



European  
Commission

# The European Higher Education Area in 2020

*Bologna Process  
Implementation Report*



Education,  
Audiovisual  
and Culture  
Executive Agency

**More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).**

**Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020**

PRINT ISBN: 978-92-9484-357-9

doi: 10.2797/851121

EC-02-20-828-EN-C

PDF ISBN: 978-92-9484-356-2

doi: 10.2797/756192

EC-02-20-828-EN-N

**© Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2020**

The Commission's reuse policy is implemented by Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39 – <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2011/833/oj>).

Unless otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the EU, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders. The EU does not own the copyright in relation to any images which do not carry the copyright indicator © European Union.

CREDITS

Cover image: © Logo EHEA Ministerial Conference, Rome 2020

# CHAPTER 6:

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

---

### Chapter outline

This chapter reflects on how the EHEA and its member countries, higher education institutions, students and stakeholders may develop in the future. It considers elements that are part of the current policy discourse at European and national levels and, therefore, are likely to have an impact. While not being comprehensive in scope (other issues are also likely to develop in the years ahead as policy challenges) these topics are nevertheless worthy of careful scrutiny and may require strategic planning and action from policy-makers and relevant stakeholders.

### 2018 Paris Communiqué

'We also 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' (Paris Communiqué, p. 4).

## 6.1. Introduction: continuity and change

The world is a very different place in 2020 than it was in 1999, and it is normal to reflect on the framework required for European higher education systems to develop their further cooperation. This is particularly striking in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a reality that has shaken and disrupted all 'normal' behaviour at the level of individuals and groups, institutions and countries. Yet the current crisis has also presented a unique opportunity to highlight the importance of science, as well as rational and evidence-based policy, and clear communication.

We begin a new decade at a point of genuine and unprecedented rupture. It is a time where we have to question where we are going, how we are planning the journey, and even if we are able to move. Whatever its successes and failures have been, the European Higher Education Area provides a framework for this common critical reflection.

The Bologna Process has been built upon voluntary commitment, and upon the notion of policy-making through consensus. Compared to policy-making in other sectors, it stands out as a unique and interesting anomaly: a consensual process, relying largely upon trust and action between a wide range of very different countries, institutions and stakeholders. It has proved to be a force for developing shared understanding of the aspirations that higher education systems should strive to reach, as well as a catalyst for major reforms in a number of policy areas – including degree structures, quality assurance systems, and recognition. On the negative side, it has sometimes proved easier for countries to agree to policy commitments than to implement them.

Many have argued that although the Bologna Process proved to be an effective vehicle for structural reforms in its first decade, it seems to have 'run out of steam' in recent years, and is in need of a new 'vision'. Others point more to the unanticipated complexity arising out of the implementation of major reforms, and to the issues that emerge as countries, higher education institutions, staff and students develop and deepen relationships.

Whatever assessment is made of the last 20 years, it is clear that reforms only benefit the higher education community and society at large when they are fully implemented on the ground. As there is

no EHEA country that can legitimately claim that it has successfully accomplished all policy objectives agreed throughout the Bologna Process, it is clear that one part of the agenda for the coming years must continue to be the strengthening of the implementation of agreed commitments. As stressed in Chapter 4, the social dimension remains a major policy area where the Bologna Process has so far not yet managed to engage sufficient political will to bring about significant change.

At the same time as these 'known' challenges are tackled, the academic community needs to address new challenges that are emerging for European higher education. 'New' issues should be limited in this context to those where a coordinated response is necessary and helpful.

## 6.2. Values

The distinction between 'old' and 'new' issues for the EHEA to address may not always be helpful. From the beginning of the Bologna Process, there has been an acknowledgement that cooperation is built upon shared fundamental values. There is therefore nothing new about the notion of fundamental values. Indeed, for the greater part of the Bologna Process, fundamental values have been affirmed but otherwise taken for granted as the basis for partnership and cooperation.

