Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG)

8th Meeting, Hosted by CIMEA, Rome Italy,
22 January 2024
10:00 – 16:00 (CET)

Minutes of Meeting

List of Participants

Delegation	First Name	Family Name(s)
Austria (BICG Co-Chair)	Helga	Posset
Belgium Flemish Community (TPG C Co-Chair) *	Liesbeth	Hens
Co-chair of TPG A (Latvia)	Baiba	Ramina
Co-chair of TPG A (Austria) *	Karin	Riegler
Co-chair of TPG A (Georgia) *	Khatia	Tsiramua
European University Association (EUA)	Maria	Kelo
EURASHE	Jon	Edwards
European Commission (EC) *	Svein	Hullstein
European Commission/ Eurydice *	David	Crosier
France (TPG C Co-Chair)	Martin	Beyer
Italy (BICG Co-Chair)	Ann Katherine	Isaacs
Italy (TPG B Co-Chair)	Chiara	Finocchietti
Italy (CIMEA Guest)	Giacinta	Ratto Vaquer
Italy (CIMEA Guest)	Elisa	Petrucci
Romania (TPG C Co-Chair)	Daniela Cristina	Ghitulica
Romania *	Madalina	Matei
BFUG Secretariat (Head)	Edlira Adi	Kahani Subashi
BFUG Secretariat	Aida	Myrto
BFUG Secretariat	Kristina	Metallari

*Online participation

Albania and Bulgaria did not participate in the meeting.

1. Welcome from Co-Chairs and approval of the agenda

Ann Katherine Isaacs (BICG Co-Chair) welcomed all participants to the 8th BICG meeting and outlined the agenda. Changes were suggested, including swapping an item on the agenda regarding the BICG report for BFUG February timeline with items concerning BICG and TPG proposals for the Tirana Communiqué. The modified agenda was approved.

For more information, please see: *Agenda of the meeting*

2. Update from the Secretariat (Board, BFUG, other events)

Aida Myrto (BFUG Secretariat) presented updates on BFUG meetings in the second half of 2023. This included a Board meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia, on October 2, followed by a BFUG meeting in Madrid, Spain, on 16-17 November. Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed interest in joining TPG B during this time. Work continued on updating the EHEA website in collaboration with the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing and the IN-GLOBAL project. The Tirana Ministerial Conference was scheduled for 29-30 May 2024, and Edlira Adi Kahani Subashi was appointed as a member of the Albanian Working Group for the conference.

An update was provided on the BFUG meetings for the current semester, the last of this working period, beginning with a Board meeting in Vatican City on January 23, 2024, followed by a BFUG meeting on February 19-20, 2024, in Brussels, Belgium. Final reports from all working structures should be presented in time for these initial meetings, with approvals set for subsequent sessions. The next Board meeting is on 12 March 2024, in Vatican City, followed by a BFUG meeting on 11-12 April, again in Brussels. During this second BFUG meeting, the Terms of Reference for the next working period will be introduced, taking into account the deadline 2-weeks before the meetings for document submission. The final BFUG meeting is set for the morning of 29 May in Tirana, before the Ministerial Conference. Working group meetings are also scheduled throughout the period and updated on the EHEA website. Notably, the Working Group on Roadmap for San Marino concluded its work in 2023. This period represents the longest working period of the BFUG, involving 15 working groups and 21 sub-groups.

3. Update from the BICG Co-chairs (developments since the last meeting in September 2023

The BICG Co-Chairs provided an update on recent meetings, starting with the Tbilisi Board meeting. They emphasized the work of the BICG and TPGs, highlighting the BICG's central task of concentrating on key commitments. This need was also emphasized in the Madrid BFUG meeting on 16 -17 November 2023, where it was proposed that each Ministry prepare a publishable statement and action plan after the-Ministerial Conference in Tirana, showing how they intend to implement the commitments made. No objections were raised to this proposal, though concerns were voiced about significant implementation gaps in the EHEA, despite praise for TPG achievements.

4. Update from the European Commission about Higher Education

David Crosier (Eurydice) presented an overview of the key commitments and progress in their implementation based on the Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR), covering the years from 2018 to 2024. The analysis focused on commitments such as degree structures, quality assurance, and recognition. A new scorecard indicator was introduced, although its final inclusion is pending. Proposed changes to the Quality Assurance and automatic recognition indicators are under discussion, with disputed outcomes. The report also introduced a new indicator on degree structures, emphasizing commitment to three cycles, with specific requirements in terms of the ECTS range. While most qualifications adhere to these commitments, exceptions exist, particularly for integrated programs. Discussions with different countries are ongoing, rendering the data provisional and not definitive.

