



MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI NAȚIONALE



Republic of North Macedonia  
Ministry of Education and Science

Last modified: 28/06/2019

**ADVISORY GROUP ON SOCIAL DIMENSION  
THIRD MEETING  
Wien (Austria), 5 June 2019**

Minutes

**List of participants**

<b>Delegation</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Surname</b>
Austria (Austrian Students' Union)	Marita	Gasteiger
Austria (Office of the Austrian Student Ombudsman)	Josef	Leidenfrost
Austria (guest expert)	Anna	Wockinger
Bulgaria	Stanimir	Boyadzhiev
Croatia (Co-chair)	Ninoslav	Šćukanec Schmidt
Denmark (National Union of Students)	Julian	Lo Curlo
EI - ETUCE	Annette	Dolan
ESU	Sebastian	Berger
ESU (Co-chair)	Robert	Napier
EUA	Anna-Lena	Claeys-Kulik
European Commission	Klara	Engels-Perenyi
Eurostudent (technical expert)	Angelika	Grabher-Wusche
Eurostudent (technical expert)	Martin	Unger
Germany	Ronja	Hesse
Kazakhstan	Daniyar	Alenov
Luxembourg	Isabelle	Reinhardt
Slovenia (expert)	Maja	Švent
Slovenia (expert)	Urska	Pikec Vesel
Sweden	Lovisa	Hellberg
United Kingdom	John	Storan
BFUG Secretariat	Giovanni	Finocchietti
BFUG Secretariat	Susanna	Taormina

Apologies from: Belgium Flemish Community, Lithuania, Poland, United Kingdom (Scotland).

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

The Austrian Student Ombudsman at the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Josef Leidenfrost, welcomed the participants in the meeting, introduced the organisation, tasks and services of the Ombudsman Office, and gave information on the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education, that will take place on 25-28 June 2019 In León (Spain). The Co-chairs Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt (Croatia) and Robert Napier (ESU) thanked the Austrian Student Ombudsman for hosting the meeting and welcomed the participants. A short tour de table followed, to allow new members, invited experts and guests to introduce themselves. The Co-chairs then introduced the Agenda, pointing out that the main goal of the meeting is completing the list of Principles for Social Dimension (SD). The AG2 Drafting Team was thanked for the valuable work done in plotting out the list and expressing very relevant comments. The Co-chairs illustrated the work procedure proposed to achieve the goal of finalising the list. After agreeing on the goal of reaching everyone's consensus on the list of principles before starting the discussion on the guidelines, the agenda and the working procedure were approved by the participants.

*AG1\_Social\_Dimension\_3\_Agenda.pdf*

## **2. What can we learn from Austrian experience in creating social dimension policy?**

Anna Vöckinger, Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research - Department of Evidence Based Higher Education Development, held the presentation "What can we learn from Austrian experience in creating social dimension policy?". Vöckinger recalled that she was replacing Helga Possett, who was unable to attend. The presentation explained the steps for the development of the Austrian "National strategy on the social dimension of higher education", and identified as national targets the total population, as well as underrepresented student groups and groups with specific needs. The Strategy identified three target dimensions to which different action lines are connected and set quantitative goals to be achieved by 2025 (an interim evaluation will be carried out in 2021-2022). Actions for the implementation, monitoring and mainstreaming of the Strategy were illustrated, including amendments to the University Act and integration in the funding plans of institutions and student support system. Among lessons learned, the presentation underlined the use of existing data and expertise, the importance of dissemination and visibility, and the importance of interfaces and synergies with other policies and with stakeholders.

*AG1\_Social\_Dimension\_3\_Wöckinger.pdf*

## **3. Strategies towards equity, diversity and inclusion at higher education institutions in Europe: outcomes of the INVITED survey**

Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik, EUA - European University Association, held the presentation "Strategies towards equity, diversity and inclusion at higher education institutions in Europe. INVITED Project survey outcomes". The presentation focused on the preliminary results and conclusions of a survey aimed at supporting institutions in fulfilling their social responsibility to reflect societal diversity, promote good practices, peer learning and exchange between institutions and policy levels. The presenter clarified that the sample on which the survey was based is self-selected and composed mainly of small-medium higher education institutions. Institutional strategies and approaches, as well as dimensions of diversity were

reported; institutional measures and barrier or success factors were identified. Preliminary conclusions stressed the point that HE institutions are developing strategies and measures for enhancement of diversity and inclusion, even if there are no incentives for HEIs through performance based funding or through some other mechanisms supported by the state. Challenges emerge, among which lack of awareness in the academic community, need for funding and targeted student support as well as staff training. Dialogue between all actors/stakeholders is needed as a basis for new policies.

