

## Working Group on Social Dimension

Fourteenth Meeting, Online  
2 February 2024

Minutes of meeting

### List of Participants

Country/Organization	Name	Last Name
Albania	Flamur	Bidaj
Belgium French Community	Caroline	Hollela
Croatia (Co-Chair)	Ninoslav Šćukanec	Schmidt
Denmark	Maria	Køpke Kjeldsen
ESU - European Students' Union (Co-Chair)	Horia	Onita
EUA - European University Association	Henriette	Stoeber
EI ETUCE	Annette	Dolan
European Commission	Svein	Hullstein
EUROSTUDENT	Martin	Unger
France	Alain	Bouhours
Georgia	Tornike	Bakakuri
Germany	Carlotta	Eklöh
Malta	Jana	Kazarjan
Malta	Sergio	Carbonaro
Montenegro	Dunja	Bulajic
Montenegro	Dajana	Pavivevic
Poland	Krzysztof	Marcyński
Turkey	Lütfiye	Durak Ata
United Kingdom	Penny Evans	Angharad
BFUG Secretariat	Kristina	Metallari

Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Council of Europe, Cyprus, Estonia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain did not attend the meeting.

### 1. Welcome remarks and approval of the agenda

The Co-Chairs welcomed everybody to the fourteenth meeting of the 2021-2024 work period. The minutes of the thirteenth meeting were approved. Moreover, an outline of the agenda was provided, which was adopted without any changes. A tour de table took place, during which the members explained their respective roles within the institutions/bodies they represented.

For more information, please see: [Agenda of the meeting](#)

### 2. Summary of the main conclusions from the last meeting: how will they guide our future work?

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair, Croatia) highlighted the WG's key achievements and progress. The expanded scope of the Principles and Guidelines (PAGs) document enabled the establishment of monitoring systems at both the European and national levels. The development process of the indicators and descriptors involved extensive consultation, spanning 12 cycles and 20 iterations, including presentations at BFUG and Board meetings, feedback collection, and iterative improvements.

#### 2.1. Update and discussion on the BFUG Board Meeting (23 January 2024) and the consultative meeting with Nordic countries (10 January 2024)

Horia Onita (Co-Chair, ESU) informed members that, following feedback from the Madrid BFUG meeting, the Co-Chairs convened with Nordic countries, Germany, Belgium, Holy See, and Eurydice on January 10 to gather further

input. A new version of the document was prepared, highlighting the toolbox approach and flexibility in the use of indicators and descriptors. From the outcomes of the meeting with the Nordics, revisions were mentioned that now include a summary with implications for the monitoring exercise. The revised document clarifies that there are no changes to the indicators themselves. The essence of the indicators lies in being policy tools that countries can utilize for the implementation of principles and guidelines. He highlighted the sustained understanding that principles and guidelines represent high-level political commitments meant for attainment by all members in the EHEA. The indicators function as a means to implement these principles, yet they are not the exclusive method. Countries have the flexibility to demonstrate adherence through alternative approaches, as illustrated by the Nordic countries' reference to universal design. This nuance underscores that the indicators will not be automatically adopted for monitoring purposes. As a result, discussions on the topic of monitoring will continue to be significant, both for the ongoing implementation exercise and future considerations.

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) reported comments from the Board, emphasizing the need for a distinct title for the document. The original document adopted in 2020 and the current version's title were considered too similar. The Co-Chairs stated that a new title would be discussed during this meeting, with a new proposal expected for consideration and agreement at the BFUG meeting in February. Further, countries were invited to submit written comments by January 31<sup>st</sup>, with the WG aiming to finalize the document for the February BFUG meeting. The Co-Chair emphasized the goal of adopting the document as a standalone endorsed by ministers, providing a clear reference to its adoption in the Communiqué.

## 2.2. Update on the work of the BFUG Drafting Committee for the 2024 Tirana Communiqué and its relevance for the social dimension in HE

