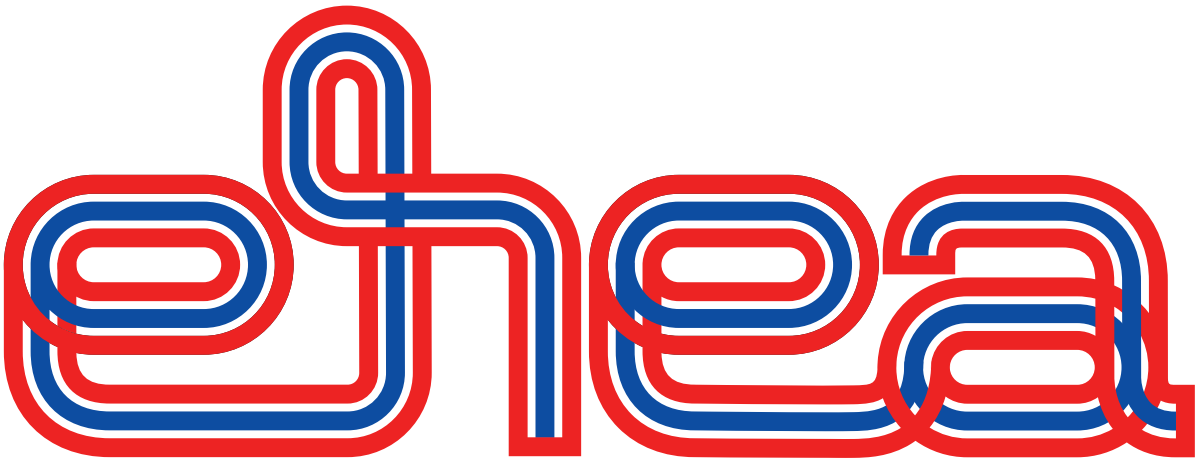
European Commission

The European Higher Education Area in 2024

Bologna Process Implementation Report



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European Education and Culture Executive Agency

Unit A6 – Platforms, Studies and Analysis
Boulevard Simon Bolivar 34 (Unit A6)
B-1049 Brussels

E-mail: eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu

Website: http://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu

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FOREWORD

Twenty-five years ago, ministers from 29 countries gathered to sign the Bologna Declaration, making the first step on our transformative journey towards an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Tirana Ministerial Conference at the end of May marks a major milestone: a quarter-century of progress since that inaugural ministerial conference in Bologna. Now comprising 49 higher education systems, the EHEA has seen many policy reforms come to fruition thanks to collaborative efforts of public authorities, higher education institutions and students working together within individual countries and across Europe.

In a world facing shared global challenges, broadening and deepening cooperation in higher education is not only a necessity for Europe – it brings major benefits to students, academics, higher education institutions and our societies at large. It is easy to forget that before the Bologna Process, it was unthinkable that all European countries would base their higher education systems on a common three-cycle degree framework consisting of bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies, that quality assurance standards and guidelines would be developed at the European level, and that agreements would be in place for an automatic recognition of qualifications from other countries.

Today, these ideas are a reality, and the European Commission is fully committed to deepening these policies. In March 2024, we adopted a set of ambitious proposals for Europe's higher education sector, comprising a Communication on a blueprint for a European degree and proposal for two Council recommendations to improve quality assurance processes and automatic recognition, and to make academic careers more attractive and sustainable.

Commission's support for the EHEA pre-dates the Bologna Process. Over 35 years ago, the launch of the Erasmus programme kindled a demand for student mobility that continues to grow to this day. Erasmus also highlighted the need for a more intense and better structured cooperation among European higher education institutions. Since those early days, EU higher education programmes and the Bologna Process have grown increasingly interconnected and reinforce each other.

The Erasmus+ programme now not only continues to enhance student and staff mobility, but also supports Bologna structures and events, finances cooperation projects in EHEA countries and funds teams of experts who assist countries in the EU and beyond with Bologna-inspired reforms. As a full member of the Bologna Follow-up Group and its Board, the Commission is a driving force for innovation, inclusion and interconnectedness that we aspire to achieve in the EHEA.

