

# Introduction



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## Twenty Years of Bologna and a Decade of EHEA: What's Next?

Looking at the past policies proposed by the Bologna Process, one can see that structural reforms have been the most successful policy area of the EHEA. Even so, implementation is uneven, and some countries are far from fulfilling their commitments in one or more areas of structural reforms. This puts the credibility of the EHEA in jeopardy as a framework within which national qualifications are compatible, are issued within comparable qualifications structures, are quality assured according to agreed standards and guidelines and are described in easily understandable formats. Nevertheless, EHEA was successful in promoting structural reforms but less so at explaining the rationale and the principles behind them.

The fundamental values on which the EHEA builds—in particular academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation in higher education governance, and public responsibility for higher education—have not received the

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attention they deserve. This can be explained by the fact that there is a political need to show rapid accomplishments and that defining goals and assessing implementation of fundamental values have proved challenging. Also, fundamental values are closely linked to the overall situation of democracy and human rights, and the EHEA is not an area of democratic perfection.

The discussion on non-implementation has always been difficult. Uneven implementation is not solely a question of a North/South or East/West divide or a divide between countries that joined the Bologna Process in the early years and those that joined later and therefore had less time to implement the reforms since the expectation was—at least officially—that all EHEA members would have met the same goals by 2010.

“Two speed Bologna” is not solely due to different accession times or different starting points. Differences include: centralised versus decentralised systems, differences between larger and smaller systems, and the degree to which systems differentiate between different kinds and profiles of higher education institutions as well as varying levels of commitment between and within EHEA members. One of the challenges in the further development of the EHEA will, therefore, be to reconcile the need to ensure implementation of common principles and goals with the need to recognise that EHEA members have different traditions as well as recent pasts.

The EHEA was envisaged as a structure and a cooperation process fit for the challenges facing education ministers and the higher education community some 20 years ago. The future of the Bologna Process depends on the capacity to identify the challenges of political importance, and that can be addressed within the loose and extensive structure that is the EHEA. This is essential, as there is a widespread feeling that the EHEA is losing steam and political interest as shown by the decreasing participation rates of ministers in the Ministerial Conferences.

Failing that, Europe faces the need to redefine those structures so that a different EHEA can meet new challenges.

## **Bologna Process Researchers Conference—Where Research Meets Policy**

The Bologna Process Researchers’ Conferences aims primarily at further consolidating the researchers’ community in order for it to provide those research-based insights and recommendations, which would best inform discussions and decisions, including of the Bologna Process Ministerial Conferences. As such, the third edition of the Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference was an excellent opportunity to continue the dialogue initiated during the 2012 and 2015 Ministerial Conferences, between research, policy-making and implementation of the Bologna Process.

It is worth underlining that, in terms of its participants and interested researchers, the topics of the Bologna Process and the construction of the European Higher Education Area have already reached the stage of building its own research community.

The third conference was focused on the already configured impacts as well as on the future of the Bologna Process. It took stock of existing initiatives and attempted to identify some of the key challenges, needed developments and future trends. Five main topics were addressed in particular: internationalisation of higher education, the social dimension within a quality oriented higher education system, transparency tools, financing and governance and the future of the Bologna Process.

## *Context*

The newly emerging contexts of the European higher education developments and Bologna Process implementation are altogether different from those of the launching period. A closer look at recent trends reveals challenges and new configurations, which may hardly be ignored.

The external higher education context is marked by accelerating changes, which bear on higher education policies:

**Technological:** the emerging digital revolution. Technology and digitalisation are becoming a basic necessity for society;

**Social:** growing inequalities, a shrinking middle class and a growing class of precariat, crisis of the traditional welfare state, population ageing, a growing demographic decline, increasing youth unemployment, changes in the life style, refugee crisis: rapidly increasing numbers and a hardening of attitudes in many European countries;

**Political:** the rising of populist ideologies, challenging of established status-quo and democracies, increase in violent extremism, decrease of a broad consensus on basic political and societal principles, and the emergence of “alternative facts” and “post truth politics” (e.g. illiberal vs. liberal democracy, international unilateralism vs global multilateralism);

**Economic:** slow recovery from the economic recession and financial crisis (2008–2012), emerging protectionism, tensions between old and newly emerging industries, sharply divergent views on globalisation;

**Culture:** following the previous post-materialistic cultural developments, a sort of cultural backlash is at work, bringing to the fore formerly dominating cultural values;

**Regional:** European Union is searching for its new future, while growing tensions within the wider Europe and in the shaping of globalisation waves are constantly emerging, including Brexit challenges.

