

Bologna Process impact and future trends: Policy commitments, implementation gaps and priorities for the next decade

First Draft

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Introduction: purpose, scope and methodology

1.1. The role of the study

The Tirana 2024 mandate and the road to 2027

The immediate policy driver of the present study is the mandate given by the Ministers responsible for higher education at the Tirana Ministerial Conference (29–30 May 2024). In the Outlook section of the Tirana Communiqué, Ministers mandated the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to ensure that “*the policy commitments aiming at creating by 2030 an inclusive, innovative, and interconnected EHEA, mindful of the fundamental values, are properly monitored, including through a Bologna Process Implementation Report that assesses key developments*”, and asked the BFUG “*to submit to us in 2027 proposals for the main priorities for the next decade, in close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff and students*” (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 6). The 2027 EHEA Ministerial Conference and Global Policy Forum, to be co-hosted by Romania and the Republic of Moldova in Iași and Chișinău in May 2027, will therefore be a double-horizon event: it should both take stock of the implementation of the 2030 vision agreed at the Rome Ministerial Conference (Bologna Process, 2020), and open the work on the policy agenda for the decade beyond 2030.

Within the BFUG Work Programme 2024–2027, this mandate has been operationalised through dedicated working structures, including the Task Force on the Future of the Bologna Process, which has been producing thematic background papers to structure the BFUG-level debate.

In preparation for the 2027 Ministerial Conference, the EHEA Secretariat organises a Conference on Bologna Process implementation and future trends in September 2026, in a dual-track format with the Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference (BPRC) and bringing together Europe-wide stakeholders. A meeting of the Task Force on the Future of Bologna follows in Bucharest on the day after the Conference.

The present study is designed as an evidence-based analytical input, consolidating the existing literature and institutional perspectives on the future of the Bologna Process, as well as global trends. The study serves both as a background for the Conference and as evidence-based support for the Task Force on the Future of Bologna and the Drafting Committee of the Iași-Chisinau Communiqué.

The document is in a draft format, which will be revised after the discussions at the Conference and the Task Force on the Future of Bologna meeting. The document does not aim to propose final recommendations but rather motivate debate and reflections, offer a guide for the discussions and evidenced-backed proposals to be considered within the BFUG bodies.

The Task Force’s Terms of Reference, its membership and the background papers it has produced to date (on lifelong learning, on the interconnectedness of the EHEA, VET and the ERA, and on the EHEA–ERA relationship) are published on the EHEA website and are listed in the References (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2024, 2025, 2026; BFUG, 2025).

Continuity with previous end-of-decade reflections

Reflection exercises of this kind are not new; they are, in fact, a recurrent feature of the Bologna Process, with direct antecedents in the background reports such as the Bologna beyond 2010, prepared by the Benelux Bologna Secretariat before the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Conference, and The Bologna Process Revisited: The Future of the EHEA, prepared before the 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009; BFUG, 2015).

Ahead of the 2010 Budapest–Vienna anniversary conference that formally launched the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Commission, in cooperation with the BFUG, commissioned the first Independent Assessment of the Bologna Process, carried out by a consortium of CHEPS, INCHER-Kassel and ECOTEC (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). That assessment appraised the achievement of the operational objectives of the Bologna Declaration and subsequent communiqués, such as the three degree cycles, recognition of qualifications, quality assurance and enhancing mobility, and evaluated the extent to which these operational objectives had advanced the strategic goal of establishing a European area of higher education and promoting it worldwide (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 10). Its central warning was that political momentum was needed to minimise *“the risk of the process becoming administration without much impact on the reality of higher education”* (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 10), a sharp formulation of the implementation problem that has been discussed within the Bologna Process ever since.

A second reflection cycle preceded the 2020 horizon. In the Paris Communiqué (2018), Ministers asked the BFUG to submit *“proposals for the main priorities for the next decade”*, a wording almost identical to the Tirana mandate (Bologna Process, 2018; BFUG, 2019b). This triggered in 2018 a consultation process that included an online survey of BFUG members and consultative members on governance and thematic priorities after 2020 (BFUG, 2019a), followed in 2019 by national and organisational consultations across the EHEA (BFUG, 2019b), whose outcomes fed directly into the Rome Communiqué’s vision of an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030 (Bologna Process, 2020).

In the current cycle, the BFUG mandated the Task Force on the Future of Bologna to prepare debates for the BFUG on key topics. The Terms of Reference of the Task Force on the Future of Bologna identified relevant topics (micro-credentials, lifelong learning, AI, VET etc), based on the discussions during the elaboration of the Tirana Communiqué (during the BFUG meetings of the Belgian-Holy See BFUG co-chairmanship).

The current cycle differs from its predecessor though in its sequencing. In 2015–2018 the preparatory work was carried out by two dedicated structures (Working Group 2 on fostering implementation of the agreed key commitments and the Advisory Group on dealing with non-implementation) whose conclusions fed into the Paris Communiqué and, through it, into the mandate to define the priorities for the post-2020 decade (BFUG Working Group 2 on Implementation, 2018; BFUG Working Group 3 on New Goals, 2018; see Section 2.3).

This input was then operationalised in the 2018-2020 cycle, when the definition of priorities, the discussion of how they would be put in practice, and the broad stakeholder consultation were all handled.

The 2024-2027 cycle is deliberately structured as a preliminary step through identifying priorities, leaving the question of how they are to be operationalised to the 2027-2030 cycle. Some are expected to be delivered by 2030 in preparation for the next cycle, while others would arguably be considered for delivery beyond 2030. This two-stage sequencing gives the present exercise a different function from its predecessors - agenda-setting rather than programme design.

A changed geopolitical reality

Finally, the study responds to a genuine need to consider the terms of EHEA cooperation in a geopolitical environment that differs qualitatively from the one in the 2020 Rome Communiqué vision was drafted. The Tirana Communiqué itself acknowledges that the world faces “*complex and interrelated geopolitical, social, economic, and ecological challenges, including rising polarisation*”, and that fundamental values of higher education “*are now more threatened than they were a decade or even four years ago*” (Bologna Process, 2024, pp. 1-2). In some cases, this led to drastic necessary measures, for example the suspension of Russia and Belarus from participation in all EHEA structures due to the armed attack against Ukraine by the Russian Federation, supported by Belarus, since April 2022 (see Section 2.4).

At the same time, the institutional environment surrounding the EHEA has become more asymmetric. The European Union has considerably deepened its own higher education agenda by introducing the European Education Area, notably through the European strategy for universities (European Commission, 2022), the European Universities alliances, and the European Degree (European Commission, 2024a). This created what can be described as a polycentric governance landscape in which EU instruments interact with EHEA ones. The Tirana Communiqué registers the developments by taking *note of the blueprint* and looking forward to *exploring synergies with the EEA*). Furthermore, the Council of Europe, co-author of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, is also aiming to develop additional instruments in adjacent fields (including a possible sectoral instrument on AI in education, a possible Convention on automatic recognition that rests on turning Bologna tools into binding commitments, a possible legal instrument on academic freedom), raising a parallel question of articulation with the Bologna toolset, potential duplications and even a change-in-nature of Bologna tools.

Combined with demographic decline in parts of the EHEA, the financial fragility of public funding models, and the system-wide implications of artificial intelligence for learning, assessment and qualifications, all addressed in Chapter 5, these developments mean that the current reflection cannot be a routine renewal of commitments.

The question on the table is how to ensure that the Bologna Process, an intergovernmental process designed in 1999, remains fit for purpose for the 2030s. That question now has an additional concrete institutional dimension. Following the Tirana mandate, the Task Force on a long-term EHEA Secretariat brought decisions to the BFUG in March 2026 on the future organisation and financing of the Secretariat, with the BFUG agreeing to move forward with a long-term EHEA Secretariat, agreeing to place its administrative capacity on a stable, jointly financed footing rather than on rotating national hosting (BFUG Task Force on a Long-Term Secretariat, 2026).

1.2. What “impact” means in this study

“Impact” is used in this study in a deliberately practical sense: the observable difference between what Ministers committed to and what was actually implemented in higher education systems and institutions. The study deliberately stops short of claiming to establish what changed in higher education as a result. The available evidence does not support causal claims of this sort, and the research literature is consistent in finding that the Process’s effects on national systems are mediated by domestic politics, pre-existing structures and reform agendas (Witte, 2008; Sin, Veiga & Amaral, 2016).

Following the analytical distinction introduced by the 2010 Independent Assessment, the study separates **operational objectives** (adopting a three-cycle degree structure, implementing ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, establishing quality assurance in line with the ESG, ratifying and applying the Lisbon Recognition Convention, developing national qualifications frameworks) from **strategic objectives** (a functioning, attractive and equitable European Higher Education Area) (Westerheijden et al., 2010c). Three of these operational objectives — the three-cycle structure scaled by ECTS and compatible with the QF-EHEA, quality assurance in line with the ESG, and recognition in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention — have been formally designated ‘key commitments’ by Ministers since Paris (2018), and are referred to as such throughout this study (Bologna Process, 2018).

On the achievement side, the record should not be understated. The Bologna Process remains the longest-standing regional cooperation framework in higher education, and its voluntary, intergovernmental character is both the source of its legitimacy and the structural reason why implementation depends on national political will.

Over twenty-five years, the Bologna Process has produced the most extensive convergence of higher education structures ever attempted: a shared three-cycle architecture based on learning outcomes and ECTS, an overarching qualifications framework (QF-EHEA) with (mostly) self-certified national frameworks, a common quality assurance reference (the ESG) with a European register of agencies (EQAR) and a public database of external quality assurance results (DEQAR), a shared recognition regime anchored in the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and the Diploma Supplement as a transparency instrument.

The EHEA is a recognisable space, as identified in the 2023–2024 IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from beyond the EHEA which found that the Bologna Process is widely regarded as a reference and source of inspiration for other regions' reform agendas (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024).

On the gap side, the evidence is equally consistent. The 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report *“confirms and illustrates the still incomplete and uneven implementation”* of the three key commitments (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 2; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). The mobility benchmark of at least 20% of graduates with a study or training period abroad, set at Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 for 2020, remains unmet and had to be re-committed in Tirana (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 5). Lifelong learning, committed since the Prague Ministerial Conference in 2001, still matches the London-era “early stage” diagnosis. The social dimension has accumulated principles, guidelines, and indicators and descriptors only recently, since 2020.

Each thematic section of Chapters 2 and 3 therefore follows a common approach analysing *what was committed* → *what was measured* → *what actually changed*.

1.3. Methodology, sources and methods

The study is a qualitative, desk-research-based policy analysis, combining systematic documentary review with a secondary synthesis of the empirical consultation record accumulated by the BFUG. No new large-scale primary data collection was undertaken; instead, the study derives its added value from bringing existing, and in several cases under-exploited, bodies of evidence into a single analytical frame. Four bodies of sources are used.

(1) The corpus of ministerial declarations and communiqués (1998–2024). All texts from the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and Bologna Declaration (1999) to the Tirana Communiqué (2024), together with their annexes (notably the Rome Communiqué's annexed Statement on Academic Freedom, Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension, and Recommendations on Learning and Teaching, and the Tirana annexes on fundamental values), are treated as the primary record of commitments. The study codes commitments longitudinally (when a theme first appears, how its formulation evolves, whether it is ever retired) to substantiate the claim, developed in Chapter 2, that successive communiqués have added commitments faster than they have withdrawn them.

(2) Prior assessments and monitoring instruments. This source comprises two distinct bodies of material. The first is the sequence of reflection reports commissioned ahead of earlier decade transitions, which establish the general category to which the present study belongs: Bologna beyond 2010 (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009); Bologna Achievements, Challenges and Perspectives 1999–2010 (2010); The Bologna Process Revisited: The Future of the EHEA (BFUG, 2015); and the final reports of the 2015–2018 Working Groups on fostering implementation and on policy development for new EHEA goals (BFUG Working Group 2 on Implementation, 2018; BFUG Working Group 3 on New Goals, 2018).

The second is the standing monitoring apparatus. This comprises: the 2010 Independent Assessment in its three published volumes (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2010c); the BFUG stocktaking reports (2005–2009) and the Bologna Process Implementation Reports of 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020 and 2024 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024); the EUA Trends series, most recently Trends 2024 (Gaebel, Zhang & Stoeber, 2024); the European Students' Union's Bologna With Student Eyes 2024 (ESU, 2024a) and ESU's formal contribution to the implementation of the Bologna Process (ESU, 2024b); and the successive volumes of the Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (e.g., Curaj, Deca & Pricopie, 2018, 2020). Where these sources disagree, the divergence is itself treated as a finding.

(3) The BFUG consultation record on the future of the Process. Three consultation exercises are synthesised systematically:

- the **October 2018 online survey** on governance and thematic priorities after 2020, carried out under the BFUG co-chairs Austria and Switzerland, which received 40 responses (32 members, 8 consultative members) (BFUG, 2019a);
- the **2019 national and organisational consultations** on the vision and thematic priorities of the EHEA after 2020, launched in June 2019 and reported to the BFUG in November 2019, with 39 responses (35 members, 3 consultative members, 1 partner) (BFUG, 2019b);
- the two parallel **IN-GLOBAL surveys of stakeholders' perceptions** of the Bologna Process, conducted from 23 June to 11 September 2023 and published in February 2024 — one addressed to stakeholders within the EHEA, supporting the work of the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing, and one addressed to stakeholders beyond the EHEA, supporting the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024). The survey for non-EHEA stakeholders collected 560 responses, of which 462 originated from Iraq, an imbalance that the source report itself flags and that the present study handles by relying on differences between stakeholder groups rather than absolute frequencies.

To these the study adds a proposed fourth instrument, an **Autumn 2026 BFUG survey on the future of the Bologna Process**. The questionnaire is proposed with the suggestion that it be conducted in autumn 2026 within the 2024–2027 Work Programme as the direct empirical preparation of the 2027 proposals. Should the survey be carried out, the study can be updated through a supplementary note setting out its results and the conclusions to be drawn from them.

(4) Task Force and working-structure background papers, and desk research on global trends. The thematic background papers of the Task Force on the Future of the Bologna Process on lifelong learning and on the interconnectedness of EHEA, VET and ERA (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2025; BFUG, 2025), the final recommendations of the Task Force on

Enhancing knowledge sharing (TF EKS, 2024), and the outputs of the 2024–2027 working structures are used as the most current expression of problem framing. For the forward-looking analysis in Chapter 5, these are complemented by desk research on international trend analyses from the OECD, UNESCO, the European Commission and sector organisations, selected according to two criteria: documented relevance to higher education systems in the EHEA, and amenability to intergovernmental action through the Bologna framework.

(5) Research literature on the Bologna Process.

Twenty-six years of the Process have generated substantial scholarly literature, which this study uses selectively rather than exhaustively. Three bodies of work are drawn on. The first concerns the Bologna Process as a mode of governance, and explains how a voluntary declaration acquired binding force through monitoring and peer pressure rather than through law (Ravinet, 2008; Veiga & Amaral, 2006; Deca & Harmsen, 2020). The second concerns implementation, and supplies the analytical vocabulary of convergence alongside persistent diversity, path dependence, the distance between formal adoption and institutional practice that Chapter 3 applies to the 2024 evidence (Witte, 2006, 2008; Vögtle, Knill & Dobbins, 2011; Sin, Veiga & Amaral, 2016; Feeney & Hogan, 2017). The third concerns the Process's stakeholders and its external dimension (Klemenčič, 2012, 2019; Zgaga, 2006). Literature is cited where it offers an explanation that the policy record does not itself supply.

Analytical method. The study proceeds by triangulation across these bodies of evidence. Commitment-tracing (source 1) establishes what was promised; monitoring and assessment data (source 2) establish what happened; the consultation record (source 3) establishes what members and stakeholders believe should happen next. Finally, the working-structure and trends material (source 4) and the research literature (source 5) together establish the conditions under which any future priorities will have to be delivered. Findings are reported at the level of the EHEA as a whole; where country-level variation is decisive, it is flagged, but the study does not rank or present results for individual members.

1.4. Scope and limitations

This is deliberately a small-scale, forward-oriented study. Like the 2010 Independent Assessment, which stated plainly that it was “*not an evaluation of the entire Bologna Process*” (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 10), **this study does not evaluate every action line of twenty-six years of cooperation.** It concentrates on the themes that structure the 2027 Ministerial Conference topics: the key commitments, social dimension, lifelong learning and flexible paths, mobility and internationalisation, fundamental values, the EHEA's external dimension, and the governance of implementation.

Furthermore, the study relies on secondary data. The quality of its conclusions is bounded by the quality of the underlying monitoring instruments, whose known weaknesses (self-reported national data in the implementation reports, self-selected respondents in stakeholder surveys, uneven response rates across countries) are inherited.

On another note, there is a structural attribution problem. Bologna tools and policies are deeply intertwined with EU instruments (Erasmus+, the EQF etc) and with national reform agendas that in several countries both predate or exceed EHEA commitments. This intertwining makes it difficult to isolate the distinct impact of the Bologna Process itself. The study therefore speaks of the impact of commitments rather than claiming causal attribution to the Bologna Process alone.

The timing of the study within the 2024–2027 cycle also imposes provisionality. Several decisive inputs (e.g. 2027 Bologna Process Implementation Report) were still in progress or unpublished at the time of drafting.

Finally, the study is forward-oriented by design. Its historical chapters serve a practical, decision-maker oriented purpose, without going into technical nuances or historiography; its treatment of global trends (Chapter 5) is selective, privileging trends on which intergovernmental action through Bologna is plausible, and explicitly distinguishing them from trends better addressed through other frameworks (EU, Council of Europe, UNESCO). Recommendations (Chapter 7) are framed as actionable proposals for the 2027 Communiqué and the next work programme, and are therefore constrained by what a voluntary, consensus-based intergovernmental process can realistically adopt.

2. 25 Years of the Bologna Process: A political history of commitments

This chapter provides the historical backbone of the study, reading the Bologna Process as a cumulative political acquis of commitments, an arc that runs from **architecture-building** (1999–2010), through the **multiplication of substantive aspirations** (2010–2020), to the **consolidation of a more mature diagnosis** (Rome 2020–Tirana 2024). The guiding question throughout is what each communiqué added, what it retired and what this pattern implies for the accountability of the Bologna Process as a whole.

2.1. 1999–2010: The structural decade

The Bologna Declaration, signed on 19 June 1999 by ministers from 29 countries, set out a compact and largely architectural agenda: a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, a structure based initially on two main cycles, a system of credits, the promotion of mobility, European cooperation in quality assurance, and a European dimension in higher education (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Building on the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and drawing on instruments that pre-dated the Process — ECTS as an Erasmus transfer mechanism, the Diploma Supplement developed jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES, and the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention — the first decade was devoted to putting a shared structural skeleton in place across a rapidly enlarging membership, which grew from 29 signatories in 1999 to 46 by the end of the first decade (47 from March 2010, with Kazakhstan's accession at Budapest–Vienna).

The milestones of the decade were predominantly technical, and each was largely delivered. Prague Conference (2001) added lifelong learning, the involvement of students and higher education institutions, and the attractiveness of the EHEA as action lines, and welcomed students and higher education institutions as full partners in the Bologna Process governance, an arrangement that was, and remains, unique among intergovernmental policy processes in the extent to which it promoted stakeholder agency in the process. No comparable framework grants student and institutional representative bodies such standing membership of its steering structure, and the research literature treats the admission of consultative members as a defining, and genuinely unusual, feature of the Bologna model rather than a procedural detail (Klemenčič, 2012; Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018). Berlin Conference (2003) accelerated the timetable, with quality assurance systems, the two-cycle system and recognition instruments expected to be in place by 2005, and added the doctoral cycle, formally linking the EHEA to the European Research Area. Bergen Conference (2005) adopted the two instruments that still define the regulatory core of the EHEA: the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) and the overarching Qualifications Framework of the EHEA (QF-EHEA). The London Conference (2007) established the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), operative from 2008, as the first, and still the only, legal entity created by and through

the Process itself. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Conference (2009) closed the decade by setting the EHEA's first and only quantified benchmark: by 2020, at least 20% of graduates should have had a study or training period abroad.

Measured against its own operational objectives, the structural decade genuinely delivered. By 2010, the three-cycle degree structure was implemented in virtually all participating systems, with most countries moving, in the words of the Independent Assessment's case studies, *“rather easily towards the three-cycle structure”* where its ingredients pre-existed (Westerheijden et al., 2010b, p. 86); the ESG had been systematically adopted and EQAR was operative; all Bologna countries except two had signed or ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with 39 having legislation compliant with it; and the Diploma Supplement was issued automatically and free of charge in most institutions in 30 of the 46 countries (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8). No other regional higher education initiative, before or since, has achieved structural convergence on this scale and so fast. It is precisely this achievement, however, that set up the problem of the second decade: the architecture was in place yet the work of fully and adequately implementing it at institutional level, together with its surrounding political objectives, principles and values, was still far from settled.

2.2. The role of the Independent Assessment (2010)

Commissioned by the European Commission in cooperation with the BFUG ahead of the 2010 anniversary Budapest-Vienna Conference, the Independent Assessment of the first decade (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) was the first and, to date, the only external, research-based evaluation of the Process as such, methodologically distinct from the BFUG's own stocktaking in that it selected comparable system-level indicators and combined them with twelve case studies and stakeholder interviews rather than relying on governmental self-reporting (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 10). The present study treats it as the key historical baseline:

Across every action area, the assessment found the same asymmetry: **formal adoption ran far ahead of substantive transformation (a separation between compliance and change)**. Degree structures had been reformed, but curricula were not systematically redesigned yet around learning outcomes; recognition legislation complied with the Lisbon Convention, but divergent interpretations of “substantial differences” created continuing uncertainty; and only eight higher education systems had self-certified national qualifications frameworks against a 2010 deadline that had to be extended to 2012 (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8).

