

## Transcript

### Michelle Claville

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening everyone. Welcome to the first of our 2025 CHEA/CIQG webinar series. It is our pleasure to have you join us to start the series for the year. This particular topic that we will discuss as you've seen from our ads is entitled "Equity and Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Progress Challenges and Impact." From our last report, we have about 200 registrants representing 29 different countries. We welcome you and we invite you to input your questions in the Q and A section of your Zoom module. Please feel free to ask your questions there and at the end of the presentations then please expect that we'll have some discussions around your questions. With that said, it is my pleasure to introduce our moderator for today's webinar. His name is Dr. Jamil Salmi and you've seen the ad so you know that he's a global tertiary education expert and we also have the pleasure of working with him in the capacity of being a CIQG Advisory Council member. In addition to his, including in his vast accomplishments, he served as editor for the book of case studies that documents innovative equity promotion initiatives at the institutional level across the world. And that particular work was called "Transforming Lives." Thank you again for joining us. And now I ask Dr. Jamil Salmi to join us. The floor is yours, Sir.

### Jamil Salmi

Thank you, Michelle. A very good morning, good afternoon or evening to all of you who have joined wherever you may come from. It's my great pleasure to introduce the two other panelists who have joined us today. Dr. Nadine Zacharias, who is the founder and managing director of Equity by Design. It's a specialist consulting firm on student equity strategy and program evaluation, and she will be presenting the case of Australia. And our second panelist is Dr. Maria Kelo, who is the director of the Institutional Development Unit at the European University Association, EUA, and previously director of ENQA, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. I will start by introducing the topic and then we will move on right after that to the presentation, first of the Australians' experience and then the European experience in the context of the Bologna Process. I have a few slides to share.

If you indulge me, I'm going to bring them up right away. I trust that you can see my slides. I used to be a university professor in Morocco, my home country. And back then the tradition was that within your classroom you were like the captain of a ship. Nobody else had any right to interfere or intervene. It was God and you. But that's very different from the tradition in the U.S. in the UK and the commonwealth countries where there was a strong tradition already for many decades of external QA. And then as we will be here from Dr. Maria in the context of the Bologna Process in Europe, it was introduced and has developed very quickly and we've seen a similar evolution in other regions. And when I used to work at the World Bank, I participated, together with our colleagues from UNESCO, in supporting the launch, the creation and launch of regional networks on bringing together all the quality assurance agencies in these regions.

And I call that the quiet QA revolution. Why quiet? Because unlike reforms in funding or governance that are often met with opposition, this transformation of the landscape with introduction of QA was very peaceful even. And it has continued. Over the past two decades, we've seen an evolution from input- based to looking at results at student learning outcomes, employment results, also moving away

from the single focus on education to research and also the third mission of universities. We've seen the development of cross-border QA and accreditation and more recently an emphasis on integrity and ethics. Then the look at an integration of the social dimensions and looking very closely at the quality of opportunities, which is the topic of today's webinar. Three, four years ago, the U.S.-based foundation, Lumina asked me to do a study on equity policies across the world and I was able to study 71 countries and looking at the various instruments they use to promote equity in higher education.

And at that time, to my surprise, I realized that a growing number of countries and their table summarizes the results, have introduced equity elements and criteria as part of their QA processes. We will share the slides with the participants, so I will not go into the details. And more recently in 2022 together with CHEA and CIQG, we launched a survey that we had respondents from 37 countries. And here again, the quality assurance agencies told us 26 of them out of the 37 that equity was part of their quality assurance process and criteria. And unfortunately in recent years we've seen that our world has become more polarized and all of the sudden we see a backlash against equity. I'm going to say a few words. This takes three forms, exclusion of targeted groups. The worst case perhaps is what has happened to Afghani to women in Afghanistan three, four years ago.

There has been an outright ban. Female students are not allowed to go to universities anymore and we think, is it only Afghanistan? In fact, it's very scary to see that even in the U.S. recently, the governor of the state of Florida appointed to a university board a gentleman whose life crusade has been to say that women should stay at home, be only mothers, and not pursue higher education. So if I were to share the same slide a year from now, maybe it would look a little bit different. We've seen also a mission of equity promotion programs in several countries. It started in Hungary and more recently with the United States Supreme Court decision to ban affirmative action. We've seen a dismantling of DEI programs--diversity, equity and inclusion--which is the acronym used in the U.S. We've seen public subsidies for poor students enrolled in private universities eliminated.

And since January 20th in the U.S., DEI has been passed by across the United States. So those of you who may be working in office dedicated to a diversity and equity, you can imagine that from one day to the other, these offices are being closed. And the last manifestation is through force prohibition, censorship, book banning and indoctrination. So it started again in Russia, in Hungary, where gender studies were eliminated, and moving to the U.S. where Black studies critical race theory, decolonialization are now under scrutiny. We've seen book banning in Hungary, in the U.S., in Iran, bringing back terrifying pictures from the past. We have censorship with words like diversity, equity and inclusion are forbidden in the U.S. In fact, the more than 200 words including women and female have been banned. Books like "Harry Potter" are so banned in both U.S. schools and a few U.K. schools I'm told recently of Florida University started to throw in the garbage hundreds of books that they don't like, reminding us of these terrifying pictures from the Nazi era.

