

Task Force on establishing a long-term EHEA Secretariat

Revised concept note: Long-term EHEA Secretariat Funding and Governance

For XCVIII BFUG meeting (December 2025)

1. Introduction

1.1 State of play

The Task Force on the Review of Rules and Regulations for the governance of the EHEA, established by the BFUG in 2022 to review the organizational structures of the Bologna Process, concluded that a more long-term arrangement for the EHEA Secretariat poses no unsurmountable challenges and would better support the governing structures of the Bologna Process and thus lead to a more efficient functioning of the EHEA. The issue was discussed at the BFUG meetings in [Stockholm](#) and [Madrid](#) in 2023, and at the two BFUGs in Brussels in [February](#) and [April](#) 2024. Ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA gave the BFUG a mandate to further explore the matter.¹

The Task Force explored different options and scenarios. It discarded in the period 2023-2024 the options of contracting a service provider, the establishment of an international organization, and the provision of the Secretariat by a member or a consultative member.

The BFUG confirmed as the one remaining option the establishment of a private-law entity. It also confirmed that, while the Secretariat could in principle be established anywhere in the EHEA, ideally a member or consultative member should offer a hosting arrangement, that would support the Secretariat, in the period of its establishment, and beyond, without infringing its independence, neutrality and accountability solely to the BFUG.

On this basis, a Task Force for establishing a long-term Secretariat was established at the BFUG in Budapest (Sept 2024), to:

1. Develop further the proposals for the establishment of a long-term, independent, and internationally staffed Secretariat for the EHEA, in particular regarding governance and funding.
2. Prepare a call for proposals for hosting countries/organisations, to be endorsed by the BFUG, and disseminated by the Secretariat.

¹ [2024 Tirana Communiqué](#)

- **mandate the BFUG to continue working on the possibility of establishing a long-term, independent, internationally staffed Secretariat** to create effective support for the BFUG, and to evaluate the feasibility and sustainability of the related proposals, models, and terms of reference in Spring 2026, to be presented for adoption and implementation at our 2027 Ministerial Conference;
- **agree to undertake an assessment** of the chosen arrangement after two work periods.

3. Organise the evaluation of applications, including the assessment of the regulations and conditions of applicant countries/organisations.
4. Provide a reasoned proposal for the arrangements and terms of reference for the Long-term Secretariat, with a proposal for the hosting country/organisation, to the BFUG.
5. Prepare discussion and decision-making process at the BFUG, for a decision on the Long-term Secretariat (tentatively spring 2026).
6. In case it is decided to establish a Long-term Secretariat, following the indications of the BFUG, propose its draft statutes by autumn 2026, for discussion and endorsement by the BFUG (tentatively autumn 2026).
7. Advise the BFUG on the further preparation of the new Secretariat, including the job description for the head of Secretariat (tentatively autumn 2026).

2. Tasks and Responsibilities

The EHEA Secretariat has an administrative and technical support function. The strategic and political guidance lies with the BFUG. The Terms of Reference of the Secretariat¹ outlines, among others its contribution to the following main tasks:

Management of the EHEA work plan

- supporting the BFUG Co-chairs drafting the work plan,
- supporting its implementation throughout the period, in coordination with the responsible working structures;

Administrative and operational support for the BFUG, its Board and all BFUG sub-structures

- assisting in planning the meetings,
- drafting background documents and reports,
- drafting minutes,
- ensuring communication between different bodies and working structures;

Consistent communication within and outside EHEA structures

- managing and updating the EHEA website at all times,
- sharing information with members and stakeholders,
- serving as contact point for outside parties interested in the Bologna Process and the EHEA,
- representing the EHEA at external events/meetings within the mandate agreed by the BFUG co-chairs,
- maintaining contact with other structures and initiatives in Europe and beyond (e.g. European Research Area, ASEM);

Support the organisation of the EHEA Ministerial Conferences and Policy Forums

- ensuring coordination with the BFUG in close collaboration with the host country

Management of the EHEA finances

- preparing an annual budget,
- managing accounting

- providing annual accounts.

3. Required Resources

In line with the Secretariat's tasks, responsibilities and principles as described above, the TF estimated the necessary staff and budget.

3.1 Staff

Based on the experiences of the previous Secretariats, the estimated staffing needs are the following:

Head of Secretariat – team leader and overall coordinator, fully accountable to the BFUG It is an important managerial role that needs to be filled by a highly skilled professional with strong expertise in European cooperation, understanding of higher education policy and experience in managing a small, dynamic team; to be recruited through an open competition, for an open-end contract or for a long term (e.g. two work periods, renewable), and appointment by the BFUG, or with its approval.

