

The Evolution of European Higher Education Policy: From Bologna Declaration to Tirana Communiqué

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Abstract: The Bologna Declaration (1999) was the beginning of an important cooperation between the participating countries regarding changes in their higher education systems. The goal was to facilitate mobility within European countries for studies and work, support cooperation among higher education institutions and increase institutions' internationalization, attracting students from all over the world. The monitoring and updating of the proposals was continuous, with conferences of the competent Ministers taking place at regular intervals, with most recent the one in Tirana (2024). The initial points of the Bologna Declaration remain, and recent ones added, to meet the needs of the institutions and societies.

At this article, we will observe the initial points of the Bologna declaration and their evolution through the declarations of the eleven conferences of ministers responsible for education until recently, pointing out the most important changes, as well as the impact the Bologna Process had worldwide and how the stakeholders reacted to the implemented changes.

Keywords: Bologna Process; European Higher Education Policy; Ministerial Communiqués; changes in higher education.

1. Introduction

The Bologna Process (BP), which started with the Bologna Declaration¹, exists for more than two decades and at that time significant changes were applied in higher education in the (nowadays) forty-nine participating countries, both members and non-members of the European Union. Before the BP, European countries had differences in political, cultural and academic matters in the higher education systems. Significant changes were necessary and the only way to succeed without great opposition from the stakeholders was to present them as a proposal by a higher authority and with voluntary participation, both of which are characteristic of the BP. The goal of the BP was to bring the participating countries together around a common goal and reform higher education systems so that graduates and students could move freely between the countries, their degrees and study periods would be fully recognized, and they could access the European labor market. All of the above would enable higher education in Europe to become more competitive and international, drawing students from all over the world. The European higher education institutions could collaborate more easily, based on shared standards regarding transparency and quality, and the governments could fit their national higher education reforms into a larger framework.

The responsible Ministers decide on the changes, and each nation decides how to implement them the best. Twelve ministerial conferences were held between the time the Bologna Declaration was signed in June 1999 in Bologna, Italy, and the latest conference in May 2024 in Tirana, Albania. Every conference concluded with an implementation report, which detailed the modifications that had been made to each of the participating nations up to that point on the suggested thematic. A comprehensive support system provides the Ministerial Conferences with the required input. The Bologna-Follow up Group (BFuG) and Coordination groups on various topics (like the social dimension, learning and teaching, and the global policy dialogue working groups) work year-round supervising the implementation of the Ministerial Communiqués and devising plans to handle the current issues of the BP, like the situation with the Russian Federation's armed attack against Ukraine, which Belarus supported and led to the suspension of the participating rights to both attacking countries, etc. To further their cause, the working groups host seminars and delve deeper into particular topics.

2. Bologna Process: Main Suggested Changes

The Bologna Declaration, which was signed by 29 ministers of education following their conference in Bologna on June 18–19, 1999, serves as the foundation for the BP. The European Ministers in charge of Higher Education [1] outlined its' main points as follows:

¹ Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999 in the Bologna University, Italy during the anniversary for the oldest University in the world. [1].

- Adopt a system of degrees that are easily readable and comparable, with the Diploma Supplement providing support.
- Provide a minimum 3-year bachelor's degree and a two-year master's degree.
- Establish the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as a mechanism to promote student mobility. Credits can be earned also in non-academic settings, like lifelong learning programs, as long as the universities that grant the ECTS's accept and acknowledge the offered programs.
- Encourage mobility and remove barriers to allow academics, researchers, instructors, and support personnel to move freely throughout Europe, valuing their time spent abroad for training, research, teaching, and study.
- Encourage the development of similar standards and procedures to advance quality assurance cooperation throughout Europe.
- Encourage the presence of Europe in higher education through curriculum development, collaboration with other institutions, adoption of mobility plans, and integration of study programs, training, and research.

All the above points work in the same direction: to ease the mobility of students and degree holders, to facilitate cooperation among institutions and to promote the European higher education institutions' image internationally.

3. Conferences and Ministerial Communiqués that followed

On May 18 and 19, 2001, in Prague, Czech Republic [2], the thirty-two participating Ministers confirmed the progress made thus far regarding the modifications proposed in the BP on the two study cycles, the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, the support for mobility, and the promotion of cooperation on quality assurance issues. They also added the following: Support lifelong learning; Actively involve higher education institutions and students in shaping the EHEA by asking them to participate in the organization and content of education; taking the social dimension of the BP into consideration; Develop a common qualification framework based on learning outcomes; strengthen information efforts, and implement quality assurance and accreditation procedures to increase the attractiveness of European higher education institutions.

