

**BFUG Working Group on
Social Dimension 2021-2024**

Final Report for the Period 2021-2024

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Summary

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension (2021-2024) significantly advanced the social dimension within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), culminating in a key achievement: the creation and adoption of the "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area" in 2024. This document, a first of its kind, serves as a comprehensive framework for enhancing social dimension in higher education across member states, building on the "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA" adopted at the 2020 Rome Ministerial Conference. By introducing actionable indicators and descriptors, the new document allows for an adaptable and tailored approach for public authorities and higher education institutions to effectively implement and monitor inclusive policies.

Throughout the period 2021-2024, the Working Group organized numerous meetings, engaging in extensive peer-learning activities, discussions, and consultations to refine and enhance the framework for the social dimension. The adoption of the "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area" in 2024 marked a pivotal achievement, providing a comprehensive set of tools to guide EHEA member states and institutions in implementing inclusive policies and practices effectively.

To be included: proposals for the future of the work

Introduction

During the preceding Bologna Follow-up Group (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 Working Group on Social Dimension for the period 2021-2024. The task of this Working Group was to complete the new framework for the social dimension in Europe, which was initiated during the previous BFUG period of 2018-2020, a period during which the Principles and Guidelines were completed. The main objective of the 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension was to define indicators and descriptors for the principles and guidelines of the social dimension. These indicators and descriptors are intended to enable the creation of a system for monitoring the implementation of the social dimension's principles at both the EHEA and national levels. The Working Group was led by two Co-chairs: Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, representing Croatia, and Horia Onița, representing the European Students' Union.

Reference to the 2020 Rome Communiqué: *“We adopt the ‘Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA’ (Annex II) based on a broadened understanding of the social dimension and commit to implementing them in our systems. We will engage in wide-ranging policy dialogue on how to implement the principles and guidelines fully at the national level. We will support our higher education institutions in integrating them into their institutional culture and core missions: learning and teaching, research and innovation, knowledge circulation and outreach, institutional governance and management. We ask the BFUG to report back to us in 2024 on the steps taken and the related monitoring measures to assure evidence-based follow-up”.*

In 2021, the Working Group defined its Workplan for 2021-2024². During the working period of 2021-2024, the Working Group organized three to five meetings per year. These meetings incorporated various methods of work, including peer-learning activities and examples of best practices for implementing the Principles and Guidelines; discussions on tools, indicators, and benchmarks for the Principles and Guidelines; and discussions on a system for monitoring the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines. The Working Group had a section on the EHEA website: <http://www.ehea.info/page-Working-Group-SD>. This section contained documents related to all the meetings of the Working Group (including minutes and agendas); key documents relevant to the work of the Working Group; and useful resources such as literature, policy briefs, and information on relevant projects.

Activities of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension in 2021a

¹ In the further text we use the abbreviated title ‘Principles and Guidelines’ instead of the full name of the document: Rome Ministerial Communiqué. (2020). Annex II to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area. Rome: EHEA Ministerial Conference. Available at <https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communications>

² Available at [https://www.ehea.info/Immagini/BFUG_WG_Social_Dimension_Workplan_2021-2024_\(1\).pdf](https://www.ehea.info/Immagini/BFUG_WG_Social_Dimension_Workplan_2021-2024_(1).pdf)

1st online meeting, 8 July 2021

The first meeting of the Working Group on Social Dimension (2021-2024) convened online on 8 July 2021, focused on laying the groundwork for enhancing the social dimension in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Co-chaired by Ms. Martina Darmanin of the European Students' Union and Mr. Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt from Croatia, the meeting emphasized the achievements from 2018-2020, presented the Working Group's Terms of Reference for the period until 2024, and engaged members in a productive discussion on developing indicators and benchmarks for the Principles and Guidelines. A key update from the European Commission/Eurydice on assessing the social dimension in higher education was also shared, setting the stage for the Working Group's activities and objectives aimed at improving social dimension policies across the 49 countries in the EHEA. The meeting concluded with a consensus on the Work Plan 2021-2024, underscoring a collaborative approach towards implementing and monitoring the principles of social dimension in higher education.

