Bologna Process Researchers' Conference
Future of Higher Education

The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference, fifth edition (FOHE-BPRC5)
Bucharest, 25-26 March 2024

Conference report

The [Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC)](#) has become a significant event within the European higher education landscape, with numerous participants from all around the world. These conferences have been strategically scheduled before the Ministerial Conferences since 2011, fostering ongoing discussions between researchers and policymakers. The key findings from the FOHE Conferences were then shared at the EHEA Ministerial Conferences, whenever possible, ensuring that the perspectives of researchers were more effectively communicated to European policymakers and decision-makers.

The fifth edition of the Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC) took place in Bucharest on 25 – 26 March 2024, bringing together more than 100 higher education researchers, policy makers and practitioners from almost 20 countries, to discuss key developments in the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The event was organized by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), in partnership with the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) and the University of Bucharest, under the High Patronage of the President of Romania.

This event facilitated discussions on the achievements of the Bologna Process and critically analyzed the emerging challenges in **five thematic areas**: (1) internationalization, between new challenges and opportunities; (2) access, inclusion and employability; (3) fundamental values and the Bologna Process; (4) digitalization and its policy and ethical implications; and (5) innovative teaching and learning for a sustainable student-centered learning. Rooted in a diverse selection of articles presented throughout the two days, the sessions were moderated by well-known experts in the field and encouraged lively debates amongst the participants. Both in the introductory part and the concluding panel, the thematic coordinators and participants discussed on the achievements of the Bologna Process on the dedicated topics, but also critically analyzed the challenges awaiting in the following years.

The main outcomes and conclusions of the event, for each section, are highlighted below.

Internationalization of Higher Education – beyond 2020 EHEA targets

The internationalization of higher education has been profoundly influenced by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, rising nationalism, particularly in high-income countries, and debates on migration, all of which impact internationalization. These factors continue to pose significant challenges to the internationalization efforts within higher education. While internationalization ideally implies collaboration, recent trends indicate a much more anti-international climate – growing focus on individual opportunities rather than cooperative efforts, placing research collaborations increasingly under pressure. It remains crucial that higher educational institutions foster a comprehensive understanding of internationalization, including as part of their third mission, contribution to society.

It is however important to recognize the progress made since earlier conferences, for example there have been advancements in internationalization at home initiatives, such as virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning (COIL). Given the diverse societies throughout the world, true internationalization of higher education implies, inter alia, working with people from diverse backgrounds and fostering inclusive, collaborative environments for mutual learning. The challenge lies in recognizing that diversity in domestic contexts is also a powerful tool in driving progress.

Some **key messages** on internationalization of higher education emerged during the Conference.

Internationalization of higher education has become a transversal topic for the Conference, since all thematic sessions had papers tackling the topic from various perspectives, but also beyond. However, it further requires striking a delicate balance between fostering collaboration and embracing healthy competition, and between international academic cooperation and European and national security. Strengthening the link between internationalization and European values is in this context essential.
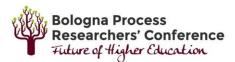
The results of the latest EAIE Barometer, presented during the conference, also highlighted the challenges and opportunities related to internationalization, providing insights into how internationalization has become much more decentralized and integrated into institutions compared to ten years ago. Internationalization has evolved into a more comprehensive process, yet there remains a strong need for capacity building at both the management level and within the structures of HEIs.

Boosting research on internationalization and broadening networks among PhD students and emerging researchers is also crucial, as well as addressing the support needs for mobile students, including degree mobility versus credit mobility. Additionally, it is important to motivate students through active promotion of the European Higher Education Area initiatives, such as "Study in Europe" and "Study in [Country]," Brands (such as 'Study in Romania'), and overcoming barriers in the development and long-term sustainability of the European Universities Alliances.

The expansion and impact of the internationalization of higher education should be noted, yet there continues to be a need to adequately address the third mission of HEIs, and the third cycle, internationalization at doctoral level. Both of these should receive greater attention in the Bologna Process going forward.

