Iași – Chișinău Communiqué

Draft 1

Introduction

Meeting in Iași and Chișinău, twenty-eight years after the Bologna Declaration, we, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area, reaffirm our shared commitment to an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA. That our Conference convenes across two countries, for the second time after Budapest-Vienna in 2010, is consistent with the longstanding international cooperation which sits at the centre of the Bologna Process.

This period of cooperation has taught us that the credibility of the EHEA, and the measure of our success, rests on enhancing trust: in our qualifications and the quality of programmes delivering them; in the observance of the EHEA fundamental values; and in the steadfast intention to implement the commitments agreed at our Ministerial Conferences in our systems. We acknowledge that the frameworks and tools we have built together over more than two decades exist and should be used to give practical effect to that trust, and we recognise that sustaining it requires continuous effort.

We meet at a time when that trust is being tested by developments that extend well beyond higher education: academic cooperation is increasingly viewed through the lens of strategic competition and security, artificial intelligence is transforming the production and assessment of knowledge faster than our systems can adapt, and demographic change, budgetary constraints and the rising cost of living test our shared ambition that higher education remain open to all. We are convinced that EHEA, which has adapted to significant change throughout its history, is equipped to meet these developments through cooperation rather than retrenchment.

We continue to stand with Ukraine and its higher education community, whose staff and students have sustained teaching, learning and research under circumstances that no academic community should have to face, and we decide to maintain the suspension of the rights of participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in all structures and activities of the EHEA. We commit to supporting the recovery of Ukrainian higher education and to facilitating the return of academic talent as circumstances allow.

Higher education should remain a public good and a public responsibility, contributing to the formation of European citizens as well as professionals, and providing the evidence and critical inquiry on which informed public debate depends. At a time marked by disinformation and political polarisation, we consider sustained public investment in higher education and research to be a condition for the resilience and prosperity of our societies, and we intend to advocate this position within our respective national contexts.

[The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2027 indicates that XXX.] We recognise that the uneven implementation of our agreed commitments diminishes confidence in the European Higher Education Area as a whole, including in those systems that have implemented them fully, and we consider the consistent delivery of our commitments the principal political undertaking of this Communiqué.

EHEA remains the widest policy community in higher education in Europe, and one in which governments meet between each other and with institutions, staff and students to shape common policy. We will strengthen synergies with the European Education Area and the European Research Area, so that instruments developed within them remain compatible with,

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and accessible to, the whole of EHEA, and we ask the BFUG to open a standing policy dialogue with the ERA Forum to that end.

Fundamental values: the condition of trust

Higher education can fulfil its missions only when its fundamental values are respected, protected and promoted. Yet we note with concern that, in parts of the EHEA, these values continue to come under pressure, such as through constraints on academic freedom, encroachments on institutional autonomy, and limits on the participation of students and staff in governance and/or their ability to organise independently. In some cases such pressures have intensified since we last met. Geopolitical tension, polarisation and rapid societal and technological change place further strain on open inquiry and democratic academic communities.

Against this background, the protection and promotion of the fundamental values is not a one-off achievement but a continuous and shared responsibility of all members and consultative members of the EHEA. It is in this spirit that we reaffirm our fundamental values as a coherent and indivisible whole in which deficiencies in one value cannot be offset by strength in another.

[We welcome and endorse the first report on the monitoring of the implementation of the fundamental values across EHEA, which shows XXX and identifies XXX.] We commit to giving due consideration to its findings within our own higher education systems and, where gaps are identified, to taking appropriate action to address them. We ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to continue this monitoring, building on this framework and maintaining a holistic approach that recognises the interdependence of the values as a whole, and to report back to us at our next Ministerial Conference.

We are committed to advancing a common understanding of the fundamental values across EHEA, with the statements adopted in Tirana as our shared reference point. As related initiatives multiply at European and international level, we ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to promote coherence between them, building on existing instruments and avoiding duplication, so that the understanding developed within EHEA is consolidated rather than diluted across separate processes.

We regard these values not merely as principles to be upheld in favourable circumstances, but as our standing reference point in addressing the challenges before us: academic freedom in the context of geopolitical competition and research security; institutional autonomy in the context of growing political interference in the governance of higher education institutions; academic integrity in the context of artificial intelligence and disinformation; the participation of students and staff as a source of democratic legitimacy; and public responsibility at a time of competing demands on public budgets.

