



AD HOC TASK FORCE TO INCREASE SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE EHEA, THE HIGHER EDUCATION DIMENSION OF THE EEA AND THE ERA

First Meeting, Hosted by European Commission, Online*
Monday, September 27, 2021
10.00-12.00 (Brussels time)

Minutes

List of Participants

Country	Name	Last Name
Austria	Susanne	Buck
Belgium French Community	Marc	Vanholsbeeck
EI-ETUCE	Agnes	Roman
Estonia	Kristi	Raudmäe
EUA - European University Association	Thomas	Jorgensen
EURASHE	Armando	Pires
European Commission (Co-chair)	Anette	Bjornsson
European Commission	Tine	Delva
European Commission	Stijn	Delaure
Finland	Jonna	Korhonen
France	Carle	Bonafous-Murat
Greece	Lina	Ioannou
North Macedonia	Borcho	Aleksov
Norway	Jana	Weidemann
Slovenia	Duša	Marjetič
Slovenia	Darinka	Vrečko
Switzerland	Suzanne	Monnier
BFUG Secretariat (Head)	Enida	Bezhani
BFUG Secretariat	Kristina	Metallari
BFUG Secretariat	Patrik	Bardhi

Belgium Flemish Community and Council of Europe sent in their regrets.

***Note:** Due to the extraordinary circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, this meeting was held online.





1. Welcome and introduction to the meeting by the BFUG Chair and Co-chairs of the Ad Hoc Task Force

The Co-chairs welcomed everybody to the first meeting of the Task Force (TF) and invited its members to introduce themselves and inform the group on their respective roles within the institutions they represent. Duša Marjetič (Co-chair) underlined the importance of increasing synergies between the EHEA, EEA and ERA, and stated that this is a priority of the BFUG Slovenian presidency, as they wish to establish synergies within the EU and with the Bologna Process. She added that great emphasis is placed on the working methods and governance structures, as the synergies can only be addressed if a designated space is created for the participation of actors from all the areas.

2. The current state of play on EHEA, EEA and ERA objectives and governance Presentation

2.1. The current state of play on EHEA

Tine Delva (Co-chair) provided a brief overview of the Bologna Process and its Working Structures (WGs, TPGS, TFs). She indicated that in the Rome Communiqué, it was stated that the Bologna Process should strengthen its cooperation with European Research Area (ERA), through, enhancement of synergies, an alignment among education, research and innovation policies, guaranteeing scientific and academic freedom and focusing on research-based learning.

Similar provisions were adopted in **The Conclusions on the New European Research Area**, on 1 December 2020, due to the need to develop stronger interconnections between ERA, the EHEA and the higher education-related elements of the European Education Area (EEA). It was noted that there are currently discussions going on in the Council, aimed to be concluded in 2-3 months' time. This TF was set up aptly, with the possibility to feed into the process and propose a way forward. As discussions between the EEA and ERA are ongoing, the purpose of this TF is to focus on how to mobilize the Bologna structures to cooperate with the new EEA and ERA governance structures, once they are in place. Due to the limited mandate duration of the TF, the goal is to present a proposal to the BFUG, at its December meeting, with concrete possibilities for increasing synergies between the Bologna structures and ERA, as well as building on the respective structures.

For this reason, the TF members were encouraged to come forward with a proposal to link the three areas and to describe how this cooperation can be achieved in a fitful purpose and flexible manner. For instance, joint meetings or working groups can prove to be beneficial, as well as concrete avenues to strengthen the cooperation on specific topics such as the ones mentioned



in the Rome Communiqué (i.e., research-based learning, academic and scientific freedom, achieving the ESGs).

2.2. The current state of play on EEA

Tine Delva (Co-chair, European Commission) gave an overview of the current state of play of the EEA. She emphasized the aim of the EEA to foster cooperation between the European Union (EU) Member states to further enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems. EEA aims to: develop a holistic approach to EU action in education and training, create a genuine European space of learning that benefits all learners, teachers and institutions and foster the cooperation between Member States to increase further the quality and inclusiveness of national education systems. A key reference document, "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 the EU Member States and education and training stakeholders. The Commission's vision for the EEA is guided by six dimensions, one of which is dedicated to higher education. EEA and ERA announced 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.

In the 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)", it was highlighted that structured synergies with the EHEA and Bologna process should be ensured. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the links between education and research & innovation needed to be strengthened both in a national and European level, and this matter was re-emphasized in both Communications adopted by the Commission last year.

