

Governance and funding in times of ruptured developments in Europe

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Developments outside higher education in Europe affect its course today and they will influence its future. This has always been the case, of course. Except that the current period is not just one of business as usual. We are living in times of significant changes, rupture and junction points feeding into new trajectories.

We cannot analyze and understand the present of higher education in Europe and we cannot talk about its future, gauge it, unless we acknowledge and try to understand major historical evolutions we are living through at this time. It would be an illusion to do otherwise. It would be an illusion concentrate on just some some kind of technical scrutiny of what is going on already, just inside higher education alone. Times are changing, and not from within higher education itself.

There is still a lot that is continuing from former times, there is some degree of stability, even inertia, and that too must be studied and acknowledged. We also need to acknowledge what is changing, the new emerging paradigms. If we are not able to identify them as yet, we can at least identify some major questions we have to ask.

Looking back into the last 15-20 years, one can easily notice that broader aspirations and processes, beyond the sector, helped higher education become central to the European experience, probably more than ever before.

Higher education, in particular through the Bologna Process, became a key tool to advance the European construction. European politicians and also the then supporting European “public” bet on higher education and on Bologna not simply to promote reforms here and there, but actually to help build a European ethos and perhaps even a European demos. I am talking of Bologna as a whole here, or most of it, not just of its dimension regarding intra-European mobility, which was directly geared towards achieving these objectives.

Politicians and policy makers supported Bologna not because they were interested that much in higher education, but because they were interested in Europe. Higher education was a tool for building Europe, which is not even bad. The European Union institutions starting with the Commission, also supported higher education very forcefully, not only nominally at political discourse level, but also through active initiatives, policies, regulations, and funding, in particular after the launched of the Lisbon strategy in 2000. Here again, higher education was not an objective in itself, but a tool. It was supposed and asked to help bring about stronger social cohesion and economic development in Europe.

Most governments of the continent as well supported higher education for the same reasons. Thus, until recently higher education thrived in Europe, supported by the strong policy narratives of the European construction and knowledge societies, supposed to bring about better integrated societies, with higher economic competitiveness, better employment landscape, and social cohesion.

It is also important to remember that, from an even broader perspective, until recently all this was also made possible by what looked like a triumphal march of democracy after the fall of the communist regimes of the East.

In our part of the world, which is Europe, the buzzwords words that mattered for higher education during all this time were democracy, Europe, social cohesion, economic development, and jobs of course. This is what made Bologna and the European Higher Education Area possible. This is why almost all European countries supported higher education and promoted their own reforms in the sector.

Now times are changing. That is because in many places where democracy was a genuine commitment (not just a buzzword) and democratic development a genuine reality, not just discourse, we now witness authoritarianism, populism, or what is called with cynical self-flattery “illiberal democracy”.

Where we used to hear talk about Europe, we now hear Brexit and about governments calling to “stop Brussels”, even when their citizens had voted earlier overwhelmingly in earlier referenda to join the Brussels, to join the EU. Where we used to hear talk about genuine concern among politicians for seeking economic development and social solidarity and shared benefits from economic developments, now we hear almost open talk about institutionalized corruption at state level, captive states or even of mafia states.

How will this influence the future of higher education on the continent and in its countries? How is it influencing its present already?

Will the support for higher education diminish in the years to come? Will higher education become again less central for the European experience, including in the individual countries that compose Europe?

Of course these emerging trends are not happening equally in all quarters and parts of Europe. The European Union remains committed to the knowledge society narrative and thus to higher education. Many national governments share this commitment, in their own ways, and continue to act nationally as if higher education was indeed something to be treasured. But even in such countries, times seems to be changing. Germany, for example, remains one of the champions of betting on higher education to sustain its economic and social model and high standards of living. The newly emerging political force, however, are at least skeptical about higher education, and many in the country begin to realize that. If these new forces accede to power, or just closer to power, how would that play for higher education institutions?

Our conference is the Bologna researchers’ conference, but it is not only about Bologna. As it is also about the future of higher education, some questions we need to ask are:

- What is the future of the European Higher Education area now that the European integration process is stalled, or perhaps reversed?
- Should the EHEA continue after Brexit? Is that possible? There are many arguments in favor, but will it happen? Will EHEA remain the same? How can this be done? What is the role of the ministers, to whom we are going to report, in making it happen? Who else is important and can play a role in this?
- What do governments, the public and those working in higher education education need to know about the changing narratives and policies that are or will impact on higher education? What should we tell them, as researchers?

- How should higher education institutions position themselves? This is not an easy question, and it does not apply in the same way to higher education institutions in all European countries, some are already under severe pressure. It is still an important question, whether we are asking it about universities in Turkey (some of which were closed down, what can they do?), in Hungary (where autonomy has all but evaporated already), in Germany, or in the UK, or in any other country of Europe.

The papers on the section on governance and funding look both emerging movement and continuing development. The accent is, however, mainly at continuing trends in these areas of higher education, at the interaction between the supra-national (European), the national and the institutional level. They look at governance and funding as tools for political steering in the hands of the government, as internal tools for higher education themselves that are used for universities to go about their business, but also, in particular in the case of governance, as defining characteristics of higher education institutions related to values and institutional identity, that need to be understood and promoted beyond being simple operational principles or tools.