

The Bologna Process: an introductory module

English version

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1. Introduction

In June 1999, the education ministers of 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, in which they agreed to pursue the creation of a single European higher education area. The aim was to make it easier for students and workers to live, study and work anywhere in Europe. The Bologna Process is still relevant and has a significant influence not only on higher education in the countries participating in the process but also on the higher education institutions and their staff.

This module

This module aims to provide you with an overview of the consequences of the Bologna Process for the development of higher education in Europe, and in the Netherlands in particular. You will learn about the tools developed as part of the Bologna Process and gain insight into the consequences that the Bologna Process has, or has had, for your work at a research university or a university of applied sciences.

This module was originally developed by the Dutch team of Bologna Experts under the FaBoTo+ project (Facilitating the use of Bologna tools for quality assurance organisations and higher education institutions), which was financially supported by Key Action 3 of the Erasmus+ Programme. The module was up-dated by the Bologna Experts in March 2023.¹

Target group and learning objective

The target group of this module are staff employed in higher education.

The learning objective of this module is: to gain insight into the Bologna Process and the consequences of the process that staff employed in higher education will be facing.

On completion of this module, you will know:

- how the Bologna Process originated and how it has developed;
- what consequences the Bologna Process has, or has had, on higher education in the Netherlands;
- what tools have been developed as part of the Bologna Process;
- in what way you, as a staff member, will be affected by these tools and how you can use them.

Prior knowledge

You do not need any specific prior knowledge for this module.

¹ In the period 2022-2024 the Dutch team Bologna Experts consists of: Eltjo Bazen (Utrecht UAS); Anja Brandsma-Dieters (NHLStenden UAS); Fred Jonker (Wageningen University); Guido van Leerzem (Tilburg University); Robert Wagenaar (University of Groningen); Bas Wegewijs (Nuffic); Els van der Werf (formerly Hanze UAS Groningen), and representatives of the national student unions and the Dutch NA Erasmus+.



2. Origins and development of the Bologna Process

Contrary to popular belief, the Bologna Process does not stem from an initiative of the European Commission, but from an action initiated by four EU countries. France, Germany, Italy and Great Britain signed the Sorbonne Declaration in Paris on 25 May 1998. The immediate cause was their concern for the competitive position of European higher education in a worldwide perspective.

The signing of the Sorbonne Declaration sparked a discussion in Europe that led to the signing the Bologna Declaration a year later and that marked the launch of the Bologna Process. The aim was to make it easier for students and workers to live, study and work anywhere in Europe. We will now explain the origins of the Bologna Process and what the process has meant for higher education in the Netherlands.

2.1. The Sorbonne Declaration

In the Sorbonne Declaration, the four education ministers expressed the intention to create a comparable and transparent structure for higher education. The subtitle of the declaration was 'Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system'. In the new structure two cycles were envisaged, undergraduate and graduate, which was already standard practice in the Anglo-Saxon countries. For this reason, we also called this the BaMa structure at that time.

The aim of the declaration was twofold. Firstly, to increase the economic competitiveness of the European countries by ensuring that the higher education institutions prepare students adequately for the future labour market. Secondly, to promote student and graduate mobility.

2.2. The Bologna Declaration

The Sorbonne Declaration resonated with the other European countries. On 19 June 1999, 29 European education ministers convened in Bologna for the signing of the Bologna Declaration. They represented the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom; all EU or EU candidate members or members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

This marked the launch of the Bologna Process

The objective of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with comparable academic degrees, study programmes that promote mobility among students, teaching staff and researchers, higher education institutions that guarantee the quality of education, and higher education with a clear European dimension.



2.3. The members of the European Higher Education Area

The Bologna Process was initially a Western and Central European affair. However, over the years, more and more countries have joined the Bologna Process and become members of the European Higher Education Area.

A country that wishes to become a member of the EHEA must sign the European Cultural Convention and express its willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in its national higher education system.

Currently, 49 countries, plus the European Commission, participate in the EHEA initiative. These countries are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium (both the Flemish and Walloon Regions), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldavia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Vatican City.

However, the position of Russia and Belarus is changing. In the autumn of 2022, Russia announced that it planned to launch a new national system for higher education and that it would leave the Bologna Process. In April 2022 it was already decided that the right to representation of Russia and Belarus in the so-called Bologna Follow-Up Group had been suspended (see under 2.4.).



Illustration 1: The EHEA countries



2.4. Who is responsible for the Bologna Process?

The education ministers of the participating countries steer the Bologna Process. During the ministerial conferences, which are held every two to three years, the progress achieved is evaluated and the following steps are determined.

The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Bologna Process. The BFUG consists of representatives, usually education ministry officials, from the countries participating in the Bologna Process. The European Commission is also a member of the BFUG. During the BFUG meeting of 11-12 April 2022, it was decided that the right of representation of Russia and Belarus in the BFUG would be suspended.

The BFUG is responsible for monitoring the progress. It also prepares the ministerial conferences. In addition to the participating countries, other organisations are also represented in the BFUG as consultative members or partners. The European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Student Union (ESU), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (collectively known as the E4) and the Council of Europe are the most prominent advisory organisations.

The BFUG is assisted by the Bologna Secretariat, which rotates. It is located in the country in which the next ministerial conference will be held. Currently this is Armenia (until 30 June 2024).

2.5. The ministerial conferences

The education ministers of the countries participating in the Bologna Process meet every two years to discuss progress made.

They met for the first time in Prague in 2001 following the signing of the Bologna Declaration. Joint conferences followed in Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Budapest/Vienna (2010), Bucharest (2012), Yerevan (2015), Paris (2018), Rome (2020).

At the conclusion of each conference, a communiqué is signed, in which the ministers set out the priorities for the coming years. The communiqué is named after the city in which the conference is held. Based on the communiqué, a work plan is drawn up for the coming two to three years. You can find an overview of the communiqués that have been signed over the years [here](#).

2.6. Progress on the Bologna Process

To assess the progress achieved during the Bologna Process, progress reports are drawn up prior to the ministerial conference. The first progress report was issued in 2005. Initially, the BFUG was responsible for drawing up progress reports based on information it obtained from the national governments. However, this changed when it appeared that governments were inclined to paint a too rosy picture of their own efforts.



