



BWSE FOR2030
Bologna with Stakeholders Eyes for an Innovative, Inclusive and
Interconnected EHEA by 2030

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

How to foster an inclusive, innovative and interconnected
European Higher Education Area by 2030

February 2024

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To achieve our vision, we commit to building an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030, able to underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe:

- *Inclusive, because every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training;*
- *Innovative, because it will introduce new and better aligned learning, teaching and assessment methods and practices, closely linked to research;*
- *Interconnected, because our shared frameworks and tools will continue to facilitate and enhance international cooperation and reform, exchange of knowledge and mobility of staff and students.*

Rome Ministerial Communiqué 2020

Foreword

At the 2020 Rome Ministerial Conference, ministers for Higher Education from European countries set the vision towards building an inclusive, innovative and interconnected European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2030. Following these commitments, the Erasmus+ project “Bologna with Stakeholders Eyes for an Innovative, Inclusive and Interconnected European Higher Education Area by 2030 (BWSE FOR2030)” took as its overall goal to bring together stakeholders from all relevant levels (institutional, national and European) to analyse what concrete steps are needed so that the EHEA can become more inclusive, innovative and interconnected. Through peer exchange, dialogue and sharing of best-practice examples, it identified key challenges in these areas and developed recommendations on how to tackle them.

The project’s policy recommendations are presented in this document. They aim to inspire European and national-level policy makers, staff of higher education institutions in leadership positions as well as students to take action, implement policies and advocate and design policies that will enable the EHEA to realise the vision outlined in the Rome Communiqué. Additionally, the policy areas discussed in peer learning activities, which formed the basis for the policy recommendations, have also influenced the selection of topics for ESU's Bologna with student eyes 2024 publication.

The BWSE FOR2030 project is coordinated by the European Students Union (ESU), in partnership with the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is an associate partner.

About the Policy Recommendations

The Policy Recommendations issued by the BWSE FOR2030 project address challenges and recommendations related to the inclusiveness, innovativeness and interconnectedness of the EHEA, respectively. These challenges and recommendations have been identified through three Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) which were held in 2023:

- "Towards an Inclusive EHEA by 2030", The Hague, Netherlands, February
- "Towards an Innovative EHEA by 2030", Zagreb, Croatia, April
- "Towards an Interconnected EHEA by 2030", online, June

The PLA's participants included representatives from higher education ministries, higher education institutions, students, higher education experts and other relevant stakeholders.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE EHEA

As stressed in the Rome Communiqué, socially inclusive higher education is at the core of the European Higher Education Area and will continue to require relevant actors (e.g., national policy makers, Higher Education Institutions) to provide opportunities and support for equitable inclusion in higher education of individuals from all parts of society. Learners with diverse socio-economic, professional, cultural and educational backgrounds must have the possibility and the tools to seek out and avail themselves, at any time of life, of the educational options most useful for them. At the same time, HEIs are expected to better reflect today's diverse societies. This expectation is also supported by the [Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA](#), which take as their starting point the need for "the composition of the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels [to] correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries" (London Communiqué, 2007).

Challenges

Missing sense of belonging and insufficiently holistic policies

Various factors hinder certain groups of staff and students from accessing higher education, including physical infrastructure inadequacies and other limitations such as policies and resources. Examples include buildings, services, and resources lacking accommodations for individuals with physical impairments. Additionally, recruitment practices, staff development (regarding cultural or gender sensitivity), and career evaluation policies can disadvantage women and first-generation academics. Moreover, the "hidden rules" of academia's career progression may be inaccessible to first-generation academics. On another note, adult learners may face challenges meeting performance expectations due to conflicting caretaking responsibilities.

As a result, institutions may depict an image of higher education as a good that is exclusive to a specific section of society. At the same time, some groups may get the impression that Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policies either do not concern them or are even directed against them. Meaningful and authentic D&I efforts should, however, not

aim to exclude majorities, but truly engage every member of a higher education community.

Current societal developments underpin the necessity of such an ambition and demonstrate the limited plausibility of addressing D&I based on sheer numbers (i.e., in a way that opposes majorities and minorities). One such development is that female higher education students and graduates are either already, or on the path towards, outnumbering their male peers in many Western countries. In addition, many cities are quickly turning into very diverse spaces, which renders the notion of majorities and minorities outdated." However, overall many outdated structures, approaches and ways of thinking prevail in higher education, despite sincere innovation efforts.

