Minutes of the

5th Thematic Peer Group D on Social Dimension meeting

Hybrid (Malta), 1 October 2026

List of participants

Nr.	Name	Country / Organisation
1	Helga Posset	Austria
2	Julia Barnay	Austria
3	Charlotte Maekelberghe	Belgium – Flemish Community
4	Ivana Ramic	Croatia
5	Annette Dolan	Education International - ETUCE (online)
6	Jass Juuremaa	Estonia (online)
7	Franziska Knogler	ESU (Co-chair)
8	Bianca Pace	ESU
9	Henriette Stöber	EUA
10	Mia Wallin Hansen	European Commission
11	Martin Unger	Eurostudent
12	Alain Bouhours	France
13	Lasha Zivzivadze	Georgia
14	Tilman Dörr	Germany (online)
15	Nikoletta Chardalia	Greece
16	Ismini Kavvadi	Greece (online)
17	Bianka Paulovics	Hungary
18	Una Strand Viðarsdóttir	Iceland (online)
19	Artūrs Čerņiševs	Latvia (Co-chair)

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20	Dāvis Dejus	Latvia
21	Jana Kazarjan	Malta (Co-chair)
22	Jessica Sammut	Malta
23	Jon Vercellono	Malta
24	Maria Røed	Norway
25	Berit Johnsen	Norway (online)
26	Maria Bołtruszko	Poland (online)
27	Monica Cavalli	San Marino
28	Miriam Kanioková	Slovakia (online)
29	Graeme Atherton	United Kingdom
30	Viktoria Malincakova	INSPIRE project (guest)
31	Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt	INSPIRE project (guest)
32	Oana Alexandra Țînțar	EHEA Secretariat
33	Lorina Xiaoyu Hou	EHEA Secretariat

Albania, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Czech Republic, EURASHE, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden were absent.

Romania sent its apologies.

1. Welcome and introduction from the TPG D Co-chairs
1.1. Adoption of the agenda
1.2. Acknowledgement of the 4th TPG D meeting minutes
1.3. Tour de table

Document:

TPG_D_5_IE_ME_1_Draft_Agenda

The Maltese Co-chair opened the meeting by welcoming the participants and invited James Perry Maia, CEO of the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), to deliver a brief opening address on behalf of the hosts.

The Maltese Co-chair presented the draft agenda and invited participants to raise any comments or questions.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, asked whether the meeting would address the future of the social dimension within the BFUG Work Programme for 2027–2030, as well as how the outcomes of the TPG's work on the social dimension could be presented at the 2027 Ministerial Conference. The Maltese Co-chair clarified that both matters would be addressed under agenda point 6, TPG's contribution to the 2027 Ministerial Communiqué.

As no further comments or questions were raised, the agenda was adopted as proposed.

The Maltese Co-chair also invited participants to take note of the minutes of the 4th TPG D meeting, which had been circulated to members in their final version and published on the EHEA website. She then invited participants to briefly introduce themselves.

2. Updates from the EHEA Secretariat regarding the activity of the other WS and feedback from the 4th meeting of the TPG D on Social Dimension

Documents:

- TPG_D_5_IE_ME_2_1_Updates_EHEA_Secretariat
- TPG_D_5_IE_ME_2_2_Feedback_Report_4th_TPG_D_meeting

The EHEA Secretariat member provided an update on the Secretariat's recent activities, including its support for the meetings of the BFUG working structures and the organisation of Conference 'The Future of Higher Education: Sharing Knowledge and Supporting Implementation for a Stronger Bologna Process', held in Bucharest in September 2026. She also referred to the elaboration of the draft Study on Bologna Impact and Future Trends, prepared as an evidence-based contribution to discussions on the future priorities of the Bologna Process. In this context, she informed participants that a survey would be circulated to the BFUG to collect their views on future priorities, in preparation for the discussions at the upcoming BFUG meeting in Dublin.

She further presented the proposed structure for the final reports of the BFUG working structures for the 2024–2027 work programme, outlining the main sections to be prepared by the Co-chairs and the annexes to be compiled by the EHEA Secretariat. In this context, she invited participants to share their views on whether the activities and results of the Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs) should continue to be included exclusively in the final report of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG), or whether separate reports should be prepared for each TPG.

Participants expressed support for the preparation of individual final reports for each TPG, highlighting that this approach would provide greater visibility to their work and allow for a more detailed presentation of their activities and results. It was suggested

that the BICG final report could retain a concise summary of the work undertaken by each TPG, while the individual reports would provide more comprehensive information.

