Bologna Process Researchers' Conference
Future of Higher Education

FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION – BOLOGNA PROCESS RESEARCHERS' CONFERENCE

Bucharest, 16-17 September 2026

Conference Report

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Executive summary

FOHE-BPRC6 brought researchers together with European and global decision-makers in Bucharest on 16–17 September 2026, eight months before the Iași–Chișinău Ministerial Conference. The edition marked the conference's 15th anniversary and, for the first time, ran jointly with the EHEA Secretariat's conference on supporting Bologna implementation, so that researchers and practitioners worked through one programme. This summary sets out the issues most relevant to the BFUG and to EHEA ministers as they prepare for 2027. The evidence behind each point is in Chapters 2 and 4 to 8, and the full set of proposals is in Chapter 3.

Main issues for EHEA decision-makers

1. **The implementation gap is systemic.** In areas that rarely meet, adopting a commitment did not change practice. National social dimension action plans address on average 3.3 of the ten principles in EHEA documents and show no relationship between need and response. Highly rated internationalisation strategies have no measurable link to outcomes. Academic freedom is in law almost everywhere, yet 45% of systems have no measures to promote it. Inclusion is formally endorsed, yet 43% of the future teachers surveyed had no training in assistive technology.
2. **Monitoring diagnoses but does not drive.** EHEA monitoring has clarified commitments, but it records declared policy more readily than practice. University alliances, the decentralised award of European Degree labels and the classroom are its blind spots.
3. **Labels risk replacing reform.** National action plans that label what already exists, a European Degree taken up out of fear of missing out, and 'anchor' university designations carry the same risk: a label that many hold but that changes little.
4. **The decisive instruments are national.** Habilitation and post-doctoral gates, promotion criteria, national law on joint programmes, national AI rules and network reorganisation remain national, often predate the EHEA and are only loosely connected to the European agenda. Exceptions in national law were considered acceptable only as pilots with an explicit path to system-wide change.
5. **Fundamental values are Europe's main asset and are under pressure.** 45 of 49 systems report threats to academic freedom. Public authorities guarantee these values, but their decisions in other policy areas, including security and foreign policy, can also erode them. There is no shared EHEA position on knowledge security.
6. **AI has moved faster than policy.** Student use of generative AI had passed 80% by 2025, while in 2023 only around 10% of institutions had guidelines. No EHEA system defines AI as a graduate competence, many staff lack criteria for assessing AI-supported work, and research suggests AI helps the already competent while hindering those still learning. The policy questions now concern assessment, staff capability and quality assurance.
7. **The European Degree tests Bologna implementation.** The Degree depends on Bologna tools and runs into difficulties exactly where their implementation is uneven. Its criteria were described as more political than excellence-based, and the first labels are already being awarded in a decentralised way that makes monitoring difficult.
8. **Europe is no longer the centre of global higher education.** Partners from other regions often feel uninvited, and Europe is absent from many new forms of cooperation. Its fundamental values still make it a place of refuge. The shift to 'responsible internationalisation' brings risks of self-censorship, a disproportionate burden on smaller institutions and a two-speed Europe.

Decisions ahead of Iași–Chișinău 2027

- Make fewer and more binding commitments, with implementation reported and audited, and read the 2024 national action plans against the 2027 implementation report.
- Extend monitoring to practice and outcomes, including university alliances and the European Degree label while it is still being shaped.
- Treat the promotion of fundamental values as an obligation distinct from protection, integrate the values into quality assurance and develop a shared EHEA position on knowledge security.
- Consider whether AI literacy should become a graduate competence, and support institutional frameworks for assessment and integrity, with staff development at the centre.
- Decide whether the European Degree label is a visibility instrument or a quality instrument.
- Make post-PhD qualification policies transparent and mutually recognised.

1. About the conference

1.1 Background

The sixth edition of The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC6) took place on 16–17 September 2026 at the Hotel Sheraton in Bucharest. It was organised by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) together with the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research.

The conference is one of the lasting outputs of the Romanian Bologna Secretariat of 2010–2012. The first edition was held in 2011, and later editions followed in 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2024. Each edition has produced rigorously peer-reviewed volumes published by Springer (all open access except the 2012 volumes), and together these volumes have been downloaded more than 3.5 million times. The conference gives researchers a collective voice in the Bologna Process and brings their evidence before the decision-makers who gather at the EHEA Ministerial Conferences. It has always looked beyond Europe, with researchers from more than 50 countries. In the Tirana Communiqué (2024), ministers recognised that all EHEA countries need to disseminate knowledge and to link the policy level more effectively with the higher education community.

The 2026 edition marked the 15th anniversary of the first FOHE-BPRC. It was held while UEFISCDI hosts the EHEA Secretariat for the second time, under a 2024–2027 mandate shared by Romania and the Republic of Moldova that leads up to the Iași–Chișinău Ministerial Conference in May 2027. This edition introduced a new format, designed explicitly to translate science into policy. A 'Researchers' Voice' strand kept the classic structure of an academic conference, with peer-reviewed papers presented in thematic panels. An 'EduGlobal' strand brought European and global decision-makers and organisations, such as UNESCO, the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Global Student Forum, to respond to the issues raised by researchers.

FOHE-BPRC6 was organised in a dual-track format with 'The Future of Higher Education: Sharing knowledge and supporting implementation for a stronger Bologna Process', the first edition of a policy-oriented conference organised by the EHEA Secretariat on mechanisms for supporting Bologna implementation at national and institutional level. The two events shared the opening plenary, participants in the implementation conference were invited to the EduGlobal sessions, and the 170

participants from 43 countries could move between selected sessions. This approach was new. It put researchers in the same programme as the practitioners who implement Bologna commitments (ministries, BFUG delegates, agencies, institutions and student organisations), and the final plenary of the implementation conference drew on the messages of FOHE-BPRC6. This report covers the FOHE-BPRC component; the implementation conference has its own report (BFUG_101_IE_ME_5_5, 27 October 2026).

1.2 Programme

The first day, Wednesday 16 September, opened with a joint plenary shared with the EHEA Secretariat conference. The Ministers of Education and Research of Romania and of the Republic of Moldova gave welcome addresses, followed by a presentation on the state of play of the Bologna work programme ahead of the 2027 Ministerial Conference and a prospective study on the impact of the Bologna Process and its key commitments. The plenary was not part of FOHE-BPRC6 as such, but it framed both parallel conferences.

The Day 1 research programme then continued in parallel panels organised around four themes, plus two standalone panels on topics relevant to the Bologna Process.