Finally, identities are always inter-sectional (e.g., white first-generation female student with a hearing impairment, transgender student of colour from an academic household). These intersecting identities are linked to intersecting mechanisms of systemic exclusion or privilege. Intersectionality, therefore, and this concept might be challenging for many current policies.

Limited representation

Higher education at all levels, ranging from ministries, HEI staff and leadership to student representations, is sometimes insufficiently inclusive and insufficiently diverse. This implies lost potential and perspectives in both decision-making and consultation processes. As a result, those collaboration and consultation processes that are meant to assemble diverse perspectives and ideas often exclude the experiences and viewpoints of underrepresented groups. In some cases, the involvement of underrepresented groups in consultation and decision-making processes may be limited or even hindered entirely by factors not pertaining to higher education. This may, for example, be the case with students who need to work or have caretaking obligations, and who therefore cannot afford to invest additional time and effort into engagement activities.

Another facet of limited representation is that student involvement may take on the form of a token measure, with students either being involved at a late stage of a consultation or decision-making process, or their input weighs less than the input of other stakeholders. Meanwhile, although institutional aspirations to engage students may exist, it is frequently observed within the diverse array of European institutions that the current culture of student involvement remains underdeveloped.

Unequal financial means

There are still a variety of existing inequalities and inequities at supranational, national, institutional and personal levels. Quality higher education that is inclusive and accessible depends on adequate and equitable financial means, with regard to general funding of higher education, funding of different types of HEIs, the financial means of students and staff, as well as more targeted approaches to funding. Not least, lack of financial affluence or support for students and the need to work or fulfil caretaking responsibilities are factors that may influence an individual's decision or capacity to study and graduate. In comparison with big academic centres, higher education institutions in smaller, regional-oriented communities, many professionally-oriented, may face additional hurdles in terms of access to funding or networks, due to their geographic location, despite catering for a diverse range of students.

TOWARDS AN INNOVATIVE EHEA

The term "innovation" is the product or process of self-reflection on what can be done better. It embodies disruption, transformation, and risk-taking, as well as out-of-the-box and forward-thinking. Innovation thus requires openness, agility and adaptability.

As underlined in the Rome Communiqué, higher education learning and teaching should be innovated with a view to fostering context-sensitive knowledge and a comprehensive set of skills (including soft skills, language, digital and green skills) and competencies among learners that allow them to be innovative thinkers and responsible citizens of the world. European HEIs are continuously searching for solutions to the challenges our societies face, and the social and creative sciences and arts as well as STEM must continue to play their vital role in enabling citizens to understand the changes the world faces. HEIs must engage in swift up-dating of knowledge, skills and competencies, which are required to respond to the challenges and opportunities that the new decade will bring. HEIs need to integrate holistic approaches into education and foster innovative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving abilities, as well as enterprising attitudes. Flexible learning paths are

important aspects of student-centred learning and are in increasing demand in our societies.

Innovation ought to be a tool and not an end in itself. Innovation should ultimately also serve all higher education stakeholders and society at large and, accordingly, depends on collaboration (locally, regionally, nationally and internationally) and the inclusion of ethical considerations. Such an approach to innovation would also help ensure that its outcomes are not in breach of higher education's responsibility to contribute to a sustainable, inclusive and just society.

Challenges

Fear of innovation and lack of incentives

Teachers and learners often lack the necessary resources (financial, time and infrastructure) to invest in innovating their teaching and learning processes. As such, the lack of resources is stifling innovation efforts. This challenge refers to all types of resources, including financial (project and institutional/core funding), human (staff, external experts), material (facilities, physical and digital infrastructure) and non-material (availability of time for experimentation, continuous professional development, skills training) resources.

In addition, explicit incentives, such as recognition and rewards for teachers and learners to proactively innovate (e.g. in curriculum design, teaching and learning methods, projects, and assessment), are often lacking entirely or not embedded in a holistic and formalised manner. As a result, many teachers and learners have little reason to invest their time and energy in the design, implementation and evaluation of complex innovative approaches such as, e.g. transdisciplinarity involves flexible curriculum design and ongoing training for teaching staff to support lifelong learning. Furthermore, there are not adequate mechanisms in place to explain the advantages of innovation and how the process should be organised.

Another facet of this challenge can be a high degree of risk aversion and resistance to change among members of an institutional community, ranging from the leadership level to teachers and students. This point is also connected with the challenge related to flexibility vs regulation balance.