The EHEA Secretariat member also provided an update on the submission of National Action Plans, noting that 43 out of 49 had been received. Finally, she outlined the main documents scheduled for discussion and decision at the BFUG meeting in Dublin.

The EHEA Secretariat member briefly presented the feedback report from the 4th TPG D meeting, noting the positive feedback received and thanking Austria for hosting the meeting.

3. Updates from the INSPIRE project

Document:

TPG_D_5_IE_ME_3_Updates_INSPIRE_project

The Latvian Co-chair and Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, provided an update on the activities carried out within the INSPIRE project since the previous TPG D meeting.

The Latvian Co-chair summarised the main outcomes of the two Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) organised in Salzburg and online in June 2026, focusing on counselling and guidance, inclusive institutional culture and community engagement. He highlighted the importance of comprehensive student support, inclusive institutional environments, reciprocal partnerships with external stakeholders and the integration of the social dimension into institutional strategies and practices. He also noted that the PLA reports are available on the ESU website.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt presented the progress of the country reviews conducted within the INSPIRE project in Austria, Lithuania and Portugal, aimed at assessing the implementation of the EHEA Framework for the Social Dimension and providing tailored policy recommendations. He informed participants that the Austrian review report was awaiting ministerial approval, the Lithuanian report was under preparation, and the Portuguese review was scheduled for November 2026 [meanwhile postponed to January]. A synthesis report bringing together the findings and recommendations from all three reviews is expected in 2027, with the desire of presenting it at the EHEA Ministerial Conference.

He also shared preliminary findings from the Austrian review, highlighting the country's strong policy foundations and evidence base, while emphasising the need to strengthen coordination and shift the focus from implementing measures towards assessing their impact. He clarified that these findings remained subject to formal approval.

4. Discussion on the latest version of the TPG D Action Plan

Document:

TPG_D_5_IE_ME_Updated_TPG_D_Action_Plan

The Latvian Co-chair presented the latest version of the TPG D Action Plan, updated based on the discussions held during the previous TPG D meeting. The only comment raised concerned a typographical error in the dates of the planned TPG D meetings.

The participants agreed on the updated Action Plan, subject to the minor correction.

5. Discussion on the draft narrative text submitted for the Social Dimension chapter of the BPIR 2027

Document:

TPG_D_5_IE_ME_5_First_Draft_Narrative_text_SD_BPIR2027

The ESU Co-chair introduced the discussion on the first draft of the narrative text for the Social Dimension chapter of the Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR) 2027. She reminded participants of the guiding questions circulated ahead of the meeting and invited them to provide input through Mentimeter, followed by discussions on each question. The session aimed to identify additional initiatives and national practices, reflect on challenges encountered during implementation and gather suggestions for future priorities.

Regarding national and EHEA-level initiatives supporting the implementation of the social dimension since 2024, participants referred to national working groups, access and participation initiatives, surveys and cooperation with relevant stakeholders. The Maltese representative highlighted the work of a dedicated national working group on the social dimension, bringing together stakeholders from higher education, employment and skills development, as well as a planned survey on parental engagement in education. The UK representative informed participants about a newly established national task force on access and participation in higher education in England, expected to present recommendations in January 2027.

The discussion then focused on concrete national practices illustrating progress in implementing the social dimension. The Hungarian representative presented a higher education mentoring programme supporting disadvantaged students, particularly during their transition into university life, with the aim of improving integration and preventing dropout. The Croatian representative highlighted the contribution of Erasmus+ mobility programmes to inclusion, particularly through additional financial support and flexible mobility formats for students with fewer opportunities.

She also referred to the written contribution shared with the TPG D Co-chairs prior to the meeting.

The ETUCE representative presented an alternative tertiary education pathway introduced in Ireland, allowing students to begin their degree studies at local further education colleges before progressing to university. She highlighted its potential to widen participation by reducing geographical, financial and admission-related barriers, while noting that the initiative was still at an early stage and would require further evaluation. The Austrian representative also referred to the European Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Network, which had evolved from an EHEA-funded initiative into a self-sustaining network facilitating the exchange of practices and expertise.

Regarding obstacles to implementation, the Mentimeter responses highlighted recurring challenges related to insufficient and unstable funding, limited institutional capacity, competing policy priorities, uneven implementation and difficulties in mainstreaming inclusion across higher education institutions. Participants also identified gaps in political commitment, cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder communication and student participation.

