# THE FORGOTTEN FACE OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

## *BOLOGNA SÜRECİNİN UNUTULAN YÜZÜ: SOSYAL BOYUT*

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## ABSTRACT

The Bologna process is a reform process that was initiated in 1999 to create a common European Higher Education Area and continued with the participation of 48 countries as of 2019. One of the objectives of the Bologna process is to ensure the harmonization between higher education systems, increase international prestige and enable students to study and find jobs outside their own countries. An important component of the Bologna process is the concept of social dimension. The concept of Social Dimension is the process of achieving the objective of reflecting the diversity of societies in the groups of students who reach, participate in and complete higher education. The social dimension of the Bologna process aims to ensure that everyone has equal access to higher education and successfully completes his/her education. Again, in the Bologna process, student participation is seen as one of the most important components of governance in higher education. However, implementation in this area is moving slow and inadequate. In addition, there are no healthy indicators and data on which developments can be monitored. In the works of student unions in Europe, it is stated that students support the vision of a common higher education area, but do not feel as part of such a European system. Indeed, this ignorance of the social dimension turns the whole process into a hollow structural reform framework. The social dimension is the most important component representing the European tradition which prevents the Bologna Process from being a typical Americanization movement and perceives higher education as a public service. Higher education should not underestimate its centuries-old traditions and the purpose of public interest, while making changes in accordance with the conditions of the day. For this reason, studies on the social dimension in higher education should be increased and reflected in the policy area. The aim of this study is to examine the current situation related to the social dimension of the Bologna process, identify problem areas and develop policy recommendations.

**Keywords:** European Higher Education Area, Bologna Process, Student Participation, Social Dimension, Higher Education

## ÖZET

Bologna süreci ortak bir Avrupa Yükseköğretim Alanı oluşturmak amacıyla 1999 yılında başlatılan ve 2019 yılı itibarıyla 48 ülkenin katılımıyla sürdürülen bir reform sürecidir. Bologna sürecinin hedeflerinin başında yükseköğretim sistemleri arasında uyumun sağlanması, uluslararası saygınlığın artırılması ve öğrencilerin kendi ülkeleri dışında öğrenim görme ve iş bulabilme olanaklarına kavuşturulması gelmektedir. Bologna sürecinin önemli bir bileşeni de sosyal boyut kavramıdır. Sosyal Boyut kavramı, genel anlamda, yükseköğretime erişen, yükseköğretime katılan ve yükseköğretimi tamamlayan öğrenci gruplarının toplumların çeşitliliğini yansıtması hedefine ulaşma sürecidir. Bologna sürecinin sosyal boyutu herkesin yükseköğretime eşit erişim fırsatına sahip olması ve eğitimini başarılı bir şekilde tamamlamasını hedeflemektedir. Yine, Bologna sürecinde öğrenci katılımı yükseköğretimde yönetişimin en önemli bileşenlerinden biri olarak görülmektedir. Ancak, mevcut durumda gerek Avrupa'da gerekse Türkiye'de Bologna reformları kapsamında sosyal boyutun yeterince ilgi görmediği, bu alandaki uygulamaların yavaş ilerlediği ve yetersiz kaldığı görülmektedir. Ayrıca bu konudaki gelişmelerin izlenebileceği sağlıklı göstergeler ve veriler bulunmamaktadır. Sosyal boyutla ilgili faaliyet alanlarının göz ardı edilmesi, tüm süreci içi boş bir yapısal reform iskeletine döndürmektedir. Avrupa'daki öğrenci birliklerinin yaptığı çalışmalarda öğrencilerin ortak bir yükseköğretim alanı vizyonunu desteklediği, ancak kendilerini böylesi bir Avrupa sisteminin bir parçası olarak hissetmedikleri dile getirilmektedir. Oysaki sosyal boyut bir anlamda Bologna Sürecini tipik bir Amerikanlaşma hareketi olmaktan alıkoyan ve yükseköğretimi kamusal hizmet olarak gören Avrupa geleneğini temsil eden en önemli bileşendir. Yükseköğretim günün koşullarına uygun değişimleri gerçekleştirmekle birlikte, yüzyıllara dayanan geleneklerini ve kamusal yarar amacını göz ardı etmemelidir. Bu nedenle yükseköğretimde sosyal boyuta ilişkin çalışmaların artması ve politika alanına yansıtılması gerekmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Bologna sürecinin sosyal boyutuna ilişkin mevcut durumu incelemek, sorun alanlarını belirlemek ve politika önerileri geliştirmektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrupa Yükseköğretim Alanı, Bologna Süreci, Öğrenci Katılımı, Sosyal Boyut, Yükseköğretim

