

**Title:**

Globalization, Mobility, and European Education Credentials: The Bologna Process

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In 1988, 388 university rectors from across Europe convened to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna. They signed the Magna Charta Universitatum, which advocates for academic freedom in both teaching and learning, asserts that research should be at the forefront of teaching, and emphasizes the importance of cooperation between European universities. In 1998, The Sorbonne Declaration was signed by ministers from France, Germany, Italy, and the UK. This declaration - a precursor to the Bologna Declaration - called for European countries to create a common education framework that promotes mobility. In 1999, The Bologna Declaration (Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education) was adopted by 29 countries. Between 1999 and 2010, six ministerial meetings were held to reaffirm commitment and monitor implementation progress. All of this work culminated in 2010 with the Lisbon Declaration and the inception of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Lisbon Declaration is the legal agreement for credential evaluation in Europe. It states that credentials must be recognized unless substantial differences can be proven, and it was this declaration that legitimized the EHEA.

**Overview:**

On June 19th 1999, representatives from 29 countries gathered in Bologna, Italy to sign The Bologna Declaration. This declaration, following the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), called for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the standardization of educational systems and credentials across Europe. This topical paper aims to examine the progress of Bologna Process implementation and the implications this Process has had on European higher education.

By 2010, six Ministerial meetings had taken place: in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven (2009), and Budapest-Vienna (2010). The main establishing objectives of the Bologna Process between its inception in 1999 and 2010 were easily readable and comparable degrees, implementation of cycle-based education systems, the establishment of a widely-accepted credit system, increased mobility for students and teachers, and quality assurance and cooperation within and between universities. Easily readable and comparable degrees were facilitated through the advent of the Diploma Supplement. The Diploma Supplement is provided with each qualification and contains pertinent information about the qualification and its requirements. It is provided for free and in a common language.

The cycle-based education system focuses on learning objectives and outcomes and is described using the Dublin Descriptors - a set of criteria agreed upon as part of the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) to ensure quality assurance was upheld through the execution of the Bologna

Process. These descriptors define basic required learning outcomes for the first and second cycles of the Process, and consider knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, making judgments, communication, and lifelong learning skills.

### **Objectives:**

Today, 49 countries have agreed to implement higher education reforms that will ensure degree compatibility, quality assurance, and increased ease and opportunity of academic and career mobility. The ultimate purpose of implementing the Bologna Process was to introduce coherence to European higher education (*The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, 2024*). Starting with the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), all countries committed to the unification process agreed to the following:

- to introduce a three-cycle higher education system consisting of bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies,
- to ensure the mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad completed at other universities through easily readable and comparable credentials,
- to implement a system of quality assurance, to strengthen the quality and relevance of learning and teaching,

all of which contribute to an ultimate goal of increased mobility for students, faculty, and academic professionals across Europe.

In recent years, the objectives of the EHEA have evolved to meet current needs and challenges faced by the European education system. Bologna Process objectives are now focused extensively around mobility opportunities for students and teachers, mobility of both credits and qualifications, and ensuring that those opportunities are reflective of the diversity of the EHEA. In 2011, a significant commitment was made to enhance mobility within the EHEA, with a goal that 20% of graduating students from EHEA will have mobility experience by the year 2020 (BFUG Working Group, 2011).

### **EHEA Members:**

Since its inception, 49 countries have signed on to adopt the Bologna process under the EHEA (See Chart with countries listed). It is important to note that some countries have changed their name, and even borders, since original membership into the EHEA. An example of this is Serbia-Montenegro, which has since separated from each other but both became ratified members in 2003 and 2007, respectively. Additionally, in April 2022, it was decided to suspend the rights of representation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the EHEA (EHEA, 2022).

### **Implementation and Development:**

Several features of the Bologna Process have contributed to both its effectiveness and its success since its inception over two decades ago. Perhaps one of the most valuable features of a Bologna-compliant degree is their adherence to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). As a general rule, the following framework (EHEA, 2020) for ECTS application under Bologna-compliant credentials is applied:

**Table 1:** Framework for ECTS Equivalency in the United States

US QF	Cycle	Number of ECTS
Secondary Education	Short Cycle	120
Bachelor's	1st Cycle	180 or 240
Master's	2nd Cycle	60, 90 or 120
Doctoral	3rd Cycle	varying/not specified

ECTS is more than just attaching credits to a Bologna credential; it represents learning outcomes and student workload, facilitating both credit and degree mobility around Europe and, by extension, the world. Students holding ECTS credentials can seamlessly move between countries and institutions under the same compatible credit transfer scale. This is done through a commitment to credential transparency, with ECTS values listed on all supporting documents. ECTS has been adopted by most countries in the European Higher Education Area as the national credit system and is increasingly used elsewhere.