Furthermore, participants reflected on the future direction of the Bologna Process regarding the social dimension. The responses emphasised the need to prioritise practical implementation, monitoring and evaluation, stronger cooperation between stakeholders, the exchange of good practices and the assessment of the actual impact of social dimension policies. Other suggestions included strengthening community engagement, addressing transitions between educational levels, promoting inclusion and considering the implications of artificial intelligence.

The ETUCE representative further emphasised the importance of sustained interagency and interdepartmental cooperation throughout the entire educational pathway, from early childhood to higher education. She noted that overcoming fragmented approaches across government departments and public services would be essential to reaching underrepresented groups and improving equitable participation in higher education.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, welcomed the draft narrative text and proposed four specific amendments aimed at strengthening references to the existing EHEA framework and better reflecting the outcomes of the INSPIRE project.

Firstly, regarding the second paragraph on page 1, he suggested explicitly referring to the *Indicators and Descriptors for the EHEA Principles of the Social Dimension*, endorsed by Ministers at the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference. He proposed adding the following wording:

"In Tirana the EHEA ministers endorsed 'Indicators and Descriptors' for the EHEA Principles of the social dimension providing a valuable framework, guidance and methodologies for monitoring, evaluating and assessing the impact of social dimension policies."

Secondly, concerning the description of the country reviews on page 2, he proposed revising the paragraph to more accurately reflect their objectives, the involvement of national stakeholders and the contribution of international experts.

Thirdly, referring to the discussion on the difficulties of measuring progress on page 5, he suggested adding a sentence highlighting the practical relevance of the existing Indicators and Descriptors for national monitoring and evaluation:

"EHEA 'Indicators and Descriptors' for the Principles of the social dimension should guide public authorities in creating effective evaluation strategies."

Finally, regarding the *Future prospects* section on page 5, he emphasised the importance of moving beyond monitoring the implementation of policies towards assessing their actual impact, including identifying which measures work and for whom. He indicated that he would also submit the proposed amendments in writing to facilitate their consideration in the revision of the narrative text.

The ETUCE representative presented several suggestions for strengthening the narrative text, noting that she had also submitted detailed written comments on the draft.

She emphasised the importance of continuous data collection, monitoring and reporting to assess progress in implementing the social dimension, rather than relying on ad hoc exercises. She also proposed highlighting the need for ongoing consultation and dialogue with relevant stakeholders, particularly student unions and staff trade unions.

Regarding the Main achievements section, she suggested placing greater emphasis on supporting children from birth, recognising that educational opportunities and inequalities develop well before entry into formal education. She also highlighted the importance of training teaching staff, support staff and institutional management to translate social dimension principles into practice. In this context, she proposed explicitly acknowledging the transformative role of teaching and other staff in higher education institutions, whose support and encouragement can significantly influence students' opportunities and outcomes.

Furthermore, she stressed the need for stronger interagency and intergovernmental cooperation across education, health, social services, housing, justice and local government. She suggested that relevant services and support mechanisms should be coordinated and made accessible to students and their families, including through facilities located within or near higher education institutions.

Finally, she reiterated the importance of recognising teaching and support staff as key actors in institutional transformation and in the effective implementation of the social dimension.

The ESU Co-chair thanked participants for their contributions, both during the meeting and in writing, and confirmed that the Co-chairs would take these into account when revising the narrative text. She encouraged members to submit any additional written feedback following the meeting and clarified that the text would be revised once feedback had also been received from the general editor of the BPIR 2027.

6. TPG's contribution for the 2027 Ministerial Communiqué

Documents:

- TPG_D_5_IE_ME_6_1_TPG_D_Contribution_Ministerial_Communique
- TPG_D_5_IE_ME_6_2_Presentation_University_Lifelong_Learning_EHEA
- BFUG_Board_100_IE_ME_8_Draft-0.1-Communique_17.09.2026

The Maltese Co-chair opened the discussion by inviting participants to reflect on the future of the social dimension within the next BFUG work programme (2027–2030), particularly regarding the continuation of a dedicated working structure.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, emphasised the importance of maintaining the TPG D on Social Dimension in the next BFUG work cycle. He recalled that securing a dedicated working structure for the social dimension had been challenging in previous cycles and stressed that its continuation should not be taken for granted. He therefore proposed that the TPG D Co-chairs communicate to the BFUG the importance of maintaining the social dimension as a priority, supported by a dedicated working structure.

The ESU representative, speaking on behalf of ESU rather than in her capacity as Co-chair, supported the proposal and highlighted the importance of reaching a common position among TPG D members regarding the continuation of the group. She noted that such a position could be taken forward by the Co-chairs and supported by member countries within the BFUG.

