

QAA Viewpoint

Post-EU referendum: the UK, European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process

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Background

Initiated in 1998, the [Bologna Process](#) is a voluntary inter-governmental agreement between countries in Europe, through which the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was created. Today, the EHEA exists as a multi-lateral agreement between [49 countries](#), both European Union (EU) and non-EU members. Although some of the EHEA's activities are supported by the EU, it exists above and outside the EU, meaning the UK continues to be a member of this higher education body.

The UK was one of the original signatories to the Bologna Process in 1998, alongside France, Germany and Italy. The Process was established to provide greater comparability and compatibility between the higher education systems of individual European countries. In the context of the continued globalisation of higher education, it aims to support greater recognition of degrees and other higher education qualifications internationally, and to strengthen the global competitiveness and reputation of higher education in the EHEA.

The UK continues to participate actively in the Bologna Process, including through Bologna's principal decision-making forum, the [ministerial conferences](#) which take place on a two or three-yearly basis. Ministers and formal delegations from all member countries attend these conferences, where progress is assessed and future strategic directions agreed. Scotland provides half of the members of the UK's ministerial delegation to these conferences. At the last ministerial conference in Armenia in 2015, it was agreed that enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching would be the main mission of the EHEA to 2020.

The UK is also actively involved in the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), which oversees the implementation of the Bologna Process between ministerial conferences and meets at least once every six months.

QAA's role in the EHEA

QAA is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ([ENQA](#)), the umbrella organisation for quality assurance agencies in the EHEA. Full membership of ENQA represents recognition that an agency complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* ([ESG](#)). The ESG offers a framework within EHEA agencies and providers can work, and which protects the interests of students. The compliance of ENQA's member agencies with these standards is checked every five years, through an independent review. QAA was last reviewed by ENQA in 2013, when [it was judged to be fully compliant](#) with all European standards and guidelines - the first higher education quality assurance body to achieve this.

In 2013, QAA also joined the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which lists those agencies which have demonstrated substantial compliance with the ESG. The mission of EQAR is, in the future, to enable EHEA countries and providers to have the choice of using any EQAR-registered agency for carry out their external quality assurance.

On behalf of the sector, QAA also works closely with the European Students' Union, European University Association and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, on issues of quality and standards. These organisations, together with ENQA, make up what is known as the E4 Group.

QAA's involvement in these organisations provides additional fora through which to influence policy for the benefit of the UK sector.

QAA's position: the case for the UK's continued membership of the EHEA

- The UK's membership of the EHEA and continued participation in the Bologna Process ensures influence on European policy decisions. In light of the recent EU referendum result, this is particularly important in ensuring the comparability of UK higher education with European systems. It also strengthens the competitive position of UK providers, in relation to competitors in other European countries.
- Decisions made through the Bologna Process have implications for UK higher education providers, whether or not the UK participates in the EHEA. It is, therefore, to the UK's advantage to continue to participate in and actively influence Bologna decisions. By being within the Bologna Process, the UK sector is also better placed to understand and anticipate any changes which might have significant impact, for example on the recruitment of European students.
- Bologna reforms have supported and enabled students and graduates to move within the EHEA – and increasingly, globally – with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study. Student mobility through the transfer of credit will also be important for degree apprenticeships, a key current policy focus for the UK government. Mutual recognition of standards also helps facilitate university-level partnerships across Europe and ensures that UK graduates are globally employable.
- Current Bologna policy priorities, as set out in the [Ministerial Communiqué](#) from the last meeting in 2015, echo a number of the priorities of the UK government and devolved administrations. They include: enhancing graduate employability; recognition of qualifications; enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; and fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives.
- The Bologna Process and its progress since 1998 continues to attract significant attention from the wider international community. Respected and recognised pan-European approaches to quality assurance, underpinned by the Bologna Process, are important in securing wider international trust in transnational education, which benefits the fast growing number of UK providers now operating around the globe.
- As preparations continue for the UK's exit from the European Union over the next two years and beyond, a reaffirmation of the continued commitment of the UK to the EHEA and the Bologna Process would be a powerful statement of intent, in a time of uncertainty.