



Bosnia and Herzegovina
Ministry of Civil Affairs

WORKING GROUP ON SOCIAL DIMENSION

Tenth Meeting, Hosted in Brussels, Belgium

24-25 April 2023

Minutes of meeting

List of Participants

Country	First Name	Last Name
Belgium French Community	Adriana	Gonfroid
Belgium French Community	Justyna	Nerkowska
Belgium Flemish Community	Patrick	Willems
Belgium French Community	Caroline	Hollela
Croatia (Co-Chair)	Ninoslav Šćukanec	Schmidt
EI-ETUCE	Annette	Dolan
EI-ETUCE	Rob	Copeland
ENQA	Elena	Cirlan
EQAR	Blazhe	Todorovski
European Commission (EC)	Julie	Anderson
European Students Union (Co-Chair)	Horia	Onita
European University Association (EUA)	Maria	Kelo
European University Association (EUA)	Gohar	Hovhannisyan
EUROSTUDENT	Martin	Unger
France	Stéphane	Lauwick
Germany	Carlotta	Ekloh
Italy	Alessandro	Arienzo
Malta	Valerie	Attard
The Netherlands	Arthur	Belle
Poland	Krzysztof	Marcynski
Slovenia	Maja	Svent
Turkey	Lütfiye	Durak Ata
BFUG Secretariat	Oltion	Rrumbullaku
BFUG Secretariat	Ana	Zhibaj

Albania, Austria, Council of Europe, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom, and SIHO did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome remarks and meeting with representatives from the ETUCE Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC)

Rob Copeland, Chair of the Higher Education Research Standing Committee (HERSC), welcomed participants to the joint online webinar of Social Dimension Working Group and HERSC. He provided an overview of HERSC's role in supporting and advising ETUCE on higher education and research policies. He highlighted the committee's focus on ensuring the voice of staff is heard in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Mr. Copeland emphasized the importance of creating a supportive environment for staff and the need for equity, inclusion, and diversity among higher education staff to align with the Social Dimension goals.

Annette Dolan (EI-ETUCE) presented an overview of the ongoing work of the WG on developing a comprehensive EHEA framework for the Social Dimension of higher education to the representatives from the ETUCE Higher Education and Research Standing Committee. The Principles and Guidelines (PAG) for the Social Dimension were originally included in Annex II of the Rome Communiqué, covering both staff and students. The WG task was to develop indicators and explanatory descriptions for each principle to facilitate the creation of national and institutional policies and action plans.

It was noted that the framework aims to enable public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) in European member states to strengthen the Social Dimension of higher education through the implementation of inclusive strategies. These strategies will provide support for vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented students, while also benefiting the broader student population and staff. The framework aligns with the definition of Social Dimension, which emphasizes the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that reflects the diverse social profile of society and addresses the needs of local communities.

The presentation was followed by a discussion on the Social Dimension of academic staff, highlighting the need to address diversity among staff members. The precarious nature of academic career paths, characterized by fixed-term contracts and selectiveness, was identified as a common challenge across many countries in the EHEA.

Gender equality was then discussed, with women having limited access to resources, and perceiving differential treatment. It was emphasized that various reports and testimonials noted that women were also more susceptible to stress and health issues. Equal opportunities for accessing resources such as research funding and employment security were emphasized as crucial for gender equality. The impact of structural factors, rather than individual conditions, on women's experiences in academia was underscored.

The importance of increasing the share of individuals with higher education degrees was recognized for creating a more inclusive system. National targets were set to raise the percentage to 50%, and recruitment practices were discussed, including the challenge of balancing open competition with tenure track positions, which tended to favor international male candidates.

The need for comprehensive data on staff was highlighted, with a current lack of information on staff demographics and previous university experiences. Initiatives to address gender imbalances in fields such as technology were mentioned, but funding limitations were identified as a significant barrier to implementing impactful Social Dimension initiatives in HEIs.

The representatives of ETUCE expressed gratitude for the chance to discuss with the WG and contribute to the PAG document. The host thanked the members for their contributions to the discussion and acknowledged that there were opportunities to cooperate with SD initiatives of the CoE.

2. Approval of the agenda

The Co-Chairs welcomed everybody to the tenth WG meeting and thanked the EI-ETUCE representatives for hosting the meeting. The minutes of the ninth 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 all of the participants introduced themselves and explained their respective roles within the institutions/bodies they represented, as well as their contribution to the Social Dimension group.

