

Implementation of Key Commitments and the Future of the Bologna Process

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Abstract

The Bologna Process has brought radical change to Higher Education policy and practice at both the European and national level. It has built trust between systems, enabled mobility of students and staff, and the recognition of credits and degrees throughout the EHEA.

However, the Bologna Process and its philosophy can only function through effective commitment to its implementation. As a voluntary process with a limited legislative framework it relies on national policymakers, institutions, staff, students and stakeholders to effectively implement the strategic tools of the process; as once countries have committed to it, it is arguably no longer voluntary to implement the commitments they signed up for.

In recent years there has been increasing concern about the level and nature of implementation of the Bologna commitments in many of its member countries. Incomplete implementation can easily undermine the entire system, destroy its credibility and might, in the end, bring about a two-tiered or even a multi-tiered EHEA, with a non-functioning Bologna Process at its empty core.

At the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015 these concerns were strongly expressed, and the 2015-2018 work program has put increased emphases on implementation of Bologna commitments, as well as the monitoring of the fundamental values of the Bologna Process. This presentation will discuss challenges faced in introducing increased monitoring to a collegial collaboration, and how the success of this work may in the long run determine the eventual survival or extinction of both the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area.

1. Introduction

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a unique international collaboration on higher education, where 48 countries, with different political, cultural and academic traditions cooperate on the basis of open dialogue, shared goals and common commitments. Although membership is voluntary, the convergence of higher education systems in all EHEA countries, and as such the entire concept of the EHEA, relies on the implementation of a common set of commitments: structural reforms and shared tools, which have been agreed to and adopted at a political level in all member countries. Furthermore, the EHEA is grounded in a number of shared fundamental values, including a commitment to academic freedom, free mobility by students and staff, institutional autonomy and the full and equal participation of higher education students and staff in institutional governance.

The EHEA is thus a wide-ranging international collaboration with potential to bring about radical change in European higher education, and for some countries and across some borders it has managed to fulfil that potential. It proposes to change the way the entire EHEA structures higher education with a range of shared tools, values, and a level of transparency that is not found or even attempted in many other international collaborative areas, designed to allow ready, free and fully recognised mobility across the entire EHEA.

When fully implemented the Bologna Process foresees countries working together across geographical and political boundaries, bringing with that the idea of a near to utopian higher education system of a borderless Europe and beyond, with common values and a shared fundamental philosophy; a philosophy of academic freedom, democracy, stakeholder participation, institutional autonomy, and higher education actively building social cohesion and responsible citizenship.

2. The Limitations of Utopia

A process that began with Ministers responsible for Higher education in 29 European countries signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999 has expanded to 48 countries in the intervening near to 20 years. In such a rapidly expanding collaborative network countries will find themselves at various stages in the adaptive process, and advancing through it at vastly different paces. Such an uneven advancement of improvements can be workable, if all within the process are moving in the same direction, and aiming to meet the commitments which they have signed up for as soon as possible and at least within a foreseeable future. That determined directionality, however, is not always evident, and national reports on implementation suggest that the EHEA is still a long way from functioning in the way it is intended. In some cases, such as the recent reintroduction of Minister appointed rectors in Turkey, it may even be suggested that countries have changed direction and are moving further away from the shared Bologna goals and values that they had previously committed to.

Upon examining the level of implementation of even the most basic of Bologna commitments, such as the implementation of ECTS credits or recognition of qualifications obtained abroad, it is evident that not only are there countries who are moving very slowly, admittedly in a common direction, but also that this group includes countries who are not newcomers to the EHEA. In other countries the implementation of certain Bologna commitments has ground to a complete halt. Thus for a number of countries implementation of even relatively simple commitments is incomplete or even non-existent. More worryingly, amongst them are countries which have participated and thus been supposedly committed to the process for a long time.

The 2015 Bologna Process Implementation report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurodyce, 2015) highlights well some of these problems, only a handful of which are highlighted here. Degree structures

are highly variable across the EHEA and workloads behind qualifications differ so dramatically between education systems that those with the greatest number of ECTS credits for the first two cycles combined are 120 ECTS longer than those with the smallest number of ECTS credits for the same. In addition many countries still offer first cycle higher education programmes that are longer than four years, as well as programmes that fall completely outside of Bologna structures, even when equivalent programmes elsewhere in the EHEA have been successfully shortened or separated into two cycles, and meet equivalent learning outcomes. This difference in workload leads to problems with recognition of degrees, and makes recognition of qualifications across borders problematic. It also raises the question whether learning outcomes in what should be equivalent qualifications are proportionate to the length of the course of study and the workload needed to finish it.

