

Rome Ministerial Communiqué

Rome, Italy, 19 November 2020

We, the Ministers responsible for higher education, meeting online on 19 November 2020, celebrate the achievements of the 21 years since the signing of the Bologna Declaration. We reaffirm our commitment to developing a more inclusive, innovative, interconnected and resilient European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

We thank Italy for its key role in preparing and hosting our conference and for having adapted it to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EHEA is a unique cooperation, built on trust, where public authorities and higher education stakeholders work together to define and achieve shared goals. Thanks to the diversity of our cultures, languages and environments, and to our shared commitment to quality, transparency and mobility, our higher education systems offer unequalled opportunities for learning, teaching, research and innovation.

Our societies are facing unprecedented challenges connected with the worldwide spread of COVID-19 and its consequences. The pandemic has shown how interdependent we are, and how vulnerable we can be. It has made evident that we are all part of one world, where human solidarity is an imperative. We greatly appreciate and recognize the efforts of the higher education community in rising to these challenges and reaffirm our determination to provide inclusive quality higher education fulfilling its full range of purposes also in times of crisis.

We are determined to enable our higher education institutions to engage with our societies to address the multiple threats to global peace, democratic values, freedom of information, health and wellbeing – not least those created or exacerbated by the pandemic. We commit to continue and step up our investment in education, to ensure that higher education institutions have appropriate funding to develop solutions for the current crisis, post crisis recovery, and generally, the transition into green, sustainable and resilient economies and societies.

We are committed to overcoming the social inequities that still limit the achievement of a fully inclusive EHEA. Digitalization has allowed most of our systems to continue to function during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the intensified use of digital means has brought to light certain limits. With its consolidated experience of transnational and international cooperation and research, higher education must take a leading role in exploring and advising on how to address and overcome these limitations.

We look with determination and optimism towards 2030, confident that we will succeed in fostering more effective cooperation and closer dialogue among our countries, our higher education systems and institutions and with the broader higher education community.

We are pleased to welcome San Marino as a new Member of the EHEA. San Marino will be supported in the implementation of its commitments with an agreed roadmap.

Our Vision

We envision the EHEA as an area where students, staff and graduates can **move freely** to study, teach and do research. **The EHEA of our vision will fully respect the fundamental values of higher education and democracy and the rule of law.** It will

encourage creativity, critical thinking, free circulation of knowledge and will expand the opportunities offered by technological development for research-based learning and teaching. It will ensure that our higher education systems offer all learners equitability of opportunities in accordance with their potential and aspirations. We recognize that accomplishing this will require enacting policies and implementing measures in our national frameworks, some of which will go beyond our higher education systems and will entail alignment of wider national economic, financial and social strategies.

To achieve our vision, we commit to building an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030, able to underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe:

- **Inclusive**, because every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training;
- **Innovative**, because it will introduce new and better aligned learning, teaching and assessment methods and practices, closely linked to research;
- **Interconnected**, because our shared frameworks and tools will continue to facilitate and enhance international cooperation and reform, exchange of knowledge and mobility of staff and students.

Higher education institutions have the potential to drive major change – improving the knowledge, skills and competences of students and society to contribute to sustainability, environmental protection and other crucial objectives. They must prepare learners to **become active, critical and responsible citizens** and offer lifelong learning opportunities to support them in their societal role.

Higher education will be a key actor in **meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030**. We commit to supporting our higher education institutions in bringing their educational, research and innovation capacities to bear on these fundamental global objectives and to deploying resources to ensure that our higher education systems contribute to the achievement of **the SDGs**. Moving towards climate neutrality is essential for all of us, and learners must be prepared for new “green” jobs and activities. They must be offered up-skilling and reskilling opportunities in a lifelong learning perspective, and enabled to develop and apply new technologies and approaches.

Quality education will continue to be the hallmark of the EHEA. A robust culture of **academic and scientific integrity** that blocks all forms of academic fraud and distortion of scientific truth, will be supported by all higher education institutions and all public authorities.

Fundamental Values

We reaffirm our commitment to promoting and protecting **our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation** as the necessary basis for quality learning, teaching and research as well as for democratic societies. We commit to upholding institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education.

We ask the BFUG to develop a **framework** for the enhancement of the fundamental values of the EHEA that will foster self-reflection, constructive dialogue and

peer-learning across national authorities, higher education institutions and organisations, while also making it possible to assess the degree to which these are honoured and implemented in our systems. We adopt the **definition of academic freedom** as freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in and with society without interference nor fear of reprisal (**Annex I**).