Theme	**Format**
Internationalisation and the Bologna Process	Research panel
Fundamental values	Research panel – *paired with* ***Public responsibility panel***
AI and digital transformation	Research panel
Models, mechanisms and practices in the EHEA	Research panel
The European Degree in transformation: institutional, policy, and educational perspectives	Moderated panel discussion
Public Responsibility for and of Higher Education: Exploring Tensions between Public Authorities, Higher Education Institutions, and a Culture of Democracy	Moderated panel discussion – *paired with the Fundamental Values research panel*

The second day, Thursday 17 September, moved to plenary format. It opened with a high-level session on the future of higher education from a global perspective. A debate on what the EHEA has to decide on digitalisation came next, then a panel on common global challenges, and the day closed with a session on responsible internationalisation followed by the final remarks of FOHE-BPRC6.

1.3 How this report is organised

The report is organised by policy theme, not by programme day. Chapter 2 sets out the conclusions that recurred across sessions and Chapter 3 the proposals for the 2027 work cycle. Chapters 4 to 8 give the detailed findings for each theme and combine the Day 1 research panels with the Day 2 plenary debates on the same subject. Each thematic chapter closes with a short box on implications for policy.

2. Cross-cutting conclusions

Across two days, four main thematic sessions and the Day 2 plenaries, FOHE-BPRC6 returned with unusual consistency to a single diagnosis: **the EHEA has largely built the instruments it needs, but the distance between adopting a commitment and changing practice remains the central problem of the Bologna Process.** Eight conclusions recurred across sessions.

The implementation gap is systemic, not sectoral. The same pattern appeared in domains that rarely meet. Social-dimension action plans showed no relationship between need and response. Highly rated internationalisation strategies had no measurable link to outcomes, and legal convergence ran ahead of institutional change. Academic freedom is enshrined in law almost everywhere, yet 45% of systems have no measures to promote it. Inclusion is formally endorsed, yet 43% of the future teachers surveyed had no training in assistive technology. The European Degree runs into difficulties exactly where Bologna tools are applied unevenly. When independent evidence from so many areas points the same way, the problem lies in how commitments are made and followed up, and not in any one policy field.

Monitoring diagnoses but does not yet drive. EHEA monitoring, from the first fundamental values cycle to the Bologna Process Implementation Report, has clarified commitments, but it records declared policy more readily than practice. Speakers repeatedly called for indicators that capture the depth of implementation and its outcomes, for audits that separate delivered commitments from deferred ones, and for monitoring to reach its blind spots: university alliances, the decentralised award of European Degree labels, and the classroom, which policy cannot reach directly.

Labelling is a recurring risk. National action plans that label what already exists, a European Degree adopted out of fear of missing out, and institutions designated as 'anchor' universities were three versions of the same warning. A label that many hold but that changes little uses up political energy and delivers no reform.

A European agenda, national instruments. The decisive levers remain national and often predate the EHEA: habilitation and post-doctoral gates, promotion criteria, national legislation on joint programmes, national AI laws and network reorganisation. Derogations and exceptions were considered acceptable only as pilots with an explicit path to system-wide change. Mutual recognition and transparency were favoured over harmonisation as the proportionate first step.

Digitalisation is now a question of assessment and staff capability. The debate has moved past bans and access. No EHEA system yet defines AI as a graduate competence, staff largely lack criteria for assessing AI-supported work, and students use AI in very different ways. Research also suggests that AI helps the already competent and hinders those still learning. These findings place digitalisation within quality assurance, the social dimension and fundamental values. They also raise the question of whose knowledge the dominant tools embody.

Fundamental values are Europe's distinctive asset and its most exposed one. Values have moved from assumed principles to monitored commitments. Yet they are under pressure from populism, security concerns and political interference, including from the public authorities meant to guarantee them. The global discussion held up a mirror: Europe is no longer the centre of higher education, but these values keep it a place of refuge. That makes protecting and actively promoting them a strategic priority as well as a matter of principle.

Europe must listen as well as speak. The external dimension works as a feedback channel, and partners from other regions feel uninvited. From both observations the conference concluded that the EHEA's global role depends on openness to models developed elsewhere, and on a seat at the table on issues such as AI where other regions are ahead.

The conversation needs to widen. Speakers called on governments to state their own vision for higher education. They also asked for informal student groups to be heard as well as formal unions, for academics' career motivations to be taken seriously in policy design, and for policy to be co-created with students instead of made for them.

3. Proposals for the 2027 work cycle

The proposals below are those put forward in the conference sessions. They are grouped by policy area.

3.1 Commitments, reporting and monitoring

For the next EHEA work cycle, the conference points to:

- fewer, more binding commitments, with implementation reported and audited;
- reading the 2024 national action plans against outcomes in the 2027 implementation report, with ministers reporting on what they have delivered;
- monitoring that measures practice and outcomes rather than declarations, extended to university alliances and to the European Degree label while the label is still being shaped.

3.2 Fundamental values

On fundamental values, the conference supports:

- treating promotion as an obligation distinct from protection;
- integrating fundamental values into quality assurance;
- piloting a charter-based framework in a small number of alliances;
- developing a shared EHEA position on knowledge security that is transparent about any restrictions it imposes;
- ministries speaking out publicly when values are threatened elsewhere and accepting scrutiny of their own conduct.

3.3 Digitalisation and AI

On digitalisation, the EHEA could:

- consider whether AI literacy should become a graduate competence;
- support institutional frameworks for assessment and integrity in AI-rich learning;
- place staff development at the centre;
- explore common approaches such as joint procurement;
- strengthen inter-regional cooperation on a human-centred approach.

3.4 The European Degree

On the European Degree, the EHEA and the EU should:

- decide whether the label is a visibility instrument or a quality instrument;
- scope the work needed to articulate it with qualifications frameworks;
- revisit why the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has not taken hold;
- treat the two initiatives as complementary rather than competing.

3.5 Academic careers, the social dimension and internationalisation

In these areas, the conference suggests:

- transparency and mutual recognition of post-PhD qualification policies;
- career pathways that recognise teaching and scholarship alongside research;
- inclusive digital competence embedded in initial and in-service teacher education;
- judging internationalisation strategies by completion, equity and institutional transformation rather than recruitment;
- bolder experimentation with mobility formats that reach disadvantaged students.

3.6 The Global Policy Forum 2027

Finally, for the Global Policy Forum of 2027, the discussions suggest that the EHEA should come less as a model to export and more as a partner ready to learn: anchored in fundamental values, open to the networks forming in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and willing to engage governments directly on their vision for higher education. That is perhaps the clearest message FOHE-BPRC6 has for the ministers who will meet in Iași and Chișinău. The research community has identified where the work remains; the next step is political commitment to verified implementation.

4. Implementing Bologna commitments: models, mechanisms and practices

The session on models, mechanisms and practices examined the instruments that turn the Bologna agenda into national and institutional reality, or fail to. Its common finding was that the agenda is European, while the instruments that decide implementation remain national, largely inherited and only loosely connected to one another. These instruments include national action plans, post-doctoral qualification gates, promotion criteria, quality assurance and network reorganisation.

