

## Working Group on Social Dimension

Fifteenth Meeting, Austria (Hybrid)  
4-5 April 2024

Minutes of meeting

### List of Participants

Country/Organization	Name	Last Name
Austria	Helga	Posset
Austria	Elisabeth	Pelikan
Belgium Flemish Community*	Lynn	De Palmaer
Croatia (Co-Chair)	Ninoslav Ščukanec	Schmidt
Denmark	Michella	Ravn
ESU - European Students' Union (Co-Chair)	Horia	Onita
EUA - European University Association*	Henriette	Stoeber
EI ETUCE*	Annette	Dolan
European Commission*	Svein	Hullstein
EUROSTUDENT	Martin	Unger
France	Alain	Bouhours
Germany	Carlotta	Eklöh
Malta	Sergio	Carbonaro
Montenegro*	Milica	Kavedzic
Poland	Krzysztof	Marcyński
ÖH Austria (Guest)	Katharina	Weissenböck
ÖH Austria (Guest)	Antonia	Riegler
BFUG Secretariat (Head)	Edlira	Subashi
BFUG Secretariat	Enkelejda	Mezini
BFUG Secretariat	Kristina	Metallari

Online participation\*

Albania, Belgium French Community, Council of Europe, Cyprus, Estonia, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and United Kingdom did not attend the meeting.

### 1. Welcome remarks and approval of the agenda

The Co-Chairs extended a warm welcome to all attendees at the fifteenth meeting of the 2021-2024 work period and expressed gratitude to the hosts for facilitating the meeting in Vienna. The minutes of the fourteenth 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.

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. The development process of the indicators and descriptors involved extensive consultation spanning 12 cycles, including presentations at BFUG and Board meetings, feedback collection, and iterative improvements.

### 3. Update and discussion on the BFUG Meeting (19-20 February 2024) and BFUG Board Meeting (12 March 2024)

Horia Onita (Co-Chair, ESU) conveyed to members that the document regarding indicators and descriptors had been



presented and adopted during the BFUG meeting in February. The revisions were discussed, now encompassing a summary with implications for the monitoring exercise. It was emphasized that the indicators themselves remain unchanged, serving as policy tools for countries to implement principles and guidelines within the EHEA. The understanding persisted that PAGs signify high-level political commitments for all EHEA members. Furthermore, discussions at the BFUG included proposals for sessions at the Ministerial Conference, suggesting a dedicated session on the social dimension rather than merging it with other topics. Additionally, future priorities for Bologna discussions were addressed, with a document summarizing the conclusions available on the EHEA website.

During the March 2024 Board meeting, it was communicated that there was no need to present Terms of Reference (ToRs) as originally intended for the April BFUG meeting. Instead, the final reports and work of the working structures will be showcased at the upcoming BFUG Meeting. Additionally, there will be a brainstorming session on future priorities, emphasizing the exploration of interlinkages and the possibility of merging Working Groups. April 5<sup>th</sup> was emphasized as the deadline for submitting priorities for discussion at the BFUG.

#### **4. Update on the work of the Drafting Committee for the 2024 Tirana Communiqué and its relevance for the social dimension in HE**

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) provided an update on the work carried out by the Drafting Committee (DC) regarding the Communiqué. He highlighted numerous rounds of development, particularly emphasizing significant revisions in the section concerning the inclusive EHEA. There was a notable emphasis on ensuring the effective implementation of PAGs, measuring progress in their execution, and urging the BFUG to provide a report on this by 2027. Additionally, the endorsement of the document "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA" was underscored as a pivotal step, establishing a comprehensive framework for the social dimension within the EHEA. The importance of enhancing data collection, notably through involvement in initiatives like Eurostudent, was also highlighted. The subsequent paragraph centered on a commitment to address challenges encountered by students in collaboration with stakeholders and communities. Lastly, the focus shifts to intensifying efforts to ensure the recognition of students' qualifications and eliminating barriers to their enrollment in higher education institutions.