Regarding the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), the data show significant improvement between 2020 and 2024, with countries reporting full integration of convention principles into legislation. Quality Assurance (QA) indicators also show improvement, albeit at a slower pace compared to the period between 2018 and 2020. There has been enhanced student involvement and progress in allowing institutions to have quality assurance procedures from external agencies, provided they are EQAR registered.

Overall, progress is noted in all commitments, possibly influenced by the work of TPGs, although assessing their impact alone is challenging due to various influencing factors. Nonetheless, their contribution was acknowledged.

It was acknowledged that the report does not cover short cycle issues due to a lack of a scorecard indicator approach and the different approaches to implementation of short cycle, ranging from not existing as a higher education qualification in some countries to a variety of qualifications considered to be short cycle in various countries.

The progress of the TPGs in implementing key commitments was commended, despite the challenge of quantifying their impact due to various factors, including national and regional differences. However, their positive influence was acknowledged, with a suggestion to focus on fostering a culture of change, understanding, and consensus. A brief session at TPG A resulted in consensus on contentious issues. It was proposed that countries evaluate and monitor the impact of TPGs' work on key commitments and ways to proceed further. Progress in European Union countries may be swifter due to a more systematic approach. Notably, only one of the three key commitments is grounded in an international convention, the LRC, simplifying legal-ground comparison with implementation.

The TPGs were praised for keeping key commitments in focus between Ministerial Conferences and facilitating knowledge sharing. However, it was noted that TPG C on QA lacks ministry representatives, highlighting the importance of their involvement in implementing reforms. It was recommended that TPG participants maintain connections with their ministries to facilitate knowledge exchange and action, emphasizing the role of individuals who can drive change

within countries. The importance of the European Commission's funding was acknowledged, as it has enabled participation from countries needing funds to participate, but sometimes there have been challenges in understanding the terms of reference of the TPGs.

Daniela Cristina Ghitulica (TPG C Co-Chair) stressed the importance of clarity and understanding of key commitments by countries and members. Participation in meetings by representatives from ministries and quality assurance agencies was emphasized for information exchange and issue resolution. It was advised that the focus be on mandatory activities in each group's work, starting from project inception. Challenges were discussed regarding proposing national plans due to delays in countries submitting action plans, with approximately 15% of countries yet to do so after three years. The absence of action plans hinders progress in implementation. Additionally, the lack of detailed reports from countries poses challenges in assessing plan implementation levels.

The importance of European projects supporting TPGs was acknowledged, yet it was noted that their topics can sometimes be broader than key commitments, leading to loss of focus and timeliness. David Crosier highlighted the need for clearer definitions of key commitments and emphasized the positive dynamics resulting from the TPGs' work, particularly in facilitating cross-country peer learning in higher education.

Svein Hullstein (EC) provided an update regarding the higher education sector. He stressed that the focus of the European Commission in the field of higher education is on the European strategy for universities. The European universities initiative launched a call in October aiming to reach the ambitious goal of 60 European University Alliances by mid-2024, thanks to the last and final call. Results will be announced in the summer, and efforts are also underway on the European degree.

He informed that the European University initiative is also working to develop an investment pathway to secure sustainable funding and synergies between EU funding within the Commission and national and regional funding. The sustainability of funding was an ongoing process, with consultations with stakeholders and member states. Additionally, demonstrating to the Council, Parliament, and member states the transformative potential and impact of the European Universities Initiative was a crucial step in the process of funding the initiative more sustainably. A study was launched in 2024 to assess the progress and transformational potential of alliances and present a monitoring framework for the initiative as a whole. This fed into the process towards the evidence base for funding post-2027. The European alliances aimed to advance the agenda throughout Europe and encourage development at the national level.

He stated that the blueprint for the joint European degree was among the key priorities for 2024. The higher education package 2024 consisted of three elements: communication on a joint European degree a proposal for a council recommendation on the European quality assurance and recognition system, and a Council recommendation on sustainable careers in higher education.

The higher education package aimed to facilitate joint European degrees at a European level by addressing complex national rules, lack of a common European framework for joint degree design, delivery, and awarding, uneven trust in quality assurance, and lack of incentives and recognition for academic staff careers.

The initiative was tested through projects on the Erasmus program and six policy experimentation calls.

5. Updates by the Thematic Peer Groups

5.1 TPG A on QF

Baiba Ramina (TPG A Co-Chair) provided an update on TPG A activities during this period, describing five TPG meetings and several Peer Learning Activities (PLAs). PLAs were conducted in Georgia on self-certification, Austria on micro-credentials and learning outcomes, and one on recognition of learning outcomes in program level in Tblisi end of

September 2023. Depending on the budget, for the final conference might be planned for the Concerns were raised in the Coordination advancing the implementation of recommendations and promoting the Paris implementation regarding short cycle and micro-

one the Group

more meeting working group. regarding

Communique's credentials.

