

First meeting of the Task Force on establishing a long-term Secretariat**Minutes of the meeting***Tuesday, 3rd of December 2024**Brussels, Belgium**Venue: European University Association: Avenue l'Yser 24, 1040, Brussels, Belgium*

Nr.	Country/Organisation	Name
1.	Czech Republic (Co-chair)	Michal Karpíšek
2.	EUA (Co-chair)	Michael Gaebel
3.	European Commission	Hugo Pinto de Abreu
4.	EQAR	Aleksandar Šušnjar
5.	Romania	Luminița Matei
6.	San Marino	Remo Massari
7.	Türkiye	Aydın Aslan
8.	Head of the EHEA Secretariat	Horia Onița
Online		
9.	Italy	Luca Lantero
10.	Hungary	Andras Balo

Iceland sent their apologies. Kazakhstan is absent.

The meeting started at 09:37 CET.

1. Welcome & Introduction by the co-chairs

Documents: [Draft agenda](#)

The Co-chairs welcomed the participants to the first meeting of the Task Force. The meeting started with a tour de table of the participants.

The EUA Co-chair invited the participants to reflect on their motivation for joining the Task Force and whether they consider applying to host the long-term Secretariat. Türkiye replied that they are planning to apply, while still requiring information on the expected costs. Romania said they are looking into it, while Italy also expressed their interest, adding that they consider whether the long-term Secretariat could be inclusive, with the participation of different actors and countries, thus showing the collaboration nature behind the EHEA. In this way, Italy would seek

a structure that is functional for everyone with a distribution of competencies and geographical balance between EU and non-EU countries.

Hungary mentioned they did not have intentions to apply at that moment, while inquiring whether non-interest in applying was not a criterion for joining the TF, to which the EUA Co-chair replied that both interested and non-interested parties were eligible to join the TF and that everyone could change their mind in the meanwhile.

2. Terms of Reference, objectives, concept of work, roadmap

Documents: [Presentation by the EUA Co-chair](#)
[Draft Terms of Reference](#)

The agenda item started with the presentation from the EUA Co-chair, explaining the main remits of the TF. He referenced the materials prepared in the previous work period, which focused on the RoP, while also exploring the idea of a long-term Secretariat, which led to the conclusion that such arrangements is in principle feasible. As such, the BFUG agreed on a set of Principles and a Roadmap for establishing a long-term Secretariat, with a Go/No-Go decision in 2026, in order to establish the long-term Secretariat in June-July 2027, if agreed. The two main tasks of the TF are to explore in further detail the long-term Secretariat (legal structure, organisation, staff, funding, relation to the BFUG), while carrying out the process of selecting the country in which the Secretariat would be hosted and their hosts. The Co-chair outlined the balance of having a Secretariat as independent as possible from the host, while also relying on their support. In this sense, the country where the Secretariat would be located would need to ensure a stable environment, no interference, support from the host but also guarantees of maintaining that support for a relevant time. The Co-chair emphasised that the two main tasks need to go hand-in-hand, considering both suitability of options for setting up the Secretariat and adaptability to the conditions of the best offer of hosting from those who submitted applications.

The Czech Co-chair recalled the Principles on which the long-term Secretariat should be founded, related to independence, accountability, sustainability, capacity of employing international staff and secondments, location that ensures the rule of law, operation without any undue influence and easy funding from EHEA countries, non-profit. He informed the members that the Principles have been referenced in the draft ToRs, and that the ultimate objective is to have a Secretariat which is fit for purpose.

Moving to the draft ToRs, the Head of the EHEA Secretariat mentioned there were no comments received from the BFUG, thus the adoption procedure should follow.

Italy raised three main comments are preliminary points. Firstly, the legal form should not be strict in the sense of requiring either an NGO or a foundation, since different entities could be created at national level in the form of consortia. Secondly, independence should not only be a principle, but also a mechanism, with the applicants having to explain how the Secretariat decision-making would work and the relation to the BFUG. He gave the example of QA agencies, which are independent in decision-making, although funded by governments. Thirdly, consultative members should not be allowed to apply other than jointly with member states.

The European Commission suggested using the terminology of “NGOs, foundations and other types of associations”, in order to make it as broad as possible in order to avoid any limitations.

