

From Political Commitment to Structural Implementation: Operationalizing University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) as a Fourth Key Commitment of the Bologna Process

Short Summary of BFUG Position Paper | Draft 0
prepared by EU.ACE – European University for Academic Continuing Education

An Existing Commitment. A Missing Architecture.

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) is not a new topic within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Lifelong learning has formed part of the Bologna Process since the Prague Communiqué (2001), where ministers identified lifelong learning as “an essential element of the European Higher Education Area”.¹ Subsequent ministerial communiqués have repeatedly reinforced this commitment. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) emphasized widening participation and flexible learning pathways. The Paris Communiqué (2018) strengthened recognition of prior learning (RPL) and flexible provision. The Rome Communiqué (2020) highlighted micro-credentials and adaptable learning pathways, while the Tirana Communiqué (2024) linked lifelong learning to democratic resilience, social cohesion, and the green and digital transitions.

The policy commitment therefore already exists. However, unlike the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition, lifelong learning has never been supported by a comparable implementation architecture. It lacks dedicated indicators, monitoring mechanisms, structured peer learning and a permanent Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) working structure. As a result, implementation remains fragmented and uneven across the EHEA.² The challenge is therefore not a lack of political commitment, but a lack of implementation architecture.

Why Existing Bologna Structures Work

One of the defining strengths of the Bologna Process is its ability to transform political commitments into operational reality through monitoring, transparency and peer learning. The three-cycle degree structure is supported through implementation scorecards and comparative reporting. Quality assurance is monitored through ESG implementation, ENQA and EQAR-related benchmarking. Recognition instruments such as ECTS and the Diploma Supplement are regularly assessed through Bologna implementation reports and peer-learning processes. By contrast, lifelong learning remains only partially visible within current Bologna monitoring. Adult learner participation, recognition of prior learning, flexible study provision, modular learning and stackability are addressed only indirectly and often through qualitative reporting. The result is that progress remains difficult to compare, monitor and support across the EHEA. The Bologna

¹ European Ministers in charge of Higher Education. *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the Meeting of European Ministers in Charge of Higher Education, Prague, 19 May 2001*. Prague: Bologna Process, 2001.

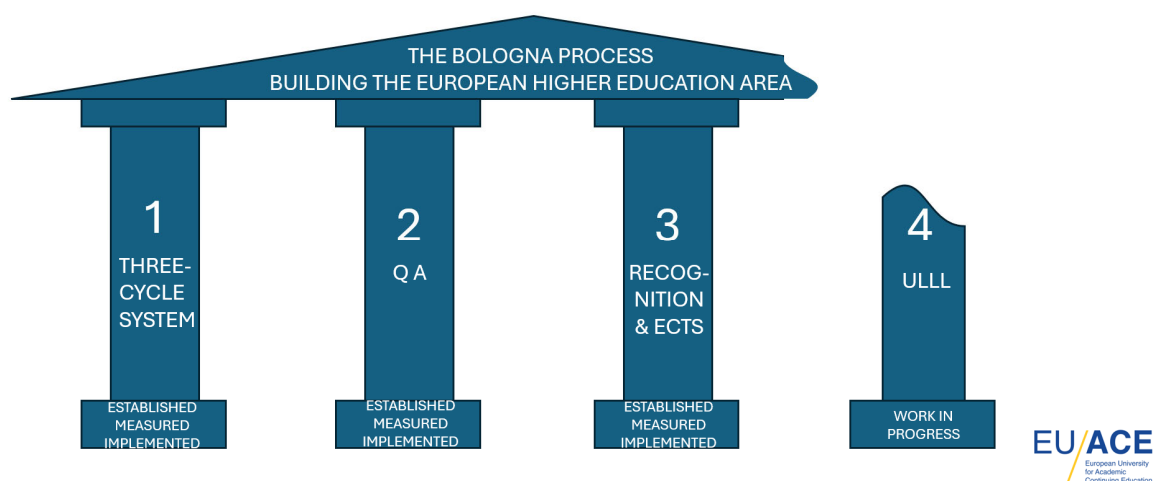
² European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report (2020)* and *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 (2024)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Process has historically achieved its greatest successes where commitments are accompanied by implementation mechanisms, monitoring structures and mutual accountability.