For more information, please see: [WG SE BA 10 Agenda of the meeting](#)

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

Ninoslav Š. Schmidt (Co-Chair) provided an overview of the specific objectives, including improving the already adopted document, developing a system of implementation monitoring, PLA organizing, and organizing a seminar on SD, and workplan of the WG. It was noted that information about the work of the WG was available on the [EHEA website](#), and the dedicated Google Folder. It was announced that there was extensive cooperation between the WG and other BFUG working structures, like consultations with WG on Monitoring. It was noted that both Co-Chairs would present in the BFUG Meeting LXXXIV on May 11 – 12, 2023. Regarding consultations, it was announced that the WG opened consultations at the BFUG plenary meeting in Brno. The consultations would last until the end of the year. It was announced that the WG had received written comments by ENQA, as well as from the BFUG Board in Sarajevo. In the present meeting, the consultations would continue with ETUCE and E4 Members (ENQA, EQAR, EUA, ESU), with the aim of preparing a new version of the working document for the BFUG plenary meeting in Stockholm.

It was emphasized that the final version of the PAG would be included in the Annex of the Tirana Communique, similarly to how social dimension was included in the Rome Communique. The document would provide a very comprehensive framework for SD that included principles, guidelines, indicators, clear definitions, and explanations.

The conclusions from the previous SD meeting in Ghent, Belgium, were presented. It was announced that indicators related to quality assurance (QA) were reformulated, following the discussion of the members. Explanatory descriptors were introduced in a narrative format, presenting the previous sub-indicators. It was announced that there would not be a separate system of monitoring, instead the indicators and descriptors would allow national and European authorities to create their systems of monitoring. Finally, the introductory part of the document would be reworded, to make sure the key headings would be very comprehensible and easy to read. It was proposed that the new extended document title should include *monitoring* as well.

In conclusion, the Co-Chairs asserted that they had almost succeeded in creating a new policy framework, consisting of 10 Principles and Guidelines, with 5 indicators for each principle and explanatory descriptors that would enable independent creation of systems of monitoring.

4. The link between Social Dimension and QA – how can they reinforce each other?

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) introduced the colleagues that would present the findings from the QA FIT project questionnaires to different stakeholders.

Elena Cirlan (ENQA) presented QA-FIT project on QA for the future, with ENQA serving as the project coordinator and other partners and associated partners. It was emphasized that the overarching objective of the project was to assess the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines within the EHEA and explore potential adaptations. A comprehensive mapping exercise was planned to examine the current state of internal and external QA in the EHEA. The project aimed to scrutinize the European Standards and Guidelines in different contexts and evaluate how QA activities address emerging developments. The ultimate goal was to provide insights into the future of QA in the EHEA.

To gather necessary information, surveys were conducted among various stakeholders, including quality assurance agencies, ministries, HEIs, and international students. The collected data would inform a series of papers, with some dedicated to specific stakeholder groups and others addressing common issues identified across the surveys. The project also intended to organize webinars and focus groups to delve deeper into survey findings and seek input from stakeholders. A final publication and foundations paper were planned, with a concluding conference scheduled to be held in Brussels, Belgium.

Ms. Cirlan further presented the data received from quality assurance agencies, particularly pertaining to the Social Dimension of higher education. A significant response rate was achieved, with 76 quality assurance entities from 45 EHEA countries participating. The diverse nature of the participating agencies was highlighted, with many carrying out additional roles beyond QA, such as involvement in qualification frameworks. Although the majority of agencies primarily focused on higher education, some also encompassed other educational sectors.

Regarding the evaluation of internal quality assurance systems, it was announced that 85% of the agencies addressed the Social Dimension of higher education to varying extents. The areas most commonly addressed by the agencies included policies supporting students with disabilities, psychological services, student well-being, and policies aimed at increasing student completion rates. On the other hand, training on inclusion and equity, monitoring concrete targets, and involvement of disadvantaged groups in policy elaboration and monitoring received less coverage.

Maria Kelo (EUA) presented the survey conducted on the Social Dimension in universities. Key data points were highlighted, including the receipt of 260 valid responses. It was noted that over half of the institutions were members of European University alliances. The coverage of the survey across the EHEA countries was discussed, with responses received from 41 countries. The participation from institutions with an international focus was encouraging, indicating a greater interest in the survey topics. It was mentioned that the method of university outreach consisted of emails, various contact lists, and social media platforms. The effectiveness of these channels in eliciting responses was acknowledged.

The coverage of Social Dimension indicators within the internal QA procedures of the universities was examined. The results indicated a notable alignment between the internal and external quality assurance procedures. It was observed that around 90% of the universities reported having policies in place to support students with disabilities. Additionally, gender equality policies and the involvement of disadvantaged groups in evaluation and monitoring were also covered to some extent. Although the percentages were high, it was acknowledged that there might still be gaps that are not fully addressed.

