The EU and the Bologna Process – working together for change
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Foreword

We have now been working on a common higher education area in Europe for more than fifteen years. This year’s Ministerial Conference in Yerevan will be a crucial moment for us to take stock of the progress we have made – and to examine new challenges and decide how best to address them.

Looking back, the degree of change is remarkable. Within the European Higher Education Area, 47 countries, more than 4,000 higher education institutions and numerous stakeholder organisations continue to adapt their higher education systems with the same objective in mind – to enable people and knowledge to move freely across borders. The Bologna Process has created a space for dialogue and cooperation, but it has also led to real change on the ground for students, for staff and for the higher education institutions they study and work in.

But many commitments remain to be implemented. We must press on with modernising and internationalising higher education in Europe to improve quality, transparency and trust. And we must make the sharing of democratic values the cornerstone of our efforts, to ensure an open, inclusive space for higher education and research that will help sustain the future of Europe and its coming generations.

This is why the Commission not only engages in promoting reform and modernisation through the Bologna Process. Through the Erasmus+ Programme, it also supports projects that strengthen the principles, structures and tools we need to put the Bologna Process into practice and to turn the European Higher Education Area into reality on the ground.

Erasmus+ and the Bologna Process draw strength from each other. Together, they make mobility and recognition easier, spreading a shared understanding of high quality education, giving space to countries and organisations to learn from each other and using the power of education to help young people find their place in the labour market and in society as a whole. They give us a wonderful opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives of millions of young Europeans and to the sustainability and wellbeing of our future societies. Let’s make the most of them.
Structural reform

Constructing solid foundations for the European Higher Education Area

The Bologna Process has transformed the face of higher education in Europe. For a decade and a half, ministers have committed to a high degree of policy and reform coordination to promote quality higher education and graduate employability, as well as to deepen the international competitiveness of their higher education systems.

Because implementing structural reforms is what places the Bologna principles and objectives on a sound foundation. In turn, reforming higher education helps boost the quality and reputation of Europe’s learning institutions, mobility and internationalisation, while at the same time generating sustainable growth and jobs.

Member countries have thus made significant changes that have enabled the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to emerge. Together, European countries have put in place a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, modified higher education structures, established mechanisms to facilitate mobility and developed tools for cooperation such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

The landscape, student numbers, orientation and financial reality of higher education institutions (HEIs) are diverse across Europe. EHEA countries therefore have to apply the reforms in very different contexts and circumstances, differences that can have an impact on the main goals and the speed of higher education reforms.

The Bologna Implementation Report provides an evidence base to build on. The report analyses the current state of implementation on key issues and builds on information provided by the member countries, EUROSTAT data and EURYDICE analyses.

The 2015 Implementation Report shows, however, that implementation of EHEA objectives and principles is still uneven - for example, as regards the practical application of ECTS, coherent use of the three cycle system for all disciplines, academic recognition, qualifications frameworks, a learning outcomes approach and quality assurance. Continued support for reforms is necessary.
Commission support

Continued EU commitment to the Bologna Process

For the past 15 years, the European Commission has been working closely with countries, HEIs and stakeholders to support the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process. Through the Erasmus+ Programme, the support continues.

Erasmus+ supports EHEA reforms for HEIs to cooperate fully on the basis of quality, openness and mutual trust and for students and staff to move around freely in order to develop their knowledge and skills.

Over its 8-year lifespan, Erasmus+ will provide opportunities for millions of Europeans to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad, as well as support transnational partnerships among education, training and youth institutions and organisations. Stronger European cooperation with students, teachers, researchers and institutions in other regions of the world is at its heart.

Support for EHEA structural reforms for all EHEA members is available within various strands of the Erasmus+ programme.

For Erasmus+ programme countries, funding is available under Key Action 3 support for policy reform. 20 programme countries took the opportunity to submit 18-month national work programmes to help implement EHEA reforms.

The countries awarded support for implementation projects are Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The countries’ work programmes follow up on the Bologna priorities and findings and gaps identified in the 2012 Bologna Implementation Report for each country. The projects seek to improve the use of European tools such as ECTS, the three-cycle system, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. The projects also aim to develop and share the latest innovations and good practice in academic recognition, student-centered learning and learning outcomes.