And then we can see also Mr. Elon Musk aligning himself with this Nazi ideology. What has been the impact of the backlash? First, restrictions to academic freedom. Second, restrictions to institutional autonomy. It's very frightening to see that the independence of accreditation, at least in the U.S., has been targeted. Some states have already decided that universities should change accreditors. And we see signs of what some people call anticipatory obedience, where well-respected prestigious accreditation agency like AACSB, ABET for engineering, the Psychology Accreditation Board, have

volunteered to eliminate DEI from their accreditation criteria. It's created also an atmosphere of hostility and fear. In a famous speech in 2021, Mr. Vance declared that "University is the enemy." That is a quote. Last, we see also, most likely we will see a loss of prestige and attractiveness in the universities where this is taking place. People are already talking about science refugees.

University of Marseille in France has offered to fund up to 20 scholars from the U.S. who, and they've already received more than 250 applications. Last but not least, we see what I call equity hallucinations. You may have be familiar with the concept of AI hallucinations, where AI offers you the answers that sound reasonable but are totally wrong. So in the countries where the LGBT community has been target, because we associate the colors of the rainbow with this movement, now we are not allowed to show these colors anymore. You have to show it in black and white. So when I'm showing you this picture of my beautiful granddaughter, Ryan, while I'm not allowed in some countries, I would have to transform it in this way. This very cute sea animal called the seahorse has been banned in a few biology books in the U.S. schools because it's in this species.

It's the male who becomes pregnant. And that is deemed to be complicated, too complicated for young people to accept this concepts of a different gender approach. So it's being banned and perhaps the most recent example of this friendly that I have observed is the decision of the U.S. government to ban any pictures of reference to this airplane that carried the atomic bomb that created, that was so devastating in Hiroshima on 6th of August, 1945. Why is this history event being erased? Because the name of the plane was "Enola Gay." Because of the association with the LGBT community, somebody thought that it should disappear. That's very stupid because the name "Gay" comes from the, it's the maiden name of the mother of the pilot of that airplane. Now to finish, how can we resist the backlash through quality assurance? The first imperative is to keep framing a strong body of evidence to demonstrate why you need to have equity.

If you look at attainment rate in high education in the U.S., this graph shows very clearly that very large chunks of the population, Native American, Hispanic Americans, Black Americans, do not have the same opportunities, are underrepresented groups. And you cannot have a democratic country if that continues. Quality assurance agencies need to continue presenting equity not only as a social justice, but also as a quality imperative. You cannot have academic excellence if a big proportion of your population is left behind. There are lots of studies demonstrating that diversity boosts critical thinking and academic performance, hence the need to embed inclusion in the core quality standards of accreditation and evaluation in higher education and to keep linking equity to broader institutional goals. So my last measure, should we live in fear or can we still hope that quality assurance can be a very positive instrument? And we leave you with two quotes.

First, what is worrisome as Michelle Goldberg, opinion columnist, told us is today in some countries "The nature of reality is itself in deep dispute," but I think we can still hope and remember the wise words of Shakespeare who told us a few centuries ago that you know, it's up to us to stand up and resist. "What's past is prologue; What to come, in yours and my discharge." And I'll finish with this quote from Arthur Chan, DEI VP at Planned Parenthood in California, "Diversity is a fact of life. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. (and) Belonging is the outcome." Without further ado, we are going to move through the Australian case studies. I'm going to invite Nadine to speak.

**Dr. Nadine Zacharias**

Thank you so much, Jamil, and for your kind introduction; it says I'm sharing screen. So Jamil, I'm looking for your visuals. Can you see it on the...? Fabulous. Thank you so much. Hello everyone and good evening. It is almost 10:00 PM in Melbourne, Australia where I join you from. I would like to as is customary here, acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which I live and work the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging for their care of the land. I'm going to share you the Australian case study and I'm going to do this in two parts. I'm going to give you a bit of context on how we are conceptualizing equity and inclusion in Australian higher education policy. And then I'm going to tell you a tale of sticks and carrots to improve outcomes for equity groups across the Australian tertiary education system.

And I'm going to talk about some of the key tools that our federal government deploys to make change. Similarly to the U.S., we are a federated country and higher education policy sits very much at the commonwealth level. Like Canada, Australia is also, you know, the King. King Charles is also our head of state. So what is the policy problem we're trying to solve? And I'm going to refer you here to the final report of the Australian University's Accord, which was launched in early 2024. It started from the finding that 90% of jobs by 2050 will require post school qualifications. So the panel recommended and a tertiary attainment target of 80% of which 55% are to be at university. That represents a 10 percentage point increase. So at the moment, 45% of 25- to 34-year olds in Australia have a university degree, a bachelor-level degree. And so the intent is to increase that by 10 percentage points and increase participation in vocational education.