The EUA representative commented on the requirement for the BFUG to submit a report in 2027. She noted that this pertains to the WG on monitoring's efforts, which have also submitted a proposed survey on the future of monitoring. The WG is considering various scenarios, such as continuing with comprehensive monitoring, opting for thematic reports, or alternating between thematic and comprehensive monitoring. Depending on the outcome of these discussions, the 2027 report may not directly reflect the social dimension. The EUA representative expressed interest in the idea of alternating monitoring approaches but suggested maintaining continuous data collection within the Bologna Process, accompanied by publishing comprehensive and thematic reports alternately. However, she emphasized the importance of ensuring that key data, including that related to the social dimension, are incorporated into the monitoring process, regardless of the chosen approach.

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair, Croatia) suggested an addition following the mention of the "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA" as the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA. He proposed including a sentence affirming that this framework will empower the formulation of systemwide policies aimed at strengthening the social dimension of higher education. Additionally, it will support the development of strategies by higher education institutions to enhance their own approaches.

The discussions primarily revolved around the student mental health section and mobility. Further, Horia Onita (Co-Chair, ESU) briefly summarized the main points of the Global Policy Forum Statement. Following the discussion, the Co-Chairs expressed appreciation for the members' input and confirmed that they would send the suggested comments to the Secretariat.

#### **5. Peer-learning activity with the National Union of Students in Austria (ÖH)**

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) introduced the National Union of Students in Austria, emphasizing its advocacy and support services for students.

Antonia Riegler (ÖH Austria) outlined the union's three-tier structure and its activities, including advocacy, engagement with government bodies, and various projects such as housing campaigns and sustainability initiatives.



Regarding student counseling services, ÖH departments offer legal support on educational matters and provide guidance to students on resolving concerns like ECTS validation and study fees. Counseling extends to outreach to school students, with regional offices coordinating training sessions and presentations. Social dimension responsibilities are integrated across departments, and short-term mobility initiatives primarily fall under international affairs, aiding third-country students with visa issues. Common counseling topics include mental health, academic struggles, and financial issues, with the fund serving as a resource for immediate financial needs, particularly regarding housing expenses and mental health support.

Ms. Riegler briefly discussed collaboration with the ministry, highlighting the president's role in managing communication and collaborative efforts. She also noted that Austrian law grants student unions the right to address general political issues. It was contrasted that in many Eastern European countries, student unions primarily focus on higher education matters. Additionally, attention was drawn to a recently published online handbook on student politics, which was authored by union leaders and researchers, demonstrating various global models of student representation.

When it comes to organizational projects, she explained that decisions are usually made during coalition formation, with the involvement of multiple departments. Participation in external projects such as Erasmus or EU initiatives hinges on funding availability and the duration of mandates. The landscape of academic staff unions varies depending on legal frameworks.

The WG expressed gratitude to the ÖH representatives and congratulated them on the work done so far.

## **6. Discussion on the WG Final Report**

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair, Croatia) discussed the WG final report for the period 2021-2024, which outlined activities chronologically over the past four years, with a chapter dedicated to key achievements. While originally tasked with proposing ToRs for a future WG on SD, recent discussions at the BFUG questioned the inclusion of future references in the report. Despite this, some working groups included future references. Suggestions were made to streamline the report, including extending the summary and revising the annexes for clarity. The report's length was a concern, but the importance of including comprehensive information was emphasized. Technical issues regarding links and archiving were also discussed. Ultimately, the group agreed to maintain key elements in the report and explore potential revisions to streamline its presentation.

