



Bosnia and Herzegovina
Ministry of Civil Affairs

WORKING GROUP ON SOCIAL DIMENSION

Ninth Meeting, Hosted in Belgium
7-8 February 2023

Minutes

List of Participants

Country	First Name	Last Name
Belgium Flemish Community	Patrick	Willems
Belgium French Community	Caroline	Hollela
Croatia (Co-Chair)	Ninoslav Šćukanec	Schmidt
Cyprus	Kyriacos	Charalambous
Denmark	Jacob	Blasius
EI-ETUCE	Annette	Dolan
ENQA (Guest)	Anna	Gover
European Commission (EC)	Lucie	Trojanova
European Students' Union (Co-Chair)	Horia	Onița
European University Association (EUA)	Gohar	Hovhannisyan
EUROSTUDENT	Martin	Unger
France	Stéphane	Lauwick
Germany	Carlotta	Ekloh
Malta	Valerie	Attard
The Netherlands	Arthur	Belle
Poland	Krzysztof	Marczynski
Turkey	Lütfiye	Durak Ata
SIHO (Guest)	Valerie	Van Hees
BFUG Secretariat	Jora	Vaso
BFUG Secretariat	Patrik	Bardhi

Albania, Austria, CoE, Estonia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom, and Scotland did not attend the meeting. Georgia sent regrets for not attending the meeting.

1. Welcome remarks and approval of the agenda

Valerie Van Hees, the host of the meeting as well as a representative of SIHO (Support Center for Inclusion in Higher Education) welcomed everyone to the meeting in her opening remarks. She gave a quick overview of SIHO, the collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training and all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Flemish Community. Valerie explained that SIHO works on supporting HEIs and offers inclusion advice to policymakers.

The Co-Chairs greeted everyone and thanked Valerie Van Hees (SIHO) for hosting the ninth meeting of the 2021–2024 work period. An outline of the agenda was provided, which was adopted without any changes. During a tour de table, each member introduced themselves, discussed their individual responsibilities within the organizations/bodies they represented, as well as their work on social dimension policies.

For more information, please see: [WG SD SE BA 9 Agenda](#)

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

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) gave an overview of the main tasks of the Working Group on Social Dimension (SD WG), which include, according to the Terms of Reference, creating a list of indicators for the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines on Social Dimension (PAGs), a monitoring system for the Principles and Guidelines, as well as peer learning activities and benchmarks that would support public authorities to implement the Principles and Guidelines and develop social dimension policies.

The working group adopted a workplan, which was released in January 2022. Horia Onita also emphasized that in the previous year, the WG had convened five meetings. The summary of the last WG meetings was presented, including the three PLAs organized in the last meeting (online) in November, on Bologna with Student Eyes (ESU), the Autonomy Scorecard (EUA), and Monitoring social dimension policies (Eurydice). Within the SD WG, in 2022 three subgroups have also been formed to work on indicators. The subgroups finished their work for the meeting in Hague (June 2022).

Mr. Onita shared several conclusions from the WG's previous meetings. From the meeting in Malta, it was concluded that the dominant approach to indicators would be in the form of statements. It was agreed that after finalizing the work on indicators, the WG would proceed to propose a monitoring system, which would include questions. After the indicators and the monitoring system would be finalized, it was proposed that a toolbox will be developed on how to use indicators and monitoring system. Conclusions from the Hague meeting included information on the new Erasmus+ project, the proposed cooperation with ENQA and EQAR for indicators linked to social dimension and quality assurance, and an agreement to organize a round of internal WG SD consultations on indicators to be held in Brussels. In Brussels, the draft list of indicators was finalized and sent to the BFUG and it was determined that the sub-indicators would not be used by the Monitoring WG for BPIR 2024, but that the SD WG will continue to work on them for the final version of the document, with the name and nature of the sub-indicators still to be determined. The present and future meetings were listed as follows: the 10th in April (place TBC), the 11th in June in Croatia, the 12th in October (place TBC), and the 13th in December (Place TBC).

It was stated that, for the upcoming BFUG and Board meetings, there will be an updated, possibly final list of indicators to be approved. In addition, the drafting committee is in its early stages and will soon start requesting the WG's suggested topics for the draft communique.

Nino Schmidt (Co-Chair) clarified that, in the new document on PAGs, a foreword has been added to briefly explain what has been accomplished by the WG thus far. Regarding the agenda for this meeting, Mr. Schmidt stated that the first day would be spent gathering information, and the second day would be spent adapting and incorporating that information into the text of indicators and sub-indicators. Finally, he said that some future meetings will continue with the existing format of a two-day WG meeting followed by a two-day PLA within the PLAR-U-PAGs project.