The assessment's concluding warning about the governance risk, specifically that the Process must keep up political momentum and leadership interest *“to minimise the risk of the process becoming administration without much impact on the reality of higher education”* (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 10) identified, fifteen years in advance, the

pathology that the 2024–2027 reflection on the future of the Process is still trying to address: an intergovernmental process at risk of reproducing itself independently of trends in higher education practice.

The assessment anticipated the overload problem by noticing *“a tendency to place highly relevant but broad and complex issues on the Bologna Process agenda”*, and warned that such broad questions require *“a patient and realistic approach to implementation, including concrete action lines”* (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 10). It also flagged the emergence of different speeds of implementation across the 46 countries, linked to accession dates, administrative traditions and resource levels, with some newcomer countries having limited access to EU support (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 10). Both observations, agenda overload and a multi-speed EHEA, are findings that can be traced across multiple consultations, albeit with different degrees of actors finding them an issue.

The research literature reached comparable conclusions from a different starting point. The first is that the Process achieved genuine convergence on structures and overarching frameworks for system design, while leaving substantial diversity in what those structures contain, a tension Witte (2008) characterised as aspired convergence alongside cherished diversity. Comparative analysis confirms this by showing that convergence effects differ sharply across policy dimensions, being strongest precisely where a commitment is amenable to transnational benchmarking (Vögtle, Knill & Dobbins, 2011). The second is that the Process became binding through instruments rather than through law: Ravinet (2008) traces how voluntary participation turned into monitored coordination, in which stocktaking, reporting and peer visibility generated obligations that member states came to experience as real constraints. Both findings bear directly on 2027, because together they imply that the Process’s leverage depends on how its instruments are designed and used, not on how firmly its communiqués are worded.

2.3. 2010–2020: The substantive agenda and the widening implementation gap

Aspiration accumulation

The Budapest–Vienna Declaration (2010) formally launched the European Higher Education Area and, tellingly, was also the first ministerial document to acknowledge publicly that Bologna Process action lines were *“implemented to varying degrees”* and even that protests in some countries showed the reforms had not been adequately communicated or understood. The first part of the second decade responded to the 2010 diagnosis not primarily by concentrating on implementation, but by broadening the agenda. The Bucharest Conference (2012) adopted the mobility strategy “Mobility for Better Learning” as an annex, alongside commitments on funding, employability and automatic recognition. The Yerevan Conference (2015) adopted a revised ECTS Users' Guide, the “Widening Participation for Equity and Growth” strategy for the

social dimension and lifelong learning to 2020, and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, and began consolidating the vocabulary of “key commitments”.

After Yerevan, the conversation around implementation was boosted alongside the addition of commitments. Two dedicated working groups during the 2015-2018 period worked on the issues of supporting implementation and tackling non-implementation of Bologna Process commitments and, consequently, the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group stemmed as a conclusion of the Paris Ministerial Conference. The Paris Conference (2018) further formalised the three key commitments — the three-cycle structure scaled with ECTS and learning outcomes, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and quality assurance in line with the ESG — which were declared “*preconditions*” for the EHEA, implicitly re-classifying everything else (social dimension, lifelong learning, employability, internationalisation, the SDG connection introduced in the same years) as predominantly political commitments (Bologna Process, 2018).

The dedicated strategies of the decade were not its success stories. The 2012 mobility strategy did not bend the curve towards the 20% benchmark, which was missed in 2020 and had to be restated in Tirana (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024; Bologna Process, 2024). The Yerevan social dimension and lifelong learning strategy produced neither national targets nor measurable convergence; lifelong learning, a commitment since the Prague Conference in 2001, still matched the London-era “early stage” diagnosis. The pattern that emerges from the second decade is thus asymmetric: where a commitment had a technical instrument, a monitoring routine and a community of practice behind it (particularly in quality assurance and recognition), it advanced; where it had only communiqué (generic) commitments and a strategy annex, it stagnated. Implementation gaps between EHEA members widened accordingly, as the multi-speed dynamic the 2010 assessment had flagged.

Governance responses: from non-implementation working groups to peer support

The BFUG's own governance record of the decade is, in fact, a story of gradually admitting the implementation problem. The 2015–2018 work plan created, for the first time, as mentioned, structures explicitly dedicated to it: Working Group 2 “On Implementation — fostering implementation of agreed key commitments” and an Advisory Group on “Dealing with non-implementation”. WG2 piloted the instrument of the “reversed peer review”, in which a country experiencing difficulties invites peers to review it, running exercises on quality assurance and qualifications frameworks, and concluded candidly that its own initiatives had been dispersed, that stakeholder response was “*relatively disappointing*”, and that consolidation of the EHEA required “*a proper implementation of the agreed structural reforms but also a shift of the focus from structures to a dialogue among stakeholders about the ‘content’*” (BFUG Working Group 2 on Implementation, 2018). Its central recommendation — thematic peer groups combining countries at different levels of implementation — was adopted at Paris 2018 as Appendix I, “Structured peer-based support for the implementation of the Bologna key commitments”,

which created Thematic Peer Groups A (qualifications frameworks and ECTS), B (Lisbon Recognition Convention) and C (quality assurance), established in September 2018; the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) was subsequently set up to steer them, joined in the 2024–2027 cycle by TPG D on the social dimension (Bologna Process, 2018; 2024).

Two features of this peer-support architecture matter for the future-oriented analysis in Chapters 4 and 6. First, its composition: the TPGs are animated to a significant degree by specialist communities other than ministries — ENIC-NARIC centres in TPG B, quality assurance agencies in TPG C — which has kept the work technically expert but has also raised recurring questions about mandate, about who speaks for the intergovernmental level, and about how the recognition and QA communities connect back to national policy-making. Second, its funding model: the peer-support system has operated substantially through European Commission co-funding under Erasmus+.

Polycentric governance and the changing role of the European Union

Simultaneously, the policy space around the Bologna Process intensified. From 2017 onwards the European Union built its own higher education agenda at speed: the Gothenburg vision of a European Education Area by 2025, the European Universities Initiative piloted from 2019 under Erasmus+, the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of qualifications, and, early in the next decade, the European strategy for universities (European Commission, 2022) and the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (2022). Each of these instruments addresses classic Bologna terrain (e.g. recognition, joint programmes), but with EU policies and EU funding attached. The result, by the end of the decade, was a polycentric governance landscape.

In one respect this was a return to an old question rather than a new development. The relationship between the intergovernmental Process and the European Union's own ambitions in higher education has been discussed since the beginning, and Keeling (2006) documented the Commission's expanding role in European higher education discourse well before the European Education Area existed. What changed after 2017 is that the Commission moved from supporting and co-funding the Bologna Process agenda to policy-making alongside it, with its own definitions, timetables and instruments.

A further, quieter shift of the decade was that communiqués began accreting annexes. Where Bologna (1999) was a two-page declaration, Paris (2018) carried four appendices (peer support, the Belarus strategy, the revised QF-EHEA, the revised Diploma Supplement template), Rome (2020) three annexes (fundamental values, social dimension principles and guidelines, learning and teaching recommendations), and Tirana (2024) two (fundamental values statements, EHEA Rules of Procedure). The annex became the Process's method for adopting quasi-normative texts without cluttering the political communiqué, but also a further layer of commitments whose implementation, in some cases, is even less systematically monitored than the communiqué text itself.

Finally, the second decade closed with a symptom that is easy to overlook in documentary analysis: the progressive thinning of ministerial presence. Contemporary accounts and participant observation converge on the assessment that the conferences of the early 2010s were the last at which a significant majority of delegations were led by ministers personally; by Tirana (2024), attendance at ministerial level had visibly declined, with many delegations led at state-secretary or director-general level. For a process whose only enforcement mechanism is ministerial political commitment, this is not a protocol detail but an indicator of political de-investment (Bergan&Deca, 2018). The observation is consistent with the one systematic scholarly measurement available: analysing the political salience of the Bologna Process across time and across countries, Vukasovic, Jungblut and Elken (2017) found that salience in national policy debate peaked during the first decade and decreased after 2012.

2.4. Rome 2020 / Tirana 2024: Vision restated, incompleteness institutionalised

The Rome Communiqué (2020), adopted online at the height of the pandemic, gave the EHEA its current programmatic frame: the vision of an **inclusive, innovative and interconnected** EHEA by 2030, able to underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe (Bologna Process, 2020). Analytically, however, each pillar of the vision corresponds to an acknowledged deficit of the previous two decades: “inclusive” to the unrealised social dimension, now equipped with Principles and Guidelines (Annex II); “innovative” to the slow uptake of student-centred learning (Annex III); “interconnected” to the unfinished objectives of mobility and joint provision. The 2030 vision, in other words, recommitted the EHEA with better-structured processes but without new accountability mechanisms, until the creation of the national action plans.

Fundamental values: from preamble to policy stream

The most genuinely new development of the Rome–Tirana cycle was the elevation of fundamental values from preambular rhetoric to a key structured policy stream. Policy language about values had been present since the beginning: institutional autonomy via the Magna Charta Universitatum reference in the 1999 Declaration, academic freedom and public responsibility from the Prague Conference in 2001 (ESU, 2024a), but it was visible breaches across EHEA countries that forced the issue, and ultimately the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which led in April 2022 to the suspension of the rights of participation of Russia and Belarus in EHEA structures.

The Rome Communiqué responded by annexing the first agreed common understanding of academic freedom; the Tirana Communiqué completed the set, adopting statements on institutional autonomy, academic integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility of and for higher education, and endorsing the development of a framework for de jure and de facto monitoring for the BFUG to report on at the 2027 conference (Bologna Process, 2020, 2024; ESU, 2024a). Sector

data confirm the urgency: in EUA's Trends 2024 survey, 11% of institutions reported a decrease in academic freedom over the previous five years and 19% a decrease in institutional autonomy, with pronounced concentrations in specific systems (Gaebel, Zhang & Stoeber, 2024, p. 31).

The Commission as norm supplier on Bologna topics

The Rome–Tirana cycle also consolidated the shift in the European Commission's role from funder and political entrepreneur to autonomous supplier of norms on core Bologna topics, while nevertheless remaining very close to and supportive of the Bologna Process. The 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition and the 2022 Council Recommendation on micro-credentials created EU reference definitions and implementation timetables on matters very close to the EHEA tools; the 2024 Communication on a blueprint for a European degree (European Commission, 2024a), followed by Council recommendations on a European quality assurance. In substance, though, the Commission's instruments have largely been built on the Bologna toolset rather than beside it: the Joint European Degree Label, awarded for the first time in July 2026, is assessed by EQAR-registered agencies against criteria derived from the ESG and the European Approach, and is expressed in ECTS. The asymmetry is therefore one of eligibility and resourcing rather than of standards, since the Commission ensured compatibility with Bologna acquis.

National action plans: implementation becomes a named commitment

Tirana's most consequential governance innovation follows directly from the implementation record traced above. Citing the 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report's confirmation of the “*still incomplete and uneven implementation*” of the key commitments, ministers committed to devising and publishing national action plans for addressing remaining implementation gaps within the 2024–2027 period — a recommendation developed by the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing, which had found that in many countries no coordinated national approach to implementing and communicating Bologna commitments existed at all (Bologna Process, 2024; TF EKS, 2024). For the first time, implementation itself, rather than any thematic content, is the object of a ministerial commitment with a named, published, country-specific instrument. Whether the national action plans become genuine steering documents or another reporting formality is one of the empirical questions the 2027 ministerial conference will have to answer, and Chapter 6 returns to it as a possible template for post-2027 governance. The first returns are already available, though. Most EHEA countries submitted national action plans within the 2024–2027 period; most of the plans contain commitments across the majority of thematic areas; and the EHEA Secretariat has produced a comparative overview mapping the plans against the 2024 BPIR findings they were meant to answer (EHEA Secretariat, 2026). What the 2027 conference will have to judge is whether the plans changed the implementation dynamics, and the Secretariat's comparative table is the instrument that makes that judgement possible.

2.5. Conclusions: the arithmetic of accumulation

Read as a single 25-year sequence, the communiqués display a consistent arithmetic: each conference adds commitments; almost none are ever formally retired. Themes do disappear from the text — employability, prominent from Bucharest to Yerevan, fades thereafter; the SDG connection surfaces in Paris and Rome and thins in Tirana; VET–higher education permeability appears in Bergen (2005) and then falls silent for nearly two decades — but disappearance is not retirement. No communiqué has ever declared a commitment achieved and closed, or explicitly withdrawn one as not a priority anymore. The stock of nominally live commitments therefore only grows, while the attention, monitoring capacity and political capital available to service it do not.

The consequences for accountability are structural rather than accidental. When everything remains committed, nothing is falsifiable: implementation reports can always locate progress somewhere in the stock. The classification introduced at Paris — three technical key commitments versus a set of political commitments — was a first, partial acknowledgement of this problem, and the Tirana national action plans are a second.

The accumulation of commitments can equally be read as institutional maturation. A process that began as a two-page declaration among 29 ministries has since acquired a fundamental values acquis with agreed statements and a monitoring framework, an indicator and descriptor set for the social dimension, a peer-support system with a coordinating group, an implementation report and, prospectively, a permanent Secretariat. Deca and Harmsen (2020), taking stock of the Process at twenty years, argue for precisely this more nuanced balance sheet: that soft-law governance in the EHEA has produced real accomplishments as well as real limits, and that the two have to be assessed together rather than traded off against one another.

The two readings are not mutually exclusive, and the difference between them is empirical rather than interpretive. Accumulation is maturation where the instruments that have been added are actually used, and overload where it is not. That is the test this study applies, and it is why the analysis that follows concentrates on implementation governance rather than on the length of the commitment list.

And yet the balance of this history is clearly positive. The Bologna Process remains the longest-standing regional cooperation framework in higher education anywhere in the world, and the only one to have produced overarching systematic convergence — a shared degree architecture, a shared quality assurance reference, a shared recognition regime — through purely voluntary intergovernmental means, across a membership that spans EU and non-EU states, and that has now shown itself capable of suspending members for violating its values.

3. The unfinished agenda: Where Bologna has and has not delivered

This chapter is the core of the impact stream of the study. Applying the approach announced in Chapter 1 — *what was committed* → *what was measured* → *what actually changed*, it takes the findings of the 2010 Independent Assessment as its baseline and reads them against the evidence available in 2024–2026, principally the 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR), the stakeholder surveys of 2023–2024, EUA Trends 2024 and ESU's Bologna With Student Eyes 2024. The structure of the chapter mirrors the finding it documents: Section 3.1 records what worked; Section 3.2 shows the substantive gaps identified in 2010 that remain open; Section 3.3 documents the gaps that have accumulated since 2010; and Section 3.4 analyses the transversal deficit that helps explain the others.

3.1. The features of most success: the structural layer and the EHEA as a recognisable space

3.1.1 The key commitments in general

- **Committed:** readable and comparable degrees in a common cycle structure (Bologna, 1999; Berlin, 2003), a shared credit system, quality assurance in line with common standards (Bergen, 2005), and recognition anchored in the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- **Measured:** continuously, through stocktaking (2005–2009) and five implementation reports (2012–2024), making the key commitments the best-monitored territory of the entire Process.
- **Changed:** fundamentally. The 2024 BPIR confirms that the three-cycle degree structure is implemented in virtually all EHEA systems, that first and second cycle programmes overwhelmingly follow the agreed ECTS ranges, and that no system maintains a parallel degree architecture outside the Bologna structure other than regulated integrated programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). Quality assurance has been transformed from a patchwork of national inspection traditions into a shared professional field: external QA in line with the ESG is the EHEA paradigm, the EQAR register and ENQA's membership socialisation gives agencies a common legitimacy test, and the DEQAR database makes external QA results publicly searchable across borders. On recognition, the legislative battle identified as nearly won in 2010 — when 39 countries already had LRC-compliant legislation (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8) has since been effectively completed at the level of formal law. The scale of the quality assurance infrastructure now in place gives some measure of what was built: the 2024 BPIR records 33 of 49 higher education systems as fully meeting the quality assurance key commitment, with all institutions subject to regular external review by an EQAR-

registered agency, and most of the others with at least half of their institutions reviewed at programme or institutional level by such an agency (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, ch. 2). DEQAR passed 100,000 published external quality assurance reports during 2024 and currently holds over 133,000 reports covering more than 5,100 institutions (EQAR, 2026).

Nevertheless, structural convergence has a compliance ceiling well below universality: on the BPIR's composite scorecard indicator — over 90% of programmes within the agreed ECTS ranges for both cycles, under 20% of students in integrated programmes, no programmes outside the structure — only slightly more than half of education systems with available data fully comply (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, ch. 2). Convergence is real; completeness is not. Second, and more importantly for this study, the key commitments succeeded for identifiable reasons that the other commitments lack: each element had a precise technical definition, a designated instrument (ECTS Users' Guide, ESG, LRC, DS template), a monitoring routine with country-level visibility, and a specialist community — QA agencies, ENIC-NARIC centres, QF bodies — whose professional identity became bound up with implementation. Where all four conditions held, Bologna Process successfully delivered. This is an important lesson the 2027 priorities should internalise, and Chapter 6 returns to it.

A fifth condition is that the key commitments were built on comparatively open ground. Credit accumulation, degree cycle architecture, external quality assurance and qualifications referencing were either absent from most national systems in 1999 or existed in forms that no entrenched constituency was strongly invested in defending. The areas where Bologna has delivered in a lesser amount, like the social dimension, lifelong learning, funding models, institutional governance, are precisely those where deep national settlements already existed, shaped by welfare-state design, labour-market institutions and decades of political contestation. Building on open ground is a different task from renegotiating an occupied one, and the research literature makes the same point in the vocabulary of path dependence: the QF-EHEA advanced through a sequence of self-reinforcing ministerial decisions taken at a moment when the field was still being defined (Feeney & Hogan, 2017), while national arrangements with longer institutional histories proved markedly more resistant to European steering (Witte, 2008; Sin, Veiga & Amaral, 2016).

The success of the structural decade is not straightforwardly replicable, because the remaining agenda is not structurally analogous to the one that was completed. Where a future priority resembles the key commitments — a defined instrument, a monitoring routine, a specialist community, and comparatively little entrenched national practice to displace — the Bologna method can be expected to work very well. Where it does not, the Process should expect to influence national choices rather than determine them, and should design its commitments accordingly. Chapter 6 applies this test to each of the five proposed priorities.

3.1.2 *The Diploma Supplement*

- **Committed:** every graduate to receive the Diploma Supplement automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken European language — a commitment dating from Berlin (2003), with a revised template adopted at Paris (2018) and digital issuance encouraged since.
- **Measured:** issuance modalities in every implementation report, through a four-part scorecard indicator (to every graduate, automatically, free of charge, in a widely spoken European language).
- **Changed:** comprehensively. All EHEA countries have introduced the Diploma Supplement, and 39 of the 48 systems with available data now comply with all four ministerial commitments; the remaining systems each miss only one criterion, and none misses two or more (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, ch. 2). The residual non-compliance is narrow and identifiable — issuance on request rather than automatically in a small number of systems, and fees for versions beyond the standard language provision in a handful of others. Measured against the 2010 baseline, when automatic and free issuance was the practice in most institutions in only 30 of 46 countries (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8), this a clear case of a commitment carried from partial to near-universal implementation.

The 2010 assessment's warning that awareness of the existence and meaning of the Diploma Supplement among learners and employers needed improvement (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8) has not been answered though by the issuance data, because issuance and use are different questions and only the first is monitored. The Diploma Supplement is therefore a success in delivery with an open question about purpose — and that question now belongs to the digital credentials discussion in Chapter 5, where the relevant issue is no longer whether the document is produced but whether its successor arrangements are machine-readable, verifiable and actually consulted.

3.1.3 *The EHEA as a recognisable distinct space*

- **Committed:** in the Bologna Declaration's second strategic objective — the promotion of the European system of higher education worldwide.
- **Measured:** only recently, e.g. through the 2023–2024 IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders beyond the EHEA.
- **Changed:** substantially. The survey found that the Bologna tools best known outside Europe are precisely the structural ones — quality assurance and the three-cycle structure with ECTS — and that stakeholders' overall assessment of the Process's impact on their systems' interaction with Europe is positive (IN-GLOBAL & CG GPD, 2024, pp. 6, 9). Most tellingly, respondents from outside Europe overwhelmingly describe the

EHEA framework as “a useful reference and inspiration in developing their own national or regional frameworks” (IN-GLOBAL & CG GPD, 2024, p. 10). The EHEA has thus become a global reference model, emulated selectively from Latin America to Southeast Asia and sometimes adopted wholesale beyond what EHEA dialogue initiatives themselves intended.