National qualification frameworks (NQFs) are too frequently either not fully in place or remain unimplemented. Although a number of countries have made significant progress in implementing NQFs in the period between 2012 and 2015, some others have made no progress at all, in particular with regard to institutional implementation. The majority of EHEA countries also face challenges in including non-formal qualifications within their national qualification frameworks. Without functioning NQFs higher education systems remain both non-transparent and difficult to compare, and hinder the mobility of qualifications and credits, and by extension students and employees. Such mobility is further hindered by the fact that two thirds of EHEA countries fail to fulfil all the requirements of the Diploma Supplement (European Commission/EACEA/Eurodyce (2015): p. 74), i.e. do not issue them to all graduates automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken European language, despite such a commitment having been initially entered into in the Berlin Communiqué in 2003, to be effective across the EHEA from 2005.

External and internal quality assurance is evolving rapidly in the EHEA and most EHEA countries now have established quality assurance agencies, with a majority having been demonstrated to be ESG compliant (European Commission/EACEA/Eurodyce (2015): p. 98). However, there is still a need for greater involvement of students, employers and other stakeholders at all levels of Quality Assurance in many EHEA countries, and there is extremely limited openness to cross-border quality assurance work, with only 25% (European Commission/EACEA/Eurodyce (2015): pp. 95-96) of EHEA higher education systems allowing their institutions to be evaluated by a foreign EQAR registered agency. It is worrying that such an opportunity to increase integration of quality assurance in the EHEA only being adopted by such a small number of EHEA countries.

In addition to the problem with implementing fundamental tools of the Bologna Process, many of the fundamental values of the Bologna Process have also not been universally adopted, and some, such as academic freedom and institutional autonomy, are actively being eroded in a number of member countries. In 2015 there was such concern about fundamental values in the EHEA that in the Yerevan Communiqué the ministers stated that:

"We will support and protect students and staff in exercising their right to academic freedom and ensure their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions. We will support higher education institutions in enhancing their efforts to promote intercultural understanding, critical thinking, political and religious tolerance, gender equality, and democratic and civic values, in order to strengthen European and global citizenship and lay the foundations for inclusive societies. „

In the intervening years this situation has not really improved, if anything a number of instances of blatant violation of these values by EHEA countries that have been condemned by civil society and other stakeholders, as well as other international organisations or collaborations have gone largely un-noted, and have certainly been rarely commented on by the Bologna Process and its representatives. These include, amongst others, the recent amendment to the Hungarian National Higher Education

Law in spring 2017 that effectively undermined the operability of the Central European University; and the infringements of fundamental values of the Bologna Process following the failed coup in Turkey in autumn 2016 that saw the closure of academic institutions and the dismissal of deans and academic staff.

3. Tackling non-implementation: Yerevan, Paris and beyond

The danger with a collaboration where the lack of implementation is allowed to pass relatively unnoted and certainly without much consequence, is that participation in the Bologna Process becomes seen not so much as an agreement to higher education reform, but rather as a rubber stamp of approval of a country's higher education system as it stands, albeit with a vague promise to take up all Bologna tools, commitments and values at a future date, that is never officially questioned and challenged.

Inside and outside Europe, the Bologna Process and the EHEA have been promoted, by the BFUG itself and by its member countries, as an example of successful internationalisation of higher education, and one that could have implications for regional collaborations elsewhere. Thus coordinated structural reform, integration and resultant interoperability between national systems is seen as being exemplary of an integration that has, to all intents and purposes, led to a unified higher education area, the degrees and credits from which can and should be relied upon irrespective of the individual country in which the learning was obtained. However, problems with non-implementation do more than tarnish that example, they negate the premise that to those outside the EHEA the Bologna Process should guarantee that a graduate from any EHEA single country, be it Iceland, Belarus, France, Russia, Albania, Norway, Austria, Belgium or Liechtenstein (to name but a few) should have obtained the same learning outcomes, under the same quality assurance standards as a graduate from any other EHEA country.