Access, inclusion, completion and employability – responding to the needs of students and society

Significant progress has been made in terms of equity in education over the last two decades, especially when it comes to access to higher education which is largely no longer an issue in Europe. However, in many countries, there are still distinct elite pathways of access and success, such as selective Grandes Écoles versus open access universities in France, a division between universities and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, or more general issues related to the participation of women in STEAM programs.

Despite improved access, graduation remains a challenge, and success is not guaranteed for many students. The outcomes in higher education are heavily influenced by the quality and effectiveness of pre-tertiary education, which in turn is often correlated with the socio-economic origin of students. It is also critical for students to feel a sense of belonging when they enter universities, especially elite ones, which requires a combination of interventions to help them overcome both financial and non-monetary obstacles, such as academic preparation, motivation, and information. Indeed, a significant difficulty in higher education today is the misalignment between the organizational culture of higher education institutions and the diverse cultures of their students, especially those coming from traditionally under-represented groups. This disconnect often results in students not feeling welcome in elite universities, leading to academic underperformance or failure.

Additionally, there remains a pressing need to focus more on the transition from higher education to the labor market. Understanding and identifying equity target groups is essential for adjusting institutional policies in order to address their specific needs and help them prepare for the world of work. There is growing evidence that personal and social identities still impact job prospects, regardless of one's education.

Not least, there is has been a growing backlash against the equity agenda in recent years: despite the assumption that equity is a given in any democratic society, the anti-equity movement is gaining traction worldwide. In certain places not long ago considered democratic, terms like *equity* and *social justice* are being banned, and the anti-LGBTQ agenda is gaining momentum. This shift poses significant challenges to the progress made in promoting equity and inclusion in higher education.

The Conference debates and presentations underlined a few **important takeaways** on the topic.

Improved qualitative and quantitative data gathering on equity groups is necessary to better understand the current barriers faced by students from underprivileged groups, learn from existing good practices, and improve access and inclusion overall. There should be an intensified analysis of underrepresented groups, to include all disadvantaged groups beyond geographical distinctions. This approach is crucial for effective policy development and targeted interventions. Higher Education Institutions should place more emphasis on identifying all types of disadvantaged groups.

Equity-related criteria should be included in Quality Assurance agencies' frameworks and criteria to encourage higher education institutions to target diverse groups and all types of disadvantaged groups. Additionally, there should be greater openness to developing diverse methodologies for engaging various target groups. Finally, there should be an enhanced focus on recognition of prior learning and learning assessments.

When it comes to the connection with the labor market, HEIs face challenges in adjusting their study programs to the labor market, particularly when it comes to transversal competencies to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist. First-generation students, in particular, were found to benefit more from internships and other practical experiences, while students from disadvantaged equity groups tend to have worse outcomes in the labor market.

When analyzing equity groups, having better data, both qualitative and quantitative, is key, allowing for more relevant conclusions. While the research papers focused on new topics and new underrepresented

groups, these analyses still mostly focus on a geographical approach, when more emphasis should be put on all relevant social dimensions and the intersectionality across these groups. Not least, HEIs should pay more attention to identifying and understanding new types of disadvantaged groups to better address their particular needs.

Building an EHEA furthering the fundamental values of higher education

A dedicated section of the conference scrutinized the remarkable developments in the EHEA with regard to the fundamental values of higher education, which have been unfolding in particular after the adoption of the 2018 Paris Ministerial Communiqué. EHEA has witnessed both major challenges to the fundamental values and significant, some even unprecedented, coordinated efforts to address them. EHEA members have created a new and highly promising new policy framework, or framework of reference, unique in the world, for safeguarding the fundamental values of higher education. This framework includes a common, definite list of fundamental values, shared conceptual references for each and, hopefully very soon, a mechanism to promote their implementation in practice. Under the supervision of the BFUG and the EHEA Working Group for the Fundamental Values of Higher Education, the NewFAV Erasmus+ project has put forward a methodology and tools showing how this can be done.