In conclusion, it was noted that the universities do cover the Social Dimension indicators to some extent, although specific details about the implementation on the ground are unknown. The integration

of these indicators was highlighted as an important aspect, and it was observed that 71% of the respondents believed that external quality assurance procedures adequately address these indicators. However, caution was advised regarding the reliability of this data, as institutions' perceptions may not always align with the actual implementation.

Horia Onita (ESU) presented the preliminary results from the survey conducted among the National Union of Students (NUS). Out of the 40 member countries, responses were received from 24 NUS representing 23 countries. However, there were notable gaps in participation, particularly from Central Europe, Western Balkans, UK, and Ireland. To address this, targeted efforts were made to encourage further responses for better regional balance. The survey focused on internal and external QA indicators related to Social Dimension. The responses from NUS showed similarities with those from the quality assurance pool members, indicating an alignment in their views. The most frequently mentioned indicators covered in internal quality assurance were student support services and increasing student completion rates. However, indicators such as training on inclusion and equity for students or staff were less commonly mentioned. Similar trends were observed in external QA, with student support services and adaptive policies for students with disabilities being the most covered indicators. Gender equality policies showed better coverage in internal compared to external QA.

Regarding the importance of Social Dimension aspects in external QA, NUS emphasized the significance of policies to support access for students with disabilities, psychological services, and student well-being. The importance attributed to policies on increasing student completion rates varied, with some participants considering it less important. In terms of expanding the scope of ESG Part One, NUS highlighted the inclusion of Social Dimension as the second most chosen topic after the participation of students and staff in higher education governance.

Overall, the preliminary results provided insights into the alignment and complementarity between NUS and QA stakeholders' perspectives. The data collected shed light on the indicators covered in internal and external quality assurance procedures, but further investigation is needed to understand the implementation details at the ground level.

Blazhe Todorovski (EQAR) discussed the results of the questionnaire on Social Dimension to ministries. Out of the 36 ministries, 33 were members of EQAR at the time of the survey. This represented approximately 78% of the higher education system in EHEA. Most of the respondents provided a balanced geographical representation with a few exceptions in regions such as the Iberian Peninsula and parts of the Balkans.

One of the common questions posed to the ministries was their perception of the Social Dimension's inclusion in ESG Part One. The majority of the respondents, accounting for 66%, expressed positivity towards incorporating the Social Dimension to some extent in the ESG Part One framework. Regarding the social indicators, the respondents marked most of them as either fully or partially covered. However, it is worth noting that similar to the responses from National Union of Students (NUS), some indicators like the involvement of disadvantaged groups in policy elaboration and monitoring, as well as data collection on Social Dimension indicators, received less attention. Additionally, the involvement of HEIs in providing need-based grants was also highlighted as an area of concern.

Initially, the discussion focused on the relationship between QA and the Social Dimension, with a focus on exploring the links between these policy areas. It was recognized that while focus groups can provide valuable support in clarifying certain issues, there are inherent limitations to their effectiveness, as it is not feasible to have a comprehensive representation of all target groups within the groups themselves. While using QA for monitoring purposes was discussed, it was acknowledged that it might not provide the necessary added value in certain cases. The complexity of the educational landscape was highlighted, with multiple layers and structures in different countries, such as regional authorities and ministries, impacting the implementation of education and social support policies within the QA framework. The discussion highlighted the need for both political commitment and technical discussions in defining the quality of Social Dimension policies, as well as the importance of addressing students' concerns related to subsidies, cost of living impacts, and other aspects beyond technical indicators.

In terms of evaluation and monitoring, the participants recognized that there might be confusion or overlap between existing evaluations of Social Dimension strategies and QA activities. The question of separate evaluations conducted by different bodies or ministries was raised, but it was deemed difficult to ascertain the extent of such confusion. Identifying gaps in evaluation practices was seen as a positive outcome, as it could prompt stakeholders to engage in discussions and reach a consensus.

In conclusion, the first part of the discussion provided insights into the interplay between QA and the Social Dimension. It was noted that countries with Social Dimension strategies often have separate structures for evaluating their implementation, which may not be directly related to QA. However, it was recognized that QA can reinforce and complement these evaluation efforts. The upcoming focus groups were seen as an opportunity to engage different stakeholder groups and gather more information on the topic. The ongoing development of the Social Dimension and its alignment with QA were emphasized, underscoring the need for allies and structures that can effectively accommodate its Principles and Guidelines.