2nd online meeting, 6 October 2021

The second online meeting of the Working Group, convened online on 6th October 2021, dedicated to advancing the social dimension in the EHEA. Co-chaired by Ninoslav Scukanec Schmidt and Martina Darmanin, the session opened with reflections on the progress since their last assembly and set the agenda focused on fostering equity and inclusion. David Crosier offered an update on European Commission/Eurydice's evolving questionnaire, aiming to deepen understanding of equity and inclusion policies in the Eurydice's partner countries. This was followed by two peer-learning activities; Kristina Hauschildt and Martin Unger presented Eurostudent's insights on student life conditions in Europe, while Frans Kaiser and Anete Veidemane discussed U-Multirank's potential indicators for social inclusion in higher education. The meeting proceeded to refine the Working Group's Work Plan for 2021-2024, highlighting future strategies and tasks, underscored by contributions from members, including Professor Graeme Atherton's initiatives, to enrich discussions on enhancing social dimension policies in higher education.

3rd online meeting, 16 November 2021

The third meeting of the Working Group, held online on 16 November 2021, focused on enhancing the implementation of Principle and Guideline No.8, which aims at fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in international mobility programs. Nadia Manzoni from the European Commission discussed the Erasmus+ program's commitment to social inclusion and its relevance to Principle No.8, exploring opportunities and challenges in monitoring its implementation. The meeting also included a critical discussion on creating indicators, benchmarks, and a system for monitoring the 'Principles and Guidelines' effectiveness, particularly in terms of fostering equity and inclusion in higher education.

Activities of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension in 2022

Progress during 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 indicators 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. 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.

4th online meeting, 17 February 2022

The fourth meeting of the Working Group, held online on 17 February 2022, focused on Principle and Guideline No.9, emphasizing the enhancement of community engagement in higher education. The session showcased initiatives such as the Council of Europe's Platform on the local democratic mission of higher education and the TEFCE Toolbox from the Institute for the Development of Education (Zagreb, Croatia), both aimed at strengthening institutional commitment to community engagement in higher education. Kinga Szuly from the European Commission presented the social dimension aspects of the European Strategy for Universities, highlighting the goal of creating a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive Europe. Further discussions involved the EURASHE's project on regional engagement activities of European universities of applied sciences, offering tools and insights to support the implementation of Principle No.9. The meeting also explored the formation of subgroups to intensify the creation of indicators and monitoring systems, aligning with the group's strategic objectives and planning for future activities.

5th meeting, Malta, 25-26 April 2022

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension's meeting, held on 25-26 April 2022 in Malta, was hosted by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. The main agenda involved a comprehensive exploration of indicators for the social dimension, facilitated by co-chairs Martina Darmanin and Nino S. Schmidt. The meeting engaged participants in a World Café Method to collaboratively refine and discuss the draft indicators developed by three subgroups, aiming to cover all aspects of the social dimension across various principles. Through structured workshops, members consolidated their positions on indicators, shared insights across subgroups, and participated in a plenary session to share collective discoveries. This constructive dialogue aimed to ensure the proposed indicators were SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) and could effectively guide public authorities in implementing social dimension principles. The meeting concluded with a wrap-up of discussions, planning for future meetings, and setting the stage for ongoing subgroup work.

6th meeting, The Hague, Netherlands, 13-14 June 2022

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension convened on 13-14 June 2022 in The Hague to further refine and develop indicators for the social dimension in higher education. Hosted by the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture & Science, the meeting began with an overview and approval of the agenda, followed by a recap of the last meeting's outcomes and a discussion on the progress made since then. Notable contributions included updates from NUFFIC and U-Multirank on their work related to social inclusion, offering insights for potential collaborative efforts. The highlight of the meeting was the intensive plenary work dedicated to improving the indicators for the social dimension, spread across three sessions on the second day, focused on enhancing the clarity and effectiveness of the indicators for each of the ten principles for social dimension. The meeting wrapped up with a consensus on the revised indicators and planning for the next steps, underscoring the commitment to advancing social inclusion in higher education.

7th meeting, Brussels, Belgium, 29-30 September 2022

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension met on 29-30 September 2022 in Brussels, hosted by the European University Association, to progress the development and refinement of indicators for the social dimension in higher education. The meeting commenced with opening remarks and a review of the previous meeting's conclusions, setting the stage for the presentation of the PLAR-U-PAGs project, an Erasmus+ KA3 funded initiative aimed at supporting the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines for social dimension across the EHEA. The bulk of the meeting was devoted to intensive plenary work sessions on the indicators, facilitated by co-chairs Nino S. Schmidt and Horia Onita.

