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BFUG Board Meeting LXXV

Online*, hosted by Andorra,
Thursday, February 11, 2021,
08.30-12.00 (Time zone: GMT+1)

Minutes of Meeting

List of Participants

	Delegation	First Name	Family Name(s)
	BFUG Co-chair (Andorra)	Jordi	Llombart
	BFUG Co-chair (Portugal)	Maria de Lurdes	Correia Fernandes
	BFUG Co-chair (Portugal)	Ana	Mateus
	BFUG Vice-Chair (Albania)	Linda	Pustina
	Outgoing Co-chair (Germany)	Peter	Greisler
	Outgoing Co-chair (United Kingdom/Scotland)	Michael	Watney
	Outgoing Vice-chair (Italy)	Ann Katherine	Isaacs
	Outgoing BFUG Secretariat (Italy)	Luca	Lantero
	Outgoing BFUG Secretariat (Italy)	Vera	Lucke
	Incoming Co-chair (Armenia)	Gayane	Harutyunyan
	Incoming Co-chair (Slovenia)	Duša	Marjetić
	Council of Europe	Sjur	Bergan
	ESU	Martina	Darmanin
	EUA	Michael	Gaebel
	EURASHE	Michal	Karpíšek
	European Commission	Klara	Engels-Perenyi
	European Commission	Kinga	Szuly
	Andorra	Mar	Martinez
	Armenia	Samvel	Karabekyan
	Germany	Frank	Petrikowski
	Portugal	Angela	Noiva
	Slovenia	Marija	Skerlj
	Slovenia	Andrej	Kotnik
	UK/Scotland	Emma	Brodie
	BFUG Secretariat (Acting Head, Albania)	Oltion	Rrumbullaku
	BFUG Secretariat (Head, Albania)	Enida	Bezhani
	BFUG Secretariat (Albania)	Iliriana	Topulli
	BFUG Secretariat (Albania)	Ana	Hoxha
	BFUG Secretariat (Albania)	Eriona	Cela
	BFUG Secretariat (Albania)	Egest	Gjokutaj
	Guest – Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education (Portugal)	Manuel	Heitor





	Guest – Director of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (Andorra)	Josep	Areny
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***Note:** Due to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, this BFUG Board meeting was held online.

1. Introduction

1.1 Welcome by the BFUG Co-chairs: Portugal and Andorra

Mr. Jordi Llobart (BFUG Co-chair, Andorra) welcomed everyone to the BFUG Board meeting and introduced Mr. Josep Areny, Director of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of Andorra. Mr. Areny thanked everyone for working toward the implementation of strategies to make EHEA a free space based on fundamental values. He emphasized that the new digital tools of learning, teaching and conducting research used by the education institutions, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, should be accessible to everyone to guarantee equity. He praised the academic cooperation between Andorra and Portugal and underlined the importance of a rotating BFUG chairmanship, as well as encouraged the development of strategies ensuring the fulfilment of the Rome Communiqué’s commitments.

Prof. Manuel Heitor, Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education of Portugal noted that the pandemic has led also to a unique opportunity to increase the relevance of advanced education, particularly in building closer relationships between society and higher education institutions (HEIs) - as labor markets are changing, the population needs to re-skill and up-skill. Portugal has set up its current EU presidency as a time of action, thus, Mr. Heitor encouraged collective suggestions by the BFUG for the Council Resolution on European Universities, to be adopted in May 2021. He underlined the importance of:

- cross exchanges in Europe toward a comprehensive skill set to face the opportunities of the digital transition;
- the need to work in close cooperation with education agencies to improve mobility;
- European Universities Alliances, to be promoted as testbeds of good practices.

1.2 Welcome by the BFUG Vice-chair (Albania)

Ms. Linda Pustina (BFUG Vice-chair, Albania) thanked everyone for their support of the Albanian candidacy for the Secretariat, which followed a very active participation of Albania in the BFUG and Working Groups (WGs). She thanked, in particular, the Italian Secretariat for their great assistance to the Albanian Secretariat during the transition time and the Co-chairs for the excellent collaboration. As part of the Berlin process, the role of Albania will also be important in intensifying the process of fulfilling the key commitments and contributing to the EU integration of the region. She shared her hope that in 2024, BFUG comes together in Tirana in person to share its achievements and objectives for the future.





1.3 Information by the outgoing BFUG Co-chairs: Germany and UK / Scotland (second semester of 2020)

Mr. Peter Greisler (outgoing BFUG Co-chair, Germany) thanked the Italian Secretariat, the UK and UK/Scotland Co-chairs for the collaboration and all the BFUG for their engagement. He wished good luck to the actual Co-chairs and the new Secretariat and expressed his readiness to help further.

Mr. Michael Watney (outgoing BFUG Co-chair, United Kingdom/Scotland) also thanked the German and Italian colleagues for the fruitful cooperation and wished all the best to the current Co-chairs and Vice-chair.