However, recent history places this debate in a new context. Scientists and academics, whether working in universities, health systems, pharmaceutical companies or other settings are playing a key role in addressing the response to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. To do this effectively, the environmental conditions, including the societal value base, needs to be protective and supportive. Had there been no attempt to suppress information about the COVID-19 virus when doctors in China first became aware of it, early measures to contain the spread would have been different. Meanwhile, as the virus has spread globally, some politicians have deliberately distorted information in an attempt to shift responsibility for their own public health failures. Attempts to find solutions to the pandemic – whether in the form of vaccine development or treatments – depend on cooperation and transparency among scientists and academics. Protection of fundamental societal and academic values is therefore currently a condition for finding a path to live and interact together in the future.

The pandemic is certainly not the only catalyst for a broad discussion on the protection and promotion of academic values. In recent years, cases reported by EHEA stakeholder organisations as well as by international network organisations such as the Magna Charta Observatory and Scholars at Risk – organisations whose mission is to promote and enhance academic freedom and institutional autonomy – have pointed to increasing cases both within and outside the EHEA, illustrating that shared values cannot simply be taken for granted. The 2015 Yerevan Communiqué (2015) made a commitment through ministers to 'support and protect students and staff in exercising their right to academic freedom and ensure their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions' <sup>(79)</sup>. This was further strengthened in the Paris Communiqué (2018) where Ministers made a strong commitment to promoting and protecting fundamental values throughout the EHEA:

'Academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education form the backbone of the EHEA. Having seen these fundamental values challenged in recent years in some of our countries, we strongly commit to promoting and protecting them in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation' <sup>(80)</sup>.

---

<sup>(79)</sup> Yerevan Communiqué, p. 2.

<sup>(80)</sup> Paris Communiqué, p. 1.

The first steps in developing an approach to promoting and protecting these values have been taken through a Task Force established by the BFUG under the auspices of the reporting working group. The Task Force will report through the BFUG to EHEA ministers on progress made so far, and the further work that is required. Whatever the reasons for values being in need of protection and promotion, the Bologna Process has a major challenge ahead in developing this work.

### 6.3. Sustainable development

Creating a sustainable future is the common, global human challenge that we all face. This is not an abstract agenda, but a concrete reality that we cannot ignore. Higher education institutions can be at the heart of positive societal change, and change must also take place within higher education institutions. Sustainable development issues require reflection and action in each and every higher education institution – from how they are organised and funded, through the content and methods of teaching and research, and how they engage in society.

Higher education has a key role to play in mitigating the impact of climate change and climate-change-related migration – through research, innovation, education and engagement. Higher education institutions need to engage with their local communities to make preparations to adapt to the impact of climate change. The curriculum proposed to students should be adapted to reflect the importance of this topic. Institutions should also be disseminating research-based knowledge about climate-related issues, and encouraging thought and debate on the way we live and work in the future.

Sustainable development cannot be divorced from socio-economic recovery. The current pandemic will leave countries with major economic problems to address, and will affect different groups of society in different ways. We have created a world where inequity has made some people more vulnerable. The current crisis gives us an opportunity to reflect on how this happened, and to change direction. It will be essential for universities to play their part in this agenda globally, at European level and locally. Given their role as knowledge producers, higher education institutions can continue to help create a sustainable future. The Bologna Process also needs to play its role in providing a flexible framework for the development and exchange of policy ideas and practice. Just as the Bologna Process has been associated with degree structures and quality assurance, the coming decade must see it become a platform for sustainable higher education. This means integrating sustainable development concerns into all disciplines at all levels – and developing a supportive environment including green campuses, green mobility, sustainable development partnerships and networks.

### 6.4. European integration and innovation

The European Higher Education Area has enormous potential for innovation – particularly if it continues to become a genuinely open and inclusive space. Interconnection is essential to meet future challenges, and local and national interests will best be served by autonomous higher education institutions that have the capacity to work beyond national boundaries. Students also need to take advantage of opportunities to benefit from connection to other cultures and to other institutions. For this to happen, higher education institutions will increasingly need to work together with a broad range of institutional and societal partners and to be open and transparent in all aspects of their operations. The European Universities alliances, combining goals of excellence and social inclusion, are pioneers for achieving such novel forms of innovation, cohesion and cooperation among institutions. Their experience should become formative for the wider EHEA.

