

## Ministerial Conference EHEA, Tirana, 2024: Inclusive, Innovative, Interconnected

### EADTU position paper

Europe is facing rapid changes due to digital transformation, climate change, innovation across all sectors, geopolitical and economic crises. These changes are reshaping our societies and economies, and the policies we embrace now will determine our future. Beyond initial higher education, lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling are crucial to address these challenges. However, the participation rate in adult learning is disappointingly low. This is a significant issue, especially considering the impact of the digital and green transitions on employment trends up to 2035 (CEDEFOP)<sup>1</sup>.

To overcome these challenges, higher education institutions need to provide high-quality, scalable, and affordable learning opportunities that reach out to adult learners. Online and distance learning is becoming a gamechanger for lifelong learning by offering tailored solutions for individuals, enterprises, and sectors. This requires new organisational and pedagogical paradigms from higher education institutions to meet the immense needs for Europe's innovation, growth, jobs, and competitiveness.

Therefore, this position paper will outline possible strategies and actions, supporting the Tirana Communiqué of the EHEA Ministers of Education.

EADTU is the European association of leading higher educational institutions providing flexible degree and continuing education, delivered through various forms of digital teaching and learning. It represents 28 members, among them 11 open, online and distance teaching universities, 14 national associations of universities and single universities, 3 associated members). In total EADTU is representing over 150 European universities and 3 million students. EADTU in addition hosts the European MOOC Consortium, consisting of 8 European MOOC platforms covering 400 HE-institutions.

#### Fundamental values

EADTU fully supports the EHEA's fundamental values of academic freedom and academic integrity, in compliance with ethical and professional principles and standards to achieve the missions of the members, including their outreach through continuing and open education.

Members take public responsibility *of* higher education, serving the broader society by providing inclusive open and distance education where students are fully supported at all stages of life, with tailored policies for accessing and completing higher education, regardless of their background or starting point. Distance education institutions hold a distinctive position within higher education, opening horizons through innovative teaching and learning for a diverse range of student profiles. They accommodate those seeking to accelerate their careers through continuing education, as well as students who wish to reclaim opportunities, they missed earlier due to inclusion challenges. The public responsibility for higher education includes that public authorities assume the core responsibility for the proper functioning of the higher education system, benefiting both society at large and individual development, including continuing and open education.

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2023). *Skills in transition: the way to 2035*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/438491>

## Key commitments

### *Qualification Framework (QF-EHEA) and micro-credentials*

EADTU endorses the key commitments of the EHEA, including the three-cycle system, which is based on ECTS and compatible with the EHEA (QF-EHEA)<sup>2</sup>. Currently, the recognition and incorporation of continuing education within this structure presents significant challenges. Various qualifications and labels for continuing education awards and qualifications are used by governments and higher education institutions across Europe, leading to confusion. There is a need for the integration of continuing education into the QF-EHEA, considering different qualification layers related to the volume of learning and the complexity of competences to be acquired. Therefore, EADTU supports the *Recommendations and Guidelines on Micro-Credentials* of the EHEA Thematic Peer Group on the Qualifications Framework<sup>3</sup>. This integration would simplify the process for students to choose their learning paths and for academia and employers to recognize continuing education and evaluate qualifications. EADTU wants to actively contribute to this integration, drawing from recent projects, and aligning with the requirements of the *EU Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability*<sup>4</sup>.

### *Quality assurance*

EADTU welcomes the revision of the *Common Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*<sup>5</sup> and is ready to contribute to this revision from the perspective of digital education and lifelong learning. In 2024, EADTU will release already an updated version of its *E-xcellence manual and benchmarking instrument for blended and online higher education*<sup>6</sup>, which will incorporate recent developments in lifelong learning, digital teaching and learning, micro-credentials and international education and mobility. It will also align with the *OECD key principles for quality assurance of digital education (OECD, 2022)*<sup>7</sup>.

EADTU has also developed the *European Maturity Model for Blended Education (EMBED, 2021)*<sup>8</sup>. Maturity in this context refers to an evidence-informed and continuing decision-making process

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<sup>2</sup> QF-EHEA refers to the qualifications within the higher education systems of countries participating in the Bologna Process. It outlines the qualifications across three cycles: bachelor, master, and doctorate.

<sup>3</sup> Recommendations and Guidelines on Micro-Credentials. [QUATRA - TPG A recommendations on micro-credentials\\_09.11\\_2023.pdf \(ehea.info\)](#)

[https://www.ehea.info/Immagine/BFUG\\_BE\\_VA\\_88\\_9\\_5\\_2\\_WG\\_SD\\_Indicators\\_and\\_Descriptors1.pdf](https://www.ehea.info/Immagine/BFUG_BE_VA_88_9_5_2_WG_SD_Indicators_and_Descriptors1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Council recommends European approach to micro-credentials - Consilium (europa.eu)

<sup>5</sup> ESG. (2015). *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the european higher education area*.

