Working Group on Social Dimension

Consultative meeting with BFUG members and consultative members

6 September 2023, Online
14.00 – 15:00

I.   Introduction

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension held a consultative meeting on the Principles, Guidelines and Indicators (PAGs) of the social dimension prepared by the WG, with the aim of discussing the content of the document and explore subsequent steps for its adoption.

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) provided a presentation, wherein he elucidated the key elements of the PAGs document. He provided insights into how the Working Group on Social Dimension (WG on SD) arrived at these points and underscored the document's significance in achieving a comprehensive and successful conceptual framework for the social dimension in the EHEA. The Co-Chair emphasized that the PAGs play a crucial role in fortifying the social dimension within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). He referenced a European Commission/Eurydice report from 2022 (Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe), demonstrating that an increasing number of countries have initiated the implementation of social dimension principles into their national policies. However, in 2020, EHEA ministers expressed the need for further assistance in translating these principles into specific policies, prompting the BFUG to adopt terms of reference for the WG on SD with the primary objective to establish indicators for the social dimension principles and guidelines.

Mr. Schmidt provided an overview of the drafting and conceptualization of the PAGs, including the addition of new elements such as indicators and explanatory descriptors. These indicators serve as tools for measuring progress in implementing social dimension principles, while the explanatory descriptors offer detailed insights into the policy context and each indicator's attributes and characteristics. The intention behind these additions is to facilitate adaptable implementation in national education systems and enable the establishment of monitoring and evaluation systems at national and European level to gauge progress in social dimension principles' implementation.

He emphasized the WG on SD's collaboration with Eurydice, where the WG adopted most of Eurydice's indicators developed for the social dimension principles and expanded upon them, including with additional explanatory descriptors. This evidence-based approach derived from surveys conducted among countries reinforces the credibility of the new framework for the social dimension in the EHEA. The WG on SD introduced what they consider a novel and comprehensive EHEA policy framework for the social dimension.

The document sent to the BFUG members included a new introductory section summarizing the work done, the definition of the social dimension, the positive societal impacts of the social dimension, policy alignment with previous documents, and clear definitions of principles, guidelines, indicators, and explanatory descriptors. The WG on SD proposed naming the new document "Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area".

II.   Discussion on the document text

Participants were invited to provide their opinions on the text of indicators and explanatory descriptors for each principle, as well as the introductory summary. The WG Co-Chairs emphasized the relevance of the proposed framework in light of global events and societal dynamics. They

highlighted their efforts to integrate feedback and perspectives from various stakeholders, and to include both students and staff as target groups.

Participants expressed general satisfaction with the document's content but also emphasized the need for clarity, conciseness, and the further inclusion of higher education institutions as stakeholders in specific areas. Clarifications on terminology were also suggested (i.e., the term "explanatory descriptor" could be simplified to "descriptor), and the challenges of maintaining brevity in a comprehensive document were acknowledged.

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) clarified the document's terminology, explaining the distinctions between principles, guidelines, indicators, and explanatory descriptors. He addressed concerns about repetitions, stating that while some improvements can be made in avoiding repetition, the broad scope of the social dimension, as well as the interrelations between the already adopted principles makes it challenging to keep the document very concise. The Co-Chairs assured that the WG would thoroughly review and incorporate the suggestions into the document's next version. Mr. Schmidt noted that the document's length is comparable to other adopted EHEA documents, such as the ESG or the diploma supplement. However, they are open to further shortening it based on feedback, where possible. He highlighted the positive impact of the document based on the Eurydice report, which indicates that countries are making progress and finding the document useful.

Questions were raised about specific indicators in the document, pointing out discrepancies between the guidelines and indicators, particularly regarding training for diversity for students. It was questioned whether training in inclusion and diversity should apply to all students across Europe, given the complexity of the topic. Clarification was also sought on the relationship between community engagement and inclusion, diversity and equity. A more general concern about administrative burden due to extensive monitoring requirements in the document was also raised.