The inner context of higher education is also marked by new configurations:

A steady decrease in student flows, following on the previous massification or universalisation trends—student numbers are starting to decline, influenced by the

decrease in demography, especially in some parts of Europe (Central and Eastern Europe);

A wider range of providers, serving a more differentiated student cohort, and challenging traditional providers with respect to programmes and credentials;

The decreased attractiveness of the Bologna Process, especially at the political level, due to its perception as a *fait accompli*;

Reaching a decade of EHEA with newly accepted members that did not all show a strong commitment to implementing all the Bologna Process measures;

Variable levels of the Bologna Process implementation in the overall EHEA, which have led to an increased need for dealing with non-implementation;

A refocus on academic values and principles as the political context in some countries has put negative pressure on the autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs);

The need to search for alternative ways of institutionally codifying academic freedom and university social responsibility (e.g. a consequentialist approach to autonomous governance of university and respect for academic integrity codes);

A growing pressure on higher education to address academic and non-academic new societal challenges (e.g. integration of refugees, more transparency and assuming new institutional public responsibilities);

A re-emphasis on vocational/professional higher education in a world of rapidly changing occupational landscapes;

The view that study programmes diversification has reached a peak as a result of developments in the academic division of knowledge which are disconnected from the current economic division of labour;

A growing imbalance between the public and private financing of higher education;

The need for higher education public policies for new data, and the potential of big data and data analytics.

Both these contexts of higher education call for critically oriented research approaches to the Bologna Process and for the exploration of new innovative initiatives. A demand for an increased reflexivity of the Bologna Process is mounting. The researchers' papers and the Conference debates highlighted the relationships between European higher education's changing contexts and new developments in the Bologna Process.

## *Challenges*

There are some **Bologna Process dilemmas and questions** that arise out of the Bologna Process implementation.

Research has evaluated that some of the most pressing and complementary ones are the following:

Should the Bologna Process be focused on the implementation of the goals already defined or develop new policies and policy areas to meet changing/developing needs and demands?

Is there a need for envisaging a “two speed Bologna Process” or just rely on a development “à la carte” that is adapted to each country’s local circumstances, with hope for eventual ‘full’ implementation?

How should non-implementation be addressed in the Bologna Process? Should future Bologna commitments be more concrete in nature?

How and to what extent should the Bologna Process focus on fundamental values?

How should the interaction between supra-national (European), national and institutional levels be shaped in order to ensure a smooth implementation of the Bologna Process commitments and reaffirm the objectives and values of the EHEA?

How will the current socio-economic and political contexts (e.g. Brexit, authoritarianism, populism, migration, etc.) influence the future of higher education on the continent and in its countries?

## ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

Most articles provided a constructively critical overview of the Bologna Process. On the plus side, this provides legitimacy to the conference, focused on researchers and their analyses regarding the Bologna Process implementation, consequences and future endeavours. At the same time, it highlights the idea that after almost 20 years of Bologna Process and ten years of EHEA, there is sufficient evidence collected to highlight both achievements and shortcomings of implementation.

As anticipated from the first edition of the Conference, organised under the concept of European Higher Education at the Crossroads, the Bologna Process has reached a critical moment. Therefore, two possible scenarios for the Bologna Process/EHEA can be envisaged: either, through self-evaluation and lessons learnt, the process will be revived, adapted to the new global challenges and major societal transformations, or it will become irrelevant.

Looking at the present situation, one cannot help notice a stratification, or even a polarisation of the European higher education systems in two major clusters: countries that fully embraced the Bologna principles and largely implemented the key actions versus countries that joined the Process but have yet a long way to go. This could mean that only the “core Bologna countries” take implementation even further, thus potentially leading to a major schism in the European higher education.

Little time remains until Bologna Process turns 20 and the 2020 EHEA Ministerial Conference seems just around the corner. This is a period aimed at critical self-evaluation and an overall assessment of the Bologna Process, making use of all existing tools, including peer learning. Only by looking at past experiences and grasping the complexity of today can we redesign the Bologna Process as

a genuine European driving force, meaningful for the next 20 years, inspiring future transformations and ensuring cohesion of the European higher education.

In spite of the challenges, EHEA has been a successful story. Through the Bologna Process, higher education contributed to building not only EHEA but Europe itself. This should go on. The key from now on is how to adapt the Bologna Process constantly to its times so as to keep it up with the basic European aims and values of the time.

The Bologna Process Researchers Conference participants predominantly took the view that the future of the European higher education cooperation may be more effectively shaped by relying consistently and imaginatively on specific combinations between key referential values and operational commitments. In what follows, crosscutting illustrations, resulting from the conference papers and debates, are put forward.

### ***Bologna Process and the Wider World of Higher Education***

Bologna Process researchers share certain views with regard to the configuration of the wider world of the European higher education.