4.1 Commitments that label rather than change: the social dimension

The social dimension was described as the 'Cinderella' of the Bologna key commitments: two decades of aspirational language, continuing disagreement on what progress should look like and no settled view on suitable indicators. The 2024 Tirana Communiqué changed this by committing member states to national action plans. An analysis of the plans adopted since then asked whether they respond to the gaps identified, whether a country's standing in the Bologna Process Implementation Report is associated with the breadth and intensity of its plan, and whether either connects to students' own experience as reported in Eurostudent VIII. The working hypothesis was that the more problems a system has, the more intensive its plan should be.

The hypothesis did not hold. Plans cluster around funding, flexibility and inclusiveness and address on average 3.3 of the ten principles set out in EHEA documents; Germany, Luxembourg and Romania register the highest level of commitment. No significant relationship emerged between need and response, and thin plans appeared even in systems with mature policy machinery. The data showed selective, rational prioritisation instead, within a monitoring architecture that diagnoses but does not drive. Countries already close to a target were the most motivated to close the remaining gap. The limits of the exercise were acknowledged: the plan template was not prescriptive, and countries reported to different standards and against different target dates.

The discussion was among the most developed of the day. Indicators had to be extrapolated through proxies, because the underlying datasets were never designed to be read together. Participants asked whether the implementation report's maps are treated in practice as administrative checks, and whether the synergy between reporting instruments risks complacency, given that most plans lack monitoring and evaluation components. The diagnosis was accepted: the plans are both disconnected from needs and largely administrative. Several recommendations emerged: fewer and more binding commitments in place of many shallow ones; descriptors that capture the depth of implementation, not just its declaration; utilisation and outcome measures alongside funding, flexibility and inclusive-culture scores; mandatory stakeholder involvement in preparing plans; treating the current round as a baseline for upward convergence in the next cycle; and a direct audit that separates commitments delivered from those deferred, reading the 2024 commitments against the 2027 implementation report. Asked whether ministers will be mandated to report on implementation, the answer was yes. The risk named underneath all this was that national action plans label what already exists without generating change.

4.2 Academic careers between the EHEA and the ERA

A second topic was the academic career, shaped by both the EHEA and the European Research Area but governed by national structures. A comparative mapping of post-PhD qualification policies

(PPQPs) across Europe found very uneven arrangements. Habilitation is an academic degree in some systems and does not exist at all in others, such as Denmark and the United Kingdom. Where it exists, governance varies. In Germany it is regional, so a habilitation may not be recognised in another Land; in Poland it is national and validated by a central council; in France it is organised in four parallel routes, one of them a national research examination required for a first academic post. Romania was flagged as over-complicated. Two broad clusters emerged, a 'doctor of science' type inherited from the Soviet model and a habilitation type. There are no bridges between these national systems, which predate both the EHEA and the ERA.

The consequences bear directly on European policy. Teaching is named in assessment criteria, but research is what carries the weight. The effect of PPQPs on EHEA and ERA mobility goals is not understood, and they risk trapping researchers inside one national system. The question left to the room was whether these policies are research assessment or quality assurance of higher education. They focus on research because it is easier to measure, because of tradition and because it counts for careers. Yet they act as gates to teaching posts and doctoral supervision rights, for which no standards exist. They fall between two policy regimes, and neither fully owns them.

The same tension was examined inside the individual academic. Starting from the 2015 modernisation agenda, which promoted a European dimension to teaching enhancement, research drawing on the psychology of work explained why academics prioritise research over teaching. Job-related attitudes such as morale, motivation and satisfaction depend on how close people perceive their current job situation to be to their ideal one, and that ideal can itself change; the more uncompromising the situation, the more positive the attitudes. An academic who prioritises research is therefore pursuing an ideal in which they see themselves as a researcher. They are not evading an obligation. Professional development may help staff value teaching more, although the micro-level process by which people change is under-researched, and it takes hold only if it brings them closer to their ideal. Institutions can revise promotion criteria and shift their culture, as happened where fee-paying international students made teaching more important. The proposed response is a policy of greater specialisation, “available to those who wish to pursue it,” in which each academic plays to their strengths and the academic community as a whole covers all dimensions of the profession. The academic career is stable but assessed on research, while research careers are less stable and affordable only later; without such a policy, researchers uninterested in teaching are lost along the way. The underlying aim is to change the perception that research is the more prestigious activity. Whether a genuine research–teaching nexus exists was left open.

4.3 Evidence, quality and the courage to reform

A third group of contributions asked what makes structural reform legitimate. A study of network reorganisation in Ukraine found that licensed intake numbers are a flawed proxy for excess capacity. Accurate mapping needs verified data on staffing, facilities and where students actually are.

A second contribution started from the observation that European higher education, unlike the US and Chinese systems, is not regarded as globally competitive. It remains fragmented, with no internal market and no EU-level standards for external quality assurance. The author approached the question through commercial law, treating universities as firms and students as consumers. He argued that external QA should focus on the quality of higher education itself, the protection of students, minimum standards for faculty and their working conditions, and respect for fundamental values. Judged against these criteria, the ESG 2015 are not fit for purpose in his view: they regulate the quality of QA processes and not the quality of education. They also set hardly any minimum standards for

institutions and do not ensure students' financial security. He considered that the March 2026 draft ESG 2027 does not resolve these shortcomings, although its reference to sufficient core faculty is a step in the right direction. He proposed minimum standards on the quality of higher education in the EU and/or the EHEA. In the EU, this would mean reinterpreting open notions of EU law, such as "economic activity" and "undertaking," so that the Union can adopt binding standards.

A third contribution described the Bologna Process as a "model-producing apparatus" made up of ten analysed models. These models are not transferred into empty spaces; they produce hybrid outcomes, and the future of Bologna depends on the capacity to develop new ones. For the United Kingdom, the main claim was that stagnation rarely comes from a lack of evidence. It comes from a lack of political courage to reform maladapted models, such as outdated student funding or degree structures. Policymakers should evaluate models systematically so that structural tools do not turn into administrative straitjackets.

4.4 Implications for policy

> *Independent analyses of a key commitment, a career gate, individual motivation and system reform found the same failure at the intersection between a European agenda and nationally owned instruments. They all pointed the same way: from declaration to verified implementation. In practice that means fewer and firmer social-dimension commitments, audited in 2027; mutual recognition and transparency of post-PhD criteria as the proportionate first step, ahead of harmonisation; gates to teaching and supervision that actually assess teaching and supervision; and reform decisions based on verified data and taken with the political will the evidence calls for.*

5. Fundamental values and the public responsibility of higher education

Fundamental values were the longest-running thread of the first day, through two research panels and a policy panel on public responsibility. The shared conclusion was that fundamental values have moved from assumed principles to monitored commitments. Protection on paper is not yet matched by promotion in practice, however, and the public authorities meant to guarantee these values can also erode them.