We recognise that the Fundamental Values are living tools to be used to both meet challenges across the EHEA and to build bridges with European and global partners. These values must be embedded within the governance structures of our higher education institutions and systems to become a core part of shaping how our systems develop, evolve, and meet present and future challenges.

Key commitments

We welcome the work of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group and the Thematic Peer Groups and commit to continuing this peer-learning method, with the active participation of all members, and appreciate the success of the Tirana Communique mandate to introduce national action plans for implementation gaps. National action plans enhance accountability

and create enabling conditions for advancing implementation, and in this sense we commit to publishing, by the end of 2027, national action plans addressing our remaining implementation gaps, based on the 2027 BPIR report, developed with the involvement of national stakeholders. We further mandate the Bologna Follow-Up Group to structure the next work programme so that it integrates these implementation efforts across all relevant working structures.

We adopt the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and the revised European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes,[1] as well as the revised ECTS Users' Guide,[2] annexed to this Communiqué, and commit to their consistent implementation (*starting with 1st of September 2027?*), across our national frameworks. We commit to accrediting joint programmes on the basis of the European Approach alone, and we ask BFUG members to report on the implementation of the revised tools within one year of this Conference.

From the remaining tools, the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, agreed in 2005, has been revised only marginally since. We mandate the Bologna Follow-Up Group to prepare a revision of the QF-EHEA for adoption by 2030, ensuring that it accommodates flexible learning pathways and micro-credentials, easing their recognition in response to evolving labour-market needs, remains compatible with the European Qualifications Framework, and reflects the competences that graduates now require, including digital and artificial intelligence literacy. We mandate the BFUG to establish a platform for presenting self-certification reports and exchanging good practice, and commit to reviewing and updating our own reports whenever our national frameworks change materially, submitting revised reports to the EHEA Secretariat. We further ask the BFUG to consider whether a revision of the Diploma Supplement is necessary.

We affirm that automatic recognition of qualifications and periods of study should be considered a right of every learner and graduate in EHEA and welcome that XX of EHEA member States already implement automatic recognition for all qualifications issued in the EHEA. We recall that the conditions for automatic recognition are the adequate implementation of EHEA tools and that trust between the systems is fostered by their implementation. We will continue to support the digitalisation of recognition procedures and the ethical, human-centred use of artificial intelligence within them on the understanding that decisions on recognition remain subject to human judgement and to appeal.[3]

We welcome the revised Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance, and recall our commitment that a higher education institution should be able to choose any EQAR-registered agency for quality assurance reviews without undue barriers. We will also support the improvement of quality assurance for transnational education, in synergy with UNESCO's work.

Inclusive EHEA

[The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2027 indicates that the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension…] We acknowledge that our response to the socio-economic conditions of student life needs to be strengthened not only by removing barriers but also through ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

[1] Both proposed by E4 (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE) together with BusinessEurope, EI-ETUCE and EQAR

[2] [To ask for a sentence about each from the drafters]

[3] See also the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education and the revised Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

We commit to setting a national strategic approach for social dimension, covering measurable objectives for the underrepresented groups, including students with caring responsibilities, and to report through the national action plans in line with the Principles and Guidelines. We will develop such measures jointly with the authorities responsible for housing, social affairs, health and employment. Within this approach, we will address the affordability of student accommodation and the cost of living, remove other financial barriers to access and completion, ensure smooth access to counselling and support services to prevent drop-out and monitor equitable access to digital infrastructure, mitigating the digital divide, and strengthen systematic data collection on the progression and completion of under-represented groups. We will also support our institutions in cultivating inclusive institutional cultures.

Together with stakeholders and academic communities, we commit to tackling these challenges collectively and to ensure that social dimension remains a shared responsibility and a central focus of higher education strategies at all levels.

We recognise that the social dimension also concerns the conditions of academic staff, including precarious employment and equitable career progression. We mandate the continuation of a dedicated working structure on the social dimension of higher education, and ask it to report to us at our next Ministerial Conference.

Innovative EHEA

The EHEA must continue to evolve and innovate to respond to a fast-developing world and the needs of our learners. The further development of flexible learning pathways is central to ensure that our systems enable students to respond agilely, to learn, and to develop new skills and competencies.