## 1. INTRODUCTION: BOLOGNA PROCESS AND SOCIAL DIMENSION

The Bologna process is a reform process that took its name from the Bologna Declaration signed by the ministers of higher education in 29 European countries in 1999, which is an EU member and candidate for membership. The Bologna process, which increased to 48 member countries in 2019, can be seen as a joint work of European countries and universities that want to turn globalization into an opportunity through harmonization in the field of higher education. Although not explicitly stated in the official documents, the Bologna process stems from the search for competitiveness against the global sovereignty of American higher education. When we look at the basic documents related to Bologna Process, it is seen that both global cooperation and global competition concepts are accepted as the driving force of the process. The process aims to create a European-wide higher education area (European Higher Education Area-EHEA), to ensure harmonization among higher education systems, to increase international prestige and to enable students to study and find jobs outside their home countries (YÖK, 2014).

An important component of the Bologna process is the concept of "social dimension". The social dimension aims to ensure that everyone has equal access to higher education and that he / she successfully completes his / her education. It also aims at achieving the goal of reflecting the diversity of societies in groups of students who reach, participate in and complete higher education. The idea of social dimension was integrated into the Process in the year 2001, with Prague Communique´ which declared the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility. The Communique´ also stated that "In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life" (Prague Comminique, 2001).

In fact, inclusion of the social dimension was a result of the efforts of the student representatives. In 1999, The Bologna Conference was also attended by a small group of European students – ESIB representatives. ESIB declared the Bologna Students Joint Declaration (ESIB 1999), which brought the issue of access to higher education on to the agenda. Problem of access to higher education wasn't recognized as a priority at the beginnings of the Bologna Process and ESIB made this note: "We are firmly committed to a model of quality education open to the largest number of students. [...] Therefore, the declarations must not be a means to install any kind of limitation of the access to higher education". Again, ESIB radicalized the issue of pan-European mobility which was at the very core of the Bologna Declaration by stating that "In order to build the 'European space of Higher Education', mobility should become a right for all students" (ESIB, 1999 cited in Zgaga, 2015).

Thus, as Zgaga (2015) stated "Students left Bologna with complete success, and in the expectation that ESIB will be officially invited to the next conference as a recognized consultative member. The next conference was held in May 2001 in Prague. ESIB was actively involved in it and made every effort to make the "social dimension" a new item on the list of the official Bologna action lines".

Since it's inclusion on the agenda of the Process, the importance of social dimension has been reaffirmed by all Comminiques. The Berlin Comminique (2003) stressed the need for more comparable data on the social and economic situation of students (Berlin Communique, 2003). In 2005, it was declared that the governments should employ policies to help students from socially disadvantaged groups and provide them with guidance and counselling services (Bergen Communiqué, 2005). London Communiqué underlined the need to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity therough more flexible pathways. In 2009 the Ministers agreesd that participant countries ought to set measurable targets for widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education. It was also stated that by 2020 the student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations and adequate conditions for the completion of their studies should be provided (Leuven Communiqué, 2009. ) .