1.4 Information by the outgoing BFUG Secretariat

Mr. Lantero (Head, Former BFUG Secretariat, Italy) thanked everyone for their support during the Italian BFUG Secretariat term.

1.5 Information on the current BFUG Secretariat

Oltion Rrumbullaku (Acting Head, current BFUG Secretariat, Albania) expressed Albania’s gratitude for everybody’s support with the transition. Following an open competition, Ms. Enida Bezhani was brought on Board as the Head of the BFUG Secretariat in Albania on February 9, 2021.

Ms. Bezhani introduced herself by emphasizing the honor of contributing to such an organization, being a direct beneficiary of mobility/exchange programs herself. She updated the Board that interviews are being conducted with potential candidates for the BFUG Secretariat team and offices have been identified as well.

2. Adoption of the agenda

During the discussion of the agenda of the meeting, ESU enquired whether the issue of the Belarus Implementation Report could be added to the agenda. It was agreed to address it under Point 8. AOB

Attachment: Board_PT_AD_75_BFUG_Meeting_Agenda_draft

Attachment: Board_PT_AD_75_Annotated_Agenda_draft

3. Feedback from the last meeting

3.1- Update on the previous BFUG meeting

Mr. Peter Greisler provided an update of the last BFUG meeting held in September 2020 in Berlin, where the discussion on the Terms of Reference (ToRs) and the modalities of how to proceed with the establishment of the WGs for the 2021-2024 Work Plan took place. New groups can be proposed by the BFUG members for establishment as well.

3.2 - Information about the Rome Ministerial Conference

Mr. Lantero acknowledged the great contribution of Ms. Ann Katherine Isaacs (outgoing BFUG Vice-Chair, Italy) to the BFUG. Ms. Isaacs, on her part, emphasized that the Rome Communiqué provided a valid and strong structure and a blueprint for the next 10 years. She advised that any new WGs should be assessed according to whether they would be required. Mrs. Issacs noted that the stakeholders' consultations have been very useful and suggested that the work forward be handled by a coordination group. As she has followed up the process related to the Implementation Report of Belarus, she recommended to continue to follow the matter closely, but also supportively.

Mr. Lantero delivered a comprehensive presentation of the work carried out by the Secretariat for the 2018-2020 time period. He thanked all the members, consultative members, partners, Co-chairs of the various semesters and various WGs and his team, valuing their help and support.

The work and challenges that the Italian Secretariat had to overcome during the pandemic and the amazing performance with the organization of the Ministerial Conference in Rome were duly acknowledged by the participants.

4. Presentation and discussion of the Rules of Procedure for 2021-2024

Mr. Oltion Rrumbullaku presented the Rules of Procedure (RoP) for 2021-2024, pointing out the amendments/additions compared to the RoP for 2018-2020. The key amendments proposed are outlined below:

- Albania will hold the co-chair position in January-June 2025, as already agreed;
- the next Drafting Committee is foreseen to start work in the first semester of 2023 and the selection of the next BFUG Secretariat and Ministerial Conference host country will take place in 2023, as well;
- a section on the needs triggered by the COVID-19 situation was added;
- if a WG Co-chair participates in the Board meeting to represent a WG, s/he should speak only on the item(s) concerning that WG. If the WG Co-chair is also a member of the Board in another capacity, naturally s/he can address any item with the Board;
- upon approval of prior request in writing to the BFUG Co-chairs, partners can attend the BFUG meetings and events, and may be invited, upon approval of a written request, by a BFUG group to send an expert in the status of an observer, who will participate in some part of the work.

The Board members emphasized that:

- face-to-face meetings should resume, as soon as it becomes possible;
- the Secretariat supports the BFUG, Board and all the groups. The Secretariat is not a member of any group;
- during the discussions in the BFUG, a delegation/organization can propose changes, however, delegations wishing to propose major changes to a document should be encouraged to submit those at least 5 days prior to the meeting.



Attachment: *Board_PT_AD_75_Rule_of_Procedure*
Attachment: *Board_PT_AD_75_Annexes_and_Appendixes*

5. Presentation and discussion on the 2021-2024 Work Plan

5.1. Presentation of the 2 new WGs (Digitalization and Fundamental Values) and respective ToRs for final approval

Mr. Llombart introduced the 2021-2024 Work Plan. ToRs for four WGs were approved in Berlin. In addition, a new WG on Digitalization is proposed now by the Co-chairs, given that the pandemic has brought about a low mobility for everyone and HEIs have had to adapt to teaching online. While the WG on Learning and Teaching deals with digitalization already, as it was referenced in many parts of the Rome Communiqué, the co-chairs considered it a good approach to establish a new WG on Digitalization. Digitalization is such an important goal that it needs a WG on its own right. Its importance would be diluted, if maintained as one of the four objectives of the WG on Learning and Teaching. As per the WG on Learning and Teaching, given what was stated in the Rome Communiqué, there may be a need to adjust its mandate, to include micro-credentials, skills and competencies, innovative pedagogies, internationalization of curricula and more. Such steps should be viewed as an evolution of the existing WGs.