The key points of this configuration are the following:

Countries all over the world seem to be striving to increase internationalisation and global engagement, yet in many cases, the escalating trend towards isolationism and inward-looking nationalism results in a growing disconnection between the local and the global, thus fragmenting and indeed troubling developments in interuniversity cooperation;

While one may see an increase in academic credit and degree mobility around the world, only a small student elite is benefiting from it;

In recent years, there has been a shift from a more collaborative approach to internationalisation towards a more competitive focus. The paradoxical combination of collaboration and competition, as driving motives for internationalisation, is more manifest within the Bologna Process;

A misconception of internationalisation in higher education reduces it to a “study abroad” approach. Other misconceptions regarding what internationalisation represents are indicated by a series of perceptions like the following: the means appear to have become the goal; more teaching in English and adding an international subject to the programme would suffice for sustaining a programme of internationalisation; more recruitment of international students, more study abroad, more institutional partnerships would outweigh the constant and exigent assessment of international and intercultural learning outcomes; output and quantitative targets may run against the focus on impact and outcomes of internationalisation. Such misconceptions run contrary to an effective and valuable academic internationalisation.

There is a growing need for rethinking internationalisation in order to focus it on the internationalisation of the curriculum and learning outcomes to enhance the quality of education and research.

### ***Social Dimension Within a Quality Oriented Higher Education System***

The Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area have resulted in a growing emphasis on equity and inclusion from all groups in society. At the same time, some of the research findings illustrate the persisting gaps between policy and practice, intentions and reality, rhetoric and concrete actions.

Looking at some gaps between policy and practice, certain challenges arise:

In their higher education access policies, many European countries have not systematically targeted policies to support clearly identified underrepresented groups, but rather mainstreamed strategies to expand access and success that all groups might benefit equally;

Student background data are not readily available in many countries, which makes it difficult to analyse equity needs and design appropriate targeted policies;

Many of the learning difficulties that students bring with them to higher education institutions result from inadequate secondary education;

Too many European countries are facing major new equity challenges due to the rapid rise in the refugee population, and the higher education needs of refugee students should be attended to.

Such challenges generate the need for further research and possible actions:

**New positioning of higher education institutions within society.** There should be a greater osmosis between higher education and society, particularly with reference to refugees and working students. The current practices in higher education institutions aim to make these groups fit the institutions, without institutions investing efforts to accommodate student needs;

**Different definitions of success.** Rankings, performance-based funding as well as individual students have different definitions of success. The former two strive to outline, at least to some extent, what achievements higher education institutions have. Student success is anticipated by the learning outcomes institutionally defined. The connections between the two areas of what counts as academic success may hardly meet. Such a conceptual and practical gap should be dealt with as to replace it with a convergent approach;

**Peer learning does not currently work.** Higher education institutions and policy-makers, countries involved in the Bologna Process themselves tend to act separately instead of exchanging ideas and cooperating for a common good. Collegiate mutual learning happens only randomly. Everyone thinks that their context is unique despite having common referential commitments within the Bologna Process framework. This practice should be substituted with one framed

by peer learning. New communities of practice and social networks of knowledge sharing should be built within the Bologna Process framework;

Focussing on new challenges should not lead to a neglect of ‘old’ ones.

**Benefits of technology and digitalisation.** Researchers’ presentations and debates showed a neglect of the topic of digitalisation. More intensive teaching and learning support and also counselling could be made possible through smart applications of new technology.

No country or institution has found a magic answer to the question of how best to overcome the historical, cultural and psychological barriers faced by underrepresented groups (better counselling, better integration of migrant/working students by flexible curricula etc.). Nevertheless, the components of successful policy approaches outlined throughout researchers’ articles provide a useful blueprint for developing new and innovative responses down the road and orienting much-needed further work in the critical area of equality of opportunities in access and success at the higher education level.

### *Transparency Tools—Impact and Future Developments*

Higher education accountability is strongly enhanced by the wide and convincing transparency of its endeavours. Bologna Process researchers look closely at the current uses of institutional transparency tools and reach certain conclusions.

On the whole, higher education institutions should invest more in dealing with issues of social, academic and financial accountability to students and to society at large. Particular attention should be paid to the ways learning outcomes are set up and achieved, while graduate attributes and life-sustaining skills are closely followed up.

Transparency issues take different forms in each country, but essentially, questions are asked about the value and contribution/impact of higher education to individuals, society and the economy, and the appropriate forms of transparency and accountability of both public and private institutions.

Gaining and enhancing public trust in higher education and effective (re)assuring of academic quality are the essential objectives of higher education transparency. More innovative attention should be focused on the diversification of transparency tools, and the best ways (qualitative and quantitative) to assess and measure in an international context.

### *Financing and Governance*

The discussions about governance and funding are particularly intense in times of major changes in the world around higher education, especially as Europe is once again going through such a period. External ruptures in society-at-large and



changing trends in higher education are influencing the policy discussions and reform initiatives.