Erasmus+ also contributes to the funding for the Bologna Secretariat and Ministerial Conference.

The next call for projects under this Key Action will be published in autumn 2015, to start before mid-2016.

For Erasmus+ partner countries, the capacity-building strand of Erasmus+ supports the modernisation of higher education systems in the partner countries and backs projects initiated by HEIs with the aim of stimulating policy reform through cooperation among institutions and other relevant stakeholders.

One project is the Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs). The HEREs, appointed by national higher education authorities, are usually Rectors, Vice-Rectors, Deans, senior academics, Directors of Study, Heads of International Relations Offices and students who work to assist institutions to implement structural reforms through materials, case studies, a virtual community website and training seminars which provide a European dimension and a comparative perspective. Erasmus+ provides administrative and financial support to HEREs in 27 countries.
Mobility and...

Opening higher education systems through mobility and internationalisation

Mobility brings openness to higher education systems. It enables countries to learn from each other’s best practices and promotes international cooperation that raises the quality of higher education. For HEIs, mobility can encourage innovation in both teaching and learning and it tailors learning, training and qualifications more closely to individuals’ needs. Mobility is closely linked to the attractiveness of institutions and is a major component of internationalisation. This is why Ministers in 2012 fixed a target for mobility for the EHEA, where, by 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training period abroad.

Common European tools to promote mobility have been developed - overarching qualifications frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework and the EQF-EHEA and supportive national qualifications frameworks; European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, ECTS credit system, Diploma Supplement, all with the aim of creating mutual understanding, recognition of quality higher education and trust between institutions. However, thus far, in 2015, there is still a long way to go if the EHEA is going to reach this essential target. Currently, around 10% of EU students study or train abroad with the support of public and private means. Around 5% receive an Erasmus grant.

Ever since 1987, the highly successful Erasmus programme has been the EU’s main means of promoting mobility and internationalisation among higher education students, staff and institutions. Erasmus+ is now broadening that drive and making further quality improvements.

Erasmus mobility, with its core focus on skills development, is a central element of the European Commission’s strategy to combat youth unemployment. Mobility helps students improve their personal traits and acquire skills and competences that are much sought after on the labour market. The 2014 Erasmus Impact Study shows that students’ personal traits such as decisiveness, curiosity, tolerance and confidence improved after mobility and that graduates with international experience fare much better on the job market. They are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared with those who have not studied or trained abroad and, five years after graduation, their unemployment rate is 23% lower. 40% have changed their country of residence or work at least once since graduation, almost double the number of those who were not mobile during studies.

As well as opening up possibilities in Erasmus+ for international mobility, the European Commission also organises bilateral and multilateral policy dialogue processes with a number of International partners. Multiregional processes include dialogues with the Eastern Partnership countries, with the Western Balkan countries, and also with the South Mediterranean countries, while bilateral dialogues include those with China, Brazil, Mexico, and India.

The idea behind the dialogues is to provide methodological support, via a variety of mechanisms, to address education and training issues of interest to all partners, to ensure dissemination of best practice between the EU and partner countries as well as allowing for peer learning. Recurring themes within the policy dialogues include familiar issues such as recognition of credits, quality assurance and equivalence of qualifications.
Another focus of mobility and internationalisation is the sustainability and recognition of degrees and joint degrees. Joint degree programmes play an important role in achieving cross-border recognition of qualifications as they promote fully comparable quality assurance, recognition and transparency and support the convergence of higher education systems throughout Europe. Strong joint degree networks have emerged in most fields of study building the essential trust for completing the EHEA.
Student-centred learning – ECTS

Students’ needs at the centre of learning and teaching

Higher education across Europe has been made more transparent by the ECTS credit system. ECTS was developed under Erasmus, when large numbers of students first began to move country for part of their studies, and needed greater assurance that their study abroad would be recognized at their home institution. Taking a standardised approach to study assessments and credits has made it easier to transfer learning experiences between different educational institutions, and has opened up many more options for student mobility and more flexible learning pathways.

ECTS also assists curriculum design and quality assurance. This is most noticeable in the growing adoption of student-centred learning (SCL). Increasingly, students’ needs are at the centre of programme design, admission procedures and recognition. This is crucial to achieving the learning outcomes required in today’s world.