And the slogan was "Growth through Equity." It's not my favorite, but this is what they went for. So the recommendation by the panel was to ensure that the new focus on increasing the number of higher education students, which will involve tapping into students who are traditionally underrepresented at university, is matched by a focus on the success of these students. And you'll see this in quite a few of the tools that I'm going to introduce you to. It's always access to and success in higher education. So they're the dual goals of the same agenda. Nobody wants to create a revolving door where we attract students to higher education but lose them just as quickly and lose them often with student debt and a bad experience. Who are these underrepresented groups? Australia has six national groups that we often call the equity groups. These four attract funding under federal government programs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are first peoples, people from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds.

And we are looking here at the bottom 25% of geographical areas across the country, people from regional or remote areas. Australia is a very similar landmass to the U.S. but has only 27 million people. So just over 10% of the U.S. population just to give you a sense of the sparsity of the population. So they're very much concentrated along the coast, particularly off the east coast. And the further you go into the center, the sparser the population, and then people with disability who, are quite broadly defined in Australia. So it includes physical disabilities but also mental health issues, neurological conditions. So it's really quite a comprehensive definition of disability. I'll show you what that looks like graphically on this slide. So how have we been thinking about the problem in Australia? We are thinking about it in through the lens of underrepresentation and thus structural disadvantage.

So if you plot the four groups across the graph, what it gives you is participation ratios for these equity groups with one representing parity. So if we had straight lines and they were very close to one, it would mean that students from equity groups participate in proportion to their share of the general population. You can see that...like let's take disability out for a moment, you can see that for First Nation students, regional and remote and lower SES students, they are way below parity. So the most well-represented are students from regional and remote areas, then First Nation students and then students from lower SES backgrounds that have really hovered between the low forties and we briefly made it into the fifties.

So that cohort is the most underrepresented of the four students with disabilities is really interesting. And they've reached out to a colleague who is much more expert on this than I am. And he said the problem is two-fold. One is the inconsistent collection of the numerator. So universities are not particularly good at counting students with disability because it's a self-disclosure process. And then there's also a lack of a current reference value for the denominator. So the share of the population with disability also is prone to definitional issues and this is why you see this wild increase and then decrease in the curve between 2020 and 2023, which is when we transitioned to a new higher education data collection tool. And they haven't quite ironed out the issues with this yet. So we beg forgiveness. This is the national data, so this is not, I'm just representing what we got in the national data, but please know that there is issues with this.

Okay, this is a slide I've shared with Jamil and I've since then shared really often because what we can show here is the structural nature of the disadvantage. What that shows is the higher education completion rates, the eight-year completion rates of different student cohorts. So the top line, the index score of zero, which is the students who are not part of the four equity groups that this report looked at, have a completion rate of almost 72%. The next level down. So where a student has one equity indicator is down to 65.5%, so already a significant drop. And those two groups together are almost 90 or are just over 90% of the general cohort in Australian higher education. And so the next 10% that have two or more equity group memberships, this is where you can really see the impact on completion rates. So for two groups under 60% and then three or four well under 50% completion rates.

And so you can really track it. It almost turns into predictive analytics that the cumulative effect of being part of multiple equity groups really bears down in completion rates. So this is the context, this is how we are looking at it. It is under representation and you'll see this in our tail of carrots and sticks. So we are interested in the tools by the federal government for improving outcomes from underrepresented student groups. Okay, here are the sticks. This is the regulator in the form of the tertiary education quality and standards authority. It's a statutory body, so Australia does quality quite differently. So Michelle had to explain to me how CHEA works because this is quite different in Australia where we have one body that is the regulator and it is funded by the federal government. And then we have a very new body called the National Student Ombudsman.

I'm just going to very briefly share with you their brief, but it literally started taking complaints in February. So it's a very, very new entity. So my focus here is on the TEQSA guidance note on diversity and equity. So what constitutes diversity and equity? It is again, you can see about historically disadvantaged or underrepresented student groups or groups protected in equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation. And right at the end of this section I'm going to show you the different pieces

of legislation, but we are also talking about age, about sex and sexuality. So there's slightly different groupings to the four I've already talked about. And the imperative for the universities is to create equivalent opportunities for access and success in higher education. So again, you can see that word combination many times over and the standards do not refer to the appointment of staff. This is going to be relevant a little bit further on.

So the standard itself don't tell institutions how to go about the implementation of the standard, but other tools do. And the risk to quality I thought that was really interesting and worth sharing. So the agency is very much concerned about provider failure to implement their plans for diversity and equity from the perspective of the student poor experience, lower retention and completion rates, and for the provider, the threat of legal action and reputational damage. So again, providers are expected to mitigate the risk to students who experience disadvantage or are from underrepresented groups. And the tools there are appropriate support and a suitable learning environment, which is inclusive, and other standards delve into this in quite more detail. So here's the principle standard, which is section 2.2 and is literally called diversity and equity, sets up three broad requirements that apply to all providers in all courses of study and all students including high degree by research students.

