

Working Group on Social Dimension

Thirteenth Meeting, Belgium
7-8 December 2023

Minutes of meeting

List of Participants

Country/Organization	Name	Last Name
Austria	Eluisa	Kainz
Austria (BICG Co-Chair)	Helga	Posset
Belgium French Community	Justyna	Nerkowska
Belgium French Community*	Caroline	Hollela
Croatia (Co-Chair)	Ninoslav Šćukanec	Schmidt
ESU - European Students' Union (Co-Chair)	Horia	Onita
EUROSTUDENT	Martin	Unger
France	Alain	Bouhours
Germany	Carlotta	Eklöh
Poland	Krzysztof	Marcyński
Slovenia	Maja	Svent
BFUG Secretariat (Head)	Edlira	Subashi
BFUG Secretariat*	Kristina	Metallari

Online participation*

Albania, Belgium Flemish Community, Council of Europe, Cyprus, Denmark, EI ETUCE, Estonia, EUA, European Commission, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Moldova, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovak Republic, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom and United Kingdom (Scotland) did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome remarks and approval of the agenda

The Co-Chairs welcomed everybody to the thirteenth meeting of the 2021-2024 work period. The minutes of the twelfth 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, as well as on their contribution to the social dimension group.

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. Eleven consultations were organized related to indicators and descriptors, and in the introductory section, new elements were introduced. The document, which included 19 iterations, now includes a summary outlining its purpose, definitions of its main components, an explanation of the positive impact of the social dimension of higher education on societies, and an overview of the comprehensive framework for the social dimension. He also informed that the final WG report should be ready by the next BFUG meeting in February.

3. Update and discussion on the BFUG Plenary Meeting in Madrid on 16-17 November 2023

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) informed members about the updates of the WG's work and presentation of the PAGs document at the BFUG Meeting in Madrid. He highlighted concerns from several countries, including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, The Netherlands and Italy, regarding the social dimension aspect in the Bologna process Implementation



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Report (BPIR). These concerns aligned with the perspective collectively advocated for by the Nordic countries, emphasizing challenges in the PAGs and proposing a more flexible approach, presented as a toolbox by Finland. Despite expressing concerns, unfortunately these countries had not provided written feedback or participated in consultations of the PAGs and therefore the input could not have been incorporated before. The Co-Chairs clarified that the current document version includes non-prescriptive indicators and descriptors, allowing flexibility in implementation according to each country's higher education system. The feasibility of these indicators was emphasized through Eurydice reporting, emphasizing the need for establishing a European monitoring system.

Additionally, Ninoslav Schmidt shared information from the BFUG meeting in Madrid, where it was acknowledged that the existing work plan, including working structures, is highly extensive. Looking ahead, there is a need to carefully consider how these structures will be established or sustained in the upcoming period.

In the BFUG meeting in Stockholm, the Co-Chairs engaged in dialogue aiming to ensure the PAGs being adopted an annex. Despite no written feedback by opposing countries since Stockholm, in Madrid the same countries have opposed the adoption despite still no feedback. For this, the perceived prescriptive nature of the indicators has been signaled, and the BPIR results were deemed important, especially as concerns were raised that indicators proposed in PAGs and used in BPIR did not fully capture reality, as Nordic countries have a universal design approach that goes beyond the scope of the indicators. Feedback from Sweden, France, Belgium, Finland, and Andorra was received after the BFUG meeting in Stockholm.

Helga Posset (BICG Co-Chair) noted that different perspectives arose, leading to varied measures by countries. Despite opportunities for participation in the WG on SD, opposition to the work was deemed peculiar. She also underscored the significance of the BPIR at the political level, and acknowledged a longstanding problem with the indicators and stressed the need to understand why the indicator scores were not well-received, suggesting it might be due to it being the first report with scorecard indicators for all SD principles.

Horia Onita expressed that some of the opposition seemed directed against the PAGs rather than the indicators. Martin Unger (Eurostudent) identified the opposition as fundamental and coordinated, proposing a preamble at the beginning of the document for agreement.

Ninoslav Schmidt recommended the separation of their document from Eurydice's work. He emphasized that the concern was that many focused on colors rather than thoroughly reading the document, leading to a loss of the universal value it intended to convey. While not all BFUG members voiced their opinions, the WG Co-Chairs received commendations from several countries for the work following the presentation.

Alain Bouhours (France) recommended retaining the PAGs while concentrating on improving the indicators, suggesting a reduction in the number of indicators for each principle. Ninoslav S. Schmidt expressed agreement, recognizing the importance of working with indicators while also acknowledging the difficulty of presenting a multitude of indicators to ministers.

Helga Posset compared the document to ESG, noting its size and the challenge of implementation once committed. Carlotta Eklöh (Germany) proposed using more comfortable terms like "policy ideas" instead, with a disagreement to use 'toolbox', supported by Horia Onita. She suggested sending their proposal to the Nordics for clarification.