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) provided an update on the work carried out by the Drafting Committee (DC) regarding the Communiqué. He informed that a DC meeting was held last week, where they took into account the feedback received from the recent Board meeting, focusing on systemic elements. The draft emphasizes building an inclusive EHEA by 2030. It highlights the social dimension, acknowledging progress and the impact of COVID and economic challenges. The document also addresses migrants and refugees, emphasizing the role of higher education in integration. To foster diversity and inclusion, the draft endorses the indicators and descriptors, and expresses commitment to measuring progress, encouraging data collection practices, and referencing initiatives like EUROSTUDENT. The Outlook section outlines priorities for monitoring, mandating the BFUG to assess the degree to which EHEA is on course to achieve its overarching objectives on inclusivity, innovation, and interconnectedness by 2030. He conveyed that the DC is awaiting input from various working structures for the upcoming cycle. Emphasizing the need for the WG on SD to determine references in the Communiqué for its future work, he mentioned that the existing references in the Communiqué state the WG's commitment to measuring progress and are linked to data collection practices. Underscoring the significance of having a clear overview to encourage delegations to prioritize the social dimension, he stressed that clarity on the objectives for social dimension is crucial to maintain its prominence on the agenda. Anticipating the WG to present these expectations during the upcoming BFUG meeting in February, he noted the inclusion of a dedicated agenda section in this meeting outlining key elements for the Terms of Reference in the next working period planned by the BFUG.

EUA expressed a future-oriented inquiry regarding the mention of the SDGs and green transition in the Communiqué. Concerning the future of the WG on SD, there was contemplation about establishing a stronger connection to the SDGs in upcoming work. The question arose if another Working Group should be formed, and clarification was sought on how the Communiqué addresses the SDG reference. Horia Onita (Co-Chair) clarified that the mention of SDGs in the current draft is not extensively developed. It underscores the need for the EHEA to adapt to ongoing changes stemming from economic, political, environmental, and technical developments, requiring policy enhancement and the creation of new instruments. He informed that the previous draft had a more detailed emphasis on SDGs, but it was shortened in the current version due to document length constraints and its enclosure at the Bologna Policy Forum statement. However, he underlined that, while the Bologna Policy Forum statement focuses on SDGs with global partners, it does not guide BFUG's work. EUA suggested revisiting this topic during the future of the WG agenda item. They highlighted that principles and guidelines generally cover aspects relevant to SDG achievement. A later discussion could explore whether a more concrete link to SDGs should be fostered in the next working period.

It was inquired about the possibility of strengthening funding for the social dimension of higher education in the Communiqué. The Co-Chair responded that in the current version of the Communiqué, previous mentions of funding for the social dimension were removed due to feedback indicating that certain delegations would not accept the

Communique if funding-related content was included.

For more information, please see: [Overview of progress in 2022-2024](#)

### **3. Discussion on the final changes in the document Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators on the social dimension in higher education in the EHEA concerning the comments received at the BFUG Board Meeting in Rome**

Following the feedback received at the Board meeting, it was determined that a differentiation in the title between the two documents was necessary to enhance clarity, aiding users in understanding how to utilize the document and making its purpose more apparent. Three proposals<sup>1</sup> were presented, with the second proposal garnering the most support. Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) stated that there have been no additional comments received for the current version of the document. As a result, he proposed presenting this version for adoption by the BFUG at the February meeting. Regarding the text on the social dimension in the Communique, he indicated that there is still room for ongoing discussion on its content. He then invited participants to share any further suggestions or changes they deem necessary before finalizing the document.

A point was raised regarding the lack of explicit indication of the summary content in the document itself. To address this, a proposal suggested adding a sentence in the introduction at the end of page six. The sentence would emphasize that in certain higher education systems, particularly those with a universal approach, some listed indicators and descriptors may not be applicable. The aim is to prevent potential reactions at the BFUG in the final round and ensure that the summary remains a concise overview without introducing new elements not mentioned in the main text.

Another point highlighted was the need for clarity on what is meant by underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable staff. While definitions for underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable students is provided, the document also references underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable staff without explaining these terms in the glossary. Thus, a suggestion was made to consider adding explanatory content in the glossary of terms and definitions to provide a clearer understanding of these terms. It was proposed to assign the revision and enhancement of a more comprehensive glossary as a task for the work of the WG for the next working period.

The Co-Chairs concluded that the document's title would be changed as per the agreed version, and this information would be conveyed to the DC. Furthermore, the incorporation of a sentence in the introduction was confirmed. The revised document would be proposed for adoption at the upcoming BFUG meeting. The Co-Chairs also announced that they would reach out to Italy, acknowledging their previous remarks on indicators during the BFUG meeting, to ascertain whether Italy supports the document or wishes to propose any additional changes.

