

Bologna Process Researchers' Conference – The Future of Higher Education

second edition

Bucharest, 24-26 November 2014

Conference report

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I. Executive summary

The present report summarizes the conclusions and recommendations from the second Bologna Researchers' Conference, organized in Bucharest on 24-26 November 2014.

In particular, the report puts forward several conclusions and recommendations formulated with a view to informing the discussions and decisions at the upcoming Bologna Ministerial Conference (Yerevan, 14 – 15 May 2015). They refer to the following main themes:

- The current state of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area.
- The future of higher education in Europe.
- New priority areas for the development of higher education in Europe.
- The role of research vis-à-vis policy making in higher education.

The report also summarizes the conclusions and recommendations from the thematic sections of the conference, as follows:

- Financing and governance;
- Internationalisation;
- Education, research, and innovation;
- Quality assurance;
- Evidence-based policies in higher education: data analytics, impact assessment, and reporting;
- The impact of the Bologna Process in the EHEA and beyond;
- Teaching, learning, and student engagement;
- Excellence and diversification of higher education institutions' missions;
- Social dimension/equity.

II. About the conference

The Bologna Researchers' Conference aims primarily at providing research-based insight and recommendations to inform the discussions at the periodic gathering of the ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of Europe. As such, it represents a particular attempt to link research and higher education policy making in Europe.

Like the first edition (2011), the second Bologna Researchers' Conference was purposely organized ahead of a Bologna Ministerial Conference (Yerevan 2015, this time).

In retrospect, the first Researchers' Conference appeared to have fulfilled its objectives:

- The first edition was useful for policy makers, including by informing the discussions and conclusions of the Bucharest 2012 Bologna Ministerial Conference and its follow-up.
- The outcomes of the first edition contributed to creating a sense of anticipation, which led to the organization of the second edition.
- The first edition was useful for the community of researchers itself and for others interested in the insight provided. The papers presented at the 2011 conference have been compiled into a two-volume publication, and made available electronically and in print (*see: European Higher Education at the Crossroads – between the Bologna Process and National Reforms*, Springer 2012). To date, articles from the e-book have been downloaded almost 20,000 times and they are extensively cited in other studies, articles, and reports.

The Bologna Researchers' Conference addresses a clearly identifiable need for dialogue between researchers and other higher education stakeholders, and it is emerging as a useful new tradition in Europe.

The second edition of the Conference was co-hosted by the Romanian Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia (currently hosting the Bologna Secretariat), and the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Over 50 papers were presented in nine thematic sessions and about 180 participants attended, from almost all countries of Europe, as well as Canada, the United States, Thailand, Vietnam, and Australia. In addition, several broader panel discussions were organized with researchers, policy makers, university administrators, and leaders of international organisations from Europe and other parts of the world.

The conference brought together established and up-and-coming researchers who study developments in the European Higher Education Area while paying attention to national, as well as broader international and global trends and developments in higher education. The participants represented different types of organisations, primarily universities and research institutes, but also student organizations, professional organizations, governments, and international organizations.

The conference had a research and policy agenda, not a political one. It was not intended as a representative gathering of the community of researchers in a formal sense. The conclusions and recommendations from the Conference do not claim to articulate the views of the entire community of researchers.

Another important characteristic of the conference was its inclusive character: basically all strands of research in higher education were represented, from strongly theoretically oriented to applied policy research; from independent academic research to commissioned studies; and from research based on sophisticated methodological approaches to reflective inquiry by professionals and practitioners in higher education and higher education policy.

The main thrust of the conference was different from that of a typical academic/disciplinary oriented conference. It consisted of ***a concerted effort to identify key policy lessons based on the research conducted in this broad area so that to be able to put forward concrete conclusions and recommendations for the Ministerial Conference.*** Special attention was given to the positive contributions and shortcomings of the Bologna Process to date, and also to lessons that could inform the discussion about ***the future of higher education in Europe.***

Several of the conclusions and recommendations from the second Bologna Researchers' Conference appear to be novel in their character. They reflect the recent progress of the research in this area and consider new and emerging developments and trends.