Why This Matters Now

Europe is entering a period in which lifelong learning is becoming a structural necessity rather than an educational option. Digitalization, artificial intelligence, the green transition, demographic ageing, labor-market restructuring and geopolitical uncertainty are transforming the skills requirements of citizens and societies. The European Commission's Union of Skills initiative recognizes that continuous upskilling and reskilling will become essential throughout the lifespan. At the same time, participation in adult learning remains highly uneven across Europe. Eurostat and Cedefop data show significant disparities between countries, sectors and social groups. Participation remains particularly low among lower-qualified adults, older learners, migrants and refugees, SME employees and residents of rural regions. While universities are increasingly expanding continuing education, micro-credentials, flexible pathways and recognition procedures, the current Bologna architecture remains primarily designed for initial higher education and traditional degree students.

A Pragmatic Proposal: From Transversal Commitment to Dedicated Fourth Key Commitment



EU.ACE proposes designating University Lifelong Learning, already recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process. The proposal does not seek to create a new Bologna architecture, introduce a new policy field or impose additional regulatory obligations. Rather, it seeks to provide lifelong learning with the same implementation architecture that supports the existing Bologna key commitments, thereby strengthening the implementation of existing commitments related to lifelong learning, flexibility, recognition, inclusion and learner-centered education. A strengthened lifelong learning dimension would:

- establish a dedicated BFUG working structure on ULLL
- support the development of indicators and monitoring tools
- strengthen implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- improve permeability between higher education, vocational education and workplace learning
- support stackable and modular learning opportunities

- strengthen adult learner mobility and portability of learning outcomes
- facilitate peer learning and exchange of good practice across the EHEA.

Illustrative Monitoring Areas

A future BFUG process could explore a limited and pragmatic indicator framework building wherever possible on existing Bologna, Eurostat and Cedefop data sources. Potential monitoring areas could include:

Participation and Access

- participation rates of adult and mature learners
- participation in part-time, blended and distance learning
- access through non-traditional entry routes
- participation in higher education lifelong learning and continuing education provision.

Recognition and Flexibility

- availability of recognition of prior learning systems
- use of RPL for access and credit recognition
- stackable and modular learning opportunities
- integration of micro-credentials within qualifications frameworks.

Permeability

- transitions between VET and higher education
- recognition of workplace learning
- employer involvement in program design
- cooperation within regional skills ecosystems.

Mobility and Portability

- participation of adult learners in mobility activities
- portability of micro-credentials and modular learning outcomes
- recognition of learning across sectors and borders.

The objective is not to create a new reporting burden, but to make an existing Bologna commitment more visible, measurable and operational.

A Historic Opportunity for the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process has always been most successful when it anticipated structural change rather than reacting to it. The introduction of the three-cycle structure, ECTS, quality assurance and recognition instruments responded to transformations that required coordinated European action. Today, lifelong learning presents a challenge of similar magnitude. By 2030, the majority of Europe's workforce will need continuous opportunities for upskilling and reskilling within systems that were originally designed primarily for school leavers. No member state can address this challenge alone, and no actor other than higher education can provide learning opportunities that are publicly accountable, quality assured and recognizable across the EHEA. Designating University Lifelong Learning, already recognised as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, as a dedicated fourth key commitment would not create a new Bologna objective. It would operationalize an existing one by providing the governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms necessary to make over two decades of political commitment measurable, comparable and fully effective across the EHEA.

Draft Communiqué Language for 2027

“We recognize Higher education Lifelong Learning as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA and invite the BFUG to introduce LLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment and develop indicators, monitoring tools and implementation mechanisms supporting flexible higher education lifelong learning pathways, recognition of prior learning and stackable higher education provision for adult learners and beyond.”

Conclusion

University Lifelong Learning is already recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. What remains missing is a coherent implementation architecture comparable to that supporting the existing Bologna key commitments. A dedicated fourth key commitment would not introduce a new policy objective; it would provide lifelong learning with the governance, monitoring and implementation architecture necessary to strengthen existing commitments through transparency, comparability and peer learning. The 2027 Ministerial Conference offers a historic opportunity to take this next step in the evolution of the European Higher Education Area. For the first time since the establishment of the three existing key commitments, ministers have the opportunity to extend the Bologna implementation architecture to a policy area that has been politically recognized for over two-decades but remains structurally under-implemented.