The 33 Ministers reaffirmed the significance of the social dimension of the PB on September 19, 2003, in Berlin, Germany [3]. The goal of improving the social characteristics of European higher education is to reduce social and gender inequalities and strengthen social cohesion. They noted the report on implementation as well as the reports from the EUA, the ESU, and other organizations about how the suggested revisions to the Bologna Declaration were being implemented. The addition of doctoral studies (as the third study cycle) emphasizes the value of research and interdisciplinarity in raising the standard of higher education and making European higher education more competitive. A thorough review of the quality assurance, two-cycle system, and degree and study period recognition processes to ensure proper implementation. Also decided the establishment of the Follow-up Group (BFuG) and assigning responsibility for implementation issues and planning of the upcoming Ministerial conference. Representatives from the European Commission and each of the BP members will be involved in this group as well as the EUA, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the ESU.

The number of participating countries increased to 45 on May 19 and 20, 2005, in Bergen, Norway [4], where their ministers reaffirmed their commitment to coordinating policies to establish the EHEA by 2010. They acknowledged the support of other stakeholders and social partners who have similar goals, as well as higher education institutions, their employees, and students, as significant participants in the BP. As they were ratified at the Lisbon Recognition Convention [5], they noted the remarkable advancements made in the recognition of degrees and study periods, the three-cycle study system, the qualifications framework, the quality assurance system. In addition, they made the following decisions: encourage interdisciplinary training, foster the development of transferable skills without going overboard, and support original research for doctoral studies; Promote the social component of the BP by ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality higher education and providing the necessary resources to help students overcome barriers arising from their social or economic backgrounds; Eliminate barriers to mobility by recommending that grants and loans be portable; Provide guidelines for the high-quality delivery of international higher education while opening up EHAE to the world and emphasizing the value of respect and understanding between cultures.

The European Ministers in charge of Higher Education [5] emphasized the significance of "developing an EHEA based on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal opportunities, and democratic principles that will facilitate mobility, increase employability, and strengthen Europe's attractiveness and competitiveness" during their meeting in London, United Kingdom on May 17–18, 2007. In order to overcome financial barriers to mobility, national experts formed a network and prepared reports on national strategies and policies regarding the social dimension of higher education. Additionally, they sought assistance from Eurostat and Eurostudent,

two statistical organizations, in developing appropriate mobility indicators and enhancing the availability of data on mobility and social dimensions. These were the priorities set for the upcoming conference: Improve employability by introducing the three-cycle degree system in relation to the lifelong learning context, allowing degree holders to enter earlier at the labor market; Request that the BFuG update the information on EHEA and recognition that is currently available and report on the progress made in internationalizing the EHEA. At the conclusion of the Communiqué, the ministers reaffirmed their commitment to viewing higher education as a crucial component in ensuring that societies have a sustainable future. They did this by calling for higher education institutions and centers of recognition, such as the European Network of Information Centers and the National Academic Recognition Information Centers in the European Union (ENIC/NARIC), to evaluate qualifications from other parts of the world.

Representatives from 46 European countries participated in the conference held in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium on April 28 and 29, 2009 [6], and representatives from 15 other countries were present, expressing interest in the BP. For the first time, the idea of building "a Europe of knowledge" a continent that fully embraces lifelong learning and expands access to higher education based on the skills and abilities of all of its citizens is mentioned at the conference. Also, they decided to provide equitable access to high-quality education, establish flexible learning pathways that allow for part-time studies and work-based knowledge, remove all barriers to education, and establish appropriate economic conditions for everyone; Support collaboration between government agencies, higher education institutions, employers, and employees in the development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) and the implementation of lifelong learning; Support the enhancement of teaching quality across all study levels by implementing student-centered learning, innovative teaching and learning strategies, and the creation of new curricula; enhance mobility for employability and personal growth; Support joint degrees and mobility windows in study programs; increase the focus of higher education institutions on finding new and diverse funding sources; and help achieve the target of at least 20 percent (20%) of graduates having experience in mobility by 2020.

The EHEA was introduced, as envisioned in the 1999 Bologna Declaration, during the conference held in Budapest, Vienna, on May 10–12, 2010 [7]. 47 ministers confirmed all of the previously proposed changes, acknowledged the advancements, and reaffirmed their commitment to upholding the core EHEA principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and accountability. The conference acknowledged that the BP and the soon-to-be EHEA were instances of regional cross-border collaboration in higher education, increasing the visibility of European higher education and drawing interest from nations across the globe. They also decided to make the necessary corrections and provide additional information about the proposed changes at the institutional level after realizing the significance of some critical voices from teachers and students regarding the implementation of the BP changes and their impact.

