Bologna Process commitments: a way forward

Final Project Paper of the BWSE FORward, Erasmus+ project

Bologna Process commitments: a way forward

Partners of the project

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Foreword

The Bologna Process, and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)[1], which oversees the process in between Ministerial Conferences, has brought about major improvements in higher education, notably in fields such as quality assurance, recognition, social dimension, learning and teaching, internationalisation and mobility. The same process defined, shaped and continues to shape the European Higher Education Area, which spreads across 49 countries. As one would foresee, such a big number of countries translates into a considerable diversity of higher education systems that aim to work together in various fields despite their differences.

It is important to acknowledge that the Bologna Process played a crucial role in making many of the higher education processes more coherent. Nevertheless, there are still challenges, and the aim of this paper is to be ambitious, look ahead, and propose recommendations that will ensure that the Bologna Process continues to respond to the needs of academic and administrative staff, students and other stakeholders. This paper considers the practical approaches employed by various stakeholders and the fact that excellence can be achieved when higher education institutions are diverse and reflect the diversity of society at large. It proposes recommendations to different crucial players of the higher education community that need to work hand in hand in order to achieve the desired outcomes: governments, higher education institutions, student representative bodies, quality assurance agencies and ENIC-NARIC centres.

Based on the results of the Bologna with students' eyes (BWSE)[2] publication and the outcomes of two Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), which took place as part of the Erasmus+ Project BWSE FORward, the following areas were identified as presenting challenges that hamper the advancements in the implementation of Bologna Process commitments implementation:

- student participation in internal quality assurance
- student-centred learning
- implementation of ECTS
- recognition of prior learning
- internationalisation and mobility

Therefore, this paper includes recommendations regarding these areas and others such as the social dimension, to mention just one, which are a constant undertone in all the proposed recommendations.

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[1] To consult the list of acronyms and definitions of the terms used in the paper, please see the Annex.

[2] https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BWSE2020-Publication_WEB2.pdf

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Introduction

We, the consortium of the BWSE FORward project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union,

Having regard to the Sorbonne Declaration, Bologna Declaration, Prague Communique, Berlin Communique, Bergen Communique, London Communique, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communique, Budapest-Vienna Declaration, Bucharest Communique, Yerevan Communique, Paris Communique and Rome Communique,

Having regard to the various reports of the working and advisory groups of the BFUG along the years, and the outcomes of the discussions and work of the BFUG,

Having regard to the differences that exist within the 49 higher education systems that participate in this process and that shape the European Higher Education Area,

Having regard to the needs of students who are the end-users and ultimate beneficiaries of higher education,

Acting with the goal of fostering excellence by encompassing diversity,

Having regard to the perspectives of students and staff,

Considering the recommendations from the publication Bologna With Student Eyes as well as the different stakeholders who participated in the BWSE FORward PLAs in April and May 2021.

Understand that:

1 The Bologna Process was initiated in 1999 to create more coherence between higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area in order to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive, accessible, attractive and competitive worldwide.

2 The ministers of the European Higher Education Area affirmed, in November 2020, the success of the Bologna Process over the past two decades, and committed to develop a more inclusive, innovative, interconnected and resilient EHEA by 2030.

3 All stakeholders involved understand the importance of the Bologna Process, the crucial point at which we have arrived, and the importance of shaping the future of the Bologna Process, and ensure it responds to the changing needs of society.

4 A successful higher education system would be one which reflects the diversity of society at large, and which truly leaves no one behind, regardless of their socio-economic background.

5 Quality assurance is a cornerstone of achieving excellence and high quality of education which is based on the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion as well as the fundamental values in higher education as understood in the Bologna Process.

6 Governments, public authorities, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, academic and administrative staff, ENIC–NARIC centres, student representative bodies and other stakeholders need to work together to ensure the achievement of all the objectives of the Bologna Process in all 49 EHEA member countries.

7 Adequate funding and investment in the educational sector are crucial to achieve fully the objectives of the Bologna Process, and to maintain its relevance.

8 The current decade should be aimed at ensuring the full implementation across the EHEA of the commitments agreed upon over the past two decades, as well as a time for reflection to ensure that the Bologna Process develops and remains innovative.