*AG1\_Social\_Dimension\_3\_Claeys\_Kulik.pdf*

#### **4. Discussion with the Q&A**

The discussion took place in a Q&A session. The panellist were Anna Vöckinger, Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research - Department of Evidence Based Higher Education Development, Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik, EUA - European University Association, and Josef Leidenfrost, Austrian Student Ombudsman at the Federal Ministry of Education; the moderators were the Co-chairs Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt (Croatia) and Robert Napier (ESU). The discussion focused on the tasks of the Ombudsman Office, and the relations between its tasks and SD issues. Then, a number of key aspects of the implementation of strategies related to SD and equity and inclusion were discussed, including: creating consensus around the inclusion issue, developing a holistic approach, defining quantitative and monitorable goals, clarifying the involved actors' different roles and responsibilities, empowering all actors, those coming from prior education sectors included. Strategies should not be limited to measures related to selection and access phases (in which the excellence vs equity issue, as well as differences among national systems, are crucial) but should also address progression and successful conclusion of studies; in those phases, the individual and environmental aspects influencing effective learning, as well as monitoring the performance of non-traditional students, are crucial.

#### **5. Summary of the main outputs from the Brussels meeting: how will they guide our future work?**

The Co-chair Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt was the presenter of the topic. He gave an overview of the outputs of the previous AG1 meetings (Zagreb, 19 February 2019; Brussels, 29 March 2019), where it was agreed to use the definitions of the SD reported in the [London 2007 Communiqué](#), and introduced the vision of the Principles and Guidelines (PAGs) for the SD. 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. Principles shall be accompanied by guidelines, intended to advise policy makers on how principles should be implemented in practice according to sound practices. Following a guideline should never be mandatory. PAGs will address specific target groups and ensure synergies among different policy areas. According to the AG1 Workplan 2019-2020, next steps envisage on-line work and consultation in next September-November 2019, in order to produce by November 2019 an advanced draft showing the final structure and the contents of the document. The final version of the document should be confirmed in the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Group (expected by February 2020).

*AG1\_Social\_Dimension\_3\_Summary\_Brussels.pdf*

## 6. Presentation of the first draft of the Principles

The Co-chair Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt was the presenter. The text of the document with the draft principles has been elaborated by the co-chairs on the basis of the outcomes of the workshops held in the AG1 Brussels meeting (29 March 2019). The AG1 Drafting committee made comments and proposals, on the basis of which an integrated document, which today is on the table for discussion, was elaborated. Principles will be discussed one by one, to reach consensus and a strong agreement on the final list. The outcomes of the discussion (supported by flipcharts and minutes of the meeting) will lead to an advanced draft list of principles.

## 7. Discussion of draft Principles

The proposal to foresee an introductory part to the principles was accepted, and it was agreed that the definition of SD will combine the definitions used in the [London 2007](#) and [Erevan 2015 Communiqué](#). 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 and reference to issues like e.g. institutional autonomy should shift to a different part of the document.

### Principles of SD for HE systems

It was agreed to express principles in 1-2 sentences and to link guidelines to each principle; for each point of the draft principles document, it will be agreed which contents will be expressed in the form of a principle, and which as guidelines.

#### *Principle 1*

Draft formulation: Commitment to the social dimension in HE should be evident from its explicit mention in the national strategic goals for HE. Governments shall adopt national or system level action plans for social dimension in HE in order to facilitate operationalisation of strategic goals.

The discussion underlined the importance of envisaging a holistic approach to SD, based on a general political strategy rather than just an action plan, and on the cooperation and joint action of multiple authorities. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- the commitment to a long-term perspective will be complemented by a reference to strategic documents, concrete targets and reasonable timeframes, which must take into account the country/system differences;
- with reference to existing differences among countries, reference should be made to “national” and/or “system” levels.

### *Principle 2*

Draft formulation: Governments shall ensure the mainstreaming of the social dimension in all areas of HE policy in order to have a holistic approach with integrated and inclusive policies. Each development in the social dimension on higher education needs to be aligned with other relevant policy fields, and ministries responsible for higher education should work hand in hand with other relevant ministries in order to build resilient synergies and thoroughly improve the situation of students.

The discussion highlighted the opportunity to differentiate “students” (i.e. those who are in the HE system) and “prospective (or potential) students” (i.e. those who have the potential to enter the HE system but may not have the opportunity). For the latter, the target is increasing the participation rate of potentially underrepresented student groups; for the former, the target is improving the situation of current students. The meanings of “thoroughly”, “improve” and “situation of students” could be better specified. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- consider transforming this draft principle into a guideline for draft principle 1;
- take into account suggestions and decide how to merge inputs;
- consider remove extra words and reducing phrasing.