3.2. Persistent gaps from the 2010 assessment still open in 2024

3.2.1 Social dimension

- **Committed:** since Prague (2001) and with increasing elaboration ever since — the London (2007) definition that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of populations; the Leuven (2009) call for measurable national targets; the Yerevan (2015) strategy; the Rome (2020) Principles and Guidelines (Annex II); and the Tirana (2024) Indicators and Descriptors, presented as the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA (Bologna Process, 2024; ESU, 2024a).
- **Measured:** poorly and late. The 2010 assessment already noted that 39 of 48 systems reported under-representation of specific groups — principally lower socio-economic backgrounds, non-traditional routes, migrant backgrounds and disability — while lacking comparable data on most of them (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 58). EUROSTUDENT remains the main comparative source, and the inability of EHEA countries to agree on a common benchmark is why the Tirana Conference produced an indicator framework rather than targets.
- **Changed:** partially. The 2010 assessment's blunt verdict that “*the progress achieved in the area of the social dimension has not been impressive*” (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, p. 89) has never been overturned, but progress can be found both longitudinally in EUROSTUDENT. data and by analysing the incipient measures for implementing the Principles and Guidelines. Nevertheless, the composition of the student body continues to mirror pre-existing social inequality (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, ch. 4).

The 2010 case studies also anticipated the structural reason. Progress on equity was concentrated in countries where it was already a national priority (Westerheijden et al., 2010b, pp. 20–24, 88–89). Fifteen years later the pattern persists in stakeholder perception: in ESU's 2024 survey, only 57% of national student unions consider that their government treats the social dimension as a priority, and 53% say the same of higher education institutions, figures the unions themselves read against continued advocacy rather than delivery (ESU, 2024a, pp. 92–93). The conclusion, developed in Chapter 6, is that in this area the Bologna commitment has functioned as a mirror of and shaper for national priorities, not a driver of them, a reading

developed further in an analysis of the salience of national action plans for policy reform in the field of social dimension (Onita & Haj, forthcoming)

3.2.2 Qualifications frameworks

- **Committed:** Bergen (2005) adopted the QF-EHEA and asked for national qualification frameworks compliant with it
- **Measured:** formally through self-certification status, NQF adoption in every implementation report since.
- **Changed:** technically, yes: national qualifications frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA now exist across the EHEA and self-certification is essentially complete. Substantively, the 2010 assessment that the “*actual impact of the qualifications frameworks ... will depend on curriculum reform by higher education institutions*” (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8) remains undocumented at scale. Learning outcomes are widely written and both the use of learning outcomes and the alignment of the study programmes with NQFs, certified with QF-EHEA, are part of the ESG. Nevertheless, writing learning outcomes accurately and their application in teaching and assessment remains difficult to fully measure. ESU's 2024 recommendations to public authorities regarding QFs includes to “*better explain their role to students and employers*”, and support institutions in writing learning outcomes “*that are adequately linked to the descriptors of the NQF and are used for assessment*” (ESU, 2024a, pp. 198–199).

3.3.3 Recognition

- **Committed:** ratification and application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Berlin, 2003, and continuously since); automatic recognition as a goal from Bucharest (2012); a key commitment since Paris (2018).
- **Measured:** legislation is measured systematically through every implementation report since 2012. What is measured by BPIR is the policy as reported by public authorities. The ENIC-NARIC networks and projects coordinated by centres such as CIMEA generate a considerable volume of data on recognition casework, but it is project-bound and not fed into a common reporting line. Furthermore, thirty-five of 48 systems now apply system-level automatic recognition either universally (19) or to a defined subset of EHEA countries (16) — an achievement measured against the 2012 baseline.
- **Changed:** at the level of law, comprehensively. Nevertheless, the 2010 finding that “*different interpretations of ‘substantial differences’ and other terms and practices around recognition ... creates uncertainty*” (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, p. 8) remains a live description: divergent interpretation of substantial differences is still the recurring theme of the Thematic Peer Group B agenda and of the projects supporting it (TPG-LRC CoRE), and ESU's 2024 recommendations still ask public authorities to support institutions “*with the interpretation of substantial differences*”, to guarantee user-friendly procedures with clear time limits, and to start collecting data on recognition decisions,

denials and appeals (ESU, 2024a, p. 199). The EU has meanwhile moved with the 2018 Council Recommendation setting the objective of automatic mutual recognition among Member States by 2025 (Council of the European Union, 2018).

1.3. New gaps accumulated since 2010

3.3.1 Flexible learning paths and lifelong learning

- **Committed:** since Prague (2001), where lifelong learning strategies were declared necessary for competitiveness, social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life; specified through London (2007), Leuven (2009) — flexible learning paths, part-time studies, work-based routes, recognition of prior learning — and Bucharest (2012), through to Tirana (2024) (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2025).
- **Measured:** intermittently and mostly qualitatively; the absence of agreed indicators for RPL uptake, part-time provision or adult participation in higher education is itself a finding.
- **Changed:** marginally. The London Communiqué's 2007 verdict — that some elements of flexible learning existed in most countries, but “*a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning [was] at an early stage*” (cited in BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2025, p. 1) has remained substantially accurate through every subsequent stocktake: nearly a quarter-century after the Prague Conference, lifelong learning is the EHEA's longest-standing unimplemented commitment. This is changing at the level of working structures: in the 2024–2027 cycle flexible learning paths are one of the two transversal objectives of the Thematic Peer Groups, which are preparing a shared publication on the theme through the BP4LnT project coordinated by EURASHE. The obstacles are structural and include unresolved cost-sharing between the state, employers and learners; governance arrangements that leave continuing education at the margin of institutional funding formulas and academic career incentives; unresolved quality assurance for non-degree provision; and an inclusivity problem in the form of the well-documented Matthew effect in adult learning — participation is consistently highest among those who are already highly qualified, so that unsteered lifelong learning provision amplifies rather than reduces educational inequality. According to the 2022 Adult Education Survey, 65.7% of adults in the EU-27 with tertiary qualifications participated in education or training over the preceding twelve months, against 41.5% of those with medium-level qualifications and 25.1% of the low-qualified — that is, adults who already hold a higher education qualification are more than two and a half times as likely to keep learning as those who do not (Cedefop, 2026, drawing on Eurostat AES)

3.3.2 Micro-credentials

- **Committed:** in Rome, where ministers asked the BFUG *to explore how and to what extent these smaller, flexible units, including those leading to microcredentials, can be*

defined, developed, implemented and recognised by our institutions using EHEA tools, and at Tirana (2024), where ministers considered micro-credentials as a new modality of provision, and asked the BFUG to review the ECTS Users' Guide 2015 by 2027 to adapt it to current developments “including micro-credentials” (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 2).

- **Measured:** for the first time in the 2024 BPIR, which mapped micro-credential provision across systems — finding that by 2022/2023 ten EHEA education systems had included micro-credentials in their national qualifications frameworks, most expressing them in ECTS credits (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, p. 63).
- **Changed:** The reference definition in circulation is not a Bologna instrument but the 2022 EU Council Recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2022). The proposed revised ECTS Users' Guide (Draft 3.1, February 2026), which applies the full ECTS feature set — learning outcomes, workload, QF-EHEA level referencing, stackability — to stand-alone learning opportunities, and which is to be submitted for adoption at Iași-Chișinău, would be the first genuine Bologna tool in this space (Advisory Group on the ECTS Users' Guide Revision, 2026).

3.3.3. EHEA-ERA linkage

- **Committed:** encouraged in Paris (2018), committed in Rome (2020) in unusually operational language: “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”, with named foci on research-based learning, academic and scientific freedom, and the SDGs (Bologna Process, 2020, cited in BFUG, 2025, pp. 3–4); reaffirmed at Tirana (2024).
- **Measured:** not at all.
- **Changed:** A 2021 ad hoc task force produced a background note and a proposal for increasing synergies between the EHEA, the higher education dimension of the EEA and the ERA; the December 2025 background paper for the Copenhagen BFUG meeting records that “Since then, there has been little progress made on identifying a tangible process to address this” (BFUG, 2025, p. 4). The EHEA-ERA gap is a clear current case of aspiration without instrumentalisation.

3.3.4. VET-HE permeability

- **Committed:** barely. Across twenty-five years of communiqués there is a single concrete reference to vocational education and training: Bergen (2005) underlined “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” — that is,

the then-emerging EQF (cited in BFUG, 2025, p. 2). Thereafter the theme fell silent at ministerial level for nearly two decades, even as the parallel Copenhagen Process (2002, Riga 2015, Osnabrück 2020) built the VET-side infrastructure (BFUG, 2025).

- **Measured:** not within Bologna monitoring; permeability appears at most indirectly, through short-cycle and RPL data.
- **Changed:** on the ground hybrid qualifications, dual study programmes and shared QA arrangements have multiplied, with some countries operating single QA agencies and common guidelines across HE and VET (BFUG, 2025, pp. 2–3) — but without EHEA-level tools to generalise these practices. The theme has now re-entered the agenda through three converging routes: the revalorisation of EQF level 5 and short-cycle provision within higher education; demographic and labour-market pressure that makes tertiary permeability a structural rather than optional question (see Chapter 5); and, concretely, the proposal for the revised ECTS Users' Guide for Iași–Chișinău, which explicitly provides that ECTS “*can be used for all types of learning, regardless of the level, the mode of delivery, or the status of the learner*” and that its use in other education sectors “*can strengthen permeability between sectors*” (Advisory Group on the ECTS Users' Guide Revision, 2026). The December 2025 BFUG discussion in Copenhagen, structured around exactly this question of bridging Bologna and Copenhagen structures, signals that VET–HE permeability is a candidate priority.

3.3.5. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence

- **Committed:** since Paris (2018), where Ministers committed to enabling education systems to make better use of digital and blended education with appropriate quality assurance; extended at Rome (2020) with the first ministerial reference to artificial intelligence, and at Tirana (2024), where Ministers committed to supporting the ethical, trustworthy, responsible and rights-based use of AI and asked the BFUG to consider the longer-term impact of the digital transition on the key commitments and the Bologna tools (Bologna Process, 2018, 2020, 2024).
- **Measured:** barely, and not as a commitment in its own right. No implementation report indicator tracks digital or AI provision, institutional AI policy, or digital credentialing; what exists is sector self-reporting through EUA Trends.
- **Changed:** the environment has changed faster than the commitment. Adoption is now close to universal at the level of practice and marginal at the level of governance: OECD finds generative AI use among students approaching saturation within three years, reaching 95% of UK undergraduates and around 90% of German students by 2025/26, while most institutions still lack the infrastructure and guidance to support responsible use (OECD, 2026b). Only 14% of institutions reported being fully equipped with AI policies in 2024 (Gaebel et al., 2024). This is the clearest instance in the current record

of a commitment overtaken by events rather than neglected, and which is why Chapter 6 treats it as a cross-cutting priority rather than one file among others.

3.3.6. *Internationalisation and mobility*

- **Committed:** from the Bologna Declaration onwards, and quantified at Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009) in the EHEA's only numerical benchmark: at least 20% of graduates to have had a study or training period abroad by 2020. Elaborated through the 2012 mobility strategy *Mobility for Better Learning*, and recommitted at Tirana (2024).
- **Measured:** more systematically than any other non-structural commitment, through the implementation reports and Eurostat/UOE mobility data.
- **Changed:** substantially, but short of the target and unevenly. Mobility has grown across the EHEA and is consistently the area where stakeholders rate the Process's impact most positively (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 8–9); yet the 20% benchmark was missed in 2020 and restated in Tirana without a delivery mechanism yet.

1.4. **The disconnection from practitioners**

More than half of the individual respondents to the 2023 stakeholder perception survey did not know of the EHEA-level governing structure at all, and 18% of national and European organisations active in the sector were likewise unfamiliar with it (TF EKS, 2024, p. 6). Familiarity is stratified along ministries and national agencies.

Furthermore, only about half of students and respondents working in higher education institutions feel consulted at all (adequately or with room for improvement), directly or through representative bodies, while a large group considers consultation insufficient and many students are unable to answer the question in the first place (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, p. 11). The TF EKS analysis adds the organisational nuance: organisational respondents generally feel adequately consulted in national structures, individuals far less so, and nearly 50% of student respondents cannot say whether they are adequately consulted (TF EKS, 2024, p. 10). ESU's parallel reading of the same survey sharpens the student figures: only slightly above 20% of participating student unions feel adequately consulted, against roughly 40% who feel adequately informed (ESU, 2024a, p. 26).

TF EKS also documented that even the BFUG's own 2019 consultation on future priorities was, in some countries, answered by ministerial personnel alone, without any consultation of the sector despite such expectations (TF EKS, 2024, p. 10). Its focus groups found that in countries where the main Bologna reforms were adopted long ago, the BFUG-level debates reach national higher education communities partially or not at all (TF EKS, 2024, p. 10).

On a neo-corporatist reading of how European policy coordination works, though, the appropriate division of labour is that national authorities participate directly in EHEA

governance while institutions and their staff and students are engaged indirectly — consulted on overarching priorities, and then decisive at the level where implementation actually occurs, through national consultation structures and institutional governance. In that perspective, low practitioner awareness of the BFUG is not a governance failure, but rather what a functioning multi-level system looks like, and the relevant test is whether national-level intermediation works, not whether practitioners can name Bologna-level bodies.

However, the TF EKS found that national consultation structures bringing together BFUG delegates and sector stakeholders exist in only a minority of members (TF EKS, 2024). The mechanism that is supposed to make indirect engagement legitimate is thus absent in many countries.

An intergovernmental process has the engagement down-stream as the most effective transmission belt, and the evidence of Sections 3.2 and 3.3 shows what happens to commitments that never acquire an ‘implementing community’. The governance responses that could be considered, such as strengthening the role of national action plans, national BFUG-type fora of the kind operating in France and Germany, and renewed Bologna expert networks (TF EKS, 2024; ESU, 2024a, pp. 26–27) are assessed as candidate priorities in Chapter 6.

4. How are the members of the BFUG looking at the future?

Chapters 2 and 3 examined the Bologna Process from the outside in: what Ministers committed to, and what monitoring and assessment evidence shows was delivered. This chapter reverses the perspective by synthesising, side by side, the full consultation record on the future of the Bologna Process accumulated since 2018 (see Section 1.3 and Annex Table A2.1).

The analysis corpus consists of four completed instruments. The October 2018 online survey of BFUG members and consultative members on governance and thematic priorities after 2020 (BFUG, 2019a) and the 2019 national and organisational consultations on the vision of the EHEA after 2020 (BFUG, 2019b) constitute the intergovernmental preparation of the Rome Communiqué. The two IN-GLOBAL surveys of 2023–2024 (one of stakeholders within the EHEA, one of stakeholders beyond it) shifted the respondent base from governments to the wider higher education community (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024). The proposed Autumn 2026 BFUG survey on the future of the Bologna Process, proposed to the Task Force on the Future of Bologna and the Drafting Committee for the Iasi-Chisinau Ministerial Communiqué, would return the exercise to the BFUG as the direct empirical preparation of the 2027 proposals. Read together, the instruments provide a picture of how the membership's view of the future has evolved across a decade — with the important caveats, set out in Section 1.4, that the samples are small, self-selected and that no instrument in the corpus was designed as such for longitudinal comparison.

4.1. Evolving perspectives on the future of the Bologna Process

The 2018 BFUG survey: implementation first becomes a priority

The first step in the follow-up of the Paris Conference 2018 mandate — Ministers' request that the BFUG "submit proposals for the main priorities for the next decade" (Bologna Process, 2018) — was an online survey of BFUG members and consultative members carried out in October 2018 under the Austrian–Swiss co-chairmanship. It received 40 responses (32 members, 8 consultative members) and was reported to the BFUG in Bucharest in April 2019 (BFUG, 2019a, p. 1). The questionnaire proposed six thematic priorities for the post-2020 decade: promoting active and responsible citizenship; linking the EHEA and the ERA; using digital technologies; supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds; enhancing teacher support; and improving professional recognition. Five of the six were confirmed; only "improving professional recognition" failed to gather support, with about ten mentions (BFUG, 2019a, p. 1; Annex Table A2.2). The free suggestions for additional topics clustered around innovation in learning and teaching, fundamental values, and mobility (BFUG, 2019a, p. 1) a detail worth registering, because fundamental values, absent from the proposed list, thus entered the future agenda bottom-up, two years before the Rome Communiqué made them a named policy stream and six years before the Tirana Communiqué annexed statements on the fundamental values.

Two findings of the 2018 survey have proved the most durable. The first is the insistence, recorded verbatim in the outcomes report, that "implementation of key commitments" should always be seen as a priority in its own right (BFUG, 2019a, p. 1) — the earliest formulation of the implementation-first consensus that runs through every subsequent consultation round. The second is a marked scepticism towards quantification: about one respondent in two either suggested no topics amenable to quantitative 2030 goals or stated that such goals should not be set, given the external and national context factors involved. The question as put, however, offered respondents only a binary: EHEA-wide quantified goals or none. It did not ask about the intermediate option that is in fact the characteristic instrument of European policy coordination — member states setting their own national targets against commonly agreed objectives and reporting on them, with comparison rather than compliance doing the work. That is the logic the Leuven Communiqué had already adopted for the social dimension in 2009, the logic the Working Group on Internationalisation and Mobility has been applying to national internationalisation strategies, and the logic the research literature identifies as the mechanism through which the Bologna Process acquired binding force in the first place (Veiga & Amaral, 2006; Ravinet, 2008). The 2018 finding should therefore be read as scepticism about centrally set European benchmarks, not as a settled rejection of quantification as such. Only three areas — mobility, students from non-traditional backgrounds and teacher support — were mentioned as quantifiable with any frequency, and several respondents insisted that any targets be coordinated with the indicators then being identified for the EU post-2020 framework (BFUG, 2019a, pp. 1–2; Annex Table A2.3).

On governance, the most common answer was cautious: responses stating that no substantial changes should occur, together with non-responses, slightly outnumbered those proposing change (BFUG, 2019a, p. 2). But the specific proposals that were made read, in retrospect, as a work programme that took most of a decade to reach ministerial level. Roughly half of the proposals on the Secretariat favoured the creation of a permanent, multinational and professional body, with pros and cons identified and a task force suggested to examine feasibility (BFUG, 2019a, p. 2) — the direct ancestor of the Task Force on a long-term Secretariat that Tirana finally established in 2024 (Bologna Process, 2024; see Section 2.4). Proposals on the Board asked that its membership be reduced and that it be given real coordination power so that the BFUG could concentrate on strategy rather than detail; proposals on the BFUG itself asked for fewer procedural discussions, small-group formats, and members with a clear mandate and closer relations to their ministers (BFUG, 2019a, pp. 2–3; Annex Table A2.4). Views on the Bologna Policy Forum were openly conflicting — its focus judged unclear, its follow-up unresourced — while a clear preference emerged for holding ministerial conferences every three years (BFUG, 2019a, p. 3), the rhythm in fact adopted for Tirana 2024 to Iași-Chișinău 2027.

The richest single question, measured by the volume and detail of answers, concerned connections with higher education practitioners (BFUG, 2019a, pp. 3–4). Respondents proposed opening thematic or parallel BFUG sessions to practitioners, including regular practitioner consultation in the BFUG working methods, creating thematic practitioner networks and an e-community platform, reinvigorating the Bologna expert teams — a model that attracted "widespread positive assessment" — appointing national practitioners to the working

structures, and pairing each ministry representative in the BFUG with a national expert (BFUG, 2019a, p. 4). As such, the members themselves had diagnosed and prescribed most of the remedies that the TF EKS would formally recommend in 2024 (TF EKS, 2024). The remaining questions rounded out the picture: broad support for more Bologna events between conferences; suggestions to include the ENIC-NARIC networks and employers more formally; and, among thematic innovations, more attention to the arts and humanities and to future skills for new jobs (BFUG, 2019a, p. 4).

The 2019 national consultations: confirmation with national inflections

Building on the survey results, the BFUG agreed to conduct a follow-up consultation at national level and among stakeholder organisations, focusing on thematic priorities and the vision of the future of the EHEA. The exercise was launched by the BFUG Secretariat on 28 June 2019 and reported in draft on 8 November 2019, under the Finnish–Turkish co-chairmanship; 39 responses were received (35 members, 3 consultative members, 1 partner), with several delegations reporting that national consultations were still ongoing (BFUG, 2019b, p. 1). Methodologically, the round was heterogeneous by design, including written and online consultation, questionnaires, face-to-face and virtual meetings, workshops, focus groups and round tables. The report records that in most countries "a real discussion" was animated, involving ministries, policy-makers, higher education institutions, national organisations, researchers, employers and student unions; in some countries the discussion centred on the state of national implementation and produced proposals for systemic reform and national targets (BFUG, 2019b, p. 2).

Substantively, the consultations upheld the centrality and relevance of all seven key themes then under discussion — the societal role of higher education; inclusiveness; innovative, flexible and relevant learning and teaching; lifelong learning; digitalisation; internationalisation and mobility; and governance and autonomy — and, notably, proposed no additional key themes (BFUG, 2019b, p. 2; Annex Table A2.6). This substantive skeleton passed almost unchanged into the Rome vision and the Tirana chapters.

On targets, Germany argued that quantitative mobility targets beyond 2020 should be revised since many countries would not reach the 2020 target, while maintaining that targets should nevertheless be set. From a different perspective, Ukraine proposed maximalist national targets for 2030, including 95% graduate employment within three years, fully digital document flows including diplomas and Diploma Supplements, and 60% student and staff mobility (BFUG, 2019b, pp. 3, 5–6; Annex Table A2.5). The Netherlands and Sweden captured the median position: move to next goals while remaining focused on the implementation of key commitments (BFUG, 2019b, p. 3).