From 2012 onwards, the report was outsourced to the European Commission, in particular to the support service Eurydice. The detailed and reputable reports are issued under the title *The European Higher Education Area in 20..: Bologna Process Implementation Report*. The latest report was issued in 2018. In addition to the official reports, analyses of the progress achieved has also been published by the EUA under the title *TRENDS*, and by the ESU, under the title *Bologna with Student Eyes*.

The progress reports that have been published over the years can be found [here](#).



3. The implementation of a common degree structure

One of the objectives of the Bologna Process is to organise higher education in all participating countries on the basis of comparable cycles, each of which will lead to an internationally recognised degree. The Bologna Process initially focused on the Bachelor's degree and Master's degree cycle. In 2003, a third cycle, the Doctorate, was included in the process.

The main reason for the harmonisation of the degree structure is the desire to better align the various national systems with each other and to facilitate the comparison of exit qualifications. This is expected to promote student and graduate mobility and improve alignment between higher education and the labour market.

3.1. From three to four cycles

As part of the Bologna Process, it was agreed to organise higher education on the basis of three cycles: first cycle (Bachelor), second cycle (Master) and third cycle (Doctorate). They are now also known as levels 6, 7 and 8 of the European Qualifications Framework. In the meantime, a cycle has been added, which leads to an Associate degree, level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework. This cycle exists alongside the first cycle.

- Associate degree

The short cycle has a study load of 120 ECTS credits (two years) and leads to an Associate degree (Ad). An Ad programme prepares students for the labour market or continuation of studies in a Bachelor programme.

Originally, the Associate degree was meant to be an 'intermediate degree', forming part of the first cycle. However, in 2018 the Bologna education ministers confirmed the status of the Associate degree during their meeting in Paris. The Associate degree does not exist in all countries that participate in the Bologna Process.

- Bachelor

The first cycle represents a study load of 180-240 ECTS credits. This cycle leads to a Bachelor's degree and prepares graduating students for the labour market or an advanced programme at Master level.

In the Netherlands a Bachelor programme in research-oriented higher education has a study load of 180 ECTS credits (three years), whereas in higher professional education a Bachelor programme has a study load of 240 ECTS credits (four years). Universities of applied sciences are now also offering three-year Bachelor programmes (180 ECTS credits), specifically aimed at students with a VWO-diploma (see also under 4.2.).

- Master

The second cycle generally represents a study load of 60 to 120 ECTS credits and has a duration of one to two years. Exceptions are possible, in which case a Master programme has a longer duration.



- Doctorate

The third cycle leads to the academic degree of Doctor or PhD. Usually, no ECTS credits are linked to the third cycle, in which research is independently conducted and documented in a Doctoral thesis. In a Doctorate programme, research is sometimes combined with a teaching programme.

There is also the so-called Professional Doctorate (PD), which can be obtained after successfully completing a Professional Doctorate trajectory at a university of applied sciences.

3.2. Implementation in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, a bill implementing the Bachelor-Master (BaMa) degree structure in higher education was adopted in 2001. The Dutch universities of applied sciences and research universities transitioned to the BaMa degree structure from the academic year 2002/2003 onwards. The binary system proved to be a complicating factor: the Netherlands not only has research universities but also universities of applied sciences. The binary system was maintained in the Netherlands after the implementation of the Bachelor-Master degree structure. As a result, two different types of programmes were created, both at Bachelor and Master level.

To gain admission to a Bachelor programme at a research university, students must have obtained at least a VWO diploma (pre-university education) or the first-year diploma of a Bachelor programme at a university of applied sciences. Students can enrol in a Bachelor programme at a university of applied sciences upon completion of senior general secondary education (HAVO) or pre-university education (VWO), or upon completion of vocational education and training (MBO level 4). Universities of applied sciences have also developed three-year Bachelor programmes (180 ECTS credits), specifically aimed at incoming students with a VWO diploma.

Both universities of applied sciences and research universities offer Master programmes. The Master programmes offered by universities of applied sciences are usually profession-oriented. The Master programmes offered by research universities are usually more research-oriented. In principle, students who have completed a Bachelor programme are eligible for admission to a Master programme in the same field of study. However, there are exceptions. Students who have obtained a Bachelor degree at a university of applied sciences are in some cases required to complete a transfer programme before gaining admission to a Master programme at a research university.

The Bologna Process has not had any significant influence on the third cycle, the Doctorate programmes offered by research universities. In 2022, the Dutch universities of applied sciences started offering Professional Doctorate programmes. The introduction of this type of programme creates a continuous learning trajectory (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate) in a professional field.

Initially, the Associate degree programmes formed part of Bachelor programmes at universities of applied sciences. However, they became independent programmes on 1 January 2018, as laid down in the Dutch law on higher education. We are seeing increasing



collaboration between universities of applied sciences and a regional training centres (ROCs) on Ad programmes, with both institutions offering part of the programme. In such cases, the university of applied sciences is ultimately responsible for the programme and for awarding the degree. The intention is to raise the visibility of the Associate degree programme for students and employers through a clear profile, a larger and wider intake of students, and greater relevance for the labour market.

3.3. Degrees and titles

Upon successful completion of a Bachelor or Master programme a student receives a diploma and is awarded a degree. In the Netherlands, there is no distinction between degrees awarded in research-oriented higher education and higher professional education. However, the degree suffixes differ. In research-oriented higher education these are the degrees with the suffix 'of Arts' or 'of Science'. The suffix 'of Laws' was introduced in December 2018.

This works differently in higher professional education. From September 2013 onwards, the titles that graduates of universities of applied sciences may use are determined per discipline. The suffixes that can be used are 'of Arts', 'of Science', 'of Laws', 'of Business Administration', 'of Social Work', or 'of Education'. The Associate degree (Ad) has no suffix.

The conferral of a degree entitles recipients to use a title. Again, there is a difference between research-oriented higher education and higher professional education. The Dutch titles 'ing' (*ingenieur*) and 'bc' (*baccalaureus*) are used for degrees awarded by universities of applied sciences and the Dutch titles 'drs' (*doctorandus*), 'ir' (*ingenieur*) and 'mr' (*meester in de rechten*) are used for degrees in research-oriented higher education. For more information, see: [Regeling titulatuur hoger onderwijs](#)

3.4. Implementation in other countries

The implementation of the three-cycle structure has not proceeded equally successfully in all countries. National traditions and interests appear to be a considerable obstacle in implementing an entirely new degree structure. Although the three-cycle structure has been formally implemented in all countries, further efforts still need to be undertaken. For example, integrated Master programmes - programmes that lead to a Master's degree, without the option of an exit qualification at Bachelor's level - still exist in various countries. This is not in line with the agreements made in the Bologna Process.