### **4. Discussion on the future of the social dimension within the BFUG in the period 2024 – 2027**

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) emphasized the objective of this session to outline the primary activities and formulate the proposal for the Terms of Reference of the future WG for the period 2024-2027. The discussion centered on the means to achieve implementation and identification of additional components to be included. The previous WG meeting yielded the conclusion that there is a need to propose the establishment of a new WG on the SD for the 2024-2027 period. While considering the possibility of a thematic peer group, it was ultimately decided to maintain a WG as it aligns with policy objectives, unlike a thematic peer group which would lack a policy mandate.

Regarding the activities of the future WG, one proposed initiative involved creating a manual for implementing the social dimension principles or developing an action plan template for countries to formulate their national action plans. Another suggested activity was the formulation of recommendations related to the establishment of organizational structures at both the national and European levels, clarifying the relationships between public authorities, higher education institutions (HEIs) and student unions. It was also determined that conducting interviews with stakeholders to map opportunities and threats for implementing the principles at the national level would be an extensive activity. Hence, it was proposed that this activity could be better suited for inclusion in a specific Erasmus+ project. This envisioned project could also encompass a peer review of national social dimension policies and an awareness campaign highlighting the significance of social dimension principles for the education system and HEIs.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Principles, Guidelines and Indicators of the Social Dimension of Higher Education: EHEA Framework to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education; 2. Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA; 3. Policy Recommendations for the Implementation of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.



Additional proposed activities for the future WG included generating policy recommendations on connections between social dimension and other policy domains, such as student and staff mobility, lifelong learning and the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Supporting the SDGs was emphasized, with an activity proposed to align and promote the SDGs using social dimension principles. Other identified activities encompassed recognizing the role of prior learning, improving prospects for refugees, contributing to the development of democratic citizenship, exploring linkages with financing higher education, examining quality assurance and its connection to social dimension, supporting services for students and staff, and emphasizing the importance of social dimension for governance and management in higher education.

A remark was made regarding potential challenges in governance structures, considering the diverse rules and regulations across countries and varying levels of HEIs' autonomy. Additionally, the suggestion was made to prioritize the implementation focus on pre-tertiary education, especially at the national level. While recognizing the diversity within institutions, the emphasis was on the significance of national-level engagement with institutions and the encouragement of university rectors to promote the social dimension. Another proposal centered on focusing on monitoring. The importance of countries adopting standardized sets of definitions for national monitoring was underscored, facilitating consistent reporting in the Bologna Process Implementation Report.

In discussing the transversal dimension, Horia Onita (Co-Chair) noted the potential for creating more policies by exploring how the social dimension intersects with other aspects. While acknowledging limited mandate in the school system, he emphasized BFUG's interest in lifelong learning, emphasizing its inherent connection to the social dimension. He suggested that incorporating the social dimension into broader BFUG work areas would provide substantial added value. Regarding monitoring, he emphasized the importance of determining what data needs to be collected and how to effectively translate indicators into practical implementation.

EUA expressed support for the idea of an action plan for implementation for the peer review activities. However, they raised concerns about potential challenges in organizing such activities, suggesting that the participation might predominantly involve countries already advanced in their efforts. EUA highlighted the need to consider the level of interest from countries that are further behind in their social dimension work. While welcoming the mention of cross-cutting topics like SDGs and refugee inclusion, they suggested a more focused approach, particularly regarding SDGs. EUA emphasized the need for enhanced references to SDGs in both the Communique and the overall work of the BFUG. They affirmed the high interest among universities in integrating SDGs into various activities and expressed interest to feature this topic more prominently.

EI ETUCE informed that they would present a proposal at the next WG meeting to enhance the glossary by incorporating definitions related to staff. It was also decided that the creation of an extensive glossary of key terms for the social dimension could be proposed as a task for the future WG in the next working period.

Participants stressed the significance of peer learning for supporting countries, especially those less active in social dimensions in the past decade. Although past peer review activities were recognized for their effectiveness, concerns arose about committing to funding in the Terms of Reference. Despite this, engaging more countries through peer review activities was seen as crucial for the implementation of principles, guidelines, and indicators. The need to understand the Nordic countries' holistic approach was highlighted, with suggestions for peer reviews in these countries to enhance shared understanding. The value of exploring diverse approaches to foster a common European understanding was also underscored. Additionally, it was proposed to investigate comprehensive studies on Nordic models to gain insights into various systems' approaches to social dimensions, examining methodologies and assessing outcomes. Furthermore, a more comprehensive method for social dimension peer reviews was suggested, emphasizing a deeper analysis beyond identifying general barriers like financial constraints or lack of political will. The proposal was to focus on a select few countries, approximately four or five, to ensure efficiency in the process.