Changes outside the higher education system, such as increased migratory fluxes, an escalating refugee crisis in Europe (with huge political, social, and economic implications), the emergence of new or recycled ideologies, such as populism and nationalism have brought new challenges to the higher education governance and funding systems.

A European notion of autonomy has emerged based on some kind of European consensus regarding the need for universities to acquire more institutional freedoms so that they could be more efficient in delivering the types of services and goods deemed necessary for the advancement of defined European and national policy goals. Many national governments have also promoted reforms in the area of university autonomy and until recently, most of these reforms have been meant to support increased autonomy, at least in certain dimensions, which in turn was expected to support a more efficient work of the university, as judged against pre-set criteria defined by the public authorities. At the same time, some governments have begun restricting autonomy and academic freedom. These emerging trends are not happening equally in all parts of Europe. European organisations such as the EU and the Council of Europe remain committed to the knowledge society narrative, democracy and to the European integration—and thus to supporting higher education. Many governments, in different ways, continue to act nationally, based on the conviction that higher education is indeed something to be treasured and nurtured, and that it must remain a key matter for public policy. But even in some of those countries, times seem to be changing.

Nevertheless, the “efficiency” concept in higher education, at the core of the developments regarding governance and funding, seems to be vaguely defined as there is no European accepted definition. Moreover, its’ operationalisation and measurement are not straightforward.

The EHEA is a space for dialogue and practice in higher education becoming a new, *sui generis* type of entity (or system) that requires and indeed has developed new governance—that is, new concepts, principles, models, tools and practices.

### ***Moving to the “Next Level”***

The Bologna Process is at a critical stage, approaching a decade from the establishment of the European Higher Education Area and still facing a number of challenges. The lack of homogenous implementation is partially due to the accession of new members that do not have the same timeframe to implement the pre-existing commitments, but also to existing EHEA members that have not managed to implement those commitments. The political interest in the process has decreased as seen by the decreasing number of ministers participating in the Ministerial Conferences. It seems that there is a lack of new politically appealing commitments that would make the Bologna Process more attractive within national debates.

These challenges can be overcome by taking the Bologna Process to the next level focusing both on fundamental values relevant for our time (equity in access, ethical integrity, etc.) but also on concrete commitments and goals in connection with developments in other policy agendas (EU, OECD, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, etc.).

The fundamental values on which the EHEA builds—in particular, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance and public responsibility for higher education should be at the heart of the political debates and decisions. At the same time, it is necessary to focus on challenges of political importance in order to increase the political interest in the process, while addressing the issue of non-implementation, in order to increase the credibility of the EHEA framework. In this sense, the Bologna Process should become primarily a tool for policy learning and contribute to increasing national and institutional debates, rather than restricting them.

Also, when we talk about the *European Higher Education Area*, we don't have to look for a stage when this can be considered “fully implemented” but more we have to look for a process and build a mechanism that will be able to identify the challenges and to adjust—through appropriate policies—the higher education environment, in order to face these challenges.

From the participants to the *Future of Higher Education—Bologna Process Researchers' Conference*, Bucharest, 27–29 November 2017, the Editorial Board retained a number of specific issues that should be addressed immediately by the policymakers and assumed politically by the ministers of education across Europe. Among these it is worth mentioning:

1. Spanning the gap between the school system and higher education. Many underrepresented groups lose students prior to the point of entry into higher education, and many learning difficulties facing students come from the school systems.
2. Increasing the interaction between higher education and society—with reference to both refugees and working students, but also considering demographic developments.
3. Providing greater leadership in combating populism, extremism and anti-intellectualism by a greater focus on democratic education and links to local communities.
4. The need for a collaborative approach to internationalisation that is focused on the curriculum and learning outcomes to enhance the quality of education and research. This needs to become practice rather than a statement.
5. The need to revisit the concept of autonomy and academic freedom in a changing regional, national and European landscape, within the new frameworks of European cooperation and global competition.
6. More attention to the growing pressure to address academic and non-academic new society challenges.
7. The need for higher education public policies for new data and the capacity to integrate big data and data analytics in the new policy and governance systems.

8. Building capacities for full use of innovation and digital environments.
9. Sustainable financing and appropriate governance of higher education in the context of the above-mentioned values.
10. The need to review the EHEA governance structure to support these new ambitions.

### ***Evolution or Revolution?***

Since 2011, the *Bologna Process Researchers' Conference* has had the role of catalysing the quest for possible and plausible futures of the European Higher Education Area.

Some might think the future will be a *revolution*. Others might count on an evolution of the higher education landscape. Probably there is not a correct answer, and alternative paths should be considered. This publication is a contribution of research to policy-making, an informed dialogue among all actors accountable for the future shape of our higher education institutions and an input to the Bologna Ministerial Conference in Paris, May 2018.

The Editors

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