5.1 From assumed principles to monitored commitments

For decades, fundamental values were assumed rather than specified. They became a policy priority around 2015, and the Tirana Communiqué (2024) completed the set of six fundamental values of the EHEA. Only a few years ago academic freedom was a marginal topic. Today, under pressure from the rise of populism and a broader backlash against democracy, it is central to higher education policy. Participants saw the Bologna Process moving from ambiguity towards a more committed approach. The BFUG's monitoring examines whether countries have incorporated the six values into legislation and promote them nationally; it has produced a common understanding of the commitments and resolved part of the earlier ambiguity.

The first monitoring cycle also showed where the gaps are. Academic freedom is written into law almost everywhere, but legal protection often does not extend to students and is rarely backed by concrete measures. Twenty-two systems (45%) have no measures of any kind to promote academic freedom. Yet 45 of 49 systems report threats such as precarious employment, harassment and self-censorship, political rhetoric, knowledge-security restrictions, funding and steering of research and governance centralisation.

The recommendations were to close the gaps in definitions, treat promotion as an obligation distinct from protection, integrate fundamental values into quality assurance and develop a shared EHEA position on knowledge security. Speakers welcomed initiatives to recognise academic freedom as a human right, which they saw as helpful for promotion. They also noted that academic freedom is understood through several frameworks (EHEA, human rights, research and Council of Europe). These frameworks differ, and none is better or worse than another; the EHEA monitoring deliberately follows the definition adopted by ministers.

A tension remains between monitoring based on indicators and monitoring based on peer learning, and the session concluded that both are needed. Other proposals for strengthening the framework were more precise and detailed guidance, since statements alone are not enough; harmonised but flexible national arrangements; more sophisticated monitoring regimes and incentives; legal protection without over-legalising; and better synergies between these instruments.

5.2 Tensions between the values themselves

The tensions between fundamental values were described as real and consequential. Research has found that institutions have gained freedom while academic staff have lost some of theirs, which puts institutional autonomy and academic freedom in tension. Institutional neutrality and civic engagement also pull in different directions. The discussion asked whether professional competence, and the quality of teaching in particular, should count as a fundamental value. Participants suggested it fits within academic freedom understood as the freedom to teach, provided disciplinary standards

are respected, and this links academic freedom to academic integrity. The dimension is not ignored, but it has not yet been explicitly identified as an academic value.

5.3 The dual role of public authorities

The central policy theme was the dual role of public authorities. They are the main guarantors of fundamental values. Yet their decisions in other policy areas can erode those same values, and the instruments used to govern higher education can be turned into instruments of restriction. The same tension exists inside institutions: large public investment brings expectations of excellent science, well-trained graduates and innovation, so universities must balance innovation against fundamental research, openness against security, and tradition against renewal. Participants argued that this is the core of public responsibility both for and of higher education.

Several grey zones were mapped: public versus private funding and lump-sum versus earmarked allocations; higher education compared with other public responsibilities such as primary education or health; specific higher education laws versus general legislation; foreign and security policy; and the protection of exposed staff and students, where responsibilities between universities, national authorities and European structures are unclear. Clashes between values were considered inevitable, but any restriction needs very good justification, and transparency is essential. Authorities could, for instance, disclose how many incidents have involved certain countries, or tell institutions openly that some candidates will also be screened by security services. On many sensitive issues, such as international students from certain countries or partnerships with Chinese institutions, no official policy currently exists. Research relations should rest on compatible values, or at least on clear awareness of differences. Chinese students in Europe also need protection and understanding.

National security and foreign policy were recognised as legitimate domains of public authorities, and they are becoming more and more difficult for higher education. Where physical safety is at stake, governments should provide clear protocols. When universities are pushed to follow ideological or political currents without constructive debate, however, this goes beyond negotiated compromise and becomes a restriction of academic freedom. Speakers cited the contested measures of the COVID-19 period and a case in France where funding cuts and pressure on university leaders were reportedly used to push institutions to end cooperation with Israeli universities. One line of argument called for consistency: if ties with Russian universities were cut over their public support for the invasion of Ukraine, the same logic should apply to universities publicly supporting the war in Gaza. Such situations put the values of governments and academic communities in direct conflict; they often play out in highly politicised public debates and end in legal disputes. Participants also saw a great deal of responsibility being passed up or down between levels of governance, with the result that available tools are not always used on new issues such as artificial intelligence. Leadership positions, it was said, carry a commitment to accept the resulting frustration while continually seeking balance.

5.4 The civic and social mission of universities

A further strand looked at how universities serve their communities. Two models were compared. The 'anchor' university centres on economic and industrial impact, as well as social justice and local empowerment; the 'civic' university centres on public engagement, democratic purpose and knowledge serving local, national and global publics. The line between them is blurring, in a convergence described as both pragmatic and normative. The model faces uneven institutional capacity, limited resources and a measurement problem with direct budgetary implications. A shared policy conversation at EHEA level on this convergence was proposed as a way to strengthen higher

education's civic contribution. In the discussion, participants stressed that governments have an obligation to help resolve these tensions. A more precise definition of mission could mobilise academic communities, since people engage more readily around shared values. Labelling institutions as 'anchor' universities, though, could also constrain them by prescribing their mission. The underlying message was to strengthen the public and social responsibility of universities and their third mission, which the Bologna Process often overlooks.

5.5 Beyond the national level: alliances and the wider world

Two contributions looked beyond national systems. The first argued that fundamental values are guaranteed by law at national level, while for European University Alliances a charter-based approach, built on commitments set out in alliance charters, fits better. Adapting the EHEA framework to alliances revealed tensions between autonomy and integration, autonomy and participation, and identity and pluralism, as well as mission overload. Institutional autonomy is the value undergoing the most changes at alliance level. Monitoring at alliance level is currently a blind spot for the EHEA, and piloting such a framework in a few alliances was proposed. For the EU, one of the European degree label's criteria could serve as a vehicle for embedding fundamental values. Attention to fundamental values within alliances was said to be driven more by European Commission policy than by EHEA policy, and student and staff participation remains a weak point in many universities.

The second contribution examined the external dimension of the EHEA. It argued that engagement with non-EHEA actors has worked as outreach and also as a feedback channel, which has shaped how the EHEA presents itself globally, structures dialogue and sets priorities for international cooperation. Actors outside the EHEA contribute less through formal authority than by testing its approaches and informing its priorities.