## 6.5. Digitalisation

We live in a world of fast-changing digital technology. An immense impact is predicted by scientists and social commentators alike for artificial intelligence, big data, the internet of things and other technologies. Citizens require new skills and competences to live and to work in a digital world. Working with a wide range of online information sources and tools changes working cultures and practice, as well as human relationships. Higher education institutions are part of this phenomenon and are also embracing digital changes. The Paris Communiqué foresees the impact of these developments:

‘Digitalization plays a role in all areas of society and we recognize its potential to transform how higher education is delivered and how people learn at different stages of their lives. We call on our higher education institutions to prepare their students and support their teachers to act creatively in a digitalized environment’ <sup>(81)</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen rapid progress in switching to digital learning and teaching. There will undoubtedly be many lessons to learn from the experience over the past few months, but it is clear that a big step forward has been taken and even when a full return to normality is possible, the use of digital technologies will no doubt continue and intensify.

The wave of progress in using digital technologies was forced upon us by the pandemic. In the future, however, there will be choices to make and questions of cultural adaptation to address. For example, what will be the appropriate role for digital technologies? How should the human learning and teaching environment relate to the digital environment? How can digital technologies support higher education policy objectives?

One aspect of this changing reality that has become evident during the early months of the pandemic is that digitalisation alone cannot solve issues of inequity. Indeed limited access to technology clearly inhibited learning for people from different societal groups, with disadvantaged communities in both inner city and isolated rural regions being among the most severely affected during the pandemic. The rapid shift to online teaching has increased awareness of the need for mentoring, guidance and support to alleviate problems and prevent drop-out rates from increasing. Working out and targeting support to improve the quality of the learning experience will be a key challenge going forward.

It is important to understand digitalisation issues in the context of equipping individuals for lifelong learning in a fast-moving environment. Higher education institutions will themselves need support – including peer support – in making optimal use of digital technologies for learning and teaching, and helping to develop digital skills more broadly in society.

It is also important to reflect carefully on the way in which online or blended learning may change the nature of a higher education experience and indeed the nature of higher education institutions. Will campuses continue to exist as a main model for the organisation and delivery of higher education in a digital age? Will the kind of facilities found in many higher education institutions today – accommodation, sports facilities, social services etc. – continue to be an integral part of higher education? How will digital learning and teaching impact on public and private funding, including on student support?

Higher education from the student perspective is about more than academic learning. It is also a place and a time to develop social and civic skills, as well as confidence in personality and identity. These social functions of higher education are vitally important in equipping citizens for their future lives – and they cannot be fulfilled adequately online.

---

<sup>(81)</sup> Paris Communiqué, p. 3.

Social inclusion policy with regard to digitalisation also needs to consider a wide range of issues – beyond questions of differentiated access to technology, or the so-called digital divide. Students living in a supportive learning environment are able to benefit from online higher education provision to a far greater extent than those lacking such an environment.

It is also important to recognise and develop digitalisation not as an alternative to internationalisation, but rather as a facilitator of new forms of internationalisation and to simplify participation in mobility. International mobility in a digital age requires new approaches to blending different modes of learning, harnessing tools to ensure secure data exchange and developing new forms of civic engagement and identity. The European Student Card can help solidify this notion of a new European student identity in addition to digitalising all the main components necessary for the organisation of student mobilities and provide a digital single entry point for mobile students to access information and services.

Digitalisation also has an important role to play in advancing policy commitments made at EHEA and EU level. One example is automatic recognition of qualifications, where networking among ENIC and NARIC centres, and strengthening good practice in the use of new digital technologies can help to speed up progress.

Digital tools have a great deal of potential to reinforce both quality education and social inclusion. However, this will not happen automatically, and finding an appropriate role for digital technology will require broad thinking on a range of issues. There is an important role for strategic policy planning at both national and European levels.

## 6.6. Micro-credentials

While there has been great progress in agreeing common structures for EHEA degree programmes, recent years have seen a growing demand and supply of modularised, short courses at higher education level now commonly referred to as micro-credentials. How will the proliferation of these courses be managed and integrated into higher education systems to the benefit of citizens and society? Can these courses be part of a conception of lifelong learning that genuinely allows individuals to develop skills for the labour market and pursue learning for their own fulfilment?