Two early signals in the 2019 material acquired their full significance only later. The first is artificial intelligence, with Romania's input arguing that technological development, including AI, would enable higher education institutions to act as agents of change in the twenty-first century, and France and the United Kingdom asking that the digital transition of society and AI "be further discussed" (BFUG, 2019b, pp. 3–5). The second is sustainability as a value question: Iceland proposed "climatically responsible" higher education as a new value for the EHEA, and

Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom placed climate change among the few key areas for 2020–2030, alongside fundamental values and the challenge of non-implementation (BFUG, 2019b, pp. 2–3).

The consultative members' inputs completed the picture: EUA argued that an ambitious vision demonstrates the added value of European collaboration but that "light and flexible approaches and structures" are needed, and ETUCE put academic freedom, public investment and staff working conditions at the top of its list (BFUG, 2019b, p. 3).

The 2024 IN-GLOBAL surveys: the view from the community — and from beyond

The third consultation round inverted the respondent base. Conducted between 23 June and 11 September 2023 for the BFUG Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing (TF EKS) with the support of the IN-GLOBAL project, and reported in February 2024, the survey of stakeholders from the EHEA addressed the entire higher education community (students, academics, staff, management, ministries, agencies and outside stakeholders) and attracted 2,587 responses, of which 1,930 full responses were analysed (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 3, 6). The source report is candid about its limitations: responses were heavily concentrated in three countries (Ukraine, Hungary, Romania), and the analysis therefore relies on differences between stakeholder groups and areas rather than absolute frequencies (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 4–6).

The headline finding is a positive overall assessment of the Bologna Process' impact, strongest and most consensual precisely where the Process began: international cooperation and incoming and outgoing student mobility (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 8–9). The report itself immediately enters the attribution caveat that this study adopted as a methodological limitation in Chapter 1: cooperation and mobility were advanced not only by the Bologna Process but also by EU policies and programmes such as Erasmus+, with overlaps that make it difficult to isolate the Process' distinct impact (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, p. 8).

A minority of respondents articulated criticism by over-bureaucratisation in implementing Bologna reforms; EHEA tools not fully embraced by academics; rigid curricula with little real student choice; doubts about the suitability of the three-cycle structure for all disciplines, especially regulated professions; complaints about changed programme length in both directions; regret at the departure from the traditional "Humboldtian" university; and a perceived decrease of academic freedom and institutional democracy attributed to a more managerial and commercialised approach (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 9–10).

Country-level exceptions concentrate the same message: the Process' impact on institutional autonomy is perceived negatively in Slovenia and Sweden, and Slovenian respondents also judged its impact on quality and relevance negatively (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, p. 9). The report's own reading is that most such comments "suggest that there is a need to enhance information and understanding" to align local implementation with the actual goals of the Process (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, p. 10), but for a study for the future it is equally important to record that a small fraction of the academic community contests the goals themselves, not merely their communication.

On the future agenda, the most-ranked topics of interest — the three-cycle structure, quality assurance and student-centred learning — coincide with the topics respondents already know best, suggesting a continuing demand for knowledge-sharing even on the "core" acquis, while topic priorities vary far more between countries than between stakeholder groups (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, p. 13).

The free-text additions are where the emerging agenda surfaces: the most frequently mentioned topics were EU policies — the European University Alliances, together with the proposal for a European Degree (label) and a European legal status for alliances — followed by artificial intelligence and its impact on higher education, academic integrity and anti-corruption (including AI misuse), social inequality, joint programmes and their quality assurance, dialogue with business, and staff working conditions (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 13–14). On the Rome 2020 priority goals, none is considered achieved, but the interconnected goal is judged closest — 28% of respondents considering it achieved or close to achieved, against 22% for the inclusive and innovative goals — which the report attributes to the fact that interconnectedness enshrines the original missions of the Process (IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024, pp. 14–15).

The parallel survey of stakeholders from beyond the EHEA, conducted in the same window for the BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, collected 560 responses — of which 462 (83%) from Iraq, a concentration produced by intense local dissemination, leaving roughly a hundred responses from the rest of the world, skewed towards professionals in national and international organisations (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, pp. 5–6). Within these limits, three findings stand out for the 2027 agenda. First, the relationship most countries seek with the Bologna Process is inspirational, with most regions regarding the EHEA tools and policies as "a useful reference and inspiration in developing their own regional and national frameworks" (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, pp. 10, 16). Second, the Rome priority goals are widely shared beyond the EHEA — more strongly, in fact, than the higher-education-related Sustainable Development Goals — yet the interconnected goal is the least shared of the three, probably because its formulation reads as inward-focused on the EHEA itself (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, pp. 12–13, 16). Set against the EHEA survey, this produces the asymmetry already noted in this study: interconnectedness is the pillar rated closest to being achieved inside the EHEA and the least shared beyond it — a finding with direct consequences for how the 2027 communiqué frames global engagement. Third, the demand from partners is for practitioner-level substance rather than institutional form: a majority expressed interest in more structured cooperation with the EHEA, but the overwhelming majority of comments asked for training opportunities, staff exchange and dialogue at practitioner level, with only a small number suggesting a formal status of affiliation or membership (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, p. 15). Artificial intelligence appears here too among the topics raised in addition to the proposed list — confirming it as the one genuinely new theme common to both sides of the EHEA boundary (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, p. 12).

The consultative members' formal positions

The survey record is complemented by the formal positions that consultative members adopted ahead of the Tirana Ministerial Conference, which sharpen the governance demands visible in the surveys. ESU's 2023 statement on the future of the Bologna Process welcomed the peer-support approach of the Thematic Peer Groups but asked that it be transposed to further areas and that its tools be improved; called for "a more developed monitoring system" combining de jure and de facto indicators from a range of sources; proposed roadmaps for countries "constantly lagging behind" on commitments; reiterated support for a permanent, professionalised and independent Secretariat; insisted that consensus be kept for policy issues "in order not to create a two-speed Bologna"; and argued that, since all EU Member States and the Commission are full EHEA members, they are "bound to respect the EHEA agreed policies" when developing joint endeavours such as the European Education Area and the European Universities initiative (ESU, 2023).

EUA, for its part, has consistently coupled support for an ambitious common vision with a preference for light and flexible structures and a focus on implementation support, urging ahead of Tirana that the key commitments — quality assurance, recognition and qualifications frameworks — be brought to completion as a priority across all members (EUA, 2024; BFUG, 2019b, p. 3).

Reading the four completed instruments in sequence, between 2018 and 2024, the membership's answer to "what should the EHEA do next" barely changed: complete the key commitments, deliver the social dimension, modernise learning and teaching, take digitalisation — later AI — seriously, and stay connected to the ERA and the world.

4.2. A proposed Autumn 2026 BFUG Survey on the Future of the Bologna Process

A fourth consultation round is being suggested by this study. It stems from the Tirana Communiqué's request that the BFUG "submit to us in 2027 proposals for the main priorities for the next decade, in close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff and students", coupled with the mandate to work on the "future-proof development, dissemination and possible expansion" of the Bologna tools (Bologna Process, 2024). Within the 2024–2027 Work Programme, this mandate was assigned to the Task Force on the Future of Bologna (TF FoB), co-chaired by the Belgian Flemish Community, Germany, Ireland (up until January 2026) and Ukraine, with a membership of over twenty countries and the consultative members EUA, ESU, ETUCE and EURASHE.

The Task Force's method is deliberately different from that of its 2018–2019 predecessors: rather than a single survey-and-synthesis exercise, it organised a rolling series of structured debates — a dedicated working session of around two hours at each BFUG meeting of the period, with expected inputs for the 2027 communiqué, including "a focussed set of relevant topics for the BFUG for the next decade" (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2024).

Debates held to date have included lifelong learning, at the Warsaw BFUG meeting of February 2025, supported by a background paper tracing the commitment from Prague 2001 to Tirana 2024 (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2025; see Sections 3.3 and 5.2), and the interconnectedness of the EHEA and VET at the Copenhagen BFUG meeting of December 2025, supported by the background paper analysed in Section 3.3 (BFUG, 2025). The dedicated debate on the EHEA–ERA relationship did not take place at the Nicosia BFUG meeting of March 2026 as originally foreseen; it has been postponed to an online session on 6 October 2026 (see Priority 6.4).

The Autumn 2026 survey would operationalise the fourth task in the Task Force's Terms of Reference: "to test and strengthen the evidence base for the topics by conducting a brief preparatory survey prior to a BFUG where the outcomes of the survey would be discussed", possibly combined with an evidence-based study or meta-study investigating potential outcomes, successes and challenges of the Process (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2024). The present study is designed as the companion to that survey: the analysis of Chapters 2, 3 and 5 supplies the meta-study component, while this chapter provides the longitudinal baseline against which the 2026 responses can be read.

4.3 Key signals across all sources

Consensus on what: a remarkably stable substantive agenda

The first signal that emerges from the corpus is convergence on substance. The seven themes confirmed in 2019 map, with only changes of wording, onto the Rome vision and the Tirana chapter structure; the 2019 consultations proposed no additional key themes, and the 2024 community survey validated the Process' core missions while pointing at gaps that were already commitments, not novelties (BFUG, 2019b; IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024). Across eight years of consultation, the only genuinely new entrant to the agenda is artificial intelligence — and even it entered bottom-up, flagged by Romania, France and the United Kingdom in 2019 and confirmed as the top emerging interest within and beyond the EHEA in 2024, before the Tirana Communiqué addressed it (BFUG, 2019b; IN-GLOBAL & TF EKS, 2024; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024). The perspective thus focused on implementing and updating what exists, with Tirana's national action plans for the key commitments the first institutional response commensurate with that demand (Bologna Process, 2024; Section 2.4).

Dissensus on how: targets, monitoring, machinery

The second signal is that the consensus is not present when the discussion shifts from direction to instrument. Three instrument questions recur across the corpus without resolution. On quantitative targets, in 2018 half of the member responses supported them. The only agreed quantitative target, the 20% mobility benchmark, remained unmet in 2020 and re-committed in Tirana without a delivery mechanism. On monitoring stringency, the peer-support-only compromise that emerged from the 2015–2018 implementation debate (BFUG Working Group 2 on Implementation, 2018; Section 2.3) is accepted by member states but contested by

stakeholders asking for de facto indicators and roadmaps for persistently lagging countries (ESU, 2023).

The bottleneck is implementation governance — and it was visible in 2010

The consultation record does not mandate a new vision — the Rome triptych is confirmed by members, communities and partners alike, within and beyond the EHEA. The proposition that the Process' constraint is not vision but implementation governance was stated, in nearly modern terms, by the 2010 Independent Assessment. Its interview-based appraisal of the follow-up structures found a governance architecture "effective for the purposes of consensus seeking and political negotiation over changing process goals" but "not able to answer properly to the challenges of the implementation phases of the process"; discussions dominated by representatives of a small number of countries and some consultative members; no clear division of work between the BFUG and its Board; BFUG work increasingly overburdened by reporting at the expense of policy discussion; and, in a number of countries, intermittent communication between the BFUG and the national actors in charge of policy and implementation, with the lack of continuity of the persons representing countries on the BFUG the most frequently mentioned reason. Some interviewees wondered whether frequent changes of persons reflected lower levels of political interest and commitment (Westerheijden et al., 2010c, pp. 35–37).

Fourteen years later, the TF EKS reproduced the same findings from the opposite end of the transmission belt: the frequent change of national BFUG members leads to a loss of "historical memory" and of the link with stakeholders; less experienced representatives lack information about how the BFUG operates, which hinders active participation; in many countries the link between national BFUG members and national stakeholders is weak, so that EHEA-level discussions do not reach practitioners; and 2018 respondents had already recommended that members maintain closer relations with their ministers and hold a clearer mandate (TF EKS, 2024, pp. 10–11; BFUG, 2019a).

The research literature states the stakes more sharply than the consultation record does. Writing from inside the 2015–2018 Advisory Group on non-implementation, Viðarsdóttir (2018) argued that the peer-support model subsequently adopted at Paris contains no endpoint and no obvious consequence for members that neither improve nor engage, and that the underlying difficulty is a widespread reading of voluntariness as extending beyond participation to implementation — a country may join the Process and then treat its commitments as a menu rather than a set. The warning attached to that reading is the one that matters for 2027: incomplete implementation, left unaddressed, produces a two-tiered or multi-tiered EHEA. Deca and Harmsen (2020) reach a more balanced verdict, but locate the same limit: intergovernmentalism can generate convergence and sustain a shared normative frame, yet it cannot compel a member that has decided not to move.

Eight years after the Paris peer-support decision, the Tirana national action plans are the first instrument capable of beginning to close the implementation look, because they are the first to

require each member to state, publicly and by name, what it intends to do about its own gaps. Whether they do close it is an empirical question that will have to be answered, and it is the reason Chapter 6 treats their consolidation as the central governance test rather than as an administrative detail.

5. Global trends shaping higher education in the next decade

While Chapters 2 and 3 looked backwards at what twenty-five years of commitments have and have not delivered, and Chapter 4 synthesised how BFUG members and stakeholders themselves view the future of the Process, the present chapter turns outwards and examines the global trends that will influence higher education — and therefore the choices available to Ministers in Iași and Chișinău in 2027 — over the next decade. The chapter is explicitly forward-looking, but it is grounded in the Bologna context: each trend is read through a single analytical question, namely *what, if anything, can a voluntary intergovernmental process realistically do about it*. Not all global trends are amenable to intergovernmental action through the Bologna Process; some are better handled by other frameworks and some are simply the environment within which the EHEA will have to operate. Distinguishing between these categories — trends the Process can address through its shared tools, trends where it is one actor among several, and trends to which it can only adapt — is the purpose of the concluding section (5.9).

The evidence base combines the desk research conducted for this study, the survey and consultation sources synthesised in Chapter 4, the 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024), and, for the digital and artificial intelligence dimension, the comparative study on digitalisation in higher education prepared within the GLOBAL-2030 project (GLOBAL-2030, 2026, in preparation).

5.1. AI and digital transformation

A system-level transformation, not a technology question

Artificial intelligence is treated in this study as the single cross-cutting challenge with the widest system-level implications for the EHEA. Generative AI redefines what learning is (when a substantial share of cognitive work can be delegated), what assessment measures (when the authorship of submitted work can no longer be presumed), and what a qualification attests. Each of these redefinitions touches one of the shared instruments on which the EHEA's structural achievements rest.

The ministerial trajectory: from Paris 2018 to Tirana 2024

The EHEA has not been silent on the issue; rather, the ministerial commitments show a three-step progression of increasing specificity. In Paris (2018), digitalisation entered the Bologna agenda explicitly for the first time, with Ministers committing to “enable our education systems to make better use of digital and blended education, with appropriate quality assurance” and welcoming the digitalisation of the Diploma Supplement (Bologna Process, 2018, p. 3). In Rome (2020), held online under pandemic conditions, Ministers made the first explicit ministerial

reference to artificial intelligence, noting that “while our societies increasingly rely on innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence, we must ensure that these observe ethical standards and human rights and foster inclusion” (Bologna Process, 2020, p. 4). In Tirana (2024), Ministers moved from acknowledgement to substantive commitment, recognising that AI “impacts our societies and economies, and also learning, teaching, assessment and research”, committing to support its “ethical, trustworthy, responsible, and rights-based use”, and, decisively for the 2027 agenda, asking the BFUG to “consider in its work the wider and longer-term impact of the digital transition on higher education in the EHEA, including AI, and in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools” (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 4). The question for 2027 is therefore not whether AI belongs on the Bologna agenda but what the mandated reconsideration of the key commitments and tools should include.

A transformed regulatory environment

The next decade will be the first in which higher education in most of the EHEA operates under binding AI law. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 (the EU AI Act), in force since 1 August 2024, classifies AI systems used to determine access or admission to educational institutions, to evaluate learning outcomes, and to monitor and detect prohibited behaviour during tests as high-risk; following the adoption of the Digital Omnibus on AI (Regulation (EU) 2026/1744), the corresponding obligations apply from 2 December 2027 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, 2026). In parallel, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS No. 225), opened for signature on 5 September 2024, constitutes the first legally binding international treaty in the field, is open to non-European states, and is explicitly designed to be complemented by sectoral instruments — with the Council of Europe’s education sector actively examining a dedicated instrument on AI in education (Council of Europe, 2024). At the global level, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021), the Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research (2023), and the AI competency frameworks for students and for teachers (2024) provide the soft-law baseline shared by EHEA and non-EHEA systems alike. A structural feature of this landscape deserves emphasis: the binding instruments (the AI Act) apply to only a subset of EHEA members, reproducing within the digital domain a two-tier governance reality.

The Bologna tools under revision — and the gaps that remain

The clearest concrete manifestation of the AI challenge inside the Bologna acquis is the ongoing revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA. Launched in September 2024 and coordinated by the authoring organisations, the revision builds on the ENQA-coordinated QA-FIT evidence base; a revised draft was submitted to the BFUG at its Nicosia meeting in March 2026, with adoption foreseen at the 2027 Ministerial Conference (E4 Group et al., 2026). The draft mainstreams digital and AI considerations across the standards rather than creating a separate regime: the guidelines on quality assurance policy provide that institutional policy “addresses the overall use and implications of artificial intelligence in learning, teaching and quality assurance processes”; the standard on student-centred learning requires

that any use of AI in learning, teaching and assessment be responsible, human-centred and subject to human oversight; and digital infrastructure is placed on the same footing as physical infrastructure (E4 Group et al., 2026). A parallel revision of the ECTS Users' Guide is under preparation for adoption at the Iași-Chișinău Conference (Advisory Group on the ECTS Users' Guide Revision, 2026) which does not touch on the question of how notional student workload might be impacted by the systematic use of generative AI.

Beyond these two revisions, however, the gaps are considerable. There is as yet no EHEA-wide position on AI in higher education comparable to the positions the Process holds on the other policy commitments; digital credentialing arrangements remain fragmented; AI literacy is not yet articulated as a graduate competence in the QF-EHEA; and institutional governance of AI lags far behind tool deployment. The institutional evidence from the Trends 2024 survey shows that only 14% of institutions reported being fully equipped with policies on the use of artificial intelligence, with a further 31% equipped to some extent (Gaebel et al., 2024).

The OECD's review of system-level policy responses finds that generative AI use among students approached saturation within three years of the technology becoming publicly available — reaching 95% of UK undergraduates and around 90% of German students by 2025/26 — while adoption remains, in its own formulation, experimental and reliant on individual initiative, with most institutions and systems still lacking the infrastructure and guidance to support it responsibly (OECD, 2026b). The Digital Education Council's global survey, drawing on 45,398 responses from students and staff across 35 countries, records 88% of students using AI in their learning and 77% of staff in their teaching, up sixteen percentage points in a single year; 57% of students report that their assessments come with inadequate guidance on whether AI use is permitted, and only 31% of staff consider that their institution involves them meaningfully in shaping AI policy (Digital Education Council, 2026). The second source is industry-linked and its figures should be read as indicative rather than as measurement, but the two converge on the same finding: the governance is widening.

The comparative study conducted within the GLOBAL-2030 project situates the EHEA's position in the global landscape of digitalisation and AI governance across five macro-regions. First, in every region examined, the diffusion of digital and AI capacity tends to reproduce and amplify pre-existing inequality — a “digital Matthew effect” observable between regions (the digital divide documented in Section 5.8), within regions, and within institutions, where access to frontier AI models increasingly separates institutions and individuals (GLOBAL-2030, 2026, in preparation).. Second, while regions converge on the problems (academic integrity, AI literacy, the governance gap), they diverge sharply on regulatory philosophy, from the rights-based, risk-tiered architecture consolidated in the EHEA through the EU AI Act and CETS 225, to state-led content-control models and innovation-first soft-law approaches elsewhere. Third, and most relevant for the Global Policy Forum, AI is the single most widely shared emerging interest among stakeholders beyond the EHEA: the IN-GLOBAL survey found that the increased use of AI represents “a solid platform for dialogue and exchange between the EHEA and other regions” (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on

Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, p. 16). AI is thus simultaneously the EHEA's largest internal adaptation challenge and its most promising external cooperation agenda.

5.2. The lifelong learning reality

The traditional student is no longer the default

The second trend is often described in the future tense, but the evidence shows it is a present reality. In the Trends 2024 survey, 25% of European higher education institutions reported a decrease in the number of bachelor's students over the past five years, and 22% a decrease in master's students; looking forward, 19% of institutions predict a further decrease at bachelor's level, a figure whose significance is underlined by the fact that bachelor's students account for almost 60% of the total EHEA student population (Gaebel et al., 2024). Behind the EHEA average lie alarming country trends: all responding institutions in Lithuania, 75% in Germany and 63% in Poland reported decreasing bachelor's enrolment, and 56% in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Gaebel et al., 2024). The 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report confirms the systemic picture: 18 EHEA countries, all but one situated in Eastern Europe, reported a decline in student enrolment over the past five years, some by as much as a fifth, with Lithuania (22%), Moldova (21%) and Armenia (18%) at the sharpest end (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, p. 23). This reshapes institutional missions and undermines the assumption, implicit in much EHEA policy since 1999, that the "traditional student" entering directly from secondary school, studying full-time, completing a degree in one sequence is the default direct beneficiary of higher education policy.

