Background note

Meeting Ad Hoc Task Force to Increase Synergies between the EHEA, the Higher Education Dimension of the EEA and the ERA

27 September 2021 / 10.00 – 12.00 Brussels Time

1. Introduction

In the EHEA **Rome Communiqué** of 19 November 2020[1] it is stated that "*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.*"

The **Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area**, adopted on 1 December 2020, stress the need to develop stronger interconnections between ERA, the EHEA and the higher education-related elements of the EEA, identifying "*institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation*" as possible areas of cooperation.[2]

In this context, within the EHEA, it was therefore decided to set up an Ad Hoc Task Force to increase synergies between the EHEA, the EEA and the ERA.

It needs to be noted that the respective **governance frameworks of both the EEA and ERA are currently under discussion** between the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. It is aimed to conclude these discussions **by end November 2021**. It is therefore suggested that the discussions of this Ad Hoc Task Force focus on how to mobilise the Bologna structures, once the new EEA and ERA governance structures are in place.

2. Mandate and timeline of the Ad Hoc Taskforce

The final Terms of References of the Ad Hoc Taskforce indicate the following:

Expected outcome of the task-force:
A proposal to be presented to the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) allowing for concrete synergies between the European Higher Education Area (Bologna context), the higher education dimension of the European Education Area (EU context) and the European Research Area (EU context), building on the respective cooperation structures.

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[1] *European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process (ehea.info)*
[2] Council conclusions on the New European Research Area, document 13567/20 RECH 483 COMPET 611, 1 December 2020.
https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13567-2020-INIT/en/pdf

Specific tasks:
Building on the Rome Communiqué, develop an overall proposal allowing for a streamlined and strengthened cooperation between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the higher education dimension of the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). This proposal should describe how the cooperation can be done in a fit-for-purpose and flexible manner, for example in the form of joint meetings or working groups.

Elaborate a specific proposal for a way forward on how to concretely work on a strengthened cooperation on the specific topics identified by the Ministers in the Rome Communiqué, i.e. research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Timeline
The Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) should receive a proposal for synergies and cooperation in time before its meeting on 1-2 December 2021.

3. EHEA, EEA and ERA objectives and governance: state of play

3.1 European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Objectives

The **European Higher Education Area (EHEA**) is a **unique intergovernmental international collaboration on higher education between 49 countries** with different political, cultural and academic traditions, which, step by step during the last twenty years, built an area implementing a common set of commitments: structural reforms and shared tools. These 49 countries agree to and adopt reforms on higher education on the basis of common key values– such as freedom of expression, autonomy for institutions, independent student unions, academic freedom, free movement of students and staff. For all these countries, the main goal is to increase staff and students' mobility and to facilitate employability.

The latest key guiding document – **the 2020 Rome Communiqué** - was adopted on 19 November 2020, together with a statement on Academic Freedom, Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, and Recommendations for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in the EHEA.

The three key commitment of the EHEA are the following:
- ✓ the Qualifications Frameworks and ECTS,
- ✓ the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Diploma Supplement,
- ✓ Quality Assurance according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Governance

- *Ministerial Conferences and Communiqués*

Every three years there are Ministerial Conferences organised in order to assess the progress made within the EHEA and to decide on the new steps to be taken. A communiqué is adopted at each Ministerial Conference that outlines decisions taken by the Ministers.

In order to ensure the implementation of the steps upon which the Ministers have decided, the EHEA makes use of several support structures:

- *Bologna Follow-Up Group – BFUG:*

The Bologna Follow-Up Group **-** BFUG **-** is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences. The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meetings. The BFUG meetings play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués as well as in developing the Bologna Process. The BFUG prepares the Ministerial Conferences.

The current chairing arrangements foresee that the Bologna Process will be co-chaired by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU member country. Moreover, the host country of the next Ministerial conference is nominated as the Vice-Chair.

BFUG membership is based on the membership of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA currently has three categories: members, consultative members (e.g. stakeholder organisations) and partners.

- *BFUG Board:*

The BFUG board is an advisory committee for the Chairs and the Secretariat to prepare the BFUG meetings.

The current members of the Board are:

- ✓ the BFUG Co-Chairs double Troika (the outgoing, present and incoming Co-Chairs of the BFUG);
- ✓ the BFUG Vice-Chair;
- ✓ the European Commission;
- ✓ four of the consultative members (Council of Europe, EUA, ESU, EURASHE);
- ✓ one of the co-chairs of each working and advisory group and coordination group.

- *BFUG Secretariat*

Between January 1, 2021 and June 30, 2024, the Secretariat of the Bologna Follow-Up Group will be held by Albania.