We reaffirm our commitment to fostering ethics, transparency and integrity in and through education and research and note that the Council of Europe's Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED) offers the possibility for all EHEA members, consultative members and partners to cooperate to reach this goal.

Building the Future

An inclusive EHEA

Socially inclusive higher education will remain at the core of the EHEA and will require providing opportunities and support for equitable inclusion of individuals from all parts of society. Learners with diverse socio-economic, professional, cultural and educational backgrounds must have the possibility and the tools to seek out and avail themselves, at any time of life, of the educational options most useful for them.

We commit to reinforcing social inclusion and enhancing quality education, using fully the new opportunities provided by digitalisation. While our societies increasingly rely on innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence, we must ensure that these observe ethical standards and human rights and foster inclusion. We recognize that digitalisation does not offer 'one size fits all' solutions, and ask the BFUG to propose ways in which all learners can benefit from the new technologies.

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 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.

We recognize the importance of safeguarding student rights through legislation; we commit to developing and supporting them in our national systems through dedicated measures and structures, such as student ombudspersons or similar solutions that already exist in many EHEA countries. We commit to enabling such arrangements within our countries and higher education systems and will encourage cooperation within the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE).

An innovative EHEA

We support our higher education institutions in intensifying their search for **solutions to the challenges our societies face**. The **social, human and creative sciences and arts** must continue to play their vital role, giving depth to our lives and enabling us to understand and act in a changing world. Our higher education institutions

must engage with their communities to undertake mutually beneficial and socially responsible joint activities.

Swift up-dating of knowledge, skills and competences will be required to respond to the challenges and develop the opportunities that the new decade will bring. Higher education institutions will continue to diversify their learning offer and innovate in contents and modes of delivery in order to respond to growing needs for innovative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork and problem solving abilities, as well as enterprising attitudes.

Flexible and open learning paths, part of the original inspiration for the Bologna Process, are important aspects of **student-centered learning** and are in increasing demand in our societies. In addition to full degree programmes, many higher education institutions offer or plan to offer **smaller units of learning**, which enable learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives. We ask the BFUG to explore how and to what extent these **smaller, flexible units, including those leading to microcredentials**, can be defined, developed, implemented and recognised by our institutions using EHEA tools.

We adopt the **“Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA” (Annex III)** and commit to follow them, supporting higher education institutions in further implementing student-centered learning and teaching. The recommendations comprise increased support for all learners, and for teaching and non-teaching staff. Academic staff, including junior academics, require stable employment and career opportunities, parity of esteem for teaching and research, attractive working conditions, access to up-to-date staff development, and recognition of their achievements. In all these respects we will foster dialogue and collaboration on learning and teaching in our national systems and at EHEA level.

We commit to supporting our higher education institutions in using digital technologies for learning, teaching and assessment, as well as for academic communication and research, and to investing in the **development of digital skills and competences for all**. We commit to the development of open science and education to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and **openly licensed materials** that can be easily shared among higher education stakeholders, who can adapt and repurpose them for their needs.

An interconnected EHEA

Cooperation and mobility connect our systems and foster the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, broader knowledge and understanding of our world. Direct contacts and synergies among our diverse cultures and higher education systems through mobility of staff and students contribute to the excellence and relevance of higher education in the EHEA, making it attractive and competitive on the global scale. We acknowledge the importance and the benefits of physical mobility for students, doctoral candidates and staff. Notwithstanding the current difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we reaffirm our target that at least **20% of those graduating in the EHEA** should have experienced a study or training period abroad, and **further commit to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences through internationalisation of the curricula** or participation in **innovative**

international environments in their home institutions, **and to experience some form of mobility**, whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or blended formats.

Digital solutions will facilitate secure, efficient and transparent **exchange of data**. Joint digital approaches to enhance recognition, quality assurance and mobility are needed. We ask the BFUG to map existing and find new solutions to enhance the interoperability of digital systems and the exchange of student and institutional data in full respect of privacy and security, taking into account the experiences of the European Student Card Initiative and other initiatives.

Deeper cooperation between higher education institutions will help to address the above objectives through joint teaching and research. We will strive to eliminate obstacles to cooperation at national levels and to enable all higher education institutions in the EHEA to benefit from it. The alliances formed under the European Universities Initiative constitute one important way of exploring deeper, larger scale systemic cooperation, which can prove helpful for detecting and overcoming the obstacles to closer transnational cooperation by higher education institutions in the future.