For a detailed overview and more information, see [The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report](#).

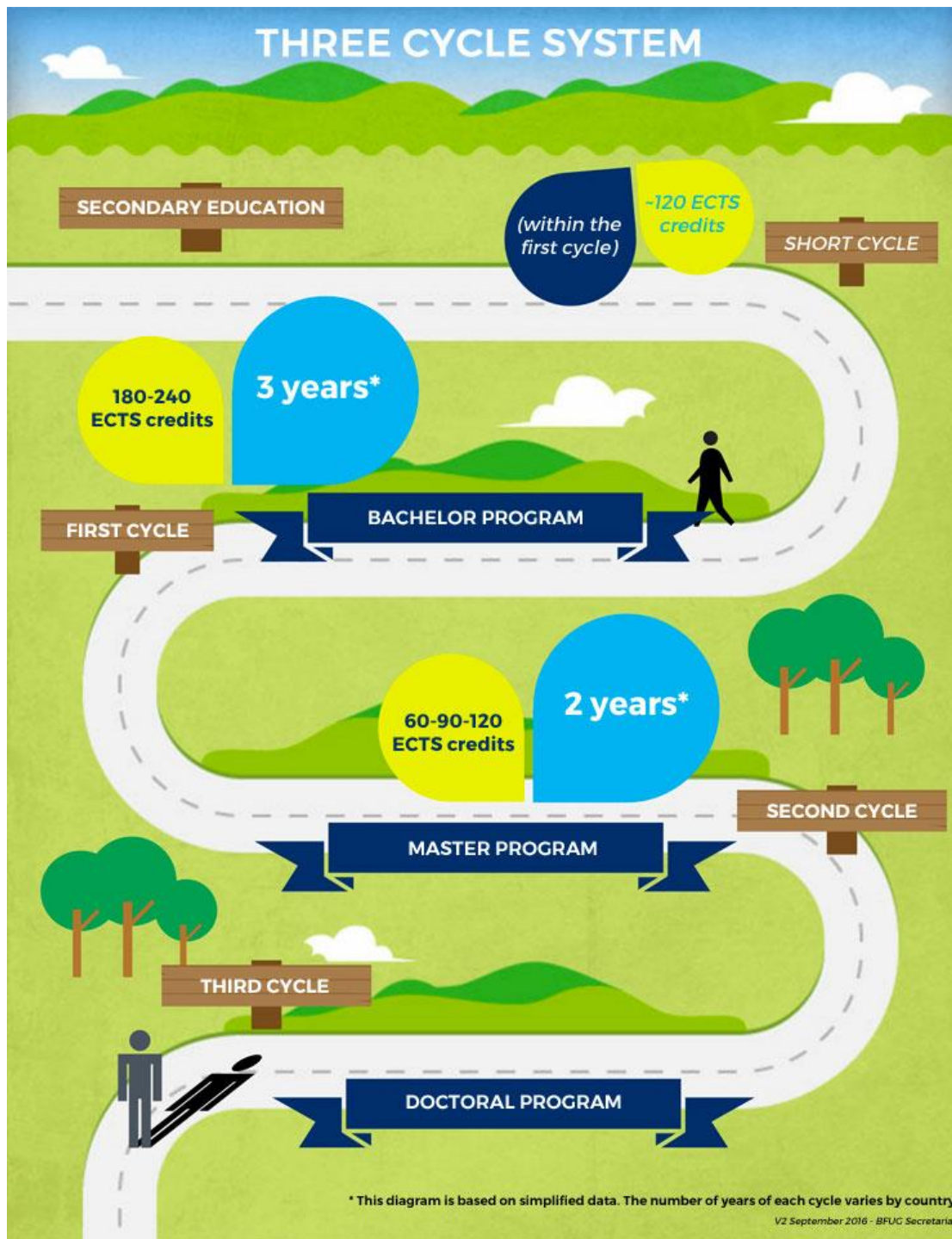


Illustration 2: The three cycles



Update January 2023

The Dutch education system

The higher education system in the Netherlands is based on a three-cycle degree system, consisting of a bachelor, master and PhD. Two types of programmes are offered: research-oriented degree programmes offered by research universities, and professional higher education programmes offered by universities of applied sciences.