III. Main conclusions

1. The state of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

The Bologna Process represents an unprecedented, ambitious and original European initiative. It has a mixed record of important and genuine achievements and also missed opportunities and failures.

It is important to emphasize that the Bologna Process stimulated or helped to promote and implement important reforms and developments in many European countries and higher education institutions.

The Bologna process has had a practical impact, noticeable and positive in many respects. Clear and significant contributions have been made in a number of areas, including, for example, quality assurance, structure of degrees, or internationalization of higher education.

One of the most important contributions of the Bologna process has been ***the creation of a European space for dialogue in higher education, which is unique in the world.*** This space for dialogue in turn made possible the emergence of new concepts and a new vocabulary, new tools and new policies and practices in higher education, with genuine value for the countries of Europe. It is important to stress than more than just a ***space for dialogue*** (or just for “discussion” or policy learning), the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area also created a platform to inform decision-making and stimulate and support ***practical action*** in higher education at the European, national and institutional levels.

The Bologna Process has attracted a lot of attention in other parts of the world, and **elements of the Bologna Process or the European Higher Education Area serve as references, source of inspiration, or as models for similar initiatives in South East Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the United States.** This phenomenon speaks for the value of the Bologna Process.

After 15 years of Bologna Process, ***many practitioners in higher education, including academic and administrative staff members, students and student organizations, but also representatives of public authorities and the business sector, have internalized the spirit of the Bologna Process, support and promote this spirit, if not the formal full process as such.*** This is true even in countries where the official government attitude is cold towards Bologna, if not simply away from Bologna. One could in fact speak of a large degree of support for the Bologna Process in Europe, with millions of anonymous but committed volunteer promoters of the spirit, ideas, and specific initiatives of the Process. This is a sociological reality that must not and cannot be ignored by policy makers, while at the same time also acknowledging existing opposition and discontent.

2. The future of higher education in Europe

The project of a European Higher Education Area continues to have important potential for promoting and supporting further positive developments in higher education and for addressing challenges at the national and European level.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the conditions of its initial design have changed. Europe has changed and the world has changed since the start of the Bologna Process. The policies, mechanisms, and tools promoted by the Bologna Process that are available today in the countries of Europe are by and large useful. However, they are linked to an older design. Currently, these policies and tools might not represent the best answer to the question “are we ready for the future?”. **This situation makes a fundamental re-thinking of how a European common space for higher education could continue necessary. For this, we could build on the positive experiences and achievements to date.**

We need to re-think “Bologna” fundamentally, if we are to keep this **name** altogether in the future, but we should not abandon the “Bologna” **idea**. ***For that, however, a new vision is needed, not just technical adjustments.***

A European common space for higher education should continue to rely on voluntary governance structures (no hard law). As such, it should allow joint policy learning, and it should help to ***inform decision-making and practical action, coordinated or individually, in order to address new and emerging national challenges, first, and then also European challenges.***

The European Higher Education Area goes well beyond the European Union. It benefits significantly from but does not rely in an existential manner on the work and support of EU institutions. The project of a European common space for higher education is related to but not identical or fully dependent on the European integration process as a political process. **It is important to acknowledge that a European common space for higher education can continue to exist and play a positive role in the future even though the European integration process might be stalled or even in some ways reversed.**

3. The role of research vis-à-vis policy making in higher education

Policy making in all European countries is hindered by the lack of sufficient evidence, data, information and professional insight that could be used efficiently.

Research in higher education is a developing field in Europe and elsewhere in the world. ***Europe***, however, ***already has a vibrant community of higher education researchers.*** This community is indeed a ***European community of researchers***, rather than being organized on a national basis, considering the scope and the depth of the research conducted, their policy aspirations, and also the nature of professional communication among researchers.

Research in higher education could contribute significantly to bridging the gap between policy-making responsibilities and the availability of reliable evidence and professional insight more generally. This potential has been only very moderately exploited to date.