Mr. Onita clarified regarding the indicator on student training for inclusive diversity and inclusion, that the indicator's intention is not to mandate training for all students in Europe but to ensure that opportunities for such training exist. It's about providing students with the chance to develop competencies in these areas. Mr. Onita also provided insights into the relationship with Eurydice indicators. While Eurydice primarily used strong indicators with yes/no questions for monitoring purposes, the WG expanded on this approach based on feedback from countries and stakeholders. They aimed to make the indicators more nuanced, moving away from a binary "yes/no" approach, in order to assess the implementation more holistically Additionally, the WG aimed to reach a broad understanding that would be acceptable to all member states. He also explained that while Eurydice indicators focused on quality assurance agencies, the WG recognized the need to distribute responsibilities more broadly. They opted for a more general term, which could encompass various entities, such as quality assurance agencies, internationalization agencies, or ministry departments. The flexibility in terminology was designed to accommodate different national contexts and support the field effectively, as requested by BFUG members in previous consultations. As such, the monitoring does not request new bodies or determines exactly the relevant monitoring authority but offers space for diversity of approaches in member states

It was recommended adding a short sentence to clarify the document's aims, emphasizing that this addition would enhance clarity and understanding for all readers. Mr. Onita noted that the WG SD will revise the document to provide additional context on their thought process. One question raised was related to the indicator on the student participation in social dimension policies and its overlap with the work of the WG on FV related to student and staff participation. While he acknowledged the legitimate question of whether this approach is necessary, Mr. Onita mentioned that there are inherent overlaps in several documents, including those related to learning and teaching, and the ESGs. In this specific context, the WG on SD focused specifically on the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and in social dimension policies, which are specific to SD and are already part of the adopted Principles and Guidelines.

Mr. Schmidt highlighted the need to emphasize in the document's summary that the full framework is not mandatory. The intention is for countries to select indicators and guidelines from the document

that align with their national context and priorities. The document should serve as a resource for countries to decide which components to adopt based on their needs and priorities. He stressed that national authorities often work over extended periods and should have the flexibility to choose what aligns with their national priorities. Mr. Onita expressed the view that the Principles and Guidelines need to be implemented, as agreed by ministers, but as this happens in different national contexts and at different speed, indicators and explanatory descriptors serve as tools to facilitate the achievement of these commitments and provide guidance, although alternative approaches to achieving the principles and guidelines may also be valid.

III.   Discussion on the document's method of adoption

Two options for adoption of the document were presented: either as an annex to the Tirana 2020-2024 communique, or as a separate stand-alone document for adoption at the upcoming ministerial conference. The Co-Chairs invited participants to share their opinions and suggestions regarding the vision and methodology for adopting the document. Mr. Onita mentioned that the WG on fundamental values planned to propose an annex on defining fundamental values, while to the best of their knowledge other WGs like Learning and Teaching and Monitoring did not intend to propose annexes.

One recommendation comprised of incorporating the document into the communique, emphasizing its symbolic and political significance for government officials and stakeholders involved in the Ministerial Conference in Tirana, as it could enhance awareness and importance of the social dimension in higher education. It was also emphasized to consider visibility when deciding whether the document should be part of the communique or separate, suggesting reviewing past visibility assessments for similar documents.

Mr. Onita emphasized the importance of broader ministerial endorsement to ensure a more significant impact. He also highlighted the advantages of including the document as an annex for effective implementation within member states. If the new document is adopted as stand-alone document, it may be prone to being overlooked. A comment was made in response, suggesting that the notion of documents not featured in the communique being less significant is misleading. It was stated that documents approved by BFUG Working Structures retain their significance even if they are not part of the communique. Mr. Schmidt shared an example from a social dimension document in the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan, which was overlooked when adopted separately from the communique, emphasizing the importance of historical experiences in decision-making.

The Co-Chairs expressed their gratitude to all participants for their valuable feedback and active engagement during the meeting. They mentioned their intention to send out a follow-up email containing introductory materials from the meeting. Additionally, they encouraged written comments by email (to be sent to the secretariat@ehea.info), setting a submission deadline of September 25th, 2023, to aid in the preparation of documents for the upcoming BFUG Board meeting in October and the BFUG meeting scheduled for November.

No other business was raised, thus the meeting was successfully concluded.