"A learner-centered system for credit accumulation and transfer, based on the principle of transparency of learning, teaching and assessment processes. Its objective is to facilitate planning, delivery and evaluation of study programmes and student mobility by recognising learning achievements and qualifications and periods of learning."  
-ECTS Users' Guide 2015

The adoption of ECTS has been a very valuable piece of information for use in Diploma Supplements. The Diploma Supplement (DS) was introduced to provide independent data designed to improve international transparency and fair academic and professional recognition of academic credentials (World Education Services, 2005). As its name implies, it is issued together with a final diploma or degree. The DS provides a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies successfully completed by the individual named on the original qualification. ECTS are recognised by higher

education institutions, public authorities and employers in their home countries and abroad, echoing the commitment to mobility made by the EHEA under the Bologna Process.

The Bologna Process under EHEA's Framework has also facilitated mobilization efforts through its transfer credit affinity to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL). EQF-LLL is similar to the Bologna Process in that it seeks to connect learning across European countries, but with a specific emphasis on life-long learning beyond the traditional post-secondary education framework (European Commission on Education and Culture, 2008). The following table demonstrates the direct relationship (europass, 2024) between the EHEA and EQF:

**Table 2:** Learning outcomes of the EQF-LLL

US QF	QF-EHEA	EQF-LLL	Learning Outcomes
Secondary Education	Short Cycle	Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge
Bachelor's	1st Cycle	Level 6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles
Master's	2nd Cycle	Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields
Doctoral	3rd Cycle	Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields

**Evaluation Limitations:**

When evaluating Bologna credentials, there are challenges that at times cannot be avoided. Although some challenges are not unique to the EHEA, they should be acknowledged to ensure they are considered during the evaluation process.

*Language and Cultural Barriers*

There are 24 official languages of the European Union (Europa, 2024). It is, therefore, to be expected that not all information can be translated across cultures, languages, and technologies while maintaining identical interpretation. An example of where research has shown ECTS credits tend to vary from the ostensible standard assessment value is in Albania. An extensive conversation with an Education USA representative about the Albanian professional degrees resulted in confirmation that Professional degrees will actually combine first and second-cycle degrees to offer one, 5-year, 300 ECTS equivalent degree. This is cause for caution when evaluating professional degrees - it is important to pay close attention to the secondary accrediting body guidelines as there are instances where direct equivalencies are not possible (for example, this occurs on occasion in professional degrees such as medicine). The Bologna Process has been good for standardizing ECTS at a non-professional degree level, but information reveals that there will continue to be a strain in maintaining a balanced relationship between the EHEA and secondary accreditation bodies.

### *Changing Landscape of the EU*

In the grand scheme of higher education, the Bologna Process is still relatively new. As of the year of publication, this process is only 24 years old, and countries are still being added to the EHEA today (EHEA, 2022). When evaluating Bologna credentials, it is important to have contextual clarity on when the country in question joined the EHEA, whether or not they are still a part of the EHEA (For example, Russia was dismissed from the EHEA in 2022), if the country has fully adopted the use of ECTS, and whether or not the country has experienced any disruptions to their education system since Bologna implementation. Another example of this would be the evaluation of Ukrainian credentials from the 2022-2023 year. When compiling research for this paper, connecting with schools or subsidiary evaluation agencies in Ukraine was not possible due to their lack of internet, blackout periods, and ongoing civil unrest.

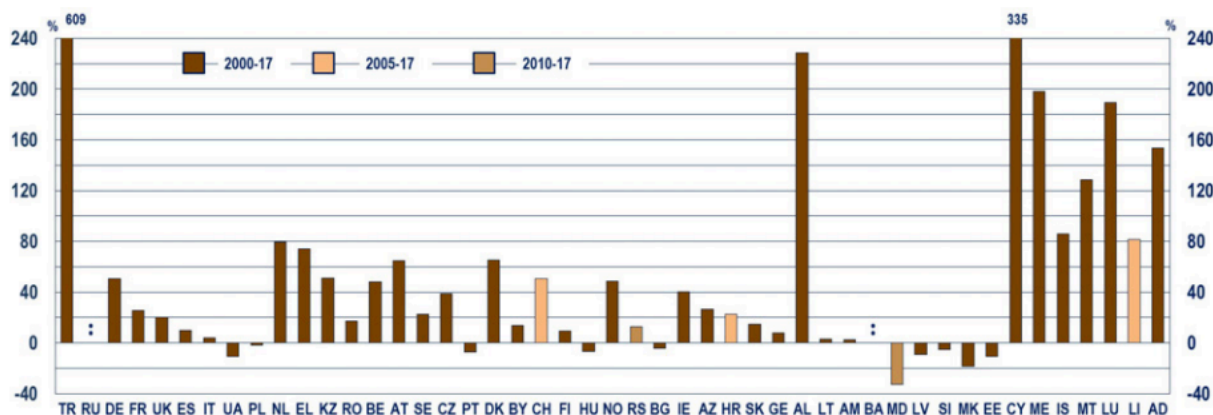
### *Conflicting Information*

Although countries agree to become Bologna-compliant on a specific date, institutional changes can sometimes take several years. The EHEA can, at times, have different data on the implementation timeline of this process than the knowledge of many subsidiary education bodies such as Fulbright Education Institutions or Education USA. These discrepancies can lead to misinterpreted credentials, denied admissions, and decreased mobility if not investigated closely.