We can only have a truly open and inclusive European higher education if all EHEA countries fulfil the commitments that they have taken on. This edition of the Bologna Process Implementation Report provides an overview of how far European higher education systems have advanced through cohesive national reforms – and highlights areas where work is still required.

Despite many positive developments, the beginning of this decade has been challenging, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and significant geopolitical shifts including Russia's war of aggression, against Ukraine supported by Belarus. The EHEA acted swiftly to suspend these two countries and to help affected Ukrainians including students and staff. In addition, we keenly feel the impacts of the climate emergency and the cost-of-living crisis.

However, it is in difficult times that European higher education cooperation can best demonstrate its value. We are all much stronger when we work together, sharing ideas and knowledge. This philosophy is both at the heart of the European Union and central to the ambitions of the EHEA.

Our resolve is strong: we have set ambitious priorities for the EHEA, boosted by the actions stemming from the Commission's European Strategy for Universities. This strategy has bolstered the European Universities alliances and at the same time driven advances in higher education, research, innovation and service to society.

A quarter of a century after the Bologna Process began, it is time to step up our efforts and achieve our ambitious goals for the EHEA.

Iliana Ivanova

European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than two decades after the launch of the Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is now evolving in a context where a series of major crises have arrived in quick succession: the COVID-19 pandemic followed by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, a cost of living crisis, various manifestations of climate emergency and war in Israel and Gaza following the atrocities committed on 7 October 2023. These crises pose challenges to society as a whole, and also have a major impact on higher education. Like other sectors, higher education may suffer social and economic consequences at a time of crisis. At the same time it also contributes – through teaching, research and assisting rational policy development – to finding a path towards a brighter future. The 2020 Rome Communiqué, emphasises this path, outlining a vision for an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030, able to underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe. This report shows where steps have been taken, and gives some indication of the distance still to travel.

The report is divided into six self-contained but inter-related chapters, giving a snapshot of the European Higher Education Area, and assessing how far policy commitments have been implemented.

Key data

The first chapter on key data sets out some current realities of the European higher education landscape to provide context about the environment in which policy commitments have been taken.

Firstly it is important to note that the suspension of Russia and Belarus has changed the dimensions of the EHEA significantly, shrinking both its geographical and demographic coverage. Student numbers in the majority of the remaining EHEA countries/systems rose significantly in the 5 years from 2016-2021 – an overall 11% increase. However, there were exceptions, and student numbers declined in several countries/systems in Eastern Europe.

It is important to note that, at least in the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased enrolment in higher education. Close to 60% of students are enrolled in first-cycle, bachelor-type study programmes, which means that there are more students in this cycle than in the three other cycles (short-cycle, second cycle and third cycle) combined.

Academic staff numbers also rose in the majority of EHEA countries/systems. However, the increase in staff numbers was less significant in most countries/systems than the increase in student numbers.

Although there are considerable variations between countries/systems, overall public spending on tertiary education relative to GDP has a median value of 1%. In most countries/systems, public expenditure has been stable in recent years. However, as student and staff numbers have been increasing, this stability could be considered as a reduction in public funding.

Key commitments

The EHEA is developed through implementing shared policy commitments. All commitments are therefore important, but three key commitments underpin the structural foundations of the EHEA. They are three-cycle degree structures in line with agreed parameters; recognition of qualifications, based upon the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and with the objective of system-level automatic recognition within the EHEA, and quality assurance systems aligned to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The vast majority of EHEA countries/systems have implemented the main agreements concerning degree structures. Nevertheless there remain a handful of national systems that maintain some

structural elements that are not aligned to the EHEA commitments. These may be programmes constructed on credit ranges that are outside Bologna agreements, degree programmes that require a qualification at the same degree level for access, or providing an excessive number of long/integrated programmes leading directly to a second cycle qualification. While there may be strong arguments within countries/systems in favour of maintaining this reality, such anomalies do not serve the objective of easily understandable and comparable high education provision throughout the EHEA. Short-cycle higher education, now included in the overall Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, is less coherent and comparable within the EHEA than the other cycles.