5.6 Implications for policy

> *The session concluded that fundamental values are no longer only statements of principle. A framework now exists to measure and monitor them, even if they are still discussed mostly in response to concrete violations. The message to ministries had several parts. What they say and write counts, but they must also speak out publicly when colleagues in other countries face problems, must not leave the work to the BFUG alone, and must accept that their own actions in sensitive areas will be evaluated, even when this is uncomfortable (in the words used in the room, 'swallow the frog'). The priority for the next cycle is to move from reactive protection to proactive promotion.*

6. AI and digital transformation

The session on AI and digital transformation changed where the digital question in higher education sits. The debate was once about whether to ban or allow generative AI, and later about access and infrastructure. The research presented here converged on other issues: assessment design, staff capability, inclusive practice, and the institutional and national frameworks that have not kept pace with what is already happening in classrooms.

6.1 Adoption has outpaced regulation

The session started from a stark asymmetry. Student use of generative AI had passed 80% by 2025, while in 2023 only around 10% of institutions had guidelines in place. The centre of gravity of the academic debate has therefore shifted from the ethics of AI towards access to the tools and concrete ways of assessing learning in the spaces they create. Throughout the session, the priority was to preserve human agency and critical thinking while promoting ethical, transparent and responsible use.

Albania illustrated the national side of this gap. The country is rapidly aligning its legislation with EU standards, but its policy framework has no specific AI guidance. Universities have written their own internal guidelines, including rules on prompt writing and acceptable thresholds for AI-generated content. Meanwhile, staff and students use AI informally in daily academic work and frequently evade plagiarism detection software. Without national guidance, fragmented bottom-up rules risk legal contradictions, institutional inequalities and ethical loopholes, so a coherent national framework for AI in higher education is urgent.

6.2 Students are not a homogeneous group

A study of nearly 700 students enrolled in higher education programmes in Spain showed that students do not use AI in uniform ways. Identical behaviours, such as replacing search engines or abstaining entirely, can stem from very different motivations, from efficiency to fear of breaching rules or ethical scepticism. Four profiles emerged. Students with low engagement interact little with AI tools, which may reflect uncertainty, lack of access or lack of confidence. Active-cautious students use AI with some caution, uncertainty or both, and lack criteria for verifying sources and evaluating outputs. Students with balanced confidence use the tools heavily and well, but need support for advanced critical evaluation. Highly engaged and vigilant students are competent and ethically aware, but exposed to high cognitive load, stress and moral pressure. The profiles are behavioural patterns, not permanent labels, and they form a continuum of support needs, not a progression scale. Uniform rules therefore fit poorly, and institutional support has to be differentiated.

6.3 Assessment and integrity as an institutional responsibility

The most consistent message across contributions concerned assessment. Many academic staff have no clear criteria for assessing student work produced with AI support, and criteria for assessment and textual integrity need to be made explicit, both to students and across the institution. Speakers treated this as a gap in institution-wide frameworks and not as a problem of individual teaching: a university that does not define how it assesses work produced with AI has not avoided the question. It has handed it, unevenly, to individual staff. Several speakers argued that assessment should move from the punitive question 'did you use AI?' to evaluating the process of how it was used, including

the prompts and reasoning behind the work. Policy frameworks should also clearly separate task performance, which AI can automate, from genuine skill acquisition.

The discussion added two proposals. Participants suggested a dedicated institutional role of 'AI counsellor' to guide staff and students through AI outputs and the academic and psychological pressure that comes with them. Professors warned against trading foundational learning for speed, especially at undergraduate level, and insisted that AI should act as a catalyst for reasoning, not an intellectual shortcut.

6.4 Open access or structured environments

A related line of research tested whether students should get unrestricted access to commercial chatbots or be guided through structured AI environments. Open access puts the whole burden of self-regulation on students, who often lack the maturity to evaluate outputs or structure prompts, and it risks a 'shortcut trap' in which quick retrieval replaces learning. When a structured environment was tested as a prototype, about 10% of interactions tried to bypass its constraints with override prompts. Students valued being able to ask questions anonymously and without judgement. They also wanted shorter and faster answers, which sits uneasily with time-intensive reflection. The recommended direction was to leave 'ban versus allow' debates behind and design responsible AI participation instead: learning spaces and curricula that stimulate autonomous thinking and the solving of unstructured problems, close to the professional environment graduates will face. Custom AI environments, however, carry financial and technical costs that could widen gaps between institutions.

6.5 Critical AI literacy and democratic agency

Research with pre-service civic education teachers in a trilateral project (Germany, Austria and Australia) placed AI within higher education's democratic mission. Rapid AI proliferation threatens citizens' epistemic agency and encourages automation bias, meaning uncritical reliance on opaque algorithmic outputs over deliberative human reasoning. Future teachers are caught in a pragmatic tension. They value AI for summarising and structuring, yet sharply criticise its structural biases, labour practices and environmental costs, and they worry about 'outsourcing thinking' and the automated amplification of social inequalities. AI models reflect human history, including its non-democratic biases and power structures, so education has to train students to challenge model outputs instead of expecting neutral or democratic algorithms. The researchers also noted that, to protect participant anonymity, they had analysed their focus-group data manually and not with third-party AI tools. It is one example of the data-ethics questions AI raises for research itself.

6.6 Inclusive digital competence

The inclusion strand took the digital question past access and infrastructure, to the participation of under-represented learners, including those with disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties or physical impairments. Its premise was that digital skills allow teachers to create equitable, accessible and inclusive learning environments, with Universal Design for Learning as the framework and assistive technologies as its practical expression. A survey of 225 pre-service teachers in Romania produced stark findings: 43% had received no formal training on assistive technologies, only 16% had used them, and 84% rated their competence as limited and lacked confidence in using them in their future profession, despite theoretical awareness. Barriers included inadequate teacher training, limited access to institutional technology and the high cost of the devices. Passive visits to

specialised laboratories did not build operational competence. Sustained hands-on practice did: producing voiced digital social stories, for example, turned students into creators of accessible resources. In the discussion, the competence was located in initial training and in-service practice, embedded in curricula and in the inclusive spirit of each subject. Whether to start with teacher training or with school infrastructure was left open, as the resource choice any national response will face.

6.7 Pedagogical innovation

Two contributions explored active pedagogies as a response to both digital and inclusion problems. In a joint Greek–Romanian study, 54 pre-service teachers designed educational escape rooms to rehearse applying Universal Design for Learning and social-emotional learning. Tasks were built to require genuine epistemic work (analysing evidence and testing hypotheses across multimodal formats) and not quick retrieval. Around 90% of the Greek participants grounded their designs in formal theory, compared with about 40% of the Romanian participants, who focused more on practical application. Designing in groups brought out friction over power dynamics. This showed that democratic collaboration has to be structured deliberately and that multimodality is not inclusive by default. The escape room was presented as a 'visible pedagogy' that makes instructional choices open to challenge before teachers enter real classrooms. Combining role-playing pedagogies with peer-learning assessment could offer a scalable way to support student participation while creating opportunities to develop autonomy and agency in STEM higher education.

