

TIRANA EHEA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

29 - 30 MAY 2024

Tirana Communiqué



In the last 25 years, we, the Ministers responsible for higher education, jointly with students, higher education institutions, and staff, have grown closer and together built the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In our Ministerial Conference in Rome in 2020, we agreed on a shared vision for building a more inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA.¹ Four years later, we meet here in Tirana to assess the progress made and decide on the next steps to fully achieve its vision by 2030. The implementation of agreed commitments will require continuous momentum and participation of all members and relevant stakeholders, to ensure that all those who wish to can access and be supported in completing a quality higher education, based on our fundamental values.

The world is facing complex and interrelated geopolitical, social, economic, and ecological challenges, including rising polarisation, and inequalities between peoples, communities, and regions. Higher education as a public good and a transformative power for society plays an irreplaceable role in addressing those challenges and promoting democratic societies.

Higher education institutions should be safe spaces of open-mindedness and diversity, and they should seek to promote, through learning, teaching and research activities, critical mindsets, tolerance, non-violence, science-based dialogue, and the peaceful exchange of different perspectives.

Particularly, within our region, the armed attack against Ukraine by the Russian Federation supported by Belarus in violation of international law has brought about the need for international support for Ukrainian higher education and has proven the importance of continually maintaining and defending the values of the EHEA. We stand strongly with Ukraine and its higher education community and decide to maintain the suspension of the rights of participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in all structures and activities of the EHEA.²

Fundamental values

Higher education can only fully develop its missions when its fundamental values are respected. While they are now more threatened than they were a decade or even four years ago, we reaffirm our commitment to protect, promote, and uphold academic freedom, as defined in the Rome Communiqué. In addition, we commit to upholding, promoting, and protecting the following values:

- We understand **academic integrity** as a set of behaviours and attitudes in the academic community internalising and furthering compliance with ethical and professional principles and standards in learning, teaching, research, governance, outreach, and any other tasks related to the missions of higher education.
- We further understand **institutional autonomy** as the will and ability of higher education institutions to fulfil their missions without undue interference and to set and implement their own priorities and policies concerning organisation, finance, staffing and academic affairs.
- **Participation of students and staff in higher education governance** encompasses their right to organise autonomously, in accordance with the principle of partnership and collegiality, without pressure or undue interference; to elect and be elected in open, free and fair elections; have their views represented and taken into account; initiate and participate in all debates and decision-making in all governing

¹ https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf.

² Decision in the BFUG Meeting LXXX on 11 April 2022, <https://www.ehea.info/page-bfug-meeting-80>.

bodies; and, through their representative organisations, be duly involved in issues concerning the governance and further development of the relevant higher education institutions and system.

- **Public responsibility for higher education** denotes a set of duties, mainly exercised at the level of the national higher education system, which public authorities must fulfil as part of their overall responsibility for the education sector and society as a whole.
- **Public responsibility of higher education** denotes the obligations of the higher education community to the broader society of which the higher education community is a part.

We adopt the statements on the fundamental values annexed to this Communiqué.³ While each value is essential, all six of them need to be implemented as a coherent whole. As a reliable monitoring of their implementation within all our education systems is required, we welcome the work on creating a technical monitoring framework, and we ask the BFUG to report back to us at our 2027 Ministerial Conference.

Key commitments

As in Paris in 2018, we today reaffirm our three key commitments to be preconditions for the successful development and innovation of the EHEA, that is to:

- implement a three-cycle system of programmes and degrees,⁴ based on learning outcomes and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), compatible with the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA (QF-EHEA);
- support the recognition of qualifications throughout the EHEA by implementing the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (Lisbon Recognition Convention) and its principles, while working towards automatic recognition in the EHEA; and
- promote a quality culture in higher education, fostered by fit-for-purpose quality assurance processes in line with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG).

The 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report confirms and illustrates the still incomplete and uneven implementation of these key commitments, but also the important contribution of the Thematic Peer Groups under the guidance of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group in improving the situation.

Therefore, we commit to ensuring that we have, or will devise, and will publish appropriate action plans to address any remaining implementation gaps, and to promoting knowledge-sharing activities related to the EHEA.

As the Bologna Process tools have developed throughout the last decade, we mandate the BFUG to work on their future-proof development, dissemination and possible expansion. To support the implementation of the ECTS, including learning outcomes, we invite the BFUG to review the ECTS Users' Guide 2015 by 2027, to strengthen its key features and adapt it to current developments, including micro credentials.

The application of the ESG promotes trust and transparency within and between higher education systems and facilitates accountability and enhancement. To keep them in line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations, we invite the authors⁵ of the ESG to propose a revised version by 2026 to the BFUG, to be adopted by us at our 2027 Ministerial conference, as well as an adjustment, where required, of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. We will also promote more robust and transparent

³ See ANNEX 1.