The 2015 Yerevan communiqué announced the EHEA social dimension strategy in which a more socially inclusive EHEA was set as an objective (Yerevan Comminique, 2015) :

"Making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as our populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes. We undertake to widen participation in higher education and support institutions that provide relevant learning activities in appropriate contexts for different types of learners, including lifelong learning. We will improve permeability and articulation between different 3education sectors. We will enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will provide mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow. We also wish to promote the mobility of teacher education students in view of the important role they will play in educating future generations of Europeans".

In the latest communiqué (Paris Communiqué, 2018), ministers committed to improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups and mandated the BFUG to take this issue forward by the next EHEA Ministerial conference. Yet, despite the repeated articulation of social dimension objectives in various communiques, there is still unknowingness, ambiguity, ignorance and so little progress both in terms of policy making and implementation. In fact, uneven implementation has evolved into a major topic of concern and the latest Bologna Process Communiqué states that implementation remains uneven, among the countires and policy areas (Paris Communiqué 2018).

## 2. (NON) IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

Social dimension is one of the policy areas that witness this uneven implementation and non-implementation. There is no consesnsus among and within member states regarding the questions as such why improving the social dimension is important? how broad the social dimension should be thought of? what's the extent of under-represented or disadvantaged groups in HE? (Unger, 2019). When we take a brief look at the implementation of the social dimension in the Bologna process, we can see this uncertainty and negligence.

One of the actors who participates in the Bologna process but also takes a critical stance is the European Students' Union (ESU). In line with the Bologna Assessment Reports, the Association prepares reports called "Bologna with Student Eyes". The 2009 Report begins with the following interesting sentences (ESU, 2009: 7):

"The last thing ESU wants is to publish a copy-paste version of the 2007 report in this Bologna review, which we have done with the eyes of 11 million students studying in Europe. The language of the report may change slightly, the formulation of sentences may vary and the data may be refreshed. However, as always, the main messages repeat what everyone knows, creating a sense of j déjà vu de, symbolizing the slowness of progress in the Bologna process. In its 2007 report, ESU defined the Bologna process as an la a la carte "menu, in which the member states closed their eyes to the others by selecting the reform areas they wanted. In 2009, the situation has not changed. In particular, areas of activity related to the social dimension are ignored so that the whole process becomes a hollow structural reform framework".

After nearly ten years ESU, again, questions whether policy statements have all been translated into reality (ESU, 2018):

"In 2015, according to our National Unions of Students, only 8 out of 36 countries considered the Social Dimension a high priority. In 2018 the Social Dimension is viewed as more or less a high priority by 15 Governments out of 43 (and only for 3 of them as "essential"); in 15 countries out of 43 it is a priority for Higher Education Institutions, in 7 for the Rectors' Conference (or equivalent institution) and in 11 for the teachers' trade unions. The data doesn't look encouraging, and it is even less encouraging that the social

dimension is considered as either a low priority or not on the agenda at all 1 in 13 countries… shows how much governments consider the social dimension as a priority as seen with student eyes. conclusion, there is some indicative trend of improvement in acknowledging the importance of working on the social dimension across Europe, especially thanks to the work of the NUSes that have been fighting for it in various ways, but the overall situation is still absolutely insufficient".

In the following paragraphs developments regarding the main policy areas of the social dimension are examined.

## 2.1. Widening Access

One of the aims of the Bologna process is to increase the number and diversity of the student population. The main purpose of the social dimension in the Bologna process is that the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the students do not affect their access and attendance to higher education, the elimination of the barriers within this scope and the profile of the students reflect the demographic diversity. Although some progress has been made on this subject, it is seen that European higher education is still far from the goal of creating equal opportunities in access to quality higher education. The number of entry to higher education across the EHEA has increased and more women have accessed higher education since the beginning of the Process. Yet, although some imbalances in the area of gender equality have diminished, inequalities remain in many countries. Almost all countries have made improvements in women's access to higher education, but the imbalances between levels of education have not ended. The representation rate of women is still low in doctoral studies and in engineering and technical sciences (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2015: 145).