Establishing three-cycle degrees has been aided greatly by the development and coherent use of ECTS, Diploma Supplement and National Qualifications Frameworks. These EHEA tools have been widely adopted, and the evidence shows that there is steady improvement in implementation. Nevertheless a small number of countries/systems still have progress to make to ensure that these tools are properly developed and used.

EHEA cooperation has focused for many years on improving and simplifying recognition practices. European higher education policy has worked towards easier and fairer recognition on the basis of the Lisbon Recognition Convention – protecting the value of learning outcomes and ensuring that qualifications are easily understood and communicated. Recent years have seen a significant improvement in embedding the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention into legislation, with all main principles now included in the relevant legislation of 31 countries/systems. Similarly an increasing number of EHEA countries/systems, now reaching 18, have put in place measures to ensure system-level automatic recognition of qualifications from all EHEA countries/systems. Automatic recognition nevertheless remains a challenging concept for many working in this sector.

Quality assurance has become an established feature of European higher education. The ESG have been a major support for the development of trust, and 32 systems now have all their external quality assurance undertaken by an EQAR registered agency.

Fundamental values

The EHEA has agreed six fundamental values – academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation, and public responsibility for and of higher education. So far only one of these values – academic freedom – has been defined within a statement of common understanding adopted in the Rome Ministerial Conference. At this stage, in the absence of adopted common definitions, this report takes a first step towards monitoring these values by examining whether and how they are protected in legislation.

There is an important divide between countries/systems that protect and define values in their national contexts, and those that do not. However, in the case of academic freedom, existing definitions may not cover all aspects agreed in the EHEA understanding, and this should be examined in the future. Analysis for this report shows that the concept of freedom to learn – integral to the EHEA understanding of academic freedom – is a dimension that is most often overlooked.

While rarely specified in legislation, increasing policy attention is being given to academic integrity throughout the EHEA with plagiarism identified as the most burning issue. Other aspects, such as academic fraud and contract cheating currently receive less attention from public authorities.

In almost all EHEA countries/systems, the concept of institutional autonomy has specifically been mentioned in legislation with the majority also providing a definition. In most cases, in addition to outlining higher education institutions' independence from public authorities, the definition includes reference to academic freedom. This confirms the interrelationship between fundamental values and

the need to consider them not only independently, but also as a set where the infringement of one value may undermine all.

Student and staff participation is another important value in itself that can also be considered as an integral element of another value – institutional autonomy. Legislative requirements for student and staff participation in higher education institutions' governance structures are in place in nearly all systems, and in the large majority the legislation stipulates that all members of governing bodies have full rights to contribute to all issues.

Public responsibility for higher education can only be assessed by considering a wide number of aspects – from amounts and types of funding, appropriate quality assurance arrangements and attention to the social dimension. These dimensions of the concept are discussed throughout this report, but there are not, as yet, any umbrella indicators for such a broad concept. Indeed it is a moot question whether it would be feasible to design such indicators in a meaningful way in the future. Meanwhile the concept of public responsibility of higher education focuses very much on the role of higher education institutions, and as such extends beyond the scope and capacity of this report.

Social dimension

The social dimension of the EHEA is a policy area where data has consistently shown that the main objective of policy – that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of the populations – is far from being reached. More detailed policy commitments were taken in 2020 through the adoption of the Principles and Guidelines ([1]) (P&Gs), and monitoring has focused on the ten areas addressed by the document. In eight of these areas a scorecard indicator has been developed on the basis of the guidelines outlined in the P&Gs. In the area of strategic commitment, a more exhaustive mapping has been favoured over the development of a composite scorecard indicator, and similarly no scorecard indicator has been included for community engagement as in this case the P&Gs are mostly targeted at higher education institutions.

Regarding strategic commitment, EHEA education systems have generally implemented some strategic measures, even if the approaches can differ substantially, ranging between mainstream and targeted policies, and more centralised and decentralised approaches. However, there is a need for greater strategic commitment in almost all education systems to address the social dimension of higher education more holistically.