⁴ Including a short-cycle fully integrated in the QF-EHEA, if delivered.

⁵ The primary authors are ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE - the E4 Group, in cooperation with Business Europe, EI and EQAR.

quality assurance of transnational education delivered worldwide, in line with the ESG, to protect the interests of students.

Furthermore, we are committed to countering diploma and accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services, made more accessible through developments in the digital field. We ask the BFUG to make good use of the work of the ETINED platform⁶ and the ENIC-NARIC networks to address these challenges and protect academic integrity.

An inclusive EHEA

We reconfirm the importance of **building an inclusive EHEA by 2030**, able to underpin a cohesive, sustainable, and peaceful Europe, where students are fully supported, at all stages of their learning paths, through policies for accessing and completing higher education irrespective of their background or starting point.

The adoption of the *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*⁷ in the 2020 Rome Communiqué was an important step in this direction, but more is needed to ensure their implementation by 2030. We commit to measuring progress in their implementation and ask the BFUG to report back on this in 2027. Furthermore, we endorse the document *Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*⁸ as the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA. Simultaneously, we promote the improvement of data collection, through participation in related initiatives, such as Eurostudent.

Students' well-being has to be understood in the broad sense, including physical, psychological, social and economic aspects, which are often interrelated. The socio-economic challenges, such as the rising cost of living and difficulty to access student housing, have impacted access to higher education and student life as a whole, particularly the mental health of students. We, together with stakeholders and communities, commit to tackling these challenges, by ensuring accessible student support services, inclusive learning environments (including digital ones), gender equality, as well as measures to support students in covering indirect costs of study.

Globally, the number of refugees and displaced individuals seeking shelter has been increasing, including students and academic staff. Europe is one of the safe destinations, and higher education plays a key role in their integration into our societies. To support refugees and make best use of their skills and potential, we will intensify our efforts to ensure the recognition of their qualifications and to remove barriers to their enrolment in higher education, including through the use of the guidelines developed by the ENIC-NARIC networks, of the *European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR)* by the Council of Europe, and of the *2017 Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation* adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

An innovative EHEA

The EHEA also needs to respond to ongoing change, due to societal, economic, geopolitical, environmental

⁶ Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED).

⁷ https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf.

⁸ [Link to Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.](#)

and technological developments. As the world is in rapid change, this has important consequences for higher education. The **green and digital transitions** require unprecedented innovation with new technologies, processes and practices to drive positive change, as well as more advanced and widespread levels of knowledge and skills, nurturing awareness, engagement and responsibility of learners.

To fulfil its mission and to respond adequately, sustainable funding for higher education, enhancement and adjustment of existing policies and instruments, and the development of new ones are needed. This includes new modalities of education provision, such as **micro-credentials**, the enhanced use of **joint programmes**, and support for the entrepreneurial and innovation capacities of higher education institutions. We will support them in strengthening their contribution to society and their local communities, responding to the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the green transition** in the area of higher education, to the ongoing **digitalisation** and the combination of **physical and online learning and teaching**. We will also ensure **synergies with the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA)**.

The need for **Lifelong learning** in society is increasing, especially for all those requiring or desiring new competences to enhance their professional, personal or civic potential. Learning paths need to be flexible, properly delivered, quality assured, and recognised. They should promote inclusion, upskilling and reskilling, and be aligned with the requirements of learners, changing societies and labour markets. This also includes the recognition of prior learning, and new forms of education provision, such as micro-credentials. We commit to fostering such **flexible learning paths** in all higher education programmes.

Students need access to **high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching**, in line with their needs and interests, to develop competences needed to tackle global challenges. This requires that they develop transversal and future-proof skills, capacity for creative and critical thinking, as well as civic competencies, to support their active participation in a democratic society and a rapidly changing labour market. Amidst these developments, we need to ensure **student-centred learning** is a reality for all students, empowering individual learners through research-based learning, effective support and guidance and cross-disciplinary teaching approaches.

We acknowledge the crucial **role of teaching staff** in supporting high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching. Teaching should be valued on equal footing with research and other professional tasks, including transnational cooperation and community engagement. To ensure this, institutions need to offer adequate and attractive working conditions, staff development opportunities, and assessment and career progression based on appropriate criteria and metrics.

Artificial intelligence (AI) impacts our societies and economies, and also learning, teaching, assessment and research. This requires the adaptation of existing, and development of new practices and policies at the level of institutions and systems in due consideration of opportunities, risks, and challenges. In particular, the ethical considerations in the development and deployment of AI are imperative. Its use should be free of biases, ensure the primacy of human decision-making, maintain data ethics and privacy, and protect academic integrity. Students and staff should be supported to understand and use AI responsibly. We commit to supporting the ethical, trustworthy, responsible, and rights-based use of AI in learning and teaching, as well as in research practice, to ensure transparency, fairness, student and staff participation and well-being. We ask the BFUG to consider in its work the wider and longer-term impact of the digital transition on higher education in the EHEA, including AI, and in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools.