The demographic and labour-market drivers

Two structural forces drive the shift, with the first being demography. Eurostat projects that the EU population will peak at around 453 million in 2026 and decline thereafter, with the proportion of young people (0–19) falling in both relative and absolute terms from 23.3% (99.4 million) in 2025 to 16.7% (66.6 million) by 2100. The under-20 age group is shrinking most steeply between 2023 and 2050 precisely in EHEA countries already reporting enrolment decline: Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Croatia and Poland (Eurostat, 2026; Darvas et al., 2024). The second is labour-market transformation: the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report estimates that employers expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030 and that a majority of the global workforce will require training in this horizon (World Economic Forum, 2025). Together, these forces make the adult learners (upskilling, reskilling, returning) an increasingly central group of beneficiaries. Institutions already register the change: a quarter of institutions report growth in mature learner enrolment and 41% expect it to increase over the next five years, while the 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report confirms that the number of adult graduates is likely to continue growing (Gaebel et al., 2024; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). Revealingly, however, 39% of institutions have no information at all about their mature learner enrolment, a data gap that is itself a symptom of systems still organised around the traditional student (Gaebel et al., 2024). EUROSTUDENT supplies the learner-side counterpart, and its eighth round confirms that delayed and non-linear

entry is a structural feature of the EHEA student body rather than an anomaly at its edges: students without a higher education background enter disproportionately through delayed transition routes, and almost a third of master's students from non-tertiary family backgrounds report a delayed transition into the second cycle, against a quarter of those from tertiary backgrounds (EUROSTUDENT, 2024, indicators B1–B3). Flexibility is therefore a condition on which under-represented students already depend.

From nice-to-have to structural necessity

Against this background, the instruments that the Bologna Process has treated for two decades as desirable extensions, such as recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, flexible pathways, VET–HE permeability move to structural necessity. The implementation record, documented in Section 3.3, is not particularly encouraging. Lifelong learning has been committed to since the Prague Conference in 2001 but it still matches the London-era “early stage” diagnosis, with unresolved challenges of cost-sharing, governance, quality and inclusivity, including a Matthew-effect risk to inclusivity. The institutional data are consistent: only 21% of Trends 2024 respondents use recognition of prior learning for non-formal and informal learning for admission purposes, and under Trends 2018 three quarters of institutions reported that their lifelong learning provision was organised separately from that offered to conventional students (Gaebel et al., 2024). The Tirana Conference renewed the commitment in unambiguous terms, stating that learning paths “*need to be flexible, properly delivered, quality assured, and recognised*”, including “*the recognition of prior learning, and new forms of education provision, such as micro-credentials*” (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 4) but, as Chapter 3 showed, no agreed EHEA tools yet operationalise it. VET–HE permeability, mentioned in the communiqués only once (Bergen 2005), has returned to the agenda through the interconnectedness discussion and the revision of the ECTS Users’ Guide for the Iași–Chișinău Conference (BFUG, 2025; Advisory Group on the ECTS Users’ Guide Revision, 2026).

A final observation applies to Sections 5.1 and 5.2 jointly. Taken together, AI and the lifelong learning do not merely require adjustments to EHEA cooperation; they may require a rethinking of the mission and format of traditional higher education itself: what a degree is for, or over what time span learning is organised. A reflection exercise for 2027 that treated these as incremental policy files would underestimate them.

5.3. The green transition and sustainability

From declaration to institutional embedding

Sustainability has moved, over the past five years, from the declaratory margins of higher education policy to the centre of institutional strategy. In Trends 2024, greening and sustainable development are of high strategic importance for 74% of responding institutions; 72% have a strategy or equivalent document explicitly addressing the green transition or environmental sustainability, up from 61% in 2021 and greening and the UN Sustainable Development Goals figure among the top five issues that have impacted institutional strategies since 2018, ahead of political and geopolitical change (Gaebel et al., 2024). SDG alignment is

increasingly embedded in national higher education strategies, and the research and teaching roles of institutions are being redefined around climate and sustainability — from whole-institution approaches to campus operations, to curricula developing climate and environmental literacy across disciplines.

The policy infrastructure sits largely outside Bologna

It is significant, however, where the operative policy instruments for this trend are located. The European strategy for universities assigns universities a key role in the twin green and digital transitions and announces concrete supporting actions — peer learning on whole-institution approaches, short learning courses leading to micro-credentials for green skills, the Higher Education Climate Frontrunners platform, and the greening of Erasmus+ (European Commission, 2022). The Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and environmental sustainability (2022) and the GreenComp European sustainability competence framework provide the competence-side infrastructure. In other words, the green transition in European higher education is being driven primarily through EU instruments, national strategies and institutional initiative rather than through the Bologna acquis.

The EHEA's communiqués acknowledge the SDGs and the responsibility of higher education towards sustainable development, but the Process has created no dedicated tool, working structure or monitoring arrangement in this field. The scale of the ministerial commitment in the Tirana Communiqué is a single clause, in which Ministers undertake to support institutions “in strengthening their contribution to society and their local communities, responding to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the green transition in the area of higher education” (Bologna Process, 2024)..

For the 2027 reflection, this suggests a deliberately modest conclusion: sustainability is a trend to which the Bologna Process should remain attentive to — notably where it intersects the tools (quality assurance of sustainability-related provision, recognition of green micro-credentials, learning outcomes for sustainability competences in the QF-EHEA logic) — but it is not a field where intergovernmental action through Bologna offers distinctive added value over what UNESCO, the EU, national governments and institutions are already doing.

5.4. Academic freedom and democratic values under pressure

A measurable global deterioration

The evidence that fundamental values are under growing pressure is no longer anecdotal. The Academic Freedom Index Update 2026, covering 179 countries and territories, identifies 50 countries that experienced a statistically and substantively significant decline in academic freedom over the preceding decade, against only nine registering improvement. All dimensions of academic freedom are now declining in more countries than they are improving, with the most widespread declines in the freedom to research and teach and in campus integrity (Kinzelbach et al., 2026). Two findings are particularly consequential for the EHEA. First, the decline is no longer confined to autocratising states: the 2026 update documents a downward

trend within liberal democracies, including several EHEA members. Second, the report singles out the erosion of institutional autonomy in the United States — whose score fell from 3.3 in 2019 to 1.7 in 2025 as a case of exceptionally fast deterioration, compared with the more gradual declines observed in other countries (Kinzelbach et al., 2026). Institutional self-reporting inside the EHEA points in the same direction: while a majority of institutions describe fundamental values as stable or improving, 19% of Trends 2024 respondents report a decrease in institutional autonomy, 11% a decrease in academic freedom — and around a third of institutions in Hungary and the United Kingdom, and roughly 40% in the Netherlands and Poland, report declining academic freedom over the past five years (Gaebel et al., 2024).

Bologna as a framework of shared values, not just shared tools

The Bologna Process has responded to this deterioration by building, for the first time, a strong *acquis* for its fundamental values. The Rome Conference (2020) adopted a common understanding of academic freedom; the Tirana Conference (2024) adopted statements on the other five fundamental values and mandated monitoring. The first cycle is now available (49 systems; protection, promotion, outlook and practice reported separately). Furthermore, the 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report contained, for the first time, a chapter on values based on *de jure* monitoring (Bologna Process, 2020, 2024; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). The April 2022 suspension of Russia's and Belarus's rights of participation converted the values agenda from preamble into practice (Bologna Process, 2024). The trend for the next decade is thus double-edged: external pressure on values is rising, including within consolidated democracies, while the EHEA is the front-runner moving towards monitoring. The first EHEA monitoring cycle points the same way from a different instrument: 45 of 49 systems report threats to academic freedom and 31 report infringements, against near-universal legal recognition of the value (EHEA Fundamental Values Monitoring Database, 2026). The open question for 2027 is what follows monitoring: whether the Process develops proportionate, credible responses to documented breaches (peer support, thematic peer groups, or, at the limit, the established precedent of suspension), or whether monitoring without consequence reproduces at the fundamental values level the implementation gap documented in Chapter 3 for other commitments.

AI and academic integrity: a values issue, not only a technical one

One dimension of the AI transformation belongs squarely in this section. Academic integrity, identified by the GLOBAL-2030 comparative study as a point of worldwide convergence, is under systemic strain from generative AI, and the EHEA's normative response has been to treat it as a values question: the draft revised ESG explicitly links academic integrity to the responsible use of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies (E4 Group et al., 2026; GLOBAL-2030, 2026, in preparation). Beyond assessment fraud, the deeper issue is epistemic: the capacity of higher education to certify what individuals know and can do is part of the trust infrastructure of democratic societies, and its erosion would compound the pressures documented above. This is a domain where the Bologna framework of shared values and the Bologna toolset intersect, and where the Council of Europe's exploration of a dedicated legal instrument on AI in

education offers a complementary, binding track that the EHEA should track closely rather than duplicate (Council of Europe, 2024).[2]

What the first EHEA monitoring cycle shows

The first full EHEA cycle (49 systems, reference date 30 June 2026) confirms the global picture rather than contradicting it. Legal recognition of the six values is broad and largely static; full protection is not. Only 16 systems meet all four protection aspects for academic freedom and 12 for institutional autonomy, while the two public-responsibility values are legislated almost completely (39 and 40 systems at full protection). Promotion is weakest where protection is thinnest: 22 systems have no promotion measure for academic freedom and 26 none for institutional autonomy. Where external evaluation of either freedom exists at all (10 systems for academic freedom; 7 for autonomy), it is embedded in quality assurance rather than assigned to a dedicated body.

The de facto record is the sharper finding. Threats are reported in 45 systems for academic freedom, 38 for institutional autonomy and 45 for participation; 32 systems report threats on all six values. The pressures that recur across values — funding, employment precarity, governance centralisation, self-censorship, and generative AI on the integrity side — are conditions of exercise, not gaps in statutory wording. The student coverage gap is structural: academic-freedom protection extends to students in only 30 systems, and organised student-union responses were missing from 26.

The trend for the next decade is therefore double-edged in a more precise sense than it was in 2024: external pressure on values is rising, including within consolidated democracies, while the EHEA is no longer only moving towards monitoring but already holds a first comparable dataset. The open question for 2027 is what follows that dataset — whether the Process develops proportionate, credible responses to documented de facto strain and to the promotion deficit on the freedoms side (peer support, thematic peer groups, or, at the limit, the established precedent of suspension), or whether monitoring without consequence reproduces at the fundamental values level the implementation gap documented in Chapter 3 for other commitments.

5.5. Geopolitical reconfiguration of internationalisation

War in Ukraine and the changed role of Russia and Belarus

The armed attack against Ukraine by the Russian Federation, supported by Belarus, is the single most direct geopolitical rupture the EHEA has experienced. Its material toll on Ukrainian higher education is documented at scale: the third Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment conducted by the World Bank with the Government of Ukraine, the European Union and the United Nations found that, as of February 2024, one in five Ukrainian universities had been damaged or destroyed (World Bank et al., 2024). Furthermore, the fifth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment of February 2026, covering the 46 months to December 2025, puts total direct damage at USD 195.1 billion, 10.8% higher than a year earlier, socioeconomic losses at USD 666.7 billion, and reconstruction and recovery needs at USD 587.7 billion over ten years, close to three times Ukraine's 2025 GDP (World Bank et al., 2026), and by late 2025 the Ministry of Education and Science reported over 4,300 educational institutions damaged or destroyed — some 17% of

the national total (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2025). The United Nations refugee agency recorded some 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees globally and 3.7 million internally displaced persons as of early 2026 (UNHCR, 2026); in Trends 2024, 80% of Ukrainian institutions stated that migration had significantly impacted them (UNHCR, 2025; Gaebel et al., 2024). The systemic response of the EHEA has run on two tracks: solidarity - an EUA mapping identified more than 300 support initiatives for Ukrainian higher education across the EHEA (Gaebel et al., 2024), and exclusion, through the April 2022 suspension of Russia's and Belarus's rights of participation. The suspension has translated into institutional practice: 74% of Trends 2024 respondents have ended (59%) or partially ended (15%) their relations with Russian and Belarusian institutions, with half reporting decreasing student numbers from the two countries (Gaebel et al., 2024). A Process designed around inclusive convergence now operates in a region where academic cooperation is itself an object of geopolitical contestation.

The European Universities initiative

The second reconfiguring force is internal to Europe: the deepening of the EU's own higher education agenda. The European Universities initiative has grown far beyond its original design of 20 alliances: as of January 2025, 65 alliances involve 573 higher education institutions from 35 countries — all EU member states plus Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye, with institutions from the United Kingdom and Ukraine participating as associated partners — collectively enrolling more than 11 million students and having launched over 600 joint programmes, including around 160 joint degrees (European Parliament, 2025; European Commission, 2025). On this foundation, the Commission's Communication on a blueprint for a European degree (European Commission, 2024a) and the subsequent Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system (Council of the European Union, 2025a) propose an integration pathway — label, then possibly qualification — available in the first instance to EU members and programme countries. That pathway is now operational: the Joint European Degree Label, established by the 2025 Council Recommendation, was awarded for the first time on 15 July 2026 to two master's programmes — the EU-CONEXUS Joint Master in Marine Biotechnology and CHARM-EU's Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability — assessed by AQU Catalunya in cooperation with UNIBASQ, the first agencies to award it (European Commission, 2026). The label runs on the Bologna toolbox: it is assessed by EQAR-registered agencies, against criteria derived from the ESG and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, and expressed in ECTS. The asymmetry between the EU and non-EU circles of the EHEA is therefore one of eligibility. The Tirana Communiqué registered this development diplomatically, *“taking note”* of the blueprint and looking forward *“to exploring synergies with the EEA”* (Bologna Process, 2024, p. 5). The risk, analysed in Section 2.4 as polycentric governance, can be mitigated by ensuring that EU-driven innovation is transposed into the EHEA acquis, particularly when it touches upon common instruments and where consensus can be reached.

Global competition and shifting mobility patterns

The third force is the reconfiguration of global student flows. Of the more than six million internationally mobile tertiary students worldwide in 2023, the four large anglophone destinations still received 46% of those enrolled in OECD and partner countries (OECD, 2025a), but the pattern is breaking. Policy tightening in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States has redirected an estimated half a million students away from these destinations within 12–18 months, with continental European destinations among the principal beneficiaries: Germany hosted a record 402,000 international students in 2024/25 and France 443,670, while Asian destinations grew fastest — Japan by 21% year-on-year — and market analyses project the international student population to reach some 8.5 million by 2030, with growth concentrated outside the traditional destinations (BONARD, 2025; QS, 2025). For the EHEA this is simultaneously an opportunity and a window in which European systems gain attractiveness by comparative openness and affordability, as well as a competitive challenge, as Asian and Gulf systems invest strategically in capacity, English-medium provision and streamlined visas. It also has an internal dimension in relation to achieving the intra-EHEA mobility benchmark of 20%, still unmet and re-committed in Tirana. Concurrently, institutions remain confident (perhaps also optimistically, in anticipation of declining domestic enrolment) that their international student numbers will keep growing (Gaebel et al., 2024). Mobility patterns and cooperation frameworks will need active adjustment rather than passive continuation: recognition infrastructure, transnational and joint provision, and the geographic diversification of partnerships are the levers the Bologna toolset influences.

5.6. Financial sustainability of higher education institutions

Public funding models under pressure

Underfunding is a persistent, not an emerging, condition of higher education, but the coming decade combines it with demographic decline and expanding missions in a way that makes it a structural trend in its own right. In Trends 2024, 34% of institutions reported that their financial means had decreased over the past five years, with a further 10% describing them as stable but not good — 44% in continuously low or deteriorating funding conditions — while 70% of institutions identify underfunding as one of the top three obstacles to improving learning and teaching (Gaebel et al., 2024). At system level, EU member states spend on average 0.8% of GDP on tertiary education, ranging from 0.3% to 1.7%, a level the Commission characterises as showing signs of significant underfunding given rising student numbers and growing institutional responsibilities (European Commission, 2022). The funding-model problem is compounded by the enrolment trend documented in Section 5.2: where public funding follows full-time student numbers, demographic decline translates mechanically into budget decline, while the flexible and non-degree provision that institutions are asked to expand is typically not captured by funding formulas at all. The mismatch between what institutions are being asked to become (lifelong learning providers, digital infrastructure operators, engines of the twin transitions) and how they are financed (per traditional full-time student) is one of the quiet structural tensions of the decade.

What the Bologna Process can do is to make the consequences visible through comparable monitoring, sustain the ministerial commitment to public responsibility for higher education, and ensure that its own tools (for instance, in the funding treatment of flexible provision and micro-credentials) do not silently presuppose a funding model that demography is dismantling.

The collapse of development funding for education

A second financial trend operates largely outside the EHEA but bears directly on its global dialogue. Official development assistance has entered its steepest contraction in decades: after falling 6.1% in 2024, DAC members' ODA — that is, official development assistance from the member governments of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, the donor group whose aid flows are reported on a common definition and are therefore comparable over time — fell by 23.1% in 2025 according to preliminary OECD data, with a further decline projected for 2026, and the cuts fall hardest on the least developed countries and sub-Saharan Africa (OECD, 2025b, 2026). The education component is contracting disproportionately: the Global Education Monitoring Report documents a 12% fall in aid to education between 2023 and 2024 and projects a decline of more than 25% by 2027 — the steepest since the 1990s (UNESCO, 2025); UNICEF estimates the loss at USD 3.2 billion (24%) by 2026 (UNICEF, 2025). While these flows are directed primarily at basic education, the contraction weakens the entire education-system finance of partner countries — including several with which the EHEA conducts policy dialogue, and including capacity-building channels (such as the international dimension of Erasmus+ and higher education development cooperation) on which countries in earlier stages of higher education development rely.

5.7. The rise of alternative and microcredentials

A parallel credential diversification at scale

The emergence of credentials operating largely outside the degree system, and in some systems outside the quality assurance, qualifications framework and recognition environment of the Bologna Process cannot be overstated. While data for Europe is incomplete, results in the United States show that over 1.85 million distinct credentials are on offer from more than 134,000 providers — up from roughly one million and 60,000 providers only three years earlier (Credential Engine, 2025), and corporate-issued credentials have industrialised: entry-level professional certificate programmes on a single platform have passed 20 million enrolments, growing at over 30% year-on-year, with global employer surveys reporting overwhelming willingness to reward such credentials in hiring and pay — and a marked employer preference for credentials developed with industry over those developed solely by academic institutions (Coursera, 2026). Acknowledging the source of data from industry-sponsored surveys, the direction is unambiguous: verified skills are becoming a currency that competes with, rather than merely complements, the degree.

It is also important to note that the independent evidence is markedly more cautious. Successive OECD reviews find that the learners taking micro-credentials are disproportionately those who

already hold a degree; that labour-market returns are clearer for holders of prior bachelor's or postgraduate qualifications than for those without; that wage returns for learners with no previous higher education are mixed, with one longitudinal study finding the initial premium decaying to zero within nine years of enrolment; and that provision remains concentrated in a narrow band of fields, information technology above all (OECD, 2021, 2023).

European institutions are responding — inside inadequate frameworks

European higher education institutions are not standing aside: 70% of Trends 2024 respondents offer non-degree programmes or courses and a further 21% plan to, with half expecting enrolment in non-degree education to grow over the next five years; 75% see micro-credentials as an opportunity to diversify their offer and 77% as a way to support inclusion and widening access (Gaebel et al., 2024). But between half and two thirds of institutions report challenges that are structural rather than transitional: recognition (68%), fees and funding (67%), the absence of a business model (65%), legal and regulatory obstacles at system level (63%), credit award (61%) and quality assurance (58%) (Gaebel et al., 2024). Institutional opinion on displacement is instructive: about 60% of institutions reject the idea that micro-credentials could offer an alternative to bachelor's programmes — but for master's programmes, half of respondents consider it fully (12%) or partly (38%) possible (Gaebel et al., 2024). The EU has moved first at policy level, with the 2022 Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022), building on the MICROBOL project's common framework for micro-credentials in the EHEA.

The strategic stake for the EHEA is straightforward. If short, stackable, digitally issued credentials become a principal medium of lifelong learning and of AI-era reskilling, then either they are brought within the Bologna architecture (quality assured under the ESG, referenced to the QF-EHEA, expressed in ECTS, documented through digital credentialing compatible with the Diploma Supplement's arrangement), or the architecture loses coverage of a growing share of learning.

5.8. Global South engagement

Demand is shifting south — and the EHEA's offer is being tested

Over the coming decade, the growth of higher education demand will be overwhelmingly located outside the EHEA. Students from Asia already constitute 58% of all internationally mobile students in OECD countries (OECD, 2025a), Sub-Saharan Africa combines the world's youngest population with the lowest tertiary participation and connectivity levels — internet use at roughly 36% of the population against near-universal levels in Europe (International Telecommunication Union, 2025) — and intra-regional mobility and new regional hubs are absorbing a growing share of demand that once flowed by default to Europe and North America (BONARD, 2025; QS, 2025). At the same time, the collapse of development funding documented in Section 5.6 is weakening precisely the education systems whose demand is growing fastest, sharpening the question of what kind of partner the EHEA intends to be: a competitor for talent, a provider of capacity-building cooperation, or both under an explicit policy.

What stakeholders beyond the EHEA actually ask for

The IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from beyond the EHEA shows that perceptions of the Bologna Process are positive, and the Rome priority goals are widely shared across world regions, even more strongly than the higher education–related Sustainable Development Goal; the EHEA is also valued “as an inspiration and useful reference” for other regions’ own reform agendas (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024, p. 16). The historical record supports this reading: already the 2010 Independent Assessment observed that other world regions were selectively adapting Bologna elements while de-emphasising what did not fit, and warned that policy borrowing of separate elements ignores the interdependence between them (Westerheijden et al., 2010a). Most consequentially for institutional design, respondents beyond the EHEA expressed a clear preference for stabilised dialogue and in-depth exchange at practitioner level — between institutions, academics and students, with artificial intelligence identified as the top emerging topic of common interest (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024).