The Board members observed that digitalization may be considered a tool that has a significant influence on many policies and, therefore, it may be treated as an aspect of those policies. Therefore, the BFUG should decide whether a transversal issue can be addressed by establishing a new WG, at a time when digitalization aspects have already been included in the agenda of the WG on Learning and Teaching. As digitally enhanced learning and teaching is the essence of learning and teaching, digitalization should be well incorporated into the WG on Learning and Teaching. The digital aspect can be emphasized more in the ToRs of the WG on Learning and Teaching, which ensures the retention of the acquired expertise as well.

In the presentation of WG on Fundamental Values, the Council of Europe noted that it was not a new group in the way the proposed group on Digitalization would be. The BFUG already considered and approved its ToRs at its meeting in September, subject to the adoption of the Rome Communiqué. Also, in the previous term, a Task Force (TF) on Fundamental Values was established within the WG on Monitoring, which for reasons of time, focused in particular on academic freedom, therefore proposed the definition and understanding that is adopted in the Rome Communiqué. As the BFUG wishes to establish a more solid basis of assessing the extent of fulfilment of commitments by the countries to uphold fundamental values, therefore, it would be very important that one of the Co-chairs of the WG on Monitoring, also be a member of the WG on Fundamental Values. Several countries have wished for this to be a fully-fledged WG instead of a TF.

Questions had arisen prior to the meeting on whether the EHEA Network of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) Correspondents and Thematic Peer Group (TPG) A on NQF overlap. It was explained that the main task of the TPG A is to improve implementation and help countries with issues they may have, while the Network aims to engage countries in a discussion on what further developments are needed.



5.2. Presentation of new proposals for the already approved WG to upscale their visibility and role

Ms. Maria de Lurdes noted that as the Rome Communiqué was approved after the BFUG endorsement of the ToRs for the WG on Learning and Teaching, it would be important to expand and reinforce some aspects of it. Therefore, the Co-chairs proposed to create 2 sub-groups within this WG. They proposed to focus on some very important current issues, such as student-centered learning, re-skilling and up-skilling and micro-credentials. The Co-chairs emphasized the need for a Call for Expression of Interest to all the BFUG members, not only those who have been members of the groups already in the previous term. This would help encourage all members to participate in the upcoming WGs.

It was added that the outcomes of the Microbol project on micro-credentials, which involves many participants from all the BFUG countries, could indeed be brought into the WG on Learning and Teaching, to see how some concrete steps can be taken to present it in the next Ministerial Conference. There was some scepticism expressed as well, though, on whether the WG on Learning and Teaching could capture all aspects of micro-credentials, as some of them would be better dealt with within the context of QF or Quality Assurance (QA). There was also concern that this WG could be overburdened with thematic issues, and that dividing the WG up in thematic subgroups, may further complicate its work. Once the BFUG has defined and approved clear ToRs, it would be up to the WGs to organise their work. The co-chairs agreed with this proposal.

A proposal was made to establish a Task Force that could propose by the BFUG meeting in Slovenia, a way on how to follow up the Rome Communiqué’s commitment to developing stronger links and potential synergies between the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA), given that their interlinks are intensifying.

When it comes to the composition of the groups, the importance of participation needs to be promoted more and the WGs should be more geographically balanced. Ideally, every country should engage in the EHEA Network of National QF Correspondents, as well as the TPGs. However, for some other groups, it is important to have a balanced membership and that the group not be too big.

A Call for Expression of Interest should go out before the next BFUG meeting for all the groups, except for the WG on Learning and Teaching and the WG on Digitalization. In addition to the expressions of interest received already for the TPGs from summer 2020, the BFUG members that have not expressed their interest yet should be encouraged to do so.

The Board members emphasized that the final composition of the WGs and Co-chairs be decided by the BFUG in its upcoming meeting. It is also important to consider that if changes occur in the composition at a later time, those changes also be approved by the BFUG, rather than just the group concerned. However, there is no need to wait until the following BFUG meeting - this process can be handled by electronic consultation. It is important, however, that right after the BFUG meeting, the work of the WGs starts.

The BFUG decides on the Co-chairs as well. It would be important to achieve a balance between retention of some of the previous chairs and new chairs. The following considerations were shared:



- for the WG on Monitoring, there may be an interest from the previous Co-chairs to continue, supplemented by a 3rd co-chair if needed;
- For the WG on Fundamental Values, it is advised that one of the Co-chairs of the WG on Implementation, be a member of it and that Co-chairs represent countries rather than consultative members;
- for the San Marino Roadmap Group it will be useful if the members and Co-chairs have been involved in the Ad Hoc Working Group and also have reading knowledge of Italian. Having Andorra in it because of the similarities of the countries would be a strength.