- *Bologna Implementation Coordination Group, Working Groups and Bologna Seminars*

The BFUG has established a coordinating body, the **Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG)**, to organise and coordinate various Peer Groups, one for each key commitment:

✓ Thematic peer group A on qualifications framework (QF)
✓ Thematic peer group B on Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)
✓ Thematic peer group C on quality assurance (QA)

The Peer Groups themselves agree on further actions aimed at fostering, improving and speeding up implementation in the participating countries and report to the BICG.

- *Bologna Working Groups and Task Forces*

There are Working Groups on:
✓ Monitoring the Implementation of the Bologna Process
✓ Fundamental Values
✓ Social Dimension
✓ Learning and Teaching

- *Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue (GPD)*

The Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue aims at developing continuous dialogue with other regions and international organisations on matters of common concern and relevance for higher education with respect to which cooperation and sharing of ideas and policies can be mutually beneficial.

- *Task Forces*

There are currently two task forces on:
✓ Ad Hoc Task Force to Increase Synergies Between the European Higher Education Area, the Higher Education Dimension of the European Education Area and the European Research Area
✓ Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA community

3.2 Higher Education dimension of the European Education Area (EEA)

Objectives

The European Education Area seeks to foster cooperation between European Union (EU) Member States to further enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems. It aims to develop a holistic approach to EU action in education and training to create a genuine European space of learning, which benefits all learners, teachers and institutions.

The idea to create a European Education Area was first endorsed by European leaders at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden. The first packages of measures were adopted in 2018 and 2019. In her 'Political Guidelines for the European Commission 2019-2024', Commission President von der Leyen committed to making the European Education Area a reality by 2025.

A **Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025** was published on 30 September 2020. It details the means and milestones to achieve the EEA's objectives together with EU Member States and education and training stakeholders. The Commission's vision for a European Education Area is guided by six dimensions, one of which is dedicated to higher education.

Both in its **Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025** and its **Communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation**, the Commission announced its intention to initiate the co-creation of a transformation agenda for higher education.

In its **Resolution of 18 February 2021 on "a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)"**, the Council has identified the establishment of an agenda for higher education transformation as a concrete action in the priority area of higher education, highlighting that "*close and structured synergies with the EHEA and Bologna process should be ensured, in particular with regard to quality assurance, recognition, mobility and transparency instruments, avoiding parallel or double structures and instruments already developed in the EHEA.*"

The **Council Conclusions** on the **New European Research Area**, adopted on 1 December 2020, stresses "*that stronger synergies and interconnections between the ERA, the EHEA and the higher education related elements of the European Education Area (EEA), are to be developed*" and identifies that "*institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation as possible fields of a more determined cooperation*".

Against this background, **the Commission is currently preparing, in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, a European Strategy for Universities**. For this purpose, the Commission is conducting targeted consultations.

Recent consultations with Member States and stakeholders point to a need for further action at European level, in full respect of the competences of Member States and institutional autonomy. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the value of deeper cooperation in higher education and research, but **transnational cooperation** between higher education institutions in Europe needs to be further facilitated to pool resources, knowledge, infrastructure, education and R&I strategies. There is a need to **strengthen higher education institutions and their surrounding ecosystems** across the EU to improve access to excellence for all institutions, closing the innovation divide. By cooperating more systematically, institutions can also boost the supply of well-trained people with skills necessary to address Europe's **twin green and digital transitions.** At the same time, there are still many shortcomings when it comes to addressing the sector's social dimension, in particular fostering **more diversity and equal opportunities**. The sector also has a duty to safeguard **fundamental values** in higher education. In all of these fields the EU could bring value through its policies and programmes, and thereby support efforts in Member States and by institutions.

The European Strategy for Universities will address the main challenges and **propose support measures to the benefit of the sector.** The Strategy will aim to bring closer together the four missions of higher education institutions - **education, research, innovation** and **service to society** - into a true **knowledge ecosystem approach**.

Governance

The Council invited the Commission to work with the Member States until the end of 2021 in order to agree on a suitable governance structure to coordinate the work and steer the development of the strategic framework towards the EEA and beyond. Discussions on the **new governance structure** are ongoing. The discussions focus on how the new structure can best enhance Member States' ownership and ensure high-level political steer, ensure more effective coordination of the work at different levels, help better valorise and disseminate results of work at technical level, and enhance synergies with other relevant policy areas. There is an agreement among Member States to strengthen the role of the informal High Level Group on Education and Training, which would help achieve the aims as above. Most Member States are also in favour of establishing a smaller coordination and steering body, the High Level Group Board[3]. The specific tasks of the HLG Board are under discussion[4].