In the period leading up to the EHEA Ministerial conference in 2015 there was an increasing lack of political interest in the Bologna Process, along with considerable discussion within the BFUG on how the lack of implementation was *de facto* undermining the process as a whole, creating a two-tiered or even a multi-tiered European Higher Education Area, where trust and transparency may have existed between the systems of some countries, but the majority would question one or other aspect of higher education offered in another EHEA country. Whether it be the perceived lack of appropriate quality assurance; an incompatibility of national qualification frameworks, or even an ingrained mistrust in a system different from your own, the end result was the same: a failure to make appropriate use of Bologna tools and with it a lack of transparency and trust. Degrees and credits from some countries might have been readily transferrable to others, but that was by many thought to be the exception rather than the rule. This unease is well documented in a concept note prepared for the conference entitled "The Bologna Process Revisited: The Future of the European Higher Education Area" (2015), which clearly states that the full implementation of the common framework and tools in all participating countries should be one of the priorities for the European Higher Education Area in years to come. The notion is carried forward into the Ministerial Communiqué from Yerevan in 2015, which voices the concern that "implementation of the structural reforms is uneven and the tools are sometimes used incorrectly or in bureaucratic and superficial ways" and highlights how "non-implementation in some countries undermines the functioning and credibility of the whole EHEA.". It goes on to state that "by 2020 we [the Ministers] are determined to achieve an EHEA where our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other's higher education systems". As a consequence the Work Programme for the period 2015-2018 includes an advisory group dedicated solely to working on non-implementation and mandated to put together a proposal for how to tackle non-implementation issues in the future, to be put before the Ministers at their meeting in Paris in 2018. The work of this advisory group is discussed in the next section of this paper.

There is a need to put this pressure to focus on implementation problems, in the political context of a Europe in a state of flux. The recent economic crisis has had a clear impact on funding of higher education across much of Europe, and there is no end in sight for subsequent austerity measures put on the sector in many countries. In others funding has been improved, adding further to the imbalance in attractiveness of different higher education systems to international students, be they wanting a full degree or a more limited period of educational mobility. At the same time there is greater pressure on education in general and higher education institutions in particular, to provide students with flexible and transferable skills for life, in a world where education no longer should prepare you for a job, but rather for work in whichever unknown or unforeseen sector becomes important to the national or international economy through your working life.

This pressure on higher education systems is in some places exacerbated by violation of the rights of students, staff and institutions, and nationalist and populist politics, which threaten the fundamental values of the "utopian Bologna philosophy". The upcoming exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, the increased closing of borders to hinder the flow of people through Europe and the subsequent loss of belief in the right to free movement has the potential to create even greater distrust of education and credits gained abroad than previously. There is thus an ever growing need to tackle the lack of implementation of Bologna commitments head-on and put in place a constructive process to deal with the problems encountered before the effective collapse of the European Higher Education area and the Bologna Process on which its foundations rest.

One of the challenges facing those wanting to put a greater focus on implementation of Bologna Commitments is the notion of voluntary membership of the Process and the way in which that is interpreted by some national policy makers and institutions. The idea of a voluntary process is central to the "Bologna ideology", as is necessitated by an international collaboration which is not underpinned by a strong, universally recognised, legal framework. It is, however, essential that for the Bologna Process to function, the voluntary nature of the agreement only applies to participation but never to implementation. In short – once you sign up to take part in the Bologna Process, you should not expect to find yourself in front of a *smörgåsbord* of educational delicacies where you might choose to have two slices of salmon, but ignore both the ham sandwiches and the potato salad. Instead you sit down to a set lunch, carefully nutritionally balanced, but not catered to individual tastes. It may look less appetising than the smorgasbord, but its constituent parts have been carefully thought through, so that unless you consume all the individual components you miss out on its full benefits, and will function less than optimally.

Many member countries, however, do not interpret the notion of voluntary membership in the way illustrated above. Rather, their understanding is that upon entering the Bologna Process countries remain free to adapt and interpret the commitments that come with such a membership in a way and at a speed that best befits their national agendas and politics. Sometimes the end result may be the same, but too often it is not. The EHEA is an area comprising 48 countries that each has its own national higher education policies, agendas, and traditions. Joining the Bologna Process frequently provides a focus and direction for fundamental national reform that would most likely have taken place with or without the Bologna Process. However, the tools of the Process enable that reform to be directional and coordinated across borders, enhancing internationalisation and mobility. Contrastingly the approach of other national governments has been less systematic. Bologna tools may operate alongside incompatible national tools, or only those tools that can be fitted within current national legislation become adopted. There is the notion that by adopting all the tools of the Bologna Process, higher education policy decisions are delegated or perhaps even lost to an international body under limited national control.

