

EUA looks forward to the Tirana Ministerial Conference and the next work programme of the European Higher Education Area

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The European University Association (EUA) looks forward to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Conference that will take place on 29-30 May 2024, in Tirana, Albania. As the voice of Europe's universities and an active member of the Bologna Process, EUA will join European ministers responsible for higher education and various representatives and stakeholders from the sector in Tirana. The event will take stock of the progress made in the previous working period and lay the foundations for the upcoming period, contributing to advancing towards the vision of an innovative, inclusive and interconnected EHEA by 2030.

EUA fully supports the goal of the Bologna Process to enhance the implementation of the 'key commitments', i.e. recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. While these have been agreed to for many years, they are still not fully implemented and not all EHEA systems and institutions sufficiently acknowledge and value them. This has become evident in the challenges facing European Universities alliances, in terms of recognition and quality assurance. This is also addressed in the recently published European Commission [blueprint for a European Degree](#).

The persisting lack of implementation across the entire EHEA diminishes the benefits of the Bologna Process for institutions, students and staff. It also runs the risk of undermining the reputation and credibility of existing European policy initiatives and instruments. While most of these appear to be fit for purpose, the EHEA, if properly applied, also provides a concerted approach for any necessary adjustments, for example in view of micro-credentials or digitalisation. In this regard, EUA, together with other European sector representative organisations advocates for a revision of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA \(ESG\)](#) and is committed to actively contributing to it. A [recently conducted consultation](#) of higher education institutions, students, ministries and quality assurance agencies provides a first indication of changes that might be needed, such as ensuring better connections between the different university missions. EUA will also ensure that the views and experiences of universities are reflected in the envisaged revision of the ECTS Users' Guide.

In addition, EUA calls for better synergies between the different European reform processes in higher education. The enhancement of transnational cooperation and mobility, for example, is not only an issue in the EHEA, but also in the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). Likewise, reforms of academic careers are crucial for achieving a better parity of esteem of the diverse university missions and will improve the assessment of individual academic careers and institutions. This must involve not only the EEA and ERA, but also the larger context of the EHEA. In addition, as many policies beyond higher education can also have a significant impact on universities, it is important to include a '[university check](#)', whereby the sector is consulted across policy areas on new legislation and regulations at both European and national level.

From its very beginning, mobility has been central to the Bologna Process, both as a means, to underpin the implementation of common policies and structures, and as a goal, as prominently enshrined in 2009 in the mobility benchmark of 20% of graduates to have a mobility experience by

2020. The next work programme must enable thorough reflection and diligent action on mobility, in consideration of changed and changing educational, societal and environmental aspects, including the concept of virtual exchanges. Indeed, as mobility needs, forms and formats change, the EHEA cannot content itself with simply reiterating the 2020 benchmark.

EUA welcomes the emphasis on the Social Dimension of higher education and looks forward to countries taking the related [Principles and Guidelines](#) forward to make higher education systems more attractive, accessible and inclusive. A lesson learnt from the Covid-19 crisis is a need for increased attention and action regarding student and staff wellbeing. This is confirmed by several studies, such as the forthcoming EUROSTUDENT survey results and EUA's own 2024 Trends report. EUA also calls upon EHEA ministers to match their ambitions and investment for learning and teaching with those for research. In particular, the recognition of teaching in academic career assessment is a key factor for a sustainable and innovative Europe.

After the Communiqués of Yerevan 2015, Paris 2018 and Rome 2020, the importance of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and greening will again be to the fore in Tirana. EUA proposes including these topics in EHEA monitoring and data collection, also with regard to the approaching Agenda 2030 deadline.

EUA welcomes the emphasis on fundamental values and recalls that, going beyond definitions, values must become a living culture. EUA therefore requests that the Bologna Process, in addition to *de facto* and *de jure* monitoring, put more emphasis on the development and dissemination of good practice between systems and institutions in supporting and safeguarding these values.

As Russia's war against Ukraine continues, for the European higher education sector the best strategy is enhancing exchange and collaboration with Ukrainian partners at all levels, i.e. within the EHEA reform process, at national and institutional level, as stated in [EUA's 2023 recommendations](#). This contributes to Ukraine's resilience, strengthens its European and international links and partnerships, and supports its ongoing higher education reform processes. EUA remains active in this regard, and it will explore new approaches in collaboration with its Ukrainian members and partners, also through its Institutional Evaluation Programme.

The Bologna Process started 25 years ago, with the goal of establishing a European Higher Education Area. Today, the goal cannot be to merely reach the finishing line for a certain number of reforms, but to maintain and enhance a European platform for policy reform, information exchange and collaboration. This should guide the Bologna Process' choice of strategic goals, but also include due consideration of the resources that this requires, in view of the larger number of countries that participate, compared to 10 years ago, and a broader range of issues and topics. Therefore, EUA welcomes the revision of the rules by which the EHEA operates and the announcement of a long-term Secretariat to support its work, to be established by 2027.

EUA is committed to work, together with the other members of the Bologna Process, to ensure that its commonly agreed goals are achieved for the benefit of European universities, their students and staff, and wider society.