This issue is closely connected to other potential areas of high priority – particularly digitalisation and the social dimension. One of the main drivers of the development of micro-credentials is that learners and employers appreciate a more flexible, time-efficient and individualised format of higher education programme to enable specific skills or competences to be acquired quickly for particular labour market needs. Digitalisation has strongly facilitated this trend, enabling provision of short courses to be offered to a broad audience.

The concept of micro-credentials is not, however, necessarily technology-dependent. In principle, micro-credentials refer to any form of ‘short courses’. The idea is to restructure content so that smaller units of learning content can be certified and recognised. In theory, micro-credentials have the potential to make education more reactive to labour market needs and individual interests, allowing for flexibility and potentially also supporting learning among under-represented groups. Hence, there is potential to democratise knowledge, and to sustain lifelong learning.

For the Bologna Process, discussion needs to focus on how to make positive use of these trends. The main policy challenges concern quality assurance, and the articulation and alignment with existing degrees. How should such new formats of teaching and learning potentially interact with the higher educational landscape as a whole? On what basis will higher education systems determine the legitimacy of providers of these (online) programmes? How will their quality be assured?

## 6.7. EHEA in the world

Throughout the lifetime of the Bologna Process, engagement with higher education communities in the rest of the world has been an important ambition. Yet this has often been a difficult process. Partly this is related to the fact that the EHEA is a nebulous concept compared to a national system or a specific higher education institution. Just as members of the European academic community are more likely to consider particular countries and universities as reference points, so too will members of the academic community in different parts of the world relate to national systems, specific institutions or networks of institutions in the EHEA.

Nevertheless, in an increasingly fast-moving global environment, connection and cooperation across and between different world regions is essential, and the EHEA will need to find ways to continue global-level dialogues that are meaningful and engaging for all parties.

Recognition is one aspect of reality where improvement can be made at global level. The same principles now commonly embedded in national legislation as a result of the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention should be applied globally through ratification of the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention. EHEA countries are certainly in a position to provide a global lead in this process. Automatic recognition is now embedded in the new Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) to further promote the principle as a standard in Erasmus mobility and monitor the implementation of automatic recognition in credit mobility.

However difficult the process of global-level dialogue, cooperation that is meaningful and engaging for all parties is essential, and the EHEA needs to play a leading role.

## 6.8. Conclusions

At a time when European cooperation is often threatened from many different sides, it is heartening to observe that the Bologna Process has brought about significant progress not only in higher education reforms but also in trust-building and furthering cooperation across the EHEA. Few working in the higher education sector would contest the proposition that working with a community of policy-makers and stakeholders across national barriers represents the best chance for Europe as well as for the rest of the world. The Bologna Process has demonstrated throughout its history that cross border trust is enhanced as a result of working together to face common challenges. This report and others that have preceded it during the process have demonstrated that it has also provided a dynamic for change and that the EHEA itself has almost doubled in size in 20 years, moving from 29 countries in 1999 to 48 countries today.

The known challenges ahead are many, and there is no doubt that unexpected challenges will continue to emerge. Ongoing and strengthened political support and increasing ownership by all stakeholders is required by EHEA countries to find solutions for common challenges. Whatever the specific areas for action in the coming years, the deepening of this trust-based cooperation provides the greatest hope for the next decade.



## **Getting in touch with the EU**

### **IN PERSON**

All over Europe there are hundreds of local EU information centres.

You can find the address of the centre nearest to you at: [europa.eu/contact](http://europa.eu/contact)

### **ON THE PHONE OR BY EMAIL**

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696, or
- by electronic mail via: [europa.eu/contact](http://europa.eu/contact)

## **Finding information about the EU**

### **ONLINE**

Information in all the official languages of the European Union is available on the Europa website: [europa.eu](http://europa.eu)

### **EU PUBLICATIONS**

You can download or order free and priced EU publications from EU Bookshop at: <http://bookshop.europa.eu>. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see <http://europa.eu/contact>).

### **EU LAW AND RELATED DOCUMENTS**

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1951 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

### **OPEN DATA FROM THE EU**

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