The Bologna Process is a collegiate process, and for some countries that fundamental notion of collegiality is challenged by initiating a set of actions that specifically target any of its members, even when those countries have been repeatedly documented to be unable to or unwilling to implement the commitments of the Bologna Process. Thus there is a need for any plan to tackle non-implementation to in the first instance, at least, do so in a way that reflects that ethos of peer-support and peer-review that for many is seen as the underlying principle of the "Bologna culture". Although a worthy notion, it is also one that makes tackling non-implementation issues essentially more difficult than had the choice been made to simply set a time limit to get things in order, with clear consequences for missing the deadline.

4. Bologna Key Commitments

The Bologna Process has many tools, values and principles, but hitherto monitoring has primarily focused on those aspects that can be easily quantified and identified. Thus work on non-implementation has to focus on those aspects of the Bologna Process on which we have relatively reliable information, i.e. those that have been monitored through the regular monitoring process. The Advisory Group that has been tasked with coming up with ways in which to deal with non-implementation has therefore agreed to focus its work on three key elements of the Bologna Process that meet these criteria. These commitments are seen by the group as forming the core of the commitments all countries signed up to when joining the EHEA. It should be clarified that these three commitments in no way represent all EHEA tools, reforms and common values, but they are felt to be central to the Bologna Process, because, as the foundations of the EHEA, they allow recognition and mobility across the whole EHEA to function. Furthermore, their correct implementation is a necessary prerequisite to any higher education system that embraces the fundamental premises of the Bologna Process, including the ready mobility of staff, students, credits and degrees. Having put down that initial framework, the group still acknowledges that problems with implementation also lie elsewhere. The three key commitments identified as the focus for the current work on non-implementation are as follows:

- **A Three-Cycle System compatible with the QF-EHEA and scaled by ECTS:**
Here the emphasis is on programmes that are structured according to the three cycle-system of the Bologna model and scaled by the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Qualifications achieved in each cycle should be defined in a self-certified National Qualification Framework (link provided in reference list) which itself is compatible with the Qualification Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)
- **Compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC):**
This key commitment calls for cross-border recognition practices to be in compliance with the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention (link provided in reference list), including that nations promote, through the national information centres or otherwise, the use of the Council of Europe/European Commission/UNESCO Diploma Supplement (link provided in reference list) or any other comparable document by the higher education institutions of the Parties. The Diploma Supplement should according to Bologna principles be issued automatically, free of charge and in a language that is widely read through the EHEA, as agreed by the Ministers in the Ministerial Conference in Berlin in 2003 (EHEA Ministerial Communiqué, 2003).
- **Quality Assurance in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG):**
To meet this key commitment, countries should ensure that institutions granting degrees assure the quality of their programmes following the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015). External quality assurance (be it at programme or institutional level) should be performed by agencies that have demonstrably complied with the standards and guidelines stipulated in the current ESG. This is best ensured where only those agencies registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) are allowed to operate in the country, although if countries can show their agencies to be compliant with ESG standards through other means, such as a full membership of ENQA, that too is taken as a fulfilment of this key commitment.

Although the Advisory Group on Dealing with non-implementation has been mandated to propose a method by which to improve implementation of these three commitments, it should be emphasised that ultimately it is up to the EHEA Ministers to endorse and follow through any such recommendation and agree on the eventual procedure for coordinating and monitoring it. The Bologna Follow Up Group has agreed to recommend to the ministers that the support and monitoring of support for the key commitments follow a so-called “Cyclic Procedure” as has been put forward by the aforementioned Advisory Group (for further information on the work of this group link in reference list).

5.1 The cyclic procedure

The proposed cyclic procedure (Figure 1) is an eight-step repeating process with the central purpose to improve the implementation of the three key commitments of the Bologna Process. To reflect the aforementioned ethos of the process, it is built on principles of collaboration, peer-support, peer-review and peer-counselling. Its aims to highlight exemplary implementation, as well as problems of non-implementation, and to improve full and effective implementation of Bologna key commitments throughout the EHEA. Furthermore, it aims to make implementation of key commitments more transparent.