## **7. Discussion on Terms of Reference for the WG on SD for 2024- 2027**

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair) presented a proposal for the future of the WG on SD, aiming to integrate social principles into educational policy. Future activities include refining policy recommendations and potentially merging with related areas. Despite opposition from some countries who deemed the WG's mission accomplished, an alternative proposal emphasizing 'Need Assessment' was suggested. He acknowledged uncertainties in policy implementation beyond 2024 due to lacking infrastructure. He highlighted societal challenges such as climate change and economic disparity, suggesting that aligning higher education with societal engagement could address these issues effectively. The proposed establishment of the "Working Group on Inclusive Higher Education for and with Society (WG-IHES)" within the BFUG aims to promote inclusive higher education by fostering dialogue between higher education systems and societal stakeholders. This new structure, titled as the "Working Group on Engaging Higher Education with Society (WG-EHES)," seeks to enhance the responsiveness of higher education to societal needs. Potential deliverables include developing policy recommendations, creating national action plans, identifying best practices, and supporting monitoring and impact assessment.

The EC representative expressed uncertainty regarding the necessity of a separate working group dedicated to the social dimension in the future. He acknowledged the existence of a comprehensive framework within the EHEA but emphasized the importance of individual countries taking ownership of its implementation due to varying challenges and needs. He suggested integrating the social dimension into existing working groups' activities rather than establishing a separate entity. Additionally, he highlighted concerns about the growing complexity of the current structure and the need for specific justifications for the continuation of existing groups. While acknowledging the importance of engaging higher education with society, he remained unsure about the need for a separate working group, citing the broad and advanced nature of the topic. The representative emphasized the importance of clarity and specificity in proposals and expressed reservations about the vagueness of certain aspects.



The EUA representative expressed a preference for focusing on the implementation of existing policies rather than introducing new recommendations. She highlighted the challenges of addressing soft topics and emphasized the need for clarity in framing concepts within the Bologna Process. She stressed the importance of countries implementing the PAGs by 2030 and proposed that a future Working Group could play a role in monitoring and data collection related to the social dimension. She supported the idea of a future working group with a focus on action plans and implementation, particularly targeting countries that have not been actively involved in the past. Additionally, she expressed reservations about broadening the scope of objectives, such as engagement with society, due to the potential difficulty in achieving concrete outcomes in these vast areas.

Concerns were voiced regarding the insufficient political will and the inclusion of additional elements hindering the implementation of the PAGs.

Horia Onita (Co-Chair, ESU) questioned whether the tools, mechanisms, and policies required to achieve the objective of an inclusive EHEA by 2030 are readily available. While acknowledging the theoretical availability of principles, guidelines, and indicators, there is concern over a perceived lack of substance in understanding and implementing these elements. Additionally, he stressed the significance of establishing a dedicated working structure focused on the social dimension within the Bologna process, citing historical evidence of how the absence of such structures hindered progress, especially in areas like mobility. Moreover, he highlighted the absence of alternative platforms for collaborative work on the social dimension, citing the dissolution of previous networks and WGs dedicated to this cause. The Co-Chair advocated for the creation of a distinct structure to sustain efforts in addressing the social dimension within the Bologna process, ensuring organized initiatives for implementation, peer learning, impact assessment, and data collection.

The BICG Co-Chair offered insights into the evolution of working structures concerning the social dimension within the EHEA. She highlighted her participation in the WG on the social dimension from 2012 to 2015 as a valuable experience, during which strategies for countries were devised and strong emphasis was placed on the social dimension in the Yerevan communique. However, she noted a gap between 2015 and 2018 when no such WG existed, coinciding with a lack of progress in the social dimension within the Bologna process. The Co-Chair also recalled concerns regarding the absence of indicators and measurement methods despite the availability of principles, guidelines, and indicators like those found in the Eurydice report. Expressing the need for the reinstatement of a dedicated WG for the social dimension, she proposed expanding its scope to include societal engagement or exploring connections with other relevant topics such as the SDGs and AI. The BICG Co-Chair emphasized the importance of securing political commitments and ensuring monitoring and follow-up procedures to achieve the implementation of the social dimension.