In the other areas, while some scorecard indicators show a strong commitment towards social dimension principles in the EHEA, others uncover a relatively lower level of policy attention.

The principles with the highest degree of implementation are related to sustainable funding for equity, inclusion and diversity in higher education, and to guidance and counselling provision. All EHEA education systems provide some form of financial support to higher education students, and there are only two countries/systems with no academic or career guidance provision. EHEA countries/systems also do relatively well in monitoring and data collection as well as in enabling flexible learning conditions. At the same time, education systems could do more to collect data on the completion of first-year students in the first cycle, and to establish legal frameworks allowing access to higher education through the recognition of prior learning.

The scorecard indicators that take middle position in terms of overall implementation relate to the principles on synergies and lifelong learning, and creating inclusive learning environments and institutional cultures. Most education systems still lack significant elements when it comes to these policy areas. The principles with the lowest level of implementation are on international mobility and policy

([1]) Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, Annex II of the Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020.

dialogue. This result concerning mobility is particularly disappointing, as the need to support disadvantaged learners in mobility programmes has been on the EHEA policy agenda for more than a decade.

Learning and teaching

Supporting quality and innovation in learning and teaching is the objective of the Recommendations adopted by ministers in the 2020 Rome Communiqué ([2]). Three interconnected thematic areas were outlined: system-level policies and measures, student-centred learning and initiatives fostering continuous enhancement of teaching.

While only around half of the EHEA countries/systems have an ongoing system-level strategy in place promoting learning and teaching in higher education, many other system-level policy measures can be found. These measures often promote digitalisation of higher education and/or enhancement of higher education pedagogy, and there have also been regulatory changes in some countries/systems to boost learning and teaching innovation. Three countries/systems have in place national bodies dedicated to supporting learning and teaching in higher education institutions.

Student-centred learning, despite being a central objective of higher education, is not always mentioned in national policy documents and is rarely defined at national level. However, most countries/systems have in place policy measures addressing areas that are closely associated with student-centred learning. For example, top-level policy documents commonly specify that higher education programmes should include explicit intended learning outcomes, and in more than half of the systems, documents accompanying higher education qualifications must specify achieved learning outcomes.

Most higher education countries/systems have in place regulations that (to some extent) restrict flexible study arrangements. The restrictions in question commonly concern possibilities for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, the choice of assessment methods and/or the extent of online, blended and distance learning, or part-time studies. These restrictions are often justified by quality assurance concerns. Thus, while the provision of adequate learning opportunities for all learners, including non-traditional and self-directed learners, is a stated policy objective, in practice, it is often hindered by other actions.

Unlike at other education levels, teaching staff in higher education institutions are rarely required by top-level legislation to follow training in teaching. However, the EUA Trends survey shows that higher education institutions often make training in pedagogy and didactics compulsory for their teaching staff. In other words, requirements set at institutional level regarding training in teaching for academics commonly outstrip those specified at national level.

Regulatory information also suggests that research performance remains the main criterion valued in academic career progression. Thus, parity of esteem of research and teaching has not been achieved. Nevertheless, data show that teaching performance plays a non-negligible role in academic careers.

Mobility and internationalisation

The Bologna Process has undoubtedly played an important role in stimulating greater mobility and internationalisation in European higher education.

Nevertheless, statistical data for 2020/2021 shows that the target of 20% of graduates experiencing mobility by 2020 was not met. One important explanation of this is that 2020/2021 was the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and student mobility slumped significantly as a result. As this is an anomaly

([2]) Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA, Annex III of the Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020.

year, it makes no sense to use it for purposes of comparison and establishing longer-term trends. Future reference years will give a more informative picture of mobility within the EHEA.

Nevertheless certain patterns in student mobility are clear. The first is that mobility increases with each higher education cycle – more mobility in the first cycle than the short cycle, more again in the second cycle, and the most in the third cycle. In terms of percentages of graduates experiencing mobility during their studies, the majority of credit and degree mobility therefore takes place at master and doctoral level. However, in absolute numbers, most mobility takes place in the first cycle. This paradoxical finding is explained by the much greater numbers of students enrolled in first cycle higher education programmes.