So the first one is around institutional policies, practices, approaches to teaching and learning and that they are inclusively designed and with the intent to create equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of student background. Then there are specific considerations for First People for First Nation students, and the third one is around participation progress and completion rates by identified subgroups and that universities monitor them systematically across the student life cycle. And that's where the new data collection system comes in, that as we've already established, has a few issues still to be ironed out. There's more detail in other standards. There's one on admission, there's one on information for perspective and current students, orientation and progression, well-being and safety, learning resources and educational support. So if you're interested you can really delve down much deeper. I have on the slides the link to the website, the TEQSA website.

So all of this material is straight off the website and they're really great in referring you out to the other standards. And so you can really look quite deeply if you're interested and this is your area of work into how the intent of the standards gets operationalized. So again, a bit more of a summary. So what are these standards trying to do? Providers are expected to consider and plan to meet the learning and support needs of all their students. And I love this opening statement, all providers can expect that there will be diversity in the backgrounds and characteristics of their student body. So in other words, please design for that, don't wish it away, don't deny it, just plan for it and design for it. However, the standards are also really clear that providers do not need to achieve representational equity. So we are not aiming for every university to have 25% of the cohorts from low SES backgrounds, 2.5% First Nation students, almost 30% students from regional and remote areas because the diversity of the different institutions and the different institutional groupings are very different.

So we have the equivalent of the Ivy Leagues, the Russell Group, they're the group of eight in the Australian case and they're usually in metropolitan areas in the big cities and the diversity of their cohort looks very different. If you go into the regions, you get up to 70-80% of the cohort being from an equity group. So they are just so different and the standards make allowances for that. However, to be considered and accredited as a university, the provider must demonstrate a commitment to social

responsibility and its activities. And then here's the bit that goes along with institutional diversity is that TEQSA's not prescriptive in the extent to which providers commit resources to actually put their plans in place. And again, I really like that the bottom line is that any provider that admits students without considering how all students will have equivalent opportunities for academic success and an appropriate learning environment is likely to face multiple difficulties in meeting the high education standards framework. So it is really plain that institutions have to design for diversity and they can't plead ignorance or denial to the regulator. I'm conscious of time, so I'll move through that quickly. Here's the relevant federal legislation with regard to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination in Australia and then there's various state and territory legislation as well.

Okay, a quick word on the National Student Ombudsman. It really came out of quite a comprehensive and shocking report by the National Union of Students on gender-based violence and the prevalence of gender-based violence on campus. And the current minister was incensed by this and really wanted to do something meaningful about it. And so this is where the idea of the Ombudsman was born. As I said, the Ombudsman has been taking complaints since the 1st of February this year and you can see how students can complain about other elements that TEQSA is concerned about, such as course administration, teaching provision and facilities, and here's where the staffing comes in. So is there sufficient staffing? Are there appropriate waiting times to access support and services? This is where this comes in and for the purposes of our conversation, reasonable adjustments for students with disability or experiencing special circumstances and that has sent some shivers down my spine, who knows a bit how universities are dealing with what we often call learning access plans or equitable access plans and their implementation.

So there is a lot of room for improvement and I would think that we will hear quite a bit about the support of students with disability. Okay, let's have a look at the carrots. So what does the federal government do to incentivize Australian universities to improve equity and diversity? I'm going to focus particularly on two tools that I'm very familiar with. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program or the HEPPP, and the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework--the SEHEEF. You can already tell we have gorgeous acronyms in Australia and they are part of our vernacular. So this is a slide I shared a little while ago, I won't go into detail. All I wanted to call out to you is that Australia has been in this space for almost two decades. So in 2008 the predecessor to the Australian University's Accord was the Bradley Report of Higher Education and that really kicked off very comprehensive reform and higher education.

So in 2010, the HEPP was introduced alongside demand-driven funding where universities could enroll as many students as they could attract and were funded for it by the Australian government. And that created massive growth, particularly around students from low SES areas, First Nation students and students with disability. And then there were, so the rest of the years sort of charts the various attempts to reform policy and make changes that were reasonably unsuccessful until 2020 when a package called Job Ready Graduates was passed, made some changes to the HEPPP and particularly to the pricing of courses. And we are still trying to unravel this, so the current government has not done anything about it and we are literally begging them to because it's resulted in some quite distorted outcomes for students. I won't go into this just to say we've been in this for almost two decades in 2024, as I've already raised, the most recent review report was released and we are looking towards needs-based funding.

I'm going to come back to this at the end of my presentation. So quickly, the the HEPPP funds universities to implement outreach strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses and then to implement supports to improve participation, retention and completion. So again, it comes back to that access and success. You're going to see that in everything that Australian, the government and the institutions do. Here's the three target groups that you already know about. The grants are made to eligible higher education providers. We call them Table A providers. So they are the public universities. There's very few private institutions in Australia and they do not in the main get equity funding. The exception are the two Catholic universities, who are also eligible and Table A providers. Since 2010, the Australian government has spent more than 2 billion dollars on institutional allocations alone. So this is over a billion dollars U.S. over 15 years.

