

BPIR 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 0.95 %. 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

⁽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.

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 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.

⁽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.

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 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.