9 Social dimension and fundamental values are crucial cornerstones of higher education, and of all the topics discussed within this paper. The partners of the project acknowledge fully the need to implement the principles and guidelines[3] to strengthen the social dimension of higher education adopted at the Rome Ministerial Conference, and the absolute need of following up on their implementation, alongside the implementation of the fundamental values across the EHEA.

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[3] http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf

Based on this common understanding, we have drafted this final Project paper with the aim of providing recommendations to advance the implementation of the Bologna Process. **This paper will be distributed to national authorities, higher education institutions, and project partners' networks to make sure the findings of the project are known and used in future developments.**

The topics discussed in this paper were chosen mainly by students and highlighted as areas which require particular attention within the BWSE publication. In particular, this paper proposes recommendations to different stakeholders of HE about student participation in internal quality assurance, student-centred learning and implementation of ECTS, recognition of prior learning and internationalisation and mobility. These topics have also been discussed in the two PLAs organised as part of this project, and this paper seeks to mirror the main conclusions discussed by all those who participated.

Student participation in internal quality assurance

Students play a crucial role in internal quality assurance and should be involved as equal and full partners. The ESG Part 1 is a cornerstone to achieving this recommendation.

To ensure meaningful participation of students, the project consortium is putting forward the following recommendations to different stakeholders involved:
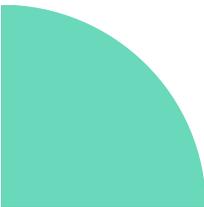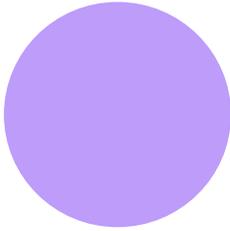
All stakeholders:

Work together and **strive** to end tokenism, which unfortunately still exists at various levels. Students are equal to other members of the education community and should be treated as such.

Governments:

Establish or **update** the relevant legal frameworks to allow for a higher degree of student participation in internal QA and in institutional decision-making bodies.

HEIs:

Create an institutional culture where the focus is on fruitful collaboration among various stakeholders, where the involvement of students in formal decision-making bodies is assured, and their involvement in the QA cycle is perpetual.

Ensure an inclusive approach to student involvement in QA and in discussions of relevant policy documents, whereby students are consulted and involved in the drafting and evaluation of relevant policies. **Inform** students about the importance and benefits of their participation in these activities.

Consult and **inform** students about the issues that are proposed for formal decision making. Inform them about decisions taken as a result of their feedback and explain how these decisions would impact their studies. This would ensure that students keep being motivated and understand the importance of participating in internal QA processes.

Formalise and **recognise** student participation in institutional formal decision-making bodies. This could be done through practical application of micro-credentials, in the recognition of skills and competencies, or through the allocation of ECTS based on defined learning outcomes.

Set up adequate financial support for student representative bodies, student training and other activities. This will assure an independent and unbiased student voice.

Together with other stakeholders, such as student organisations **provide** training sessions for students.

Collaborate with schools and **co-create** tools that would ensure a smooth transition from school to university that would cultivate in students a participatory mindset and a quality culture.

Student representative bodies:

Ensure that the election of student representatives within the student representative body as well as in the institutional formal decision-making bodies is inclusive, fair, transparent, and based on clear eligibility criteria.

Assure continuity of student participation in institutional formal decision-making bodies and student representative bodies as well as a smooth transition between graduating and newly elected student representatives by organising handover sessions, providing clear communication materials and training sessions.

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In collaboration with the institution **develop** appropriate policies and tools that would ensure an autonomous and independent student voice and would protect student representatives from any form of discrimination in case of differing opinions from that of other representatives.


Student-centred leaning (SCL) and implementation of ECTS

According to the ESG standard on student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, students should be able to take an active role in creating their learning process (ESG 1.3). There needs to be a high level of commitment at national and institutional levels to implement the Bologna tools, which facilitate the achievement of SCL. One of such tools is the ECTS which should be implemented in line with the ECTS Users' Guide.[4]

All stakeholders:

Support and **strengthen** higher education institutions with the necessary capacity to respond to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and to create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures.
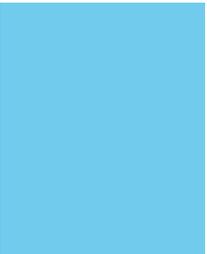
Governments:

Develop relevant structures to follow up and monitor the implementation of the recommendations produced by the BFUG's Advisory Group on learning and teaching adopted at the Rome Ministerial Conference in order to guarantee that the policy discussions on SCL extend from the European to the national and institutional level.