The significance of mobility was acknowledged, but concerns were raised about duplicating existing efforts by the EU, which heavily integrates social inclusion into Erasmus. While there are numerous ongoing activities, a suggestion was made to explore interest in organizing a dedicated event specifically focusing on the social dimension. Such an event could serve as a platform for alliances to showcase and share their initiatives.

It was suggested that a manual may not be as useful since the WG has already created the document comprising of the indicators. However, an action plan for countries to implement principles was deemed more impactful and practical. A voluntary action plan was viewed as a positive approach to encourage proactive engagement from

countries. The concept of the action plan could be linked with a peer review, assisting countries in developing tailored plans in their national contexts, presenting a valuable project activity. There was an inquiry about the forthcoming European Commission call for the next working period that clarified that the call's priorities will be aligned with the content of the Communiqué, establishing the Communiqué as the key determinant for the call's focus.

Regarding the manual, Horia Onita (Co-Chair) proposed that it should primarily focus on monitoring and data collection rather than prescribing specific implementation methods, highlighting the limited progress in the social dimension observed up to 2020, particularly in areas like accessibility. The emphasis is on addressing shortcomings in the default monitoring of indicators, as evidenced by the 2024 draft Bologna Process Implementation Report showing progress more in the process than looking for tangible outcomes. Another approach was that the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) is already seeking publishable action plans for key commitments, which could present an opportunity to integrate the social dimension. Emphasizing the need for increased focus on action and grassroots support over another policy document, the importance of focusing on the publishable action plan was underscored.

External projects were underscored as more suitable for managing peer learning initiatives, directing the primary focus of the WG's Terms of Reference towards the creation of a manual or action plan. Concerns arose about potential conflicts with the holistic approach of certain countries, prompting a suggestion for alternative wording. One proposal involved stating that countries would furnish an action plan voluntarily. Additionally, the suggestion was made that the peer review process could tailor action plans to the national context. Furthermore, it was recommended to incorporate topics like lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning into the Terms of Reference for the next working period.

The Co-Chairs summarized the discussion by highlighting the consensus among members to continue the WG into the next period. It was recognized that enhanced national support for implementing principles and guidelines would be crucial, leading to the proposal of initiating peer review exercises. Seeking funding through Erasmus Bologna projects to facilitate these exercises was considered. The deliberations included exploring voluntary action plans to aid implementation, along with examining policy connections to other topics, particularly emphasizing SDGs, mobility, and the transition from secondary education levels. The potential development of a manual focusing on monitoring and data collection was also discussed. The Co-Chairs announced their intent to prepare a draft Terms of Reference for presentation at the next WG meeting.

For more information, please see: [Future of the social dimension in the EHEA for the period 2024-2027](#)

## **5. Preparation of the sessions related to the social dimension at the Tirana Ministerial Conference/Bologna Policy Forum (June 2024)**

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) conveyed that the 'save the dates' for the Tirana Ministerial Conference have been dispatched to the BFUG, while invitations to global partners for the Bologna Policy Forum are pending. He indicated the presence of a parallel session on inclusivity during the Bologna Policy Forum. However, the confirmation of the WG's session at the Ministerial Conference, as mentioned in the Terms of Reference, is contingent upon the agenda confirmation from the Albanian authorities.

## **6. Preparation for the WG SD final meeting in Vienna on 4-5 April 2023**

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) informed that the central topics of discussion for the next meeting would focus on the Terms of Reference for the future WG, and finalizing the text of the WG for the Tirana Communiqué. Horia Onita (Co-Chair) proposed highlighting the exemplary practices of the National Student Union in Austria, known for its specific system and notable support services for students. The meeting format was mentioned as hybrid, with an emphasis on encouraging in-person participation.

## **7. Concluding remarks: division of tasks for the next WG's meeting and meeting conclusions**

The Co-Chairs provided an overview of upcoming steps, and expressed appreciation for members' efforts in finalizing the document on indicators and descriptors, intending to present it at the upcoming BFUG meeting for adoption. The Co-Chairs outlined plans to propose tasks for the future WG during the BFUG meeting and subsequently draft Terms of



Reference at the WG meeting in Vienna. They expressed satisfaction in successfully achieving all the outlined objectives in the current WG Terms of Reference.

The Co-Chairs thanked everyone for their contributions. No other discussions were put forward and the meeting was successfully concluded.