



EU2019.FI Finland's Presidency
of the Council
of the European Union



Ministry of
Education
and Culture



REPORT OF THE ADVISORY GROUP ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

Board Meeting 24 September 2019, Istanbul

Introduction

The Advisory Group on Social Dimension Advisory Group (AG1 on SD) is co-chaired by Ninoslav Schmidt (Croatia) and Robert Napier (the European Students' Union – ESU). 17 other members and stakeholders are part of this advisory group, and these are: Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, EI/ETUCE, EUA, European Commission, EUROSTUDENT, Germany, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom and United Kingdom (Scotland).

Advisory group meetings

The Advisory Group met for the first time in Zagreb on the 19th of February 2019 at the Ministry of Science and Education. 13 representatives were present for the meeting together with the co-chairs and the members of the secretariat. At the time of the meeting, Luxembourg participated in an advisory role, and a few countries could not attend due to various reasons. The UK also participated for part of the meeting via Skype.

The first meeting saw a discussion on the terms of reference and what is intended to be achieved by the end of this working period. The Group was also informed about Luxembourg and Sweden asking to join, and the procedure for the online consultation was explained. A roundtable discussion followed on the current state of play of the social dimension, with emphasis being put on the commitments made on the topic within the BFUG, and an analysis of how many of these were actually implemented. A discussion was also had to analyse national experiences and perspectives, to report on concrete examples of implementation and to identify possible obstacles to implementation.

The most productive part of the meeting was definitely the workshops. During the workshop **the vision for the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension** that the group should deliver

by the next Ministerial Conference was discussed. Following this, a **SWOT analysis was carried out**, to make sure that a realistic picture is being taken for the way forward. There was a tacit agreement that the PAGs should be short and concise, to be able to actually implement a concrete change post 2020.

As part of the work of the Workshops, a **clear Workplan 2019-2020 with timeline** for the upcoming meetings of this group was also set out. The request of the Board to deliver a first draft for feedback as soon as possible and in a timely manner was also taken into consideration. It was also agreed that the work of the AG would take into consideration reports done by previous groups that have dealt with the topic, in order to ensure not to duplicate work and to work constructively-taking into consideration things that have and have not worked in the past. The detailed timeline for the upcoming meetings is clearly laid out in the minutes of this first meeting. The restricted area for members has also been set up, and the co-chairs have made sure to update it accordingly, with both useful literature as well as drafts that have been prepared.

At the **second meeting** held in Brussels in March further strides were made towards achieving an ideal structure for the Principles and Guidelines. The **AG decided to work on two sets of concise principles** to start with: one set of **Principles and Guidelines for HE System Level** policy making and **one set for HE Institutions**. The discussions from both workshops served as a basis for the work of the drafting team. Certain priorities were highlighted, such as the need to have the commitment to the SD evident through explicit mention in national strategic goals, to data collection, to the need of accurate and reliable information. Discussions remained taking place in parallel, until at the end of the discussions, both groups reported in a plenary format, and a discussion could take place on the outcomes of the workshops. There was at this point already a discussion on whether and how two sets of PAGs can be developed, and what the link of enforcement between them would be.

The group decided to formulate a drafting team consisting of seven members. The co-chairs had to act as moderators, as well as provide a first draft based on the discussions that took place during this meeting. A discussion also took place regarding possible topics for the PLAs for this group. It was decided that amongst others, we should learn more from countries which have a set plan for SD or have defined SD Goals within their HE strategy. The definition of social dimension was also brought up as a possible topic, together with the link that exists between investing in the social dimension and improving the quality of education.

Following this meeting the co-chairs worked with the Drafting team and proposed the first draft of the PAGs, which were to serve as the basis of all discussions in the group's **third meeting in Vienna**.

During the third meeting, **two keynote presentations** were also given to widen the scope of the group's discussion. The first was given by a representative of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research, which focused on the Austrian experience in creating social dimension policy. The presentation explained the steps for development of the Austrian National strategy including the identification of national targets as well as underrepresented groups and groups with specific needs. Following this, the representative of EUA presented the preliminary outcomes of the INVITED Survey, which is part of a project aimed at supporting institutions in fulfilling their social responsibility to reflect societal diversity, promote good practices, peer learning and exchange between institutions and policy makers. Following this, a panel discussion with Q&A took place, which was basis for developing the content of the draft of the PAGs.

When discussing the **outcomes of the Brussels meeting**, the group agreed that the PAGs should be based on a list of key principles, high level statements based on a proposition or value, serving as a basis for the conceptualisation of policies. Following this, the group started thoroughly discussing the draft principles, where the proposal to foresee an introductory part was accepted, and it was also agreed that the **definition of SD will combine the definitions used in the London 2007 and the Yerevan 2015 Communiqué**. It was also agreed that the introductory part must be short and stress the contribution of SD to equity, quality, excellence, and economic development. The discussion outlined also the symbolic relevance and sensitiveness of words, recommending the use of positive rather than negative approach and terms, when possible. The use of the term "groups" vs. "students" or "learners" was discussed. The **following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed**:

- reference to "underrepresented", "vulnerable" and "disadvantaged" groups and/or students/learners will be made, with a clear definition of the categories; therefore, all the three terms will be used in the text, depending on the context. The definition of these categories will be made at the beginning of the text.
- the terms "groups", "students" or "learners" will be used depending on the context;
- the notion of intersectionality should be considered;
- although relevant, practical examples should shift to a different part of the document.

- Reference to the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions should be already included in the introduction

The rest of the meeting was spent analyzing each draft principle individually, and reaching a consensus on the wording and way forward. Towards the end of the meeting, a **discussion arose about the way forward, and whether the group should actually put forward two sets of PAGs or one.** The discussion was based on the fact that a list of PAGs targeted to HEIs could not be released without consulting those institutions. The Co-chairs suggested to discuss the proposal to add a final principle to the list, establishing an obligation for the ministries to consult HEIs and relevant stakeholders in their systems, in order to bring their feedback for the BFUG within the next Bologna cycle, i.e. three years. According to this proposal, AG1 would give to the Rome 2020 Ministerial Conference: a) one set of PAGs for the ministerial level with a final principle introducing the national consultation; b) an annex, i.e. the list of PAGs for HEIs. National consultations would be carried out on the basis of the latter list, in order to allow actors being affected by the adoption of the PAGs for HEIs to be consulted and give feedback.

Strong and weak points of the proposal were widely discussed, and participants finally agreed to go on working on the existing sets of principles. An introduction (or preamble) will be provided to explain the rationale of two separate lists and to stress the importance of tackling the national level, recommending that ministries hold a consultation process with their HEIs and national stakeholders, to create ownership and legitimate the adoption of principles, that should be implemented according also to national needs.

At the end of this meeting, it was agreed that the AG1 Drafting Committee will work in the coming months to revise and rephrase the two sets of principles for HE systems and for HE institutions. **At the moment, the members of the drafting team have been giving their input, and the co-chairs are working on combining the inputs from all the members.** Once this is finalized, the advanced draft sets of principles and (a part of) guidelines will be ready and an online consultation will be opened, based on a majority rule. After this step, single PAGs can still be discussed and changed as appropriate, but the decision on the whole structure of the document and the lists cannot be changed. The 4th and 5th AG1 meetings (Helsinki, 11 November 2019; venue to be confirmed, 11 February 2020) will be targeted at finalising the whole document(s).