8th online meeting, 14 November 2022

The Working Group's online meeting on 14 November 2022 focused on the progression towards establishing a system for monitoring the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA. Key activities included peer-learning activities on different monitoring systems: "Bologna with Student Eyes," highlighted by Horia Onita, demonstrating student-led monitoring efforts; the EUA's Autonomy Scorecard, presented by Enora Bennetot Pruvot, providing an evidence-based overview of university autonomy in Europe; and an update from the European Commission/Eurydice on the development of indicators for social dimension principles, shared by David Crosier.

Activities of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension in 2023

Progress during 2023

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 plenary 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 6 September 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 plenary 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.

9th meeting, Ghent, Belgium, 7-8 February 2023

The Working Group convened on 7-8 February 2023 in Ghent, focusing on the enhancement of indicators for the social dimension in higher education. The meeting featured updates from the European Commission on the European Strategy for Universities and related frameworks, along with discussions on collaboration opportunities. A significant portion of the agenda was dedicated to evaluating the relationship between social dimension principles and quality assurance, led by ENQA, and examining the SIHO's role in promoting student mental health in Flanders. The group also worked on refining the indicators for social dimension principles and explored creating a national monitoring system, aiming to align quality assurance policies with social dimension objectives.

10th meeting, Brussels, Belgium, 24-25 April 2023

The Working Group convened on 24-25 April 2023 in Brussels and was hosted by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE). The meeting opened with a session chaired by Rob Copeland from ETUCE, discussing ways to foster the social dimension within the trade union which includes teachers in higher education in Europe. This was followed by a detailed examination of how the social dimension and quality assurance in higher education can mutually reinforce each other, featuring presentations on the QA-FIT project and debates with E4 representatives. The group also dedicated time to internal work on drafting a list of indicators and developing a monitoring system, aimed at strengthening the implementation and effectiveness of the social dimension across European higher education.

11th online meeting, 12 June 2023

The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension held an online meeting on 12 June 2023. The meeting featured an in-depth update and discussion on the feedback from the BFUG Plenary Meeting in Stockholm (May 2023) regarding the Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators for the social dimension, focusing on their adoption in upcoming BFUG meetings in 2023. The group also dedicated time to refine the current text of these documents, aiming to enhance their effectiveness and implementation across member states.

12th meeting, Ghent, Belgium, 24-25 October 2023

Key discussions revolved around updates from the Erasmus+ projects PLAR-U-PAGs and inclusive engagement of non-traditional students, along with the outcomes from a recent consultative meetings. The group also reviewed the draft chapter on social dimension for the upcoming 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report and engaged in extensive discussions on improving the indicators for social dimension principles. The meeting concluded with deliberations on the future role of the social dimension within the BFUG for the 2024-2027 period, setting a strategic direction for upcoming sessions at the Tirana Ministerial Conference/Bologna Policy Forum in May 2024.

13th meeting, Ghent, Belgium, 7-8 December 2023

The meeting focused on reviewing the outcomes from the BFUG Plenary Meeting in Madrid (November 2023) and discussing the relevance of the 2024 Tirana Communiqué for the social dimension in higher education. Significant time was dedicated to finalizing changes to the document on Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators for the social dimension based on feedback received in Madrid. Discussions also delved into the future of the social dimension within the BFUG for the 2024-2027 period, culminating in group work and plenary conclusions to shape strategic directions.

Activities of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension in 2024

Progress during 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.

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 was "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. All the members of the BFUG adopted the document at its plenary meeting in Brussels on 19 February 2024.

14th online meeting, 2 February 2024

The online meeting held on 2 February 2024 included updates on the 2024 Tirana Communiques, insights from the recent BFUG Board Meeting in Rome (January 2024), and a consultative meeting with Nordic countries. The group focused on finalizing changes to the Principles, Guidelines, and Indicators document, specifically considering a change to the document's title to better reflect its content. Additionally, the meeting addressed the future of the social dimension within the BFUG for 2024-2027 and prepared for upcoming sessions at the Tirana Ministerial Conference/Bologna Policy Forum and the final Working Group's meeting in Vienna in April 2024.