The timeframe proposed for a single eight-step reporting cycle is the period between Ministerial Conferences, thus following the normal monitoring timeframe in the EHEA, although action plans and actions taken under its different steps may refer to a longer time frame. The process is foreseen to be facilitated by a coordinating group appointed during the Ministerial Conference, the main purpose of which is to ensure that countries that are failing to meet key commitments are fully supported in taking positive action to improve the situation.

5.2 The eight steps of the cyclic procedure¹

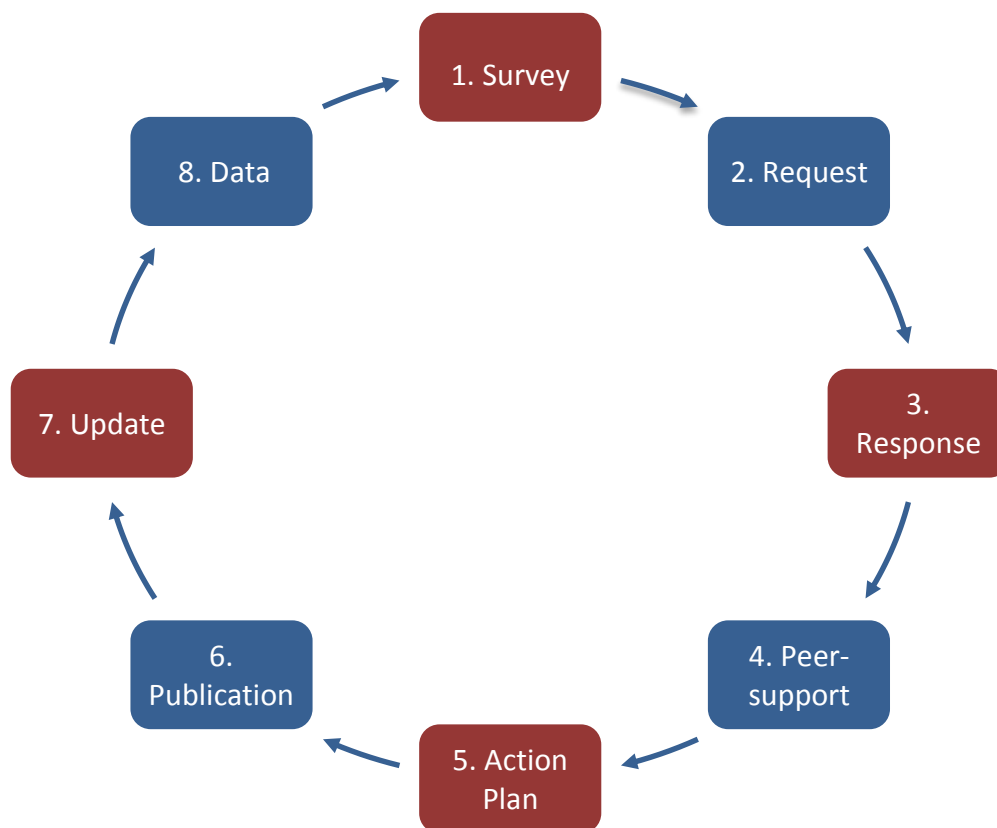


Figure 1.

The cyclic procedure being proposed to tackle non-implementation of key commitments in the Bologna Process. Please see text for a more detailed description.

¹ The model as presented here is one that was discussed and agreed upon in the meeting of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) in Gozo in May 2017; following further debate at the subsequent meeting of the BFUG in Tartu in November 2017 some adjustments are to be made to the details of the model. The advisory group will meet to put together the adjustments in December 2017 and they will be presented to the BFUG at its meeting in Sofia in February 2018. Therefore the model included in the present version in the paper is likely to differ in its details from that included in the published version of this presentation, and that presented to the EHEA Ministers at their meeting in Paris in May 2018.