Thought should be given to events and Bologna promotion. The engagement of the academic community in the discussion of issues should be considered. Various opinions were shared on whether a WG should be established on this. It should also be considered whether there is an opportunity to integrate the Bologna partners, who are very interested in cooperating and contributing to the BFUG. Therefore, the Board agreed that a draft ToR for such a group be presented to the BFUG.

Attachment: *Board_PT_AD_75_DraftWorkPlan_andTORs_Annex_I*

6. Discussion on the draft agenda for the BFUG meeting in Lisbon

Ms. Maria de Lurdes explained that due to the pandemic situation, the BFUG meeting to be hosted by Portugal in April will take place online. A draft agenda was presented. A discussion on Belarus's implementation reporting was added to the agenda. The main focus of the BFUG meeting will be the discussion of the Work Plan and the establishment of the WGs, as well as delegations' feedback on the Rome Ministerial Conference, as there may be lessons to be learned.

Portugal's EU Presidency is gathering all responses on Covid-19 from the education and training sites on an online platform, to foster the debate and have good practices' sharing among the BFUG countries. During the Greek Presidency of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, there was a political declaration and a Roadmap for action focused on education's response to the Covid-19 crisis. It was also advised to enable consultative members to share updates on their work, as well as talk about Covid-19 implications in higher education. Generally, it was agreed that all parties should be invited to send contribution on Covid-19 to the Secretariat to include these as background documents.

The logistics of organizing the meeting and re-arranging the agenda for most efficiency to cover ToRs and groups' composition were discussed. Portugal will send the **draft** agenda to the Board.

Attachment: *Board_PT_AD_75_BFUG_Meeting_Agenda*

7. Information by the incoming Co-chairs

7.1 BFUG Board meeting in Armenia (Fall 2021)



Ms. Gayane Harutyunyan (incoming BFUG Co-chair, Armenia) congratulated and wished good luck to the Albanian Secretariat. The BFUG Board meeting to be hosted by Armenia is intended to take place online for now, however, Armenia leaves the option open for a face-to-face meeting if the situation changes. Armenia will revert back on the exact date within a week and a tentative meeting agenda will be ready to be presented in the next BFUG meeting in April. The Board advised to choose a date not in early September, but rather closer to the BFUG meeting date.

7.2 BFUG meeting in Slovenia (Winter 2021)

Ms. Duša Marjetić (incoming BFUG Co-chair, Slovenia) stated that Slovenia is very enthusiastic to be the incoming Co-chair. The meeting in Slovenia is planned for December 1 and 2, 2021, online. The meeting has been planned as part of the Slovenia's EU Presidency and they wish to promote it as a green event. A 2-half days format is being considered for now, depending on topics to be discussed. During the Slovenian presidency, the synergies between EHEA and ERA are a priority, therefore, something on this topic may be included in the agenda of the meeting as well. Slovenia will also be organizing a meeting of General Directors of Higher Education and Science.

Some Board members underlined that it would be important for the Board and the BFUG to meet physically as soon as conditions allow and thought it would be premature to decide already now on the format of the meetings to be held in Fall 2021.

8. **AOB**

ESU reminded the participants of the situation the students are suffering in Belarus and asked the Board to decide on how to monitor progress for Belarus onward. This was echoed by other participants as well – a decision needs to be made on whether the Board will have a mandate to follow up on the Belarus Implementation Report. In the second semester of 2020, a statement was signed by several members and consultative members supporting the fundamental values of the EHEA, which were violated in Belarus. In 2015, Belarus was admitted to the EHEA with a Roadmap that included implementation of the fundamental values. There was a Roadmap Advisory Group during the 2015-2018 period. For the 2018-2020 program, Belarus presented the BFUG with an Action Plan and committed to reporting back to the Board, which was mandated to check on the reports. There was a report on Belarus presented in the BFUG meeting in September 2020 in Berlin. In the upcoming BFUG meeting in April 2021, a slot should be given to Belarus to report and it is important that arrangements for the way forward are discussed.

In conclusion, the Co-chairs will in due course prepare and disseminate procedures for the Expression of Interest for the WGs via the Secretariat for the groups with clear ToRs. For the other two groups, the BFUG members and consultative members will be given the chance to express their interest, after these WGs are discussed in the BFUG meeting. The Co-chairs will also work on upscaling the WG on Learning and Teaching, in the meantime. In cooperation with the European Commission, the Co-chairs will make provisions for a Task Force on the synergies between EHEA and ERA. The Vice-chair will prepare a proposal on knowledge sharing in the EHEA.

