

Lifelong Learning in the EHEA

Background Paper from the Task Force on the Future of Bologna

Lifelong Learning has been recognised as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area since the Ministers met in Prague in 2001. The 2001 [Prague Communiqué](#) signals that in a Europe built on a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies, and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life.

Since then, there has been growing awareness of the need to embed lifelong learning within higher education, if we are to meet the challenges of the future. This includes the particular challenges arising from the changing demography of EHEA.

Increasingly, lifelong learning is seen as a cross-cutting issue, inherent in all aspects of the Bologna Process. The following steps were deemed necessary for the implementation of lifelong learning:

- widening access to higher education;
- creating more flexible, student-centred modes of delivery;
- improving the recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning;
- developing national qualifications frameworks
- improving cooperation with employers, especially in the development of educational programmes;

The [2007 London Communiqué](#) reports that some elements of flexible learning exist in most countries, but a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning is at an early stage. Ministers have therefore asked the Bologna Follow-up Group to increase the sharing of good practice and work towards a common understanding of the role of higher education in lifelong learning.

The [2009 Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve Communiqué](#) further specified the concept of lifelong learning, stating “lifelong learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths, including part-time studies, as well as work-based routes”. The Ministers also acknowledged that successful policies for lifelong learning would include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes. Further on, the Ministers aimed to have national qualifications frameworks implemented and prepared for self-certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012.

The [2012 Bucharest Communiqué](#) reaffirmed the role of lifelong learning as one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market, and stressed the central role of higher education institutions in transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances.

The [2024 Tirana Communiqué](#) stated that “the need for Lifelong learning in society is increasing, especially for all those requiring or desiring new competences to enhance their professional, personal or civic potential. Learning paths need to be flexible, properly delivered, quality assured, and recognised. They should promote inclusion, upskilling and reskilling, and be aligned with the requirements of learners, changing societies and labour markets. This also includes the recognition of prior learning, and new forms of education provision, such as micro-credentials. We commit to fostering such flexible learning paths in all higher education programmes.”

Topics Relevant to the EHEA and the Bologna Process

LEARNERS AND STAFF

To support lifelong learning in the EHEA, both learners and staff should have access to opportunities that encourage ongoing development. It is vital to **include under-represented groups in participation** in order to build a higher education system that is inclusive, diverse, and offers equal opportunity. It is not enough to create entry points in order to broaden access - attention must be widened to include **access, participation, and success** so that learners from every background can gain entry to higher education and receive assistance throughout their educational journey to achieve successful completion of their studies.

With changing labour markets and the emergence of new skill requirements, many individuals pursue upskilling or reskilling. To meet the needs of these **work-based learners**, institutions should provide flexible and adaptable learning pathways that take into account previous experience and learning. **Recognition of prior learning** can lower entry barriers and allow more people to participate in higher education without unnecessary coursework, enabling learners to transition more smoothly between work and study.

Cost can be a significant factor affecting uptake of lifelong learning and therefore, it is important that lifelong learning is financially affordable and accessible for everyone. This means considering issues such as tuition fees, the availability of financial support, and employer-sponsored education initiatives as well as financial aid, scholarships, and work-study programmes.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Flexible learning is a central tenet of lifelong learning, requiring a broad spectrum of delivery methods and environments. Learning can take place in various **locations**, including traditional onsite university campuses, online platforms, work-based training environments, and community-based learning hubs such as libraries and local education centres. Expanding learning opportunities across these different locations ensures that education is not confined to conventional classroom settings.

Knowledge dissemination through **open online sources** is becoming increasingly relevant and online learning platforms provide accessible, high-quality educational content to a broader audience, removing geographical and time constraints, which can act as barriers.

Lifelong learning is available in a **variety of modes**, including continuous learning, part-time study, modular courses, distance learning, evening and summer classes, and self-directed study. These flexible approaches accommodate individuals who need to balance education with work, family, caring or other commitments. Modular and stackable courses allow learners to build their qualifications over time rather than committing to long-term study programmes.

Methodologies and pedagogical approaches enhance the learning experience. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes inclusivity by ensuring that courses are designed to accommodate a diverse range of learning styles and needs.

The **content** of lifelong learning should be aligned with workforce demands and societal needs. Reskilling and upskilling are key priorities, with curricula designed in such a way so as to support both personal and professional growth and bridge the gap between education and employment.

Assessment strategies may need to align with the evolving landscape of education and employment. Competency-based assessment models, which focus on demonstrating practical skills and knowledge, can provide a more effective measure of a learner's abilities compared to traditional examinations.

Criterion-referenced assessments ensure that learners meet clearly defined benchmarks, offering transparency and consistency in evaluation.

Certification mechanisms are critical for validating lifelong learning achievements, providing learners with formal recognition of their skills and knowledge. Micro-credentials and stackable degrees allow learners to earn qualifications in smaller, manageable units that can be accumulated over time, supporting a more personalised learning journey

ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

Enhancing engagement is essential for the success of lifelong learning. **Career services** should provide lifelong career guidance and skills development support. **Employer engagement** should support alignment of educational provision with labour market needs while collaboration with **local communities**, including libraries and other public institutions, has the potential to expand access to learning resources and support networks. **Targeted outreach programmes** can also ensure that specific groups, such as marginalised cohorts and non-traditional learners, are included in lifelong learning opportunities.

Finally, **digital platforms** such as online learning environments can provide digital solutions that support lifelong learners. Leveraging technology to enhance accessibility, engagement, and efficiency can ensure that lifelong learning opportunities are available to a broader audience.

Questions for the BFUG:

- *Is this a relevant and live topic for Bologna and EHEA?*
- *What are the challenges and opportunities for higher education?*
- *Which tools are most important in enabling lifelong learning?*
- *Are the Bologna tools ready for use for micro-credentials?*
- *How useful are these tools for enabling lifelong learning? Is there the potential for a new tool?*
- *Are there other ways we can enhance the Bologna Process to enable lifelong learning?*
- *Is there potential for synergies with EEA-ERA to progress lifelong learning?*
- *How long will this take? Are there any potential quick wins, new ideas or solutions?*