An example of this occurred with Belarus. Despite the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQFs) in most EHEA countries, students still face difficulties getting their qualifications recognised. The insights within the 2020 edition of Bologna With Student Eyes show that in most of the countries where National Unions of Students were surveyed, the three-cycle system is implemented either 'always' or 'in most of the cases', while in a very small minority of countries, the National Union of Students (NUSes) points out the need to put further effort into ensuring that degree programs are truly comparable with similar qualifications of other EHEA member states (European Students' Union, 2020). When speaking with Education USA representatives in Belarus, they assured us that Belarus has not joined the Bologna Process to date, and any commitment to joining the Process has been stopped since signing on to the Process in 2015. To a prospective student, this conflicting information could be detrimental to their admission process and future mobility assumptions.

### **Implementation Success:**

Increased mobility is one of the main accomplishments of the Bologna Process. The EHEA has seen a continuous rise of total student numbers since its inception, reaching more than 38 million students in 2016/17. This is an increase of more than 18 million students compared to 2000; Turkey, Russia, Germany, France and the United Kingdom now account for almost 60% of the EHEA student population.



**Figure 1:** Percentage change in the number of students enrolled in tertiary education, 2000-2017 (from Eurydice, 2020, p.19).

More and more students have the opportunity to participate in mobility programs because of the Bologna Process. However, this increased mobility does not have the same outcomes for every country. Mainly countries in Eastern Europe are struggling with 'brain drain,' while northern countries like the Netherlands and Denmark are currently creating measures to decrease the high influx of international students.

### **Quality Assurance:**

Multipurpose quality assurance should be utilized as a tool on the national and institutional levels for further enhancing transparency and public trust among higher education institutions in the EHEA. On the national level, there is a need to create more incentives for universities to involve students as full members in internal QA. The existing barriers to student engagement should be reflected and addressed. Students' engagement in QA should be supported through flexible study conditions and non-academic learning recognition.

The implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) as a key commitment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was followed under a newly established peer support structure during the 2018-2020 cycle of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG). This structured, peer-based support platform served as a space for member countries to share their experiences, implement projects, and drive changes in their quality assurance systems.

Several countries have gone the extra mile in ensuring the quality of their credentials. The Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA) was created on 22 November 2006, and guarantees the quality of higher education in Andorra. The purpose of AQUA is to evaluate, accredit and certify the quality of higher education in Andorra in accordance with the principles of the European Higher Education Area, and the criteria established in the European Standard Guidelines for Quality Assurance 2015. The curricula of the Bachelor, Master and Doctor degrees are accredited every ten years by AQUA.

**Conclusion:**

The most recent Ministerial Communiqué was in November 2020 following the meeting in Rome and reported progress in the two prior years though it also referenced the pandemic, then under full sway. It also mentioned that the 2008 financial crisis stunted implementation and that nearly a full decade was needed to surpass the progress made up to that point. The next Ministerial Conference will take place this year (2024) in Tirana, Albania.

The Bologna Process is a modern success story in higher education, and the impacts of its implementation can be felt around the world. Increased mobility benefits the learner, the labor market, the nation, the European Community, and the entire global community by extension.

"As a way forward, the best way to strengthen trust is to practice trust. Implementation works better when higher education systems take account of the experience of other countries."

-Mariya Gabriel, The EHEA in 2020, Bologna Process Implementation Report

The successes highlighted in this White Paper were achieved through collaboration and trust between institutions and countries. Many of the challenges already faced, and many of the challenges yet to come, may be overcome through that same trust and collaboration.

**Table 3:** List of EHEA Countries and Their Respective Implementation Years (EHEA, 2024)

<b>Country</b>	<b>Country Code</b>	<b>Implementation Date</b>
Albania	AL	2003
Andorra	AD	2003
Armenia	AM	2005
Austria	AT	1999
Azerbaijan	AZ	2005
Belarus	BY	2015 (withdrawn in 2022)
Belgium	BE	1999
Bosnia and Herzegovina	BA	2003
Bulgaria	BG	1999
Croatia	HR	2001
Cyprus	CY	2001
Czech Republic	CZ	1999
Denmark	DK	1999
Estonia	EE	1999
Finland	FI	1999
France	FR	1999
Georgia	GE	2005
Germany	DE	1999
Greece	EL	1999
Hungary	HU	1999
Iceland	IS	1999
Ireland	IE	1999
Italy	IT	1999
Kazakhstan	KZ	2010
Latvia	LV	1999
Liechtenstein	LI	1999
Lithuania	LT	1999
Luxembourg	LU	1999
Malta	MT	1999
Moldova	MD	2005
Montenegro	ME	2007
Netherlands	NL	2001
North Macedonia	MK	2003
Norway	NO	1999
Poland	PL	1999
Portugal	PT	1999



Romania	RO	1999
Russian Federation	RU	2003 (withdrawn in 2022)
San Marino	SM	2020
Serbia	RS	2003
Slovak Republic	SK	1999
Slovenia	SI	1999
Spain	ES	1999
Sweden	SE	1999
Switzerland	CH	1999
Turkiye	TR	2001
Ukraine	UA	2005
United Kingdom	UK	1999

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