Next, the Co-Chairs centered the discussion around how the findings could support the work of the WG, particularly on implementing the PAG. It was acknowledged that the PAG has largely improved and consisted of realistic commitments, it was recognized that there needs to be a balance between succinctness and flexibility. The document should clearly communicate the role of QA agencies in addressing the Social Dimension and provide realistic and understandable guidance to quality assurance professionals. The PAG can also be viewed from the perspective of how they can support QA agencies in enhancing the Social Dimension and identifying areas of interest for further exploration.

It was emphasized that the findings from the surveys and discussions greatly support the work of the WG in implementing the PAG, providing valuable insights into the perspectives of different stakeholders, including QA agencies and ministries, on the relationship between QA and SD. These findings could inform discussions at the national level on how to monitor and implement policies related to SD. It is suggested to focus on what works and what can be replicated in different countries, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach. The importance of having criteria and checking points while avoiding evaluation fatigue was emphasized. By examining the experiences of countries where both QA agencies and bodies dealing with the Social Dimension exist, valuable insights can be gained on the effectiveness of different approaches and the results achieved. This comparative analysis can lead to recommendations on how to move forward and enhance the Social Dimension in HE systems.

The European Commission representative expressed excitement about the document and plans to carry out consultations on QA and recognition links, including the QA FIT as part of the process. A study would be conducted to identify any gaps at the EU level in the QA FIT and explore the inclusion of environmental sustainability aspects. The goal is to strike a balance between ensuring the necessary QA measures and minimizing unnecessary regulatory burden, in line with the principle of "less is more."

An example from Croatia was introduced, highlighting the country's efforts to collect data and stimulate HEIs through a second generation of the Social Dimension strategic plan. The Croatian Ministry had changed the HE law, introducing objectives related to funding agreements that fostered diversity, equity, and inclusion. Indicators related to the Social Dimension were defined for these funding agreements, and it was anticipated that some of these indicators would be adopted by the ministry.

The QA FIT survey showed that approximately two-thirds of respondents expressed a desire for all topics to be covered. This made it difficult to prioritize and suggested that achieving a conclusive outcome based solely on the survey was challenging. The participants recognized the need to strike a balance between inclusivity and practicality, considering both the viewpoints of those who believe "less is more" and those who disagree.

The consultations with QA structures had been ongoing since November, and the WG now had a comprehensive understanding of the QA landscape and its potential for further development. It was hoped that the document would be adopted as an Annex to the Communiqué by the Ministers, providing a political dimension to the document while also allowing for its adoption at the national level through the BFUG structures.

5. Internal work of the WG on draft list of indicators & monitoring system

5.1. Update on the BFUG Board meeting in Sarajevo (31 March 2023)

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) presented an update of the recent Board meeting, highlighting the feedback received as largely positive, acknowledging the development of the indicators and appreciating the active engagement of the WG. However, there was a raised concern about the conclusion of the document and its approval by the ministers. It was unexpected as this issue had not been previously discussed during the two years of work. The concerns centered around the potential impact and outcome of the document if it remained unapproved. Two main arguments were put forward: firstly, the document was considered overly technical and specific, aligning with the given mandate and the nature of

indicators. Secondly, there was a perception that the document was too prescriptive. Further discussions and clearer instructions on the position of certain countries were expected to provide a better understanding of the next steps and how to advance the debate in the BFUG.

During the meeting, there was a discussion about the development of the WG's documents and the need for approval by the ministers. The Yerevan Ministerial was mentioned as an example where documents were approved separately from the Communiqué. Some participants expressed concerns about the visibility and impact of the documents if they are not included in the Communiqué. However, it was clarified that the WG's mandate includes the production of indicators. The concerns raised by some countries about the indicators were addressed, stating that the WG's document does not restrict national-level indicators. The group agreed to have further discussions on the next steps once the improved version of the document is available.

5.2. Discussion of the executive summary

Participants discussed the approach to the document and its connection with the Communiqué. Various suggestions were made, including mentioning it in the Communiqué and referencing it in the Annex, placing it before the document, or treating it as a separate document connected to previous work. It was agreed that the decision on how the Annexes would be introduced should be made by the BFUG to establish a relationship between the Annexes and the Communiqué.

