PLA Laboratory: flexible learning paths – understanding the challenges of Higher Education Institutiotns

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Expectations and challenges of and for the universities are changing

- Attractiveness and accessibility of Higher Education for learners
- Relevance of HEIS for the regional development and social cohesion
- Competition between Universities and private sector to attract talents
- Retention of students, combatting dropouts, through positioning of the universities as a lifelong knowledge hubs, offering both long and short learning opportunities
- Economic priorities changing the HE landscape through a growing focus on skills

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- Erasmus+ co-funded, 2025-2027;
- Coordinated by EURASHE, in partnership with EUA, ESU and Algebra Bernays University (HR);
- Explores implementation of SCL and lifelong learning across the EHEA;
- Findings will feed into playbook (launch end of 2026/early 2027).

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Project Consortium

EURASHE
European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education

ESU
EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION

eua
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

ALGEBRA UNIVERSITY

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EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Employability and Social Cohesion

- Improving employability and promoting social cohesion by ensuring equal access to learning opportunities (Prague Communiqué, 2001).
- Recognition of prior learning and qualifications frameworks are as essential tools for making lifelong learning a reality (Berlin Communiqué, 2003)
- Qualifications frameworks facilitate permeability between formal and non-formal learning pathways. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009)

Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning

- Widening Participation for Equity and Growth: A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015)
- Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (Rome Communiqué, 2020)

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Lifelong Learning in the Bologna Process Today

"We commit to fostering flexible learning paths, properly delivered, quality assured, and recognised, including RPL and micro-credentials."

LLL

Tirana Ministerial Communiqué (2024)

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Challenges, Goals & Expectations

- Make Student-Centred Learning a reality for all students - Implementation of student-centred learning (SCL) still uneven across countries & institutions.

- **Foster flexible, quality-assured Lifelong Learning pathways by both institutional approach and national strategies - Lifelong learning (LLL) underdeveloped at system level (funding, strategies, recognition).**

- Provide and nurture a platform for dialogue on these topics for institutions, students and policymakers

- Expected impact: Providing know-how, mapping, validation and recommendations to inform BFUG & Ministers ahead of 2027 conference

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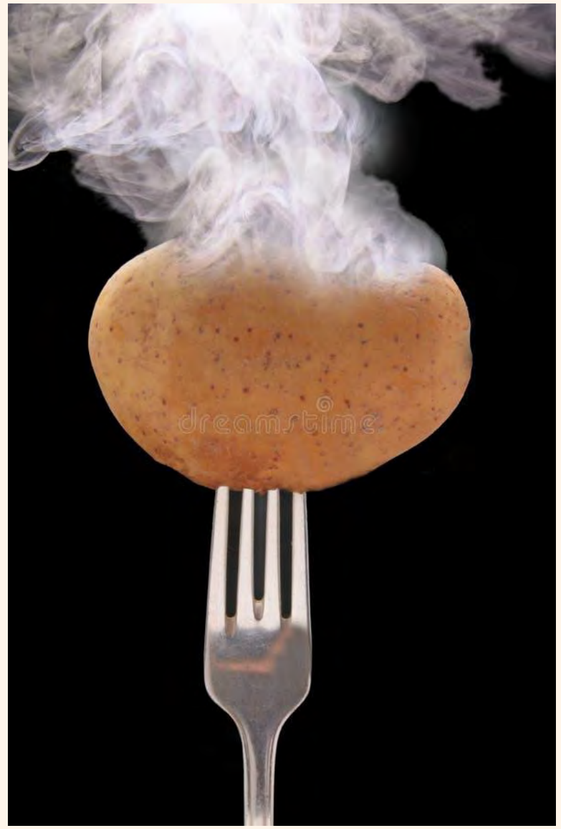
‘Flexibility’ is the wider desired frame, but who’s responsibility it is?

- Flexibility is becoming an overarching issue across the Bologna agenda.
- It cuts across recognition, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, social dimension, mobility and lifelong learning. In that sense, flexibility is not a niche topic: it is increasingly part of the future of learning in higher education.
- flexibility should not be treated as one isolated policy theme. It is increasingly a connecting topic across the EHEA architecture.



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Why alignment across TPGs matters?

Flexibility can move further when work on recognition, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance and social dimension is better aligned.

These topics are often discussed separately, but for learners they are part of one pathway experience.

Better alignment could help translate policy ambition into more usable pathways in practice.

HEI perspective is that fragmentation between policy themes can slow progress, even when all the right priorities are already on the table – guidance, funding and political relevance seem to be necessary

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Different languages of flexibility

Within institutions: flexibility of curriculum design, progression, delivery, assessment, and individual study paths, new microcredential frameworks

Within national systems: flexibility between VET, HE, adult learning and employment-related learning; this often depends on frameworks, rules and cooperation structures.

Across borders: flexibility in the Bologna context through recognition, mobility, RPL, micro-credentials and international comparability.

In reality, we often use the same word, “flexibility”, while referring to different levels of reality.

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Different learners, different flexibility needs

- Learners do not all need the same forms of flexibility.
- Needs may relate to entry, progression, pace, format, recognition, return to learning, work-based learning, mobility, or short learning opportunities.
- Institutions also respond to different missions, local contexts and learner groups

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Challenges for Higher Education Institutions

- **Stable funding:** flexible provision, short formats, guidance and recognition work often require funding models that are not yet stable or sufficiently supportive.
- **Staff capacity and profiles:** institutions need staff time, new professional profiles and staff development for RPL, guidance, learning outcomes, credit recognition and flexible delivery.
- **Quality assurance**: flexible pathways need internal and external QA that can accommodate different sizes, modes and routes without undermining trust.
- **Student guidance and support costs:** non-traditional learners often need stronger counselling, information and progression support, which creates additional institutional cost.
- **Reaching new learner profiles**: HEIs must attract adult learners, workers, returners and other non-usual full-degree learners with relevant and accessible offers.
- **Employer relevance:** lifelong learning has to be meaningful not only academically but also for employers, local economies and skills needs.

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The recognition question

- Flexible learning pathways only become meaningful if learning can be recognised in practice.
- HEIs may be open to flexibility, but recognition depends on legal room, trust, guidance and capacity.
- Learning outcomes are often central, but application still varies across systems and cases.
- ENIC/NARIC roles differ: advisory in some countries, more operational in others.

from the HEI perspective, flexibility is not only about creating pathways. It is also about whether systems can make fair and trusted recognition decisions.

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Enough talking

Lets peer exchange!

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45-minute PLA group work - scenarios

Case A — Recognition of prior learning
A learner with several years of relevant work experience seeks access to a higher education programme or exemption from part of the curriculum without holding a prior degree

Case B — VET or short-cycle progression
A learner coming from VET or short-cycle higher education seeks entry to a bachelor programme and recognition of previously achieved learning.

Case C — Study periods abroad
A learner returns from a mobility period abroad. The learning outcomes and workload appear compatible. Learner has acquired as well some extracurricular microcredentials and wish them to be recognised in the country of origin

Landscape: how is this issue handled in your system?

Collaboration: how do authorities/ENIC-NARICs work with HEIs in national setting?

Bottleneck: where does recognition become difficult?

Priority: what should be improved or shared?

Heading	What to report
Landscape	Who is responsible, and what is the ENIC/NARIC role?
Collaboration	How do authorities/ENIC-NARICs and HEIs work together?
Bottleneck	What is the biggest practical obstacle?
Priority	What should be improved or shared?

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