Echo, **translate** and **streamline** the definition of SCL in the context of the Bologna Process at both the national and institutional levels. Given that SCL requires a mindset and culture shift, and different pedagogical approaches, governments must implement changes with both a bottom-up as well as a top-down approach.

Allocate funding to support HEIs to develop SCL through the creation of an inclusive, student-centred educational environment to ensure that the needs of the students are met and to increase the overall effectiveness of higher education. In this regard, provide more financial resources to higher education institutions for capacity building (e.g. research, training and peer learning opportunities) and for the development of a favourable institutional environment for SCL (e.g. the promotion of research on SCL at institutional level, the development of research infrastructures, allocation of human resources).

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[4] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1

Foster and **implement** the Social Dimension, and particularly the notion of equity and flexibility. **The Principles and Guidelines on Social Dimension[5]** serve a crucial role in this, and not only need to be echoed in national processes and legislation, but also need to be followed up upon through reporting about the state of implementation.
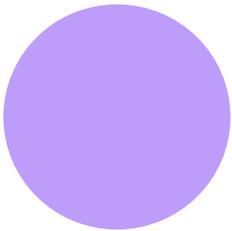
HEIs:

Ensure that learning outcomes are realistic, clearly formulated and drawn up in collaboration with the various stakeholders, including students, representatives of the labour market as well as the civil society sector.

Place greater focus on the EHEA wide and aligned implementation of ECTS, particularly in ensuring that the allocation of ECTS gives a clear indication of workload as well as the learning outcomes.

Provide training and **organise** institution-wide activities where academics share best practises regarding SCL. Encourage or even mandate pedagogical training, and implement systematic monitoring instruments to evaluate whether the pedagogical approaches respond to the needs of students and actively engage their participation in the learning environment.

Together with student representative bodies, **organise** training for students to enhance the understanding of SCL and the role of students in fostering a student-centred academic environment.

Ensure that digital tools are used to facilitate the implementation of SCL. Take appropriate actions to avoid a digital divide. Institutions need to have equitable policies and support structures in place to help those who do not have the financial means to invest in the necessary resources.

QA Agencies:

Support HEIs in their implementation of SCL. QA agencies should integrate student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (ESG 1.3) in all of their external QA activities.

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[5] http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf

Recognition of prior learning

RPL is a tool which ties together the social dimension and SCL and supports the diversification of the student body by having a positive impact on widening access, transition and completion, equity and inclusion, mobility and employability[6]. RPL was mentioned in the 2012, 2015 and 2018 ministerial communique, particularly because it benefits students, HEIs, employers and society at large, and can be a game changer in responding to the needs of the wider society and the job market. RPL can facilitate re-entry into higher education and promote lifelong learning. The principles and procedures stipulated by the Lisbon Recognition Convention[7] can also be applied to RPL.
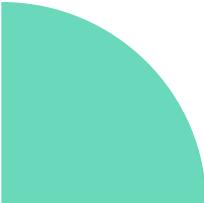
All stakeholders:

Create a framework for RPL which tackles the existing challenges at all levels sectoral, institutional, practitioner and student. This should lead to:

- **Underlining** the benefits of RPL and a further discussion about the importance of it within the higher education sector.
- **Reaching** a satisfactory level of coherence of the processes between and within HEIs.
- **Promoting** understanding that skills and knowledge acquired outside of academia are very important for the students' academic journey.
- **Creating** and **spreading** awareness about the existence of transparent processes for RPL and highlighting the added value for students in their studies and everyday life.

Governments:

Back up RPL procedures with appropriate national legislation or frameworks which allow for RPL or remove any existing restrictions for its applicability.

Ensure that RPL is included in the national strategy for higher education and is promoted at all levels. To achieve this successfully, there needs to be closer cooperation between all stakeholders of higher education, including employers and the wider community.
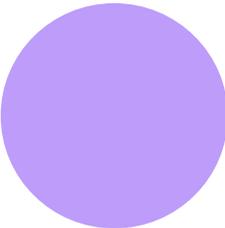
HEIs:

Adopt transparent procedures and guidelines to support a streamlined and fair RPL across the EHEA.