IV. Recommendations for the Yerevan Ministerial Conference

1. We recommend that the Ministers re-affirm the significance of a substantial European dialogue and coordinated efforts in higher education, within a common European space for higher education.
2. We recommend that the Ministers affirm the need to develop a new vision for the European Area of Higher Education. This new vision should consider new developments in Europe and in the world, build on achievements to date in the European Higher Education Area, and address new and emerging challenges at national level first, then at the European level. This new vision might require a revised/refined understanding of governance in a European common space for higher education, as well as the identification of new priority areas, some of which are suggested in the detailed conclusions and recommendations of this conference.
3. One of the main shortcomings of the Bologna Process has been the exaggerated emphasis on structures and bureaucratic ways of implementation, at the detriment of content and substance of higher education. To correct this situation, we recommend that the Ministers designate teaching and learning, including lifelong learning, as a priority area for the immediately following period. Moreover, we recommend to the Ministers to mandate a working group to identify ways in which to promote the advancement of teaching and learning within the context of the Bologna Process even before an overall re-thinking eventually takes place.
4. We recommend to the Ministers to affirm the importance of various strands of research in higher education for higher education policy making. We recommend that the Ministers mandate a working group to identify models (including building on already existing projects in this area) and ways in which a more effective relationship could be promoted between research and policy making in countries of the European Higher Education Area. We suggest that existing EU funding could be considered in this context.

V. Conclusions and recommendations from the thematic sections of the conference

1. Financing and governance

Findings:

- The concept of performance-based funding is differently understood in Europe and it is reflected in different policies and practices across European countries.
- It appears that financial aid policies for students from underrepresented groups are underdeveloped, as opposed to merit-based support. There is a need to provide more attention to low-income students and students from minorities.
- We witness worrying discrepancies in the level of funding for research between post-communist EHEA countries and the countries of Western Europe, the U.S.A., and the Far East.
- Efficient public funding needs agreement on the goals, continuous consultation with the sector, proper regulatory frameworks, and effective assessment of the funding measures and their impact (both wanted and unwanted).
- Funding of internationalisation is a severely understudied area (who funds what, in which way, with what effects).

Recommendations

- It remains important to study more thoroughly the impact of various funding policies and tools. Moreover, there is also a need for a more structured approach in gathering data regarding financing of higher education. Concentrated European efforts might support faster progress in this area, as it is shown by the experiences of the European University Funding Forum, or the EUA Public Funding Observatory.
- It is important that the higher education sector be involved in co-designing the funding formulae. Funding mechanisms should be clear about their aims and purposes. Their impact at the institutional level needs to be considered.
- In the design and implementation of policies for funding for excellence, regional inequalities should be considered as well.
- Academic prestige comes primarily from research, not from teaching. There is a need however to promote and reward good teaching, including through appropriate funding policies and incentives.
- There is a need for further research regarding the identification and needs of underrepresented groups in to provide better support measures, (including by analysing the impact of fees on students).

2. Internationalisation

Findings and recommendations:

- Internationalization strategies are influenced by a variety of drivers and also by context-dependent starting points. National policies in this field should be clear about their intended purposes, as well as about the role of public authorities in supporting HEIs in their efforts to pursue specific purposes. This is key to positioning countries and institutions.

Internationalization should be approached with a clear purpose and intention. It should not “just happen”.

- Specific strategic approaches need to be developed for achieving specific outcomes. For example, in the case of internationalization at home, key aspects to be considered are: developing appropriate teaching and learning strategies, strategies for the development of intercultural competences, structured staff development strategies, or appropriate and effective assessment strategies.
- Ethics and internationalization need be embedded in order for higher education to contribute to sustainable development.
- Mobility policies should shift to becoming a European responsibility; if the EHEA goals in this field are to be achieved, all EHEA students should benefit from the same conditions as the EU students. This might mean *inter alia* access to transparent EHEA-wide information on admission and funding in the different countries and institutions.
- There is need for more evidence-based policy making in the area of internationalization, and also for more willingness to reassess goals based on emerging evidence. For example, mobility imbalances might not be always detrimental to internationalization. Imbalances might need to be addressed, however, when one of the affected parties feels such a need, and in a way that does not limit freedom of movement. EHEA goals in this area (e.g. increased and balanced mobility) might need to be readjusted, as one of the EHEA goals is indeed increased attractiveness, but it is a fact that the most attractive HE systems are rarely seeing balanced mobility flows.
- More research is needed regarding: the influence of institutional differentiation and concentration of resources (mergers, alliances) on internationalization trends; internationalization at home; the understanding and the definition of internationalization; effects and uses of mainstream internationalization policies ‘at the periphery’ (including in both countries and HEIs ‘at the periphery’).