All EHEA countries face specific issues, but they also experience similar challenges regarding the fundamental values of higher education. Understanding and addressing these challenges through peer learning is a crucial working method in the EHEA. For this, research can help. In fact, important research has already been undertaken in this area, and the topic has now been put on the Bologna Process Researchers' Conference agenda for the first time. The conference reviewed some of the most important research-based recommendations available already and discussed a few specific that have been put forward for consideration by EHEA Ministers of Education at their Tirana conference on May 29 – 30, 2024.

Following the presentations and debates in this section, several **conclusions** emerged:

EHEA needs to further strengthen the emphasis on fundamental values. Continuing discussions in academic and research circles should help with and facilitate policy developments. Given the relative novelty of the very concept of fundamental values, further research and scholarship should help develop and refine theoretical models and methodologies to study, assess or monitor them, etc. The current process of developing a monitoring framework within the framework of the NewFAV Erasmus+ project is an excellent illustration in this regard, arising from a specific request of the ministers. It will hopefully also to be reflected in the upcoming Tirana Ministerial Communiqué. Rather than focusing on the values themselves, let alone on "measuring" them, the monitoring framework will emphasize the commitments made by EHEA member states to uphold these fundamental values and indicate how to benchmark progress in this regard, as a way to promote policy dialogue and peer learning, for the purpose of safeguarding these values in the EHEA. It is important that the proposals put forward by the BFUG Working Group on Fundamental Values, along with the associated monitoring framework, be adopted in Tirana.

The fundamental values of higher education are not only about rights and freedoms. They are also about duties and obligations – for public authorities, higher education institutions and individual members of

the academic community. Efforts are being made for an improved and balanced policy dialogue between public authorities and HEIs, supplemented by research and peer learning on fundamental values to emphasize their central role in higher education, and address violations. Academic staff are encouraged to discuss fundamental values in their classes and to initiate open dialogues with students, fostering a deeper understanding and commitment to these essential principles.

Research has already contributed significantly to this policy area. Area. However, there is need for even more research on the topic. The idea of a common framework of reference was introduced through research at the European level, highlighting how policy ideas and models can travel and be adopted across borders globally, and specifically in the transnational common space for dialogue and practice in higher education that is the EHEA. This cross-pollination of ideas is remarkable and essential for the continued development and implementation of the fundamental values in higher education as well.

Digitalization and the Future of European Higher Education: Implications for Public Policies

The participants at the conference tried to identify the main risks associated with digitalization (e.g. with AI) and possible approaches to mitigate them. It was acknowledged that the speed of change in digitalization is immense, rapidly progressing from weak signals to trends, and then to mega-trends. This unprecedented rate of change has been significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the society in general – and education in particular – should not merely be driven by these changes; instead, all those involved should be prepared to actively drive the change. There are numerous publications that discuss the risks, opportunities, challenges, and impact of digitalization and, more recently, of AI, on education, and it is up to researchers to engage in meaningful discussions about these changes and their long-term implications.

Both from the papers presented and additional debates, some ideas clearly took form.

The rapid advancement of digitalization and artificial intelligence presents both significant challenges and opportunities for higher education. Important ethical concerns such as data privacy, biases and impact of AI on the society must also be addressed. It is crucial to have harmonized regulations to ensure consistent standards across institutions and countries, thus allowing a responsible and equitable use of these technologies.

To enhance access and quality, higher education must integrate innovative digital tools, courses, and platforms. This includes the development of digital hubs, providing access to cutting-edge technologies and learning materials, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and flexible learning opportunities to all students.

In the future, higher education should integrate digitalization and AI in all its aspects, while also establishing better partnerships with industry. These collaborations can drive innovation, ensuring that curricula are aligned with the latest standards and technological advancements. Such academia-industry partnerships, with support from digital tools, can offer students practical, hands-on experiences, preparing them for the jobs of tomorrow.