Making domestic student grants and loans fully portable is a policy commitment made by ministers two decades ago to support mobility. This is a commitment which has, however, mostly not been followed up and which continues to be neglected by many systems. The countries/systems which have taken steps to improve the situation are the exception and not the rule.

Supporting the Ukrainian academic community

Many higher education institutions around Europe have made a significant effort to support students and staff exiled from Ukraine following the war of aggression launched by Russia.

While several systems do not track Ukrainian nationals in their higher education enrolments, more than half of the systems do collect enrolment data at the top level. This is important for monitoring the evolution of Ukrainians in the academic community around Europe, as well as for the purposes of ongoing communication with the Ukrainian Ministry.

In most cases, EHEA countries/systems have made available existing forms of support in their system to Ukrainian nationals. Thus the most widespread form of support is the provision of grants to students from Ukraine. Language learning support can also be found in many systems, while less commonly preparatory courses have been set up as a bridge into the national higher education system. Academic and psychological counselling services have also been made available to Ukrainians.

While this report is not able to assess the quality of actions that have been taken, there is clear evidence that EHEA countries/systems have responded positively to the challenge of supporting the academic community of a partner country at a time of need.

INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999 by ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries. It was developed following the Sorbonne Conference and Declaration of 1998, which was signed by the higher education ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, and called for a 'Europe of knowledge' paving the way for a genuine European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These ministerial events and declarations set in motion an intergovernmental process based on European cooperation for more convergence of higher education systems in Europe that has radically changed higher education. Reforms have affected countries within and beyond Europe, and the number of official signatory countries has reached 49 with San Marino being the most recent country to join in 2020. However, two countries – Belarus and Russia – have been suspended following the ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine launched by Russia and supported by Belarus on 24 February 2022.

The chart below outlines some of the commitments of the ministerial conferences within the Bologna Process up to 2020. It illustrates that several main themes can be followed throughout the process – mobility of students and staff, a common degree system, the social dimension, lifelong learning, a European system of credits, quality assurance and the development of Europe as an attractive knowledge region. Learning and teaching and sustainable development were added as explicit priorities in the Yerevan Communiqué, while digitalisation was recognised as an issue for attention in the Paris Communiqué in 2018. The Rome Communiqué in 2020 set out a vision for the future decade that embraces all these developments under the concepts of an EHEA that is inclusive, innovative and interconnected.

The Rome Communiqué is noteworthy for stressing socially inclusive higher education, and for adopting the Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension in the EHEA. The text also stresses the need to protect and promote fundamental values through intensified political dialogue and cooperation. It asks the BFUG to develop a framework for the enhancement of the fundamental values that will foster self-reflection, constructive dialogue and peer learning across national authorities, higher education institutions and organisations, while also making it possible to assess the degree to which these values are honoured and implemented in our systems.

The Rome Communiqué calls for higher education institutions to be innovative in intensifying their search for solutions to the challenges our societies face. It calls for flexible and open learning paths, and emphasises student-centred learning. It also points out how cooperation and mobility connect our systems and foster the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, broader knowledge and understanding of our world.

To transform objectives into reality, the EHEA has established three key commitments that underpin cooperation and must be fully implemented in each system. These are three cycle degree systems supported by Qualifications Frameworks and ECTS, recognition based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and Quality Assurance aligned to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The Bologna Process: from Sorbonne, 1998 to Paris, 2018