For more information, please see: [Overview of progress in 2021-2022](#)

3. Update from the European Commission

3.1. Update related to the implementation of the European Strategy for Universities and update related to the European Framework for Diversity and Inclusion (goal 4.2.)

Lucie Trojanova (European Commission) introduced the plan for the new forthcoming study to support the development of a European Framework for Diversity and Inclusion, intended to help the EC identify the main obstacles and evidence factors that limit access and attainment in HE as well as provide policy-related solutions for both the EC and ministries. Ms. Trojanova clarified that the study will focus on social dimension policies and be evidence-based, with information gathered at the level of member states. She announced that the research's requirements have been drafted and approved by the EC, that they would soon be shared with possible contractors, and that the

process of conducting the study would be launched shortly after. She continued by saying that the study will build on the SD WG's ongoing work, the Eurostudent survey, and Eurydice's social inclusion research.

Lastly, Ms. Trojanova discussed the STE(A)M Manifesto on closing the gender gap in higher education. She clarified that the member states and the EC will work together to launch the manifesto. The EC will also release a factsheet outlining the commitments required to rectify the underrepresentation of women in STE(A)M. She ended by stating that the manifesto would soon be expanded upon and put into practice as part of the Horizon program call.

3.2. Update related to the WGs of the EEA strategic framework: Is there a space for collaboration between the 'WG on Equality and Values' and the 'WG on Higher Education' with our BFUG WG on Social Dimension?

Lucie Trojanova (EC) began by emphasizing that the European Commission's Working Group on Equality and Values will have as its priority, for the first semester of 2023, the topic of citizenship in education and how the EU dimension of teaching and EU values relate to it. The second phase, which begins in August, will focus on special needs education and training of students with disabilities, with a focus on tackling stigmatization. Regarding the working group on Higher Education (WGHE), Ms. Trojanova confirmed that its current workplan is approaching the end and new priorities will be set in a future meeting. She continued by announcing that one of the four objectives in the European strategy for universities is the social dimension, with a focus on inclusiveness and equal access to education.

3.3. Update related to the European Higher Education Sector Observatory

The European Higher Education Sector Observatory, according to Ms. Trojanova, will be a one-stop shop portal that will compile all EU data on policies and characteristics of education systems from member states onto a single online platform. The observatory's goal is to keep track of the European strategy for higher education. The unification and alignment of all existing EU sets of data in a single portal will also help to ease the administrative burden of data collection. The observatory portal's initial release is anticipated by the end of 2023. A detailed technical presentation on the Observatory will be distributed to the WG members at their request.

Ms. Trojanova expressed the willingness of the European Commission to work with the SD WG and confirmed that the Observatory will take into account the new SD policy framework. The SD WG group can exchange and utilize pertinent findings from the upcoming study "*European Framework for Diversity*", which will include a section on gender-based discrimination at the regional level.

Questions regarding the observatory were raised. Namely, the eligibility of smaller countries, to which it was responded that the Observatory may cover all the Erasmus+ program countries, but this needs to be confirmed. Some suggestions were ensuring the compatibility of data under one portal, in order to ensure comparability, and the provision of contextual data, as well as explanations behind real success stories.

Nino Schmidt (Co-Chair) concluded by restating that the SD policy framework is a comprehensive one that makes it possible and advantageous to create successful synergies with other entities, such as the Observatory.

For more information, please see: [Update from European Commission](#)

4. Discussion on the indicators for the principles of social dimension and the role of quality assurance

Anna Gover (ENQA) introduced ENQA and its function as the representative of 55 quality assurance (QA) ESG-compliant agencies across Europe. She then provided feedback from ENQA on the proposed indicators for the social dimension principles, with particular focus on the indicators that are linked to QA.

Ms. Gover described the diverse external QA landscape, clarified the limits of QA's role and affirmed that the indicators should not put too much responsibility on QA. She explained that many issues connected to SD are already reflected in various ESG standards, which directly reference topics such as the need for diversity in the student population within a HEI, recognition of prior nonformal and informal learning, among others. Ms. Gover clarified that these social dimension aspects are not very comprehensive but there are QA agencies that are going beyond what is provided in ESG.

Ms. Gover shared some results from the QA-FIT project which relates to whether agencies are addressing social dimension in HE, and looks into the aspects most and least commonly addressed by QA agencies. She emphasized that the issue with some agencies is that they address SD as part of their criteria while others give it more attention, as separate initiatives. She clarified that currently there is no data on through which channel these agencies address SD.