Students must be active participants in their own learning. By fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving and reflective thinking, SCL enhances students’ autonomy, responsibility and critical abilities through an outcome-based approach. It gives learners more choice as to the content, mode, pace and place of their learning.

By allocating credits to the different educational components that provide the building-blocks of a degree programme, ECTS makes it easier to create tailor-made, flexible learning pathways. Its outcome-based approach also builds closer links with labour market requirements, encourages wider participation in lifelong learning and facilitates various kinds of student mobility: within an institution or country, from institution to institution, from country to country, and between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Where it has been applied fully, ECTS has been an undoubted success. However, implementation of ECTS within the EHEA remains patchy.

The revised ECTS Users’ Guide takes account of recent developments such as the consolidation of lifelong learning, the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred higher education, the increasing use of learning outcomes, and the development of new modes of learning and teaching. It includes a specific focus on programme design and delivery, and builds on the experience of higher education institutions in using qualifications frameworks and applying ECTS principles in academic practice.

As well as being a practical tool for better mobility, the revised Users’ Guide will also help to make learning outcomes a reality.

For more information, please visit: http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/ects_en.htm
Increasing students’ study choices

For students to study in different institutions in different countries, it is essential that their qualifications are recognised. Despite the very encouraging changes that have taken place since the Bologna Process began, students still experience obstacles when seeking recognition of studies abroad.

One in 11 students taking, or wishing to take, a full degree in another country, is faced with obstacles that hinder learning mobility and recognition.

Overcoming obstacles to recognition is one of the main aims of building the EHEA and a vital element in promoting mobility and internationalisation. In April 2012, the EHEA Ministers committed themselves to the long-term goal of automatic recognition and set up the Pathfinder Group to explore the issue further, with the Commission as facilitator.

Members: Belgium (French Community), Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and Netherlands.

Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access).

A Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor.

The Pathfinder Group carried out their work over nearly two years from end-2012 to mid-2014, exploring ways on how to achieve automatic recognition through a series of regional initiatives, by consulting a large number of stakeholders, and through the analysis of existing recognition practices across European HEIs with a survey.

The group agreed that the automatic recognition of qualifications at system level, and in particular for the purpose of accessing the next cycle, was the most promising path to follow. Through its work, the Pathfinder Group concluded that automatic recognition is possible, and is convinced that a qualification which follows the EHEA three cycle structure from one EHEA country should be recognised at the same level anywhere else in the EHEA.

Automatic recognition by the group is seen as necessary pre-condition for large-scale academic mobility, and must complement other internationalisation and mobility policies to guarantee their success. Tools and measures such as the Diploma Supplement, ECTS credits based on learning outcomes, the EAR manual and the European Standards and Guidelines are valuable for improving quality assurance and smoother recognition.

The Pathfinder Group report

The report from the Pathfinder Group on automatic recognition recommends that governments should ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are recognised on an equal level with domestic qualifications, for example through enacting specific legislation to achieve this objective.

Erasmus+ is currently providing funding to two projects – FAIR and EMREX – that follow up the recommendations from the Pathfinder Group by looking into improving recognition procedures at institutional level and supportive IT platforms.

The Pathfinder Group took inspiration from models of automatic recognition in Portugal and Belgium-Flanders. It found regional cooperation between like-minded countries as one important means to improve automatic recognition of degrees and developed several configurations of regional cooperation as a driver for improvement, in the Benelux, Baltic-Nordic, and South East Europe regions.

The Pathfinder Group report
http://www.eurorecognition.eu/emanual/
To find out more

For general information about Erasmus+ projects, future opportunities and contact information, please visit:
ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus

For specific information on cooperation for countries outside the European Union, please visit:
ec.europa.eu/education/opportunities/higher-education/international-cooperation_en.htm

For contact information:
Erasmus+ Programme Countries, can find a list of Erasmus+ National Agencies on:
ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/tools/national-agencies/index_en.htm

Neighbourhood Countries, can find a list of National Erasmus+ Offices (former National Tempus Offices) on:
eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/contacts/national-erasmus-plus-offices_en

or

Contact the Executive Agency (EACEA) in Brussels for Joint Master Degrees, Knowledge Alliances, Capacity-Building Partnerships, Policy support projects and Jean Monnet at:
eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus_en
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