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Draft Guidelines for BFUG Peer Support 2021-2024

Background and objectives

With the Paris Communiqué, "[a structured peer support approach](#) based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning" was adopted. In the work programme of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for 2021-2024, structured peer support will continue to focus on completing the implementation of three key commitments.

The Rome Communiqué states:

*In the 2018 Paris Ministerial Conference we decided to devote special effort to completing implementation of three "**Key Commitments**" essential for the functioning of the EHEA: the Qualifications Frameworks and ECTS, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Diploma Supplement, and Quality Assurance according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).*

*We reconfirm our determination to see the Key Commitments fully implemented. We ask the BFUG to continue to employ the **peer support method** to achieve this. We commit to the continued participation in and contribution to this effort.*

To this end, the BFUG established a coordinating body, the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG), to organise and give guidance to the work of three Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs), one for each key commitment.

The Thematic Peer Groups themselves will agree on further actions aimed at encouraging, improving, accelerating and completing implementation in the participating countries and report to the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG). In line with its mandate, the BICG will follow the peer support activities and will report on overall progress and any necessary review of the peer support approach or methodology on a regular basis and in particular prior to the next Ministerial Conference. Furthermore, the BICG is tasked with preparing analytical reports to the BFUG on the activities of the different TPGs and the support for the implementation of Key Commitments as a whole, including operation (what works, what doesn't work), impact and usefulness.

Working methods

At its April 2021 meeting, the BFUG confirmed the three Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs) for the 2021-2024 period.

Each TPG will have up to three Co-chairs, who will be responsible for planning and coordinating the Groups' activities, with the support of the BFUG Secretariat. The TPG Co-chairs facilitate and steer the discussion and encourage members to share their national and other contextual viewpoints ensuring that the discussions are aimed at supporting further



implementation of the key commitments in the participating countries. The Co-chairs are also responsible for reporting to the BICG. The BFUG Secretariat takes minutes of all meetings and liaises with the meeting hosts and group members about meeting logistics.

The Groups are free to organise their work as they find most useful. However, the BICG recommends the following:

Each Group should organise preferably at least two meetings per year (physical meetings, if possible, as well as online meetings) that gather all the group members together. In addition, each group may choose to organise further joint meetings of the whole group, separate meetings on specific sub-themes and/or combinations of the two depending on the topics to be tackled. The specific themes or interests of a smaller range of countries might be addressed by specially established sub-groups, supported by specific projects (see below). Working methods that engage members and enable support for those needing to implement changes through the sharing of practices and/or policies are particularly welcome, and small group exercises are encouraged where appropriate.

The Co-chairs should prepare the first meeting of the Group taking into account the needs of the member countries based on the existing scorecard and subsequent progress. At its first meeting, each TPG should prepare a general work plan (i.e. TPG Action Plan) that indicates in general terms the topics, the working methods, the timeline and the outcomes to be achieved by each country by the end of the working period. This Action Plan is to be updated with more detailed information about each country's needs and targeted outcomes as soon as possible, and kept updated during the work period.

The Co-chairs are encouraged to prepare for meetings well in advance, in collaboration with the BFUG Secretariat, in order to provide the group members with a structured format for discussions that will lead to the expected outcomes of each meeting and, eventually, to the success of the peer support activities as a whole. Documents should be sent at least 10 working days in advance and the first draft of the minutes, with the agreed action points, should be available within 10 working days after the meeting.

Special attention should also be paid to sharing information outside the meetings. The BFUG Secretariat will provide each TPG with a dedicated webpage under www.ehea.info that will allow the TPG to communicate about its activities and results. Within one month after each peer support activity (involving either the entire Thematic Peer Group or part of it) a short summary will be published on the Group's website.

To ensure efficiency, the members should preferably send one key person to each meeting. However, other arrangements can be made in agreement with the Co-chairs. It is expected that further project activities organised to support the work will allow for broader participation. In addition, where this has not already been done, countries are encouraged to establish national teams to ensure follow up and implementation.

Recommendations from the past working period

In its November 2020 Report, the BICG described the organizational solutions adopted by the TPGs in the 2018-2020 work period, and made suggestions for the future. The BICG recommends that each TPG consider and discuss these suggestions (and in general the Report) in order to take into account past experience in designing their Action Plans for the



2021-2024 work period. In particular, the TPGs should take careful note of the final recommendations and devise ways to ensure greater **synergy within and between countries through better national coordination**.

The BICG report states¹:

*In terms of organisation, all Thematic Peer Groups used a combination of **Thematic Peer Group meetings with public seminars**. This solution worked well and has been positively assessed. In the future it is felt particularly important to keep a mix of larger panel meetings to facilitate a broad discussion, and **smaller group activities having a thematic focus** (for example, staff exchange or workshops). This combination has proved to be very effective in facilitating the sharing of good practices. Moreover, Thematic Peer Group activities should continue to be grouped under the umbrella projects to ensure consistent organisation and communication.*

In particular, the countries' contributions to the Thematic Peer Groups' Action Plans (i.e. countries' Work Plans), which countries were asked to propose and keep updated for each Key Commitment, have helped to improve the coordination of relevant national stakeholders. This way of working also encouraged self-reflection on their own practices. Continuation of countries' participation in the Thematic Peer Groups will make it possible for them to reflect further on their Work Plans and their contributions to the Thematic Peer Groups Action Plans and revise and update them in the next period.

