



European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ENQA briefing note on the Bologna Process

March 2024

This briefing note is published by ENQA in advance of the 2024 Bologna Process Ministerial Conference. It aims to provide a short and easy-to-read overview of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process, and how they function. It is based on information provided on the [EHEA website](#), with supplementary information from ENQA.

The Bologna Process and EHEA

The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is one of the main voluntary consensus-driven inter-governmental processes at European level. Since its inception, the main objective of the Bologna Process was the creation of an area where higher education systems would be more comparable, compatible, and coherent. From 1999 to 2010, the Bologna Process supported the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), offering students, graduates and academic staff mobility without obstacle and fair and democratic access to quality higher education. Formally established in March 2010, the EHEA is a unique trust-based cooperation between public authorities and higher education stakeholders to define and achieve common goals.

Key commitments of the EHEA

The EHEA has three key commitments. These are on the topics of **degree structures** using the three-cycle system (Bachelor, Master and doctorate), a common qualifications framework and European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); **recognition of qualifications** in line with the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#); and **quality assurance** on the basis of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA](#) (ESG).

In addition to facilitating the implementation of the key commitments, the Bologna Process is also a forum to address other topics, such as fundamental values and the social dimension of higher education.

A **Bologna Process Implementation Report** is prepared in advance of each Ministerial Conference, mapping the extent to which countries meet the key commitments, as well as monitoring other indicators relevant for the policy priorities of the EHEA.

Composition of the EHEA

The EHEA consists of 49 countries plus the European Commission as **members**, however Russia and Belarus have been suspended since April 2022. To become a member of the EHEA, countries have to be party to the [European Cultural Convention](#) and to declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education.

In cases where higher education is devolved from national governmental structures, a country may be represented by separate authorities. For example, the French and Flemish communities of Belgium, and Scotland separately from the rest of the UK.

In addition, the EHEA has **consultative members**, which are stakeholder organisations and other governmental associations. Consultative members do not vote but are otherwise fully involved in the discussions and working structures. ENQA is a consultative member of the EHEA. EQAR is a non-voting member of the EHEA with similar status to the consultative members. Other relevant organisations that wish to be associated with the Bologna Process can apply to be **EHEA partners**.

Ministerial Conferences and Communiqués

Ministerial Conferences take place approximately every three years to assess the progress made within the EHEA and to set the policy priorities for the coming working period until the next Ministerial Conference. The Ministerial Conference also decides on new applications for membership to the EHEA as well as any other main changes to the process. Reflections on progress, topics to be addressed, and formal commitments are set out in a Ministerial Communiqué, adopted at each Conference. The next Ministerial Conference will be in Tirana, Albania on 29-30 May 2024.

A **Global Policy Forum** takes place in conjunction with each Ministerial Conference, which brings together invited national authorities, inter-governmental organisations and stakeholder organisations from around the world.

How the EHEA operates

To ensure the implementation of the steps upon which the Ministers have decided, the EHEA has established various bodies, which operate between the Ministerial Conferences.

The **Bologna Follow-Up Group** (BFUG) is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process and is composed of representatives of all members and consultative members.

The BFUG is entrusted with:

- overseeing the Bologna Process between the Ministerial Conferences, based on the policy priorities of the Communiqué, which are translated into a work plan;
- preparing the Ministerial Conference and drafting the next Communiqué;
- and taking forward matters that do not need to be decided by the Ministers or that have been delegated by the Ministers.

The BFUG usually meets twice a year. The BFUG is co-chaired on a rotational basis of six-month periods by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU member country. The host country of the next Ministerial Conference serves as the Vice-Chair.

The BFUG is supported by a **Secretariat**, which is normally staffed and hosted by the country hosting the next Ministerial Conference. There is a current discussion about establishing a long-term secretariat from 2027. The Secretariat provides administrative and operational support for the BFUG, the Board and its working structures; prepares the Ministerial Conference under the supervision of the BFUG; and maintains the EHEA website and other communication channels.

The **BFUG Board** oversees work between the BFUG meetings, and prepares the agenda for the BFUG meetings. The Board is composed of:

- the incoming, present, and outgoing co-chairs of the BFUG;
- the BFUG Vice-Chair;
- the European Commission, and four of the consultative members (Council of Europe, EUA, ESU and EURASHE);
- one Co-Chair of each of the BFUG working groups and other coordination groups, task forces, etc.

The BFUG establishes **working structures** to implement the work plan. These usually take the form of working groups on specific topics; thematic peer groups linked to each of the three key commitments, overseen by a coordination group; and task forces with specific missions.

In the current working period, the following groups are active:

- working groups on learning and teaching*, fundamental values of higher education*, and the social dimension of higher education;
- a working group on monitoring the implementation of the Bologna Process, which prepares the Implementation Report;
- the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group, under which operate three thematic peer groups on the qualifications framework, on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and on quality assurance*;
- a coordination group on global policy dialogue*;
- a task force on the review of the rules and regulations for the governance of the EHEA (also tasked with preparing the proposal for a long-term secretariat);
- a task force on enhancing knowledge sharing in the EHEA community;
- a working group on the roadmap for San Marino's accession to the EHEA;
- a drafting committee to prepare the Tirana Communiqué.

*ENQA is a member of these groups.

Looking ahead

Drafting of the Tirana Communiqué is at an advanced stage. The latest draft (12 March 2024) is available [here](#). The Communiqué focuses on the role of higher education in society and asks Ministers to commit to further work to address the fundamental values and social dimension of higher education. Other topics addressed include a renewed focus on facilitating mobility across the EHEA, fostering lifelong learning, and promoting the ethical use of artificial intelligence in higher education.

For quality assurance specifically, the Ministers will give the authors of the E4 the mandate to revise the ESG and the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes; commit to promoting more robust and transparent quality assurance of trans-national education; and promote the appropriate use of DEQAR as a transparency tool.

In advance of each Ministerial Conference, ENQA publishes a message to ministers, highlighting what the Association sees as the main challenges and areas for development in implementing the quality assurance commitments of the Bologna Process. ENQA's message for the 2024 Ministerial Conference will be published in April, following consultation with members.

Further information

The [EHEA website](#) contains background information about the Bologna Process, an archive of relevant documents (including past Communiqués and work plans), and all details related to the current working period. This includes documents for all BFUG and BFUG Board meetings.

This [video](#) was produced in February 2024 to give a short overview of the Bologna Process.

ENQA's resources related to the Bologna Process are available [here](#).