

Discussion Paper: Internationalisation and Mobility Action Plan

Purpose of the document and BFUG discussion

Internationalisation and mobility have long been core dimensions of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA); mobility has been mentioned in every ministerial communique since 1999. The working group on Internationalisation and Mobility (WG I&M) has been given a renewed mandate for the 2024-2027 cycle to present an Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility. The group's work builds on the work of the 2012 Mobility strategy adopted by ministers in Bucharest. However, changing geopolitical conditions, unbalanced mobility flows, sustainability concerns, and unequal access to mobility opportunities have prompted a discussion to revisit the targets and agreements within the EHEA and reshape the context in which internationalisation policies are designed and implemented. Against this background, the development of an Action Plan for Internationalisation and Mobility offers an opportunity to reflect on shared priorities, identify common challenges, and consider coordinated responses at EHEA level. The Action Plan is expected to build on existing commitments and instruments, while remaining sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse national contexts and institutional realities.

The WG I&M has now convened three times to discuss the wide range of the topics and challenges in the field of internationalisation and mobility. First thoughts and ideas about action lines and recommendations are taking shape, while some themes have been discussed without a clear resolution. This discussion paper aims to support an initial exchange within the wider Bologna Follow-Up Group on these issues, the scope, focus, and strategic dilemmas involved in drafting such an Action Plan. It does not propose final positions or solutions, but rather outlines key issues that may require further reflection and guidance from BFUG members.

The purpose of this document is to facilitate a structured discussion within the BFUG on the objectives, added value, and possible content of an Action Plan for Internationalisation and Mobility in Higher Education. The discussion is intended as an early step in the drafting process. Input from BFUG members will help determine whether the Action Plan should primarily serve as a political framework, a set of practical guidelines, or a combination of both, and how it can complement existing national and European initiatives without duplicating them. BFUG delegates are encouraged to prepare for the questions in this document, and to consult with their Ministries and stakeholders, as well as to identify additional issues that should be considered in the further development of the Action Plan.

Questions for discussion by the BFUG members

1. Should the WG I&M revisit the Leuven target of 20% mobility?

The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference in 2009 set a target to be achieved by 2020 that at least 20% of EHEA graduates should have had a study or training period abroad related to higher education. In the 2012 mobility strategy this target was further specified to entail at least 15 ECTS credits obtained abroad (in person). While this target has been reaffirmed in subsequent ministerial commitments, it has not been achieved. Monitoring progress towards the target has also proven complex and uneven across the EHEA. The two most recent Bologna Process Implementation Reports (BPIRs) provide the most reliable aggregate data and indicate that the EHEA remains far from the agreed objective. According to the 2024 BPIR, the mobility rate was 8.4% (based on the academic year 2020/21 and likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic), compared to 9.4% in the 2020 BPIR (based on the academic year 2016/17). Meanwhile the EU has adopted a different target on its learning mobility ambitions, and has formulated a 23% target for learning mobility in HE for the EEA region in the 2024 'Europe on the Move' Council Recommendation, which however includes any mobility of over 3 ECTS credits, which can also be obtained in a blended format.

Possible route: Since we are far removed from the Leuven mobility target we don't have to revisit and increase the mobility target. Instead, we can reaffirm the mobility target at 20% and focus on the underlying reasons the target is not met; persistent obstacles to learning mobility.

Alternatively: If we open up the Leuven mobility target, there's the question of how we would alter it:

- We could change the threshold from 15 ECTS to 3 ECTS, to be more inclusive of different types of learning mobility? Consequently, what would that mean for measurement in the BPIR, and trend analysis?
- We can open up the 20% target to align with the EEA 23% target, or move toward more national targets, taking into account the different starting positions of countries.

2. How can we operationalise recommendations to move toward balanced mobility?

The concept of balanced mobility was first introduced in the London Communiqué of 2007 and has been monitored in Bologna Process Implementation Reports (BPIRs) since 2012. While the objective of more balanced learning mobility has been consistently reaffirmed, the concept itself has remained only loosely defined, and progress towards achieving balance has been limited. The WG IM has sought to address this gap by developing a more comprehensive definition of balanced mobility. This definition, presented in the *Note on Terminology* and discussed at the BFUG meeting in Copenhagen in December 2025, combines a quantitative perspective on mobility flows with a broader societal cost-benefit approach. While this represents an important conceptual advance, concrete recommendations on how to translate this definition into policy measures and practical action remain underdeveloped.

Possible route: One possible approach would be to collectively move towards more open and accessible systems across the EHEA. This includes more comparable proportion of the number of courses taught in English and English degree programmes across our systems. By working to collectively and individually break down undue barriers to mobility, we open up the route towards more balance. By further improving comparability, transparency, and accessibility at similar levels

of attractiveness, international student populations may be more evenly distributed across the region over time:

- *Concretely, this could be operationalized with mobility targets looking separately at outgoing and incoming mobility numbers. By comparing incoming and outgoing mobility, we can promote countries to adopt measures that move toward a 'balanced trend line'. .*

3. How should we address the geopolitical component of internationalisation strategies?

Geopolitical tensions and security concerns, particularly in sensitive research fields, intensifying global economic competition, and shifting demographic trends have reshaped the conditions for cooperation and exchange among countries, among regions, and among HEIs. Simultaneously, varying political and societal responses to international engagement continue to influence attitudes toward openness and mobility. These developments have increased uncertainty and, in some cases, led to more cautious or selective forms of international cooperation.

Considerations:

- *It may be necessary to reflect more explicitly on the distinction between intra-EHEA and extra-EHEA cooperation and mobility, including whether different principles, expectations, or policy instruments should apply, while maintaining a coherent overall vision for international engagement.*
- *These developments highlight the need for a forward-looking and adaptable approach to internationalisation and mobility — one that safeguards academic cooperation, fosters inclusivity and sustainability, and reinforces the EHEA as a space of trust, solidarity, and shared values.*
- *We can reaffirm that internationalisation and mobility serve the goal of promoting intercultural and international understanding and solidarity, and aim to promote shared values.*