An interconnected EHEA

We reaffirm our commitment to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competencies. As the hallmark of an **interconnected EHEA** is seamless **mobility of students and staff**, we will reinforce our efforts to identify and remove barriers and promote physical mobility, to achieve the benchmark of at least 20% of mobile students. We mandate the BFUG to prepare an action plan to stimulate mobility and internationalisation of higher education and to support measures for achieving a greener, more inclusive, and more balanced mobility.

We acknowledge the pivotal role of **seamless and secure data exchange** in enhancing recognition, quality assurance and mobility, and establishing interoperability standards to facilitate student access to mobility opportunities and support services, such as the European Student Card initiative and other initiatives.

While all students and staff should have the opportunity to benefit from physical mobility, we will support higher education institutions in their exploration of practices and benefits of **blended mobility and virtual exchanges**, and in fostering the internationalisation of the curricula. We commit to supporting transnational cooperation, including for joint programmes and joint degrees, through better implementation of the key commitments and by removing undue administrative and legal barriers. In this regard, we welcome the **deepening and institutionalising of transnational cooperation**, supported by the Erasmus+ programme, underpinned by and with respect for the Bologna tools and commitments. Initiatives on various levels, including the European Universities alliances, create new opportunities for our academic communities, and should include participation of students and staff in all decision-making processes. We take note of the European Commission's Communication on a blueprint for a European Degree⁹ and look forward to exploring synergies with the EHEA.

We reaffirm our commitment to making **automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad** a reality for all students and graduates, welcome the revision of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and the use of other tools developed by the ENIC-NARIC networks, and will continue to promote the use of quality assurance and transparency tools, such as DEQAR¹⁰.

We welcome the adoption of the **Global Policy Forum Statement** and ask the BFUG and its working structures to continue to develop and strengthen dialogue and collaboration with macro regions on various levels and with appropriate interlocutors. This includes reciprocal referencing of qualifications frameworks and credit systems, ratification and implementation of the UNESCO *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*, as well as the second generation *regional recognition conventions*, and alignment and mutual understanding of quality assurance principles.

We recognise the need for all EHEA countries to **disseminate knowledge and engage in dialogue and collaboration on ongoing work**, in order to ensure a more effective linkage between the policy level and the higher education community. This may also include the establishment of international and national expert networks, supporting their implementation and cooperation across borders and with the BFUG.

⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a blueprint for a European degree of 27 March 2024 (europa.eu).

¹⁰ The EQAR Database of External Quality Assurance Results.

Outlook

For our 2027 Ministerial Conference, we mandate the BFUG to ensure that the policy commitments aiming at creating by 2030 an **inclusive, innovative, and interconnected EHEA**, mindful of the fundamental values, are properly monitored, including through a Bologna Process Implementation Report that assesses key developments. We also ask the BFUG to submit to us in 2027 proposals for the main priorities for the next decade, in close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff and students.

We welcome that **San Marino, the most recent member of the EHEA**, has largely implemented the agreed roadmap accompanying its accession to the EHEA and we encourage San Marino to continue to address the few remaining items identified.

We gratefully accept the offer by **Romania and the Republic of Moldova to host the next EHEA Ministerial Conference and the EHEA Global Policy Forum in 2027**.

In view of the long-term character of the EHEA, we consider that firmer structural arrangements are now necessary to ensure its consistent, stable development. We, therefore:

- adopt the “**Rules of Procedure for the EHEA**”¹¹ and invite the BFUG to adopt revised Rules of procedure of for its own work in due course;
- mandate the BFUG to **continue working on the possibility of establishing a long-term, independent, internationally staffed Secretariat** to create effective support for the BFUG, and to evaluate the feasibility and sustainability of the related proposals, models, and terms of reference in Spring 2026, to be presented for adoption and implementation at our 2027 Ministerial Conference;
- agree to undertake an **assessment** of the chosen arrangement after two work periods.

Tirana Commitments

- » We are resolved to make an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA a reality by 2030.
- » We stand strongly with Ukraine and its higher education community and decide to maintain the suspension of the rights of participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in all structures and activities of the EHEA.¹²
- » We reaffirm our commitment to protect, promote, and uphold academic freedom, as defined in the Rome Communiqué. In addition, we commit to upholding, promoting, and protecting the values of academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education, and adopt the statements on the fundamental values annexed to this Communiqué. We welcome the work on creating a technical monitoring framework, and we ask the BFUG to report back to us at our 2027 Ministerial Conference.
- » We commit to ensuring that we have, or will devise, and will publish appropriate action plans to address any remaining implementation gaps, and to promoting knowledge-sharing activities related to the EHEA. We mandate the BFUG to work on the key commitments’ future-proof development, dissemination and possible expansion. Furthermore,
 - we invite the BFUG to review the ECTS Users’ Guide 2015 by 2027, to strengthen its key features and adapt it to current developments, including micro credentials;

¹¹ See ANNEX 2.