In addition to those 2 billion, there were competitive grants for cross institutional and strategic initiatives and the government has funded research, provided research and operational funding for the Australian Center for Student Equity and Success in Higher Education. Again, I really commend you if you're interested in this and research in student equity, check out the ACCESS website. I'll drop it into the, oh no, I have it. I have it on the slide. So [www.accessacs.edu.au](http://www.accessacs.edu.au), they are treasure trove of resources around equity research for many years. The other one closely related, as I said, is the SEHEEF. So despite all of this funding that the federal government has provided, there's very little quite limited evidence still around what works and what particular interventions really shifted in terms of application by young people to universities or their success. So the SEHEEF aims to increase our understanding of contribution and attribution of the HEPPP. So impact evaluation and really showing not just correlation but causation between equity initiatives and student outcomes is a stated objective of the federal government. So there's university-level activity both through continuous quality improvement, which the federal department coordinates, and then impact evaluation, both quantitative and empirical and theory based, and that synthesis of the findings and also the incentives for that kind of research is undertaken by ACCESS.

Jamil wanted me to quickly talk about the backlash against DEI In Australia, the high-level summary is nothing dramatic yet. So what you've seen is like I've inverted, this is the picture is meant to be a progress, you know progress up? And at the moment, you know like we are all still hanging there crossing our fingers and toes that nothing major tumbles. There are a few signs of backlash. The most visible and discouraging was a no vote in a referendum like a national referendum to recognize Indigenous people as our First People in the Constitution. That got defeated almost two years ago and it was like a significant blow to equal rights, equal rights conversation in Australia. There's also criticism of big corporations taking a stand on DEI issues. The previous CEO of Qantas, our national airline was very visible. He was a gay man or he's a gay man and he was very visible on marriage equality and got shot down for it by the conservative quarters.

There's also some winding back off DEI policies in companies that are headquartered in the U.S. or have major exposure to the U.S. There's also a noticeable cooling of support for gender-affirming care in children following the CAS report. And so there's now similar explorations at state level in Australia and finally this morning, and I couldn't believe it, there was questioning of women in the military, particularly in elite military units and the shadow defense minister claiming that it was all about excellence and we now have the same standards for everybody admitted into elite military units. So all of this, the talk is it's definitely more subtle than what is going on in the U.S. and other places, but it is



certainly simmering under the surface. Okay, and this is my final slide, those of you nervously watching the clock. So what is the future of equity in higher education?

It really depends on the outcomes of our federal election. So we are electing a new federal government next Saturday. If the current government, which is a labor government, so a more left-of-center, if they get reelected, they will continue to progress the implementation of the Australian Universities' Accord, including the introduction of needs-based funding for underrepresented student groups with a focus on First Nations and lower SES students. So this is a rejigging, a slight rejigging off the HEPPP. There's additional funding, quadrupled funding for students with disability that has started this year and there will be (unintelligible) for students on regional university campuses. If the opposition gets selected, and the future is much more uncertain in terms of what happens for the students or policy settings, the funding incentives for universities. But I do want to call out that Australia, I hope I've demonstrated that has a really longstanding and largely bipartisan commitment to addressing educational disadvantage and really quite strong legislative and regulatory mechanisms. So I hope that they won't be able to be dismantled quickly even if we get a change in government. And I'll hand it back to Jamil.

### **Jamil Salmi**

I was going to say that when I did a study on the 71 countries, I identified a few champions in the world and Australia was one of them and you can understand after having listened to Nadine's presentation why it is so. Now we move to another important part of the world, which is Europe, a huge part and I would like to invite Maria to tell us about quality assurance and the social dimension of high education in Europe.

### **Dr. Maria Kelo**

Thank you very much, Jamil. Hello everybody. I will try to catch up a little bit with the time. So I will go quite quickly. I hope there's always the promise that I will be quick and then there's so much to say that let's see how it goes. So a couple of qualifiers before I really start is that I work for the European University Association, which is a representative organization of almost 900 universities in Europe across the whole wider Europe, which is the Bologna Process Europe, much bigger than the European Union. European Union is 27 countries. The European Higher Education Area covers almost 50 higher education systems. So also countries like Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan or Armenia, also Iceland, Ukraine, et cetera. So a very wide range of different countries across Europe. So my experience really comes from the European context. I will not give you any such detail insights into one system like we just heard now from Australia, but kind of what we think about social dimension in higher education in the European and Bologna Process context.

So in that regard, just a couple of words. So that Bologna Process is this kind of intergovernmental higher education reform process that started in 1999 and the higher education ministers of all these different countries meet every 2, 3, 4 years to discuss priorities for higher education reforms. And while those reform agendas started as what is needed for Europe to be more attractive and more competitive globally in terms of higher education and to facilitate international mobility and cooperation. Now the agendas also include things that are not strictly speaking connected to mobility and international dimension of higher education such as indeed the social dimension. So we use that word in the European discourse social dimension that really covers all the different dimensions of equity, access, fairness, non-discrimination, but also support of different disadvantaged groups, et cetera.