Implementation

We take note of the results described in the **Bologna Process Implementation Report** on the progress made over the past two decades. The achievements are impressive. Nevertheless, more work is required to ensure that the EHEA is built on strong foundations, capable of supporting interconnected, innovative and inclusive higher education in the coming decade.

We count on the continuous support of the Erasmus Programme and other mobility and cooperation programmes to support our commitments.

In the 2018 Paris Ministerial Conference we decided to devote special effort to completing implementation of three “**Key Commitments**” essential for the functioning of the EHEA: The Qualifications Frameworks and ECTS, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Diploma Supplement, and Quality Assurance according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

We reconfirm our determination to see the Key Commitments fully implemented. We ask the BFUG to continue to employ the **peer support method** to achieve this. We commit to the continued participation in and contribution to this effort.

We commit to completing and further developing the **National Qualifications Frameworks** compatible with the **Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)** and ask the BFUG to update the criteria for self-certification to include a stronger element of peer review of national reports. We mandate the **Network of QF correspondents** to continue its work, contributing to the further development of the QF-EHEA and the self-certification of national qualifications frameworks against it.

We will strengthen the implementation of the **Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention** and apply its principles to qualifications and periods of study outside the EHEA, using common assessment criteria and reports, in collaboration with the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the ENIC and NARIC Networks.

We will **ensure automatic recognition of academic qualifications and periods of study within the EHEA** so that students, staff and graduates are able to move freely to study, teach and do research. We will make the necessary legislative changes to

guarantee automatic recognition at system level for qualifications delivered in EHEA countries where quality assurance operates in compliance with the ESG and where a fully operational national qualifications framework has been established. We also encourage the application of agreed and secure systems of digital certification and communication such as blockchain, as well as the further development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to facilitate automatic recognition.

We commit to reviewing our own legislation, regulations, and practice to ensure fair recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in refugee-like situations, even when they cannot be fully documented, in accordance with Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the **European Qualifications Passport for Refugees** and will support further broadening its use in our systems.

We acknowledge the progress made in the development of **quality assurance systems** aligned with the ESG, and we commit to removing the remaining obstacles, including those related to the cross-border operation of EQAR registered agencies and the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. We commit to ensuring that our external quality assurance arrangements cover transnational higher education in the EHEA with equal standards as for domestic provision. In view of the need for increased flexibility and openness of learning paths, smaller units of learning and greater synergies among higher education institutions, we encourage **an enhancement-oriented use of the ESG to support innovation in higher education and its quality assurance.**

We commit to strengthening cooperation with the **European Research Area**. We call for the BFUG to work closely with the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) to enhance synergies and alignment between education and research and innovation policies. Focus will be inter alia on developing research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

We commit **to building a more closely connected and sustainable higher education community**, which fosters inclusion, communication, cooperation, and solidarity, essential for **the relevance and excellence of the future EHEA**. To accomplish this, we commit to keeping our national higher education sectors informed about and involved in EHEA developments, and to working closely with student and higher education associations and networks on the development and implementation of national reforms. We recognize the importance of the broad consultations carried out to identify priorities for the future of the EHEA, and ask the BFUG to organize EHEA events such as **transnational seminars, workshops and hearings** involving the wider higher education community (students, academic staff and external stakeholders), to discuss present and future goals and explore collaborative ways to address them.

The EHEA in the global setting

While the COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible to hold the Global Policy Forum as intended, we are pleased that our Conference includes a global session. We recommit to international dialogue on higher education values, policies, and reforms, drawing on the experiences of the EHEA as well as those of other areas of the world, and ask the BFUG to further develop and strengthen Global Dialogue in the coming work period.

We welcome the adoption of the **UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education and commit to ratifying it promptly**, in order to facilitate fair recognition of qualifications and periods of study from outside the EHEA, using Lisbon Recognition Convention compliant assessment criteria and reports.

We appreciate the inclusion in the recently updated **Magna Charta Universitatum** of the global values of diversity and social and civic responsibility.

Conclusion

We call on the BFUG to address the actions and priorities indicated for the next decade with the overall purpose of creating a **European Higher Education Area that fulfils our vision and achieves our goals by 2030**. For our Conference in 2024 we mandate the BFUG to produce an implementation report assessing progress in our agreed commitments.

We gratefully accept the offer by Albania to host the next Ministerial Conference of the EHEA and the Global Policy Forum in 2024.

Annexes

- Annex I to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Statement on Academic Freedom
- Annex II to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA
- Annex III to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA