

Bucharest Communiqué (2012)

Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area

Bucharest, 26-27 April 2012

We, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 47 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have met in Bucharest, on 26 and 27 April 2012, to take stock of the achievements of the Bologna Process and agree on the future priorities of the EHEA.

Investing in higher education for the future

Europe is undergoing an economic and financial crisis with damaging societal effects. Within the field of higher education, the crisis is affecting the availability of adequate funding and making graduates' job prospects more uncertain. Higher education is an important part of the solution to our current difficulties. Strong and accountable higher education systems provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies. Higher education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis – now more than ever.

With this in mind, we commit to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future. We will support our institutions in the education of creative, innovative, critically thinking and responsible graduates needed for economic growth and the sustainable development of our democracies. We are dedicated to working together in this way to reduce youth unemployment.

The EHEA yesterday, today and tomorrow

The Bologna reforms have changed the face of higher education across Europe, thanks to the involvement and dedication of higher education institutions, staff and students. Higher education structures in Europe are now more compatible and comparable. Quality assurance systems contribute to building trust, higher education qualifications are more recognizable across borders and participation in higher education has widened. Students today benefit from a wider variety of educational opportunities and are increasingly mobile. The vision of an integrated EHEA is within reach.

However, as the report on the implementation of the Bologna Process shows, we must make further efforts to consolidate and build on progress. We will strive for more coherence between our policies, especially in completing the transition to the three cycle system, the use of ECTS credits, the issuing of Diploma Supplements, the enhancement of quality assurance and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, including the definition and evaluation of learning outcomes.

We will pursue the following goals: to provide quality higher education for all, to enhance graduates' employability and to strengthen mobility as a means for better learning.

Our actions towards these goals will be underpinned by constant efforts to align national practices with the objectives and policies of the EHEA, while addressing those policy areas where further work is needed. For 2012-2015, we will especially concentrate on fully supporting our higher education institutions and stakeholders in their efforts to

deliver meaningful changes and to further the comprehensive implementation of all Bologna action lines.

Providing quality higher education for all

Widening access to higher education is a precondition for societal progress and economic development. We agree to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education. We will work to raise completion rates and ensure timely progression in higher education in all EHEA countries.

The student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We will step up our efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning. We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to monitor progress in this area. We reiterate our commitment to promote student-centered learning in higher education, characterized by innovative methods of teaching that involve students as active participants in their own learning. Together with institutions, students and staff, we will facilitate a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment. Higher education should be an open process in which students develop intellectual independence and personal self-assuredness alongside disciplinary knowledge and skills. Through the pursuit of academic learning and research, students should acquire the ability confidently to assess situations and ground their actions in critical thought. Quality assurance is essential for building trust and to reinforce the attractiveness of the EHEA's offerings, including in the provision of cross-border education. We commit to both maintaining the public responsibility for quality assurance and to actively involve a wide range of stakeholders in this development. We acknowledge the ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE (the E4 group) report on the implementation and application of the "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance" (ESG). We will revise the ESG to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope. The revision will be based upon an initial proposal to be prepared by the E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which will be submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

We welcome the external evaluation of EQAR and we encourage quality assurance agencies to apply for registration. We will allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements. In particular, we will aim to recognize quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes.

We confirm our commitment to maintaining public responsibility for higher education and acknowledge the need to open a dialogue on funding and governance of higher education. We recognize the importance of further developing appropriate funding instruments to pursue our common goals. Furthermore, we stress the importance of developing more efficient governance and managerial structures at higher education institutions. We commit to supporting the engagement of students and staff in governance structures at all levels and reiterate our commitment to autonomous and accountable higher education institutions that embrace academic freedom.

Enhancing employability to serve Europe's needs

Today's graduates need to combine transversal, multidisciplinary and innovation skills and competences with up-to-date subject-specific knowledge so as to be able to contribute to the wider needs of society and the labour market. We aim to enhance the

employability and personal and professional development of graduates throughout their careers. We will achieve this by improving cooperation between employers, students and higher education institutions, especially in the development of study programmes that help increase the innovation, entrepreneurial and research potential of graduates. Lifelong learning is one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market, and higher education institutions play a central role in transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances.

Our societies need higher education institutions to contribute innovatively to sustainable development and therefore, higher education must ensure a stronger link between research, teaching and learning at all levels. Study programmes must reflect changing research priorities and emerging disciplines, and research should underpin teaching and learning. In this respect, we will sustain a diversity of doctoral programmes. Taking into account the “Salzburg II recommendations” and the Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training, we will explore how to promote quality, transparency, employability and mobility in the third cycle, as the education and training of doctoral candidates has a particular role in bridging the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA). Next to doctoral training, high quality second cycle programmes are a necessary precondition for the success of linking teaching, learning and research. Keeping wide diversity and simultaneously increasing readability, we might also explore further possible common principles for master programmes in the EHEA, taking account of previous work.

To consolidate the EHEA, meaningful implementation of learning outcomes is needed. The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent. We call on institutions to further link study credits with both learning outcomes and student workload, and to include the attainment of learning outcomes in assessment procedures. We will work to ensure that the ECTS Users’ Guide fully reflects the state of on-going work on learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning.

We welcome the progress in developing qualifications frameworks; they improve transparency and will enable higher education systems to be more open and flexible. We acknowledge that realizing the full benefits of qualifications frameworks can in practice be more challenging than developing the structures. The development of qualifications frameworks must continue so that they become an everyday reality for students, staff and employers. Meanwhile, some countries face challenges in finalizing national frameworks and in self-certifying compatibility with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QFEHEA) by the end of 2012. These countries need to redouble their efforts and to take advantage of the support and experience of others in order to achieve this goal. A common understanding of the levels of our qualifications frameworks is essential to recognition for both academic and professional purposes. School leaving qualifications giving access to higher education will be considered as being of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 4, or equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF, where they are included in National Qualifications Frameworks. We further commit to referencing first, second and third cycle qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively, or against equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF. We will explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications (EQF level 5) and encourage countries to use the QF-EHEA for referencing these qualifications in national contexts where they exist. We ask the Council of Europe and the European Commission to continue to coordinate efforts to make the respective qualifications frameworks work well in practice. We welcome the clear reference to ECTS, to the European Qualifications Framework and to learning outcomes in the European

Commission's proposal for a revision of the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications. We underline the importance of taking appropriate account of these elements in recognition decisions.

Strengthening mobility for better learning

Learning mobility is essential to ensure the quality of higher education, enhance students' employability and expand cross-border collaboration within the EHEA and beyond. We adopt the strategy "Mobility for Better Learning" as an addendum, including its mobility target, as an integral part of our efforts to promote an element of internationalization in all of higher education. Sufficient financial support to students is essential in ensuring equal access and mobility opportunities. We reiterate our commitment to full portability of national grants and loans across the EHEA and call on the European Union to underpin this endeavour through its policies.

Fair academic and professional recognition, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA. It is a direct benefit for students' academic mobility, it improves graduates' chances of professional mobility and it represents an accurate measure of the degree of convergence and trust attained. We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. We therefore commit to reviewing our national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual⁸ and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance.

We strive for open higher education systems and better balanced mobility in the EHEA. If mobility imbalances between EHEA countries are deemed unsustainable by at least one party, we encourage the countries involved to jointly seek a solution, in line with the EHEA Mobility Strategy.

We encourage higher education institutions to further develop joint programmes and degrees as part of a wider EHEA approach. We will examine national rules and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts. Cooperation with other regions of the world and international openness are key factors to the development of the EHEA. We commit to further exploring the global understanding of the EHEA goals and principles in line with the strategic priorities set by the 2007 strategy for "the EHEA in a Global Setting". We will evaluate the strategy's implementation by 2015 with the aim to provide guidelines for further internationalization developments. The Bologna Policy Forum will continue as an opportunity for dialogue and its format will be further developed with our global partners.

Improvement of data collection and transparency to underpin political goals

We welcome the improved quality of data and information on higher education. We ask for more targeted data collection and referencing against common indicators, particularly on employability, the social dimension, lifelong learning, internationalization, portability of grants/loans, and student and staff mobility. We ask Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor the implementation of the reforms and to report back in 2015.

We will encourage the development of a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing in countries that request it. This will help to assess the level of implementation

of Bologna reforms and promote good practices as a dynamic way of addressing the challenges facing European higher education.

We will strive to make higher education systems easier to understand for the public, and especially for students and employers. We will support the improvement of current and developing transparency tools in order to make them more user-driven and to ground them on empirical evidence. We aim to reach an agreement on common guidelines for transparency by 2015.

Setting out priorities for 2012-2015

Having outlined the main EHEA goals in the coming years, we set out the following priorities for action by 2015.

At the national level, together with the relevant stakeholders, and especially with higher education institutions, we will:

- Reflect thoroughly on the findings of the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report and take into account its conclusions and recommendations; Council of Europe/UNESCO (1997): "Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region"; NUFFIC, Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in higher education (2012): "European Area of Recognition Manual"; London Ministerial Conference (2007): "European Higher Education in a Global Setting. A Strategy for the External Dimension of the Bologna Process".
- Strengthen policies of widening overall access and raising completion rates, including measures targeting the increased participation of underrepresented groups;
- Establish conditions that foster student-centered learning, innovative teaching methods and a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment, while continuing to involve students and staff in governance structures at all levels;
- Allow EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements;
- Work to enhance employability, lifelong learning, problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills through improved cooperation with employers, especially in the development of educational programmes;
- Ensure that qualifications frameworks, ECTS and Diploma Supplement implementation is based on learning outcomes;
- Invite countries that cannot finalize the implementation of national qualifications frameworks compatible with QF-EHEA by the end of 2012 to redouble their efforts and submit a revised roadmap for this task;
- Implement the recommendations of the strategy "Mobility for better learning" and work towards full portability of national grants and loans across the EHEA;
- Review national legislation to fully comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and promote the use of the EAR-manual to advance recognition practices;
- Encourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA, focusing on research and technology.

At the European level, in preparation of the Ministerial Conference in 2015 and together with relevant stakeholders, we will:

- Ask Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent to monitor progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms and the strategy "Mobility for better learning";

- Develop a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing by 2013 in countries which request it and initiate a pilot project to promote peer learning on the social dimension of higher education;
- Develop a proposal for a revised version of the ESG for adoption;
- Promote quality, transparency, employability and mobility in the third cycle, while also building additional bridges between the EHEA and the ERA;
- Work to ensure that the ECTS Users' Guide fully reflects the state of on-going work on learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning;
- Coordinate the work of ensuring that qualifications frameworks work in practice, emphasizing their link to learning outcomes and explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications in national contexts;
- Support the work of a pathfinder group of countries exploring ways to achieve the automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees;
- Examine national legislation and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts;
- Evaluate the implementation of the "EHEA in a Global Setting" Strategy;
- Develop EHEA guidelines for transparency policies and continue to monitor current and developing transparency tools.

The next EHEA Ministerial Conference will take place in Yerevan, Armenia in 2015, where the progress on the priorities set above will be reviewed.