The implementation of the targets is very difficult to assess in this policy area since a common European definition of under-represented groups is absent. However, with the exemption of the Holy See, all EHEA systems have implemented at least one measure supporting the access of disadvantaged learners to higher education. Some EHEA countries do set targets and quantitative objectives regarding the entry and/or participation of specific under-represented groups and do systematically collect and monitor information on students' drop-out and completion (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018, cited in Vögle, 2019; p.424). Yet, as the 2018 Bologna implementation report also states, much has yet to be done to follow up on this commitment and so far only a few countries have developed and implemented distinct policies on widening participation. There are still significant inequalities among the students with different socio economic backgrounds, as stated in the latest Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018: 15):

"Social dimension challenges have accompanied the Bologna Process throughout its existence. Yet, disadvantaged learners still face access barriers to higher education: students from low and medium educated families are strongly under-represented, and are more likely to enter higher education with a delay; gender imbalances, if improving slightly, still persist and remain marked in some discipline areas with significant implications for the labour market and society; and life-long learning is not a reality for learners in many countries. In addition to barriers to access, disadvantaged students also face difficulties in completing higher education, dropping out in higher proportions. Despite evidence of these trends over a number of years, and commitments re-iterated in several ministerial communiqués, only a few countries have introduced measures in recent years to improve the conditions for under-represented groups to access and complete higher education".

## 2.2. Student Participation

Student participation has been declared as one of the most important components of governance in higher education. Student participation was introduced in the process in 2001 Prague Ministerial Summit and has been included in all Bologna declarations since then. In the decision-making processes, student participation is limited to the advisory function, and students' opinions are generally consulted. However, students are excluded from the decision-making process on critical

issues. Again, in spite of the dramatic changes in quality assurance since the beginning of the Bologna process, there is still considerable progress to be made in terms of student participation in external quality assurance processes. In addition, EHEA countries have widely varied in terms of participation in international quality assurance processes. Despite efforts to strengthen participation at European level, student participation at the institutional level is not at the expected level (ESU, 2018). This raises the question of whether the policies in the European Higher Education Area find sufficient response in universities. In other words, question marks arise about the interaction and harmony of European-level policies and institutional-level policies (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2015: 145-146; ESU, 2018).

## 2.3. Student Support Services

As of the year 2018, in the majority of European countries student support services are partly taken into account and suffer from underfunding and neglection. Student grants and scholarships are still the most common way to support students who are regarded as eligible for financial support in accordance with the criteria on the financial situation of their families. Yet, this model is not enough to ensure access and participation in higher education for students of all backgrounds. In addition, scholarships do not cover the needs of the students to continue their education and huge numbers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded due to the lack of funding(ESU, 2018: 32).

In 2015 student survey held by the ESU, housing was specified by students as the number one problem and it remains one of the most problematic areas in the year 2018. Students demand more support for mental health, since such problems leads to exclusion and stigmatization in the society and requires more attention in higher education institutions. Yet, students state that such services often lack resources in universities. Similarly, students with disabilities and students with chronic illnesses are left out of the higher education system, which will be explored in more depth later, due to the lack of resources to meet all individual needs. In 2018, in general, although student support services have increased in 13 countries out of 43, additional investments are still not enough since in many cases small increases are outweighed by much bigger cuts to other services. In addition, only 14 countries have dropouts prevention measures in place at the national level, 21 have something at the institutional or faculty level and only 16 have measures at the program l (ESU, 2018: 33).