Apart from the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue and the engagement work of other working structures, additional concrete interfaces already exist on which such cooperation can build: the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, in force since March 2023, provides for the first time a global recognition instrument to which the Lisbon Recognition Convention regime can connect; the African–EHEA dialogue on recognition and quality assurance conducted through the HAQAA initiative offers a working inter-regional model; and the GLOBAL-2030 project’s comparative work on digitalisation identifies AI governance, digital credentials and academic integrity as fields where the demand for exchange is explicit across all macro-regions (UNESCO, 2019; HAQAA3, 2024; GLOBAL-2030, 2026, in preparation). The 2027 Global Policy Forum in Iași and Chișinău is a natural venue to insert these findings into the defined cooperation mechanism.

5.9. Conclusions: what Bologna can and cannot usefully address

Convergence and divergence between global trends and member priorities

Setting the trends of this chapter against the survey evidence synthesised in Chapter 4 reveals substantial convergence and one instructive divergence. The convergence: every consultation round since 2018 has demanded implementation of existing commitments, and the two dominant trends of this chapter — AI (5.1) and the lifelong learning (5.2), together with the credentials disruption (5.7) do not, in fact, require new commitments so much as the modernisation of existing tools and the delivery of commitments already made (lifelong learning, flexible paths and micro-credentials, digitalisation). As such, the 2027 Communiqué should frame adaptation to AI and lifelong learning as the completion and updating of the *acquis* rather than another addition. The early signal on AI, recorded in the 2019 national consultations, and its confirmation as the top emerging interest both within and beyond the EHEA, indicates that the opinions of the membership have, in this respect, been ahead of the formal agenda (BFUG, 2019b; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024). The divergence is that several of the forces analysed here, such as funding

contraction or demographic decline, do not appear in stakeholder consultations as priorities because they are not policy files at all but rather the environment in which the Bologna Process acts. Treating them as commitments to be adopted would repeat the aspiration-accumulation pathology documented in Chapter 2.

A three-way test

Applying the chapter's analytical question systematically yields three categories:

Trends the Bologna Process can address at intergovernmental level, through its distinctive assets. These are the trends that run through the shared tools: the adaptation of ECTS, the ESG, recognition practices and QF learning outcomes to AI (5.1); the operationalisation of lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning and VET-HE permeability (5.2); the integration of micro-credentials into the qualifications and quality assurance architecture (5.7); and the consolidation of the fundamental values monitoring framework with credible follow-up (5.4). In each case the EHEA possesses an instrument no other framework replicates at scale, and in each case the work is at least already partially scheduled (ESG and ECTS Users' Guide revisions, values monitoring data by 2027).

Trends where Bologna is one venue among several, and should position itself deliberately. The geopolitical reconfiguration of internationalisation (5.5) is co-governed with the EU (European Universities, European degree pathway, Erasmus+) and shaped by national visa and funding policy. Global South engagement (5.8) is shared with UNESCO (Global Convention, regional conventions) and with EU external instruments; Bologna Process can contribute with a specific asset in the practitioner-level, tools-based dialogue that partners request. The binding regulation of AI (5.1, 5.4) belongs to the EU and the Council of Europe; Bologna Process's role in this field should avoid a duplication.

Trends better handled by other frameworks, to which Bologna can only adapt. The level of public funding (5.6) is a matter for national budgets and EU financial frameworks; development assistance (5.6, 5.8) for donor governments and multilateral channels; demographic policy (5.2) lies wholly outside education policy; and the green transition (5.3) is being driven effectively through EU and national instruments. For these, the honest posture is acknowledgement and monitoring, not commitment, with one exception: the Bologna Process should ensure its own tools do not structurally presuppose conditions that these environmental trends are removing.

The overall conclusion of the chapter can be stated compactly. The next decade will test the Bologna Process not primarily on its capacity to articulate new visions — the Rome's vision of an inclusive, innovative, interconnected EHEA remains implementable — but on its capacity to modernise the toolset fast enough to remain the operating system of European higher education under AI, demographic reversal and geopolitical fragmentation.

6. Possible priorities for the next decade

This chapter provides concrete suggestions outlining potential priority areas for the next decade, based on the diagnosis developed so far. Each priority is deliberately structured in the same four steps: *why it matters now*; *what Bologna has already done*; *what the gap is*, and *what intergovernmental action could realistically achieve*.

6.1. AI, digitalisation and the transformation of learning (cross-cutting priority)

Why it matters now

Section 5.1 established artificial intelligence as the single cross-cutting challenge with the widest system-level implications for the EHEA: it redefines simultaneously what learning is, what assessment measures, what a credential attests and what quality assurance must examine - that is, touching upon all Bologna key commitments and tools. The urgency is regulatory, as well as pedagogical: from 2 December 2027, AI systems used for admission, for evaluating learning outcomes and for exam supervision will be subject to binding high-risk obligations under the EU AI Act in the EU subset of the EHEA — a deadline deferred from August 2026 by the Digital Omnibus on AI precisely because institutional and standards readiness lagged behind (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, 2026). AI is also the top emerging interest of stakeholders beyond the EHEA, making it a natural backbone of the 2027 Global Policy Forum agenda (IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, 2024).

What Bologna has already done

The *acquis* is more substantial than often assumed. Ministers committed to digitally enabled education with appropriate quality assurance in Paris (2018), made the first ministerial reference to AI in Rome (2020), and in Tirana (2024) committed to supporting the “*ethical, trustworthy, responsible, and rights-based use of AI*” and mandated the BFUG to consider the longer-term impact of the digital transition “*in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools*” (Bologna Process, 2018, 2020, 2024). During the 2020–2024 cycle, the Working Group on Learning and Teaching developed recommendations on the ethical use of digital tools and AI (ESU, 2024a). Most concretely, two revisions are already scheduled to reach the 2027 conference: the revised ESG, which mainstreams AI across the standards, requiring institutional policy to address AI in learning, teaching and quality assurance and any use of AI in assessment to be human-centred and subject to human oversight (E4 Group et al., 2026); and the revised ECTS Users’ Guide (Advisory Group on the ECTS Users’ Guide Revision, 2026). Beyond the tools under revision, the quality-assurance community has already moved on practice: ENQA’s *Guidelines for the Responsible Use of AI in External Quality Assurance* — establishing that AI supports but does not replace human judgement, in line with the ESG’s peer-review principle — together with early agency pilots, make AI-supported quality assurance the one dimension of the digital transition where the comparative evidence places the EHEA at the global frontier (ENQA, 2025; GLOBAL-2030, forthcoming 2026).

What the gap is

Three gaps remain between the Tirana mandate and an operational response. First, there is no EHEA-wide position on AI in higher education comparable in status to the positions the Process holds on other technical or political commitments. Second, the qualifications architecture has not been touched: the QF-EHEA, last revised in 2018 with the inclusion of short-cycle qualifications, and never touched upon the key aspects decided in 2005, does not articulate AI literacy as a graduate competence, and does not accommodate micro-credentials explicitly. The building blocks for closing this gap already exist within the EHEA's regulatory environment — Article 4 of the AI Act makes AI literacy a binding obligation for providers and deployers of AI systems, and DigComp 3.0 integrates AI competence transversally — so that the task is one of articulation through the QF-EHEA descriptors rather than of invention (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024; Cosgrove & Cachia, 2025). Third, digital credentialing arrangements remain fragmented across the EHEA, and the capacity divide between institutions able to invest in AI and those not, the digital Matthew effect documented globally, is reproducing itself inside the EHEA.

What intergovernmental action could realistically achieve

The realistic ambition is convergence of standards and tools, not regulation. . Nor is this a second-best: the comparative evidence finds that the governance model towards which every region examined is converging for AI in higher education — voluntary, interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder coordination — is precisely the Bologna method (GLOBAL-2030, forthcoming 2026). Concretely, the 2027 conference could: (i) mandate the preparation of a concise EHEA statement of principles on AI in higher education, anchored in the fundamental values acquis and consistent with the AI Act and CETS No. 225, giving all 47 systems, including the 20 outside the EU, a common reference (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024; Council of Europe, 2024); (ii) mandate a structured review of the QF-EHEA for the 2024–2030 horizon, addressing AI-era learning outcomes and the positioning of micro-credentials (see Priority 6.2); (iii) designate AI in higher education as the standing theme of the Global Policy Forum dialogue, where demand from partners is explicit and (iv) mandate the development of a small set of digitalisation and AI indicators for the BPIR 2030. Each of these actions uses a framework that already exists; none requires new instruments.

6.2. Lifelong learning as a system, not a commitment

Why it matters now

Section 5.2 documented the structural shift: 25% of EHEA institutions already report declining bachelor's enrolment, 18 EHEA countries report system-level enrolment decline, the EU population peaks in 2026, and employers expect roughly two fifths of workers' core skills to change by 2030 (Gaebel et al., 2024; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024; Eurostat,

2026; World Economic Forum, 2025). The lifelong learner is no longer a marginal category and became, over the decade, a core constituency. This converts recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, flexible pathways and VET-HE permeability from desirable extensions into structural necessities for the sustainability of institutions.

What Bologna has already done

The commitment genealogy is one of the longest in the Process: lifelong learning has been on the agenda since Prague (2001), which framed it as necessary for competitiveness, social cohesion and quality of life; London (2007) recorded flexible learning as being “at an early stage”; Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009) specified that qualifications may be obtained through flexible paths including part-time study and work-based routes, and linked lifelong learning to recognition of prior learning based on learning outcomes; Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015) reiterated this, and Tirana (2024) committed to fostering flexible learning paths “*in all higher education programmes*”, expressly including recognition of prior learning and micro-credentials (BFUG Task Force on the Future of Bologna, 2025; Bologna Process, 2024). On the EU side, the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the 2022 Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials provide reference frameworks, and the MICROBOL project developed a common framework for micro-credentials specifically for the EHEA context (Council of the European Union, 2012, 2022).

What the gap is

The widest gap in the Process is relative to the age of the commitment. The London-era “early stage” diagnosis remains broadly valid, with unresolved questions of cost-sharing, governance, quality and inclusivity, including the Matthew-effect risk in adult learning. The institutional evidence quantifies it: recognition of prior learning is used by only a minority of institutions and most organise lifelong learning separately, while between half and two thirds of institutions report structural obstacles. Finally, the Tirana commitment, as Chapter 3 showed, is not yet backed by any agreed EHEA tool.

What intergovernmental action could realistically achieve

The realistic programme is to make the existing tools carry lifelong learning, rather than to restate the commitment another time. Concretely: (i) embedding micro-credentials in the qualifications architecture — the QF-EHEA review proposed under Priority 6.1 should define how micro-credentials relate to the cycle descriptors, building on the MICROBOL framework and compatible with the 2022 EU Recommendation, so that the EHEA-wide instrument leads rather than trails behind; (ii) operationalise recognition of prior learning as a monitorable commitment — a defined BPIR indicator (share of institutions applying RPL for progress), and RPL included as a standard item in the national implementation plans agreed in Tirana; (iii) institutionalise VET-HE permeability through the Copenhagen-Bologna interface, using the two concrete alignment areas identified by the BFUG background paper — ESG-EQAVET quality assurance alignment, where several countries already operate single agencies for both sectors, and ECTS-higher VET credit-system alignment, for which the revised ECTS Users’ Guide is the available vehicle (BFUG, 2025; Advisory Group on the ECTS Users’ Guide Revision,

2026); and (iv) address the institutional “change of mentality” through peer support by supporting dedicated peer-learning strands on funding models, learner status and the mainstreaming of flexible provision.

6.3. Social dimension: from aspiration to accountability

Why it matters now

The urgency to act on social dimension has been sharpened from two directions identified in Chapter 5. Demographic decline makes widening participation an existential matter for systems losing their traditional cohorts, and the cost-of-living crisis has widened inequality in real time. A lifelong-learning agenda pursued without a social dimension correction would, through the Matthew effect, actively worsen the problem it is meant to solve.

What Bologna has already done

The *acquis* is, at least technically, complete. Bergen (2005) committed governments to report on national strategies for the social dimension; London (2007) supplied the canonical goal — that “*the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations*”; Leuven (2009) committed members to “*set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups*” by 2020; Yerevan (2015) adopted the strategy *Widening Participation for Equity and Growth*; Rome (2020) annexed the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (PAGs) — the first comprehensive and coherent set of commitments in this field, developed by the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension; and Tirana (2024) adopted the Indicators and Descriptors for the PAGs, creating for the first time an agreed measurement grid (ESU, 2024a; Bologna Process, 2020, 2024).

What the gap is

The gap is not normative but consequential: each layer of the *acquis* has been adopted and then, at least in the initial years, not truly enforced. The Bergen reporting commitment “*translated into little effective practice*”; the Leuven measurable-targets commitment for 2020 passed unmet and unremarked. However, the first post-PAGs stocktaking exercise observed noticeable implementation progress. Structural features explain the slow-time progress: the social dimension initially developed as a transversal action line without defined means, most national action in this field occurs independently of the Bologna Process, and — as the 2010 assessment already concluded — under-representation is nationally specific, so that elaborate one-size-fits-all measures cannot be defined at European level (Westerheijden et al., 2010a, 2010b). Adding to this is a persistent data problem: key equity indicators (notably socio-economic background) are unavailable or unrecorded in many systems, partly for legitimate ethical reasons, which structurally weakens comparative monitoring (Westerheijden et al., 2010a).

What intergovernmental action could realistically achieve

A clear evidence-based suggestion is to focus on a small number of monitorable commitments. Concretely: (i) convert the Leuven logic into the Tirana architecture each member state defines, within its national implementation plan (Priority 6.5), two to three quantified national equity targets, self-chosen to fit its own under-represented groups, with a 2030 horizon; the EHEA does not set the targets, it requires that targets exist and are published, respecting the 2010 finding that the content must be national; (ii) commit to a defined minimum equity data set, developed with Eurostudent and Eurostat, acknowledging and working within national data-protection constraints.

6.4. Interconnecting the knowledge ecosystem (EHEA-ERA-VET)

Why it matters now

Interconnectedness is the one pillar of the Rome 2030 vision with no operational roadmap or guidelines comparable to the PAGs for inclusiveness or the learning-and-teaching recommendations for innovation. The nearest counterpart to the PAGs on this pillar is the developing Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility prepared by the dedicated Working Group in the 2024–2027 cycle, which addresses the mobility and internationalisation dimension of interconnectedness directly and in operational terms. The gap analysed in this section is therefore narrower than the pillar as a whole: it concerns the links to research and to vocational education and training, where no comparable instrument exists. Furthermore, the IN-GLOBAL survey found it to be the most internally consolidated of the three Rome pillars yet the least externally shared (Section 4.1; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA Community, 2024). The trends of Chapter 5 give the pillar new urgency from three directions. Lifelong learning requires functioning bridges between VET and higher education. Furthermore, the ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 includes among its expected outcomes a “roadmap adopted for ERA/EEA (higher education-related) strategic alignment” - a roadmap without a Bologna reference despite the longstanding search for engagement (Council of the European Union, 2025b; European Research Area Platform, 2025).

What Bologna has already done

The commitments exist but are thin. VET-HE permeability was mentioned in the communiqués only once, in Bergen (2005), before returning to the agenda through the 2025 BFUG background paper on interconnectedness and the ECTS Users’ Guide revision (BFUG, 2025). On the research side, Paris (2018) and Rome (2020) committed to synergies between the EHEA, the EEA and the ERA, Rome specifically committing to strengthen cooperation with the ERA and calling on the BFUG to work closely with the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) on research-based learning, academic and scientific freedom, and the SDGs (BFUG, 2025). A 2021 ad hoc task force produced a background note and a proposal to the BFUG on increasing synergies, and Tirana (2024) recommitted to the goals towards 2030 (BFUG, 2025). The counterpart landscape has meanwhile matured: the ERA now runs on a policy agenda with eleven structural policies — including research careers, building on the December 2023 Council

Recommendation and the new European Charter for Researchers — and the Commission has proposed a Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education (COM(2024) 145) explicitly designed to bridge the teaching and research strands of academic work (Council of the European Union, 2025b; European Commission, 2024b).

What the gap is

The BFUG's own December 2025 background paper records little progress since the 2021 task force on identifying a tangible process for EHEA–ERA cooperation (BFUG, 2025; see Section 3.3). No standing BFUG–ERAC coordination mechanism was ever established; the three operational questions posed in 2021 — which EHEA body links to the ERA, through what coordination method, and on which concrete fields — remain unanswered four years later. On the VET side, the same paper identifies real but scattered assets (single quality assurance agencies covering both sectors in some countries; shared qualifications frameworks via the EQF) and two unexploited alignment areas: ESG–EQAVET quality assurance guidance and ECTS–VET credit-system alignment (BFUG, 2025). Meanwhile academic careers — the single issue that most concretely spans EHEA (teaching), ERA (research) and national policy — are being addressed in parallel silos: the ERA careers framework, the EU higher education careers recommendation, and the EHEA's learning-and-teaching strand, with EUA explicitly calling for synergies across all three and for the EHEA to be included in careers reform (EUA, 2024).

What intergovernmental action could realistically achieve

This is the priority where modest institutional changes would not suffice, because the obstacle has been process, not substance. Concretely: (i) ensure a standing EHEA–ERA liaison arrangement through a named BFUG working structure with a mandate to interface with the ERA Forum (the successor governance to ERAC) and a defined joint work plan on the three Rome fields: research-based learning, academic freedom, and the SDGs; the 2027 communiqué should name the counterpart body and the reporting rhythm, since the 2021 experience shows that unaddressed process questions stall for years; (ii) use the revised ECTS Users' Guide as a concrete Copenhagen–Bologna bridge identified by the BFUG's own analysis, with peer learning drawing on the countries that already operate integrated ECTS and quality assurance across VET and higher education (BFUG, 2025); (iii) connect the careers files by inviting the alignment of the EHEA's learning-and-teaching work with the ERA research-careers structural policy and the EU higher education careers recommendation, so that parity of esteem between teaching and research is pursued once, at 47-system scale, rather than three times in overlapping circles (EUA, 2024; European Commission, 2024b).

6.5. Governance, ownership and implementation culture

Why it matters now

The 2024 evidence documents both the persistence of the implementation gap (Chapter 3) and a deepening ownership problem: in the TF EKS stakeholder survey, student unions and academics reported feeling poorly consulted in the Bologna Process (BFUG, 2019a, 2019b; ESU, 2024a; IN-GLOBAL & BFUG Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA

Community, 2024). The Task Force itself found that in many countries no coordinated national approach to implementing and communicating Bologna commitments exists at all (TF EKS, 2024). The trends of Chapter 5 raise the stakes: a Process that could afford a leisurely implementation culture in a stable environment cannot afford one in a decade of AI-driven tool obsolescence, demographic contraction and geopolitical fragmentation.

What Bologna has already done

The Working Group on non-implementation (2015–2018) produced the first systematic non-implementation analysis and led to the creation of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) and the Thematic Peer Groups on the three key commitments — a peer-support model co-funded by the European Commission (BFUG Working Group 2 on Implementation, 2018). Peer-support practice has accumulated through projects such as the DAAD-managed Bologna Hub Peer Support and the EUA-managed SPHERE/HERE initiatives (TF EKS, 2024). The 2020–2024 Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing consolidated this experience into five formal recommendations adopted in 2024: national implementation plans reflecting national priorities; consultation with and use of national Bologna experts, including the establishment of Bologna hubs; identification of adequate, sustainable resources; a standing Coordination Group within the BFUG; and the pervasive use of contemporary communication tools (TF EKS, 2024). Tirana then took the decisive step: citing the BPIR's confirmation of *“still incomplete and uneven implementation”*, ministers committed to devising and publishing national action plans for addressing remaining implementation gaps within the 2024–2027 period — the first time implementation itself became the object of a named ministerial commitment.

What the gap is

Four weaknesses persist. First, the stocktaking and BPIR exercises describe non-implementation with increasing precision, but description does not necessarily trigger structured follow-up. Second, TPGs dominated by specialist communities other than ministries raises recurring questions about mandate and about how the wider academic community is engaged, while national-level consultation structures — “national BFUGs” bringing together BFUG delegates and national stakeholders — exist only in a minority of countries (ESU, 2024a). Third, the expert infrastructure has decayed: the national Bologna expert networks that once carried peer-to-peer implementation support have lapsed in many countries, and the TF EKS recommendation to reactivate them and build Bologna hubs is, so far, a recommendation without resourcing — the funding model remains dependent on Commission project cycles (TF EKS, 2024). Fourth, the new instruments are unfinished: the Tirana national action plans commitment has been successful yet requires strengthening, and the Coordination Group proposed by the TF EKS is subject to BFUG approval and definition.

