal learning (Bologna Implementation Report 2018, figure 5.15 and Bologna Implementation Report 2020, figure 4.13).

There is no recognition of prior learning either at national or at institutional level (IBID). Consequently, AQHE was not required to monitor the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in HE as part of its procedures for accreditation, re-accreditation and evaluation.

The analysis of the top-level policies suggests that the country stands poorly against the third principle of **life-long learning** that should improve the inclusiveness of the entire education system (1 of 4 scoreboard indicators)

There is no top-level coordination mechanism between different levels of education (early childhood education and care, school education 1-3, initial and continuing vocational education and training, higher education and adult education) dealing with equity and inclusion, neither the top-level higher education coordination mechanisms are systematically involving representatives from related policy sectors (e.g. finance, employment) in discussions on equity and inclusion, 2020/2021. Although it existed in the previous few years, there are no supporting measures for adults to access HE in the academic year 2020/21. Improving availability of HE for those with physical disabilities is one of the measures envisaged with the National Education Strategy 2018-2025.

Teachers in primary and secondary education are offered continuous professional development on equity, diversity and inclusion. According to the Law and the Rulebook on the basic professional competencies of pre-university teachers (teachers in primary and secondary schools) by areas, the basic professional competencies of teachers include professional values, professional knowledge and understanding and professional abilities and skills in six areas - creating a safe learning environment and school climate; and Social and educational inclusion being among them. The training of the subject teachers does not include contents related to the area of Social and Educational Inclusion. In the study programs, on the faculties that prepare class teachers, this area is represented with only one compulsory or elective subject (inclusive pedagogy, multicultural education, civic and multicultural education with methodology), or the contents of this area are given cross-circularly.

The professional development of teachers is achieved through accredited training programs, through projects approved by the Ministry, internally professional in-school training, inter-

school learning teams and through individual forms of learning. Following the adoption of the new Law on Primary education and the new Concept for Inclusive Education, a Program for training and professional development of teachers and professional associates for 2020/21 has been adopted by the Bureau for Education Development (BDE) that includes a special aspect of social and educational inclusion, which incorporates competences such as knowledge of different concepts and models of inclusive education; recognizing students which need additional support in the learning; prepares students to accept children from vulnerable groups and children with special needs, etc. Each teacher undergoes 20 hours of training within three years for these priority programs determined by the Minister.

The fourth principle states for reliable data **“as a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of HE”**(3 of 4 scoreboard indicators). The administrative data is collected at national level on following student characteristics (age, gender, labor market status prior to HE entry, municipal residence/geographical area, people with SEN, disability, ethnicity, low economic status and family background (e.g. single parent, care home upbringing). Data is collected on HE completion rates after the first year of the first cycle of HE and at the end of the first, second and the third cycle of HE;

MoES keeps data on students with different characteristics that are awarded state scholarships based on different eligibility criteria (low economic status, Roma ethnic affiliation etc.) HEIs keep data on enrolment and completion at 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle, while the State Statistical Office collects admin data annually. North Macedonia didn't participate in the Eurostudent VII survey project.

The fifth principle states that the “public authorities should have policies that enable HEIs to ensure effective **counselling and guidance** for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies”. In the Republic of North Macedonia there is a top legal requirement for career guidance, but there is not a top legal requirement for academic and psychological counseling (2 of 4 scoreboard indicators). Academic guidance exists only in the form of provision of information and advice for students and those who are applying for HE on the content, structure, requirements and rules of the study courses. The academic guidance in the country is provided by HEIs that offer such services to their students, whereas the tutoring assistance for Roma students has been provided by the Roma NGO active in the field. Psychological counselling services are provided only at the University St. Kliment Ohridski -Bitola (the second oldest state university in the country), offered only for its students but not focused on students with specific characteristics. There is no requirement for psychological counselling services to be subject to quality assurance as part of the Agency for Quality in HE / AKVO Rulebook on the Standards and Procedures for Self-evaluation and External Evaluation of Institutions.

There are public institutions that have a formal role in mediating conflicts related to equity. State educational inspectorate (SEI) has authority related to equity issues within the HE regulated in the Law on SEI. Both (students or employees) have the right to complain written or verbally to the SEI for protection and realization of their rights and interests, public interests determined by the law or for the purpose of initiating another initiative of public interest (according Law on complaints). Also, the student Ombudsman has the role to represent students' rights. The role of Ombudsman is to focus mainly on the mediation of conflicts related to studies and research but can also address conflicts related to equity. If a student's right related to equity is not solved, then everyone has the right to address the Student Ombudsman.

The sixth Principle and its Guidelines focus on two key objectives of HE public **funding** - that it should be sufficient and sustainable, and that HEIs should have and should use autonomy to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion.

The public funding of Macedonian universities is not linked to the university performance, nor is the public funding attributed on the basis of equity targets (2 of 4 scoreboard indicators). HEIs are not supported nor rewarded for meeting agreed targets in widening access, increasing participation in and completion of HE studies, in particular in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. The Ministry of Finance is responsible for budget preparation and execution based on the Government strategic priorities in HE. Direct financial support can be provided by public authorities in the form of grants or loans. The difference between the two forms of support is that grants are direct financial aid from the public budget that students do not have to pay back, while loans must be repaid.

Considering student support, generally, there are two categories of students: self-funded and state funded students. Students that are self-funded pay higher annual fees than the state funded students. The fees are set by the Government. On the other hand the fees for second-cycle students depending on the study profile are set separately by each university profile and program, based on proposals submitted by the universities. Percentage of full-time, first cycle students receiving universal or need-based grants, 2019/2020 is from 0,1%-9,9%

Subsidized Student accommodation, transport, meals and health insurance in North Macedonia are intended to students in the first cycle of HE who leave outside the place of studying, but this type of support is also available to all other students.