The eight steps of the proposed cyclic procedure are expanded and explained below. Note that although taking place alongside the normal monitoring procedures of the EHEA the cyclic procedure is distinct from and supplementary to it, albeit with a single shared step (submission of data in step 8)

1. The level of implementation of the three key commitments is surveyed based on data submitted during the BFUG's normal monitoring procedures, using the scoreboard indicators in the Bologna Implementation Report. The implementation of the key commitments is addressed in a supplementary report thereon, and briefly summarised in a table in the monitoring report. Countries will be identified as either (a) sufficiently implementing each key commitment or (b) not, or insufficiently, implementing each key commitment. Sufficient implementation means that none of the relevant scoreboard indicators is red and not more than one is orange.
2. The BFUG delegates of all EHEA countries receive a letter from the Implementation Committee detailing the level of implementation of each key commitment
 - (a) Countries **successfully implementing all key commitment** will be asked to suggest ways in which they are willing to support countries having problems with implementation of key commitment, e.g. through peer-learning or other activities designed to share their examples of successful implementation.
 - (b) Countries found as having **not or insufficiently implemented** a key commitment will be asked to provide an explanation of the problems they experienced with implementation of that key commitment, whether they are planned/expected to be rectified, and what peer support would be beneficial to aid implementation.
3. The BFUG delegate sends a written reply to the Implementation Committee. The reply contains, where relevant, a list of people or stakeholders who could offer, or be the recipients of, peer-support or peer counselling to aid implementation of one or more key commitment.
4. The Implementation Committee matches up countries offering peer-support with those having identified the need for such support, and facilitates initial contact.
5. The BFUG delegate of countries experiencing problems with implementation (b) submits an action plan to the Implementation Committee. The action plan presents concrete steps the country commits to take in order to improve the implementation of the relevant key commitment(s). The action plan should be developed in consultation with the relevant stakeholders in the country.
6. The action plans are published on the EHEA website.
7. The BFUG delegate of a country that has submitted an action plan gives an update on the plan and any action taken no later than at the penultimate BFUG meeting before the next Ministerial Meeting
8. All EHEA countries submit their data for the next implementation report.
The supplementary report on implementation of key commitments (see step 1) will show current implementation alongside level of implementation in the previous report for all countries. Submitted action plans on implementation of specific key commitments will be highlighted in the supplementary report.

The cyclic model in itself is not tied to the specific three commitments currently identified as a focus by the EHEA representatives. It merely provides an operational procedure through which such issues

can be addressed, and can be employed to tackle problems with implementation across the full range of Bologna Commitments and values.

The most notable problem with the model as proposed is that it contains no endpoint and no obvious consequences for those countries who are either unable, or more worryingly, unwilling to participate in it and for whom no improvement is noted over the course of the cycle. It is theoretically possible within the model as stands that it becomes a perpetual cycle of “support” for countries, in which no improvement is ever seen or judged likely. Having noted the near standstill that some countries have come to with regard to implementation of some key commitments makes it necessary that an escalation or endpoint to the model be put forward for discussion and eventual decision by the EHEA ministers at their next conference in Paris in 2018.

6. Challenges of monitoring and indicators

As mentioned above, the 2015 Monitoring report makes it clear that a number of countries were facing challenges with implementing key commitments at the time when the data on which the report is based were collected. It is also evident that some traditional key indicators may need to be adapted to pick up on-the-ground implementation of the key commitments.

Information on the implementation of the first key commitment, on the three cycles and ECTS, is relatively problem free in this regard, and reveals six higher education systems in need of targeted support in this area in 2015. The score card indicators reflecting implementation of the second commitment could be challenged to some degree, in that the Monitoring report mainly assesses the extent to which the principles of the LRC have been enshrined in law, rather than whether national cross-border recognition practices are in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In many countries institutional autonomy is, rightly or wrongly, seen as preventing prevents national legislation on recognition of degrees, when in practice the autonomic institutions may be applying the LRC fully and competently. A recent report on monitoring of the LRC (Monitoring Implementation of the LRC, 2016) gives a more nuanced view of recognition practices and could be used to clarify the picture on recognition of foreign qualifications nationally. The 2018 EHEA Monitoring report will include some new indicators that are better suited to specifically address this second key commitment.

Similarly, the third key commitment on quality assurance, takes a wider approach to conformity with ESG than has hitherto been monitored. It is thus necessary to allow for that difference in monitoring that key commitment, either through the development of new monitoring criteria, or by calling for further information from national representatives.

