

Task Force Establishment of a Long-term Secretariat of the European Higher Education Area

Draft Terms of Reference for the period 2024 - 2027

Background

As a result of the discussions at its meeting in Brussels on 9-10 April 2024, the BFUG decided to further explore the establishment of a Long-term Secretariat. A proposal for the Communiqué was agreed by the BFUG and adopted by the ministers in the Tirana Communiqué. This was based on a document¹ agreed upon by the BFUG in April 2024 containing the principles of such a Secretariat, and the roadmap for its establishment. Therefore, in the working period 2024-2027, the BFUG should continue to work towards a Long-term Secretariat to be established in 2027, subject to the final decision to be taken by the BFUG in spring 2026 (see reference in the Communiqué)².

On this basis, this document puts forward terms of reference of a new working structure to follow up the issue. This includes an updated roadmap (see annex), as the schedule originally proposed at the BFUG in April 2024 is no longer feasible. However, the milestone decision on the Long-term Secretariat of spring 2026, and, if agreed, the launch of the Secretariat in 2027 have been retained. Also, the principles for the Secretariat remain as agreed at the April 2024 BFUG.

The working structure is recommended to be a Task Force (TF) consisting of BFUG members and consultative members. As the feasibility and alternative models of the Secretariat have been explored in various documents provided by the previous Task Force, the task of the incoming TF should be to consider and propose what would be a good, workable and affordable solution for the EHEA. Where needed, the TF can invite outside experts.

The TF should focus on the Secretariat issue. The code of ethics mentioned in the Rules of Procedure should be developed by other ways and means, for e.g. a few BFUG members volunteering to undertake this task, or a smaller TF.

Draft Terms of Reference

Contact persons/Co-Chairs

Based on the previous Task Force, this working group (WG) may have 2-3 chairs, two representing countries and one representing stakeholders.

¹ [Annex to the Communiqué: Long-term EHEA Secretariat. Principles and Roadmap. Document for the BFUG in Brussels, April 2024](#)

² While a large number of BFUG members supported the idea of a Long term Secretariat, a few delegations were undecided or had concerns regarding the concept or some of its potential implications. Therefore, it was decided to continue work towards its establishment, also to make the approach more concrete, but allow for a final decision in 2026.

Composition and profile of participants

The BFUG should ensure that the TF has a manageable size (approximately 12 participants, including the co-chairs) and diverse and representative participation, in terms of geography and systems.

Participants

- should be ready to contribute proactively, regularly and constructively to the work, including drafting and revising texts etc.
- should not exclude any constructively critical voices, as long as they respect the decision by Ministers in the Tirana Communiqué. The TF's task is not to decide whether a Long-term Secretariat should be established, but to prepare tangible and feasible solutions in consideration of governance, organisation and management, finance, legal forms. The ultimate decision on the Secretariat is for the BFUG respectively the Ministers.
- Parties who have an interest in hosting the Secretariat are welcome to join the TF. As the TF will operate in openness and fairness, and all decisions will be made by the BFUG, respectively the Ministers, a keen interest in the issue should not be seen as a conflict of interest, but on the contrary, would help to develop concrete and feasible ideas and approaches, and also recognise challenges at an early stage. Representatives of such parties should not co-chair the TF and would be exempted from any activity related to the evaluation and preselection of proposals for hosts.
- The party which the BFUG selects as a host for the Secretariat, if not yet part of the TF, would have to join it, in order to contribute proactively to the development of the approach.

Purpose, tasks and envisaged outcomes

The TF builds on the results and outcomes of the Task Force on the Rules of Procedure to prepare the establishment of a Long-term Secretariat, in particular on the [Revised concept note: Long-term EHEA Secretariat](#) (BFUG Brussels 19-20 February 2024) and the document proposed as an [Annex to the Communiqué: Long-term EHEA Secretariat. Principles and Roadmap](#) (BFUG Brussels 9-10 April 2024). It supports and facilitates the process of the introduction of the Long-term Secretariat. It further develops the concept, interacts with potential hosts of the Secretariat, and provides the BFUG with relevant information for its decisions.

Specific Tasks

1. Develop further the proposals for the establishment of a long-term, independent, and internationally staffed Secretariat for the EHEA, in particular regarding governance and funding.
2. Prepare a call for proposals for hosting countries/organisations, to be endorsed by the BFUG, and disseminated by the Secretariat.
3. Organise the evaluation of applications, including the assessment of the regulations and conditions of applicant countries/organisations.
4. Provide a reasoned proposal for the arrangements and terms of reference for the Long-term Secretariat, with a proposal for the hosting country/organisation, to the BFUG.
5. Prepare discussion and decision-making process at the BFUG, for a decision on the Long-term Secretariat (tentatively spring 2026).

6. In case it is decided to establish a Long-term Secretariat, following the indications of the BFUG, propose its draft statutes by autumn 2026, for discussion and endorsement by the BFUG (tentatively autumn 2026).
7. Advise the BFUG on the further preparation of the new Secretariat, including the job description for the head of Secretariat (tentatively autumn 2026).
8. To the extent required as a consequence of the decision to establish a Long-term Secretariat, propose amendments to the Rules of Procedures for the EHEA and/or the Rules of Procedure for the BFUG (to be adopted by Ministers, respectively the BFUG).

Reporting

The TF should report to the BFUG and its Board in accordance with the schedule of their meetings. The reports should focus on the progress of and proposals for the specific tasks outlined above.

