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INTERNATIONAL  
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DISTANCE EDUCATION

Position Paper

# Bologna Digital

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Position Paper submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). The Paper was prepared with support of the **Bertelsmann Foundation** by **Kiron Open Higher Education** in close partnership with **Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (HFD)**, the **European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)** and the **Groningen Declaration Network (GDN)**. It additionally is endorsed by the **Institute for Education and Socio-Economic Research and Consulting (FiBS)** and the **International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)**.

## Proposed Call to Action

***"Digitalisation is changing teaching, learning, credentialing processes and associated services in higher education. We [the Ministers] call on the BFUG to propose measures and guidelines on how to implement a 'Bologna Digital' for our learners and teachers and how to encourage peer learning between policy-makers and between higher education institutions to improve teaching, learning and credentialing and further support widening participation for all parts of society."***

## Key Message

**Digitalisation should not be viewed as an additional challenge, but as a powerful means to meet existing challenges for higher education.**

Twenty years after the Sorbonne Declaration, the key challenges of opening up higher education, improving the quality of teaching and learning, reforming assessment and recognition, and promoting internationalisation and mobility remain the same for all countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). We argue that digitalisation can significantly contribute to overcoming them.

Digitalisation has not been ignored within the Bologna Process. Policy-makers, individual higher education institutions and other education providers have been active. However, the full potential of digitalisation has not been reached on systemic level. This is partly due to digitalisation being viewed as an additional challenge, rather than a means to meet existing challenges for higher education. In order to emphasise this point, this paper discusses digital solutions in the context of the main action lines of the Bologna Process. For each of these, it presents current challenges and discusses how digital solutions can contribute to solving them.

It is our aim that the Paris Communiqué for May 2018, and the work programme which comes after it, should pay even more attention to the benefits, but also to the challenges related to the increasing digitalisation of our lives. Also the envisaged 'European Universities' should set examples in digitalising education, research and innovation.

Attaining a 'Bologna Digital' by 2020 is not a separate action line, but a cross-sectional goal which can improve higher education performance in all existing action lines.

# Action Lines & Recommendations

## I. Opening up Higher Education to a Diverse Population

### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

The challenge of achieving a student population that fully reflects the diversity in our societies is frequently discussed within the context of the Bologna Process as the 'Social Dimension'. It is about raising aspirations of potential students, facilitating second chance routes into higher education and providing specific support to students to assure student success. This involves, in particular, effective forms of information, advice and guidance for learners and offering special bridging courses to account for a diversity of educational routes into higher education. Better use of digital tools in learning environments can offer personalised education options according to diverse prior knowledge and personal needs, tailored curricula and learning units, as well as providing better individual guidance during study progress.

### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 1) Higher education institutions are encouraged to consider making induction courses for their study programmes available online (e.g. through MOOCs), including adequate support mechanisms, allowing new students to be better informed and better prepared for their studies.**
- 2) Governments and the EU are invited to provide funding for such digital solutions to open up higher education and to help ensure study success for non-traditional learners.**

## II. Recognition of Non-formal (Digital) Learning

### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

Simplifying and scaling recognition of learning at different and flexible locations of learning (both formal and non-formal) remains a challenge. This issue is particularly relevant to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) throughout the educational biography of lifelong learners, inside and outside of formal study programmes. When higher education providers recognise and build on the increasing learning opportunities throughout the digital environment, they can put learners on new learning pathways into and through higher education, which are more responsive to learners' needs and labour-market requirements.

### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 3) Higher education institutions are encouraged to develop and publish procedures (steps to take) for the assessment and recognition of prior (digital) learning achieved through different forms of (open) online education building up on quality assurance to be done by MOOC providers. This can also facilitate the gradual integration of non-traditional learners into full programmes of study and allow for more flexible student journeys.**
- 4) Higher education institutions are invited to publish a list of MOOCs and micro-credentials, which they can accept as part of their degree programmes and to accordingly develop transparent digital recognition management solutions.**

### III. Admission Process

#### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

Whilst most programmes of study are announced online on university and college websites and on dedicated study portals, the process of admission into higher education programmes is still largely a lengthy paper-based process. Paper-based admission processes often lack transparency and cause delays and frustration, especially among international students. Digitalisation of processes and student records can facilitate reform and improvement here and reduce efforts and costs at institutional level.

#### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 5) Higher education institutions are encouraged to discontinue paper-based admission processes and expand the use of electronic student data in order to inform, secure and speed up recognition and admission processes, based on the principles laid down in the Groningen Declaration.
- 6) Governments and the EU are invited to support the establishment and networking of centralised (national) electronic depositories of student data (in line with the principles laid down in the Groningen Declaration) and implement adequate measures to ensure a high level of data security and protection.
- 7) The EU Student Card proposed by the European Commission should be considered a (virtual) Lifelong Learning Card facilitating admission decisions on a much wider scale.