The seventh Principle and its Guidelines focuses on the “**appropriate training** that can help **academic and administrative staff** to respond better to the needs of a diverse student body and to work better with colleagues of different backgrounds and/or orientations” (0 of 4 scoreboard indicators). It considers this topic from the perspective of quality assurance (QA), examining whether QA systems focus on equity and inclusion, and whether equity and inclusion inform the core values of the HEIs and/or of their study programs. Macedonian HE system doesn’t have training on diversity or inclusion required or recommended to academic and administrative staff, and has no legal requirements on HEIs in this matter. Also, there is no offer from public authorities to HEIs with regard to training on diversity or inclusion to academic and administrative staff.

Whereas the National Strategy for Education 2018-2025 identifies the “Quality Assurance and Efficiency of HE in Line with European Good Practices” (MOES p.53) as its first strategic priority in the area of HE and research, the country in the reporting year 2020/2021 doesn’t have focus on social dimension in the external quality assurance processes.

The eight principle provides that the **international mobility programs** in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that foster diversity, equity and inclusion and should particularly foster participation of students and staff from vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds.

Excluding European programs such as Erasmus Plus, in North Macedonia there is no specific top-level policy to increase physical learning mobility on students with specific characteristics. The procedure/access to mobility is the same for all students. In RNM there is no top-level monitoring of specific characteristics of students participating in physical learning mobility. Some Universities (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje (UKIM)) have information only for the number of incoming and ongoing students for credit mobility and for incoming degree mobility. No financial support in the form of public grants provided for participation of students with specific characteristics in the mobility programs. Mobility grants are targeted for students with specific characteristics only in the Erasmus plus Program. There are no measures undertaken to increase the participation of disadvantaged learners in learning mobility. Top-level authorities are advising HEIs on the use of new technologies in teaching and learning 2020/2021. Strategies of the University Ss. Cyril and

Methodius in Skopje (UKIM) (2019-2023) and University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola are aimed for: Development of ICT infrastructure and electronic services for staff and students; improving the ICT system of the University; Application of new digital technologies in teaching (online learning, digital platforms for information exchange and dissemination of knowledge, etc.), Improving and expanding the capabilities of the iKnow system and its mandatory use by all constituent units of the University; Improving the quality of teaching processes by applying ICT technologies and distance learning methods.

Higher education institutions should ensure that **community engagement in higher education** promotes diversity, equity and inclusion (ninth principle), while the external quality assurance agencies are required to monitor community engagement activities of HEIs. In 2013 a Rulebook was adopted, according to which all HEIs established their Boards for Cooperation and Trust with the Public (BCTP) aimed at ensuring quality by considering all stakeholders' opinions and recommendations for development of the institution. As a result of a Law on HE (Official Gazette 82/2018) Articles 40, 42, 122, Art. 122 (3), the Boards for Cooperation and Trust with the Public (BCTP) are formed in every HEI which have an advisory role and which comprise representatives of the Founder, relevant representatives of the Business Community from the area of the Study Programs and from the Civil Sector. Art. 48 (11) of Law on HE - Agency for Quality in HE (Board for Accreditation of HE includes one representative from the Organization of Employers, one member appointed by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MASA) and one member from the Students. Art.42 (2) of Law on HE - National Council for Higher Education and Scientific and Research Activity (Official Gazette:88/2021) (Including members of Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MASA), Business Community and Students) with aim to monitor the development of HE and its harmonization with the European and international standards. The Economic and Social Council is a tripartite body with equal representation of the GoRNM, employers' associations and trade unions (12 members in total) and has a consultative role in designing and implementation of economic and social strategies and policies including education and training. There are also six Local Economic and Social Councils where representatives of the education sector are also involved. But, there is no requirement for External quality assurance agencies to evaluate community engagement activities focused on equity and inclusion, 2020/2021.

Public authorities should engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders about how the above principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented both at national system and institutional level. Since the adoption of the Principles and Guidelines (P&G) in November 2020, in RNM there has been no top-level policy dialogue established to address questions of implementation of the Principles and Guidelines.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research team concludes that the existing challenges in this area need to be addressed by developing social dimension components of the university's and HEIs' strategies with clear indicators and measurable long-term targets. HEIs should also consider integrating the P&G indicators into their policies and practices (strategic documents, statutes, by-laws) and consider offering training on diversity or inclusion to academic and administrative staff for its better understanding and implementation. The establishment of a permanent structure of dialogue on the educational policy at the national level and a cross-sectoral body for horizontal and vertical connection can provide for greater policy efficiency and synergy with other subsystems of education and training.

The public funding needs to be attributed on the basis of equity targets and gradually increase the percentage of full-time, first cycle students receiving universal or other equity

labeled grants every year. It is also important to take other actions for improving service provision (academic, psychological support, career guidance, participation in mobility programs, use of new technologies in teaching and learning etc.) targeting low income, non-traditional learners and other under-represented groups. AQHE needs to review and revise accordingly the indicators and requirements for accreditation and evaluation of the study programs and HEIs through the prism of these equity and inclusion indicators and definitions. In this way, it will be ensured that all HEIs will collect the same data sets that will facilitate the work of monitoring them, including the community engagement activities of HEIs focused on equity and inclusion. Data collection through HEMIS and/or the information management system of the universities need to be improved to enable quick and easy identification of students with specific characteristics for the need of ad-hoc and/or other continuous measures for addressing inequalities in HE.

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