The damaging societal effects of the financial crisis that broke out in Europe and around the world had to be taken into consideration at the conference held in Bucharest, Romania on April 26–27, 2012 [8]. The financial crisis had an impact on universities and the labor market, which made it uncertain for graduates pursuing higher education. Significant progress has been made in many of the changes that have been suggested thus far, including the Qualifications Frameworks, the three-cycle study system, the ECTS credit system, quality assurance, and the switch to a student-based teaching model assessed by learning outcomes. The new decisions were to recognize all forms of learning outcomes, including those from non-formal and informal learning, facilitate the transferability of national grants and loans throughout the EHEA, and improve mobility as a means of improving learning; To strive for more balanced mobility and open higher education systems; Support for the creation of cooperative degrees and programs to improve mobility; More targeted data collection on employability, social dimension, lifelong learning, mobility of staff and students and international relations; Increase public awareness, particularly among higher education system employers and students. The Bucharest conference is the first one where the priorities for the forthcoming period are set at both national and European levels. All the priorities come from the decisions of the former Ministerial conferences and aim for better results and the report on the implementation of suggestions.

The Ministerial Conference on May 14–15, 2015 [9] held in Yerevan, Armenia, proudly acknowledged the advancements made in facilitating student and graduate mobility within the EHEA, energizing higher education institutions in the global context, and fostering academic collaboration with other institutions worldwide. They acknowledged that some reforms were applied unevenly, and that improper or superficial use of the tools resulted in skepticism from both teachers and students. The objectives for the subsequent context were to: Encourage pedagogical innovation in student-centered learning through the use of digital technologies and enhance the quality and relevance of education; assist recent graduates in their careers by providing them with access to lifetime education so they can acquire new skills that may be necessary for their employability; create more gender-balanced, inclusive educational systems and expand access and completion opportunities for students from underprivileged backgrounds; thoroughly execute the agreed-upon structural reforms in each of

the participating nations, i.e. the shared degree structure and credit system, the shared guidelines and standards for quality control, the collaboration for mobility, and the shared programs and degrees.

The participating ministers expressed their satisfaction with the creation of the European Higher Education Area [10] during the conference held in Paris, France on May 24–25, 2018. Under the EHEA, goals and policies are agreed upon at the European level and implemented at the national level with mutual understanding, trust, and excellent results in terms of comparability and transparency. The Ministers urge the participating nations to take action and correctly and completely implement the recommended modifications and tools in order to fully realize the potential of EHEA; Enhance regular cooperation with other regions and international organizations through a global policy dialogue, with the support of the BFuG; Provide interdisciplinary programs that combine academic and work-based learning; Further develop the EHEA with intensified cross-disciplinary and cross-border cooperation, offering an inclusive and innovative approach to learning and teaching; Support and stimulate a wide range of innovative learning and teaching practices through joint European initiatives; With the backing of the BFuG, will enhance regular cooperation with other areas and international organizations by means of a global policy dialogue.

The 2020 EHEA conference in Rome [11] was the only virtual gathering where attendees primarily reviewed the advancements of both the BP and the EHEA rather than making specific recommendations for changes. The three primary themes of the conference were how to achieve an interconnected, innovative, and inclusive EHEA. The COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, demonstrating the vulnerability of our societies. In response, the higher education community took action and provided numerous means of mitigating the pandemic's effects on a global scale. The EHEA's vision was for graduates, faculty, and students to be free to study, teach, and conduct research while upholding the core principles of democracy and higher education. By 2030, this should be accomplished. The Ministers also stated that because the EHEA is not being implemented in accordance with the rules, the benefits of the Bologna Process for staff, students, and institutions are diminished, and the legitimacy and reputation of current European policy initiatives and instruments may be compromised.

The most recent Ministerial Conference took place in Tirana, Albania on May 29–30, 2024 [12] and included participants from 49 nations as well as the European Union. During the conference, participants discussed the changes that had been implemented thus far and made commitments to: Create and disseminate suitable action plans to bridge any gaps in implementation and encourage knowledge-sharing pertaining to the EHEA; Address socioeconomic issues (such as high living expenses and challenging access to student housing); Encourage flexible learning pathways with lifelong learning, introducing micro-credentials to acknowledge prior learning; Support the ethical, responsible, and rights-based use of Artificial Intelligence in teaching and learning; Support staff and student mobility, whether actual, virtual or blended.