Insufficient stakeholder engagement

Innovation depends on transformative collaboration and the inclusion of relevant perspectives and new ideas, and therefore on the involvement of many stakeholders (e.g., students, the business sector, the general public, etc. depending on the context). These stakeholders are in several cases approached not as partners in, but recipients of innovation. Nevertheless, engaging stakeholders in innovation processes and conversations around these processes is a necessary precondition for raising public awareness of existing challenges, creating trust in the approaches to tackling these challenges, and creating a culture of accepting failures related to innovation endeavours. The lack of active engagement of relevant stakeholders can hamper in safeguarding a transparent and socially responsible approach to innovation, with the greater good of society in mind.

Current innovation approaches can exclude relevant stakeholder groups from the conversation around innovation, by approaching stakeholder engagement as a box-ticking exercise, by failing to concisely and transparently communicate current challenges and developments to stakeholders like the general public, or by not considering the broader, long-term impact of innovation products and processes on society at large.

Flexibility vs regulation balance

When thinking of innovative teaching and learning approaches, there is a question of how to balance the need for flexibility and experimentation with the need for frameworks and regulations that ensure accountability and quality. Flexibility and experimentation that are required for innovation to happen, and which might in their very nature entail erring, may sometimes be perceived as in conflict with regulations and frameworks that are meant to ensure that final outcomes of innovation are always geared towards quality and accountability (e.g., quality assurance, curricula, assessment frameworks). Looking at the matter from another angle, frameworks and regulations are occasionally overly rigid and bureaucratic, thus stifling flexibility and experimentation. Such situations may ultimately limit the fitness-for-purpose of those regulations and frameworks since they reduce the capacity of higher education to fulfil its mission to foster innovation in and through its activities.

TOWARDS AN INTERCONNECTED EHEA

An interconnected EHEA means that the member states are and should be efficiently connected in the following: physical and blended student and staff mobility; internationalisation at home and virtual cooperation; cross-border collaboration, including in the context of accreditation and quality assurance; and shared frameworks and tools. The Rome Communiqué defines cooperation and mobility as tools for fostering the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, broadening knowledge and understanding of our world with direct contacts and synergies among our diverse cultures and higher education systems. It contributes to the excellence and relevance of higher education in the EHEA, making it attractive and competitive on a global scale. The target is still that at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have experienced a study or training period abroad, and foster all learners to acquire international and intercultural competencies through internationalisation of the curricula or participation in innovative international environments in their home institutions.

Challenges

Continuing inequities

There are various examples of a lack of equity preventing adequate and balanced interconnectivity across the EHEA. This lack of equity concerns several levels and includes skills, resources, access and geographical inequities. At the individual level, such inequities may, for example, take the form of individuals lacking the financial means to take advantage of physical mobility opportunities, or the digital skills or resources to engage in virtual learning opportunities. At the institutional level, inequities may materialise in the form of a lack of administrative capacity or pre-existing networks that would enable access to further networking opportunities or platforms. An often-encountered inequity at the national or international level is unequal mobility streams and invitations to collaborate in projects, which may leave some regions or even entire countries overlooked.

Barriers related to diversity of frameworks and approaches

The diversity of the EHEA, its higher education systems and institutions should be seen as a strength, but the day-to-day practice in higher education renders it a challenge all too often when moving, operating or collaborating across systems. These challenges can range from language and cultural barriers to differences in legislative frameworks, standards (e.g., in accreditation, programmes, qualifications) and academic calendars.

A related challenge to the one outlined above is the complexity of the various systems and frameworks that make up the EHEA. An example illustrating this point is joint programmes and the administrative challenges that may prevent more such programmes from being offered. The European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes remains under-used by HEIs, either because EHEA countries have yet to create a national framework that renders its application a practical possibility or because it has been insufficiently promoted. This forces many HEIs to either apply two different quality assurance processes or to refrain from establishing a joint programme altogether in order to avoid the bureaucratic burden this entails.

The lack of trust in the quality or comparability of higher education provided in another EHEA country remains a challenge, as well as an uncertainty among mobile learners whether their qualifications or study periods from abroad will be recognised. However, the EHEA and other international bodies such as UNESCO or the Council of Europe have also provided crucial transparency tools and common frameworks (e.g., qualifications frameworks, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Lisbon Recognition Convention) that have driven the harmonisation of the EHEA and allow national authorities, institutions and individuals to assure themselves of the quality and comparability of the education provided in another country. Yet not all countries are exploiting the full potential of these tools and frameworks or do not have sufficient trust in them.

