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## FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION – BOLOGNA PROCESS RESEARCHERS' CONFERENCE (FOHE-BPRC)<sup>1</sup>

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In preparation for the 2012 Bologna Process Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum, Romania organised the first edition of the Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC) in Bucharest on 17-19 October 2011, with the support of the European University Association (EUA) and the Romanian National Committee for UNESCO. The conference brought together the voice of researchers' in higher education, as well as the experience of various actors active in international level policy making.

The conclusions of the Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC) are at the crossroads between policy making and research and thus extremely appropriate to add food for thought for the Bologna Process and for higher education reforms in general. The participants of the conference warmly welcomed this initiative and recommended creating a tradition of dialogue between researchers and policy makers prior to major policy events such as the Bologna Ministerial Conferences.

The conference looked at the Bologna Process from diverse perspectives and aimed at sketching a systemic vision of 'going beyond Bologna' which would be relevant not just at the European level, but also for other regions in the process of building higher education areas. The Bucharest conference also attempted to mobilise the results of higher education research under eight themes: European Higher Education Area (EHEA) principles, learning and teaching, quality assurance, governance, funding, differentiation, mobility and foresight/ futures of higher education.

As the FOHE-BPRC General Rapporteur, Prof. Peter Scott, outlined in his concluding remarks at the end of the FOHE-BPRC proceedings, the conference participants acknowledged that Bologna is a dynamic process. Few who attended the original signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 could have imagined the momentum that would build behind efforts to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), or that the policy process they were initiating that day would become one of the most significant aspects of the wider European project. Although education had initially been a minor focus of efforts to promote European integration in the EU context (and, indeed, had only been 'smuggled in by the back door' because of the relevance of educational policies and structures to professional formation – and, consequently, the free movement of labour), future historians may well judge that the much broader Bologna process was among the most important elements in building the

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<sup>1</sup> The event was organised in the frame of the six higher education strategic projects run by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding and funded by the European Social Fund, the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development.



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movement to consolidate a common European 'home' in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Participants in the conference considered that the Bologna process has become one of the most powerful symbols of 'European-ness' and is the home of common 'Enlightenment' values – in other words, a shared commitment to scientific and critical enquiry and to a scholarly and intellectual culture. Also common across Europe, despite significant differences in administrative regimes in higher education, was a commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

However, in the context of this 'Bologna heritage', the process was conceived in very different political and economic circumstances. The economic difficulties that began with the banking crisis in 2008 and are now culminating with the crisis in the Euro-zone in 2010-11 have created an entirely new context for Bologna, mainly characterised by increased pressure over social expenditure as state deficits increased, increasing levels of unemployment and the uncertainty about the eventual resolution of the economic crisis. It is in this new context that the Bologna Process has to be carried further.

To continue to have the same impact Bologna must 'go beyond Bologna' and become a more open and systematic process. While facing the synergies (but also the tensions) between national, European and global perspectives and policies, the Bologna Process can continue to act as a rallying point for reform.

Considering the ongoing evolution of the Bologna Process, it is possible to argue that Bologna has become a powerful brand. It is also possible to argue that other mainstream organisational and academic agendas are becoming increasingly related – however informally and tangentially – to the Bologna process. Among these, researchers put forward the following:

1. **Reforming university governance:** the implementation of national higher education reforms that have given greater autonomy to HEIs and also of Bologna 'action-lines' (and wider challenges presented by Europeanisation and globalisation) have made it imperative to reform how universities are governed;
2. **Strengthening university leadership and management:** the same challenges also make it equally imperative to enhance the leadership and management capacity of universities, by adopting what have sometimes been seen (and criticised) quasi-corporate practices. The fact that many Bologna 'action-lines', for example on compatible quality systems, place the responsibility firmly on institutions rather than state bureaucracies has reinforced this need;
3. **Promoting inter-disciplinarity:** several Bologna 'action-lines', such as the move to a three-cycle systems, and the emphasis on skills and employability in the Lisbon Declaration and linked agendas have encouraged a shift towards greater inter- and trans-disciplinarity. Although there have been other, more powerful, influences on the transformation of the pattern and content of higher education in Europe, the influence of Bologna has not been negligible;
4. **Stimulating entrepreneurship:** similar forces have also encouraged a shift to what has been termed the 'entrepreneurial university'. These forces have been expressed



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not simply in terms of inter-disciplinary courses but also of more applied, embedded and distributed modes of research. To some extent these changes also reflect the instrumental / neo-liberal pressures on all higher education systems, outside as well as inside Europe;

5. **Emphasising engagement:** in European terminology the 'social dimension' has been interpreted by some as code for a backwards-looking defence of the 'public' university and resistance to 'marketisation'. But new forms of social and cultural engagement, which reflect both the growth of mass university systems and also the globalisation of higher education, can also be subsumed under this label.

The extent to which all, or any, of these agendas can be attributed, even tangentially, to the Bologna process is open to debate. However, in two respects such an attribution can be defended. First, there is sufficient evidence that Bologna has either directly contributed to these agendas or at any rate opened up a space in which they can at least be discussed across Europe to form the basis of a plausible argument. Secondly, the links between these agendas and the Bologna process are reflexive rather than linear or causal. The overall effect is that Bologna has become a much more interesting cultural and intellectual project, and also a more creative policy arena, that could have been imagined when the original declaration was signed.

19 October 2011