The Head of Secretariat is entitled to recruit the necessary staff (in line with the budget agreed by the BFUG:

- **Policy Officers** – support BFUG/WGs both in terms of policy and logistics. In most cases, one officer supports two/three working structures, therefore 4 or 5 officers are usually required;
- **Communications Officer** – responsible for overseeing both internal and external communication;
- **Administrative Officer** - managing administrative tasks in the country hosting the Secretariat;

This leads to **approximately 7 FTE** staff, to manage the present tasks and workload.

Obviously, the staff numbers can be adjusted to changing workloads, resulting either permanently or temporarily in higher or lower staff costs. T

3.2 Secondments

Seconding staff should in principle be a possibility open to all BFUG members and consultative members. The host country of the next Ministerial Conference should second one staff member to the Secretariat to facilitate liaison with the local organising team. In addition, the Secretariat host country may second one further staff member.

The Task Force advises a ratio of not less than two-thirds contracted staff to one third seconded staff, and only provided that continuity can be secured through commitment to a reliable and binding schedule for secondment. Staff should be seconded for at least 1 year, but preferably for the full duration of the work programme, for example to support a certain number of working structures over the entire working period, or for specific tasks. All this would be feasible under

the above proposed scheme, but may need further consideration also regarding the management and cost implications.

3.3 Budget

Budget estimates cannot be based on the costs of previous secretariats, as the total cost of running the Secretariat varied greatly depending on the country, especially due to different levels of staffing and local salaries. Moreover, there has been no explicit reporting of the actual costs covered by host countries, e.g. in-kind contributions such as office space or staff covered by national budgets.

In addition, as the intention is to employ staff from different EHEA countries, salaries and employment conditions must be sufficiently attractive, regardless of the location of the Secretariat.

The following is an estimate of the annual costs based on different past examples and the staff needs described above. As described, costs might vary, possibly up to +/-20%, thus the below calculation should be seen as a rough estimate.

Item	Estimated cost (EUR)
Staff salaries (7 FTE)	675 000
Travel/meeting costs (BFUG and EHEA structures, occasional external representation)	65 000
Office space	75 000
Other administrative costs	50 000
Total	865 000

3.4 Financial Contributions by EHEA Members

In order to share the costs of the Secretariat fairly and to ensure sustainable funding, the TF recommends that the Secretariat be financed by annual contributions by EHEA countries, differentiated based on GDP and GDP per capita, similar to the system currently used by EQAR.

Indicative annual contributions per country (EUR)

Example based on the current EQAR fee system: countries are assigned to one of four brackets based on an index calculated from their GDP (absolute) and GDP per capita. See below and in detail at https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2024/12/Final_EQAR_Indexed_Governmental_Fees_2025.pdf

Governmental Members

Group per GDP category ²	# of countries per group	Base fee	Fee 2023	Fee 2024	Indexed Fee 2025
Group 1	11	€ 16,740.00	€ 14,949.00	€ 18,304.45	€ 18,935.48
Group 2	8	€ 12,555.00	€ 11,213.00	€ 13,728.33	€ 14,201.61
Group 3	14	€ 8,370.00	€ 7,474.00	€ 9,152.22	€ 9,467.74
Group 4	10	€ 4,185.00	€ 3,737.00	€ 4,576.11	€ 4,733.87
Total		€ 443,610.00	€ 373,723.00	€ 485,067.79	€ 501,790.26

Assuming that all EHEA countries would contribute financially, and that the European Union would continue to contribute to the funding of the EHEA Secretariat (currently ca. EUR 250 000 per year through the Erasmus+ programme), fees for countries would have to cover approximately 600.000. Calculated on the current number of active BFUG members (47 - excluding the EC, and the 2 suspended countries), the fees for the Secretariat could eventually be lower than the current EQAR fees².

The exact amount of the contributions should be agreed by the BFUG once the location of the Secretariat has been decided upon. As an example, the TF calculated indicative annual contributions adding up to the estimated costs as above (excluding the EU grant):

The TF found no other feasible model for covering the costs, than the joint contribution from EHEA members.

It should be assumed that all parties, once they agreed on establishment of the Secretariat, would regularly pay their contributions. There might be cases, where the BFUG might waive the fee of a member, due to its financial situation.