Horia Onita clarified that the BPIR is not intended only for politicians but also for implementing various policies at technical level, and that the WG on SD does not have a document mandating which indicators are compulsory, but that all Principles are aimed to be followed, not only some of them, while countries have a choice into how the principle is implemented. In this way, the indicator just gives a recommendation for implementation, while other ways can be equally relevant if proven effective for achieving the principle. He suggested addressing Nordic concerns by adding information on how means lead to outcomes without weakening the PAGs.

The Co-Chairs informed that they would hold a meeting with the Nordic countries to determine the best course of action, and underscored the importance of emphasizing the adoption of PAGs and the commitment to their implementation. They also aimed to gather questions from the Nordic countries and explore methods for measuring progress.

The ESU Co-Chair and the Germany and Poland representatives would collaborate on editing the document, ensuring that the agreed-upon elements were seamlessly integrated into the text. Once the document was edited, the plan

included further discussions with the Nordic countries to review its content.

4. Update on the work of the BFUG Drafting Committee for the 2024 Tirana Communiqués and its relevance for the social dimension in HE

Horia provided an update on the work carried out by the Drafting Committee regarding the Communiqué and shared feedback received during the BFUG meeting in Madrid. He highlighted that while specific comments on the social dimension section were not emphasized, Hungary requested the removal of "gender identity" from the draft Communiqué. BFUG suggested restructuring the draft Communiqué under the three "I"s vision. Currently, the Drafting Committee is prioritizing various issues by organizing them under different bullet points, including refugees, gender equality, and flexible learning pathways, among others.

5. 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 Meeting in Madrid

Ninoslav S. Schmidt informed that the designated individuals would create a new summary and share it with the WG for review. Subsequently, the Co-Chairs planned to convene a meeting with the Nordic countries and Eurydice to present the revised document. During the meeting, discussions would encompass the incorporation of the social dimension chapter into the Bologna Process Implementation Report, and there would be an opportunity to request modifications to the social dimension chapter from Eurydice. The Secretariat would create a doodle for scheduling the meeting.

6. Discussion on the future of the social dimension within the BFUG in the period 2024 - 2027

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) indicated that the EHEA has established three overarching priorities known as the "3 Is", and the WG on SD's work aligns with this vision of the EHEA, thus it was emphasized that the structure should persist. The Co-Chairs conducted a survey to gather insights on challenges related to implementation and the future of implementing the Principles and Guidelines. They suggested focusing on simple actions and outlined various areas such as impact assessment, quality assurance, financing of education, and community engagement. The proposed actions included spreading knowledge about existing principles and guidelines, developing step-by-step guidelines for state implementation, organizing peer learning activities, and initiating data collection with a minimum list of required data.

The Co-Chairs noted that the overarching goal was to agree on a set of activities for the future WG, in order to prepare the first version of the terms of reference and facilitate dialogue with BFUG, with an aim to support the PAGs effectively. The main topics discussed included overcoming challenges in implementation, addressing barriers such as a lack of political will, and mapping out the key challenges in implementing the guidelines. Members suggested tasks like creating an equity index, peer review, as well as tackling the issue of implementation. This would also require a larger pool of members for the future WG.

In discussing the main objective of implementing existing initiatives and addressing barriers, Horia Onita contemplated the need for either a WG or a Thematic Peer Group (TPG). He acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches but emphasized the importance of making a decision that is appealing and sees the added value of connecting with other topics. Specifically, he noted the challenge of convincing the BFUG to address implementation barriers, data, monitoring, and impact assessment, but also the particularly appealing approach of the relation between social dimension and lifelong learning. He underscored the significance of coherent data collection and impact assessment for prioritizing initiatives in the social dimension.

In his proposal, Ninoslav Schmidt advocated for stakeholder interviews within the WG, linking them to peer reviews and various policy areas. He questioned the feasibility of this approach without a dedicated project but found consensus that an Erasmus+ project could support WG activities in the upcoming period. Structured dialogues and stakeholder interviews were deemed more effective than PLAs, with PAGs connected to multiple policy areas. He highlighted the significance of cooperation with quality assurance and emphasizing the importance of connecting work with SDGs. He stressed the importance of dispelling the notion that the social dimension only targets specific vulnerable groups, urging policymakers to recognize its relevance across all policy areas. He also expressed a desire



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to generate policy recommendations illustrating how the social dimension can intersect with diverse areas within the EHEA.

Additionally, there was a call for intensified advertising and social campaigns to elevate awareness and comprehension of the social dimension. The emphasis was on practical suggestions rather than relying solely on theoretical approaches. Another observation emphasized the importance of establishing a connection between higher education institutions (HEIs) and student bodies, with a focus on effectively addressing the needs of students and assessing the efficacy of support mechanisms. The goal was to identify areas where existing efforts could be made visible and appreciated, without creating parallel structures. Additionally, there was a suggestion that this connection could extend to how ministries at the system level could provide support to the objectives of the WG.