Retrieved from [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ubachs, G., Williams, K., Kear, K., Rosewell, J. (2015), *Quality assessment for e-learning. A benchmarking approach*. Retrieved from <https://e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu/about>

<sup>7</sup> Staring, F., Brown, et al. (2022), "Digital higher education: Emerging quality standards, practices and supports", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 281, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f622f257-en>.

<sup>8</sup> EADTU (2021), The European Maturity Model for Blended Higher Education (EMBED). . European Union funded project, Erasmus+ <https://embed.eadtu.eu>

aimed at enhancing blended education at the course, curriculum, and institutional levels. The instrument and accompanying guidelines for this model are openly available.

EADTU emphasizes that, also in continuing education, universities have a fundamental responsibility to serve the public interest. This includes promoting access, equity, and social cohesion. Private universities should not compromise academic standards for commercial gain and should avoid misleading advertising and diploma mills.

### **An inclusive EHEA**

EADTU members play a crucial role in the European education landscape by offering education for non-traditional, part-time students. These students balance their studies with work commitments and often have busy schedules. The flexibility offered by EADTU members allows these students to pursue their education at their own pace and tailor their learning experiences to their individual needs. By embracing distance education and innovative learning methods, EADTU members contribute to a society where continuous competence development and growth are accessible to all. In addition to degree education.

EADTU and EMC members offer micro-credential courses and programmes for the labour market, and open education through open educational resources and MOOCs.

EADTU endorses the *Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (EHEA SD)*<sup>9</sup>, representing the first comprehensive and consolidated framework for the social dimension in the EHEA *at system level*. In practice, EADTU members make participation in higher education a lifelong option, including for adults who decide to return to or enter higher education at later stages in their lives and contribute par excellence to this social dimension.

Furthermore, EADTU plans to create a complementary Inclusion Reference Framework along with instruments and resources to evaluate and enhance inclusion strategies and practices *at institutional level*. This framework includes indicators rooted in principles and recommendations from research, European and national policies, the EHEA SD principles, existing institutional guidelines, and best practices. It aligns with the inclusion challenges as defined by the European Commission (Erasmus+ priorities), reinforcing a shared European language and approach. These challenges, which include disabilities, health issues, educational system barriers, cultural differences, social barriers, economic barriers, discrimination, and geographical barriers, are faced by individuals or groups of students throughout their academic journey. The framework will empower leaders and staff at higher education institutions to enhance inclusion at all levels - course, curriculum, and institution.

### **An innovative EHEA**

#### *Innovative teaching and learning*

Recent EADTU studies in the framework of the European Commission's Digital Education Readiness Initiative identified three main digital education settings for higher education during and after the COVID-19 period at European universities:

- Synchronous hybrid learning: based on course design that simultaneously includes both on-site ("here") students and remote ("there") students;

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<sup>9</sup> [Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area \(ehea.info\)](https://ehea.info)

- Blended learning: based on a course design with a deliberate combination of online and offline learning activities;
- Online distance learning: based on a course design with a continuous physical separation between teacher and student.

Most institutions use all three settings to some degree, depending on factors such as the profile of students and courses, the personal preference of the teaching staff, or the institutional culture. Open and distance universities primarily use an asynchronous online distance setting to provide accessible, flexible and scalable provisions for working students.

EADTU studies outline the state-of-the-art development of these settings, including examples of best practices and institutional policies. They have also made available courses for continuing professional development of higher education staff on course design for each of these settings in open license (DigiteL Pro)<sup>10</sup>.

### *Artificial intelligence*

Generative AI such as ChatGPT has caused a disruptive storm by applying AI in education. This has led to discussions on its use and implications. EADTU is implementing a European project to establish the necessary educational and ethical conditions that enable the utilization of Generative AI as a means of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education (ADMIT)<sup>11</sup>.

The project will continuously track the latest developments in research, innovation, and on evolving policies and practices. It aims to develop evidence-informed guidelines for integrating Generative AI into teaching and learning design models and to formulate recommendations for the ethical use of AI. It will also create online course modules for the continuing professional development of staff and leadership European-wide on the use of Generative AI in higher education.

### *Lifelong learning*

EADTU and EMC members are at the forefront of lifelong learning, enhancing personal development, employability and social inclusion. By organizing lifelong learning as their primary mission, EADTU and EMC members are helping to shape the future of education in Europe. This perfectly aligns with the goals of EHEA.

Their work is crucial for the advancement of lifelong learning in traditional universities in EHEA. Many European higher education institutions lack the structures to organize large-scale lifelong learning, although the *EU Recommendation on Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability* is encouraging such developments. To meet the labour market's demand for highly educated individuals, online provisions are most suitable due to their quality, flexibility, and scalability. But, there are some issues.