15th meeting, Vienna, Austria, 4-5 April 2024

The meeting covered updates and discussions from the recent BFUG Plenary Meeting in Brussels (February 2024) and BFUG Board in Vatican (March 2024), focusing on the 2024 Tirana Communiqué. A peer-learning activity with the National Union of Students in Austria highlighted measures to enhance student support services. The meeting also engaged in preparing the Terms of Reference for the future BFUG structure engaged with the social dimension of higher education 2024-2027 and concluded with approving the final report of the Working Group for the 2020-2024 cycle, marking significant steps towards improving the social dimension in higher education in the EHEA.

Key Achievements

The Working Group successfully created the document "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area," which was adopted by the BFUG in 2024. This pivotal document builds upon the previously approved "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)," serving as Annex II to the 2020 Rome Communiqué. It introduces precise indicators and descriptors for the social dimension, offering essential guidance for public authorities on implementing these Principles and Guidelines. Together, these documents create a robust framework that effectively addresses the social dimension within the EHEA.

This framework equips public authorities and higher education institutions in the EHEA with the tools to develop system-wide and institutional policies, strategies, and action plans aimed at enhancing the social dimension. Moreover, it provides methodologies for monitoring, evaluating, and assessing the impact of these policies. The indicators and descriptors facilitate the practical application of the Principles and Guidelines, suggesting adaptable recommendations for approaches that can vary to suit different contexts and policy preferences.

Authorities have the autonomy to select indicators for the social dimension that best match their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education, reflecting national priorities and the specificities of their higher education systems. In systems that adopt a universal approach, some indicators and descriptors might be deemed inapplicable. The toolbox approach permits the exclusion of certain indicators and descriptors, allowing focus on those that resonate with their national context. This adaptability ensures progress in implementing the principles is measurable and congruent with each unique setting. Recognizing that various approaches can contribute positively to the social dimension in the EHEA is crucial.

EHEA Framework for the Social Dimension in Higher Education

The key achievements of the Working Group on Social Dimension have facilitated the creation of the first comprehensive EHEA framework for the social dimension in higher education. This framework comprises principles, guidelines, indicators, and descriptors for the social dimension. It represents a coherent system that enables public authorities in EHEA member states and higher education institutions to integrate social dimension principles and guidelines into their policies, strategies, institutional missions, governance, and culture.

The social dimension intertwines the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Access, participation, progress, and completion of higher education should primarily depend on students' abilities, rather than on personal characteristics or circumstances beyond their direct control. With this goal in mind, public authorities are encouraged to support the implementation of these Principles and Guidelines by providing legal, financial, administrative, and informational support to kickstart implementation processes at the national level. This framework advocates for inclusive strategies, offering specific support for vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented students and staff while also promoting broader measures and policies that benefit the entire student population and staff at higher education institutions.

The adopted document "Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area" contains definitions for the framework's constituent parts, including a definition of the social dimension. The social dimension in higher education is a process entailing specific and transversal policies aimed at creating an inclusive environment in which the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diverse social profile of society in EHEA countries. This definition also emphasizes the creation of an inclusive higher education environment that fosters equity, diversity, and responsiveness to the needs of local communities.

Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension in Higher Education

The ten principles, adopted in the 2020 Rome Communiqué, should be viewed as high-level political commitments that form the foundation for conceptualizing various policies to enhance the social dimension. The guidelines, also adopted in the 2020 Rome Communiqué, are recommendations designed to assist policymakers in practically implementing these principles. Public authorities and higher education institutions are advised to integrate these principles across multiple dimensions of higher education: learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge circulation, outreach,

institutional governance, management, and policies for empowering current and future students and staff.

Indicators and Descriptors for the Social Dimension in Higher Education

Indicators for the social dimension are tools for measuring progress in implementing its principles. Each indicator is accompanied by a descriptor that provides a detailed outline of attributes, features, and characteristics, enhancing understanding of the indicators and delineating their effective implementation. Consequently, descriptors offer specific recommendations for actionable steps. In some higher education systems, especially those adopting a universal approach, certain listed indicators and descriptors might be inapplicable.

Future of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area in the Period 2024-2027

To be included for the BFUG

Literature

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