*Mobility*

One of the most important objectives of the Bologna process is to increase student mobility and quantitative objectives have been determined in this context. By 2020, it is aimed that at least 20% of the graduates of the EHEA have had a short-term experience abroad. Currently, it is not possible to make a full measure of achieving this goal, but it appears that the barriers to mobility have not yet been overcome (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2015: 145-146; ESU, 2018). Although mobility signals a positive impression at the first insight, it might rise the inequality among students. Within the scope of exchange programs, a certain amount of loans are granted for students, yet usually additional spending is required to cover the expenses of living abroad. Thus, students having more financial resources could attain such programs more easily. Moreover, the majority of poor students do not have the language skills necessary to participate in the exchange programs. Thus, exchange programs may turn into another source of inequality as long as they lack additional support mechanisms for the poor and disadvantaged students (Okçabol, 2011; Gümüş & Kurul, 2011). Bologna's model of mobility also, of course, encourages and supports spatial mobility in higher education within Europe. Indeed, this is one of its key contributions to the European project. However, as Powell and Finger argue (2013: 270), it ignores 'the social selectivity of spatial mobility'. In the Bologna declarations the benefits and effects of spatial mobility have been largely 'taken for granted', while 'both its social selectivity and its effects on social mobility' have been 'understated'.

To sum up, despite some progress the latest studies show that the targets are far from being achieved nearly in all countries regarding the social dimension of the Bologna Process. In Turkey, one of the

members of the Bologna process, the situation is not much different. Although policies on the social dimension are being implemented, a much wider social policy approach is needed to ensure equality ragarding access and success in higher education.

## 3. SOCIAL DIMENSION IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Turkey became a member of the Bologna Process in 2001 and the Turkish higher education has witnessed a new reform agenda within the European Higher Education Area. Within the scope of the Bologna process, which gained momentum after 2004, significant developments have been achieved. Regarding the implementation of social dimension in Turkey, despite some positive developments, there are significant challenges in many areas.

One of the significant studies on the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area within the scope of the Bologna Process is the Eurostudent project carried out on a European scale. On the basis of national student surveys, the Eurostudent Project matches the ability to collect, analyze, compare and provide reliable data on the socio-economic conditions of students in Europe to help relevant institutions in the participating countries determine their educational policies and / or improve their existing policies. Turkey has been involved in this project from the year 2007 onwards (YÖK, 2014).

An important component of the social dimension is the provision of equal opportunities in access to higher education. Regarding equal opportunity, there is no discrimination in terms of transparency of the legal aspects of the application process. Yet, it should not be underestimated that socioeconomic conditions lead to inequalities in access and completion of higher education. With the establishment of new universities access has been increased. In addition, distance education programs have provided opportunuties for different student populations. Removal of tuition fees was an important policy to increase equal opportunities in access to higher education. Yet, like many European countries there is no suffcent mechanism for monitoring access regarding disadvantaged groups. Thus, who remains outside the system and who reaches to high quality higher education could not be analyzed. There is also no detailed data and study on the dropout rates and reasons. Despite the affords for decreasing gender inequalities, there are still imbalances and glass ceilings (Erdoğan, 2015).

The rapid expansion of universities without the necessary infrastructure leads to insufficient student support services in many universities. In the provision of these services, due to the increasing tendency of privatization and inequality among students leads to a sharper exposure in the university environment. Particularly in newly established universities, physical conditions have not yet reached a sufficient level, and it is necessary to improve facilities such as accommodation, food, transportation, library and internet in order to improve students' living conditions and increase their success. In terms of consultancy services, the mechanisms of academic counseling and support of students' social activities seem to be insufficient in practice, although most of them are found in universities. Professional counseling has not yet become widespread.