### *Principle 3*

Draft formulation: External quality assurance procedures can be a tool to enhance the social dimension in HE.

The conclusions of the recent [BFUG meeting LXV](#) in Bucharest (4-5 April 2019) on the topic of ESG were reported: ESG should not be used to measure everything, and there is already a reference to the dimension of “inclusion”. Although SD should not be integrated within ESG, the discussion stressed that two statements are crucial: it exists a link between SD and QA; SD can have a positive influence on, and can enhance quality. It was also stressed that SD should not refer to QA only, since it has a positive influence on other policies, too, and should be combined with them. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- refer to different policy levels, considering the option of quoting them in the guidelines;
- mention explicitly “external” and “internal” QA.

### *New Principle*

Participants agreed to formulate a new principle focused on the idea of a broad-based dialogue and the collaboration among governments, HEIs, stakeholders, social partners, people coming from underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged student groups. All those actors should be consulted on the topic of SD in the creation of HE policies, and embedded in their design and implementation.

### *Principle 4*

Draft formulation: The existence of reliable data is an important condition for the improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Governments should commit to the following: regular data collection on the composition of the student body in access and participation, drop-out and completion of HE, identification of vulnerable and underrepresented groups of students, implementation of regular evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of social dimension policies.

Pros and cons of collecting general data vs. micro-data were analysed. The discussion underlined that data collection is not a goal in itself, and it must be connected to policy goals. It was also underlined that data (micro-data) collecting is a very sensitive topic, that national legal limitations exist in some countries, and that new data regulations (e.g. GDPR for EU countries) can make data collection increasingly difficult. Transition from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle was quoted as an additional topic for data collection. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- the need of reliable data must be stressed;
- data comparability should be stressed, maybe in the Guidelines;
- end goals and targets of data collection must be indicated in the guidelines;
- data collection must be workable for HEIs and national authorities.

### *Principle 5*

Draft formulation: Government should have policies that ensure that accurate and reliable information, counselling and guidance about prospects in HE for potential and enrolled students in order to increase their access, participation in and completion of HE studies.

Pros and cons of having an ombudsperson-type function set up in HEIs were discussed: ombudspersons can manage potential conflicts in accession, progression and completion stages, on the other hand it was argued that it is better to focus on a function (mediation) rather than on a figure, and that HEIs should deal directly with students' representatives. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- different players must cooperate and create synergies;
- focus on "effective" services and "accessible" and "reliable" information;
- information must be "understandable" for everyone (e.g. curricula description).

### *Principle 6*

Draft formulation: Governments should ensure that economic reasons do not prevent anyone from studying. Such reasons are not restricted to tuition fees, but also include ancillary expenses such as housing, general living expenses and transportation.

Participants agreed that the draft text should focus on economic barriers – therefore the initial formulation is effective and should remain. . This approach will help governments to focus not just on fees, but also on further obstacles like, e.g. living costs. It is meaningful not to expand it to other topics, which may be dealt with in separate principles. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- add references to financial support services in the guidelines as part of the solution.

### *New principle*

Participants agreed to formulate a separate new principle focused on funding issues, with the aim of creating a robust connection between funding and SD. The text must be drafted in the form of a general statement (e.g. funding policies, financial support for effective SD), being careful with the phrasing and avoid going too much in details, that may prove dangerous.

### *Principle 7*

Draft formulation: Legal regulations should enable sufficient flexibility in study programs (programmes) organisation and delivery, which takes into account the diversity of students.

The discussion underlined that diversity concerns not only student profiles but also their living conditions, and that it is important to develop a framework (e.g. administrative rules, learning environment, etc.) that allows students to study in different ways according to their needs. The option to keep this as a principle, or make it a guideline, was discussed. The following input for the Drafting committee was agreed:

- combine it with some another principle or reformulate it.

### *Principle 8*

Draft formulation: Governments should help HEIs towards improving higher education teacher training (initial and continuous) for working with a diverse student body, as teacher training has a decisive impact for attaining most of these principles. Sufficient budget should be foreseen for staff training.

The discussion highlighted the importance of developing at system level a framework and an environment able to support HEIs in delivering initial and continuous teacher training (TT). The importance was stressed of a holistic approach, offering a specific guidance to prospective first-generation HE students in primary and secondary education, since they may not receive adequate support by families, despite their potentials. The topic of future teachers' academic curricula was discussed; the education system as an employer has an interest in providing SD-related contents in the future teachers' curricula, to enhance capacity

to deal with a more diverse student body; although a relevant issue, it was argued that this is not a task for governments, and that SD issues should not be limited to TT curricula.