On the institutional level, the lack of recognition of institutional diversity is often leading to "silos" in the higher education system and the existence of a stigma towards e.g. professional schools or colleges in comparison with universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address the challenges outlined above and help realise the Rome Communiqué's vision of an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA, the BWSE FOR2030 project consortium would like to put forward a series of cross-cutting recommendations for consideration by governmental actors and other policy makers, HEIs and other key stakeholders in European higher education, including student unions.

Ensure inclusive and equitable policies for higher education governance, access and funding

Formal student representative bodies are recommended to:

- evaluate to which degree their own structures and processes are inclusive, and potentially revise their current approaches, with a view to becoming more representative of the diverse student body.

HEIs are recommended to:

- Support and train students to give constructive input and give clear mandates for them to do so, in order that consultation processes, are effective and efficient, at all levels and for the whole policy cycle, instead of tokenistic measures;
- provide holistic support to students throughout their studies' "life cycle", including preparation for the labour market and with a special focus on the first year so as to support a sense of belonging and reduce drop-out rates in the long term;
- Review institutional standards and values communicated through infrastructure, curricula, and staff practices;
- Develop inclusive representations of higher education on websites and brochures where necessary;
- Ensure accessibility of physical and virtual facilities and resources for all members of the institution, and to provide continuous professional development for staff at all levels, emphasising leadership in diversity and inclusion;
- revise staff recruitment and career assessment policies and procedures, with a view to ensuring that underrepresented groups have an equitable chance at following an academic career, for example through the introduction of family-friendly work models, the provision of targeted information and career guidance services;

- explore options for offering more blended mobility and integrate internationalisation at home in their curriculum design and teacher training, in order to support their students in obtaining vital intercultural competences, both in preparation for a potential upcoming mobility period and as a complementary offer to physical and blended mobility, so as to support a broader range of students in taking advantage of internationalised learning opportunities;
- consult and seek cooperation with internal (e.g., students) and external stakeholders (e.g., enterprises, civil society, local communities), who know the needs and challenges of minorities, underrepresented and disadvantaged groups among students and staff;
- establish streamlined processes to continuously monitor and evaluate whether their priorities, strategies, structures, frameworks and procedures (still) foster D&I;
- Address holistic thinking strategies and approaches in order to build a D&I culture in higher education that takes into account intersectionality. Equally, support staff at HEIs with the necessary means and professional development to operationalise a D&I culture.

National and supranational governance bodies are recommended to:

- identify and implement solutions to ease the financial burden on students, for example by revising funding and fiscal systems with regard to free or more affordable health care, as well as marginal employment (i.e., so-called mini/student jobs) and reducing tuition fees, especially for students who cannot afford them;
- ensure adequate and sustainable funding streams to citizen initiatives, activities, infrastructure and other resources that support D&I in higher education with a long-term view, so as to ensure that funding decisions are not overly dependent on short-term leadership decisions;
- ensure an equitable distribution of financial and other resources across HEIs, thus enabling all institutions to engage in opportunities to connect with peers nationally and internationally;
- make it a national priority to coordinate the implementation of Bologna tools and European approaches across the higher education system, in close collaboration and consultation with relevant stakeholders, including HEIs and students.

Governmental actors and HEIs are recommended to cooperate with the goal to:

- facilitate equitable access to affordable student housing and transportation, as well as support in acquiring digital devices for studying;
- ensure easily accessible and clear information about available funding opportunities (e.g., for projects, studies, mobility) for higher education students and staff;
- jointly review and ensure the flexibility of approaches to academic careers and assessment in collaboration with relevant stakeholders such as HEIs and students.

Rethink old structures by encouraging innovative approaches and risk-taking

HEIs are recommended to:

- create and promote platforms, processes and opportunities for peer learning and exchanges among teaching staff and across staff categories (e.g., between academic and administrative staff), so as to foster the further spread and development of innovative thinking and new practices;
- enable transdisciplinary approaches and skills among staff and students (e.g., through staff training, curriculum design);
- establish policies and processes for risk assessment preceding the implementation of new methods or formats, so as to not jeopardise students' learning;
- allow for more flexible formats (e.g., fully digital, hybrid) and teaching hours, so as to accommodate a broader range of pedagogies and learning styles;
- invest in infrastructure and resources, especially linked to universal design and digital tools, software and training, including in virtual and augmented reality;
- remain mindful of the impact of new approaches and activities on the workload of higher education staff and seek to avoid negative implications for this workload in a dialogue with staff members;
- increase cooperation with other research-conducting organisations, and consequently increase synergies between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