The Council also agreed that the strategic framework, during the first cycle (i.e. till end 2025), should **maintain all the tried and tested mutual learning arrangements of the ET 2020, such as the working groups, Directors-General formations and peer learning instruments**.

The meetings of **Directors-General for Higher Education** will therefore be maintained, and **seven working groups under the EEA strategic framework** will be established – five sector-focused (WG on early childhood education and care, WG on schools with two subgroups - Pathways to school success and Education for environmental sustainability, WG on vocational education and training and the green transition, **WG on higher education**, WG on adult learning – opening up opportunities for all) and two issue-focused Working Groups (WG on digital education and WG on equality and values in education and training). The Working Groups are foreseen to start work at the end of October/in November. Their overall objective is to promote mutual learning on policy reform of national education systems with a view to effectively contributing to the achievement of the EEA by 2025.

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[3] The discussions on the composition of the HLG Board focus around options of having representatives of one or two previous Council Presidencies, the current Presidency, and two upcoming Presidencies, and the Commission.

[4] '*With specific regard to the "knowledge square" (education, research, innovation and service to society), special attention should be paid to policy and funding synergies between education and training, research and innovation, namely in the context of the ERA and the European Education Area, while ensuring consistency with the EHEA.*' – 18 February 2021 Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the EEA and beyond

3.3 The European Research Area (ERA)

Objectives

The European Research Area (ERA) is the ambition to create a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU. It helps countries be more effective together, by strongly aligning their research policies and programmes. The free circulation of researchers and knowledge enables better cross-border cooperation, building of critical mass and continent-wide competition.

ERA was launched in 2000, in the context of the Lisbon strategy, to address the fragmentation of the EU's research and innovation system. The process to revitalise the ERA began in 2018 when the Council invited the Commission "to publish by mid-2020 a new ERA Communication for the period beyond 2020, based on sound evidence, which may propose revised ERA policy priorities and ERA governance and monitoring mechanisms at national and EU level".[5]

The new ERA - as announced in the Commission Communication on a "New ERA for Research and Innovation" on 30 September 2020 - has four strategic objectives:

1. prioritise investments and reforms in research and innovation, to support the digital and green transition and Europe's recovery

2. improve access to excellent research and innovation for researchers across the EU

3. translate results into the economy to ensure market uptake of research output and Europe's competitive leadership in technology

4. deepening the ERA by making progress on the free circulation of knowledge, researchers and technology through stronger cooperation with EU countries

As indicated in section 3.2 on the EEA, both in its **Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025** and its **Communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation**, the Commission announced its intention to initiate the co-creation of a transformation agenda for higher education. Against this background, **the Commission is currently preparing, in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, a European Strategy for Universities**, which will bring closer together the education and R&I dimension. See section 3.2 for more information.

Governance

In its Communication of September 2020[6], the Commission proposed that "the new ERA requires action at national and EU levels, supported by a process to set and update the policy priorities, monitor and assess progress and ensure strategic advice towards common objectives". The following Council conclusions of 1 December 2020 on the "New European Research Area" called on the Commission and the Member States to develop in 2021 "a multi-level governance model to deliver on the 'New ERA'".

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[5] Council conclusions on "Governance of the European Research Area", 30 November 2018.

[6] COM(2020) 628

On 16 July 2021, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe.[7] The proposal sets out commonly agreed values and principles and identifies the areas where Member States will jointly develop priority actions, supporting in this way the implementation of the vision and objectives of the new ERA. The Pact also constitutes the bases for a simplified policy coordination and monitoring process at EU and Member States' level.

Deliberations on a new ERA governance framework have been pursued in the ERA Forum for Transition, which has been set up as an informal Commission expert group to advise on the future ERA governance for the duration of one year. The Forum is chaired by the Commission and composed of Member States' experts, as well as observers from Associated Countries and EU institutions. Currently, the future governance framework is examined in the Council preparatory bodies with a view to adopt Council conclusions on 26 November 2021. At this point in time, the discussions reaffirm the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) as the main high-level strategic policy joint advisory committee, providing input to the Council, the Commission and the Member States on strategic R&I policy issues.

4. Guiding Question for discussion: how to increase synergies between the EHEA, the EEA and the ERA?

Question 1: To increase synergies between the EHEA, EEA and ERA, **which body/bodies within the EHEA** are best placed to link with the EEA/ERA?

Question 2: Building on the respective structures within EHEA, EEA and ERA, what **methods of coordination** do you suggest for closer cooperation/synergies?

Question 3: Bearing in mind that the Rome Communiqué pays special attention to synergies linked to **research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**: do you have specific suggestions to operationalise strengthened cooperation in these fields?