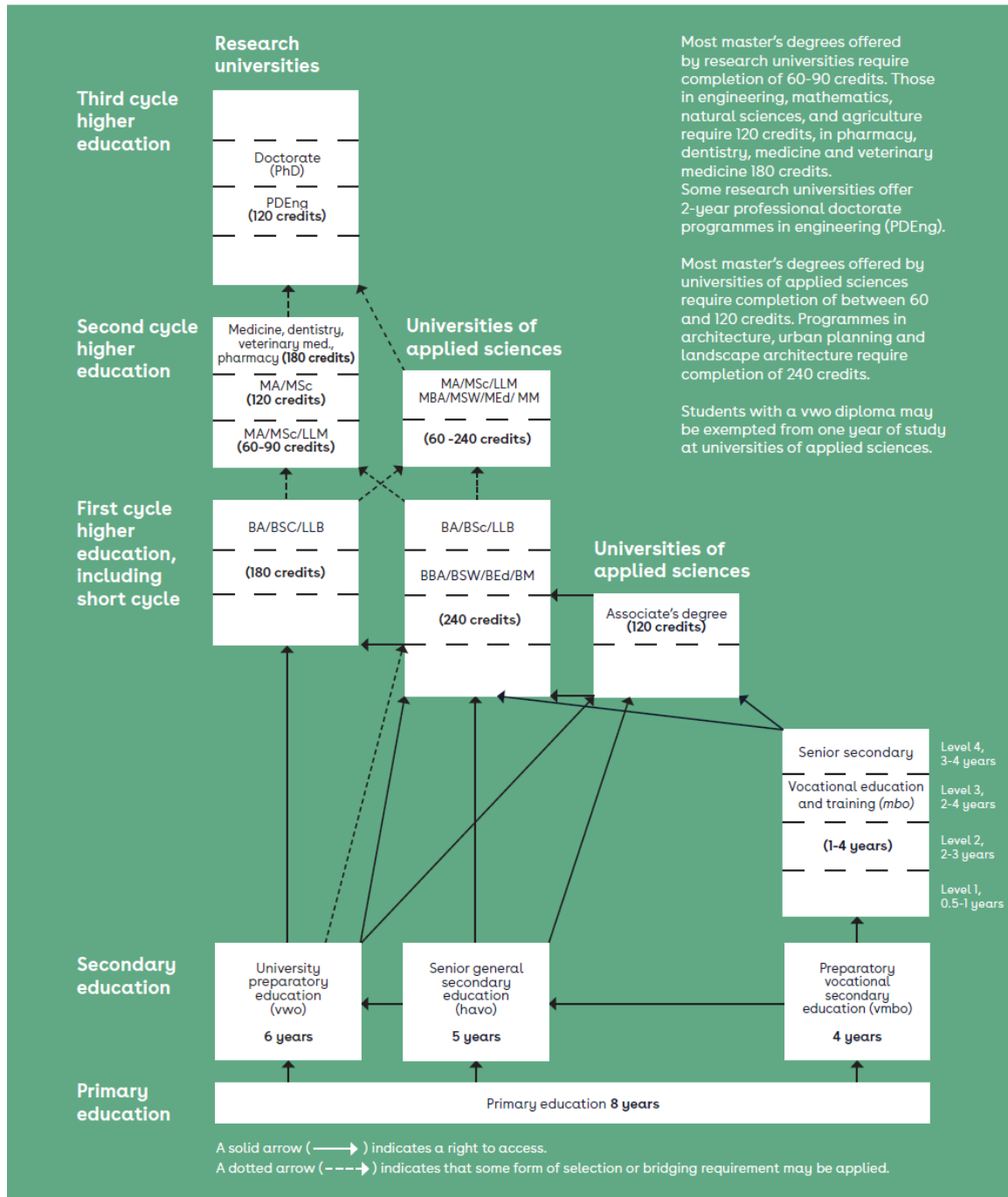


Illustration 3: The Dutch education system



4. Qualifications frameworks

The implementation of a common degree structure brought about a need to provide insight into the comparability of qualifications. How does one degree programme compare to another? When can students from one degree programme transfer to another?

A qualifications framework is a schematic overview of the exit levels that can be achieved by pupils, students and other learners. We have made a distinction between qualifications frameworks at European level and at national level.

4.1. European qualifications frameworks

- **Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)**

The *Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)* was adopted during the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005. It covers the qualifications that fall within the scope of higher education: first cycle (Bachelor's degree), second cycle (Master's degree), third cycle (Doctorate), as well as the short cycle (Associate degree). These qualifications are described on the basis of generic learning outcomes and the number of ECTS credits linked to the qualifications (except for the third cycle).

Here is an example to illustrate this. A student who has earned a Bachelor's degree has demonstrated that he or she possesses skills including the following:

- [student has] demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon [their] general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
- [student is able to] communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- etc.

The QF-EHEA is limited to higher education. It soon became clear that it was important to set out the qualifications of the complete education cycle in a framework. After all, without a description of the other levels, there would be many unanswered questions about the transfer of learners from one level or type of education to another. This gave rise to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

- **European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning**

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning is based on a so-called 'Recommendation of the European Council and the European Parliament'. It was adopted in 2008 and now serves as the benchmark at European level.

It spans all levels of education, from primary education to higher education. The EQF distinguishes between eight levels, the last four of which (5, 6, 7 and 8) correspond to the levels in the QF-EHEA, including the short cycle.



4.2. Qualifications frameworks for fields of study

Both national and international qualifications frameworks have also been developed at field of study level. Authoritative international reference frameworks have been developed by international groups of experts in the field under the TUNING initiative. TUNING Educational Structures in Europe was initially launched as a project in 2000 and has evolved into an approach for the redesign and development of curricula for the implementation of student-centred learning. The basic principles of the QF-EHEA and the EQF have been combined in the most recent TUNING project 'Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe' (CALOHEE). The TUNING projects are supported by the European Commission.

National reference frameworks also exist. The so-called 'Benchmark Statements', developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom are a good example. They are similar to the national study programme profiles used in higher professional education in the Netherlands.

4.3. Qualifications frameworks at national level

During the 2005 Ministerial Conference, the education ministers of the Bologna countries not only adopted the QF-EHEA, but also made a commitment to develop a national qualifications framework (NQF) for their own country.

The NQFs show the educational qualifications that exist in a certain country. To facilitate international comparison, the qualifications in an NQF are compared with the EQF. The individual countries are free to determine how many levels they use to describe their national education system, provided that a translation to the 8 EQF levels is demonstrated.

The development and adoption of an NQF is usually a lengthy process, as numerous stakeholders need to agree on the content. The national adoption of the NQF takes place following a review by an international team of experts. The process has now been completed or at least initiated by most of the Bologna countries.

4.4. The status in the Netherlands: the NLQF

The Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) was adopted in 2011. All qualifications regulated by the government have been classified at an NLQF level. To facilitate comparison of the NLQF with the EQF, it was decided to work with eight levels in the NLQF.

The image below provides a schematic overview of the qualifications in the NLQF. Education and training providers in the private sector have also been able to obtain classification since 2012. The NLQF National Coordination Point is responsible for classification.

Schematisch overzicht generieke inschaling in NLQF en EQF van door de overheid geregeleerde kwalificaties.