He also asked whether the option of establishing an international organisation was ruled out, to which the Co-chairs explained that it would take too long, and since the Secretariat is supporting the BFUG it could not be a separate entity requiring international organisation status.

The EUA Co-chair suggested referring to “association, foundation or any other legal form that would fit the purpose”. The Head of the EHEA Secretariat, supported by Italy and the European Commission, added that the interest of the classification did not lie in the instrumentum (the vehicle), but in negotium, the substance of the legal entity in relation to the rights given to the arrangement itself (signing contracts, having legal personality and not having legal capacity bound to the administrative capacity of the state).

On the second point raised by Italy, the EUA Co-chair replied that the relation between the Secretariat and the BFUG is partly defined by the legal form, as the BFUG themselves should decide the governance arrangements, not the applicants, giving the example of the Head of the Secretariat being selected and dismissed by the BFUG. On the third point, the Co-chairs suggested keeping the eligible applicants open, in line with previous discussions in the BFUG, also considering the example of EQAR.

Romania suggested adjusting the call, clarifying that consultative members can apply together with member states and joint applications are possible, also reflecting on adjusting the questions related to national legislation. The Czech Co-chair replied that addressing the national legislation is relevant whoever applies, while supporting the revision of the question in lines with the applicability for different types of applicants.

Italy, supported by San Marino, reiterated that as BFUG members they wouldn't accept a Secretariat hosted only by consultative members, as they couldn't represent the whole stakeholders in EHEA. Furthermore, some consultative members don't have members from Italy, make it even more difficult for them to accept this possibility. Italy added that if applying together with member states, consultative member should prove representativeness. San Marino added that consultative members could not offer guarantees of the national legislation.

The EUA Co-chair mentioned that the hosting party should not have any influence on the activity of the Secretariat, thus consultative members applying would not be detrimental in any way. The hosts serve as a local guide to the operations, and ministries of education are not in a position to guarantee national legislation either. Furthermore, consultative members have proven their representativeness through being accepted within the BFUG. Finally, the Co-chair recalled that the BFUG could establish the Secretariat in a location without the prior application of a member state. The Head of the EHEA Secretariat added that a question on motivation is included in the application, where the applicants would explain themselves and their rationale for applying.

The Co-chairs also raised the issue of who signs the applications, as this should be a non-binding, yet serious commitment from the applicants. After a host would be selected, the arrangement should furthermore ensure that the Secretariat is independent of the whims of one administration. Romania highlighted that it should be the legal representative of each member signing the application, while this would be more complicated for the Council of Europe, should they wish to apply, as the Education Committee, composed of member states, should give a mandate.

Türkiye considered different authorities from the country of the applicant should submit the application, as different competencies are required, giving the example of the ministry of work and mayors for the work permits. Romania replied that it is the ministry of higher education that

applies on behalf of the country, as they are members of the EHEA, and if a non-EU country applies, they should commit to ensuring the same treatment for international staff as for national citizens.

The EUA Co-chair emphasised that ministries of HE can hardly guarantee national treatment or that a specific work permit would be issued, thus in the application they should present how the process works and commit to supporting the Secretariat in the process. Furthermore, he highlighted that the applications are an offer for the BFUG, and ultimately it is for the BFUG to decide the arrangement, also ensuring that the Secretariat remains independent of the hosting party.

The Head of the EHEA Secretariat raised the issue of clarifying what is the burden of proof needed in the application, whether the applicants should rely on referencing national legislation or explain in extenso how the Secretariat would work. Italy suggested keeping the application as an expression of interest, while the EUA Co-chair added that the expression of interest should be detailed, concrete and indicate the commitment, while being open about elements which are not certain.

Italy asked whether the funding arrangements would also be discussed during this meeting, with the Czech Co-chair replying that at this point in the call only a general indication of the size should be included (approximately 8 full-time equivalents) and that the main source of funding is coming from EHEA members and the European Commission.

The Czech Co-chair presented the Roadmap, with a Go/No-Go decision expected in Spring 2026 BFUG, so the last year is dedicated to establishing the Secretariat, selection of the Head of Secretariat, drafting rules and regulations etc.