*While there has been a very positive assessment of this first phase of work, the survey respondents proposed a number of **recommendations for the future**.*

In particular:

- *the methodology could be further developed in order to enable **more intensive work in smaller groups**;*
- *more **digital meetings** could be held to facilitate and broaden participation;*
- *more **practical sessions** could be offered with examples presented by each participant;*
- *improved synergy within and between countries could be brought about by more efficient **national coordination**. Public authorities should cooperate systematically with stakeholders in discussing and introducing necessary changes in legislation and regulations.*

Support through European Commission projects

The European Commission is preparing an "invitation to submit project proposals" to support the work of the Thematic Peer Groups. Applicants can be National Authorities for Education in the Erasmus+ ("Programme") countries and consultative members of the Bologna Process, including EQAR. The "Programme Countries" can make proposals for projects including any member country of the EHEA. The BICG encourages the Erasmus+ "Programme Countries"

¹ https://ehea.info/Upload/BICG_Final_Report.pdf



to consider this opportunity creatively and proactively, and to build meaningful projects with all EHEA countries to address common implementation concerns. The European Commission will inform the BFUG about the publication of the “invitation to submit project proposals” and the application deadline. The Co-chairs of the Peer Groups will facilitate exchange of information about participation of the members in the different peer projects. Ideally, all Peer Group members should be involved in at least one project for targeted peer support.

Timeline, outcomes and reporting

The TPGs are expected to be active from May 2021 to May 2024. Their work will be based on their **Action Plans, to be sent to the BICG by 31 October 2021** (date to be decided)

The main focus of the Groups’ work will be ensuring further implementation of the key commitments as outlined in the Paris and Rome Communiqué. To monitor progress in this regard, each group is expected to send to the BICG **an interim report by the fall BFUG 2022 and a draft final report by 15 February 2024**, respectively. The reports should outline the key changes carried out by participating countries with the aim of implementing the key commitments and describe the key challenges encountered.

Since the work period in this instance is of three years, and on the basis of the work already accomplished, it is reasonable to expect that by the 2024 Ministerial Conference notable progress can be made, bringing the goal of full implementation in all countries much closer. Not only will awareness of both challenges and solutions be enhanced through networking: the Thematic Peer Groups should aim to reach incisive results in a good number of cases.

Practicalities

The TPGs are free to decide on the venue, the exact length, and timing of their meetings. Meetings can also be held online.

Except in the case of TPG activities covered by a project (such as the above-mentioned Erasmus+ projects), the member countries and organisations cover their own travel and accommodation costs for the meetings. The hosts of meetings are expected to arrange the meeting venue and catering and provide logistical and practical information for the participants.

In order to ensure financial support for the meetings, EHEA Erasmus+ “Programme Countries” are highly encouraged to organise projects on the key commitments in response to the European Commission’s call described above, and to include all EHEA countries in them.



Annex

The following are examples of some themes that might be considered. It will be up to the TPGs and their Co-Chairs to discuss these and other relevant topics, and to refine their Action Plans on the basis of a review of the present situation, keeping in mind that the **overarching purpose is the full implementation of the Key Commitments themselves**.

Peer Group A on Key Commitment 1 (a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching Qualifications Framework of the EHEA and first and second cycle degrees scaled by ECTS):

Specific thematic indications included topics such as:

- self-certification of the national qualification frameworks the overarching Qualifications Framework of the EHEA;
- complete implementation of the ECTS User's Guide;
- short cycle higher education;
- multiple purposes and use of the qualifications frameworks by the stakeholders;
- study programmes outside of the Bologna three-cycle structure;
- relationship between the qualifications frameworks and quality assurance.

Peer Group B on Key Commitment 2 (national legislation and procedures compliant with the Lisbon Recognition Convention [LRC])

Specific thematic orientations indicated include the topics such as:

- establishing the legal framework to allow the implementation of the LRC;
- establishing the distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent institutions that have the right knowledge and capacity to carry out recognition procedures;
- achieving automatic recognition;
- recognition of alternative pathways;
- qualifications held by refugees;
- optimising the potential of digital technology for the recognition agenda and the Diploma Supplement.

Peer Group C on Key Commitment 3 (Quality Assurance in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)

Specific thematic orientations include the topics such as:

- legislative framework in line with the ESG (introducing changes);
- ensuring effectiveness of internal quality assurance arrangements, including the use of QA results in the decision-making process and quality culture as well as links to learning and teaching;
- the role and engagement of stakeholders in internal and external QA (students, teachers, employers);
- Cross-border QA and European Approach to accreditation of joint programmes.