She also drew attention to the *Inclusive EHEA* section of the first draft of the 2027 Ministerial Communiqué, which already includes a proposed mandate for the continuation of a dedicated working structure on the social dimension of higher education, with a request to report back at the following Ministerial Conference. She encouraged TPG D members to support the retention of this provision in the final Communiqué.

The Maltese Co-chair then invited participants to share concrete suggestions and proposed amendments to the first draft of the 2027 Ministerial Communiqué.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, welcomed the draft Ministerial Communiqué and proposed several amendments aimed at strengthening the visibility of the social dimension throughout the document.

Firstly, regarding the proposed revision of the Qualifications Framework for the EHEA (QF-EHEA), he suggested explicitly acknowledging the increasingly diverse student body, alongside evolving labour-market needs. He proposed amending the relevant wording to read: "easing their recognition in response to an increasingly diverse student body and evolving labour-market needs".

Secondly, referring to the Inclusive EHEA section, he proposed aligning the terminology with the definitions established in the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, by referring explicitly to "underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups", rather than only to underrepresented groups. He also suggested removing the specific reference to students with caring responsibilities, considering that they were already covered by these broader categories.

Finally, regarding the Future Priorities section, he proposed adding an explicit reference to inclusiveness in the following wording: "ensuring that the EHEA remains open and inclusive by design, connected globally, coherent internally, and consequential for the societies that sustain it".

The European Commission representative welcomed the proposed amendments concerning the terminology used for the different student groups but suggested retaining the explicit reference to students with caring responsibilities. She explained that this reference helps highlight the diversity of students' circumstances and educational pathways, particularly those who do not follow traditional routes through higher education, thereby strengthening the inclusiveness of the message.

The ETUCE representative proposed two amendments to the Inclusive EHEA section of the draft Communiqué, also reflected in her written contribution shared prior to the meeting.

Firstly, regarding the opening paragraph, she suggested strengthening the reference to equitable opportunities by explicitly highlighting the importance of continuous data collection, monitoring and the provision of appropriate support to students and staff.

Secondly, she proposed expanding the reference to stakeholder involvement in the third paragraph to explicitly include students, staff, the wider academic community and relevant public authorities responsible for education, housing, social affairs, health and employment. She emphasised the importance of cooperation across these sectors and suggested reinforcing the commitment to addressing social dimension challenges collectively, as a shared responsibility and a central priority of education at all levels.

The Hungarian representative referred to the commitment to establish measurable national objectives in the Inclusive EHEA section and suggested that the Communiqué should acknowledge differences in national data collection systems and legal frameworks. She emphasised that countries should be able to identify relevant underrepresented and disadvantaged groups according to their national contexts and build on existing data before establishing further targets for student progression and completion. She also highlighted the importance of ensuring compliance with national data protection requirements, noting that differences between monitoring systems could make the proposed commitments challenging to implement in some countries. She indicated that she would submit further comments in writing.

The UK representative referred to the commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the draft Communiqué and suggested strengthening the reference beyond its current focus on the green transition. He highlighted that the SDGs also encompass access to quality education, particularly through SDG 4, and noted ongoing UNESCO discussions on future global development goals, including the possibility of broadening commitments to underrepresented groups. He suggested that these developments could be reflected in the Communiqué, given their relevance to the social dimension.

The EUA representative welcomed the reference to the SDGs but raised concerns regarding the absence of a dedicated BFUG working structure addressing sustainability and the green transition. She emphasised that, if these priorities continued to feature in the Ministerial Communiqué, appropriate mechanisms should be identified to ensure their implementation and follow-up within the Bologna Process.

The Austrian representative also referred to upcoming UNESCO discussions, suggesting that any relevant new wording could be considered for inclusion in the Communiqué. Regarding the green transition, she noted that sustainability was already addressed to some extent in the draft Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility, but that clearer arrangements would be needed to ensure concrete follow-up during the next BFUG work programme.

The Austrian representative delivered a presentation on *University Lifelong Learning in the EHEA Context*, based on a proposal developed by a consortium of universities advocating for the recognition of university lifelong learning as a fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process. She highlighted the importance of strengthening the links between lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education, particularly in the context of demographic changes, evolving labour-market needs and increasingly diverse learner profiles.

She recalled that lifelong learning has been addressed in successive Ministerial Communiqués and is already reflected in several Bologna commitments and monitoring instruments, including those related to recognition of prior learning (RPL), flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials and the social dimension. However, she noted that significant implementation gaps remain, particularly regarding access to flexible and part-time learning, recognition of prior learning, financial support for adult learners

and the integration of micro-credentials into existing higher education frameworks.