It was discussed that countries are not obligated to adopt the short cycle, but it was stressed that those who do should adhere to the Paris Communique, while those that do not should recognize the short cycle qualification. Addressing the short cycle issue was suggested should be taken up for discussion again, highlighting the importance of a clear definition to ensure equal opportunities for all students applying for degrees across different countries.

5.2 TPG B on LRC

Chiara Finocchietti (TPG B Co-Chair) provided an update on the activities of the TPG B. The latest PLA, held on December 7, 2023, focused on digitalization and digital solutions for the recognition process. The next TPG B meeting, scheduled for February 1st online, will involve sharing country experiences on automatic recognition and staff mobility outcomes. TPG B will present the 2nd edition of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual on achieving automatic recognition. Subsequently, the TPG B meeting will take place on April 23-24 in Rome, followed by a seminar on digitalization. It was noted that staff mobility was carried out in 13 countries.

5.3 TPG C on QA

Daniela Cristina Ghitulica (TPG C Co-Chair) updated on TPG C activities. One meeting was held during this period, conducted online in December. The next meeting will be held in person on June 13-14 in Romania, with another scheduled for November 2024. Two rounds of staff mobilities occurred, with 37 applications selected in the first round and 31, plus two postponed from the first round, in the second round. Of the 43 TPG C members, only 17 countries applied for this round. A PLA took place in September in Belgium on the European Approach to the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. TPG C has 3 working groups: QA of Micro-credentials, QA of European Universities, and digitalization of QA processes. The Working Group on QA of Micro-credentials held meetings in person in September and online in January, with another planned for April in Belgium. A research report developed guidelines for micro-credential quality assurance and supported organizations in framework development, with EQAR working to include micro-credentials from alternative providers. The Working Group on QA of European Universities plans to distribute a questionnaire on quality assurance perspectives. The digitalization WG aims to maintain a current status quo with a workshop planned for November 2024 in Belgium.

6. **BICG and TPG proposals for the Tirana Communiqué: discussion and conclusions**

The draft of the text with the BICG recommendation for the Tirana Communiqué was presented. Suggestions arose regarding the first paragraph, emphasizing the TPGs' role in identifying challenges, raising awareness, and finding solutions. A discussion ensued on whether countries should participate in all TPGs or only in those where they face implementation gaps. The argument for participation in every TPG was that countries with gaps could benefit, while others could offer support, and that in reality all countries always have much to learn.

Regarding the last paragraph on closing the implementation gap, it was suggested to place it before the bullet point. Additionally, the phrase "we all commit to participating in those peer groups where we have an implementation gap or it can offer support" was recommended for rephrasing.

An additional recommendation suggested acknowledging the progress made in implementing key commitments and tools, emphasizing that further commitment and efforts are necessary to close the implementation gap. To support these efforts, nominees should be experts in the field.

It was proposed to link points two and three related to nominees in the group to the terms of reference, separating them from the commitments. As the Communiqué is an official political document, it was suggested that it should not contain technical details. The main message of the Communiqué should focus on the commitment to address the implementation gap. Ministers should participate in identifying and closing all remaining implementation gaps, reviewing their national situation, updating laws where necessary, and publishing an implementation plan to address them. It was emphasized that these reforms and efforts at the national level must align with European Higher Education Area norms.

The need for umbrella projects was identified as an issue, and the call formulation should ensure that umbrella projects are feasible, as groups struggle to function without EU funding. In-person meetings are necessary for the peer support approach to function well and are highly encouraged.

7. BICG report for BFUG February Timeline for finalization

The BICG Co-Chairs stated that, in order to finalize the BICG report, the contributions of the TPGs is essential. Once these have been incorporated, an executive summary will be compiled, encapsulating the most notable items, recommendations, and activities.

8. BICG 2024 – 2027: Draft Terms of Reference

Regarding the draft Terms of Reference, it was noted that they are currently being revised for the upcoming period of the BICG. It was emphasized that while the terms of reference for the next period will likely remain similar, it will be advisable to include suggestions specifying the requirements for nominees to the TPGs.

9. AOB/ Next meeting

It was agreed to schedule another meeting before the BFUG meeting in April, possibly virtually. The date is still to be determined depending also on the finalization of the written report. Meanwhile the Secretariat was asked to distribute a doodle poll in order to establish the date for a meeting during the last week of March.

No other business was brought forward, and the meeting was concluded with thanks to all the Co-Chairs and participants for their contribution.