3. Education, research, and innovation

Findings and recommendations:

- There is a general agreement that doctoral graduates should produce an original contribution to the development of knowledge and that they should also achieve a broad set of competences beyond the delivery of a definite piece of research. For this, what is needed are clear policies and mechanisms to support and promote independence, interdisciplinarity, and achievement of generic/transferrable competences as part of doctoral programs.
- Supervisors play a key role in ensuring that candidates achieve a broader set of competencies and in guiding them in the development of their research careers. More adequate training and support for supervisors should be considered. In addition, the relationship between the institution and the doctoral candidate/early stage researcher should be clarified and approved in advance. It is necessary to clarify the roles and expectations of all parties involved in order to make the best use of all available competence and institutional assets.
- Doctoral candidates are often too narrowly evaluated. There are several unintended consequences of the use of present standards for assessing candidates (such as by single monographs or single authored publications).

- There is a need for internationally agreed standards to evaluate/compare the competences achieved by doctoral students, based on the expected learning outcomes of doctoral programs, be they oriented more towards academic careers or careers outside the academe. We should make the best use of the tools that researchers have put on the table and not try to reinvent the wheel (e.g. Bologna tools, Tuning experiences, and the researcher professionalism model).
- It is important to promote international collaborations and large European infrastructures for research in order to counter brain drain.

4. Quality assurance

Findings:

- Quality assurance is applied very differently in Europe and it is reflected in different policies and practices in different European countries. Practices vary between accreditation driven systems and quality enhancement driven systems. In some systems the distinction between external and internal quality assurance is not evident for academics and the administrative staff.
- The staff is often critical of a close link between quality assurance and funding.
- It appears that the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) guide national and institutional practices, but the ESG are not commonly referenced or known outside the quality assurance community in many EHEA countries.
- There is a need to pay more attention to the role of students in institutional quality assurance and further develop practices for the use of course evaluations.
- Transnational quality assurance has both benefits and challenges for higher education institutions, and its use is often related to the implementation of an internationalization strategy. In many countries, the national legislative framework is nevertheless inhibiting such reviews.

Recommendations:

Higher education institutions should consider:

- To use the revised ESG for creating a quality culture where all stakeholders within the institution feel that they can contribute to the development of learning and teaching.
- To further develop internal frameworks to support the quality of the student experience by focusing more on liminalities and thresholds in order to improve participation and retention rates.
- To define critical points in students' experience and put in place more innovative and nuanced support structures to equip students with threshold capital.
- To improve communication and information internally and externally regarding channels or paths of progression in order to manage student expectations better.
- To improve data collection. At present, significant parts of the necessary evidence/data are often not available, which does not allow a good understanding of the quality assurance situation.

Governments should consider:

- To create forums for dialogue and communication in quality assurance at national level.

- To find solutions for opening higher education systems to cross-border quality assurance, in order to enhance internationalisation.
- To reduce bureaucratic reporting requirements in quality assurance.
- To consider for the purpose of quality assurance the broader contexts and factors influencing higher education, such as: demography, globalisation, technology, responsibility of higher education towards society, poverty, climate, or sustainable development.
- To consider that quality is a multidimensional concept and that it is determined by other processes outside quality assurance-proper as well.
- To create avenues for better dialogue between research and decision-making. The new ESG might serve to open excellent new opportunities for dialogue.

