

UNESCO Higher Education Activity Report for the Bologna Follow-up Group Meeting

(April – November 2021)

This report provides an overview of UNESCO higher education activities since the last Bologna Follow-up Group Meeting in April 2021 and which are of relevance to the European Higher Education Area. The focus is on recognition, quality assurance and preparations for the 3rd World Higher Education Conference.

1. Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education

UNESCO launched a Drive to Ratify the higher education conventions in October 2021, with a particular focus on the [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#). The drive centres on increasing the visibility of the conventions, stronger engagement with Member States as well as capacity development.

In this context, a series of Higher Education Conversations have been initiated on issues of relevance to the conventions and the broader higher education agenda in the leadup to the 3rd World Conference on Higher Education. The first took place on 4 November, focusing on the global and regional conventions, and the second is scheduled for 7 December on the futures of higher education. A full list of topics and dates will be published on UNESCO's Higher Education website in the coming days.

On 11 November, in the framework of UNESCO's General Conference, Norway, Tunisia, the United Kingdom and UNESCO organized a side event to renew momentum around this global treaty and support Member States' efforts to both ratify and implement it. The event brought together Ministers and high-level experts from the States Parties – Norway, Nicaragua, Estonia, France and Romania – as well as Tunisia and the United Kingdom who were preparing to deposit their instruments of ratification. Close to 400 viewers also followed online.

On 19 November, Tunisia ratified the Global Convention, becoming the sixth State Party and first country from the Arab States. Five more countries have announced the deposit of their instruments in the coming weeks – Australia, Holy See, Lithuania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

At the same time, UNESCO launched a short survey with Member States to gather information on where they are the ratification process, the challenges faced and how UNESCO can better support them. This is complemented by widespread dissemination of the [Practical Guide to Recognition](#), primarily aimed at credential evaluators.

2. Regional Recognition Conventions

A [Conventions Portal](#) is now available on UNESCO's website, providing an overview of all recognition conventions, including their texts, information on ratification as well as links to key documents adopted by Committees and regional networks of national information centres.

The second monitoring report on the **Lisbon Recognition Convention** will be released in 2022, focusing on (a) the right to appeal, (b) information provision and (c) transnational education as well as (d) automatic recognition and (e) digital solutions which are not directly mentioned in the Convention, but repeatedly highlighted in declarations and other instruments. UNESCO and the Council of Europe, as the co-Secretariats to the Convention, are supporting the Bureau in the development of this report.

The next session of the Convention Committee is scheduled for November 2022 (tbc). The ENIC/NARIC networks in the European region have also started to develop workplans for the upcoming period, including a focus on strengthening cooperation with other UNESCO regions.

In Africa, the 2014 Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (**Addis Convention**), which entered into force two years ago, will see its first Convention Committee meeting on 9 and 10 December, hosted by the Government of Togo in Lomé. The Committee is expected to define the workplan for the implementation of the Convention for the next two years and lay the building blocks for initiating a network of national information centres in the region. On 19 November 2021, Zambia ratified the convention, bringing the total number of States Parties to 13.

The Committee of the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (the **Tokyo Convention**) convened virtually on 14 and 15 October 2021 to explore how to further the effective use of the Convention, including focusing more on recognition of non-traditional learning and micro-credentials. It also elected new officers, with China as President, Australia and Fiji as Vice Presidents and the Holy See as the Rapporteur. The plenary of the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC) was held in conjunction to discuss shared priorities and a common framework of good practice.

The 2019 Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (**Buenos Aires Convention**) is one State Party short of entering into force. Cuba deposited its instrument of ratification on 19 November, joining Peru and Grenada. UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), the Secretariat of the Convention, has developed an online course in four languages to support its implementation and is working towards a regional network of national information centres.

An International Conference of States will be held at UNESCO Headquarters on 1 and 2 February 2022 to adopt the revised text of the 1978 Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the **Arab States**. The new text is the result of a broad revision process which began in 2017 and culminated in its final endorsement at a regional expert group meeting on 17 June 2021. The Arab States are the last UNESCO region to adopt a “second generation” convention, reflecting developments in higher education in the region over the last five decades.

3. UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants

Building on the experiences of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), developed by the Council of Europe, UNESCO launched the [UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants \(UQP\)](#) as a global recognition tool for higher education qualifications and qualifications giving access to higher education. The passport is a key implementation mechanism for Article VII of the Global Convention and similar provisions in the regional recognition conventions.

The UQP tool allows for the evaluation and recognition of the qualifications of refugees and vulnerable migrants, even for cases where documentation is lacking, thus enabling their access to further studies and work. The UQP is currently being implemented in Zambia and Iraq, and UNESCO is working to expand the implementation of the tool into other regions and countries.

4. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

With growing internationalization and demand for higher education, UNESCO is expanding its work on quality assurance, with a focus on developing Member States' capacities to establish robust quality assurance agencies/mechanisms. Efforts are targeted towards developing countries, especially Africa.

With UNESCO’s support, national quality assurance agencies have been established in Cabo Verde, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger and Senegal, while the process is ongoing in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo. In October 2021, a new project was launched in six African countries, to enhance the capacity of higher education institutions to respond to the skill needs for national development by facilitating collaboration between higher education and the industry, enhancing labor market-oriented teaching and strengthening competence-based learning.

Assistance is also extended to other regions. In the Arab States, for example, UNESCO backstopped the development of a regional reference framework for the quality assurance of e-learning at higher education institutions in response to Covid-19, also benefitting from the European experience. At the global level, the Organization is working on an updated reference framework on the main challenges facing cross- border higher education and recommendations for improved use of a revised version of the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education.

5. 3rd World Higher Education Conference

The 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC 2022) will take place from 18 to 20 May 2022 in Barcelona, Spain, focusing on reinventing the role and place of higher learning for a sustainable future. WHEC 2022 is organized by UNESCO with the generous support of the Government of Spain, the regional Government of Catalonia, the City Hall and Regional authority of Barcelona in partnership with GUNi/ACP (Global University Network for Innovation/Catalan Association of Public Universities).

The conference will bring together relevant stakeholders to define a roadmap for a new era of higher education, looking both at higher education systems and institutions and paying special attention to the lessons of the global disruption created by COVID-19. Focus is placed on the 10 themes below. Organizations and alliances are invited to produce and share knowledge, research, practices or impactful ideas to enhance higher education, locally and internationally, by 14 February 2022. More information, including guidelines for submissions, are available on its [dedicated website](#).



6. Survey on the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

Between December 2020 and February 2021, UNESCO carried out a [survey on the impact on COVID-19 on higher education systems](#). Some 57 Member States responded, almost half of which came from the European region. The results demonstrate that this region has able to cope with the disruption relatively well compared to others, with adequate government funding, a well-developed system of distance learning and increases in domestic enrolment. However, those countries that responded reported a 77% reduction of inbound and 73% reduction of outbound mobility. At the same time, renewed interest has emerged in intra-regional mobility.

The second round of this survey will be launched in the coming weeks, both to gather data on how countries have fared in comparison to the past year and expand the question base to have a more comprehensive overview.