We reaffirm our support to high-quality, student-centred learning that is delivered in innovative and flexible ways. Support for lifelong learning and for modalities of delivery such as microcredentials is key and must be underpinned by robust quality assurance and clear recognition pathways.

Student-centred learning remains a central paradigm for learning and teaching in the EHEA, and its implementation remains incomplete. It requires curricula built upon clearly defined learning outcomes, assessment designed to evidence those outcomes, adaptation to new learning environments and academic staff who are supported, valued and rewarded for teaching on an equal footing with research. We affirm that student-centred learning needs to remain as the prevailing paradigm also in the context of evolutions determined by digitalisation and AI. We recognise that our Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching have had limited effect, and ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to ensure a clear method of implementation and follow-up.

Flexible learning pathways are not new to our systems, which have long offered part-time study, modular provision and the recognition of prior learning. Making such flexibility portable and easily recognized across the EHEA is nevertheless an ongoing effort. This requires consistent quality assurance and recognition of flexible provision within joint programmes and alliances. We endorse the criteria set out in the 2022 Council Recommendation on micro-credentials as our common reference, and we will strengthen the connection between higher education and vocational education and training, so that pathways between them are permeable.

We reaffirm our commitment to responding to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the green transition in the area of higher education and will continue to support Higher Education Institutions to enhance their contributions to these objectives.

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence

In 2020, we asked the Bologna Follow-Up Group to address digital interoperability; in 2024, we asked it to consider the implications of the digital transition and of artificial intelligence for our key commitments and tools. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence are no longer a peripheral concern for EHEA, as they are altering what a qualification certifies, how learning is assessed, and the basis on which our societies can place trust in the value of completing higher education.

Artificial intelligence requires us to reconsider the design of learning, teaching and assessment, so that it continues to evidence what a learner knows and is able to do. The public responsibility of higher education requires transparency and accountability in the use of artificial intelligence, applied in the best interests of students. We reaffirm that the professional judgement of academic staff cannot be delegated and commit to sustained capacity-building for staff and students to accompany this transition.

We mandate the Bologna Follow-Up Group to establish a dedicated working structure on digitalisation and artificial intelligence for the next work period, and, involving the national authorities responsible for digital policy, to deliver, by 2029, an EHEA-wide agreement on principles for the use of artificial intelligence in higher education together with a digital interoperability framework ensuring that the tools already in use function together.

We ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to examine the implications of AI for our fundamental values, with particular regard to academic integrity, including countering diploma and accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services enabled by digital technologies.

We expect digital and artificial intelligence literacy, including the capacity to assess critically the limitations and risks of such tools, to become a recognised outcome of higher education across EHEA, reflected also in the revision of the QF-EHEA.

We recognise that human-centred learning is entering a new phase shaped by artificial intelligence, and ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to submit, by 2030, proposals on responsive learning and teaching approaches informed by the UNESCO AI competency framework for teachers.

Interconnected EHEA

We committed in Rome to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences. In Tirana, we called for renewed efforts to make mobility more inclusive, balanced and sustainable, and to identify persistent barriers to mobility and ways to remove them. Today, we adopt the EHEA Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility, which sets out how we will overcome persistent barriers to the mobility of students and staff and to the internationalisation of our higher education systems. We recognise comprehensive internationalisation of higher education as a cornerstone of European and global cooperation, which enhances the quality and accessibility of higher education and equips students and staff with international and intercultural competences.

We commit to a holistic and inclusive approach to internationalisation, encompassing physical mobility, blended formats and internationalisation at home, including virtual exchanges and internationalisation of the curriculum. All forms of internationalisation should be designed with clear learning outcomes, be quality assured and be recognised.

We reaffirm the benchmark of at least 20% of graduates having undertaken a physical study or training period abroad of at least three months or 15 ECTS credits, and commit to renewed

efforts towards its achievement through national milestones, to be set by 2028 and reported on at our 2030 Ministerial Conference. We recognise that physical mobility remains a key driver for acquiring international and intercultural competences and a catalyst for intercultural understanding and international solidarity. We therefore commit to removing persistent administrative, financial, recognition, social and linguistic, as well as policy and structural barriers to both outgoing and incoming mobility, with particular attention to learners and staff with fewer opportunities and to those coming to the EHEA from other world regions, including by facilitating visa and residence procedures in cooperation with competent authorities.