The European Strategy for Universities will reflect on: how should European universities look like in 10 / 20 years and how can the higher education sector be empowered? The bridging element is to connect the EEA and ERA, following intense consultation processes with Member States and stakeholders, including European University Alliances. Additionally, she indicated that the European Strategy for Universities is planned to be presented in early 2022. The goal is to empower the higher education institutions, in adapting to the changing conditions and unlocking their full potential, as well as in supporting universities in education and research & innovation.

It was reiterated that the EEA, ERA and EHEA share common principles such as inclusivity, mobility, connectivity, and this can help boost the interaction between education and Research & Innovation. She emphasized that several calls are being made to:

- increase flexibility in academic careers;
- promote fundamental values and academic freedom;
- increase diversity and focus on gender equality;



- enhance the involvement of students and academic staff to promote knowledge transfer;
- facilitate collaboration in transdisciplinary teams.

The governance structures are currently being revised, with ongoing discussions focusing on how to ensure best Member States' ownership and better coordination at different levels. Furthermore, there seems to be strong support for Member States to strengthen the role of the High-Level Group on Education and Training. Most Member States are also in favor of establishing a smaller coordination and steering body, with its respective specific tasks still under discussion.

A new working group is being set up, **WG on Higher Education** which is key for this TF. Additionally, there are other working groups with links to this TF such as the: WG on Schools; WG on Vocational Education and Training and Green Transition; WG on Digital Education; WG on Equality and Values in Education and Training.

The work of the WGs is foreseen to start at the end of October/in November. Their main objective is to promote mutual learning on policy reform of national education systems to contribute effectively to the achievement of the EEA by 2025.

2.3. The current state of play on ERA

Anette Bjornsson provided an overview of the work of the ERA. She stated that there has been an agreement between the Member States, the Commission and also associated countries on the ERA, to develop roadmaps and action plans for the implementation of research policies that are consistent in the union.

ERA went through the process of revitalization as announced in the Commission Communication on a "New ERA for Research and Innovation" on 30 September 2020. An expert group (the ERA Forum for transition) was developed, consisting of member states and some associated countries, with the aim of encouraging coordination and cooperation on the ways to implement ERA in the most efficient ways possible and make sure that all stakeholders, countries and the Commission are involved in this process.

Presently, the future governance framework is examined in the Council's preparatory bodies, with the aim 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.

On 16 July 2021, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe. The proposal sets out commonly agreed values and



principles: ethics, integrity, academic freedom, gender equality, free circulation of researchers, careers and mobility. These values and principles have been identified as priority areas, and the Commission is focusing on many issues related to research such as open science, career, mobility, research assessment and global engagement. Focus is placed on how to explore synergies between research, innovation and education, new skills agenda and industrial policy. It is also crucial to ensure the involvement of citizens and the development of synergies at a policy level (EU level, national level, regional level), and to ensure that Member States are moving faster towards the same target and look at funding opportunities nationally and at the EU level.

Discussions have taken place in the ERA Forum for Transition on how to identify specific actions to implement the priority areas mentioned above. A list of proposed actions has been drafted, which will be discussed further with the purpose of assessing and prioritizing these actions, by taking a holistic approach at research-related content and finding ways to ensure that the education aspect supports the research aspect, and the other way around. Overall, this expert group has made a huge impact and positive contribution through enforcing co-creation among all levels.

3. Increasing synergies between the EHEA, the Higher Education Dimension of the EEA and the ERA Discussion with participants

This part of the agenda included a brainstorming session among members to discuss and suggest potential ideas and recommendations on increasing synergies between the three areas: EHEA, the Higher Education Dimension of the EEA and the ERA.

Several suggestions were provided, including:

- exchange of information between different groups;
- organizing seminars and joint meetings among existing structures;
- delegation of tasks to the respective bodies;
- the setup of a new, dedicated body.

These suggestions were then discussed more in depth. It was pointed out that setting up small groups might not be the most effective way to move forward as they might not provide new, innovative ideas. Focus should be placed on the work to be done within existing structures and through cooperation with relevant bodies within the three areas to work on the priority areas. A long-term suggestion was made, that a dedicated WG can be set up by the BFUG, where stakeholders and invited colleagues from the research departments of the ministries could work on research areas. There was only limited support for setting up a such a new body.

The importance of EU discussions feeding into the Bologna process, was underlined.