In addition, governmental and supra governmental actors, HEIs and other key stakeholders in higher education are recommended to collaborate and jointly:

- embrace the use of open science and open-source materials, in order to even out funding inequalities (i.e., between countries or regions) and thus ensure that innovation processes and outcomes are as widely accessible as possible;
- consider options for establishing specific funds for innovation in higher education;
- recognise the regional role of the institutions outside of the major academic centres and their role in fostering the development of the local community and economy;
- determine how to introduce (more) flexible learning paths, including recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, as well as extra-curricular learning, thus also supporting an educational system based on lifelong learning.

Simplify procedures while maintaining a culture of transparency, quality and accountability

HEIs are recommended to:

- embed flexibility in the design of entirely new programmes, which will allow for swift, unbureaucratic adjustment in case problems are identified;
- support a culture of transparency, quality and accountability instead of one of responsiveness to top-down regulation, through context-sensitive, self-steered mechanism for external quality assessment, as well as closer ties between internal and external quality assurance;
- complement teacher training with an evaluation of the skills teachers have, so as to allow for a personalisation of training needs;
- maintain a continuous discussion with all relevant stakeholders on whether current outcomes of education allow for innovation and flexibility in approaches, and on whether current performance indicators are still relevant.

In order to support HEIs in these tasks, national governments and policymakers are recommended to:

- create and maintain transparent and compatible frameworks and regulations within which the HEIs can easily operate and allow the proper use of existing EHEA tools and frameworks'.

Ensure stakeholder consultation by formalising their engagement

Governmental actors, other policy-makers, HEIs and student representations are recommended to jointly:

- identify who may generally be considered a key stakeholder of higher education in the local, regional, national and international context;
- enshrine stakeholder consultation and engagement in key strategic documents (e.g., in national policies, institutional strategies);
- formalise the unique status of students as the primary group of higher education stakeholders in legal frameworks and institutional strategies, and through quality assurance.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative for national governments to intensify their efforts in aligning national legislation, standards, and systems with established European tools and frameworks. This alignment must be coupled with coordinated implementation efforts at both international and national levels to streamline processes and eliminate redundancies across various systems. Additionally, policymakers and decision-makers should remain vigilant in monitoring and supporting the implementation of existing Bologna and other pertinent tools crucial for the integration of the EHEA. Furthermore, HEIs should prioritise the establishment of robust quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the integrity and excellence of mobility programs and cross-border collaborations involving students and staff.

Ultimately, a collective commitment from all EHEA member states to leverage European frameworks and Bologna tools is essential for promoting coherence and efficacy within the European higher education landscape.

Abbreviations and Definitions

EHEA - European Higher Education Area. EHEA members are 49 countries and the European Commission, whereas stakeholder organisations are consultative members of EHEA. To become a member of the EHEA, countries have to be party to the European Cultural Convention and declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process. At the time of publication, the rights of representation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the EHEA are suspended.

HEI - Higher Education Institution

Inclusion - the extent to which individuals feel part of an organisation and to which they can be their authentic selves (Shore et al., 2011)

D&I - Diversity and Inclusion. In the first BWSE FOR2030 PLA, these two concepts mainly referred to inequalities and inequities due to age, gender, race, sexual orientation and identification, and native language; scholars and students at risk and in a situation of displacement; staff and students of various socio-economic, confessional and cultural backgrounds, as well as first-generation students; students and staff with special needs or mental health issues.

Innovation - In the second BWSE FOR2030 PLA, the term "innovation" was approached as both a product and a process, meaning both 1) approaches and structures through which higher education can contribute to innovation or innovative products (e.g., through research projects and collaboration with the business sector), and 2) innovative methods and practices in higher education itself (e.g., through innovative pedagogies). This latter point also concerns all phases and aspects of the student life-cycle (enrolment, progression, assessment, recognition, certification) as well as continuous professional development and career paths of higher education staff.

Interconnection - In the third BWSE FOR2030 PLA, the concept of an interconnected EHEA was addressed and discussed with a focus on the following aspects: physical and virtual student and staff mobility; cross-border collaboration, including in the context of accreditation and quality assurance; and shared frameworks and tools.

PLA - Peer Learning Activity