Ms. Gover emphasized that expectations for QA agencies should respect that different agencies have different remits and competences within their national systems, that QA agencies are independent from government, institutions and stakeholders, and that they need to maintain non-conflicts of interest with the HEIs they evaluate. As such, if a QA agency provides training to an HEI, it cannot subsequently evaluate the same HEI.

Ms. Gover went over her proposed amendments to the draft document of SD indicators on PAGs which included adding such phrases as "or other appropriate bodies" in cases where the QA agency might not be appropriate for monitoring, and listing objectives that do not fall beyond the scope of QA agencies. She reiterated that the diversity of QA agencies and their remits must be considered when constructing the SD indicators on PAGs and reminded that the objective of external QA agencies is to evaluate the HEI and their programs, not the entire HE system as a whole.

Regarding the draft in general, Ms. Gover suggested that the explanatory descriptors and sub-indicators should be rephrased as reflective questions. She added that a high number of indicators can be perceived as too prescriptive, that it stifles innovation and it risks loss of focus.

In the discussion that followed, it was made clear that countries with less developed QA systems require a prescriptive approach while those with more developed systems favor more inventive strategies that offer benefits beyond box-ticking. Also, where there is a high level of stakeholders' trust within HE, the QA monitoring can take a more hands-off approach.

It was advised that when QA agencies are involved in capacity building in HEIs, conflicts of interest should be prevented by explicitly stating the QA agency's responsibilities. A suggestion was put forth in which QA agencies can be used as examples of suitable monitoring bodies appointed by governments, rather than always being identified as exclusive monitoring entities. It was recommended that, for each specific task, a monitoring entity should be specified and that external QA agencies represent an effective monitoring entity. It was briefly remarked upon that work on SD indicators within this WG may not be the best way for SD and QA to cooperate, and that it may be more fruitful to address SD when the ESG will be revised.

Lastly, it was emphasized that QA is one tool among many, and that other actors should not cease participating when QA is involved. It was concluded that synergies among various stakeholders can help fulfill the SD WG's goal of making HE systems more socially responsive.

For more information, please see: [*Social Dimension of Higher Education: The role of external QA*](#)

5. Presentation of SIHO and the work on Social Dimension in Flanders

Valerie Van Hees (SIHO) provided an overview of the work of the Support Centre for Inclusiveness in Higher Education (SIHO) and how it is positioned within the Flemish higher education landscape. Regarding SIHO and its links to the social dimension, Ms. Van Hees declared that SIHO is working to make HE accessible for all students, in line with the Flemish government's ongoing funding and incentives for diversity, inclusion and a holistic approach to SD.

Ms. Van Hees outlined how SIHO members meet regularly with working groups to discuss different

topics that belong to inclusion. They provide guidance to HEIs and policy makers on the subject and have organized trainings and generated supporting resources on inclusivity in HEIs. Underrepresented groups in the Flemish community have been identified and are currently being included in all discussions. SIHO offers services free of charge to HEIs, which in turn are part of SIHO.

The presentation then focused on SIHO's efforts to support students' mental health in Flemish higher education. Based on a number of studies, Ms. Van Hees provided a detailed and thorough review of the current situation of mental health among students in HE. Some interesting results were that frequently students' emotional issues have physical traces, this generation of students now has more mental health issues than previous ones, and that connectedness to HEIs and peers is key in students' good mental health. Ms. Van Hees recommended that there should be a focus on the newer, lesser-known mental health problems. She also pointed out that students' cognitive barriers prevent them from seeking mental health care and that this requires a strategy that involves actively reaching out to them.

She continued by reiterating that student mental health should be a priority at the micro and mezzo/mid levels. She added that HEIs are currently teaching staff members to identify emotional issues of students by using the data from the SIHO project to implement new interventions. Through access to these interventions, the Student Mental Health Monitor keeps track of student mental health. Students can also complete a mental health self-evaluation on Moodspace, which is maintained by SIHO.

For more information, please see: [Social Dimension, SIHO and Student Mental Health: A public mental health perspective](#)

6. Session 3: Improvement of indicators for the principles of social dimension

There were several discussions regarding the text. Firstly, it was noted that funding as an indicator for several principles is excessively mentioned in the text. It was suggested that the text should be structured in a more enticing way and refrain from sounding overly demanding. It was recommended to clarify that most of the data will come from administrative data plus one survey (in the sense that a survey would not be needed for each indicator that looks into collecting data), and to ensure that there is room for more content or information in the answering of questions. There were questions on whether the text can effectively reach and communicate with students as well as both public and private institutions.