Meeting schedule

The TF should organize its work so as to meet the deadlines specified above, and in accordance with the meeting schedule of the BFUG and its Board.

The number of physical meetings may be limited to 2-3 per year, organised also in conjunction with BFUG meetings, with an additional 6-8 online meetings of shorter duration³. It may be necessary that representatives of the TF travel to countries offering to host the secretariat in order to discuss and better understand the conditions and circumstances.

Liaison with the activities of other Working Groups

The TF would liaise with the Co-Chairs of other Working Groups as required.

Reference to the Tirana Communiqué⁴

In view of the long-term character of the EHEA, we consider that firmer structural arrangements are now necessary to ensure its consistent, stable development. We, therefore:

- *adopt the “Rules of Procedure for the EHEA” and invite the BFUG to adopt revised Rules of procedure of for its own work in due course;*
- *mandate the BFUG to continue working on the possibility of establishing a long-term, independent, internationally staffed Secretariat to create effective support for the BFUG, and to evaluate the feasibility and sustainability of the related proposals, models, and terms of reference in Spring 2026, to be presented for adoption and implementation at our 2027 Ministerial Conference;*
- *agree to undertake an assessment of the chosen arrangement after two work periods.*

³ Most members of the previous TF found monthly meetings (some of them quite short) to allow an appropriate rhythm. In certain periods, the TF, in its entirety or in subsets, may face a higher frequency of meetings and written exchanges (e.g. ahead of BFUG meetings), whereas in others, no meetings may deem necessary (e.g. over the summer months).

⁴ See <https://ehea.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique1.pdf>

⁵ [Annex 2 to the Tirana Communiqué](#). Rules of Procedure for the European Higher Education Area as adopted by Ministers. See <https://ehea.info/Immagini/Annex-2-to-the-Tirana-Communique1.pdf>.

Long-term EHEA Secretariat: Principles and Indicative planning schedule

A. Principles for a Long-term EHEA Secretariat

In order to provide stable and ongoing professional support to the European Higher Education Area's working structures the ministers ask the BFUG to make necessary arrangements for establishing a long-term Secretariat for the EHEA, including the exploration its legal form and its location.

In the implementation of this task the BFUG will need to respect the following principles and conditions.

1. Independence and Accountability

The Secretariat should operate independently from the country and/or organisation (with)in which it is hosted. Its legal, financial and organisational arrangements should ensure its independence, minimise the risk of undue influence.

It should operate under the authority of and be fully accountable to the BFUG including its governing structure arrangements, reporting and appointment of its staffing.

2. Sustainability

The chosen arrangements, especially the funding model, must be sustainable, with a clear perspective on how the Secretariat can function for a longer term. Its main source of funding should be contributions by the EHEA members. Any potential in-kind contributions should not imply any influence on the Secretariat operations and agenda.

3. Staff

The Secretariat must be able to recruit and contract a sufficient number of staff, with suitable profiles and competences, from different EHEA countries. The employment rules of the country in which the Secretariat is based should allow for this, under flexible and fair contracts.

In addition to its own staff, the Secretariat should be able to accept secondments from EHEA members and consultative members, according to clear rules approved by the BFUG, ensuring its independence. This would also regard the secondment of a liaison officer from the host country of the following ministerial conference, who will work under the authority of the Head of the Secretariat.

4. Location

Regulations of the country where the Secretariat will be located must ensure the rule of law, allow its operation without undue influence of the national or local authorities and easy funding from different other EHEA countries.

5. Non-Profit Principle

The Secretariat would operate on a non-profit basis, with any surpluses reinvested into its budget. It may accumulate a reserve, which however should not exceed one annual budget. Otherwise, the fees for EHEA members should be reduced.

B. Roadmap

Based on the Roadmap proposed at the Brussels BFUG (9/10 April 2024), the following indicative planning is proposed, to be further developed and adjusted by the working group, in consideration also of the BFUG schedule.

Date	What	Who
Sep 2024	establish a dedicated BFUG task force for the period 2024 – 2027 to oversee implementation	BFUG
spring 2025	launch a call for proposals for host of the Secretariat, incorporating the principles above	BFUG Input TF
June/July 2025	deadline for expressions of interest	
summer/autumn 2025	evaluate proposals and propose shortlist for the BFUG review proposals for location and shortlist no more than 3	TF
Oct/Nov 2025	address the BFUG's questions with the shortlisted countries / organisations, further review of proposals for the BFUG decision	TF & BFUG
Nov 2025 – Mar 2026	Specification of legal, financial, organisational details respecting the relevant regulations and circumstances including the funding model. Plan for the Head of the Secretariat recruitment	Host candidates & TF
spring 2026	Selection of the potential Secretariat host / location GO / NO GO DECISION Alternatively, a call for a “rotating secretariat” linked to the host of the next ministerial conference 2030	BFUG Input TF
Nov 2025 – autumn 2026	Drafting Statutes, review of EHEA Rules of procedure, identification of potential necessary changes. Capacity specifications, resources	Host & TF
autumn 2026	Approval of the statutes of the new legal entity and selection of the Head of Secretariat	BFUG
autumn 2026 – spring 2027	Founding the new legal entity in the chosen location / other relevant steps	BFUG, TF, Host accordingly
first half of 2027	Recruitment and training of further staff Organisational preparation	Head of the Secretariat
spring 2027	Official launch of the EHEA secretariat During the Ministerial conference	Ministerial Meeting
1 July 2027	EHEA Secretariat full operation Take over of the agenda of the previous secretariat	Secretariat