

BFUG Working group on Social Dimension 2021-2024

Report for the BFUG meeting in Brussels on 19-20 February 2024

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Date: 5 February 2024

Background

During the preceding BFUG mandate from 2018 to 2020, the BFUG Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension achieved significant milestones. The Advisory Group successfully formulated fundamental principles, guidelines, and introduced an updated definition for the social dimension of higher education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In 2020, during the ministerial conference held in Rome, the EHEA ministers officially adopted a forward-thinking strategic document entitled 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.'¹ This document defines 10 principles of the social dimension of higher education for the upcoming decade of the Bologna Process, in the form of high-level statements that serve as the basis for conceptualizing policies for the enhancement of the social dimension. Notably, the Principles and Guidelines with the revised definition were integrated as Annex II to the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué. The aim of the Principles and Guidelines is to support convergence of social dimension policies in the EHEA through shared commitments and provide support to EHEA member countries in their ongoing endeavors to refine policies related to the social dimension and facilitate their effective implementation at the national level to achieve the objective of an inclusive EHEA for all students and staff by 2030.

In 2021, the BFUG established a new BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension for the period 2021-2024. The task of this Working Group is to complete the new framework for the social dimension in Europe, initiated during the previous BFUG period 2018-2020, during which the Principles and Guidelines were completed. The main objective of the 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension is to define indicators for the principles and guidelines of the social dimension.

Progress during 2021-2022

In 2021-2022, the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension collaborated effectively with the European Commission/Eurydice to develop indicators of the social dimension. By the end of 2022, the Working Group agreed to adopt most of Eurydice's indicators² for each of the 10 social dimension principles, which typically include three to five indicators per principle. The Working Group's unique contribution is the creation of additional descriptors for each indicator. These descriptors provide detailed information about the indicators, making them easier to understand and implement, and offer practical recommendations for action.

At the end of 2022, the Working Group created a proposal for a new document titled 'Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.' This document includes the previously adopted principles and guidelines for the social dimension in 2020, as well as newly added indicators and descriptors. The document begins with the summary and introduction that define key concepts, provide instructions on how to use the document, and establishes connections with previous BFUG communiqués. During the BFUG Meeting in Brno on November 7-8, 2022, the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension initiated a consultation with all BFUG members regarding the content of this new document.

¹ In the further text we use the abbreviated title 'Principles and Guidelines' instead of the full name of the document.

² Published in the report: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice [EC-Eurydice] (2022). Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/towards-equity-and-inclusion-higher-education-europe>

Progress during 2023 - 2024

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension presented updated versions of the document 'Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' at BFUG Board meetings in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia, as well as at the BFUG meetings in Sweden and Spain. Feedback was gathered from EHEA members during these meetings and through written submissions afterward. Following each round of consultations, the Working Group made refinements to the document.

In 2023, the Working Group held four additional meetings alongside the BFUG Board and BFUG meetings, aiming to make further improvements. These meetings involved extensive consultations with members of E4 (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE) and Education International – ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education). The discussions led to a mutual agreement on enhancing the document for the benefit of all stakeholders. In total, there were 19 iterations of the document throughout 2023.

To finalize the aforementioned document, the Working Group organized also an online consultative meeting for all BFUG members on September 6, 2023. The purpose of this online meeting was twofold: (1) to gather feedback on the document's content and (2) to discuss the modalities of adopting the document at the end of the BFUG cycle in 2024. The online meeting was attended by 20 BFUG representatives who expressed their support for the document and suggested additional improvements. All participants in the meeting reached a consensus that the document should be adopted by the ministers, with the majority opting towards adopting it in the same manner as it was in 2020, as an annex to the 2024 Tirana Communiqué. Alternatively, the EHEA ministers could opt to adopt the document as a standalone document, provided there is a clear reference to its adoption in the communiqué's text.

The Working Group facilitated the submission of written comments until September 25, 2023. Following this round of consultation, the Working Group thoroughly discussed all the received comments during their meeting in Ghent on October 24-25, 2023, and subsequently produced a revised version of the document for presentation at the BFUG meeting in Madrid.

At the BFUG Meeting in Madrid on November 16-17, 2023, the working group received new comments on how to improve the document 'Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA', primarily from the Nordic countries. They stressed that the document should highlight the flexibility in using the indicators of the social dimension in higher education and adopt a toolbox approach to indicators. The Working Group discussed all the comments received in Madrid at the meeting in Ghent on December 7-8, 2023, and subsequently prepared the new version of the document for further discussions at the BFUG Board Meeting in Rome on January 23, 2024.

The Working Group organized one more consultative meeting on January 10, 2024, with Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Germany, Belgium, the Holy See, and the European Commission-Eurydice to discuss the new version of the document and modalities for its inclusion among the documents for the 2024 Tirana Ministerial conference. There was a general agreement that the improvements in the latest version of the document effectively addressed earlier comments received at the BFUG Meeting in Madrid. It was agreed that this new version of the document should be presented at the BFUG Board meeting in Rome in January 2024. Additionally, there was an agreement that the BFUG should explore different options on how to include the document among the documents for the 2024 Tirana Ministerial conference – this decision should be made through the upcoming BFUG meetings in 2024.

Attendees of the BFUG Board meeting in Rome on 23 January 2024 agreed with the improvements in the content of the document, particularly because the toolbox approach to indicators and descriptors, as well as flexibility in their use, is highlighted in the new version of the document. The Holy See

suggested changing the title of the document so that there is a visible difference between the title of the already adopted document, Principles and Guidelines, in 2020 and the new document. It was agreed that the Co-chairs of the Working Group on Social Dimension would discuss the final improvements with members of the Working Group and prepare the new document for adoption by the BFUG at its meeting in Brussels in February 2024.

The Working Group on Social Dimension had an online meeting on 2 February 2024 and agreed on the new title of the document on indicators and descriptors of the social dimension. The proposal for the new title to the BFUG is “Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area.” The Working Group adopted the final version of the document and asked the Co-Chairs to propose its adoption to the BFUG at its meeting in Brussels on 19 February 2024.

Way Forward Proposal

Over the past 14 months, the Working Group meticulously analyzed all suggestions, comments, and written contributions received from the EHEA members, which have been incorporated into the latest version of the document, “Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area.” Following extensive consultations conducted by the Working Group with the BFUG members regarding the content of the document, each BFUG member had the opportunity to provide recommendations for its enhancement at several stages. Therefore, the Working Group on Social Dimension recommends that the final version of the document, “Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area,” attached to this report, be approved by the BFUG at its meeting in Brussels on 19 February 2024.

*This report has been prepared by the Co-Chairs of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension:
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