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[6] EHEA (2020), Principles & Guidelines to strengthen the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA, Rome, November 2020. Retrieved from: http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf

[7] Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997). The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, ETS No. 165.

Ensure that RPL is seen as a means of diversifying the skills and knowledge within the learning environment. RPL should be seen as a mean to both supplement and in specific circumstances substitute units of learning and credits, based on a thorough criteria founded on learning outcomes.

Offer training and **organise** activities for sharing of best practices regarding RPL, particularly to clearly highlight its benefits on the quality of education.

Ensure that National Qualifications Frameworks support the transparent recognition of learning outcomes, beyond those acquired in formal higher education settings.[8]

Inform the institutional community about RPL by setting up support structures and by proposing support materials (i.e. guidelines, examples of application forms).

Involve student unions in the dissemination of information regarding existing RPL possibilities and in reflections and discussions on how RPL benefits or can benefit students.

ENIC–NARIC centres:

Provide support and information to HEIs' recognition practitioners and support the streamlining of RPL procedures across the EHEA.

Provide information about RPL to students that intend to have their prior learning recognised.

Internationalisation and Mobility (IM)

One of the key commitments of the Bologna Process is to promote IM and overcome any obstacles regarding its implementation. In an ever-more globalised world, the role of IM in HE continues to increase its importance. The present global crises and refugee flows are just one clear example and a reminder of how important it is to work together and in solidarity as an academic community and to invest in IM as a means to achieve global unity and pool resources and expertise. This area was many times highlighted as a priority for the EHEA by ministers, and it has seen drastic improvements over the past years.

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[8] In countries where the responsibility for recognition processes and decisions is in the remit of a non-HEI entity, this recommendation may be considered as being addressed to that entity .

All stakeholders:

Encourage participation in IM and develop national strategies for IM. Diversity, equity and inclusion should be at the core of all strategies and policies regulating internationalisation and mobility programmes in higher education.

Give particular attention to students with vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds, to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reap the benefits of mobility during their higher education journey.

Ensure that the competent authorities that regulate higher education facilitate collaboration among different stakeholders and allow for the implementation and recognition of cross-border QA in line with the ESG and the use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.[9]

Ensure that blended mobility is seen as an opportunity for internationalisation to those who typically cannot be mobile whilst emphasising that virtual mobility does not replace investment in physical mobility.

Remove existing obstacles for the mobility of staff, to achieve a cross-border sharing of expertise within the EHEA.
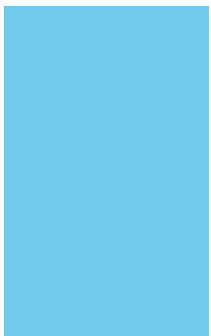
Governments:

Provide more funding to make IM a reality for all those who wish to benefit from it.

Ensure portability of student grants and loans and remove barriers for students, including international students to access loans and grants and consistently strive to see education as a public good and offer equitable access to education for all.

Ensure that international students are adequately supported when it comes to tuition fees, access to health services and housing. In the case of the latter, sufficient student housing, which allow for decent standards of living, should be made available at affordable prices for international students.
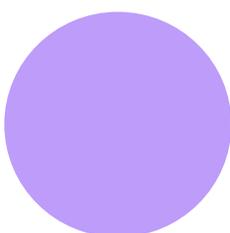
HEIs:

Inform the institutional community about the existing opportunities through the international and information centres and other support structures that should also provide support materials such as guidelines, examples of application forms.

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[9] https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes

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Ensure access to adequate information prior, during and after the mobility programmes.

Integrate international students within the HE communities and within the wider community (e.g. by offering language courses and sufficient guidance and support).

Train staff in cultural awareness and non-discrimination, and adopt a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to discrimination, in order to create a safe space for all students, regardless of their country of origin.

Have clearly formulated learning outcomes for courses part of the mobility programmes to facilitate their recognition.

Embed internationalisation in the institutional culture by internationalising the curriculum and fostering discussions on global topics and cultural exchange.

Student representative bodies:
Help in disseminating information regarding the existing possibilities, including through the creation of platforms for sharing of experiences.

Reflect on how internationalisation is taken up in their structures.

Conclusions

Conclusions

It is evident that the Bologna Process has been instrumental to achieving higher education as we know it today, however, challenges persist with the implementation of its various tools and commitments. All those involved in the process, at any level, should ensure the implementation of what has been agreed upon, as well as put in place relevant procedures to monitor and follow up on the implementation.