I think another important point to mention here is that in the European context, the role of the stakeholders is very, very substantial. So the Bologna Process is an intergovernmental process. So that's of course representatives of different ministries in charge of higher education in the countries, but many of the tools used and adopted in the Bologna Process including, and very importantly, those of quality assurance are created by the stakeholders that might also kind of color--tint, if you like--how we see and how we approach the social dimension. So it's maybe a little bit less practically directed or politically directed and more maybe ethically or some kind of ideologically almost, guided discourse. But of course it's all interlinked and mixed. So when did we have had the social dimension in the Bologna Process in different forms and shapes along the years of course, but an important milestone was that the Rome Ministerial Conference, which of course didn't meet in Rome but online because it was in 2020, adopted a set of principles and guidelines to strengthen the social dimension of higher education in the European Higher Education Area based on important understanding of the social dimension.

And they also, these ministers took a commitment to implement these principles and guidelines in their systems. The principles and guidelines were developed in the previous Bologna Process working period. So the previous five year, well, no two years, sorry, and since the Paris Ministerial Conference, but also for the previous three years through a specific working group where there were stakeholder representatives, ministry representatives and other experts. So this kind of working group worked for years and prepared these principles and guidelines.

So we have that set since 2020 and then we had a mandate in 2024 in the Tirana-Albanian ministerial conference to report back on how things are going and the ministers in that occasion, so about a year ago reconfirmed the importance of building an inclusive European Higher Education Area by 2030 where students are fully supported at all stages of their learning parts through policies for accessing and completing higher education, irrespective of background and the starting point as well. They also endorse a document that was kind of a more practical implementation stemming from the principles and guidelines that were adopted in 2020 and it's called "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles." So we have the principles and then we need to make sure how we measure with and to what extent countries and systems, et cetera meet the expectations of those principles. And so that's kind of the framework for the measuring or monitoring of those principles in the European Higher Education Area.

So it's quite a new thing, but it's a very, very comprehensive thing. I think it's dozens and dozens of pages of indicators and descriptors. So it's a very comprehensive approach. It covers a lot of things kind of student well-being is very important including the physical, psychological, social and economic aspects of that well-being. But also kind of acknowledging the current, particularly burning issues related to the socioeconomic challenges that we have, housing, funding of students, et cetera, which are really creating issues for us in many European countries, particularly in the capital cities or around more popular and populous higher education institutions.

There was a commitment to tackle the challenges by ensuring accessible students support services, inclusive learning environments, gender equality and measures to support students in covering indirect cost of study, acknowledging thereby that there's not only the question of fees, but students need to be able to then survive, live, eat, have shelter during their studies. So those were all the commitments. Then what about the quality assurance? Because I was asked to, of course, that's the topic of this webinar, quality assurance and social dimension. So like you saw from the years the European or see

now the "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance." So that's our set. Our European framework for quality assurance was created in 2005. So we are celebrating our 20 years of the European standards and guidelines this year that were revised 10 years ago and are now being revised at this moment to be adopted in their new format in 2027 by the next ministerial conference to be held in Romania and Moldova jointly.

So the European standards and guidelines were written either very much before the principles for the social dimension were created in the European Higher Education Area context and are now being revised. So there is clearly two separate documents of which one refers to quality assurance, the quality assurance document, not so obviously directly to the principles and guidelines for the social dimension. Importantly, the European standards and guidelines are written by stakeholders, although approved by the ministers, and these are generic standards. You will understand that thinking of the diversity of countries, systems, cultures, traditions, et cetera, we have in the European High Education Area and that they have to be relatively generic. They form kind of a basis for trust, that's how we call it. And they cover both external and internal quality assurance elements, requirements and also the processes.

So they always need to be somehow translated into the different national context. Some elements of the social dimension are obviously mentioned also in the current version of the ESG because it's not that we have been blind and deaf to the social dimension until a few years ago. And out of the 10 standards that directly apply to higher education institutions, three make clear reference to a social dimension or elements of it. So the standard on quality assurance policies mentioned that those policies should guard against intolerance and any kind of discrimination by the light and generic one. The standard 1.3, which is a standard on student-centered learning says that the students-centered learning needs to respect diversity of students and their needs, which seems quite obvious, but it is mentioned specifically in the guidelines to that standard. And then another standard on learning resources and students support mentions that there should be resources that are adapted to students with disabilities and to mature students specifically.

But these are very generic. This is almost all there is written in the current document, so it doesn't go to any level of detail. And a little bit like in the Australian example, even more so in the European context, this will and will need to be translated into national standards and then the national standards should ideally allow institutions to see what is their own best way to implement those standards. We run quite a large scale survey in the run up to the idea of starting the revision of the European standards and guidelines and as we have had a lot of pressures from the different stakeholder groups, particularly to do more about the social dimension through the European standards and guidelines. So through quality assurance, we asked them first of all, what is happening in the different national context. Is this a topic that is addressed through quality assurance and we saw kind of diverse responses.