What intergovernmental action could realistically achieve

Concretely, the next work programme could:

- (i) complete the national implementation plans instrument — a detailed template asking who was engaged and how; reporting on the link with BPIR and on the link with the previous national action plan; a mid-cycle BFUG review;
- (ii) institutionalise the Coordination Group recommended by the TF EKS with an explicit implementation-coordination mandate — liaison with stakeholders, support to Bologna experts and hubs, an international peer-exchange platform (TF EKS, 2024);
- (iii) revitalise the Bologna expert and hub model with a dedicated, multi-annual funding strand, drawing on the DAAD and SPHERE precedents, and with the explicit function of carrying Priorities 6.1–6.4 into institutions;
- (iv) set a minimum consultation standard, generalising the national-BFUG practice, and the BPIR monitors its existence, directly addressing the consultation deficit quantified in 2024;
- (v) make accountability follow-through automatic and supportive — a defined threshold on BPIR scorecard indicators triggers, by default, an offer of thematic peer support;
- (vi) undertake a consolidation review of the accumulated commitments, retiring or merging those that are superseded or dormant. This last step would be the clearest possible signal that the arithmetic of accumulation described in Chapter 2 has been understood.

The five priorities as a single programme

Read together, the five priorities form one programme rather than five files. The first — AI and the transformation of learning — is cross-cutting because it forces the modernisation of the same tools and frameworks on which the second (lifelong learning) and fourth (interconnectedness) depend; the third (social dimension) supplies the equity condition without which the first two would amplify existing advantage; and the fifth (governance and implementation culture) is the delivery mechanism for all four.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Synthesis of the study

Twenty-five years of the Bologna Process display a single, coherent arithmetic, traced in Chapters 2 and 3: each ministerial conference has added commitments, almost none have ever been formally retired, and the resulting volume has grown far faster than the political capital and monitoring capacity available to support it. Where this arithmetic operated on open ground — the three-cycle structure, ECTS, the ESG-EQAR-DEQAR quality assurance regime, recognition under the Lisbon Recognition Convention — it produced the most extensive voluntary convergence any regional higher education framework has ever achieved, an achievement now used as a reference well beyond the EHEA's own borders. Where it met occupied ground — the social dimension, lifelong learning, the EHEA-ERA linkage, and the wider practitioner disconnect analysed in Section 3.4 — commitments accumulated language rather than concrete results delivered, reproducing across two further decades the pathology the 2010 Independent Assessment had already named: a process at risk of becoming administration without impact on the reality of higher education.

Chapter 4's reading of the consultation record, spanning 2018 to the proposed Autumn 2026 BFUG survey, shows that this is not a diagnosis the study imposes from outside. It is what the membership and the wider community have said, with remarkable consistency, for eight years: the substantive agenda barely needs adding to — the seven 2019 themes and the Rome triptych are confirmed at every subsequent checkpoint — but every consultation round splits on the instruments that would make the agenda real: quantified targets, monitoring stringency, and support infrastructure. The bottleneck is implementation governance, not vision — a finding stated in near-identical terms by the 2010 assessment's own interviews, fourteen years before the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing reproduced it from the opposite end of the assessment timeline.

Chapter 5's account of the trends bearing on the next decade — AI's system-level disruption of assessment and credentials, the arrival of the lifelong learner as the EHEA's central rather than marginal constituency, the two-speed risk created by the EU's own higher education instruments, financial fragility, the rise of micro-credentials outside the Bologna Process framework, reinforces the same conclusion from a different direction. None of these trends asks the Process to write a brand new vision. Each asks it to modernise the tools (ECTS, the ESG, the QF-EHEA, the Diploma Supplement) quickly enough to remain fully usable in an evolving environment.

Chapter 6 converted this diagnosis into five priorities for 2027: the AI-driven modernisation of the Bologna toolset; lifelong learning as an operational system rather than a loosely restated commitment; the social dimension's move from principle to monitored accountability; the interconnection of the EHEA with the European Research Area and with vocational education and training; and governance, ownership and implementation culture as a condition on which the first four depend. The recommendations below translate that programme into potential

follow-up that the EHEA Ministers can ask the BFUG to act on within the 2027–2030 Work Programme.

7.2 The 2027 ministerial conference as an inflection point

The 2027 Iași–Chișinău Conference carries a double mandate that no previous ministerial meeting has combined in quite the same way. It must take stock of the Rome 2030 vision with several years still to run, and it must open, per the Tirana mandate, the priorities for the decade beyond 2030. The 2024–2027 cycle was deliberately designed as agenda-setting rather than programme design, leaving operationalisation to the following cycle; but agenda-setting is not costless, and what Ministers commit to in Iași and Chișinău will determine whether the 2027–2030 cycle inherits a mandate it can act on, or another restated aspiration.

The stakes are concrete rather than rhetorical, for three reasons documented in this study. First, several of the instruments the next decade will depend on are already scheduled to reach this conference — the revised ESG, the revised ECTS Users' Guide, the outcome of the Task Force on a long-term Secretariat, and the first EHEA-wide fundamental values monitoring data — so that 2027 is mainly a moment to decide, adopt, and resource ongoing and future work.]

Second, the consultation record reviewed in Chapter 4 shows a membership that has converged on what needs to change and grown visibly impatient with communiqués that convert that convergence into another restatement rather than an instrument; a further cycle of recommitting the 20% mobility benchmark, the social dimension, or lifelong learning without a delivery mechanism would confirm, rather than answer, the skepticism the practitioner community has expressed for meaningful progress in these policy fields.

Third, the conference takes place in a geopolitical setting the Rome Communiqué did not anticipate — a Europe still absorbing the consequences of the war on Ukraine, co-hosted for the first time by countries directly affected by it, and operating in a values environment shown to be deteriorating even within long-standing democracies. Fundamental values monitoring without a credible account of what follows a documented breach would leave the Process's most consequential innovation of the cycle unfinished at the point where it matters most.

What needs to be committed now, in short, is not a longer list of aspirations but the delivery architecture: named mandates for tool development and reporting, and, where the evidence supports it — quantified accountability, attached to a small number of instruments the Process already possesses.

7.3 Potential policy recommendations for the Iași–Chișinău Communiqué

Building directly on the five priorities of Chapter 6, the following eight potential recommendations are suggested for consideration:

1. Adopt an EHEA Statement of Principles on Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education — covering human oversight of AI in assessment, academic integrity, equity of access and transparency towards learners, anchored in the fundamental values *acquis* and aligned with the

EU AI Act and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence (CETS No. 225), so that all 47 systems, EU and non-EU alike, share a common reference. Mandate the BFUG to review the QF-EHEA for AI-era learning outcomes and the positioning of micro-credentials within the 2027–2030 Work Programme.

2. Mandate the operationalisation of lifelong learning as a system, not a restated commitment, by embedding micro-credentials in the QF-EHEA on the basis of the MICROBOL framework, establishing recognition of prior learning as a monitorable Bologna Process Implementation Report indicator against its documented baseline, and using the revised ECTS Users' Guide to align credit accumulation and quality-assurance practice between higher education and vocational education and training.

3. Convert the social dimension from principle to accountability by requiring that every national action plan include two to three quantified, nationally self-chosen equity targets with a 2030 horizon; and committing to a minimum common equity data set developed with Eurostudent and Eurostat, within national data-protection constraints.

4. Establish a standing EHEA–European Research Area liaison mechanism, naming the BFUG working structure responsible, its counterpart within the ERA Forum, a joint work plan on research-based learning, academic and scientific freedom and the Sustainable Development Goals, and a defined reporting rhythm to the BFUG — closing a gap that has been acknowledged but unaddressed since 2021.

5. Confirm and resource the long-term EHEA Secretariat on a stable, jointly financed, multi-annual footing, formalising the direction agreed by the BFUG in March 2026 and ending the rotating national hosting model that has structured the Process's administration since 2003.

6. Institutionalise implementation governance and ownership: adopt the Coordination Group recommended by the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing with an explicit implementation-coordination mandate; set a minimum national consultation standard, generalising the “national BFUG” model to every member; commit funding for Bologna expert networks and hubs; link defined Bologna Process Implementation Report scorecard thresholds automatically to an offer of thematic peer support; and mandate a consolidation review of the accumulated commitments, retiring or merging those that are superseded or dormant — the clearest possible signal that the arithmetic of accumulation traced in this study has been understood.

7. Define a structured Global Policy Forum cooperation offer for partners beyond the EHEA, built around the practitioner-level exchange they have explicitly requested — on AI, digital credentialing, recognition equity of digital access, and quality assurance — anchored to the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications and existing inter-regional dialogue models such as HAQAA.

8. Match the declarative ambition regarding fundamental values in higher education with with a credible, published account of how the EHEA's fundamental values monitoring translates into follow-up when breaches are found.

Taken together, these eight commitments would convert the 2024–2027 cycle’s agenda-setting mandate into a 2027–2030 Work Programme with named instruments, owners and reporting lines attached to each of the five priorities.

A final recommendation is worth mentioning, as provided by someone who was a key player in the launch of the European Higher Education Area, which will soon turn 30 years old. As with any longstanding intergovernmental cooperation, its political attractiveness fades with time. It might be the time to couple the new commitments with a political relaunch of the process. This political impetus may take the form of a joint meeting of EHEA Ministers responsible for higher education, research and VET or, depending on the main foci of the Iași – Chișinău Communiqué, perhaps even a joint meeting of EHEA ministers for higher education and ministers for finance, thus recognising the crucial role of higher education in the social and economic development of our societies.

Additionally, an enhanced dialogue could be designed between the EHEA, the EU and the Council of Europe, since many topics prioritised in the work plan of these organisations, in the field of higher education, either overlap or complement each other. In this sense, meetings between the BFUG and omologue structures would be beneficial, especially in assuring coherence and coverage of important topics lending themselves to intergovernmental cooperation, in line with the existing political mandates.

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Annexes

Table A1.1. Ministerial conferences of the Bologna Process, 1998–2027: membership, commitments, instruments and governance decisions

Conference and date	Membership	Principal commitments and action lines added	Instruments and annexes adopted	Governance and process decisions
Sorbonne Declaration Paris, 25 May 1998	4 signatories (France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom)	Harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system; a system based on two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate); use of credits (ECTS-type) and semesters; promotion of student and teacher mobility and of recognition.	None (declaration only).	Open invitation to other European states to join; no follow-up structure yet.
Bologna Declaration Bologna, 19 June 1999	29 signatories	Six action lines: (1) easily readable and comparable degrees, including through the Diploma Supplement; (2) a system based on two main cycles; (3) a system of credits (ECTS-type); (4) promotion of mobility for students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff; (5) European cooperation in quality assurance; (6) European dimension in higher education.	None.	Informal follow-up arrangements agreed; biennial ministerial meetings foreseen.
Prague Communiqué 18–19 May 2001	33 (+ Croatia, Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Turkey)	Three new action lines added: (7) lifelong learning; (8) higher education institutions and students as partners in the Process; (9) promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA. First reference to the social dimension of higher education.	None.	Students recognised as full partners in higher education governance; consultative membership created (EUA, ESIB/ESU, EURASHE, Council of Europe); Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) formalised as the executive structure between conferences.
Berlin Communiqué 18–19 September 2003	40 (+ Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Holy See, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, North Macedonia)	Doctoral studies added as the third cycle, formally linking the EHEA and the European Research Area; intermediate priorities set for 2005 (quality assurance systems, the two-cycle system, recognition of degrees and periods of study); every graduate to receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge from 2005;	None (mandates issued for the ESG and QF-EHEA, both delivered at Bergen).	Stocktaking exercise instituted as the Process' first systematic monitoring mechanism; membership criterion set (parties to the European Cultural Convention committed to Bologna goals).

Conference and date	Membership	Principal commitments and action lines added	Instruments and annexes adopted	Governance and process decisions
		commitment to elaborate national qualifications frameworks and an overarching framework for the EHEA.		
Bergen Communiqué 19–20 May 2005	45 (+ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine)	Social dimension elaborated as a constituent part of the EHEA; reinforcement of mobility and of the external/global dimension; the only communiqué of the first two decades to address permeability with VET, as well as introduction of flexible learning paths and recognition of prior learning.	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG 2005) adopted; Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) adopted; principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies agreed.	ENQA, Education International (Pan-European Structure) and UNICE (now BusinessEurope) added as consultative members.
London Communiqué 17–18 May 2007	46 (+ Montenegro)	Objective in the social dimension that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of populations; Employability moved up the agenda; commitment to national strategies and action plans on the social dimension and to improved mobility data collection; first strategy for the EHEA's external projection.	Strategy "The EHEA in a Global Setting" adopted; establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) decided (operational from 2008).	EQAR created as the first — and to date only — legal entity established by the Process itself.
Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 28–29 April 2009	46	Priorities for the decade 2010–2020: social dimension with measurable national targets to be set by end of the decade; lifelong learning as a public responsibility, supported by partnerships and national qualifications frameworks; student-centred learning; employability; multidimensional transparency tools; international openness. Adoption of the EHEA's first — and still only — quantified benchmark: by 2020, at least 20% of graduates should have had a study or training period abroad.	None.	Ministerial conferences to be organised approximately every three years; BFUG to be co-chaired by the EU presidency country and a non-EU country; first Bologna Policy Forum held with non-EHEA countries.
Budapest–Vienna Declaration 10–12 March 2010	47 (+ Kazakhstan)	Official launch of the European Higher Education Area. Acknowledgement — unique in the ministerial corpus — of critical voices and protests, and that Bologna action lines were	Declaration (anniversary format), not a communiqué.	Second Bologna Policy Forum; reception of the Independent Assessment of the first decade (Westerheijden et

Conference and date	Membership	Principal commitments and action lines added	Instruments and annexes adopted	Governance and process decisions
		“implemented to varying degrees”; recommitment to full and proper implementation; affirmation of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability of institutions, and the public responsibility for higher education.		al., 2010) commissioned ahead of the conference.
Bucharest Communiqué 26–27 April 2012	47	Three overarching priorities under austerity conditions: providing quality higher education for all, enhancing graduates’ employability, and strengthening mobility; automatic recognition of comparable degrees set as a long-term goal; commitment to allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform external quality assurance across the EHEA; securing the highest possible level of public funding acknowledged as a commitment under crisis conditions.	Mobility Strategy 2020 — “Mobility for Better Learning” adopted as the first thematic strategy annexed to a communiqué.	Third Bologna Policy Forum; pattern of annexing dedicated strategies/instruments to communiqués begins.
Yerevan Communiqué 14–15 May 2015	48 (+ Belarus)	Four priorities: enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering employability throughout working lives; making systems more inclusive; implementing agreed structural reforms — the first time non-implementation is named as a central policy problem. Commitment to combat academic fraud. First admission made conditional on an accession roadmap (Belarus).	Revised ESG (2015); European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes; ECTS Users’ Guide (2015) adopted as an official EHEA document; “Widening Participation for Equity and Growth” strategy on social dimension and lifelong learning to 2020.	Report on non-implementation commissioned, initiating the governance track that produced the Paris peer-support architecture.
Paris Communiqué 24–25 May 2018	48	Introduction of the “key commitments” classification — three technical commitments singled out as the foundation of the EHEA: (1) a three-cycle system compatible with the QF-EHEA and scaled by ECTS; (2) compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; (3) quality assurance in compliance with the ESG. First substantive treatment of digitalisation in learning, teaching and assessment;	Appendix I: structured peer support for the key commitments (basis of the Thematic Peer Groups); Appendix II: strategy for the implementation of the Belarus roadmap; Appendix III: revised QF-EHEA, allowing short-cycle qualifications as a stand-alone level within the	Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) and Thematic Peer Groups A (QF), B (LRC) and C (QA) created; fifth Bologna Policy Forum.

Conference and date	Membership	Principal commitments and action lines added	Instruments and annexes adopted	Governance and process decisions
		renewed commitment to EHEA–ERA synergies; support for the social dimension and fundamental academic values.	framework; Appendix IV: revised Diploma Supplement template.	
Rome Communiqué 19 November 2020 (online)	49 (+ San Marino)	Adoption of the 2030 vision: an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA — the three-pillar architecture that structures the current cycle; first ministerial commitments on micro-credentials within the topic of flexible/lifelong learning provision; commitment to develop a framework for monitoring fundamental values; annexed guidance elevates social dimension and learning and teaching to documented policy frameworks.	Annex I: Statement on Academic Freedom; Annex II: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA; Annex III: Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching.	First fully online ministerial conference (COVID-19); Global Policy Forum format continued; Working Group on Fundamental Values established for 2021–2024.
Tirana Communiqué 29–30 May 2024	49 (rights of representation of Russia and Belarus suspended by BFUG decision of 11 April 2022)	Reaffirmation of the 2030 inclusive–innovative–interconnected vision and of the key commitments; each member to develop and publish a national action plans addressing remaining implementation gaps and knowledge-sharing; commitment to counter diploma mills and fraudulent qualifications; commitment to measure progress on the 2020 Social Dimension Principles and Guidelines through an agreed set of indicators; continued support to Ukraine and confirmation of the suspension of Russia and Belarus from all EHEA structures and activities.	Annex I: EHEA Statements on Fundamental Values (institutional autonomy, academic integrity, participation of students in higher education governance, participation of staff in higher education governance, public responsibility of and for higher education — complementing the 2020 Statement on Academic Freedom); Annex II: EHEA Rules of Procedure.	Mandates for the current cycle: revision of the ESG and of the ECTS Users' Guide; completion and piloting of the fundamental values monitoring framework; Task Force on the Future of Bologna; Task Force on the feasibility of a long-term Secretariat; TPG D on Social Dimension added;
2027 Ministerial Conference Iași and Chișinău,				

Sources: ministerial declarations and communiqués (<https://eha.info/ministerial-conferences-and-communicues/>); Westerheijden et al. (2010a; 2010b; 2010c); European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2024). Compilation by authors.

Table A1.2. Thematic commitment areas: first ministerial appearance, trajectory and status at Tirana 2024

Theme / commitment area	First ministerial appearance	Trajectory across communiqués	Status at Tirana 2024 (with BPIR 2024 evidence where applicable)
Degree structure (two, then three cycles, then short cycle added as an add-on in 2018)	Sorbonne 1998 / Bologna 1999	Two cycles (1999); third cycle added at Berlin 2003; short-cycle integrated as an optional stand-alone QF-EHEA level at Paris 2018. Designated key commitment 1 in 2018.	Structurally implemented in virtually all systems; BPIR 2024 records persisting outliers in programme-level alignment and credit ranges. Substantive use of learning outcomes remains uneven.
ECTS	Sorbonne 1998 (credits) / Bologna 1999	Transfer system extended to accumulation (Berlin 2003); ECTS Users' Guide adopted as official EHEA document at Yerevan 2015; revision mandated at Tirana 2024.	Near-universal formal adoption; revision under way for 2027 (Draft 3.1, February 2026) to address inter alia micro-credentials, RPL and digitalisation
Diploma Supplement	Bologna 1999	Automatic and free issuance committed at Berlin 2003 (deadline 2005); revised template adopted at Paris 2018 (Appendix IV).	Issued automatically and free of charge in most systems per BPIR 2024, but not universally — a minority of systems still issue only on request; digital issuance advancing but uneven.
Quality assurance	Bologna 1999	ESG adopted Bergen 2005; EQAR decided London 2007 (operational 2008); revised ESG Yerevan 2015; European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes 2015; key commitment 3 at Paris 2018; ESG revision mandated Tirana 2024.	The most consolidated Bologna infrastructure; cross-border operation of EQAR-registered agencies (Bucharest 2012 commitment) still not enabled in all systems. As of mid-2026: 57 EQAR-registered agencies; DEQAR holds 130,000+ reports on 5,100+ institutions (EQAR, 2026).
Recognition (LRC)	Bologna 1999 (building on LRC 1997)	Berlin 2003 national action plans; automatic recognition goal set at Bucharest 2012; key commitment 2 at Paris 2018; TPG B peer support since 2018.	Legislative compliance near-universal; practice inconsistent — divergent interpretation of “substantial differences” persists from the 2010 Independent Assessment through BPIR 2024.
Qualifications frameworks	Berlin 2003	QF-EHEA adopted Bergen 2005; national self-certification deadline of 2010 extended to 2012; revised QF-EHEA Paris 2018 (only through adding the short cycle); TPG A peer support since 2018.	Formally in place in nearly all systems; substantively inert at institutional level and towards employers, a gap open continuously since 2010.
Mobility	Sorbonne 1998 / Bologna 1999	20% benchmark set at Leuven 2009; Mobility Strategy 2020 annexed at Bucharest 2012; balanced mobility and virtual formats discussed from Rome 2020.	Benchmark persistently unmet — graduate mobility of roughly 9–12% depending on measure (BPIR 2024); expected focus of the 2024–2027 work programme and 2027 communiqué.
Social dimension	Prague 2001	Stronger integration in Bergen 2005; national strategies committed in London 2007; measurable targets committed Leuven 2009; “Widening Participation” strategy adopted at Yerevan 2015;	Under-represented groups remain under-represented; no common benchmark agreed. First progress measurement of PAGs due by 2027.