The following table presents the main points of all the above-mentioned conferences.

Table 1. Main suggestions from each Ministerial Conference

Ministerial conferences	Suggested Changes
19 June 1999, Bologna, Italy	Creation of two study cycles, a credit transfer system, easily readable and comparable degrees, a promotion of mobility and quality assurance, and European dimensions to higher education
18-19 May 2001, Prague, Czech Republic	The European Higher Education Area should become more appealing because of lifelong learning and student participation in decision-making in higher education institutions
19 September 2003, Berlin, Germany	Creation of three study cycles, connection of research and study, quality assurance
19-20 May 2005, Bergen, Norway	Connecting higher education and research, supporting social dimension, removing obstacles to students and staff mobility, supporting the cooperation among higher institutions worldwide
17-18 May 2007, London, United Kingdom	Support the mobility and employability, the social component of higher education, enhance data collection, and promote the EHEA in a global setting.
28-29 April 2009, Leuven & Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium	Facilitate access and completion for all, support on lifelong and student-center learning, improve the teaching quality in all study cycles, and seek of new funding sources for universities and other higher education settings.
10-12 March 2010, Budapest, Hungary	Launch of the European Higher Education Area, confirmation on decision to support mobility, degree and curricula reform, quality assurance, knowledge recognition,

&Vienna, Austria (<i>anniversary conference</i>)	social dimension of higher education and visibility of EHEA
26-27 April 2012, Bucharest, Romania	Support employability and mobility for better learning, improvement of data collection
14-15 May 2015, Yerevan, Armenia	Improve of quality assurance, full implementation of suggested changes and tools, connection to the European Research Area
24-25 May 2018, Paris, France	Strengthen quality and innovation in teaching, support the knowledge of pedagogy for future teachers and encourage interdisciplinarity.
19 November 2020, Rome, Italy (virtual)	Create an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA
29-30 May 2024, Tirana, Albania	Action plans to address implementation gaps, tackle the socio-economic challenges, create flexible learning paths with the use of micro credentials, support physical, virtual, or blended mobility

4. The impact of the BP and EHEA on Europe and worldwide: main points and concerns

Perhaps the most important factor in its success is BP's free will and voluntary commitment to enacting the recommended changes. The EHA, the BP's replacement program, was also founded on democratic principles, equal opportunity, institutional freedom, and academic freedom. These elements will help graduates find employment and improve Europe's appeal to students worldwide. [7]. The establishment of uniform European standards and guidelines for quality assurance, the recognition of degrees in accordance with the Lisbon Convention, and the development of structures that are compatible with three study cycles are among the suggested modifications. A series of objectives were set, such as the strengthening of mobility, the employability of graduates, the development of equal opportunities to obtain and complete studies proving the social dimension of education, the recognition of prior non-formal and informal education, the development of human-centered curricula based on learning outcomes [13]. Many of these objectives are fully achieved, while others need more work to be done.

The creation of the EHEA and the results of the suggested changes sparked the interest of countries and coalitions all over the world. Educational cooperation started to function again or new ones came up, following the model of the European BP and EHEA, in Asia and Oceania (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, <https://asean.org/> and Asia-Pacific Quality Network, <https://apqn.org/home> and the Asian University Network, <https://www.aunsec.org/>), in South America (the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR-Educativo), <https://www.mercosur.int/temas/educacion/>), in America (the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education, <https://oui-iohe.org/en/>), in Africa (the Euro-Mediterranean Area of Higher Education and Research, <https://emuni.si/> - and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa, <https://aau.org/current-projects/continental-education-strategy-for-africa/>) and others. As they saw an opportunity to implement changes that had previously failed and justified the necessary reformations in the context of the global knowledge economy, many countries and organizations expressed interest in the BP process and made an effort to cooperate. They did not want to lose momentum on the global education map.

Zahavi and Friedman [14] characterized BP and EHEA as an *international public good*, which strengthened globalization processes in university studies and research, in a way that states and higher education frameworks may benefit from the organization created. The BP and EHEA offer the framework and principles to reform higher education and a unified pedagogical and administrative language that facilitate transnational academic cooperation, strengthens international cooperation and draws attention to the function of academia in the globalization era [15]. Although the intentions of the participants and cooperation countries in the EHEA and worldwide were positive, the implementation of the changes was in many cases done selectively, far from the suggested way, according to the socioeconomic, political, historical, and cultural bases of each state [16].