The EI ETUCE representative stressed the need for ongoing work on the social dimension, highlighting the risk of principles and guidelines being neglected if efforts diminish. Emphasizing implementation, she urged the WG to focus on practical strategies, and suggested supporting countries struggling with implementation to ensure the social dimension becomes a reality. The Germany representative highlighted challenges with implementation clarity from past experiences and stressed the need for a dedicated working structure for the social dimension. She expressed concern from a student's perspective that without prioritization, achieving the social dimension by 2030 would be unlikely. The Poland representative stressed the importance of the social dimension across policy areas. He emphasized the need for concrete plans to engage with society and implement strategies effectively, suggesting closer collaboration with global partners for insights and cooperation.

The Co-Chairs concluded that there is clear majority support to continue the work on the social dimension. They noted that the focus of the future WG would be on facilitating the implementation of PAGs through peer learning, aiming to produce a report highlighting good practices by the end of the cycle. They emphasized the importance of ongoing monitoring of the 10 Principles, with the outcome of being a Thematic Peer Group (TPG) involving the production of a report and the implementation of commitments, rather than proposing policy recommendations.

Ninoslav S. Schmidt (Co-Chair, Croatia) suggested that the WG should articulate the significance of the social dimension's continued presence in the EHEA. He proposed that the primary objective for the upcoming period should involve peer learning focused on implementing principles. The resulting conclusions from these peer learning activities could aid countries in further implementation efforts. He recommended incorporating this proposal into the WG's report, to be presented at the BFUG meeting in Brussels, and leaving the decision on progression to the BFUG.

There was consideration given to modifying a sentence in the Inclusive EHEA section of the Communique to read, 'We



commit to measuring progress in the implementation of all 10 principles of the social dimension, and ask the BFUG to report back on this in 2027.' However, there was insufficient support for its inclusion in the Communiqué, leading to the decision to include it in the WG final report instead.

The Co-Chairs noted that they would prepare the new version of the report and send the WG priorities for the future to the Secretariat. Additionally, they notified that the final report summary would be extended.

### **8. Preparation of the sessions related to the social dimension at the Tirana Ministerial Conference/Bologna Policy Forum (June 2024)**

Horia Onita (Co-Chair) provided details regarding the content and structure of the Ministerial Conference programme. On the first day, there will be a one-hour period featuring four parallel sessions, one of which will focus on the social dimension. Moderators and rapporteurs will present the discussions from these sessions in the main plenary room. Each parallel session will include a 10-minute presentation followed by a roundtable discussion. On the second day, a session at the Global Policy Forum was suggested, though no specific session has been confirmed at this time. The focus of the Ministerial Conference session will be on the EHEA level, and there will be the possibility of international guests attending.

It was queried whether the invitations had been dispatched to international guests. In response, the Head of the secretariat affirmed that the invitations had indeed been sent.

For the session's organization, it was informed that there will be a presentation on indicators and descriptors conducted by the WG on SD Co-Chairs. The subsequent portion of the session could feature an external speaker from the ministry or engage in a roundtable discussion to delineate the session's objectives. Considering the reporting during the plenary, it was advised to allocate at least five minutes for presenting the document to all ministers. Consequently, 10 minutes would be reserved for the document presentation, with the remaining five minutes allocated for discussions in parallel sessions. A moderator would facilitate discussions with ministers covering various dimensions.

In summary, the session would commence with an introductory presentation showcasing the cycle's main achievements. Additionally, three questions would be prepared in advance for each minister. A panel discussion would follow, culminating in a report during the plenary session.

### **10. Concluding remarks**

The Co-Chairs conveyed gratitude for the members' efforts and the fruitful outcomes of their work during this period. They highlighted the progress made during the WG meetings and commended the WG for meeting its objectives. Additionally, the Co-Chairs expressed appreciation to all participants and members for their contributions. No other discussions were put forward and the final WG meeting was successfully concluded.