Another suggestion was to conduct a mapping of the existing governance structure that have implications on the ground. Within the governance structure, representatives of different



government structures can be invited. However, having a mapping of the different governance structures could encourage discussions on this specific topic at a European level or between Member States, to further issues like research and academic careers, as well as further research-based learning and teaching.

Greece shared the example of how they are encouraging the cooperation between education institutions and research centers, through including synergies with research centers into HE case studies, putting effort into strong capacity building for innovation and inviting universities and research centers to work together.

A targeted discussion took place on two key areas:

1. Creating a new working structure/sub-group or cooperating with existing WGs

As per the governance structure and groups, a number of members argued that creating another structure might not be the best way to accomplish the work of this group and ought to be cautious about the inflation of working structures in different areas. This way the group can avoid similar discussions that can occur within different working structures and can be more transparent in its work. Thus, it was suggested to integrate topics regarding research and higher education and how to connect these two areas into the existing structures of the three areas (EHEA, EEA, ERA) rather than create new ones. As many working groups within the BFUG discuss similar topics, it may prove beneficial to have a or flexible structure to share documents, information, exploratory ideas, etc.

Darinka Vrečko (Co-chair, Slovenia) emphasized the importance of encouraging as many working structures as possible to be involved and support the work of this TF. When it comes to the exchange of information and organization of joint meetings, these processes should be more formal, so that all structures involved are regularly informed about their respective work. To generate many new ideas, different working structures should be involved. This way, different stakeholders can participate and contribute to the work of this group as well. She noted that in the Bologna context, progress has been achieved through the establishment of new working or advisory groups, as the professionals involved in those have been able to work on concrete proposals for further actions.

2. Discuss other potential topics or limit suggestions to what has been proposed in the Rome communique

Many members suggested that although the Rome Communique presents valid and important topics, this group ought to extend its focus on academic and research careers as well. It was also suggested that the group should focus on the impact that the synergies have on students and take them more into account. It is crucial to include students more and focus on improving their student life and educational programs.



In conclusion, the use of existing structures to help increasing synergies through cooperation is significant. Before the next meeting, the Co-chairs will approach other existing working structures within the BFUG in cooperation with the BFUG Secretariat, to enquire about the possible contribution, so that the TF get a clear sense of the willingness and capacity of the other working structures to do so, especially the WGs on Learning & Teaching and Fundamental Values.

Nonetheless, the Slovenian presidency strongly supports the creation of a new working structure. Although many EU countries that are part of the Bologna process could find the opportunity to interact with ERA and EEA, the non-EU countries that are part of the Bologna process cannot do so as they have little access. According to the Slovenian Presidency, if a new working structure is formed, it could be encouraged to be more of a Coordination Group rather than a Working Group, as it should take the form of forum for discussion and exchange of information. This could help link participants from all the sectors of education within the three areas. Lastly, according to the Slovenian Presidency, if it were the case for another group to be established, a clear proposal should be formulated that would contain the added value and specific tasks of this new working structure.

4. Closing words and next steps by the co-chairs of the Ad Hoc Task Force

Ms. Delva concluded the meeting and gave a few final remarks on the next steps by the group. The Co-chairs will come forward with a draft proposal on how to bring the structures of the EHEA, EEA and ERA closer together, focusing on the Bologna context and on the potential methods of coordination. The Co-chairs also suggested for the draft proposal to be put on a common space like SharePoint or Microsoft Teams, where all the members can contribute with their suggestions and comments in advance of the second meeting. This approach of advance written comments will allow to better focus the second meeting.

A second meeting will be organized in the first half of November to finalize this proposal. After that, a written finalization procedure can be followed, or if need be, a third meeting will be convened at short notice, to ensure timely submission to the BFUG.

For most members, the most important aspects to focus on are: a structured exchange of information and joint meetings of existing structures, how existing groups in the Bologna process can contribute and take on board some other tasks, organization of dedicated events so that the link with the stakeholder community is reinforced and research careers.

Concerning the establishment of a new dedicated working group, further discussions will be needed as the majority of participants in the meeting argued against; opting for enhancing communication, cooperation and exchanges between existing structures and considering the Joint Meeting of the European General Directors of the EHEA and ERA (implemented by the Finnish (2019) and Slovenian (2021) Presidencies) a good new practice in the right direction. The new draft proposal from the Co-chairs will be formulated as comprehensively as possible, taking into account all members' proposals and the discussion from this meeting.



No other business was brought forward, therefore, the first meeting of the TF was concluded.