Regarding the proposal to introduce lifelong learning as a fourth key commitment, she acknowledged that this could increase its political visibility but also raised concerns about creating additional governance structures, duplicating existing work and treating lifelong learning as separate from other higher education priorities.

She therefore suggested that lifelong learning could be more effectively advanced as a cross-cutting priority within the existing Bologna framework, rather than through a dedicated working structure. She highlighted the potential to strengthen existing BPIR and social dimension indicators, promote peer learning on relevant topics and improve the implementation of existing Bologna tools to better address the needs of adult, part-time and non-traditional learners.

The ESU Co-chair considered that introducing lifelong learning as a fourth key commitment would be neither feasible nor necessarily appropriate. However, she suggested strengthening its visibility in the draft Communiqué and invited participants to consider whether this should be included in the TPG D's feedback to the Drafting Committee.

The Icelandic representative supported this approach, noting that the existing key commitments primarily concern structural and technical aspects of the Bologna Process. She emphasised that a stronger reference to lifelong learning in the Communiqué could help ensure its consideration when defining the priorities and working structures for the next BFUG work programme.

The Maltese representative highlighted the importance of micro-credentials in supporting lifelong learning and referred to Malta's experience in implementing related programmes. He suggested that the TPG D could further explore the barriers to their implementation, particularly those related to ECTS and learning outcomes, potentially through a dedicated discussion or survey.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, also supported strengthening the reference to lifelong learning in the Communiqué, recalling that it is already addressed within the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension. However, he cautioned against expanding the name or mandate of the TPG D to explicitly include lifelong learning, noting that the topic extends beyond the social dimension and cuts across several areas of the Bologna Process. He also suggested exploring its links with qualifications frameworks, particularly in view of the planned revision of the QF-EHEA.

The Austrian representative emphasised that stronger wording in the Communiqué would need to be accompanied by concrete follow-up measures to ensure effective implementation. She suggested that lifelong learning could be addressed within existing BFUG structures, including the TPG D, while encouraging cooperation across thematic areas such as recognition, micro-credentials and qualifications frameworks.

She also highlighted the growing relevance of lifelong learning in the context of demographic changes and increasing needs for upskilling and reskilling.

The European Commission representative similarly supported a horizontal approach, stressing that lifelong learning is closely connected to both the social dimension and recognition. She cautioned that treating it as a separate priority could risk disconnecting it from the practical implementation activities already undertaken within existing structures.

In concluding the discussion, the ESU Co-chair proposed that the TPG D's feedback to the Drafting Committee should recommend placing stronger emphasis on lifelong learning in the Ministerial Communiqué, without prescribing a specific institutional arrangement or implementation mechanism at this stage, given the absence of a concrete proposal or agreement on this matter.

The Maltese Co-chair then invited participants to discuss the possibility of organising a side event on the social dimension in conjunction with the 2027 Ministerial Conference.

Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, INSPIRE project expert, presented two proposals developed following discussions within the INSPIRE project. Firstly, he suggested organising a dedicated TPG D side event on Day Zero, ahead of the Ministerial Conference, to present the main outcomes of the PLAs organised during the 2024-2027 work cycle, alongside the findings of the INSPIRE country reviews and their synthesis report. He proposed complementing these presentations with a moderated discussion involving representatives of Austria, Lithuania and Portugal, focusing on how the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension had supported the development and implementation of national policies and what lessons could be drawn for other EHEA countries.

Secondly, he suggested exploring the possibility of including a short high-level session on the social dimension within the official programme of the Ministerial Conference, bringing together the Ministers responsible for higher education from the three countries involved in the reviews. He noted that preliminary discussions with the Austrian and Lithuanian Ministers had indicated openness to such an initiative, while acknowledging that its feasibility would depend on the overall Ministerial Conference programme. He also recalled the positive experience of including a dedicated discussion on the social dimension at the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference.

The ESU Co-chair invited participants to share any further suggestions or comments on the proposed side event. As no additional comments were raised, she noted the general agreement with the proposal and confirmed that the TPG D Co-chairs would prepare and submit a proposal for a side event at the 2027 Ministerial Conference, building on the format and content suggested by Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt.

7. Next steps - timeline and objectives

8. Any other business and closing remarks

The Latvian Co-chair informed participants that the date and format of the next TPG D meeting would be communicated to members via email.

There was no other business.

The Co-chairs thanked participants for their contributions and closed the meeting.

The meeting ended at 13:00 CEST.