The executive summary was elaborated upon by some members, emphasizing that achieving an enhanced Social Dimension in higher education involves specific and transversal policies with action plans. Some participants suggested that the definition had repetitions and that the phrasing should be simplified. There was an agreement to shorten the executive summary and make the definition clearer. In the first paragraph related to the comprehensive EHEA framework for the Social Dimension, it was suggested to include it in the executive summary and make it shorter. In the second paragraph, suggestions were made to delete the first five lines or include them in the executive summary. Rewording was proposed for the implementing frameworks, considering the BFUG's discussion, and adding support for staff. The policy alignment from previous EHEA documents and the positive impact of the Social Dimension were copied from Annex II. A new paragraph was added to provide general information before transitioning to indicators. It was suggested to place the paragraph on the positive impact of the Social Dimension immediately after the definition. The Co-Chairs thanked everyone for their suggestions, which would be integrated into the improved version of the text.

5.3. Discussions on principles

Horia Onita (Co-chair) informed the participants about the discussion methodology and that principles would be discussed one by one having a look at the indicators and explanatory descriptors.

Principle 1: A suggestion was made to clarify the second footnote from the beginning. Language editing concerns were raised. Additionally, there was a recommendation to include the word "staff" in the indicator and descriptor.

Principle 2: No significant comments or discussions were noted regarding this principle, except for a brief clarification on the concepts of the "right to enter" and "prior recognition."

Principle 3: Discussions mainly focused on indicator 3.5, with participants expressing concerns about its softness. It was proposed to develop strategies to encourage improvement in teaching and to establish a separate indicator for initial teacher training. Incorporating the Social Dimension into the curriculum was emphasized. Revised indicators were suggested: 3.5 - "Initial and continuous teacher training programs develop competencies in diversity, equity, and inclusion," and 3.6 - "Higher education staff is encouraged and facilitated to develop competencies in diversity, equity, and inclusion."

Principle 4: Suggestions included broadening the focus beyond students to include alumni. There was a debate about replacing the term "survey" with "research" in indicator 4.4. Eventually, it was decided to use "research" and remove the word "existence" from the indicator.

Principle 5: The need to strengthen the wording of indicator 5.4, particularly regarding conflict resolution and discrimination counseling, was highlighted. Discussions arose around the concept of "public institution" and its alignment with Eurydice guidelines. The decision was made to retain the wording, with the addition of the adjective "impartial." Indicator 5.4 was rewritten as "Existence of impartial bodies." It was suggested to include students and staff in indicator 5.2, while removing the term "professional" counseling.

Principle 6: Discussions focused on indicators 6.2 and 6.3. Questions were raised about the relationship between the two indicators and the definition of indirect support and cost for students. It was proposed to remove IT equipment and meals from indicator 6.3. The suggestion to remove "first cycle" from indicator 6.2 but include it in the descriptor was considered. Participants debated whether to merge the indicators or have separate indicators for direct and indirect support. A descriptor was deemed necessary for indicator 6.4.

Principle 7: The discussion centered around indicator 7.3, with a recommendation to emphasize the importance of quality assurance. It was suggested to shorten indicator 7.4, as higher education institutions may not be responsible for the building structure.

Principle 8: A comment was made to replace the word "vulnerable" with "including" in indicator 8.1, as all students benefit in those cases.

Principle 9: A descriptor was suggested for indicator 9.1, mentioning financial support through funding agreements and "call for projects" funded by EU funds with community engagement objectives. Caution was advised regarding the obligations of the EU funds.

Principle 10: A descriptor was needed for indicator 10.2.

No further questions or remarks were raised during the meeting. The revised version of the text would be circulated among members before the BFUG meeting.

6. Concluding remarks: Division of tasks for the next WG's meeting and AoB

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt invited the participants to discuss the next meeting. It was suggested that, considering the revision of the text, it might be more efficient to work online and reserve in-person meetings for the autumn. A suggestion was made to meet in June, incorporate feedback from BFUG, work on the Communiqué, and then reconvene online in the autumn.

Regarding the Communiqué, Horia Onita mentioned that a brief text to the Drafting Committee outlining the WG's work on creating a policy framework for the Social Dimension had already been sent. The Drafting Committee is currently working on the structure, and the introduction will include the topic of the Social Dimension. Draft zero is expected to be finalized in September, with no draft expected during the summer. Horia Onita proposed holding an in-presence meeting in October, as initially planned for 24-25 October, one month prior to the BFUG meeting.

Operational challenges related to the upcoming meeting in Dubrovnik were discussed, with the possibility of a hybrid format, but it was not feasible due to most participants traveling to the PLA event. Members would receive further updates before the BFUG meeting.

The Co-Chairs thanked the guests and members for their contributions and input to the meeting, as well as on the organization of the work and their comments on the PAG. No other business was brought forward, thus the meeting was successfully concluded.