The European Universities Initiative has established a network of higher education institutions across Europe that can collectively tackle emerging challenges. As part of this initiative, support structures should be established to assist HEIs in navigating the complexities of digitalization and AI, by providing resources, training, and expertise to help institutions implement innovative educational practices and technologies. By fostering collaboration and sharing best practices, the European Universities Initiative can enhance the overall quality and competitiveness of higher education in Europe.

Innovative teaching and learning towards a sustainable and effective student-centered learning

The Conference looked at what EHEA can do to promote innovative teaching and learning, given the contrast between the overarching role of EHEA and the need for grassroots approaches.
Policy experimentation is essential in higher education to adapt and address emerging challenges and opportunities. This approach allows institutions to test new policies and strategies on a small scale before implementing them widely, ensuring they reach their intended purpose.

Some challenges that need to be addressed in the future to better promote innovative teaching and learning and student-centered learning were identified by those present.

The changing profile of students – both traditional and non-traditional students- is becoming more prominent. This shift requires a re-evaluation of educational approaches to respond to diverse learning needs. Higher education teaching staff also face a new, evolving role, particularly in adapting their teaching methods to a more student-centered approach and incorporating AI and other advanced technologies.

Ensuring access to high quality learning should also be considered. This does not simply imply providing equal opportunities, but offering the best possible education to all students. Rethinking the learning process is necessary, placing considerable pressure on developing more effective learning strategies, as well as reflecting more on the learning paths available to students. Students themselves want to be more involved in these processes, raising awareness and using research to enhance the quality of learning experiences.
When it comes to academic careers, one needs more than just willingness and conceptual understanding - a mental shift, together with practical changes in how academic careers are managed is needed to ensure dedication to high quality teaching and learning This involves creating supportive environments, offering clear career pathways, and ensuring that efforts to improve education quality are recognized and rewarded.

Some **key recommendations** resulted on innovative learning and teaching.

Higher education institutions should create institutional cultures built on collaborations that are essential for innovative teaching and learning, a new mindset focused on inclusiveness and diversity, new tools and pedagogical approaches, with adequate financial support. Effective teaching practices can lead to shifting teachers' attitudes towards more innovative methods. Mentoring, as a support system, is a valuable tool for creating an institutional culture that supports growth and development.

Inclusiveness and the mindset of teaching staff are vital in acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of students. The current approach to teaching should be reconsidered to accommodate this diversity. Well-designed pedagogical approaches are essential, and we need to follow a visible track of learning to ensure clarity and progression. Research results also emphasized the need to create a learning center for teachers, which is crucial for capacity building and fostering collaboration among educators. Implementing a mentoring system can align attitudes towards innovative teaching and learning. Mentorship can provide educators with the guidance, support, and inspiration needed to adopt new methodologies and technologies. Through mentorship, educators can share best practices, learn from each other, and collectively enhance the quality of education provided to students.

Teaching and learning must be re(adapted) to respond to current and potential future crises. This includes developing flexible strategies and methodologies that can tackle unprecedented disruptions such as pandemics or technological innovations, thus ensuring resilience and continuity in education.

Quality assurance agencies should develop definitions for indicators on student-centered learning and use such indicators to encourage innovative approaches in teaching and learning. By establishing clear and measurable standards, QA agencies can encourage institutions to implement best practices with an emphasis on the needs and experiences of their students.

Not least, adjustment of policies at national and institutional levels to better address the diverse student needs, micro-learning, and micro-credentials, and to bridge gaps between life-long learning and academia.

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With its fifth edition this year, the Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference has become a landmark event in Europe and beyond, strategically scheduled a few months ahead of the Ministerial Conferences organized every 2-3 years in the EHEA framework. The Bologna Process Researchers' Conference will continue to pursue its main goal, which is to **foster an effective research-based dialogue between researchers and policymakers**, and **inform future policy developments,** in particular regarding the implementation of the key shared commitments made by the public authorities within the EHEA.

The next **Bologna Process Ministerial Conference** will take place on **29-30 May 2024 in Tirana** and the main findings of the Future of Higher Education - Bologna Process Researchers' Conference will be presented to this conference.