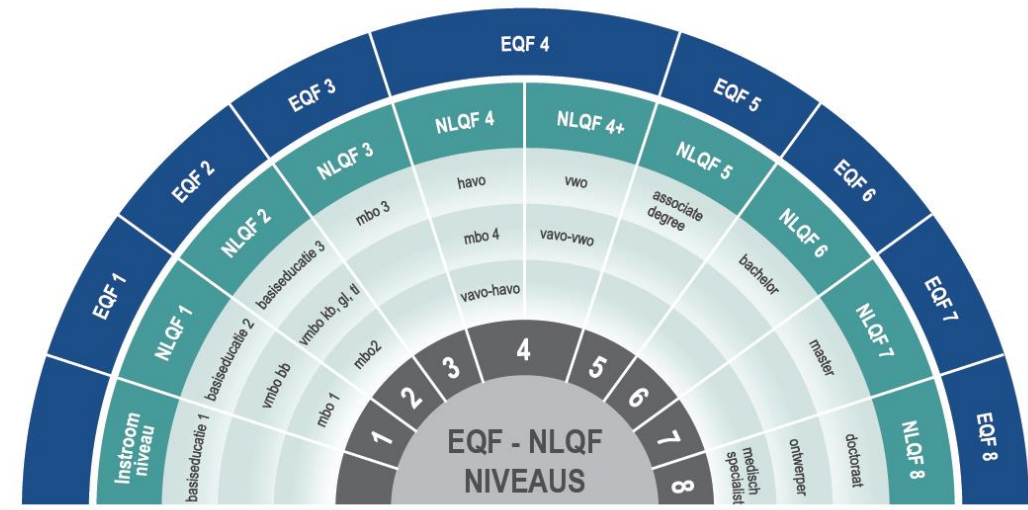


Illustration 4: The Dutch NLQF

4.5. The purpose of qualifications frameworks

A qualifications framework enables comparison of qualification levels. It offers insight into the professional and intellectual level of a person with completed qualifications. This makes it easier to make the right choice for and gain admission to an advanced study programme, irrespective of whether the qualifications have been awarded by a public or private-sector education provider. For instance, based on the Dutch NLQF, the exit level of a person who has completed a secretarial course at a recognised MBO institute (VET college) can be compared with the professional and intellectual ability of a person who has completed a secretarial course offered by a private-sector provider.

By linking the national qualifications framework to the EQF, qualifications from all European countries can be compared with each other. It enables a person who has completed a Dutch secretarial course to show in Spain at what NLQF and EQF level they are qualified. It also works vice versa. A person who has completed an ICT study programme in Estonia can, based on Estonia's NQF and the EQF, show what their qualification is worth in the Netherlands. This increases job opportunities for workers on the European labour market and helps employers find qualified staff outside their own country.



5. The tools in the Bologna Process

How do you create a higher education area? In addition to implementing the cycles and designing qualifications frameworks, there are various tools to facilitate intra-European mobility. The two central tools in the Bologna Process are the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement (DS).

5.1. ECTS

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, abbreviated to ECTS, is a system aimed at organising education in a student-centred manner, increasing the transparency of the higher education programmes offered and promoting student mobility between countries.

ECTS is a system that is designed to:

- develop and support the provision of higher education programmes focusing on student-centred learning;
- describe higher education in a more transparent manner by defining the learning outcomes of study programmes as a whole and the learning units that make up the study programme;
- make it easier for students to study at different locations (in their own country and abroad) and to have their ECTS credits recognised.

The first building blocks for ECTS were laid in 1989 under the European mobility programme Erasmus, which was launched in 1987. It soon became clear that a more uniform structure for European higher education would boost student and (teaching) staff mobility. ECTS therefore focused initially on streamlining student and (teaching) staff exchange programmes.

When the Bologna Process was launched in 1999, ECTS had already become so widely known that the implementation of the system was declared one of the key objectives. The application of ECTS is important for the quality of education. The system is explained in detail in the [ECTS Users' Guide](#).

5.2. ECTS components

5.2.1. ECTS credits

ECTS credits are based on the student's workload and learning outcomes achieved. A total of 60 ECTS credits are awarded for a full-time academic year: one ECTS credit represents a workload of 25 to 30 hours. The term 'European Credit' (EC), which is frequently used in the Netherlands, is not used in ECTS. The term 'EC' will therefore not be recognised in many countries. The term 'ECTS credit' should preferably be used

It is laid down in the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek - WHW) that an academic year comprises 1,680 hours; one ECTS credit therefore represents a workload of 28 hours in the Netherlands. In a number of



Bologna countries, just as in the Netherlands, the workload corresponding to one ECTS credit has been laid down at national level. It is not 28 hours in all countries. In Austria and Italy, for instance, one ECTS credit represents a study load of 25 hours, 27 hours in Finland and 30 hours in Hungary and in Germany. In some Bologna countries, no national agreements exist; instead, it has been left to the individual higher education institutions to determine the workload in hours for one ECTS credit.

ECTS is not used in the United Kingdom; the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) is used instead. This system is based on 120 credits for a full-time academic year. In theory, one ECTS credit therefore is equal to 2 CATS credits. However, this is different in practice, as one CATS credit only represents a workload of 10 hours.

The majority of non-European countries use credits, but they are usually based on contact hours rather than on workload. This makes it difficult to compare and convert credits.

5.2.2. ECTS Course Catalogue

The ECTS Course Catalogue contains the total range of study programmes offered by a higher education institution. It provides information at three different levels:

- information on the institution;
- information on all study programmes offered by an institution;
- information on all the individual learning units that make up the study programmes.

The catalogue must be available online and therefore forms an important tool for informing national and international students about the study programmes offered by an institution. It is also an important source of information for study advisors of secondary schools, enrolled students, future employers of former students and other parties concerned.

The ECTS Users' Guide contains detailed guidelines on the information that should be included in the ECTS Course Catalogue. In addition, a brochure is available, in which the European guideline has been translated to the Dutch higher education situation. Two points are particularly important, which we will explain here.

1. Access to information

The ECTS Course Catalogue should be published on an institution's website so that it can be viewed by the public. Institutions often opt to publish only general information and information on study programmes online, whereas information on learning units is posted on a section of the website that is not accessible to the public. However, as part of the Bologna Process, agreements have been made about the transparency of information on the study programmes offered. This means that information on units of study should also be accessible to the public.

2. Language

The information in the ECTS Course Catalogue should be provided in a widely spoken language. This means that a Dutch higher education institution should make the information



available not only in Dutch, but also in English. This applies to general information on the institution, as well information on study programmes and learning units.

This may give rise to discussion, because not everyone believes that it is worthwhile making available information in English on Dutch-taught study programmes. However, the ECTS Course Catalogue is intended not only as a source of information for (prospective) students, but for a wider target audience. In compliance with the Bologna agreements on transparency in higher education, information should therefore also be provided in English.

5.2.3. ECTS Grading Table

The ECTS Grading Table forms an integral part of ECTS. An ECTS Grading Table provides an overview of the statistical distribution of passing grades. These are calculated on the basis of the grades achieved by students in a certain field of study in a certain period.

The purpose of the ECTS Grading Table is to provide insight into the grading culture of a country, an institution or a study programme. It is an important tool for the Netherlands because the Netherlands has a conservative grading culture.