A suggestion was made to delete the sub-indicators and the reference of community engagement for the QA indicators, but retaining the QA indicator since it is already being monitored by Eurydice. It was noted that many QA agencies (QAAs) already incorporate social dimension in their evaluations, and it should be present in the document as a tool for monitoring, as this is an already existing policy across many states. It was recommended to state the importance of having a social dimension perspective when having external QA evaluation. Having social dimension as a key point in accreditation of new programs and striving for revision of the ESG was emphasized. A combination of prescriptive and reflective language was recommended to communicate the necessary support and accountability clearly.

The remit of QAAs was discussed, and it was proposed that the text explicitly cover all scenarios in which QA can operate. Participants agreed that indicators that will be monitored should check whether QA is working on social dimension, as well as other mechanisms. It was also suggested that the national quality framework should require external QA procedures to monitor institutions' social dimension strategies. However, it was agreed not to go beyond the remit of QAAs, which focus on learning and teaching and cannot consider research, outreach, and the likes.

In Principle 1/Indicator 5, it was agreed to remove sub-indicators 2 and 3, and rephrase sub-indicator 1. It was decided that indicator 5 would be rephrased in order to mention that QA is one among other tools used for monitoring.

For Principle 2/Indicator 4, the sub-indicator would be revised as it was noted that recognition policy might not be only within the remit of QA agencies.

Regarding Principle 5/Indicator 3, it was noted that it was not the responsibility of the QAAs to assess the quality of psychological counselling services. Thus, it was proposed to reformulate the indicator to clearly note that the primary responsibility for QA of all services to students lies with the HEI, and different monitoring mechanisms can be in place at national level.

Principle 7/Indicator 3 was suggested for removal as it was also addressed in Principle 1. Principle 9/Indicator 5 was proposed for removal as well.

In the context of evaluating social dimension policies, the indicators related to funding were analysed. Initially, they were qualitative indicators, but it was decided to have quantitative indicators as well to provide an objective assessment of the relevant areas. This approach would enable to evaluate the commitments made in the principles and provide a quantitative perception of the situation. The proposed list of quantitative indicators serves as an assessment tool to measure the effectiveness of social dimension policies.

The Co-Chairs examined each principle and identified potential quantitative indicators. These indicators support the assessment of social dimension policies and enable to measure their efficiency. During discussions, the balance between qualitative and quantitative indicators was explored and it was concluded that a combination of both elements would be appropriate. It was also noted that the list of indicators should not be considered exhaustive, as member states can develop additional indicators of their own. It was also agreed that the list of indicators should be considered as an annex of the Communiqué in addition to the PAGs document.

Overall, the analysis of the indicators on funding has provided valuable insights into how to assess social dimension policies effectively. By combining qualitative and quantitative indicators, a more comprehensive understanding of the situation and evaluation the effectiveness of SD policies has been gained.

It was agreed to turn sub indicators into 'explanatory descriptors', avoiding naming them as sub-indicators because they will be not monitored by BPIR. Another suggestion was that the explanatory descriptors could be rephrased as text rather than bullet points. In conclusion, some indicators would be rephrased and sub-indicators would be replaced with the term 'explanatory descriptors', possibly presented as narrative text that follow the pattern of guidelines, with the aim of avoiding being prescriptive in their formulation.

During the discussion, it was emphasized that having a list of indicators is crucial for policymakers as it provides a clear roadmap for achieving goals and is a tangible document. While there is a desire to establish a European monitoring system for all dimensions, it is important to first define the indicators precisely and ensure that all countries use the same indicators with a specific definition. Eurydice could potentially assist with this process. The PLAR-U-PAGs project could create a toolbox that supports public authorities and higher education institutions in their work by providing examples of good practices and suggestions for the implementation of the indicators. The indicators should be simple and concise, and the quantitative indicators should be used for the monitoring system. The layout of the document should be improved to make it more reader-friendly, and a new introductory text should be created to provide a clear overview of the document's purpose and how to use it. It was determined that the Co-Chairs would revise the document to make it more concise and logical, and send the revised version to the members before the BFUG Board meeting LXXXIII.

7. Session 4: How could we create a national system of monitoring the implementation of the principles for social dimension?