The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- draft a text on the topic “holistic approach” to be used as a guideline to Principle 2;
- contact (via the Co-chairs) AG2 on Learning and Teaching to find synergies on the topic of teaching assessment in the teachers’ career development;
- decide whether to provide a reference to the topic of the of future teachers’ academic curricula, and in what form.

### *New principle*

A proposal was made for a principle stating that physical, psychological and health related conditions should not prevent any student (or potential student) from studies. The discussion emphasised that, in some cases, health conditions cannot be considered the responsibility of governments, and that it should be considered whether there is a real demand for HE from people in severe conditions. The following inputs for the Drafting committee were agreed:

- define the most appropriate message and identify a proper phrasing for this principle;
- identify the most appropriate position in the list.

Before concluding the analysis on the list of draft PAGs for HE systems, a discussion was started on the fact that a list of PAGs targeted to the 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.

## Principles of SD for HE institutions

### *Principle 1*

Draft formulation: Commitment of HEI to social dimension should be evident from its explicit mention in the institutional strategy.

The discussion highlighted that HEIs may have different ways to deal with SD, while there are different levels at which a strategy may be formulated and implemented. A rephrasing of the draft text was suggested, using “inclusion” instead of “mention”.

### *Principle 2*

Draft formulation: There are standardised procedures in place for collecting data on different characteristics of the student body and HEIs implement regular evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of policies and practices regarding social dimension.

The discussion stressed the risk of students’ stigmatisation or creation of stereotypes, that can be hidden behind data standardisation. A better elaboration of the concept was suggested, phrasing it in the principle rather than in a related guideline.

### *Principle 3*

Draft formulation: HEIs continuously strive to widen access and participation, which includes also enabling alternative access routes and flexible learning paths.

### *Principle 4*

Draft formulation: HEIs should regularly check if the workload of study programmes is appropriate, and in line with the ECTS allocated.

### *Principle 5*

Draft formulation: Procedures of academic assessment are clear and transparent. Assessment criteria are fair and non-discriminatory.

The discussion underlined that some propositions refer to aspects that are regulated by national laws, thus changes in the legal frameworks are needed; this might be explained in an introductory part. Participants agreed that the three principles (3-5) are closely connected and may be packed in a single principle, connecting it to the [ECTS Users’ Guide](#) and narrowing down guidelines.

### *New Principle*

A proposal was made for introducing an additional principle to the list for HE systems, stating that governments commit themselves to remove legal barriers to the autonomy of HEIs in implementing HEIs principles. Appropriate positioning of such a new principle might be after present Principle 7.

### *Principle 6*

Draft formulation: HEIs nurture a culture that favours diversity and inclusion as an important element of enhancing an overall quality of all HEIs functions (teaching, learning, research, outreach). Internal quality assurance procedures aim to enhance social dimension at HEI.

The discussion underlined that the issue of quality and quality assurance is already discussed at system level, and that the same approach is applicable for the HEI level. A similar phrasing will be used.

Draft principles for HEIs from 7 to 13 were not discussed in detail, because there was not enough time to do it. Participants agreed that the Drafting Team will work on these remaining principles in order to enhance them. Once the Principles will be completed, the Co-chairs will send the text to the AG1 members for the next round of the conculation.

## **8. Division of tasks for the next AG meeting**

The Co-chair Robert Napier was the presenter of the topic. It was agreed that the AG1 Drafting Committee will work in the coming two months to revise and rephrase the two sets of principles for HE systems and for HE institutions. In early September 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> AG1 meetings (Helsinki, 11 November 2019; venue to be confirmed, 11 February 2020) will be targeted at finalising the whole document(s).

## **9. Upcoming peer learning activities (PLA)**

There was not enough time to work on this topic. It was agreed that the Co-chair Robert Napier will inform AG members by email about upcoming PLAs. The upcoming PLAs are planned within the project SIDERAL (financed by the Erasmus+ program). The project SIDERAL will have a kick-off meeting on July 2 in Zadar, HR, and at this meeting the project consortium will make all the necessary decisions related to the upcoming PLAs. Therefore, Robert Napier will inform memebbers about all the details related to the PLAs after this kick-off meeting.

## **10.AOB**

The EI-ETUCE representative proposed to join the AG1 Drafting Committee. Participants approved the proposal. The next meeting of the Group will take place in Helsinki on 11 November 2019 (venue to be confirmed). It was agreed to upload in the restricted area the presentations held in this meeting, as well as copies of the flipcharts.

## **11.Meeting conclusions**

The Co-chairs thanked the Austrian Student Ombudsman for hosting the meeting. They also thanked the participants for the very active contribution to the discussions. It all contributed to having a very effective and motivating meeting.