In the Netherlands grades are awarded on a scale of 1 to 10, which is frequently used to express the following:

10	excellent
9	very good
8	good
7	very satisfactory
6	satisfactory
5	almost satisfactory
4	unsatisfactory
3	very unsatisfactory
2	poor
1	very poor

However, the table does not show how often these grades are awarded. According to statistical analyses, grades 1 and 2 as well as 9 and 10 are rarely awarded. This indicates that, in the Netherlands, we actually only use a limited number of the grades. This becomes clear when an institution creates ECTS Grading Tables. An ECTS Grading Table indicates the percentage of a certain group of students who have been awarded a certain passing grade. For example:

The following is an illustrative example of a grading table:

Grades used in institution (from highest to lowest passing grade)*	Number of passing grades awarded to the reference group	Percentage of each grade with respect to the total passing grades awarded	Cumulative percentage of passing grades awarded
10	50	5%	5%
9	100	10%	15%
8	350	35%	50%
7	300	30%	80%
6	200	20%	100%
Total:	1,000	100%	

Illustration 5: Example of an ECTS Grading Table.

Application

The ECTS Grading Table is a tool that not only enables students to show the value of their grades, it also enables institutions to convert the grades students have been awarded at another institution into grades of their home institution in a substantiated manner.

The example below shows that a student who has achieved grade 12 during a study period at a French university, should be awarded grade 27 at his home institution in Italy.

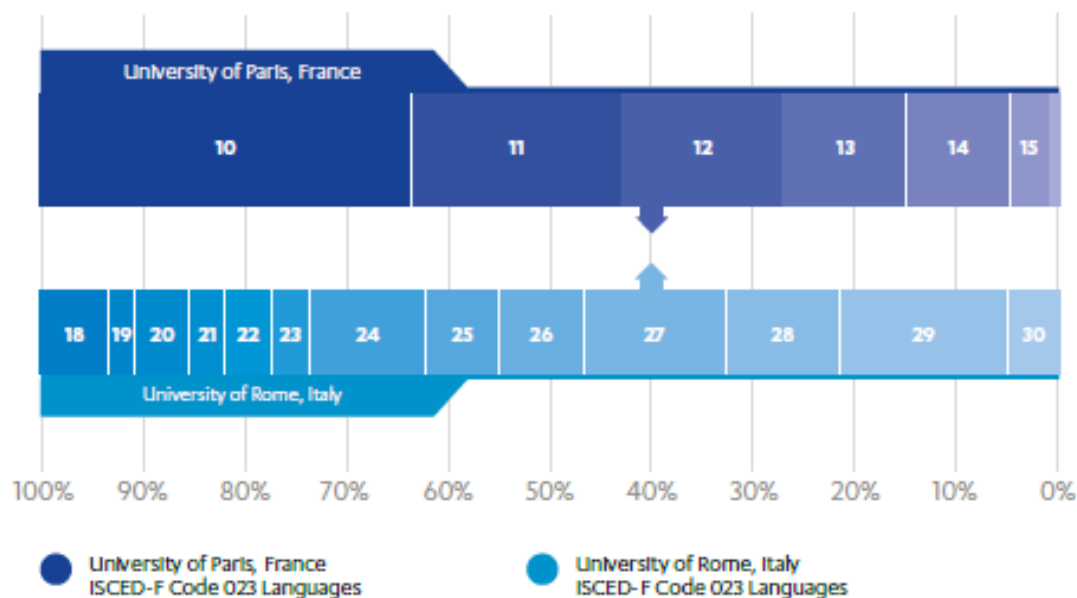


Illustration 6: Example of using conversion based on two Grading Tables.

To be able to make such a comparison, both partner institutions that exchange students must have drawn up ECTS Grading Tables.



Egracons

The Egracons project has developed a web-based tool for grade conversion. Institutions can upload their Grading Tables and use the Egracons tool to perform the conversion.

5.3. ECTS and ECVET

ECTS was developed for and is used in the higher education sector. ECVET was developed for the vocational education and training sector (VET). ECVET is the abbreviation of European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training. It was launched in 2009 as a European system for the recognition of academic achievements attained in vocational education, including Dutch *middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (MBO). The implementation of ECVET was supported by the European Commission.

In 2020, the European Commission decided to withdraw its recommendation to implement ECVET in European Vocation Education and Training. As a result, ECVET is expected to largely disappear. The instruments that have been developed in the framework of ECVET to facilitate the international exchange of students for study periods or traineeships will continue to be used in the Erasmus+ programme. The Recommendation that formed the basis of the EC decision can be found [here](#).

The second tool in the Bologna Process is the Diploma Supplement. The education ministers of the Bologna countries have agreed that graduates will not only receive a diploma but also a Diploma Supplement (DS). This is an additional document issued to contextualise the diploma.

The European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES developed a Diploma Supplement template. According to the template, a Diploma Supplement is made up of eight sections, each consisting of a number of subsections. Although institutions may design their own DS, they must adhere to the order, formulation and corresponding numbering of the sections and subsections. The 'fixed' order of the sections and subsections is important in making it as easy as possible for users to compare the diploma supplements of various graduates. The DS should be issued automatically and free of charge.

The DS is enshrined in the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW). Under the WHW, all higher education institutions are required to issue a diploma supplement to graduates, in addition to a diploma.



6. Quality assurance

One of the objectives of the Bologna Process is to improve and ensure the quality of higher education in the EHEA. In addition to the more technical steps, such as the harmonisation of the degree structures and the drawing up qualifications frameworks, a common framework for quality assurance in higher education is essential.

When the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, many of the participating countries did not yet have a quality assurance system for higher education. Quality assurance featured on the European agenda for the first time in 2003. In the Berlin Communiqué, the education ministers of the Bologna countries concurred that the primary responsibility for the quality of education lies with the institutions. Under national legislation a minister may exercise influence on how higher education institutions fulfil that responsibility.

6.1. Guidelines within the framework of the Bologna Process

The 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance' (ESG) were adopted during the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005. The European agreements on the manner in which higher education institutions should organise quality assurance are laid down in this document. It also contains guidelines for external quality assurance performed by national and international quality assurance agencies, such as the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). These guidelines were updated in 2015.

The 'European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education' (EQAR) was established in 2008. Quality assurance agencies that according to independent experts comply with the ESG requirements are listed in the register.

The next step was taken in 2015 during the Yerevan Ministerial Conference, when the 'European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA' was adopted. This European approach underlines the importance of intensive cooperation between higher education institutions by developing and offering joint programmes in Europe. The most comprehensive form of a joint programme leads to a joint diploma, which is also leads to a joint degree. The 'European Approach' facilitates the accreditation of joint programmes at European level.