In theory, they should all be the same for the different groups. There is quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions that the NUS means the National Unions of Students and so it's agencies, institutions, students. How to what extent is the social dimension covered in your countries or in your system's, external quality assurance. Higher education institutions think that's really quite well covered to some extent or to a large extent the students think it's not quite sufficiently covered. And we interpreted this quite important differences between the stakeholder groups by kind of the differences in perceptions of what should be included and what is a large extent of coverage of the social

dimension. So we don't really do a lot with this data, but it just gives us kind of a little sniff into how it is seen at the moment when we ask them which elements of the social dimension, because it's a huge package of different things are covered, in more than 80% of the cases

what is covered is completion rates, access to students with disabilities, psychological well-being and counseling and anti-discrimination policies. So this does not mean that in over 80% of the countries these things exist. Hopefully they exist in a larger number of context, but where it is actually covered by external quality assurance. So that's kind of the key in this question. Somewhat covered we found institutional strategy on social dimension monitoring of social dimension targets. This might be still quite new, so there might not be a full monitoring system and data collection on social dimension. Now with a data collection, we have a supplementary problem of course, that a lot of social dimension data cannot be collected in all countries due to kind of data protection issues. There are many countries where you cannot collect data on sexual orientation, ethnicity, even nationality, and then sometimes let alone disabilities, et cetera. So we don't actually necessarily be able to collect the kind of data that we think might be useful to monitor the social dimension and the lowest coverage through external quality assurance is whether or not there is a training inequity organized by an institution.

Now when we think about then the European standards and guidelines, which is the framework that I'm referring to in this brief presentation, we can ask, okay, now we saw that many countries are addressing many of the elements of the social dimension even in their own external quality of stress systems and then maybe also in addition through different other channels. So either explicitly by the institution, by the agencies, through quality of stress processes or by the agencies without a national mandate to do so or by some other entities within a country. But do we need a European level push in terms of quality assurance to better and more in detail address the social dimension? And I think we are not having, we are not yet ready with an answer. We are still in the process of the revision of the European standards and guidelines. Actually the process has barely started.

We should be ready in two years from now, but we have these questions that we need to ask. Is quality assurance a suited method to address the social dimension or all of its elements and to what extent can it be done by the external agency and which elements are best done by the internal quality assurance system? Also, we should remember that depending on the country and context, not all of the elements are covered or are in the hands of the university itself. For example, in some systems or for some types of institutions, the institution, the buildings are not owned by the institution. So whatever kind of reparation work to put ramps in for wheelchair access or whatever kind of accessibility repairs need to be done might not be in the hands of the university to do. So, of course then the quality assurance should not punish that university for not being able to do things that are not in their hands.

In some other places, there is substantial support for all students, not only disadvantaged students or whether it's support for disadvantaged students. That kind of support might not come from the institution but will come maybe from a national entity or different types of sources. And therefore the question is can and should we really monitor that through quality assurance and is it at the European level or are there things that can and should be really done only at the national level? Of course there's a question like was mentioned also by Jamil, maybe the social dimension, the diversity, inclusion, accessibility is part of what we think as quality of higher education and for some elements I think they really lent themselves well to that kind of thing. For example, that we should have fair assessment

methods that take into account the different possible disabilities, for example, seems to be really an integral part.

How do you otherwise make sure that the students can demonstrate what they have learned and if they can't demonstrate what they've learned, how can you then measure the quality? So that, for example, could be justifiably included in the quality measures. What would be the added value of having things in the European level framework? And we see big differences between countries here, even students, which are the ones who really, really push for the European standards to have the social dimension much more strongly in do not all agree between themselves. There are countries where that really isn't a big problem and they think we are doing fine, even the students think they're doing fine. Maybe crudely put many of the Nordic countries in Europe and then some others which really say we need European regulation on this because our universities and our countries are not doing enough in this area.

But you can quite strikingly see that overall students are really of the idea that there would be much more needed in the European standards and guidelines to cover for the social damage. And just for my last note, it's just an image to say when we are now doing this revision work for the ESG, we have very many, very complicated balances to bear in mind between the different kind of national demands between the different stakeholder groups demands between practicality and something that allows for diversity of implementation because we do love diversity in Europe. So we will have to see where and to what extent the ESG can and will cover the social dimension in the future. Also because interestingly, of course, it's not the only thing that we are asked to be integrated into the ESG, we also have a full package on values, academic values, academic integrity, et cetera that we would need to address probably et cetera. The list is very long because like I said, quality assurance has actually worked quite well in the European context. So that's just a quick snapshot and sorry for being not as short as I wanted. Thank you.

#### **Jamil Salmi**

Thank you very much, Maria. You did an excellent job really because you had to talk about 30 countries and you provided with a very clear summary of complex issues and dimensions. I'm really grateful that you did. We have about 10 minutes left for a few questions. We have a question in writing in the QA, so if anyone else want to add a question, you may have the opportunity and we will ask Nadine to answer this specific question, which is about the danger of the elections, when we allow politicians to make decisions. I think that if we had asked ourselves five years ago about what could happen in the U.S., nobody would have projected what happened in the Republican states. And if we had asked ourself what would happen on January 20th in the U.S. and nobody could have expected the level of hostility towards DEI and what has happened just in a few weeks. So what's your prediction for Australia and Nadine?