Sorbonne Declaration, 1998	Bologna Declaration, 1999	Leuven/Louvain la Neuve Communique, 2009	Paris Communiqué, 2018	Rome Communiqué, 2020
Mobility of students and teachers	Mobility also for researchers and administrative staff	Target: 20% graduate mobility by 2020	Student digital data exchange	**Inclusive**
A common two-cycle degree system	Easily readable and comparable degrees	NQFs by 2012	Short cycle as a stand-alone qualification level Revised Diploma Supplement	
		National targets for the **social dimension** to be measured by 2020	Inclusion of under-represented and vulnerable groups	
		LLL as a public responsibility Focus on employability	Combine academic and work-based learning	
Use of credits	A system of credits (ECTS)	Implementation of Bologna tools		**Innovative**
	European cooperation in quality assurance (QA)	Quality as an overarching focus for EHEA	Ensure compliance with ESG 2015 Promote European Approach for QA of joint programmes	
Europe of Knowledge	European dimensions in higher education	Enhance global policy dialogue through Bologna Policy Fora	Develop synergies between EHEA – ERA	**Inter-connected**
			Innovation and Inclusion in Leaning and Teaching Digitalisation and digital skills	
			Support to UNSDGs	
1998	**1999**	**2009**	**2018**	**2020**

Report outline

This 2024 Bologna Process Implementation report has been prepared for the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Tirana, Albania, on 29-30 May 2024, based on the mandate from the Rome Communiqué:

*'*For our Conference in 2024 we mandate the BFUG to produce an implementation report assessing progress in our agreed commitments*'*

The report aims to provide an overview of implementation of the Bologna Process commitments from various perspectives using data collected in the first half of 2023, and with 2023/2024 as the most recent reference year. Two main principles have guided its development:

1) Focus on implementation of the commitments in the European Higher Education Area.

2) Provide a comparative snapshot of reality within a narrative that discusses implementation and change in recent years.

In line with these principles, the report combines two main types of information: quantitative data, (Eurostat and a specific data collection for non-European Statistical System countries) and qualitative data – provided by the BFUG. Additional sources have been used, notably data for the forthcoming EUA Trends 2024 report, ESU Bologna Within Student Eyes 2024 report, and Eurostudent VIII.

As with previous editions, the development of the report has been overseen by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), and specifically by a working group established to guide all aspects of the reporting

process. Close collaboration has also been established with all working groups established by the BFUG.

Qualitative information was gathered through a questionnaire addressed to BFUG members. No questionnaires were sent to the two suspended countries - Belarus and Russia. Serbia also chose not to submit a completed questionnaire and, except in statistical data, is therefore represented throughout the report as 'data not available'. In all other cases, questionnaires were submitted by the Bologna representatives between May and September 2023. For the United Kingdom and Belgium, two responses each were submitted. The United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) is therefore treated as a separate higher education system to that of Scotland, while the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium are considered as distinct higher education systems. However where statistical data is combined for Belgium in Eurostat's database, it is presented in a combined form in this report.

Qualitative data is based mainly on official evidence-based information about legislation, regulations and national policies, and in some cases country representatives are asked to report on their perception of specific aspects of higher education reality. The data refers to higher education institutions that are directly or indirectly administered by a public education authority, which means public and publicly subsidised private higher education institutions.

Among the indicators presented are so-called scorecard indicators that are designed to track country progress in implementing EHEA policy commitments. New scorecard indicators have been introduced in Chapter 4 on the Social Dimension, and also in Chapter 2 (Key Commitments) where there is a new scorecard indicator (scorecard indicator 1) on the implementation of agreed degree structures. Other scorecard indicators were already used in the 2020 edition of the Bologna Process Implementation Report.

The European Union's Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), working through Agilis SA, Greece, undertook a specific data collection in 2023 for the EHEA countries that are not part of regular Eurostat data gathering exercises. Data was collected for several reference years, the most recent being 2020/2021 and with the intention of illustrating short-term change. In this context short term has been understood as a five-year period. Agilis also provided advice on presentation of statistical data and provided expert advice on the analysis of the figures.

The report is divided into six thematic chapters, with a structure that aims to maintain coherence with the previous Bologna Process Implementation Reports, while also reflecting the current policy priorities of the EHEA. Chapter three, on Fundamental Values, and chapter five, on Learning and Teaching, are both new. Meanwhile chapter two, on Key Commitments, regroups information that, in previous editions, was presented in different chapters. Chapter 6 on internationalisation focuses mainly on mobility but also includes a section on responses of EHEA higher education systems to integrate academics and students from Ukraine following the launch of the war of aggression against Ukraine in 2023.

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