6.2. National differences

Despite the agreements made at European level, there are differences between the Bologna countries in the area of quality assurance. In many European countries, accreditation is performed at the level of the higher education institution as a whole.² A higher education institution that is accredited in the above countries is responsible for the quality of the study programmes offered. Unlike in the Netherlands, no accreditations are performed at study programme level, for example

² Countries with institutional accreditation: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Luxemburg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.



Illustration 7: The importance of quality assurance

6.3. The situation in the Netherlands

Based on the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance', the NVAO developed the Dutch quality frameworks, which are updated regularly. The 2018 framework currently applies. The 'Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands 2018' distinguishes between the accreditation of new and existing study programmes.

When a higher education institution intends to launch a new study programme, it must be accredited beforehand. This is based on an initial accreditation assessment (*toets nieuwe opleiding - TNO*). Higher education institutions will only receive funding after receiving a positive decision on the initial accreditation assessment. A study programme accreditation must be renewed every six years.

Apart from study programme accreditations, higher education institutions can take part in an institutional audit (*instellingstoets kwaliteitszorg - ITK*) since 2011. This is a periodic, external independent assessment of an institution's internal quality assurance. Participation in the institutional audit is not obligatory, but an institution that has received a positive assessment for the audit can benefit from this when having individual study programmes accredited. Most higher education institutions therefore endeavour to complete an institutional audit.

NVAO is the organisation that performs both the accreditation of study programmes and the institutional audit.



7. Recognition

In promoting international mobility, irrespective of whether this involves exchange, transfer to another degree programme or meeting labour market needs, it is important that countries recognise each other's diplomas. The recognition of qualifications obtained abroad is an important aim within the European Higher Education Area. The EHEA can only function as an open education area if qualifications obtained are assessed and recognised in a transparent and reliable manner. How does this process work? What is the current status? Once again, this all began with a convention: The Lisbon Recognition Convention.

7.1. Lisbon Recognition Convention

The adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997 marked an important step towards improving the recognition of qualifications. It is an international legal framework that was drafted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and has meanwhile been signed and ratified by almost all European countries and a number of other countries, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The convention states that a diploma that provides admission to higher education in one of the signatory countries, also provides admission to higher education in the other countries. The same conditions apply to all prospective students. Admission may be refused only if a substantial difference can be demonstrated.

The convention also aims to improve access to the international labour market. Workers holding a qualification that enables them to carry out a certain profession in their own country should also be able to do so with this qualification in other countries.

7.2. Automatic recognition of learning outcomes

The principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention have been elaborated in the EU *Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning abroad*, which was adopted in 2018.

This document states that a student who has completed a study programme or part of a study programme elsewhere (e.g. with another education institution in their own country or abroad) should 'automatically' be admitted to subsequent education. The term 'automatic' may lead to some confusion. It does not mean that a higher education institution is always obliged to admit students to a programme of further study on the basis of diplomas or certificates that they have obtained. A higher education institution is permitted to set additional demands and/or selection criteria. But this is only allowed when there are substantial differences between the admission requirements of a programme and the prior education of a student.



7.3. ENIC/NARIC

There are two networks that play an important role in the recognition of diplomas: the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) Network. They were founded in the 1980s and 1990s. All Bologna countries have one or more organisations that belong to these networks. In the Netherlands, the ENIC-NARIC forms part of Nuffic.

The purpose of the networks is to provide information on:

- the recognition of foreign diplomas and other qualifications;
- the education system in their own country and in other countries;
- opportunities for studying abroad.

The Benelux education ministers affirmed the agreements in the Lisbon Recognition Convention by making further agreements on the mutual automatic recognition of diplomas. In 2015 these were the Bachelor and Master degrees; in 2018 it was decided to add the Associate degree and Doctorate.



8. Relationship with the Erasmus Programme

There is no formal link between the Bologna Process and the Erasmus Programme. Yet the two are closely connected. How exactly?

8.1. The Erasmus Programme

The Erasmus Programme has already been mentioned in earlier chapters. It is the most important EU funding programme aimed at supporting education, training, youth and sport. Erasmus focuses on all sectors of education and the youth sector. It was established in 1987 to promote collaboration between higher education institutions in Europe and student and (teaching) staff exchange. Collaboration programmes also existed for other forms of education, such as primary, vocational and adult education. These programmes were named Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, and Grundtvig. Later, all these programmes were combined into one programme, the Lifelong Learning Programme. This became the Erasmus+ Programme in 2014.

The Erasmus+ Programme offers all kinds of people the opportunity to acquire or share knowledge and experience in organisations and institutions in various countries. This may involve the exchange of pupils, students, (teaching) staff and adult learners between education institutions in Europe and beyond. The programme also supports traineeships abroad. Furthermore, Erasmus+ offers opportunities to set up international cooperation projects between education institutions, in which businesses and governments may also be involved. These projects may focus on innovation, or on collective learning, or sharing experiences and best practices. Furthermore, Erasmus+ encourages young people to become involved in youth policy at local, national and international level.

8.2. Erasmus Charter for Higher Education

Although there is no formal link between the Bologna Process and the Erasmus Programme, the Bologna Process uses and builds on the knowledge and experience acquired under the Erasmus Programme. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), for example, is one of the Erasmus programme's major achievements and now also one of the corner stones of the Bologna Process.

When the Erasmus+ programme was launched (2014-2020), the connection between the Bologna Process and the Erasmus Programme was reinforced as a result of the implementation of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). The award of an ECHE was a pre-requisite for all higher education institutions that wanted to participate in the Erasmus+ Programme. By signing the ECHE, higher education institutions made a commitment to implement the Bologna tools, such as ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. This partly ensured that the Bologna Process would not be carried out only at governmental level. The institutions were assigned an important task in implementing the Bologna Process at the level of the institutions, and hence at student and (teaching) staff level.

At the start of the current Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), all higher education institutions that wanted to participate in the programme had to re-apply for an ECHE.



8.3. New elements within the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027)

At the start of the new Erasmus+ programme, it became clear that the link between the programme and the Bologna Process was as strong as ever. Through the Erasmus+ programme, the European Commission stimulates and supports the goals of the Bologna Process and encourages higher education institutions to put serious effort into realizing these goals.