5. Evidence-based policies in higher education: data analytics, impact assessment, and reporting

Findings:

- There is a growing number of studies and assessments in higher education to support evidence-based policies. More and more governments and donor agencies are asking for such studies.
- It is important to communicate the research results in a language that is specific for and understandable to policy makers.
- Contracted research is often perceived as “second” or “third class” research because it brings the feeling that is commissioned by certain institutions to legitimize their decisions.
- Demand for higher education has increased everywhere throughout the last two decades. It is important to have more evidence about financial aid or study aid policies and tools as a way of informing policies about how to address this increased demand efficiently.
- Existing studies on cost-sharing show that, in general, public funds to institutions do not decrease as private funds increase. The introduction/increase of tuition fees usually makes the system better-off overall, by increasing the total amount of resources.
- In general, responsiveness as a result of cost-sharing is less marked in traditional universities and more clearly visible in new institutions.
- Cost-sharing strategies call for integrative approaches to institutional funding and student aid.
- Fees are not all that matters when we look at the level of inclusiveness of higher education.

Recommendations:

- It is important to develop data systems at national level, as well as data systems that allow cross-country comparisons.
- At organizational level, it is important to create efficient mechanisms that allow the study and assessment of internal activities and work, in relation to external factors, as a way to supporting the achievement of the institutional mission.
- At macro-level, it would be important to have policy-makers as active partners in promoting research in higher education and in exploiting the results of this research in a transparent and efficient way.
- It is important to continue exploring the links between research and policy making at the institutional, national, and European level. This should include exploring the role of research in the policy process, policy advice, policy support, and policy assessment.

- In the countries of Europe, there might be a need to “stop reforming”. Instead, the policy discourse and the policy process proper could concentrate on the creation of a space for science to flourish; rethinking incentive structure to align with values of policy reforms; and professionalizing Bologna implementation further.

6. The impact of the Bologna Process in the EHEA and beyond

Recommendations:

- In order to respond to the increasing need for global cooperation in the field of recognition, a meta-coordination mechanism for regional recognition conventions could be explored, or the feasibility of a Global Recognition Convention.
- Research should be encouraged on the actual implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as the UNESCO recognition conventions for other regions of the world.
- Dialogue should be encouraged to increase experience sharing and peer learning between and among countries and institutions, to understand, motivate the use of and make more sustainable the use of common tools for the advancement of the EHEA in the coming decade.
- The Bologna Policy Forum can be more effectively used in order to improve policy cooperation with the rest of the world. High level meetings linked to ministerial conferences need to be complemented by more focused meetings between policy makers and practitioners on specific topics.
- The Bologna process can consider the ASEAN flexible institutional design as a useful source for reflecting on European practices and on the future of Bologna in Europe.
- There is a need for a redefinition or renewal of the core objectives of the Bologna Process (a call for a new ‘dynamism’). The Bologna Process should continue as a tool for policy learning and contribute to increasing national and institutional debates rather than restricting them.
- Research should be encouraged about governance models that might encompass both policy learning and a common space in higher education in which members commit to a measure of common policies to further mobility and equal opportunities for students and faculty throughout the EHEA.

7. Teaching, learning, and student engagement

Findings:

- The demography of student population and the high participation of non-traditional students in mass higher education, the growing global interconnectedness, the development of educational technology and proliferation of digital media, and the increasing competition in higher education have profound implications on teaching and learning. The changes in the higher education environment are outpacing advances in scholarship, policy reforms and institutional practice. Much of teaching and learning in European classrooms happens without taking into account the latest scholarship in this area or the changes in the student population and higher education environment.
- Teaching and learning is a broad field and it comprises a number of areas with fast evolving research agendas. Some basic questions, such as who are today’s students, how do they learn,

what motivates them, how do we know what they learn, etc. have still not been satisfactorily answered.

- There is unevenness in the policy initiatives and structural support for the advancement of teaching and learning in higher education in Europe. Some countries have no policies and dedicated instruments to support teaching and learning.
- The differences among individual institutions are significant in terms of structures and processes for promoting excellence in teaching and learning. It is nevertheless uncommon that higher education teachers are left fully to their own devices to improve their teaching (or not).
- The European cooperation to modernise teaching and learning in higher education has so far been fragmented and in lack of any overarching strategy.

