

The Future of the EHEA: Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future

A preparatory note for the BFUG Bucharest meeting breakout sessions

The Ministerial Conference in Rome in June 2020 will coincide with the coming of age of the Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999.

Since then, important progress has been made. It is truly a remarkable achievement to have created today's EHEA, with its 48 member countries, its consultative members, its partners, its consolidated working methods and structures. It is a remarkable achievement to have agreed on an overarching qualifications framework and the use of ECTS, on standards and guidelines for quality assurance, and on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, even if implementation is imperfect. It is equally remarkable to have agreed on a set of fundamental values and on the importance of the social dimension of higher education even if, again, reality is not entirely commensurate with our ideals.

Not all aims have been realised, not all goals have been reached. But the fact that those goals, those aims, have been elaborated and agreed upon by so many and diverse members, partners, and stakeholders -- who have also engaged to implement them -- it is itself a remarkable result.

If we go back to the beginning of the Bologna Process, we find that the core inspiration, as first expressed by the Sorbonne Declaration and stated more fully in Bologna, was to create the necessary conditions for students to study in more than one European country, and to see their studies recognized. To achieve this it was necessary to agree on a small number of parameters -- such as cycles and credits -- to put into contact the very different HE systems that existed at the time, while guaranteeing that national specificities would remain.

To accomplish this, deep reforms were necessary: reforms that totally changed the structures of most national HE systems. For this reason, agreement between national governments and ministries of education was the necessary cornerstone of the process. Higher education institutions, academics, students and rectors' conferences were also involved from the beginning, as was the European Commission, particularly important because of its growing Erasmus programme.

As the EHEA has grown, becoming established and nearly doubling the number of signatory countries, new commitments have been added to the original ones, year by year, meeting by meeting, Ministerial Conference by Ministerial Conference. Today, even for those who were involved from the beginning in the Bologna Process, it is hard to describe or even to remember how many changes have occurred.

The upcoming 21st birthday imposes a careful consideration of what has been undertaken and why, what has been accomplished, and what can be or should be continued and accomplished in the future.

Although the Bologna Process -- and now the EHEA -- is a Ministerial and hence intergovernmental process, now, just as in the beginning, higher education reform needs the participation, perspectives, agreement, and commitment of higher education institutions, students and staff, and other stakeholders.

Higher education has a crucial role and responsibility in a rapidly changing world. Universities must look ahead to prepare the future generations and more generally to give guidance to society. As we face such concerns as climate change, unemployment, growing social inequality, migration-related issues and a rise in political polarisation, radicalisation and violent extremism, accompanied by rapid scientific and technological developments in many fields, universities must prepare to deal proactively with the new challenges, contributing to ensuring a more cohesive and inclusive society, based on democracy and the rule of law.

Education and training systems should serve and be of guidance in a world where competences will need frequent updating. Creative thinking and innovation, active learning and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership and social influence, reasoning and problem solving, technological design and programming, as well as system analysis and evaluation, may be at the forefront.

The changing structure of employment already places pressure on Higher Education to offer shorter more flexible courses and work based learning, to provide for more adult education and better recognition of prior learning, both formal and informal. Producing more portable and trustworthy certification of learning in order to facilitate recognition of mobility and of qualifications, is an immediate requirement.

If Universities have the responsibility of preparing for the future needs of society, the BFUG has a major role to suggest how EHEA members can best support and facilitate this process. The BFUG has been mandated to organise and conduct a deep and broad discussion of the future goals and modus operandi of the EHEA. In the Paris Communiqué the Ministers "ask the BFUG to submit proposals for the main priorities for the next decade, in close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff and students, and for the governance of the EHEA."

The first step has been to carry out a preliminary survey among the BFUG members themselves. As a second step, a relevant part of the present BFUG meeting in Bucharest will be devoted to a structured discussion in breakout groups and in plenary sessions, to further develop and refine our ideas.

The Board and the Chairs have decided that the present discussion about the future of the EHEA should first address our "vision" of Higher Education in the future, and then propose how the EHEA can contribute to shaping it.

Numerous suggestions for themes for the work of the next decade have already been made: rightly, these focus on issues that lend themselves to the kind of cooperation framework represented by the EHEA. They include the further implementation and/or refinement of structural reforms, mobility, the social dimension of higher education, innovation in learning teaching and assessment, and the core values of higher education: academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

A draft roadmap is also presented, in order to visualise how this discussion will go forward, from the definition of overarching goals to more specific themes and topics, and what kind of action can be taken to develop them.

During the BFUG meeting in Bucharest we aim to **reground** the discussion by **starting from the vision of the future**, then look at the main steps to get there, and finally examine at the role of the EHEA in this process.

The discussion groups will focus on the following three questions in turn:

- 1. What major changes/improvements in the Higher Education world will be necessary in order to enable the Universities of 2030 to play their fundamental societal role?**
- 2. Which of these changes/improvements can be implemented or supported by a loosely organised framework such as the EHEA?**
- 3. How many of these changes are already included, in some way or to some degree, in the existing EHEA commitments? What might be the future key priorities?**