Theme / commitment area	First ministerial appearance	Trajectory across communiqués	Status at Tirana 2024 (with BPIR 2024 evidence where applicable)
		Principles and Guidelines (PAGs) annexed in Rome 2020; indicator framework acknowledged in Tirana 2024.	
Lifelong learning	Prague 2001	Public responsibility framing in Leuven 2009; linked to social dimension strategy in Yerevan 2015; reframed via flexible pathways and micro-credentials in Rome 2020–Tirana 2024.	Still “at an early stage” in most systems per successive BPIRs; unresolved issues of cost-sharing, governance and equity of access (Matthew effect).
Employability	Bologna 1999 (implicit); explicit from Prague 2001	Prominent from London 2007 through Yerevan 2015; fades from the ministerial text thereafter — a documented case of disappearance without formal retirement.	No dedicated commitment in Tirana 2024; labour-market relevance reappears indirectly via micro-credentials and lifelong learning.
Student-centred learning and L&T	Leuven 2009	Advisory Group on L&T from 2015 to 2024; Recommendations to National Authorities annexed at Rome 2020.	Peer-learning continues; BPIR 2024 and ESU BWSE 2024 document a persistent gap between policy endorsement and classroom practice.
Digitalisation	Paris 2018 (first substantive treatment)	Accelerated by the pandemic; Rome 2020 commitments on digitally enhanced L&T; Tirana 2024 addresses digital transition and AI implications for integrity and tools.	No dedicated Bologna instrument, group or follow-up action; addressed through the ESG and ECTS revisions and EU-level infrastructure (EDCI/Europass, European Student Card Initiative).
Fundamental values	Implicit from Bologna 1999 (Magna Charta reference); explicit codification from Rome 2020	Statement on Academic Freedom annexed Rome 2020; five further value statements annexed Tirana 2024; monitoring framework developed 2021–2027.	De-jure/de-facto monitoring framework being piloted; first full monitoring exercise expected to report to the 2027 conference.
Global / external dimension	Prague 2001 (attractiveness); strategy London 2007	Bologna Policy Forums from Leuven 2009; Global Policy Forum format from Rome 2020; CG on Global Policy Dialogue continuously operating from 2018.	IN-GLOBAL (2024) evidence: interconnectedness rated closest to achieved inside the EHEA but least shared beyond it; there is demand beyond the EHEA for practitioner-level dialogue
VET–HE permeability	Bergen 2005	Single explicit ministerial mention for nearly two decades; re-emerges via the BFUG background paper on EHEA–VET–ERA interconnectedness (December 2025) and EQF level-5 dynamics.	No operative EHEA instrument; identified in this study as a candidate priority for the 2027 agenda.
Micro-credentials	Rome 2020	Tirana 2024 continues commitment to flexible learning paths; EU Council Recommendation (2022) supplies the operative definition outside Bologna.	No agreed Bologna tools yet; treatment expected via the ECTS Users’ Guide revision.
Sustainability / SDGs	Paris 2018 (SDG reference); Rome 2020	Surfaces in Paris and Rome; thins in Tirana 2024 — a second documented case of thematic fading.	Policy infrastructure sits largely outside Bologna (EU, UNESCO, national strategies).

Theme / commitment area	First ministerial appearance	Trajectory across communiqués	Status at Tirana 2024 (with BPIR 2024 evidence where applicable)
EHEA-ERA linkage	Berlin 2003 (doctoral cycle)	Renewed commitment Paris 2018; Rome 2020 innovation pillar; BFUG background paper (December 2025) records little progress since 2021.	Structurally stalled; flagged in Chapter 3 of this study as an open gap and in Chapter 6 as a 2027 priority.

Sources: communiqué corpus 1998–2024 (EHEA, 2026); European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2024); Gover & Loukkola (2024a, 2024b); BFUG background paper on EHEA-VET-ERA interconnectedness (2025); ECTS Users' Guide Draft 3.1 (2026). Compilation by authors. The trajectory column is provisional pending the quantitative commitment coding (see note above).

Table A2.1. Overview of the consultation instruments, 2018–2026

Instrument	Timing and auspices	Respondents	Purpose and coverage
2018 BFUG online survey (doc. BFUG_RO_MK_65_9_2)	October 2018; Austrian–Swiss BFUG co-chairmanship; results presented at BFUG Bucharest, April 2019	40 responses: 32 members, 8 consultative members	First step of the Paris 2018 mandate to propose priorities and governance for the next decade; 13 questions on thematic priorities, quantitative goals and every element of EHEA governance (BFUG, Board, Secretariat, chairing, Bologna Policy Forum, conference periodicity, practitioners, stakeholders).
2019 national consultations (doc. BFUG_FI_TK_67_7_1)	Launched 28 June 2019 by the BFUG Secretariat; draft report 8 November 2019, under the Finnish co-chairmanship	39 responses: 35 members, 3 consultative members, 1 partner; several delegations reported consultations still ongoing	Follow-up at national/organisational level on the vision for the EHEA after 2020 and on seven proposed thematic priorities; consultations used surveys, workshops, focus groups and round tables involving ministries, HEIs, students, employers and researchers.
IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from the EHEA	Open 23 June – 11 September 2023; conducted for the BFUG Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing (TF EKS), supported by the IN-GLOBAL project; reported 2024	2,587 responses, of which 1,930 full responses analysed (657 partial discarded); large country imbalances (Ukraine, Hungary, Romania dominant)	Perceptions and knowledge of the Bologna Process across the higher education community (students, academics, staff, ministries, agencies); knowledge of tools, perceived impact by area, consultation and representation, priorities and formats for future activities.
IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from beyond the EHEA	Same window, 23 June – 11 September 2023; conducted for the BFUG Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue (CG GPD); reported 2024	560 responses, of which 462 from Iraq and 51 from international or undefined organisations; non-Iraq n≈98	Perceptions of the Bologna Process outside the EHEA, to inform proposals for structured cooperation and policy dialogue with other regions.

Sources: BFUG (2019a, 2019b); Gover & Loukkola (2024a, 2024b). Compilation: authors.

Table A2.2. Proposed priorities for the post-2020 decade and their confirmation (2018 BFUG survey, n=40)

Priority proposed in the questionnaire	Outcome
Promoting active and responsible citizenship	Confirmed as a priority.
Linking the EHEA and the ERA	Confirmed as a priority.
Using digital technologies	Confirmed as a priority.
Supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds	Confirmed as a priority.
Enhancing teacher support	Confirmed as a priority.
Improving professional recognition	Not confirmed — only around 10 mentions; the single proposed priority to fall below the confirmation threshold.
<i>Additional topics volunteered by respondents</i>	Mostly single mentions; groupable under three headings: innovation in learning and teaching; fundamental/core values; mobility. Respondents emphasised that implementation of the key commitments should always be treated as a priority in its own right.

Table A2.3. Quantitative goals for 2030 (2018 BFUG survey)

Question	Distribution of responses
Should quantitative goals for 2030 be set, and in which areas?	About one in two respondents either proposed no quantifiable topics or argued explicitly against setting quantitative goals, citing external and national context factors. Only three areas were mentioned with any frequency as quantifiable: mobility, students from non-traditional backgrounds, and teacher support. Several respondents recommended coordinating any targets with the EU post-2020 indicator set.

Table A2.4. Governance and working methods after 2020: main findings by question (2018 BFUG survey)

Governance item	Main findings
Working methods and structure (Q3)	Responses favouring no substantial change, together with non-responses, slightly outnumber those proposing change. Most frequent proposals: greater involvement of stakeholders, researchers and practitioners; Bologna seminars open to wider audiences; more space for peer review; more interactive BFUG meeting formats; online workspaces for working/advisory groups. The feasibility of a permanent BFUG Secretariat was raised, with a task force proposed. Strong demand for documents to be circulated well before BFUG meetings to allow national consultation.
BFUG Board (Q4)	Large majority made no proposal. Recurring suggestions: reduce Board size; give the Board more coordination and decision-making power so the BFUG can focus on strategy; hold online meetings.
BFUG Secretariat (Q5)	Large majority made no proposal. About half of the proposals made favoured a permanent, multinational, professional secretariat, with pros and cons noted and a feasibility task force suggested; others proposed more staff, Europe-wide composition, and open recruitment. (The Tirana 2024 Task Force on a long-term Secretariat is the direct institutional descendant of this item.)
BFUG itself (Q6)	More than half made no proposal. Recurring themes: focus the BFUG on a few strategic issues with fewer procedural discussions; small-group/parallel sessions; invite stakeholders; ensure members hold clear national mandates and maintain closer relations with their ministers.

Governance item	Main findings
Chairing arrangements (Q7)	Large majority made no proposal; current co-chairing judged to work well and ensure ownership. A few suggested revising the vice-chair role, including a third co-chair instead of vice-chairs.
Bologna Policy Forum (Q8)	Conflicting views: value of the BPF affirmed by some, while others noted the difficulty of identifying common targets with non-EHEA ministers, an unclear focus and scope, and no resources for follow-up. Broad consensus on involving regions and transnational organisations, not only individual countries; each BPF should produce an action plan with regional preparatory events.
Timing of ministerial conferences (Q9)	Clear preference for a three-year interval; a smaller group favoured 3–4 years; shorter or longer intervals marginal.
Connections with practitioners (Q10)	The richest item of the survey. EHEA level: thematic BFUG sessions open to practitioners; regular practitioner consultation in BFUG working methods; recognised Bologna events between conferences; an e-community platform; social media use. National level: practitioner involvement in implementation; re-invigoration of the Bologna Experts model (widespread positive assessment); practitioners appointed to WG/AG/TPG structures; dual country representation (ministry + national expert).
More Bologna events (Q11)	Majority support for more events at EHEA and national level — practice-oriented workshops, peer-learning activities, virtual conferences, and events in non-EHEA countries linked to the policy forum. A minority opposed, citing workload and resources.
Formal inclusion of stakeholders (Q12)	Suggestions concentrated on national-level inclusion (events, co-representation); ENIC-NARIC networks, employers, students and universities proposed as additions; about half of respondents made no suggestion.
Other innovations (Q13)	Large majority made no proposal; suggestions included electronic consultation and decision-making, attention to arts and humanities, and future skills for new jobs.

Source: BFUG (2018), “Governance and Thematic priorities after 2020. Outcomes of the online survey”, doc. BFUG_RO_MK_65_9_2. Question numbering follows the source document.

Table A2.5. Vision and thematic priorities of the EHEA after 2020: selected national and organisational inputs (2019 consultations, n=39)

Position	Delegations / organisations (as attributed in the source)
Focus on implementing existing key commitments before adding new goals	Netherlands; Sweden — “move to next goals while remaining focused on implementation”; echoed in the 2018 survey and in Lithuania/United Kingdom’s call to select only a few majority-backed long-term priorities.
Select few key areas for 2020–2030, including fundamental values, non-implementation, SDGs and climate	Norway; Switzerland; United Kingdom.
Linking higher education and research (EHEA–ERA)	Luxembourg; Slovenia; Italy; Romania.
Stable public funding as an enabling condition	Slovenia; Sweden.
Need for tools targeted at institutions, not only policy level; new tools alongside existing ones	Finland (both positions); Switzerland warned structures rely too much on a top-down approach; UK/Scotland urged moving away from tools that lend themselves to bureaucratisation.
Values-centred vision (openness, climate responsibility, going further on values)	Croatia; Iceland (openness as a European value; climatically responsible higher education as a new EHEA value).

Position	Delegations / organisations (as attributed in the source)
Concern about EU-driven rather than EHEA-facilitated dynamics (Erasmus+ funding of European Universities)	Ireland — the earliest recorded articulation of the “two-speed EHEA” risk analysed in Chapter 5.5 of this study.
Declare the Bologna Process finished after 2020; ministers to meet triennially to consolidate the EHEA	Liechtenstein — the only proposal to formally consider the Bologna Process finished.
Quantified national targets proposed	Ukraine: 95% graduate employment within 3 years; 100% of curricula in open virtual spaces; 100% e-document flow including diplomas and Diploma Supplements; 60% of students and staff mobile at national/international level.
Stakeholder community and ownership	Italy; EUA (active participation essential; ambitious common goals but light and flexible structures); ETUCE (academic freedom, public investment, staff working conditions, recognition of teaching, inclusiveness, climate).

Table A2.6. The seven thematic priorities: main inputs from the 2019 consultations

Theme	Main inputs (attributed as in the source)
1. Societal role of higher education	HEIs as knowledge hubs for local/regional development (Greece; Romania; France on innovation ecosystems); HEIs as guardians of freedom of speech and core values (Germany; Ukraine); link with earlier education cycles and schoolteacher education (Croatia; Italy; Romania); dialogue between higher education and research (Iceland; Italy); early flag that technology including AI will enable HEIs to act as agents of change (Romania) — the first AI reference in the consultation corpus.
2. Inclusiveness	Completion rates as a major concern in Eastern Europe (Croatia); underfunding as an inequality driver (Finland); pros and cons of social-dimension guidelines/benchmarks to be discussed (Germany); extension of inclusiveness to academic staff (Hungary); inclusion related to gender, socio-economic background, disability, age and international students including refugees (Italy); common minimum requirements for the social dimension (Latvia); equity still perceived as a problem to solve rather than a quality approach (EUA).
3. Innovative, flexible and relevant learning and teaching	Student-centred learning extended to the third cycle (Croatia); social-emotional skills alongside cognitive skills (Croatia; Romania); QA and recognition to be upgraded for changing L&T organisation (Estonia); teacher support to be included, including a European framework for assessing teaching roles (Germany; Hungary); concern about innovation-inhibiting effects of uniform QA (Germany; Ukraine); ambiguity of the “short-cycle” notion, “associate” descriptor proposed (Ireland); flexible learning goals and soft skills (Italy; UK/Scotland); topic rated the most important theme for the future (Slovenia); recognition accommodating all types of learning (Sweden); transformation to be driven by HEIs with ministries in support (EUA).
4. Lifelong learning	Recognition of prior learning including non-formal/informal learning (France; Iceland); warning against one-sided responsabilisation of learners; workers’ entitlement to continuing training (Germany); funding adequacy to avoid jeopardising quality (Greece); micro-degrees for returning learners (Latvia) — pre-dating the Rome 2020 micro-credential commitment; equal quality standards for LLL provision (Luxembourg); capacity, funding-model and policy implications at system level (Romania; EUA).
5. Digitalisation	Blockchain-based qualification verification (Czech Republic; Italy); digital transition of society and AI to be further discussed (France; United Kingdom);

Theme	Main inputs (attributed as in the source)
	virtual mobility to be included (Germany); legal and ethical conditions for IT use (Hungary); digitalisation to maximise internationalisation at home (Italy); use in administration and mobility, not only L&T (Switzerland); quantified 2030 targets (Ukraine).
6. Internationalisation and mobility	Reduce obstacles to academic mobility (Czech Republic); revise quantitative targets given widespread failure to reach the 2020 benchmark, while retaining targets and adding qualitative ones for disadvantaged students (Germany); replace “EU joint degrees” by “joint degrees” and discuss an evaluation agency for joint degrees (Germany; Ukraine); green mobility (Hungary); every student to experience internationalisation in some form even if quantitative targets are questionable (Italy); European Student Card as recognition support (Iceland); inflexibility in recognising higher vocational awards (United Kingdom).
7. Governance and autonomy	Academic values linked to governance and funding (Slovenia); academic freedom and institutional autonomy linked to quality assurance (Hungary); revenue diversification to sustain excellence (Romania).

Table A2.7. Additional 2019 inputs on governance, conferences and the global dimension

Item	Inputs
EHEA governance and working methods	Continuation of peer support for Bologna tools (Croatia; Italy; Netherlands); support for countries not reaching Bologna goals (Belgium/Flemish Community); stronger direct HEI involvement (Croatia); permanent BFUG Secretariat encouraged (Luxembourg); revival of Bologna Experts teams (Netherlands; EUA); abridged BPIR data methodology for countries outside the EU statistical system (Russian Federation).
BFUG	A more active, decision-making BFUG (Georgia); greater stakeholder and practitioner involvement (Georgia; Italy); hearings and open expert consultations in working methods; labelled Bologna events for BFUG–sector exchange (EUA).
Ministerial conferences	Three-to-four-year interval (Austria; Italy) — consistent with the 2018 survey preference.
Global policy dialogue	EHEA as a platform for interregional cooperation (Ireland; Latvia); continuation of the Bologna Policy Forum (Liechtenstein); interaction with regional organisations worldwide (Russian Federation); a special status for non-EHEA countries implementing EHEA tools (Italy).
National strategies triggered by the consultation	Legal reform focused on full ESG implementation (Albania); higher education action plan and draft law (Azerbaijan); stakeholder focus group (Cyprus); eight key aspects of higher education’s role defined (Malta); social dimension and academic freedom prioritised (Italy).

Source: BFUG (2019), “Future of the EHEA — Thematic discussion on vision and priorities. Outcomes of the online survey. Draft Report”, doc. BFUG_FI_TK_67_7_1, 8 November 2019. Attributions reproduce the source; several delegations (Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, UK, UK/Scotland) reported consultations still ongoing at the reporting date.

Table A2.8. IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from the EHEA: profile and main findings (fieldwork 2023, reported 2024)

Dimension	Finding
Respondent base	2,587 responses; 1,930 full responses analysed, 657 partial responses discarded. Academics and students are the two largest groups; strong country imbalances — substantial student participation from only four countries (Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia). Country-level aggregates computed only for the 13 countries with more than 15 responses.
Knowledge of tools	Knowledge varies strongly: the three-cycle structure and ECTS are the best-known elements; the QF-EHEA and fair recognition under the LRC are among the least

Dimension	Finding
	known; lack of awareness that stakeholder involvement is an EHEA goal singled out as “particularly concerning”. The EHEA website functions essentially as an internal communication tool: more than 80% of students and academics visit it less than once a year.
Perceived impact — most positive	International cooperation and incoming/outgoing student mobility — the original, most direct Bologna goals — rated most positively, with the smallest variation across countries and stakeholder groups. The report cautions that mobility and cooperation gains cannot be cleanly attributed to Bologna alone given overlapping EU programmes (the attribution problem acknowledged in Chapter 1).
Perceived impact — least positive	Quality of education, relevance of education/skills, accessibility, recognition of prior learning, flexible learning paths and institutional autonomy — though still majority-positive. Largest cross-country divergence in these areas plus academic freedom; impact on institutional autonomy perceived negatively in Slovenia and Sweden; Slovenian respondents also negative on quality and relevance.
Critical commentary (recurring themes)	Over-bureaucratisation; incomplete academic buy-in; rigid curricula and limited student choice; doubts about three-cycle suitability for all disciplines, especially regulated professions; complaints about changed programme lengths in both directions; loss of “Humboldtian” holistic education; absence of critical reflection on the Process itself; perceived decline of academic freedom and collegial governance under managerial and commercial pressures.
Consultation and representation	Only about half of students and HEI staff feel consulted (adequately or with room for improvement) on Bologna reforms, directly or through representative bodies — the evidentiary core of the “practitioner disconnect” analysed in Section 3.4. Recurring inputs: importance of “national BFUGs”; demand for more transparent and democratic structures; lack of academic time; language barriers.
Rome 2020 priority goals	None of the three goals considered achieved. The interconnected goal is rated closest to achieved (28% “close to achieved” or “achieved”) against 22% for the inclusive and innovative goals — read in this study as reflecting that interconnectedness enshrines the original Bologna goals while the other two pillars are newer and more ambitious.
Information sufficiency and topic demand	46% consider available information about right or more than enough; 24% see room for improvement; 11% insufficient. Top-priority topics for future exchange coincide with the best-known ones — three-cycle structure, quality assurance, student-centred learning — implying that less-known policies will need deliberate prioritisation if progress is expected. Topic priorities vary far more by country than by stakeholder group.
Emerging topics (free text)	Most frequent additions: European University Alliances, the European Degree (label) proposal and a European legal status for alliances; artificial intelligence and its impact; anti-corruption and academic integrity (diploma mills, plagiarism, adverse AI use); social inequality; joint programmes and their QA; higher education–business dialogue; staff development and working conditions.
Preferred formats	Peer-learning activities, conferences/workshops/training at both policy-maker and practitioner level, and staff exchanges (the latter especially among HEI respondents).

Source: Gover, A. & Loukkola, T. (2024a), Perception of the Bologna Process: Survey of Stakeholders from the EHEA, IN-GLOBAL project / BFUG TF EKS. Percentages as reported; underlying figures published as interactive Datawrapper charts referenced in the source.

Table A2.9. IN-GLOBAL survey of stakeholders from beyond the EHEA: profile and main findings

Dimension	Finding
Respondent base	560 responses, of which 462 from Iraq and 51 from international or undefined organisations; non-Iraqi respondents predominantly work in sub-national, national, regional or international organisations (51%). The report accordingly analyses differences between groups rather than absolute numbers, and separates Iraq throughout.
Knowledge of tools	Quality assurance and the three-cycle structure including ECTS are best known; overall knowledge slightly below the EHEA survey; the QF-EHEA and stakeholder involvement rank <i>higher</i> than within the EHEA, reflecting the system-level profile of respondents; automatic recognition and removal of obstacles to transnational cooperation are less known.
Perceived relevance and impact	Generally positive; balanced perception of Bologna's facilitation of mobility and recognition to and from the EHEA. A distinctive split: respondents from Iraq speak of "implementing Bologna" directly, reflecting national policy, while most other countries treat EHEA tools as inspiration and reference for their own frameworks — not a template. A minority of comments judge EHEA tools unsuitable without adaptation to local context.
Rome 2020 priority goals	Widely shared beyond the EHEA — more strongly, the report notes, than the higher-education SDG — providing a platform for interregional dialogue.
Demand for cooperation	Strong interest in stabilising dialogue, but focused on practitioner-level exchange between HEIs, academics and students. AI and its impact on higher education is the top emerging topic of common interest.
Communication	Respondents most familiar with conferences and the CG GPD's activities; on average more familiar with EHEA communication channels than EHEA respondents themselves — indicating a self-selected, well-informed sample.

Source: Gover, A. & Loukkola, T. (2024b), Perception of the Bologna Process: Report on Stakeholders' Perceptions Beyond the EHEA, IN-GLOBAL project / BFUG CG GPD.