

Statement of the Coimbra Group of Universities on the Bologna Process

Following the debate at the High-Level Seminar “Lifelong Learning and Employability” on 24 January 2018 in Brussels, the Executive Board of the Coimbra Group initiated a discussion on the Bologna Process and current developments in higher education, notably in European Union policies. After consultation with the Rectors’ Advisory Group and Rectors at the thirty-nine member universities, the Executive Board offers the following statement on the occasion of the forthcoming EHEA2018, the Ministerial Conference of Ministers of Education of the forty-eight countries participating in the Bologna Process, to take place in Paris on 24-25 May this year.

The Coimbra Group would like to reiterate its continued support to the Bologna Process, which we see as an important framework for bringing European education systems closer together and offering improved conditions for the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as well as for student mobility and educational collaboration across borders. In Higher Education, there is no match in history to this immense shared effort, initiated by the signing of the Bologna Declaration by 29 Ministers of Education in June 1999. The long term, systematic progress of the Bologna Process has brought momentous improvements to the EHEA through the years and strengthened the role of European higher education globally. We are concerned that these achievements be completed and consolidated, and that the process continues to strive for a voluntary convergence and for improved compatibility between educational structures in the EHEA. There remain obstacles for a uniform recognition of qualifications by employers as well as for the development of joint degrees, international curricula and student mobility. We firmly believe that the efforts invested in well-structured, supported and recognised mobility and joint activities, such as joint programmes, need to be continued and strengthened to assure the competitiveness and further internationalisation of European higher education institutions. The Coimbra Group believes that this requires a continuation of the process beyond 2020. We would especially like to emphasize the following points:

1. The Coimbra Group believes that the success of the Bologna Process depends on the strongest possible inclusion of the European institutions of higher learning, something that characterised the early years of the Process. The Coimbra Group is concerned that the crucial link between public authorities and institutions of higher learning has lessened over the past years, and that in the future the Bologna Process risks becoming increasingly distant to current trends and concerns at the institutions of higher learning. As amply documented in the *Bologna Process Implementation Report*, issues at the heart of the Bologna Process are subject to continuous improvement and innovation at institutional, national and European level. As an example, let us just mention the increase in institutional or European programmes, efforts to develop digital competences and digital means of enhancing the learning experience and access to higher education. There is a risk that a gap might appear between the systematic, but by nature slow, progress of the Bologna Process and such rapid innovations at institutional and European programme levels.
2. The involvement of the higher education institutions in the process is crucial. The success of the process hinges on the commitment of both national political authorities and the higher education institutions to implement the goals of the Bologna Process and working together to promote the modernisation of higher education. Universities are autonomous degree-awarding bodies (degrees are not awarded by the State). This autonomy means that Universities are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of their qualifications. The Coimbra Group recommends a strengthening of the links between institutions of higher learning and the Bologna Process through closer involvement of universities, international university networks and other non-governmental stakeholders.
3. The three-cycle system, the use of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, the national qualifications frameworks and Quality Assurance frameworks have all been implemented by signatory states. European education programmes – Erasmus - Socrates – LLP - Erasmus+ - have provided a framework and financial support to the implementation of Bologna Process goals. While participation in the Bologna Process requires each country to establish a national framework for higher education qualifications, it is at the institutional level where quality assurance is implemented and it is ultimately here that the core activities of the Bologna Process take place. The Coimbra Group would like to direct the attention to the long-term, ground-breaking work done by university communities and professionals in the context of university networks on developing credit frameworks, qualification descriptors, improved conditions for mobility, recognition, dual and multiple degree programmes, etc. We suggest that a key priority should be to remove the barriers to international degree cooperation that remain to this day. Moreover, the recent shift of focus in the Bologna Process towards curricula and teaching and learning should take into account the autonomy of

institutions. The development and transformation of learning and teaching will have to be moved forward primarily by the higher education institutions and their students and staff, in collaboration with EHEA governments and European institutions in full respect of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and in close collaboration with the relevant external stakeholders.

4. Issues related to (national) evaluation and accreditation still raise obstacles to joint degrees, even though the *European Standards and Guidelines* and, in particular, the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* pave the way to smoother accreditation processes. Moreover, the interaction between the European and the national level gives rise to some issues of debate. European programmes, Erasmus+ in particular, are instrumental in encouraging and supporting institutional processes and activities aimed at reaching Bologna Process goals: student/academic exchanges, academic recognition, quality assurance, student services, etc. As already signalled in the Coimbra Group Position Paper on Erasmus+ (2017), the large-scale devolution of project selection to national level raises serious concerns regarding the EHEA-wide relevance and impact, notably regarding equal opportunities for all submitted projects and the equal treatment of crosscutting issues. Pan-European networks of universities such as the Coimbra Group have Europe-wide first-hand experience and so are able to identify such issues, which is why we consider it our duty to raise this issue again and to propose a more centralised selection of projects in programmes aimed at the implementation of the Bologna Process.
5. The Coimbra Group would like to see a considerable strengthening of the work on the third (doctoral) cycle, especially building on and expanding the support from the doctoral communities and groups within the existing university networks. We strongly support further work on the third cycle, whereby European-wide doctoral communities could become one of the defining characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, and a further basis of strength for the European Research Area. Holders of doctoral degrees are able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. They have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems. Therefore, doctoral students and early career researchers with higher degrees have an important role in stimulating innovation and economic growth across the European Research Area. The quality of third cycle provision will be enhanced by the sharing of best and innovative practice, increased mobility of doctoral candidates among Universities and developing jointly taught modules / jointly supervised / inter-disciplinary doctoral study programmes.
6. Finally, the Coimbra Group would like to express its unwavering support to the full inclusion of all universities currently engaged in the EHEA in the next steps of the Bologna Process. Particularly, we find the full and continued participation of universities in the United Kingdom in the further development of the Bologna Process indispensable for progress towards a well-functioning EHEA characterised by excellent research and education, institutional collaboration and high levels of mobility of researchers and students. The Coimbra Group has consistently advocated that programmes and other types of European collaboration – be it in research, education or any other kind of collaboration involving universities – have the potential to facilitate the highest possible degree of ‘academic excellence without borders’ to the benefit of society and of the European Higher Education Area.
7. The Coimbra Group would welcome the opportunity to (1) engage with the European Commission and discuss our ideas in more detail and (2) discuss a mechanism by which the collective expertise of its thirty-nine members could help to stimulate practical implementation alongside the political development of the Bologna Process.

The document was adopted by the Executive Board of the Coimbra Group on 23 April 2018

The Coimbra Group is a European university network, which, since 1985, has promoted higher education and research cooperation. The Coimbra Group consists of thirty-nine comprehensive, long-established research universities from across Europe. It comprises key institutions for promoting staff and student mobility and fostering international mobility of doctoral candidates and early-stage researchers. It brings together members from all European regions. It has, therefore, a particular awareness of regional differences and the varying impact of economic and financial instability on the different higher education and research systems. The Coimbra Group members strongly emphasise the importance of fundamental and blue-sky research and see the Humanities and Social Sciences as equal and integral parts not only of their teaching and research portfolio, but also of their contribution to society and to economic development. Moreover, the Coimbra Group and its member universities have a long-standing tradition of global collaboration with institutions of research and higher education in other world regions. www.coimbra-group.eu