Voices of concern came from various higher education stakeholders (students, staff, and researchers). The ESU expressed strong concern regarding the implementation of the suggested changes. One of the primary worries was that higher education would implement the suggested changes a la carte and exclude students from low-income families [17]. ESU closely monitored the implementation of the suggested measures and provided input to the Ministerial conferences presenting the students' opinions regarding the changes implemented with the series of reports named 'Bologna with students' eyes'. At the Rome Ministerial conference in 2020, ESU gave positive feedback [18], but still expressed concern about the social dimension and support for less-privileged students.

The changes proposed in the framework of the BP greatly transform the previous Humboldt' humanitarian model of Higher Education. The individual is not educated, aiming to become useful to society but primarily, if not exclusively, to the employment market. The goal of self-improvement, humanitarian values and

freedoms that characterized higher education since the 19th century is completely absent and this disrupts higher education's tradition [19]. Another problem pointed out is the connection of universities with the needs of the market and ultimately the "academic capitalism" that transforms the operation of universities from centers of knowledge cultivation to places of profit for the funding companies [20]. Higher education is becoming more competitive, and the distinction between public goods and privately provided goods with limited use by potential beneficiaries is being widened by the introduction of financial terms and attitudes.

Wihlborg and Teelken [21] examined articles from 2004 to 2013 regarding the attitude of the teaching population and institutions towards BP and EHEA and found that the critical attitude towards EHEA increased after its implementation in 2010. In several of the reviewed articles a difference was found between what was proposed and what was finally implemented, while in several countries the BP appeared as an excuse to promote other (necessary?) changes. The main concern expressed in the examined articles was that the compatibility of the studies in the effort to identify them more easily may lead to the opposite of the desired results, since if all higher education institutions offer the same curriculum, this will lead to harmonization and act as a deterrent to much-sought-after innovation.

As we can see, implementing the changes BP and the EHEA led to worldwide cooperation on quality in higher education, mobility, academic cooperation, and other positive factors. However, the implementation was questioned in numerous circumstances, especially regarding the goal of the suggested changes, the way they were implemented and the results these changes have on students, teachers and staff.

5. Conclusion

Europe's higher education policies have changed over the past 25 years, starting with the BP and continuing with the EHEA and the most recent Ministerial conference in Tirana, Albania. However, along with adding student and staff participation in higher education governance and public responsibility for higher education, it upheld the core values of academic freedom, integrity, and institutional autonomy. The responsibility *for* higher education pertains to the duty of the national authorities to provide financial and other suitable means of support for the public nature of higher education. Higher education institutions have a social responsibility to foster growth and address societal issues. This is known as the "responsibility *of* higher education".

At the first conferences, the decisions had to do with more practical issues, such as study cycles and the tools to facilitate mobility, like the ECTS and the recognition of acquired knowledge. Along the way, new suggestions enter the dialogue, like the response to the societal needs which changed through the financial crisis and the increasing migration for various reasons worldwide, as well as accountability on behalf of the tertiary education institutions on the use of public financing and their response to the important problems the European societies face. There are many more social issues, such as equal access and support to the completion of studies for all, the ranging unemployment and migration-related issues, in which higher education can and should play a significant role.

The BP evolved into a global phenomenon with suggested changes of the BP being implemented in countries all over the world. It became the necessary norm for HEIs worldwide, providing the common reference framework and language for reforms of higher education systems, formulating limits and standards for quality assurance, applying a common framework of workload units and learning outcomes supporting the unified qualification framework [22]. The influence exerted was great and includes the structure of 3 study cycles, quality assurance, internationalization, academic cooperation, etc.

The primary results of the BP and the EHEA are the transformation of higher education systems and the transition to more compatible and comparable education systems, facilitating the mobility for students and staff, recognizing degrees and knowledge attended in different countries, supporting the cooperation and the internationalization of the higher education institutions, creating a better future for European societies and their citizens.

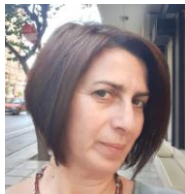
Today, to the above results we can add the interest and support to societal needs, the response on behalf of the higher education institutions in emerging problems (like the COVID-19 pandemic), attempts to more intense cooperation among nations regarding common problems which can be solved through the qualitative education they offer. We should wait and see how the education systems within the EHEA will address the upcoming challenges and how they will support the well-being of their students and societies.

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