Horia Onita noted that the current indicators are predominantly policy and process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented, highlighting the need for improvement. He noted the challenge of selecting one priority due to regional differences, and pointed out the ongoing work on alignment with the SDGs. He expressed difficulty in defining the specific role of the WG given the multitude of topics related to social dimension in Europe, including refugees, Article Seven of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, mobility, transnational cooperation, joint degrees, European alliances, and emerging European policies that lack inclusivity elements.

Ninoslav Schmidt pointed out that various policy areas, including quality assurance and mobility, benefit from extensive organizational structures at the country level and at the European level. This led to the question of whether there is a future need for organizational support structures specifically dedicated to the social dimension at both the European and national levels. The consideration is whether social dimension policies require dedicated agencies to address their unique needs. Another task for the next working period would also be to create policy recommendations for the organisational support of social dimension, and the student unions for instance could have a substantial role in these policy recommendations.

A point was made that student unions are involved in social dimension work due to HEIs shortcomings. It was stressed the need for HEIs to actively engage in social dimension work, moving beyond mere recognition. The WG was suggested to find ways to prompt HEIs to prioritize social dimension in their thinking, ensuring that monitoring processes actively acknowledge its significance. It was also highlighted that student unions play a crucial role in identifying areas where the education system needs improvement to reach a broader student population. They offer a bottom-up approach to hold HEIs accountable. In contrast, the WG can contribute by providing a top-down policy approach.

Global cooperation was raised as another topic, suggesting potential collaboration with international stakeholders focused on equity. The Head of Secretariat advised close coordination with the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue to prevent overlapping efforts when expanding outside the region. A recommendation was made for the WG to develop an action plan similar to TPGs for effective implementation. The discussion stressed the importance of working closely with international organizations and having a structured plan for future initiatives.

In concluding remarks, the Co-Chairs emphasized the WG's imperative to devise a strategy for implementing principles, guidelines, indicators, and descriptors. The discussion highlighted the significance of raising policymakers' awareness about the interconnections between the social dimension and various policy areas, encompassing mobility, funding, quality assurance, support services, SDGs, community engagement, democratic citizenship, and governance. They stressed the need for recommendations and a systematic design for implementing the PAGs, along with fostering collaboration with previous levels of education. The role of social campaigns was considered, although its connection to the WG's work versus future projects remained uncertain. Ninoslav Schmidt expressed a preference for the future structure to remain a WG over a TPG, emphasizing the necessity for policy recommendations and suggesting the creation of an action plan. While discussions on global cooperation were deemed premature, it was suggested as a potential task in the future. They proposed the formation of a consortium for a potential Erasmus+ project to support the WG's endeavors.

7. Workplan for the WG SD 2024

The Co-Chairs suggested for the upcoming BFUG meetings, the implementation of an advocacy campaign for the WG with structured support from BFUG country representatives and consultative members. The aim is to garner support for the adoption of the document. They recommended engaging members of other WGs in contacting their respective ministries and creating a concise one-pager outlining the document's importance to address potential



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counterarguments. The Co-Chairs also decided to approach BFUG countries on this proposal.

Additionally, it was agreed to draft an article for the newsletter focusing on the PAGs and submit it to the Secretariat by early January. For future WG meetings, a proposal was made for an initial online meeting in 2024 preceding the BFUG meeting, and an in-person meeting between the two BFUG meetings to finalize terms of reference and strategy for the Ministerial Conference, contingent on discussions with the Nordics and the progress of document adoption.

The scheduled online meeting was set for February 2, 2024, and the in-person meeting would take place on April 4-5, 2024, in Vienna, Austria.

8. Preparation of the sessions related to the social dimension at the Tirana Ministerial Conference/Bologna Policy Forum

In the current WG Terms of Reference, it was informed that there is a provision for a session on the Ministerial Conference, where the WG on SD will discuss the principles, guidelines, and indicators created. The intention is to present this information and explore opportunities for collaboration with other stakeholders present.

The decision was made for the Co-Chairs to communicate with the Secretariat, specifying the type of support required for the Ministerial Conference session. Emphasis was placed on the significance of conducting a session at the Ministerial Conference to elucidate the WG's work and guide countries on handling the document. Additionally, it was suggested that having a session at the Global Policy Forum would be beneficial, given established contacts with global players. The Co-Chairs would contact the BFUG Vice Chair to determine the next steps in organizing the session.

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

The Co-Chairs presented a summary of the meeting's conclusions and outlined decisions for the next steps concerning the formulation of tasks and terms of reference for the WG in the upcoming working period. Emphasis was placed on the necessity to submit the WG report before the initial BFUG meeting of 2024, with the deadline set for February 4th.

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