San Marino asked the co-chairs whether any steps were taken in consideration of the comments received from some countries saying they would not be able to pay if a Secretariat is not stemming from an international agreement. The Co-chair replied that some issues are still pending, such as the funding arrangements, the culture-shift in the BFUG or how to legally join the legal entity, as for some this may require a law through Parliament. They informed that at some point the TF should signal to each party that they should explore these national issues. In relation to the funding arrangements, they pointed out that most EHEA members are members of EQAR, and when the ministry itself cannot pay the fee, other national agencies could serve on their behalf.

3. Call for expressions of interest of the countries/hosts of the potential Secretariat: Principles and criteria, assessment of proposals

Documents: [Draft call for expressions of interest](#)

EQAR joined at this point of the meeting.

The TF worked on the call for expressions paragraph by paragraph.

Regarding the **introduction**, Italy suggested using 'elements' instead of 'conditions' for applications, as the document is an expression of interest. The Head of the Secretariat suggested using 'expectations', while also clarifying that more parties can apply jointly and in that case one is coordinating. Both changes were inserted. The deadline for the applications was agreed as Thursday, 12th of June.

Regarding the **Overall context**, Italy inquired about the condition about a fixed location in the possibility of a consortium. The EUA Co-chair replied that it should be understood as one fixed location where the Secretariat is based, for the sake of stability. However, he argued that some matters (for example physical presence, teleworking) should be left for the Secretariat itself to decide.

Regarding the **Role and tasks of the Secretariat**, Italy wondered whether maintaining the website and the role in Communication should not be also added. The EUA Co-chair replied that since the text relates to the responsibilities of the Secretariat relevant for the hosting arrangement, that would not be the case. The Czech Co-chair suggested adding the principles related to the rule of law, no undue national influence, possibility of employing international staff and secondments and of funding by other EHEA members, as well as the expected size of the Secretariat, which were inserted.

Regarding the **Role and Responsibilities of the host**, at the suggestion of Romania it was clarified that the hosts facilitate the issuance of visas and not ensure them. Romania also asked what 'recognition' of the Secretariat means, with the Head of the Secretariat replying that it should imply recognition by the state as a legal personality with legal capacity, not recognition by the Ministry. Upon a question from Romania, the EUA Co-chair clarified that in case of a consortium, the condition for legal and operational capacity should apply in all countries. To do so, the hosts would be defined in the preamble as individual or multiple applicants.

Upon a question from Italy, the EUA Co-chair highlighted the distinction between a joint application for a rotating Secretariat, where the different parties also staff the Secretariat, and one such arrangement in the case of a long-term Secretariat, wondering how the second option would work in different locations as the Head of Secretariat would employ the staff, not each ministry.

Italy asked whether the applicants should presume funding given by the BFUG or limit their application to what they can offer, considering that no decision on the funding arrangement was made. It was agreed that the call would specify that the main source of funding is expected from the BFUG, but that the applicant should only present what they could offer, mindful of not affecting the independence of the Secretariat in this way.

Romania asked clarifications on what interpretation and translation services from the host would entail, with the reply from the Czech Co-chair that they would be required for establishing the Secretariat, especially for national legislation. Romania also added that presenting special fiscal treatment regimes would be difficult, as they could only be based on a host arrangement since no special conditions are given to NGOs by the law. The Czech Co-chair replied that the applicant should simply mention in the application what they could offer since this is a voluntary section. At the suggestion of the European Commission, the 'voluntary' sections were renamed into 'optional'.

Italy suggested deleting the details regarding who employs staff. In relation to the secondments, it was agreed to exclude the section completely, as any BFUG member can offer secondments. Thus, the only relevant question for applicants is to detail whether secondments are legally possible.

Regarding the **Application form**, the EHEA Secretariat will put it in a template. Question 7 was changed, asking applicants to present other international entities based in the country that may serve as a model, thinking of potential advantages and disadvantages. However, this question

would not represent an assessment criterion. For Question 4, the form would include both respecting the four principles and the five criteria outlined in the call. A new question was introduced on the capacity to meet the deadlines in the Roadmap by 2027. Finally, the TF agreed on an indicative maximum number of words for each question

On the section for **Assessment procedure for submissions**, Romania asked why a Review Committee (RC) is necessary and which would be its composition, while also suggesting that the BFUG receives the whole documentation. The EUA Co-chair replied that it would be difficult to involve the whole BFUG, thus the RC would review and assess applications and present the results to the BFUG for decision, while the BFUG would still have access to the entire applications.