¹² Decision in the BFUG Meeting LXXX on 11 April 2022, <https://www.ehea.info/page-bfug-meeting-80>.

- we invite the authors¹³ of the ESG to propose a revised version by 2026 to the BFUG, to be adopted by us at our 2027 Ministerial conference, as well as an adjustment, where required, of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. We will also promote more robust and transparent quality assurance of transnational education delivered worldwide, in line with the ESG, to protect the interests of students;
 - we are committed to countering diploma and accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services, made more accessible through developments in the digital field. We ask the BFUG to make good use of the work of the ETINED platform and the ENIC-NARIC networks to address these challenges and protect academic integrity.
- » We commit to measuring progress in the implementation of the *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*¹⁴, and ask the BFUG to report back on this in 2027. Furthermore, we endorse the document *Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*¹⁵ as the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA. Simultaneously, we promote the improvement of data collection, through participation in related initiatives, such as Eurostudent.
 - » We, together with stakeholders and communities, commit to tackling the socio-economic challenges, such as the rising cost of living and difficulty to access student housing, that have impacted access to higher education and student life as a whole. We will intensify our efforts to ensure the recognition of qualifications held by refugees and to remove barriers to their enrolment in higher education.
 - » We will support higher education institutions in strengthening their contribution to society and their local communities, responding to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the green transition in the area of higher education, to the ongoing digitalisation and the combination of physical and online learning and teaching. We will also ensure synergies with the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA).
 - » We commit to fostering flexible learning paths, which need to be flexible, properly delivered, quality assured, and recognised, in all higher education programmes. This also includes the recognition of prior learning, and new forms of education provision, such as micro-credentials. We need to ensure student-centred learning is a reality for all students.
 - » We commit to supporting the ethical, trustworthy, responsible, and rights-based use of AI in learning and teaching, as well as in research practice, to ensure transparency, fairness, student and staff participation and well-being. We ask the BFUG to consider in its work the wider and longer-term impact of the digital transition on higher education in the EHEA, including AI, and in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools.
 - » We reaffirm our commitment to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competencies, and we will reinforce our efforts to identify and remove barriers and promote physical mobility, also in order to achieve the benchmark of at least 20% of mobile students. We mandate the BFUG to prepare an action plan to stimulate mobility and internationalisation of higher education and to support measures for achieving a greener, more inclusive, and more balanced mobility.
 - » We will support higher education institutions in their exploration of practices and benefits of blended mobility and virtual exchanges, and in fostering the internationalisation of the curricula. We commit

¹³ The primary authors are ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE - the E4 Group, in cooperation with Business Europe, EI and EQAR.

¹⁴ https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf.

¹⁵ Link to Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.

to supporting transnational cooperation, including for joint programmes and joint degrees, through better implementation of the key commitments and by removing undue administrative and legal barriers.

- » We reaffirm our commitment to making automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad a reality for all students and graduates, welcome the revision of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and the use of other tools developed by the ENIC-NARIC networks, and will continue to promote the use of quality assurance and transparency tools, such as DEQAR¹⁶.
- » We welcome the adoption of the Global Policy Forum Statement and ask the BFUG and its working structures to continue to develop and strengthen dialogue and collaboration with macro regions on various levels and with appropriate interlocutors. This includes reciprocal referencing of qualifications frameworks and credit systems, ratification and implementation of the UNESCO *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*, as well as the second generation *regional recognition conventions*, and alignment and mutual understanding of quality assurance principles.
- » We mandate the BFUG to ensure that policy commitments aiming at creating by 2030 an inclusive, innovative, and interconnected EHEA, mindful of the fundamental values, are properly monitored, including through a Bologna Process Implementation Report that assesses key developments.
- » We also ask the BFUG to submit to us in 2027 proposals for the main priorities for the next decade, in close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff and students.
- » We adopt the “Rules of Procedure for the EHEA” and invite the BFUG to adopt revised Rules of procedure of for its own work in due course; we mandate the BFUG to continue working on the possibility of establishing a long-term, independent, internationally staffed Secretariat to create effective support for the BFUG, and to evaluate the feasibility and sustainability of the related proposals, models, and terms of reference in Spring 2026, to be presented for adoption and implementation at our 2027 Ministerial Conference; and we agree to undertake an assessment of the chosen arrangement after two work periods.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: *Fundamental Values – Statements.*

Annex 2: *“Rules of Procedure for the EHEA”*

¹⁶ The EQAR Database of External Quality Assurance Results.



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