However, if a member is not willing to pay its contribution, for the TF, the only technically and politically sound consequence would be the suspension of its voting rights in relation to all matters pertaining to the Secretariat (budget, accounts, reports, appointment/dismissal of the HoS etc). In this sense, the TF found that other consequences might be either impractical (e.g. expecting concerned BFUG members to contribute in a different way, for example by seconding staff) or inappropriate, and also not in line with the present rules of procedure.

² In addition, in-kind countries have been offered by several hosts. But principally, the financing of the Secretariat should be possible even without such contributions, also as they should become a prominent factor in the BFUG's decision on the hosting arrangement. But of course, once the hosting decision is taken, such contributions need to be considered and may impact the annual budget, in particular if they concern a major cost item such as office premises.

However, a question is whether this would be sufficiently dissuasive to avoid non-payment (free-rider dilemma). As a practical implication, the Secretariat and the BFUG would need to consider how to make up for the loss of income from non-payment.

Finally, the TF considered whether BFUG members could be legally able to pay membership fees to the EHEA Secretariat. In the case of non-profit associations, the TF found this possible in principle, considering that the overwhelming majority of BFUG members are also members of EQAR, where they are paying membership fees. The TF would thus be confident that practical, even sui generis solutions could be normally found for each particular challenge that a few BFUG members might encounter. This is yet not clear for the situation of other legal formats than associations.

Questions for the BFUG:

1. Do you see any other model for dividing the costs than the one currently used by EQAR – i.e. using GDP and GDP per capita as criteria?
2. If the case, do you see any other consequences for BFUG members which would not duly pay their contribution other than suspending the right of decision in matters pertaining to the EHEA Secretariat?
3. Are the consequences dissuasive enough to prevent a free-rider problem where only a part of BFUG members would cover the costs?
4. Would you have any practical legal issues (and, if so, potential solutions) in paying membership fees to an EHEA Secretariat association? What about other legal formats?

4. Legal Form and Structure: Non-Profit Association

Based on the above requirements, the TF explored several models for establishing a **private-law legal entity**, in consideration of the above requirements, and of the prior work on the topic in the previous period (see also [Bergan & Geanta](#) (2020), as well as the suggestions provided in the applications for hosting the Secretariat.

A **non-profit association** appeared as a feasible and appropriate form for the Secretariat, confirmed also by the good experience made with the setup of EQAR. A **foundation** or even a **non-profit company** could be alternatives, but the TF concluded that the association would be preferable as it aligns better with the purpose and tasks of the Secretariat, and the governance model of the BFUG. The TF considered also specific legal forms presented by two proposals.

The important point that the TF concluded, and wants the BFUG to consider is that as a legal form an association is not only possible, but aligns well with the purposes of the Secretariat, and there considered in the following in the TF's reflections on how the new legal entity could be established and function, also regarding governance and accountability. From the review of the three hosting proposals which offered an association (Cyprus, German, Romania), the TF also concluded that association legal frameworks seem to differ only in detail.

In addition, the call for hosting brought two additional options:

- **including the Secretariat into an existing national organisation** while ensuring a maximum of independence through an agreement between the Czech organisation and the BFUG
- **an international entity**, proposed by Türkiye, as the establishment of any other legal form is

possible, which would be subject to the approval of the President of the Republic.

The BFUG would need to consider these two forms, in its decision on the hosting arrangement, and whether and to what extent to provide comparable features and advantages as the association, in terms of independence, accountability, governance etc.

Purpose and membership

An association is conceptually based on members (= EHEA members) that associate around a common cause or activity (= supporting the EHEA, through a long-term Secretariat), which is not of a commercial nature (self-evident)

The membership and governing structure of the association could be based on and linked to the existing EHEA concepts and bodies to the greatest possible extent:

- The **EHEA members** would be members of the association, forming its general assembly (GA) with identical voting rights as in the BFUG. Ideally, the country's representative in the GA and the BFUG should be identical, for practical reasons and to ensure the BFUG's ultimate authority.
- The regulations should be flexible and allow countries to have either the ministry responsible for higher education itself or another organisation designated by it, e.g. a national public agency, act as member of the association. This should, however, not change the participation of the BFUG, where countries are represented by the public authority responsible for higher education or representatives designated by this public authority and acting on its behalf.
- **Consultative members** of the EHEA would be non-voting members of the association likewise. They would automatically be considered as such and be invited to participate in the GA - without voting rights - based on their status in the BFUG. They would not be expected to become members or to contribute financially. International organisations like CoE and UNESCO could be invited as observers to the GA, having similar rights as the other non-voting members even if their legal status would not allow them to formally join the association. The EQAR statutes include similar provisions regarding permanent observers to the GA of EQAR.

