

Interconnectedness: VET and ERA

Introduction

Higher education is located within a wider tertiary education system. Lifelong learning is a clear common objective for VET (Vocational Education and Training) and higher education systems. Across the EHEA, many countries have already made this connection through strengthening pathways between systems, creating single Quality Assurance agencies for both HE and VET, and bringing forward overarching/common QA guidelines. In many countries, research systems are located in higher education systems, and so higher education institutions are operating simultaneously within EHEA and ERA frameworks.

Accordingly, there is a range of potential topics and points of intersection for the EHEA. Interconnectedness is a theme for most BFUG working structures and an idea that is percolating across the current programme of activities.

This paper aims to narrow the focus of the discussion for the BFUG meeting in Copenhagen on three key areas of connectedness, namely connectedness with:

- **VET and VET structures** - the permeability, coordination mechanisms, and frameworks that enable learners to move between vocational and academic pathways and strengthen bridges between the Bologna and the Copenhagen Processes¹;
- **European Research Area** - the closer integration of education, research, and innovation to build synergies between the EHEA, the EEA and the ERA² as interconnected pillars of Europe's knowledge ecosystem.

Purpose of the document and BFUG discussion

To stimulate the identification of new ideas, potential tools and practical solutions to support discussion on (i) what actions can be taken now by groups operating in more connected ways and (ii) what priorities could be brought forward to the next phase of the Bologna Process.

VET and VET structures

Early in the evolution of the Bologna Process, there was a recognition of the desirability of interconnectedness with other aspects of the education system. Although this was the aspiration, there was only one concrete reference in the Ministerial Communiqués. The Bergen

¹ 2002: Copenhagen Declaration – Objectives: 1) Strengthen the European dimension; 2) Improve transparency, information and guidance systems; 3) Recognise competences and qualifications; 4) Promote quality assurance.

2015: Riga Conclusions – Objectives: 1) Promote work-based learning (WBL) in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships 2) Develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET further; 3) Enhance access to VET and qualifications for all; 3) Strengthen key competences in VET curricula; 4) Encourage professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors

2020: Osnabrück Declaration – Objectives: 1) Promote resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET; 2) Establish a new lifelong learning culture – relevance of continuing VET and digitalisation 3) Ensure sustainability – a green link in VET 4) Support European Education and Training Area and international VET

² [Background note](#) for the Meeting of the Ad Hoc Task Force to Increase Synergies between the EHEA, the Higher Education Dimension of the EEA and the ERA

Communique (2005) stated that “We underline the importance of ensuring complementarity between the overarching framework for the EHEA and the proposed broader framework for qualifications for lifelong learning encompassing general education as well as vocational education and training as now being developed within the European Union as well as among participating countries. We ask the European Commission fully to consult all parties to the Bologna Process as work progresses.’

The Copenhagen Process was launched in November 2002, when European ministers and stakeholders adopted a Declaration on enhanced European cooperation in VET. The declaration was a direct response to the Barcelona European Council’s request earlier that year for coordinated action in vocational training, mirroring the approach taken through the Bologna Declaration in higher education. In essence, the Copenhagen Process is an accelerated measure to improve the quality and attractiveness of VET, and to raise the parity of esteem between it and the other education sectors. Since the launch of the Copenhagen Process, European cooperation in VET has explicitly sought to strengthen these connections between the sectors. The process emphasised the creation of shared tools and principles such as Qualifications Frameworks (QFs), Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms, and systems for credit transfer and recognition, which could make learning outcomes more transparent and comparable across borders.³

Intersection between VET and HE - The intersection between VET and Higher Education is arguably the most dynamic space where interconnectedness is being tested. Increasingly, higher education institutions and vocational institutions across Europe are collaborating to design hybrid qualifications, dual study programmes, and work-based learning opportunities that bridge academic and applied knowledge. Despite this progress, challenges persist.

Enhancing interconnectedness between VET, higher education, and other parts of the post-compulsory system offers clear mutual benefits for learners, institutions, and society alike. For learners, greater interconnectedness ensures access to a coherent and complementary set of educational and developmental opportunities that respond to a wide range of motivations and ambitions, whether at the point of leaving school or later in life as individuals seek to renew or extend their personal, vocational, and professional skills. In this sense, more interconnected systems better support lifelong learning by making transitions smoother and recognising the full breadth of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired in different contexts.