New ecosystem with between higher education institutions and other stakeholders, mainly employers, must be established to redesign educational pathways and to serve lifelong learners. Similarly to knowledge transfer for innovation, interfaces for continuing professional development are needed as bridges between institutions and the labour market. They are the meeting place where labour market demands interact with educational supply, allowing for the articulation of specific needs and the design of tailored solutions to develop talents within individual enterprises or

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<sup>10</sup> DigiTel Pro (2022), Professional development in digital teaching and learning. Project funded by the European Commission. <https://digitelpro.eadtu.eu>

<sup>11</sup> ADMIT, Leading partnership in generative Ai in higher education. <https://admit.eadtu.eu>

sectors. This also includes collaboration with cities and regions and developing skills partnerships<sup>12</sup>, further enhancing workforce capabilities and adaptability.

New structures, such as extension schools or continuing education centres are also needed to provide information, a welcoming environment and guidance services for lifelong learners. Continuing education caters to a different audience compared to degree-seeking student, looking to upskill and reskill. This necessitates tailored strategies for intake, teaching and learning, and follow-up. Designing personalized learning paths and facilitating interaction with on-the-job professional requirements are important aspects.

Course offerings should be designed to match learner profiles and the complexity of current and future competencies, that can be integrated in learning environments of higher education institutions or workplaces. To make this possible, institutions must adopt new course formats such as microlearning, MOOCs, micro-credential courses, and micro-degrees.

In support of this, the European MOOC Consortium has established the Common Microcredentials Framework (CMF)<sup>13</sup>. This format provides a structure for significant Competence development in a specific area within a duration of 4-6 ECTS, and is in alignment with the European Qualifications Framework. This approach ensures that learning is targeted, flexible, and relevant to the evolving needs of learners and the job market.

The *Modularization of Continuing Education and Professionalization by Micro-credentials (MCE)* project<sup>14</sup> of EADTU aims to contribute to the further conceptualization of micro-credentials and transformative institutional developments in alignment with national and EU policies and frameworks.

## **An interconnected EHEA**

### *Transnational collaboration and mobility*

EADTU offers support to universities and university alliances and networks by providing expertise in transnational collaboration related to lifelong learning and digital education. It has developed models and guidelines for the design and development of collaborative digital courses and programmes, as well as related virtual mobility<sup>15</sup>.

The core objective of academic collaboration and mobility is to offer students an international academic or professional experience that is related to a course or curriculum at their university or a university network. With the rise of digital teaching and learning approaches such as synchronous hybrid teaching and learning, blended teaching and learning, and asynchronous online and distance learning, new digital mobility formats have emerged. By these new formats, large or small groups of students can be involved. Making international course collaboration and mobility flexible is likely to be a groundbreaking solution to create mobility for all, especially for university alliances that aim for 50% and more mobility of their students. A variety of mobility approaches is required to address the

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<sup>12</sup> [Pact for Skills Regional Skills Partnerships leaflet - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

<sup>13</sup> European MOOC Consortium, The Common Microcredential Framework. <https://emc.eadtu.eu/cmfi>

<sup>14</sup> Modularization of Continuing Education and Professionalization by Micro-credentials (MCE). Project funded by DG Education and Culture of the European Commission. <https://mce.eadtu.eu>

<sup>15</sup> Henderikx, P., & Ubachs, G. (2022). Models and guidelines for digital collaboration and mobility in European higher education. Global Academic Press. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7016333

challenge of inclusive mobility, in accordance with the resolution of the European Parliament dated 23 June 2022.

Over the last decades, open and distance teaching universities have embraced the concept of a virtual campus to broaden access to education. These virtual campuses offer courses, degree programs, and educational services online, with minimal physical presence. Some traditional universities have extended their physical campus courses to online formats as well.

Virtual campuses facilitate international collaboration and mobility, transcending geographical barriers and providing online or blended international learning experiences. This will facilitate and upscale university alliance collaboration and mobility, needed for achieving their ambitions. The OpenEU alliance of open and distance universities exemplifies this by creating a joint virtual university campus.

#### *Global Policy Forum*

EADTU is focal point for quality assurance of digital education in the European region within the global network for quality assurance of the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE). It plays a leading role in comparing and aligning quality assurance systems related to digital education and open and distance education.

#### **Outlook**

EADTU is fully committed to contribute to the EHEA objectives of being inclusive, innovative and interconnected, especially related to lifelong learning, digital education and international collaboration and mobility. It is looking forward to supporting the BFUG in these efforts as a trustworthy partner of EHEA. It joins forces with other lifelong learning organisations, in particular the European MOOC Consortium.