#### **Dr. Nadine Zacharias**

Listen, this is dangerous probably, and thank you Jonathan for your question. I think one of the phrases that is repeated the most at the moment in Australia is we are not the U.S. and so people are trying to delineate themselves quite clearly to culturally, economically in terms of checks and balances. So I think the checks and balances in particular are stronger in Australia. So the division of powers is still a bit more, I don't know, delineated than maybe it had become in the us. The other thing is 31% of Australians were born overseas. Over 50% of people have at least one parent born overseas. So it is one

of the most immigrant nations in the world and it's also, it's a small population on a big island. So there's two things in there. The fair goal is really culturally embedded in Australia and it's sort of a all hand because there's few of us and there's lots to do and we are a country really at the coal face of climate change.

You've heard about the fires, you probably hear less about the floods. So it is that sense of still a bit of frontier country and is sort of all hands on deck. The other thing I would say is the recognition in Australia, and I think I've spoken to that often is structural disadvantage. So have the slide, and I meant to put, I contemplated putting it in, but I already had too many slides, but it basically calls out the structural disadvantage. So for First Nations, we are talking about colonization for region and remote students. We are talking about what we call the tyranny of distance for disability. It's a lack of fit with the social and physical environment and low SES is poverty and these things are not going to go away even if the politicians are deciding not to focus on it. There's strong civil society, there's strong lobbies in the regions.

We have a national disability insurance scheme, so people, a high awareness of disability and very good understanding at the supports they're getting at school. And then there is a conversation around how that continues in university. So I think there's, the foundations are strong and the final thing I'm going to say is we are having a really sort of foundational conversation around the purpose of the university, particularly partially triggered by that big accord review that we've just had and really the need for universities to get closer to their communities and demonstrate their value and their license to operate to their community. So I think there's also very specifically a task to do for the universities and to do better and to respond much more explicitly to the demands in their communities, many of them regional. So I think that's the best I can say. So I think it might hold, there's not so much risk, but as we are seeing in the U.S. this is a life tutorial of how quickly the chips can fall. Right.

### **Jamil Salmi**

Thank you very much, Nadine. At least that goes the direction of hope that we need plenty of that today. Maria, you alluded to some of the challenges in Europe regarding the use of data. I remember being on the international advisory board of a university, European university, which I would not name, but I remember one year they proudly told us how much progress they had achieved with regard to gender equity and really they had done a great job. And then I asked them noting that there were a lot of migrant population number in that the city where this university was located and asked them how much progress they were making and they had to admit that this was not on their radar screen. And one of the reasons is that there are no data. How do you think we can make progress in countries where sometimes even for legal or philosophical reasons, it's a no-no to try to collect this social data?

### **Dr. Maria Kelo**

Yes. I think what quality assurance can do at best I think is look at processes, look at, oh, that's our mantra. At least that quality assurance would not be able to detect quality itself. The similarly also not the social dimensions achievement in full by itself, but to make sure that we have systems in place that would be conducive to improving the social dimensions. So improving the different balances. So obviously not only anti-discrimination policies but also then tools and methods and carrots, not in to encourage recruitment of people from diverse backgrounds or different genders, et cetera. But I think that the impossibility to collect and use certain types of data, we make that more difficult. But then I think we shouldn't be using that as an excuse not to do things. And so I think we shouldn't just do things

that we can measure, but we should say, okay, we have to do something about this and we have to trust that it will in some way happen even if we cannot exactly measure it, there might be also some more inventive ways to detect those things.

I don't know exactly what, maybe there are voluntary surveys that could be done or focus groups, group discussions of the different stakeholders in a university to just see how they see the situation and how does that reflect the surrounding environment. So I don't really have a solution. I think it really is a bit of a complication. Generally speaking in Europe when we visit the university, I haven't personally seen one that doesn't have enough data. The problem is that there is heaps of different types of data and maybe some of those could be better used also for the social dimension. Measuring the problem is maybe we should collect a little bit less, but the right kind of data and information and then most of all do something with that because unless that moves into the policies and informs the policies, there's no merit in just having a lot of data I think by itself. So I think there it's a bit of an open discussion about the data and what we should and can collect.

### **Jamil Salmi**

Thank you very much, Maria. I have many more questions, but firstly we have run out of time and I will not try to summarize all the very important messages that have been shared by you, Maria, for Europe, by Nadine for Australia. I think that you've mentioned these important problems of data, of policy. I like the carrot and stick approach you used, Nadine, because there are some standards that need to be enforced, the elements of compliance, but also incentives that are the best way to encourage institutions to move in the right direction. That hopefully after this first webinar that has focused on only two regions of the world, we could perhaps we'll have opportunity to discuss similar issues in the other, in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Latin America. But I would like to thank you very much for your great presentations. We'll share the PowerPoints of the video and I'm going to hand over to Michelle for her conclusions.

### **Michelle Claville**

Thank you so much Jamil, and I thank you. I thank Nadine and I thank Maria so much.