6.8 What the EHEA has to decide on digitalisation (Day 2 plenary)

The Day 2 plenary on digitalisation brought together research on digitalisation in the EHEA, the OECD's work on generative AI in higher education, the global policy dialogue perspective and the view of a quality assurance agency. It took the findings of the research panels above and turned them into a question for policymakers.

An asymmetric regulatory environment. A study carried out within the GLOBAL2030 project traced how the Bologna Process has dealt with digitalisation and found that the EHEA's regulatory environment for the digital transition is asymmetric. The study found no EHEA system that defines AI as a graduate competence, and AI is mainly discussed in relation to academic integrity. The question put to the room was whether the digital transition requires the EHEA to change its policies. The digital divide is widening, many Bologna commitments are affected, and there is still no dedicated EHEA policy on digitalisation.

How AI is actually used. OECD work on generative AI in higher education identified three limitations in current practice: reliance on free, general-purpose consumer tools; a lack of guidance; and a focus on completing tasks instead of on learning. The recommendations include emerging policy responses: providing guidance on the responsible use of GenAI, developing common approaches to procurement, building generative AI competences, supporting the collection of evidence, and developing specialised GenAI tools for higher education. Research cited in the discussion added a sobering finding. AI appears to improve performance for those who already have the relevant competence, but to hinder competence development for those who do not.

Regional models and the need for cooperation. Each world region is developing its own approach. This raises the question of whether the EHEA is becoming just one model among others, and whether AI can be addressed in isolation at all. The diversity of models was considered an asset. Digitalisation,

however, intersects so deeply with education that more structured inter-regional cooperation is urgent, around common priorities such as a human-centred approach and with higher education institutions as drivers of innovation and co-shapers of policy. On global dialogue, it was noted that the prevailing approach had been to limit dialogue with China over intellectual property concerns. On AI in education the situation is reversed: China is much further ahead, but it operates with different values. Participants concluded that Europe must have a seat at the table.

The gap between policy and the classroom. From the quality assurance perspective, standards can be set, but they cannot determine what happens in every classroom. Policies exist almost everywhere, yet there is a gap between them and what students actually experience. Three issues were raised: staff capacity, including training in AI; trust, since real verification requires money, time and resources; and consistency between students' experience and institutional policy, a tension that has to be managed continuously and needs strong leadership at every level. The directions being explored include standards designed to hold whatever digitalisation brings, frameworks for institutions in place of a one-size-fits-all approach, a clear link between what students can demonstrate and what programmes aim to develop, assessment redesigned to be of greater value to students, staff development at the centre of the response, and policy co-created with students rather than merely for them. Asked about the situation in the United Kingdom, speakers explained that institutions are turning to their quality assurance agency for guidance, which is why the focus is on frameworks and not on regulating individual courses.

Responsible use, and whose knowledge. Asked what 'responsible use' of AI, a widely used phrase, means in practice, the panel answered that responsibility has to be considered across all aspects of higher education, starting with digital literacy. Participants raised sharper questions. Higher education currently uses what the market offers without shaping it. The dominant AI tools are designed by a small number of actors and do not reflect the full breadth of knowledge, so the question is whose knowledge shapes the future. The revised EU rules on AI are rarely discussed. Governments need to define the responsibilities of students, funders, institutions and political authorities, and the requirements that should apply to the tools themselves. Two tasks were named as still ahead: bringing these tools together coherently across EHEA systems, and introducing something as disruptive as AI-personalised learning into a highly organised sector.

6.9 Implications for policy

> *The working questions are no longer about tools or access. They are about how learning is assessed where AI is routine, what competences staff need, and who sets the frameworks. The inclusion evidence added a second measurable gap, between a formally endorsed commitment and a practice that is largely absent, a pattern found elsewhere at the conference too. Both lines of evidence place digitalisation within quality assurance and the social dimension, not in a separate digital policy strand. Both also point to curricula, assessment and teaching practice as the place to intervene.*

7. The European Degree in transformation

This moderated panel brought together institutional, alliance, academic, research and student perspectives. Of all the first-day sessions, it came closest to putting the Bologna Process on trial through one of its own offspring. Two questions opened the discussion: which Bologna tools are indispensable for the European Degree to work, and is the Degree a demonstration of the success of the Bologna Process, of its failure, or of both? The panel did not settle on one answer, and the reasons it could not were its most useful output.

7.1 A product of the EU built on Bologna groundwork

The dependency was set out first, and no one contested it. The European Degree is an EU initiative, but it would be impossible without the Bologna Process, which laid the groundwork through ECTS, qualifications frameworks, recognition and mobility. The joint programme idea is itself a Bologna proposal, and a quality assurance framework for joint programmes already exists. This makes it hard to establish the added value of the Degree beyond existing instruments, and the case for creating new ones.

What the Degree does supply is diagnosis. It exposes the unfinished parts of the Bologna Process, which made cooperation easier but not yet easy: the tools exist, but implementation is uneven and interpretations differ. The Degree gives an arena for testing whether instruments already adopted are compatible, and it leaves universities better equipped to press governments to remove the obstacles it reveals. It also pushes 'jointness' forward and promotes the values dimension of the Process. And it enters into dialogue with the Process by proposing its own conception of a joint degree.

7.2 Expectations, national obstacles and the 'fear of missing out'

From the institutional and alliance perspective, the label had been seen as a salvation that would solve everything, especially the legal difficulties alliances face in delivering joint programmes. In practice, solutions are sometimes not put in place. Exceptions for joint programmes written into national legislation were the typical example. They are not the best solution. They can be a legitimate first step towards piloting, but only if the aim of extending them to the whole system is there from the outset; otherwise, the derogation entrenches the obstacle it was meant to get around. Even so, the Degree has already influenced internationalisation strategies. Awareness is considerable, and there is a 'fear of missing out' effect, as institutions worry that their programmes will be less attractive without the label.

7.3 Curriculum, staff and a changing student body

From the academic perspective, the Degree was presented as more than a joint programme, because its significance lies in the curriculum. It was described as a way of transforming the traditional curriculum around dynamic components of learning and relearning, influenced by new policy arrangements such as flexibility. It is time, one speaker argued, to innovate styles of education and learning methods and not merely modularise. That requires retraining to rebuild trust within the academic community, and staff training centres inside institutions. The Degree is also expected to shift the student profile towards non-traditional learners returning for lifelong learning, and institutions are not yet prepared for this. Asked whether any single programme could meet all of the label's current criteria, the answer was no. The ambition amounts to architectural change and shifting expectations, and it needs advocacy to win the goodwill of the academic staff who must build these

programmes. For students, the added value was seen in mobility, greater international exposure and higher quality of education.