Italy agreed with Romania and suggested that the BFUG Board acts as a review committee, and the TF describes the applications without assessing them, before the applicants present themselves to the BFUG. The EUA Co-chair replied that the RC only does a qualitative assessment and summaries the application, without scoring. He also added that the BFUG Board does not have a mandate to assess applications, and that hearings would be organised in autumn 2025 BFUG. The Czech Co-chair added that the TF has the remit of assessing applications based on the ToRs, and that site visits would not be organised before the autumn 2025 BFUG due to lack of time.

Italy, supported by San Marino, suggested organizing discussions with the applicants and the BFUG first and only discussing the composition of the RC later, to which the Head of the Secretariat replied that it may compromise the independence to discuss the composition of the RC only after the applications are submitted.

The EUA Co-chair proposed a timeline in which the applications are sent to the Secretariat, which lists them and does an administrative compliance check. Then the RC analyses them in two weeks and asks applicants for additional information, which they submit in ten days. Afterwards, the TF would assess applicants before the hearing at the autumn 2025 BFUG.

On the composition of the RC, the EUA Co-chair also suggested a team of 2-3 reviewers for each application, with second or third opinions if they disagree. Italy suggested that the European Commission, UNESCO and the Council of Europe review the applications, while the Czech Co-chair suggested ensuring all groups of reviewers have one member with legal background. The EUA Co-chair also suggested having in the RC the members of the TF not involved in the applications, and possibly enhancing the composition of the RC with externals. He also suggested that all TF members review the application, with the applicants not reviewing their own.

The Head of the Secretariat, supported by the European Commission, pointed out that conflict of interest could be avoided best if applicants do not assess any application, and with 11 members of the TF, at least 5 are currently not expecting to apply. Furthermore, he mentioned that the RC should not become too formalised since it would formalise its role as well, turning it into a de facto decision-making body. EQAR questioned the consistency of different reviewers assessing different applications due to different approaches.

Italy mentioned that if they apply, they would not want to be engaged in the assessment of any application.

The agreement was reached in the sense that the TF would serve as the RC, avoiding conflicts of interest of the applicant parties. There would only be a qualitative assessment, before the hearings in autumn 2025 BFUG, where the BFUG should narrow the shortlist to 1-2 applications.

At the suggestion of the EUA Co-chair, a question about the summary of the application was added in the form.

The Czech Co-chair suggested that the TF meets physically in September to agree on the assessment.

On the **assessment criteria**, Romania asked about how suitability and flexibility are assessed. EUA suggested linking each question in the application form to one assessment criteria, to interpret how the criteria are assessed. The Head of the EHEA Secretariat emphasised that in Erasmus+ calls, one criterion can be assessed by looking at multiple questions. He also added that there is no question about the consortium and suggested that interpretation should be made considering that the application includes the maximum extent towards which the law allows flexibility, as in public law permissions cannot be presumed.

EUA added that the TF should consider what happens if no application is received.

Italy suggested making the application procedure smoother, without the need to be strict with the confidentiality protections of the applications as they trust the Secretariat in handling that.

4. Long-term view roadmap and related issues

The point was tackled in previous discussions.

5. EC Bologna project

The Czech Co-chair presented the outline of the application, which would focus on legal support, supporting the work of the TF, supporting the establishment of the Secretariat and capacity building for the next Secretariat, be it a long-term one or a rotating one. The coordination would be the Czech Agency for Internationalisation of HE, with EUA as partner.

6. BFUG Board/BFUG preparations

The point was tackled in previous discussions.

7. TF planning and schedules

The Czech Co-chair mentioned the TF should have 1-2 physical meetings per year until the Go/No-Go decision. The next dates were agreed for online meetings: Monday 13th of January, Monday 17th of February.

8. AOB

There was no AOB, thus the Co-chairs concluded the meeting thanking everyone for their participation.