The programme has a number of priorities for the period 2021-2027 that funded activities have to contribute to: inclusion & diversity, digitalisation, and 'Green Erasmus+' (sustainability, environment and climate). By signing the ECHE, higher education institutions have promised to contribute to these priorities.

The current Erasmus+ programme also has a substantial budget to support the development of so-called European Universities. After this idea was launched by the French President Macron in 2017, it was embraced at European level. Since then several collaboration proposals of universities and universities of applied sciences have been granted Erasmus funding.

Brexit, Great Britain leaving that EU, has had serious consequences for European collaboration in higher education. The United Kingdom no longer takes part in the Erasmus+ programme. The international mobility to and from the UK and the cooperation with British higher education institutions has as a result decreased. The UK launched its own Turing Scheme to provide funding for international opportunities in education and training across the world. However, this programme only provides support for UK organisations and students.



9. The future of the Bologna Process

Between 1988 and 2023, numerous steps have been taken in implementing the Bologna Process and in structuring a European Higher Education Area. What will the next decade look like? In November 2020, the education ministers of the countries participating in the Bologna Process had another conference in Rome. The Rome communiqué stated that priority would be given to inclusion, digitalisation, innovation, and sustainability.

Higher education in the European Higher Education Area must become more accessible to everyone, irrespective of religion, gender, skin colour, socio-economic background or disability. The higher education sector is also expected to demonstrate innovative capacity, so that it can continue to contribute to solving the global social challenges in the next decade. To that end, the Sustainable Development Goals will serve as a reference framework and a source of inspiration.

The digitalisation process in higher education will have far-reaching consequences. Partly as a consequence of the Covid 19 pandemic, the implementation of online and blended education has had a tremendous boost, not only locally, but especially also internationally. It is as yet unclear what the long-term effects of this will be. Will international student mobility return to its former level? What shifts will we see in international student mobility? And what are the consequences for the international mobility of teaching staff and researchers?

Other important developments are:

- The European Student Card initiative (ESCi), consisting of the introduction of the European Student Card and the Erasmus+ app, as well as Erasmus without Paper (EWP). EWP obligates higher education institutions to digitalize their entire Erasmus+ administrations by connecting it to the EWP-network, so that there can be an exchange of data at European level.
- The intention to establish (a limited number of) European Universities – the so-called European Universities initiative. The ambition is that by 2024 there will be 60 European Universities, encompassing over 500 higher education institutions. This comes down to a little over 10% of the total number of higher education institutions in Europe.
- The increasing attention for joint (international) study programmes. Higher education institutions have already been active in developing and offering Joint and Double Degree Programmes. But the emphasis is now on the development of European Degree Programmes.
- The development of micro-credentials and the international guidelines that are being developed on this topic.

A number of current themes in the Netherlands are also relevant, such as the increasing number of higher education programmes taught in English and the influx of international students. Despite public criticism on a number of developments, the Dutch education minister has reiterated the value of internationalisation for students, higher education institutions and the Dutch knowledge economy, as well as the involvement of the Netherlands in the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area.



10. Sources and further reading

Chapter 2:

- Illustration 1: Source: <http://www.ehea.info/>
- European Higher Education Area official website: <http://www.ehea.info/>
- Overview of communiqués on the Ministerial Conferences: <http://www.ehea.info/pid34363/ministerial-declarations-and-communicues.html>.
- Eurydice rapport 2020: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c90aaf32-4fce-11eb-b59f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-183354043>
- For the latest TRENDS & ESU reports, see: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/757:trends2018-learning-and-teaching-in-the-european-higher-education-area.html> and [Bologna With Student Eyes 2020 - European Students' Union \(esu-online.org\)](http://www.esu-online.org).

Chapter 3:

- Illustration 2: Source: <http://www.ehea.info/index.php>.
- Illustration 3: Source: Nuffic.
- Dutch regulation on titles in higher education: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0018486/2018-12-04>

Chapter 4:

- Illustration 4: Source: www.nlqf.nl.
- QF-EHEA: http://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/WG_Frameworks_qualification/85/2/Framework_qualificationsforEHEA-May2005_587852.pdf
- EQF: http://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Framework_for_qualifications/69/0/EQF-LLL2008_596690.pdf
- NLQF: www.nlqf.nl. Tip! Watch the short informative video clip that you can find here!

Chapter 5:

- Illustration 5: Source: ECTS Users' Guide.
- Illustration 6: Source: ECTS Users' Guide.
- ECTS Users' Guide: [ECTS User's Guide 2015 \(ehea.info\)](http://www.ehea.info/ECTS%20User's%20Guide%202015)
- TUNING: <http://tuningacademy.org/reference-points>
- TUNING project 'Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe' (CALOHEE): <https://www.calohee.eu>
- UK Benchmark statements: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmarkstatements>
- National study programme profile: <https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/profielenbank>
- Brochure on the implementation of the ECTS Course Catalogue in the Netherlands: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/sites/default/files/assets/Downloads/2017/ho/FABOTO/ect%20course%20catalogue%20in%20practice.pdf>
- Egracons: <http://egracons.eu>
- Instruction for drafting the DS for Dutch higher education institutions. This is published on the [website](#) of the Dutch NA Erasmus+.



Chapter 6:

- Illustration 7: source: www.neth-er.eu.
- NVAO Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands:
https://www.nvao.net/files/attachments/.89/Beoordelingskader_accreditatiestelsel_hoger_onderwijs_Nederland_2018.pdf

Chapter 7:

- The [EAR HEI Manual](#) is a practical handbook for admissions officers. The manual explains the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and is illustrated with practical examples.
- You can find descriptions of the education systems of other countries, including a comparison with the Dutch level, on the [Nuffic website](#). The website also provides information on applying for diploma recognition for education institutions.
- You can find information on other European and NARIC centres on www.enic-naric.net.

Chapter 8:

- The European Commission's website on the Erasmus+ Programme:
https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus_en.
- The Dutch National Agency Erasmus+: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/>.

Chapter 9:

- European Universities initiative: https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en
- Erasmus Student card Initiative: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/european-student-card-initiative>
- Digital Action plan: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>
- European Digital Credentials for Learning: [European Digital Credentials for Learning | Europass](#)
- Micro-credentials: <https://microcredentials.eu/>
- Further questions: Dutch team of Bologna Experts: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/>

Any further questions? Please contact José Ravenstein at the Dutch NA Erasmus+ (jrvstein@erasmusplus.nl).