7.4 The design of the criteria: excellence or visibility?

The criteria became the panel's sharpest thread. A balance is needed between how comprehensive the criteria are and how hard they are to implement beyond a superficial level. Institutions currently experience either the fear of missing out or the fear of being involved. If the aim is for institutions to cooperate, anyone must be able to join. The precedent cited was the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which did not take hold because institutions considered their own home arrangements good enough. Many criteria were introduced to make European values visible. Not every programme was expected to meet all of them, but each should meet a minimum, so that everyone has to think about these values. Asked from the floor whether these are excellence criteria or political criteria, the answer was that they are more political. Whether the label should aim at excellence or at accessibility was asked and left open. On what makes these degrees 'European', the answer was jointness, meaning a much larger share of credits for mobility and exposure to different cultures and communities.

7.5 Recognition, monitoring and the wider EHEA

If the Degree becomes a reality, the EHEA faces a substantial workload in adapting its instruments, starting with the articulation of qualifications frameworks. Its success depends on whether it becomes recognisable, including to the general public, and on a great deal of peer learning if it is not to become just another label. Participants put the debate in proportion. The Bologna Process is a means of advancing the EHEA, not an end in itself, and the Degree may also serve as an instrument of soft diplomacy in the wider geopolitical context.

The most candid assessment called the label a compromise that nobody wanted and that everyone is now trying to make the most of, amid considerable scepticism about any excellence-driven or elitist process serving a small number of students. Its potential is still real. It could be a catalyst for policy that covers gaps in Bologna implementation, with possible spillover effects, and an incentive, mobilised from the bottom up, for institutions to do more and better higher education and not merely more internationalisation. None of this will be known without careful monitoring at all levels, covering students, teaching staff and programmes without the label. The warning was time-sensitive: the first labels are already being awarded, and in a decentralised way that makes monitoring difficult. The model can still be shaped without reopening all the criteria. Monitoring should be accelerated so that it can inform whether the Degree should become more inclusive or more ambitious, with the ultimate aim of reaching as many students as possible.

The closing round summed up the mood of the panel. The Degree was described as an opportunity to cooperate at a time when everyone competes; as an imperfect but right step that requires trust and an open mind; as a step towards diplomacy; and as an instrument that could give future students more exposure, more international experience and higher quality. The final plea was that the European Commission and the Bologna Process should not be seen as competing initiatives, since they share the same larger goals.

7.6 Implications for policy

> *The session's value lies less in what it said about a new instrument than in its diagnosis of existing ones. The European Degree runs into difficulties exactly where Bologna implementation is uneven, which makes it the most informative test available of where key commitments are still applied unevenly. Three conclusions follow. First, the EHEA should decide whether the label is a visibility instrument or a quality instrument, since each requires different criteria and levels of accessibility. Second, exceptions in national law should count as pilots only when they come with a commitment to extend them system-wide. Third, monitoring must be designed now, while the label is still being shaped; otherwise a decentralised award process will make it unobservable just as it scales. If take-up is driven by fear of missing out and not by demonstrated value, the Degree would be widely held but little felt, the same labelling risk identified for national action plans.*

8. Internationalisation and Europe's global position

The internationalisation session examined the main instruments European higher education uses to reach beyond national borders: the European Universities Initiative, national internationalisation strategies and student mobility schemes. Its message was that Europe has built influential models. The decisive variable is still the distance between a strategy on paper and transformation in practice.

8.1 European University Alliances: innovation through implementation

The European Universities Initiative was described as a 'network of networks'. The European Commission sets a common framework and shared objectives, and each alliance charts its own course, which is why alliances share core features yet remain distinct. One central argument was that innovation in the initiative emerged through implementation instead of being designed from above. The Commission deliberately left the details open and let universities fill in the blanks. That is how it achieved real change in an area where the EU has no formal competence.

The alliances and the Bologna Process were presented as reinforcing each other. They are distinct policy processes, with different governance, instruments and actors, yet they pursue largely the same changes: joint programmes, recognition, mobility and quality assurance. Alliances depend on Bologna tools. In turn they revitalise the Bologna Process, because the practical obstacles they meet push long-standing implementation gaps back onto political agendas and trigger legislative change. Alliances are also becoming actors in their own right. They are building their own identity and brand and pushing the agenda beyond Bologna, towards a legal status for alliances, a European degree and sustainable funding.

Sustainability is still an open question. Some alliances are moving towards financial self-sufficiency, but progress varies widely, and all of them face the question of how they will adapt once initial funding ends.

8.2 Strategies and their limits

A second group of contributions questioned the value of strategy as such. A mapping of internationalisation strategy-making across EHEA countries found that only some systems have a defined national strategy. Having one does not in itself signal a more advanced approach, since many

countries achieve significant results through other policy channels. Evidence from Romania made the same point at institutional level: many public universities have highly rated internationalisation strategies, yet there is no significant relationship between the quality of a strategy and the actual level of internationalisation. An analysis of the Western Balkans found the pattern again at regional level. Legal and strategic frameworks are converging with European standards, but formal convergence outpaces implementation capacity, so that the region follows a path of Europeanisation through compliance rather than internationalisation as genuine institutional transformation. Internationalisation abroad, through mobility and projects, still dominates; internationalisation at home remains underdeveloped.

The environment in which strategies operate has also changed. Volatility, with repeated crises, was described as the new norm. Strategies and alliances alike therefore have to be adaptive and forward-looking, able to anticipate change and not only react to it. For the Western Balkans, the proposed next step was to move from compliance to implementation through internationalised curricula, research cooperation, the third mission and stronger regional capacity.

8.3 Mobility and student success

Erasmus was presented as a distinctive model that has become a 'gold standard' for other world regions, many of which shaped their expanding mobility schemes on the European example. Its record at home is mixed. Participation stands at about 9% against a 20% target, and its effect on European identity and on access remains uneven, even though its influence on higher education systems and on other regions has been considerable. The lesson for the EHEA was to experiment more boldly with different forms of mobility, including short-term and virtual formats, in order to open opportunities to disadvantaged groups. In the current political climate, Erasmus also has an important part in affirming Europe as a shared space in the face of populism and nationalism.

Evidence from Romania shifted attention from recruitment to success. International students complete their studies at higher rates than domestic students. In universities with a higher degree of internationalisation, however, Romanian students have higher completion rates, although no causal link between the two has been identified. Scholarships and fee waivers were among the strongest policy levers, with a possible selection effect among more motivated students. The conclusion was that internationalisation should be measured by completion and equity as well as by recruitment.