Governance

The **BFUG Board**, or a **Secretariat Governing Board** established for this purpose, would serve as the association's board of directors. In most jurisdictions, the board of directors is in charge of the ongoing management of the association within the decisions of the GA. The board would usually delegate a number of everyday tasks to the managing director. The **Head of the Secretariat** should serve as managing director.

The TF found from applications that:

- the functions of the GA could very well serve the functions of the BFUG
- most national legislative frameworks are fairly flexible regarding the division of competences
- most legislative frameworks allow the appointment of the HoS by the BFUG
- However, the role of the Board of the association is more prominent in the internal governance than the role of the BFUG Board.

Potential solution:

- The Statutes could limit the powers of the association Board to more closely resemble the powers of the BFUG Board. Some applicants mentioned this would be possible in their legal framework.
- Alternatively the members of the association Board should be notified and replaced through administrative procedures. Since the composition of the BFUG Board changes every six months, this may create complications and excessive burden.

Potential solution: Appoint only some members of the association Board as ‘executives’, thus not including all BFUG Board members

A potential solution to the issues above is also to specifically distinguish between the BFUG Board and the association Board as two completely distinct bodies. The BFUG could elect a certain number of members in the BFUG Board for a (longer) period of time, e.g. 3 years, and thus decoupling the association board from the BFUG Board.

In this case, however, members of the TF considered that a risk entailed is that the Secretariat would rather feel accountable to the association board than to the BFUG itself. One solution would be to nevertheless reduce the powers of the Board through statutory provision

Questions for the BFUG:

1. Do you principally agree that the governance structures of an association (General assembly and Board) would serve well the governance structure of the BFUG?
2. Would you consider it appropriate to create a dedicated Board for the association rather than rely on the BFUG Board for serving that function?

Establishment

A non-profit association is relatively easy to establish in most EHEA jurisdictions, even though the details and regulatory framework differ slightly between jurisdictions. A small group of countries could act as founding members.

Annex

Advantages and disadvantages of a rotating versus a long-term Secretariat as discussed by the previous Task Force (2022-2024)

Advantages of a rotating secretariat	Challenges of a rotating secretariat
<p>emphasises the fact that the EHEA is based on the proactive engagement of its members, even beyond holding the rotating Ministerial conferences;</p> <p>contributes to a sense of broad shared ownership and responsibility;</p> <p>helps to ensure that the hosting country is responsibly involved for the entire period, and therefore well-prepared to host and organise the Ministerial Conference.</p>	<p>host countries have different understandings and approaches to the Secretariat;</p> <p>the Secretariat's neutrality and independence of the hosting country can be challenging to ensure;</p> <p>usually entirely new Secretariat team, sometimes with little prior experience in the EHEA, needs time to take over from the previous host country and to fully take up its tasks, leading to a period of large and recurrent instability during each handover period;</p> <p>lack of continuity leads to frequent technical issues, especially in relation to the transfer and further development of the website, the establishment and maintenance of an archive, enhanced vulnerability to cyberattacks with changing hosting and security, etc.;</p> <p>hosting the Ministerial Conference always comes with the responsibility to provide the Secretariat for a three-year term, which requires significant financial, organisational and human resources investment borne by one single country;</p> <p>despite other EHEA countries occasionally seconding staff, all team members usually come from one single country, which does not reflect the European nature of the Bologna Process.</p>

Advantages of a long-term Secretariat	Challenges of a long-term Secretariat
<p>ensure business continuity for all EHEA countries and provide a more continuous, stable and reliable support structure for the EHEA, not relying on countries volunteering;</p> <p>staffed with an international team of professionals, with a potential for long-term contracts allowing a rolling staff turn-over instead of changing the entire team at once;</p> <p>enable sustainable staff development and capacity building, so that the Secretariat can gain and maintain a solid knowledge base and expertise in serving the EHEA and its bodies;</p> <p>provide a stable contact point for stakeholders from within and outside the EHEA; ensure co-ownership of the Secretariat by all EHEA countries;</p> <p>reduce the financial and logistical burden on the host country of the Ministerial Conference, and allow to focus on content-related issues, thus making hosting more attractive.</p>	<p>necessity to ensure the neutrality and the accountability of the Secretariat, acting under the authority of the BFUG and in line with the guidance documents adopted by the Ministerial conference and the BFUG;</p> <p>making the staff positions sufficiently attractive to get a suitably qualified international team, and making the team, as much as possible, geographically representative of the EHEA;</p> <p>financial contributions might be needed from all EHEA countries, thus also including those that would otherwise never host a Ministerial Conference.</p>