It is foreseen that a supplementary report on the implementation of these key commitments be issued alongside the main 2018 EHEA Implementation report, and the information in that report will inform further work on tackling non-implementation following the discussions of the EHEA Ministers in 2018. That report will, similar to the main report, draw not only on information submitted by BFUG representatives and the traditional sources of education statistics, but also on supplementary information from the European Students' Union (ESU) and the European University Association (EUA).

7. The European Higher Education Area at Crossroads.

The debate on implementation within the European Higher Education Area is not a new one. In a report prepared for the Ministerial conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009, where the focus is on the Bologna Process beyond 2010, the concerns about lack of implementation sound eerily familiar, and could just as easily apply to a post-2020 EHEA: "Not all the objectives will have been reached by all the participating countries by 2010; it is, therefore, necessary that the Bologna Process should continue after 2010 so that its implementation can be finalized. First priority for the future should be given to completing the existing action lines." (The Bologna Process revisited, 2009 p.5).

Almost a decade on, after near to two decades of the Bologna Process and 8 years of the European Higher Education Area, the EHEA ministers stand yet again at familiar crossroads. The choice lies between standing back, as has largely been done hitherto, and relying on national implementation of Bologna commitments gradually bringing higher education systems closer together, while offering peer-learning activities on disparate and broad aspects of the Bologna Process, hoping that with time political processes on a national level may choose to improve implementation. As a strategy it has the merit of being non-confrontational with a focus on voluntary participation, but, as evidenced by recent consecutive implementation reports, sadly woefully ineffective. It also runs the risk of eventually causing the EHEA collaboration to fall of the political agenda, at least of those countries for which implementation is less of a problem, effectively ending the process.

On the other hand the ministers can cement the work carried out hitherto by actively focusing on targeted measures to improve their collaboration; through ensuring the implementation of the common set of commitments, the structural reforms and shared tools, which have been agreed to and adopted at a political level in all member countries, upon becoming part of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. Doing so involves first openly admitting that the EHEA is facing problems that it cannot solve through existing procedures, and secondly requires a targeted and increased effort by all member countries, those that lag behind, those who implement well, and those which have been able to go further. Such a measure will only work if there is a shared willingness to maintain the EHEA, and bring it to its full fruition.

You can liken these crossroads to ones that fork in two directions.

Straight ahead is a road that looks (suspiciously) pleasant, but not too much further on the road forks into two or even three possible directions. Those who choose one will soon find themselves far away from those who choose the other(s). This is the road of the status quo, where implementation problems are left unchallenged to eventually undermine the process, creating a two-tiered or multi-tiered EHEA with limited potential and an ever increasing lack of trust between education systems.

Your other option is what looks initially like a precipitous obstacle course, but as soon as you embark upon it you are joined by like-minded supporters, who guide you on your journey and help you across the hurdles. As the path keeps on winding its way onwards, the road widens, the impediments shrink, and the ground is firm beneath your feet. This is the road of peer-supported measures to improve implementation of Bologna tools and values, and with it strengthen the cohesion and core of the European Higher Education Area.

At the meeting of EHEA Ministers in Paris in May 2018, the BFUG is likely to suggest that they consider taking that second road. That together the Ministers help each other build a stronger EHEA, by adopting a model that builds on the ethos of peer-support and collegiality that has been the strength of the Bologna Process, and that has the possibility, in the future, to set an example to other regions on how to ensure implementation of reform even without a strong legal framework.

Links and references:

Bologna beyond 2010: Report on the development of the European Higher Education Area. Background paper prepared for the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference (2009) https://media.ehea.info/file/2009_Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve/91/8/Beyond_2010_report_FINAL_594918.pdf

The Bologna Process Revisited: The Future of the European Higher Education Area, http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/Bologna%20Process%20Revisited_Future%20of%20the%20EHEA%20Final.pdf

European Commission/EACEA/Eurodyce (2015): *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (2016) *Monitoring the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention* http://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/Monitoring_the_Implementation_of_the_Lisbon_Recognition_Convention_2016.pdf

All Ministerial Communiqués from Ministerial Conferences under the Bologna Process and (the later) European Higher Education Area: <http://www.ehea.info/pid34363/ministerial-declarations-and-communicues.html>

Qualifications Frameworks: <http://www.ehea.info/pid34779/qualifications-frameworks-three-cycle-system-2007-2009.html>

Information on current work on improving non-implementation can be found at: <https://www.ehea.info/cid105406/ag-non-implementation-2015-2018.html>