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) introduced the session for monitoring the implementation of social dimension principles, and proposed a series of key questions that the WG would answer to in two groups in a brainstorming exercise, in order to discuss how the WG can perform its task, per the Rules of Procedure, to develop monitoring for the national level. The task can be viewed as divided into two parts: monitoring at the European level and monitoring at the national level. Currently, while structures and practices for European monitoring already exist, nothing is yet in place for national monitoring. At the European level, the Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR) is a comprehensive monitoring tool for the progress within the EHEA, including social dimension.

Additionally, various stakeholders are creating monitoring systems and presenting them to ministers. At the national level, direct or indirect references to monitoring can be found in the existing indicators.

Direct references to monitoring can be seen in Principle 1/Indicator 3, which discusses strategies and policies on social dimension in higher education with specific and measurable targets that are assessed and monitored by responsible bodies within concrete timeframes. Explanatory descriptors also mention that public authorities should periodically assess the implementation of national strategies together with stakeholders and monitor whether the selected targets are reached within proposed deadlines. Principle 4 also mentions monitoring the collected data and creating policies and strategies based on that data. Principle 10 is the most direct reference to the implementation of the PAGs, where top-level authorities engage in a policy dialogue with HEIs and other relevant stakeholders to translate and implement the PAGs at both national and institutional levels.

The Co-Chair highlighted the purpose of the session to envision the creation of guidelines, recommendations, and a framework for monitoring the PAGs at the national level. Participants were divided into two groups, each led by one of the Co-Chairs, to discuss questions related to the purpose and outcome of WG's suggestions regarding national monitoring systems, responsible parties for monitoring, stakeholder engagement, the link between EHEA and national monitoring, and the organization of monitoring.

Mr. Onita shared the conclusions from the first group's discussion. Some key takeaways were the importance of looking at the previous cycle and having an evidence-based monitoring system that informs national policy. Prioritizing indicators was suggested and keeping in mind that quantitative indicators are easier to collect. It was also mentioned that public authorities may have another structure mandated to implement monitoring and that having an independent monitoring system may be beneficial so that data is not affected. Mr. Onita concluded by clarifying that suggesting a national monitoring system is not possible but that there is a natural monitoring system clearly outlined on Principle 10 of the SD PAGs.

Nino Schmidt (Co-Chair) presented the conclusions drawn from the discussion of the second group. This group also decided that a system of national monitoring will not be proposed. Mr. Schmidt reiterated that the indicators already include monitoring within their descriptions. He added that national authorities have the capacity to take from these documents what they need to improve their social dimension policies in their specific context. Mr. Schmidt clarified that, in the absence of an explicit recommendation for a national system of monitoring, the European level system of monitoring should become stronger. He concluded that a more comprehensive, separate report on Social Dimension may be suggested to the BFUG as a European monitoring tool for social dimension.

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

The Co-Chairs announced that the new improved version of indicators will be ready before the next meeting on April 24-25, 2023. It was decided among WG members that this meeting should be in-presence due to the necessary work on the text. The host of this meeting has yet to be confirmed but the two alternatives are ETUCE (Brussels) or Oxford.

Members were reminded that the meeting on June 12-13, 2023 and related PLA activity will take place at the University of Dubrovnik. It was reiterated that the April and June meetings are crucial for the SD WG. Because the BFUG needs to adapt certain parts of the text by the end of the year 2023, most of the work should be completed by the June meeting, where a final draft of the text should be confirmed. Austria and Cyprus offered to host WG meetings toward the end of the year or the beginning of next year.

Caroline Hollela (Belgium French Community) shared the key takeaways from the first meeting of the Drafting Committee, which included a request for all BFUG Working Structures to develop initial ideas on what should be presented to the BFUG Board meeting and delivered to the Drafting Committee as a first draft. The Co-Chairs agreed to prepare bullet points and send them to

members for review before submitting them to the Drafting Committee for the Board meeting in Sarajevo. It was decided that the next SD WG meeting in April would involve a more detailed discussion on this matter.

For the next meeting, the group would discuss how to communicate the new policy framework for social dimension. It was agreed that the framework would consist of principles, guidelines, indicators, and descriptors. It was noted that it should be clearly stated that this policy framework represents a new architecture for social dimension in Europe, which includes all necessary elements for public authorities to continue working on social dimension. Additionally, the framework will serve as a general European framework that will be adopted by all ministers. It was proposed that, in the Communique, the document should be explicitly referred to as Policy Framework for Social Dimension.

The Co-Chairs thanked the guests and members for their contributions and input to the meeting. The ninth meeting of the WG on SD was successfully concluded.