Recommendations:

- Concerted effort is needed among European governments and other higher education stakeholders, including higher education researchers, to advance excellence in teaching and learning in European higher education.
- Cross-country exchange of knowledge and collaborative projects for advancement of scholarship in teaching and learning is called for, especially in the following areas:
 - o Instructional methods, tools and technologies and learning environments (active and effective learning; reflective learning and teaching; educational technology; digital learning environments and online education)
 - o Authentic assessment of student learning and student experience (consequences of different grading and assessment practices on student learning; standardised versus individualised practices of assessment; student surveys and qualitative methods to investigate student learning and experience)
 - o Student motivation, self-regulation and student engagement (self-regulated learning; sense of belonging and ownership; student learning outside academic tasks; student engagement in extracurricular activities; student social networks; challenges for non-traditional students)
- Joint initiatives within the EHEA would be helpful to help translate scholarship into policy and practice through joint policy development, policy learning, and support for capacity-building for research, education and training in the area of teaching and learning at the European, national and institutional levels (teaching and learning institutes/agencies/research groups, and institutional units for excellence in teaching and learning).

8. Excellence and diversification of higher education institutions' missions

Findings:

- The expansion and quality of higher education are key for the development of modern economies.
- Most countries are concerned about and promote policy reflection and work on the quality of their existing higher education institutions.
- Very often governments are not happy with the slow evolution of their higher education systems and the global standing of their universities. They push higher education institutions to compete internationally by setting goals in this area and sometimes by offering additional

funding to achieve them. Usually the changes in rankings position are considered as the main outcomes of these actions.

- Excellence initiatives are observed in a large number of countries. Positive changes usually take place in the universities participating in excellence policies. The challenge is to continue the push for excellence while respecting autonomy and the culture of self-development.
- With the increased influence of rankings, the international research university becomes the gold standard for all institutions.
- Rankings provide a partial picture of what a university is and does. It remains an open question whether ranking measures are related to measures of quality assurance or organizational effectiveness.
- Ranking methodologies are not immutable but have changed over the years.
- Rankings have a significant impact on public opinion and decision makers.

Recommendations:

- More data is needed in order to be able to assess the impact of excellence initiatives.
- A larger set of indicators should be used to demonstrate the third mission of universities.
- Universities need to be visionary centres of sustainability, innovation, and excellence. It is fundamental for the future of universities to promote the integration of sustainability indicators into standard university rankings not only for assessment purposes, but also for spreading a sustainable perspective in all academic institutions.

9. Social dimension/equity

Findings and recommendations:

- There is an overall need for the re-definition of the social dimension in the EHEA. This re-definition must include closer attention to the relevance of local contexts for the social dimension.
- Progress on the social dimension requires developing monitoring, advising and peer learning. In this context, EHEA needs strategies to adapt to changing diversity.
- There is a clear need for more data in this area in order to be able to define the underrepresented groups and their needs, as well as to better identify issues of equity. It would be useful to have targets set for data collection (including more targeted data, more relevant, more specific) as part of policies geared towards the social dimension.
- One of the main challenges with regard to the social dimension is the lack of action, although the social dimension is a pre-condition to achieve the Bologna agreed-upon objectives.
- A national strategy is recommended for the allocation of funds meant to support the social dimension, with explicit targets, measures and plans.
- More frequent policy evaluation is needed in the area of social dimension.
- Supplementary mechanisms of support for Roma students coming from poor or traditional backgrounds need to be developed.
- Information and communication campaigns to improve public perception of the problems of groups with special needs should be undertaken (especially looking at the information that reaches the parents and potential candidates).
- In universities, good practice examples should be rewarded in order to motivate a change of attitude and the proactive construction of internal mechanisms in support of vulnerable groups.

- Universities need to increasingly adapt to addressing student needs and to move beyond a reactive and passive attitude, which is not aligned with the Bologna process.
- Lifelong learning is becoming an important equity driver.