For institutions, closer alignment between VET and HE creates space for collaboration rather than competition. Shared frameworks for qualifications, credit transfer, and quality assurance can allow institutions to design flexible pathways and joint programmes that combine academic and applied learning. This strengthens the capacity of each sector to meet its mission while contributing to collective goals such as inclusion, innovation, and employability.

At the system level, the objective is to ensure that the education and training landscape functions as a coherent, complementary, and diverse ecosystem. When the distinct strengths of VET and HE are connected through well-aligned structures and shared tools, the result is a more

³ <https://danish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/new-declaration-to-strengthen-european-cooperation-on-vocational-education-and-training/>

responsive, resilient, and equitable system, a system that supports both economic development and individual growth throughout life.

Though VET and HE systems share the EQF and qualifications frameworks in many countries, there is potential for greater alignment for credit systems, quality assurance guidelines and procedures and recognition processes.

There is scope for further alignment in two areas in particular:

1. The connectedness between EQVET and ESG: In some countries, quality assurance agencies provide a single set of QA guidelines across VET and HE.
2. ECTS and qualification credit systems in VET: In some countries, there are separate systems and frameworks, in some countries they share one framework and credit systems.

Questions for discussion by BFUG members:

1. “Increasingly, higher education institutions and vocational institutions across Europe are collaborating to design hybrid qualifications, dual study programmes, and work-based learning opportunities that bridge academic and applied knowledge.” Can you identify the key areas of interconnection between VET and the Bologna processes?
2. Are there examples where this interconnectedness already manifest? Are there examples of other “bridging” initiatives?
3. How could we go about building better connections between the EHEA and its tools and procedures and VET?
4. What have been and are the potential barriers to this? What could the BFUG do/ explore to overcome them

EHEA and ERA

Both the Paris and Rome communiqués encouraged synergies between the EHEA, the EEA and the ERA as interconnected pillars of Europe’s knowledge ecosystem. The Rome Communiqué stated that: *‘We commit to strengthening cooperation with the European Research Area. We call for the BFUG to work closely with the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) to enhance synergies and alignment between education and research and innovation policies. Focus will be inter alia on developing research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.’*

Higher education and research are inherently connected. Research is one of the principal functions of higher education institutions. HEIs’ research output and scientific achievements are important to their evaluation, ranking, funding and reputation. They are also important for the quality of teaching and learning as well as the development of optimal and relevant curricula. Last but not least, academic and research activity together maximize the HE impacts on society and their capacity to address contemporary challenges.

In this framework, it is crucial to find ways to accomplish effective cooperation between EHEA and ERA and achieve progress regarding common, important issues: academic and knowledge mobility, social inclusion, transparency, fundamental values, SDGs, European University Alliances etc.

In 2021 a BFUG task force brought forward two papers on this subject:

- A [background note](#) to Increase Synergies between the EHEA, the Higher Education Dimension of the EEA and the ERA
- A [proposal to the BFUG](#) from the Ad Hoc Task Force to increase synergies between the EHEA, the higher education dimension of the EEA and the ERA

An Ad Hoc Task Force prepared a proposal to be presented to the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) and in Tirana 2024, the ministers committed to continue to support these goals towards 2030. The challenge was framed in three questions, i.e.:

Question 1: To increase synergies between the EHEA, EEA and ERA, which body/bodies within the EHEA are best placed to link with the EEA/ERA?

Question 2: Building on the respective structures within EHEA, EEA and ERA, what methods of coordination do you suggest for closer cooperation/synergies?

Question 3: Bearing in mind that the Rome Communiqué pays special attention to synergies linked to research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: do you have specific suggestions to operationalise strengthened cooperation in these fields?

Since Tirana, there has been little progress made on identifying a tangible process to address this.

Questions for discussion by BFUG members:

1. Are there examples where interconnectedness with ERA is already manifest?
2. Where do we want to be (at what state of synergies) by 2027? after 2030?
3. Why did a closer collaboration (after the TF on ERA/EHEA) not “take off”? What kind of obstacles is hampering further progress?
4. Explore the steps to achieve this aim through:
 - a. BFUG
 - b. national systems
 - c. HEIs
5. How can we open dialogue, agree on the basis of common goals, and establish stable collaboration between EHEA and ERA?