One of the cornerstones of the Social Dimension is student participation. Student participation means that students participate in higher education management and take part as "equal stakeholders in decision-making processes. Student participation in Turkish universities is ensured by the establishment of student councils and the participation of council representatives in commissions on university administration. However, the existence of formal regulations on student participation does not guarantee adequate and effective participation and there are many shortcomings in practice. First of all, the student representative does not have the right to vote in the senate which means that they could not participate in important decisions as equal stakeholders. The councils do not have independent budgets and physical facilities, as well. Election and participation process does not function properly due to problems such as the lack of sufficient student support for participation in student council elections, the lack of awareness of student representatives and university students about the Bologna Process and the opportunities created by them, and the political impacts on the functioning of student councils.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The social dimension of the Bologna process aims to ensure that everyone has equal access to higher education and that she completes her studies successfully. In this regard, the social dimension has been the representative of the demands for equity and inclusion from all groups in society. With the inclusion of social dimension, the issue of higher education as a public good and public responsibility was introduced to the Bologna Process by students. The "public" character of higher education has a close relationship with the social dimension at a principle level (Yağcı, 2012: 94). Yet, both research findings and reports on this issue reveal that the persisting gaps between policy and practice, intentions and reality, rhetoric and concrete actions. First of all, widening access and success has been one of the main ideas of social dimension, yet most of the EHEA countries follow only mainstream strategies instead of systematically targeted policies to support clearly identified underrepresented groups. Data collection and monitoring systems are lacking in many countries which makes it difficult to design appropriate targeted policies. Again, many countries suffer from the difficulties resulting from socio-economic background of students and inadequate secondary education. Rapid rise in the refugee population and needs of refugee students is another problematic issue in many countries (Curaj et al., 2018: 7).

As recommended in the Social Dimension Strategy of EHEA in Yerevan in 2015 (EHEA, 2015) there are further steps that all national governments should take to ensure the implementation of social dimension. These include; setting up a coherent and inclusive process, setting general objectives, analysing the current position, identifying data gaps and ways to overcome them, identifying barriers to access, participation and completion in higher education, contrasting existing measures with identified barriers, developing strategies to overcome these barriers, implementing a follow-up process and set specific targets, restarting the process.

In fact, the social dimension is not necessarily more complicated or dependent on the national systems than the other action areas of the Bologna Process (Yağcı, 2012: 221). Yet, when it comes to the social dimension, a rhetoric change is needed first. As Yağcı stated in her disseration on the social dimension of Bologna Process, (Yağcı, 2012: 218-220): The social dimension is not a priority issue of the Bologna Process. A common frame of action for the social dimension is missing. The emphasis on underrepresented groups is the main distinctive feature of the social dimension; albeit, the means to enhance their participation are mostly missing. Monitoring of the social dimension is insufficient. The lack of a common action frame to be translated into national policy agendas can be considered as a sign of its treatment as a "nice sentence" to confirm without proposing any obligation to take action. That is why its goals are commonly agreed and feasible policies are not produced to achieve these agreed goals. As such it can be concluded that the social dimension functions as a fig leaf in the Bologna Process, a noble idea to agree on but not an urgent issue to act on. Also for the countries the social dimension is a low policy item.

It can be considered that the first reform studies to achieve the objectives of the Bologna Process give priority to issues other than the "Social Dimension" and "Student Participation". However, a European Higher Education Area that is not strongly supported by the Social Dimension and Student Participation cannot achieve its objectives even if improvements in other main areas have been successfully completed. These two concepts are essential elements in achieving the goal of creating a democratic, participatory, fair and competitive information society through the Bologna Process. From a participatory democracy point of view, it is unthinkable that students who are directly or indirectly affected by all the decisions taken about higher education do not have a say in the relevant decision mechanisms. Again, within the framework of democratic rules, higher education institutions have a special importance in creating a society where differences live in harmony. In the formation of the European Higher Education Area, the supporting and integrating role of these two elements in the development of European societies should not be ignored (Kurtoğlu & Güven, 2008).

In fact, ignorance of the social dimension may turn the whole Process into a hollow structural reform framework. In the reports of ESU, it is stated that students support the vision of European higher

education area, but do not feel themselves as a real part of such a system. The social dimension should be perceived as a crucial component of the Bologna Process which prevents the process from being a typical Americanization movement. It could also be employed as a reflection of the European higher education tradition that stresses on the "public interest" mission. Higher education should not underestimate its centuries-old traditions and the mission of public interest, while making changes in accordance with the current realities.

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