8.4 The global perspective (Day 2 plenary)

The opening plenary of Day 2 was the only session devoted entirely to global developments, whether or not they intersect with the BFUG agenda. It brought together the three main global constituencies of higher education: UNESCO as the intergovernmental forum, the International Association of Universities (IAU) for institutions, and the Global Student Forum for students. The question behind it was whether the EHEA is ahead of what is changing worldwide, behind it, or dealing with different problems.

A shifting centre of gravity. Europe remains highly attractive to the rest of the world, and the classic goals of internationalisation (attracting students, competing for talent and building partnerships) are still valid. Yet the centre of gravity of global higher education has moved. Asia has invested heavily, Africa is expanding as never before, Latin America is building its own networks, and countries such as India say they no longer look to the North but build their own way. Europe is absent from many of these new forms of cooperation. Brain drain is still an issue, and partners from other regions often

feel they are not invited to help shape the future of higher education. Voices from the floor went further. Europe has not been the centre of the higher education world for a long time, they said, yet a student at risk still looks to Europe rather than to the United States or China. This, it was argued, shows that fundamental values are Europe's core asset and the reason it is seen as a place of refuge.

Inequality and the financing of inclusion. Massification has been uneven and, in some parts of the world, has not happened at all, so the main question is how to provide quality higher education for many, on equal terms. In countries experiencing democratic decline, access to higher education creates opportunities. Access has grown enormously worldwide but must expand further, which requires financing the inclusion agenda. Participants asked whether the perception that funding higher education is a waste of money is becoming a European trend. The response was that this view is not universal: Latin America, for instance, clearly recognises the importance of higher education. At the same time, time spent at university is shrinking, funding is decreasing and programmes are getting shorter, including through micro-credentials, and all of this pushes institutions to become more efficient.

Pressure on universities and the return to core values. Universities that believed they were safe spaces are now affected by immigration policy, funding decisions and political influence, and this pressure is more visible in the United States than ever before. In such uncertain times, the UNESCO view was that higher education must double down on its core values: free debate and the freedom to learn, teach, research and collaborate internationally; the value of inquiry and study; and solidarity, the value that unites the global higher education community. Higher education was also seen as having several possible futures, a diversity that is desirable and should be valued.

Artificial intelligence and the purpose of higher education. AI was called the dominant topic of the moment, at a time when everything seems to happen at once, and it brings both opportunities and risks. Higher education must shape the digital transformation instead of being shaped by it, because universities do more than prepare people for jobs. They develop the capacity for judgement, critical thinking and taking responsibility for decisions, which links directly to fundamental values. Many outside actors are telling academic communities how to integrate AI. The private sector wants a place in the conversation, but how it should take part is still unclear. From the student perspective, the priority is that every student has a voice in AI policy and an impact on it.

A new social contract. The social contract for higher education is being renegotiated. The focus is moving from employability to the quality of higher education's outcomes, with a richer understanding of quality, excellence and relevance. Sustainability and regeneration were singled out as areas where universities can lead, not least because of the land they hold worldwide. One participant asked whether higher education, while training more highly qualified graduates than ever, is still forming intellectuals. The same participant argued that the task is to shape the future, not adapt to it, as part of the public responsibility of higher education and of Europe's particular responsibility at a time of unprecedented pressure on fundamental values. In response, speakers agreed that intellectual depth is essential, but noted that 'skills' had been largely missing from the debate and should be linked with equity and research. The strategic priority, it was argued, is to scale up what is known to work.

Who decides the future of higher education. A former Minister of Education argued from the floor that the future of higher education is decided by governments, corporations and society, not by higher education itself, and that across all editions of the conference the debate has nonetheless taken place almost entirely among higher education actors. His hardest battles as minister, he recalled, were fought within government, not with students, universities or society, and he urged the community to

push politicians to state their vision for higher education. The student perspective added that higher education cannot keep talking only to itself. Existing structures must become more transparent and open to new forms of engagement, recognise informal student groups alongside formal unions, and involve students strategically. Bologna With Student Eyes was cited as a good example of bringing solid data to the table.

8.5 University networks across regions (Day 2 plenary)

This plenary brought together European and cross-regional university networks to discuss problems shared by higher education systems worldwide and solutions, adapted to different contexts, that have proved effective. The European Universities Alliances were described as the third major achievement of the EHEA, after Erasmus and the Bologna Process. The initiative was launched with a target of 20 alliances by 2024 and now counts 65 alliances and around 650 institutions, backed by strong leadership commitment, Member State involvement and significant funding. It was argued, however, that alliances still need university networks, which are less formalised, broader in scope and membership, and more active in EU-level advocacy. UNICA's umbrella role shows this in practice, through joint events with alliances, thematic seminars and publications. SPHERE and the HERE network, which brings together over 100 experts from the Western Balkans, Central Asia, the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Southern Mediterranean, were also presented. SPHERE links EU and EHEA priorities with national reforms through a flexible toolkit of seminars, study visits, technical assistance missions and Bologna events. Its impact shows over time, in system-level reforms and in the capacity of HERE experts to build consensus and advise policymakers. Both presentations stressed that flexible, long-term cooperation networks are essential for turning European priorities into concrete institutional and national change.

8.6 Responsible internationalisation (Day 2 session)

The closing session addressed what responsible internationalisation means in practice and how responsibilities are shared between governments, funders, institutions and international organisations. Responsibility is the newest framing of the internationalisation of higher education, after the earlier paradigms of cooperation, mainstreaming and competition. Several developments drive the shift: growing geopolitical rivalry, the rise of economic security on policy agendas, concerns about foreign interference, mounting pressure on academic values, and the severing of institutional ties with Russia and Belarus. At European level, the new approach is summed up by the principle "as open as possible, as closed as necessary", set out in the Council Recommendation on enhancing research security (May 2024). Member States increasingly agree on common principles, namely a risk-based, country-agnostic and proportionate approach, but they differ considerably in how they apply them. Six dimensions of "responsible" internationalisation were identified: values, security, ethics, equity, sustainability and reciprocity. The discussion also pointed to a tension between two logics. A security logic seeks to protect knowledge and strategic assets; a social-responsibility logic puts the public good and global engagement first. The shift carries clear risks. It may produce a chilling effect and self-censorship among academics. It places a disproportionate administrative burden on smaller institutions with limited compliance capacity. And it could produce a two-speed Europe, in which well-resourced systems manage risk effectively while others pull back from international cooperation altogether.

8.7 Implications for policy

Read together, the contributions show one pattern from several angles: highly rated strategies with no measurable link to outcomes, legal convergence ahead of institutional change, and strategies that are neither necessary nor sufficient for results. The European Universities Initiative, by contrast, showed how leaving room for bottom-up implementation can produce real change. The session suggested that internationalisation policy should be judged by what it delivers in completion, equity and institutional transformation. The EHEA's own flagship models, it added, need bolder experimentation if they are to reach the students they currently miss.