We further commit to advancing environmentally and socially sustainable internationalisation and mobility. We will promote balanced and mutually beneficial mobility by strengthening both incoming and outgoing mobility and moving towards more comparable levels of attractiveness, accessibility and affordability of our systems, favouring openness over restrictive measures, while taking into account the capacity of education systems, housing availability, and local contexts. Balanced mobility should foster brain circulation.

We will deepen transnational cooperation by removing remaining obstacles to joint programmes and degrees, including through the consistent implementation of the Bologna key commitments and of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, and by valuing staff mobility in academic, research and administrative careers. Where innovative new instruments emerge within one part of the EHEA, such as the European Universities alliances and the European degree label, we will promote their openness to, and compatibility with, the whole of the European Higher Education Area.

We commit to implementing the Action Plan, including through national strategies, policies or action plans, to monitoring progress through the Bologna Process Implementation Report, and to supporting implementation through peer learning. We further ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to review how mobility and internationalisation are measured across our Area, moving towards regular, comparable and disaggregated data collection, and to develop, together with the higher education sector, a shared understanding of and quality criteria for international experiences without physical mobility, to be monitored separately from the 20% mobility benchmark, and mandate the BFUG and its working structures to support and monitor implementation of the Action Plan and report back to us at our 2030 Ministerial Conference.

We will strengthen the link between EHEA and the European Research Area, supporting research-based learning at all levels, the place of doctoral education within both processes, and the participation of our institutions in regional innovation ecosystems and in partnership with industry, the public sector and civil society. In doing so, we will foster the role of higher education in the societal, economic, environmental and industrial development of Europe.

Beyond EHEA, we affirm openness as both a European value and a strategic choice, emphasise that academic cooperation retains its worth irrespective of geopolitical circumstances, and our universities have a role in academic diplomacy that governments alone cannot fulfil. Risks to security to our fundamental values, including political instrumentalisation, should be assessed and addressed proportionately, on the basis of evidence and with respect for institutional autonomy. We support the development of operational mechanisms to enable structured forms of cooperation between EHEA and non-EHEA countries, including the development and use of transparency and comparability tools to enhance the mobility of learners and professionals. We

welcome the adoption of the Global Policy Forum Statement and ask the Bologna Follow-Up Group to carry forward our priorities [in the Roadmap] for international cooperation beyond 2030, working with our partner regions. We also recall our support for the ratification and implementation of the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education,

Future priorities

In Rome, we committed to making EHEA inclusive, innovative and interconnected by 2030. We reaffirm that commitment yet recognise, at the same time, that a process which awaits full implementation before determining its future direction risks losing momentum. We therefore set out future priorities that will guide our work beyond that date, in preparation for setting the post-2030 agenda of the EHEA.

[Drawing on the work of the Task Force on the Future of Bologna and on the consultation of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, its members and stakeholders, on the priorities for the next decade, XXX.] Three priorities will shape our agenda beyond 2030: making flexible and modular learning as portable as a full qualification; maintaining the credibility of our qualifications and Bologna Process tools, also in the context of artificial intelligence; and ensuring that EHEA remains open by design, connected globally, coherent internally, and consequential for the societies that sustain it.

We mandate the Bologna Follow-Up Group to translate these priorities into the next work programme, to develop a full agenda for the decade to 2040, and to present it at our Ministerial Conference in 2030; and to ensure that the commitments set out in this Communiqué are properly monitored, including through a further Bologna Process Implementation Report.

Final remarks

In view of increasing demand, we consider it necessary to place EHEA's common structures on a firmer footing. We therefore establish a long-term, independent, internationally staffed Secretariat of the European Higher Education Area [in accordance with the model, terms of reference and financing arrangements annexed to this Communiqué], to be situated in Romania. We will assess this arrangement after two work periods and invite the BFUG to adopt revised rules of procedure for its own work in due course.

The commitments set out in this Communiqué set a clear direction in which EHEA is moving, in preparation for our next Ministerial Conference. We gratefully accept the offer by [country] to host the next EHEA Ministerial Conference and the EHEA Global Policy Forum in 2030.

Annexes

- Annex 1: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- Annex 2: European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
- Annex 3: ECTS Users' Guide
- Annex 4: Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility, with the Note on Terminology
- Annex 5: Decisions on the Secretariat of the European Higher Education Area and revised Rules of Procedure for the EHEA (TBD)