With that being said, the Bologna Process will always be as strong as the stakeholders want it to be. It is already a big step in the right direction to have the political will and commitment to follow up on the topics mentioned in this paper (and not only) and this can be attested by the various ministerial declarations. It is now the responsibility of those on the ground to strive for the implementation of the EHEA reforms, and to continue collaborating and discussing with governments and authorities about the importance of the process and everything it stands for. Above all, it is crucial to ensure that the respect of the fundamental values becomes a cornerstone of the process, and that any disregard of these, leads to relevant actions.

Last but definitely not least, digitalisation needs to be seen as a mean to achieve the implementation of the EHEA tools, as well as the values the process stands for. Especially during the pandemic, we have seen that digitalisation is a tool that can make higher education more accessible. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that no matter how many advances are made, digitalisation can never replace the benefits of in person learning.

The BWSE FORward project consortium fully understands how crucial the Bologna Process is for the higher education sector, and how much impact it has on the day-to-day life of all those involved in the sector. The consortium highlights that all stakeholders should commit to continue doing their utmost to see higher education flourish, advance and be strengthened to foster an equitable and democratic environment which caters for the needs of all students, regardless of their background. The consortium hopes that the recommendations in this paper will serve to achieve this goal.

Annex: Acronyms & Definitions

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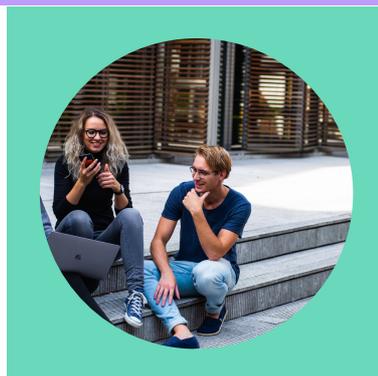
Acronyms & Definitions

- **BFUG** is the Bologna Follow-Up Group, which is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences.[10]

- **Blended mobility** is to be understood, for the purposes of this paper, as a method of combining physical and virtual mobility and a system of blended learning during a student's internationalisation and mobility experience.

- **BP** is the Bologna Process, which was launched in 1999 through the Bologna Declaration, and which defines the EHEA as explained above.

- **ECTS** is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, which is "A learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer, based on the principle of transparency of learning, teaching and assessment processes. Its objective is to facilitate planning, delivery and evaluation of study programmes and student mobility by recognising learning achievements and qualifications and periods of learning." [11]

- **EHEA** is the European Higher Education Area, which is a unique international collaboration on higher education and the result of the political will of 49 countries with different political, cultural and academic traditions, which, step by step during the last twenty years, built an area implementing a common set of commitments: structural reforms and shared tools.[12]

- **ESG** are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA[13], which were adopted at the EHEA Ministerial Conference in 2015 and which serve as the basis for quality assurance within the EHEA.

- **HEIs** refers to higher education institutions, which offer academic degrees or other forms of professional certifications to students. It is important to note that for the purposes of this paper, HEIs go beyond universities and vocational training institutions, and encompass any institution with a recognised status in the higher education system.

Acronyms & Definitions

- **QA agencies** are the quality assurance agencies, which are tasked with ensuring, maintaining and enhancing the quality and standards of higher education, as explained above, normally from an external point of view. Within the EHEA, QA agencies use an agreed common framework, which is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)

- **QA** refers to quality assurance, and for the purposes of this paper should be understood as all the aspects involved to ensure the highest level and quality of education possible in the higher education sector.

- **RPL** is the recognition of prior learning, which is a process of recognising different forms of prior formal, non-formal and informal education.

- **SCL** is student-centred learning, which is an approach to education, which aims at overcoming some of the problems inherent to more traditional forms of education by focusing on the learner and their needs, rather than being centred around the teacher's input.[14]

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[10] Ibis

[11] As defined in the ECTS Users' Guide 2015, http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/5/ECTS_Users_Guide_2015_613725.pdf

[12] As defined on the official EHEA website, http://www.ehea.info/

[13] https://www.eua.eu/downloads/content/standards%20and%20guidelines%20for%20quality%20assurance%20in%20the%20european%20higher%20education%20area%20esg%202015.pdf

[14] As defined on the official EHEA website, http://www.ehea.info/page-student-centred-learning

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