### IV. Teaching and Learning

#### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

Various Ministerial Communiqués call for a student-centred approach to learning. This approach fosters the motivation of learners and the relevance of learning to learners' own context (their current life, their future profession, etc.) and it is more reflective of how learning occurs outside of the institutional setting. It enables the student to experiment with and exercise self-determined learning. The call for this type of learning is not new, but it is seen as difficult to offer on a large scale and in an institutional setting. It requires learning materials to be developed which go beyond knowledge transition and requires new skills of teachers. Utilising open educational resources and peer-learning networks are two examples of how digital solutions facilitate overcoming this challenge. European-wide initiatives could be explored as a central resource and as examples for national solutions.

#### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 8) Higher education institutions are encouraged to consider making the use of digitally-enhanced learning environments an important institutional strategy in order to enhance the learning experience and success of all learners they serve.
- 9) Higher education institutions are encouraged to collaborate in developing digitally-enhanced learning environments (e.g. making use of and further developing open educational resources) to ensure peer learning and quality improvements between higher education institutions.
- 10) Governments and the EU are invited to provide funding to higher education institutions and other stakeholders to support teaching staff's pedagogical innovations.
- 11) Stakeholders are invited to explore the idea of creating a Europe-wide platform for digital higher education and enhanced cooperation (one-stop-shop).

## V. Degrees and Qualifications

### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

During the development of the Bologna Process, the common programme has led to agreement on four cycles of study (short-cycles, Bachelor, Master and Doctoral programmes) and to the wide use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to award credit points for learning progression. Currently, increases in the diversity of provision in and widening access to higher education lead to two additional questions: whether qualifications awarded at the end of a study programme should be the main form of credential or should more focus be given to smaller units of learning, which would promote more flexible forms of study progress; and are these qualifications a comprehensive and fair record of what is learned during higher education study? In particular, this second question is related to the issue of how higher education outcomes can be better formulated for their use in the labour market, where employers are increasingly interested in the acquisition of transversal soft-skills alongside formal qualifications. Digital solutions for alternative credentials focus on digital badges and other portfolio innovations. They can be used to make visible skills and experiences acquired during studies, but also for documenting the acquisition of micro-credentials and nano-degrees designed to serve labour-market needs. However, their value is also dependent on their acceptance in the labour market.

### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 12) Higher education institutions are encouraged to make use of digital solutions (e.g. digital badges) to ensure a more detailed documentation of the knowledge, skills, competences and experience gained by students during their learning progress.**
- 13) The EU is encouraged to continue working with governments and stakeholders on envisioning and implementing European-wide solutions, with high acceptance in the labour market (e.g. Europass reform)**

## VI. Internationalisation and Mobility

### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

The internationalisation and mobility of students and staff within the EHEA is a key route to a person's formation as a global citizen and to improving social cohesion between populations of different nations. The Erasmus programme and various national initiatives have been highly effective in supporting physical movement of students and staff within the European region. However, this is only one element of internationalisation, especially when one considers that only a fraction of each nation's students and staff take part in such programmes – and non-traditional students are least likely to be internationally mobile. Good internationalisation strategies depend on close cooperation between sending and hosting institutions. Additionally, initiatives must be implemented to support 'internationalisation at home' for all students and staff in higher education. Digital technologies can play a role in promoting virtual connections between citizens through collaborative online or blended-learning programmes and courses. They can also help students to better prepare for their studies abroad and experience the academic culture at their host institution even before physically going there.

### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 14) Higher education institutions are encouraged to make better use of virtual exchange opportunities as an addition to physical exchange programmes for students and staff.**

- 15) Higher education institutions are encouraged to consider making induction courses for their study programmes available online (e.g. through MOOCs), allowing international students to be better informed and better prepared for their on-campus studies abroad.

## VII. Quality Assurance

### ***Challenges and benefits of digital solutions***

Improving the quality of teaching and learning for all students in higher education is a central challenge for institutions and policy-makers. Digital solutions offer new forms of learning and new modes of learning delivery; however, they also present new challenges to existing quality assurance procedures. For instance, open educational resources (OER) present a challenge in that they allow all users to modify and adapt learning content, whilst Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) present a challenge since they are often open entry and do not always monitor progress. For this reason, higher education stakeholders regularly express their concerns about the quality of online courses and the impact of digital learning on student competences. This calls for a review of standard quality assurance measures (e.g. the European Standards and Guidelines - ESG), setting common standards and exploring mechanisms of quality assurance through large-scale (digital) peer review processes. This review process could be facilitated with independent advice on the quality of online provision, e.g. MOOCs, produced by third parties.

### ***Recommendations for a 'Bologna Digital'***

- 16) Stakeholders and public authorities (EHEA, EU) are encouraged to work together and identify a set of quality criteria (rubrics) and quality indicators that would help higher education institutions, students and accreditors gauge the quality and relevance of online learning provisions and alternative learning credentials.
- 17) Governments and the EHEA are encouraged to review current quality assurance measures and to extend these to include appropriate procedures for new forms of (online) lifelong learning. In this context, governments and stakeholders could encourage the creation of one or more dedicated European agencies, focusing on assessing digital lifelong learning offerings, e.g. MOOCs.

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