

## Education Department

### *Higher Education and Research*



## THE FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF THE EHEA: A GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

Yerevan Ministerial Conference, May 14 – 15, 2015<sup>1</sup>

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Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

*[Introduction]*

I am happy and honored to have been invited to speak at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference of the European Higher Education Area. I take the invitation as a strong sign of recognition of the role of the Council of Europe in developing a higher education area that is truly European.

The conference program indicates that this presentation should address

“Fundamental values of the higher education in the context of the current political, socio-economic and demographic challenges: economic crisis, regional conflicts, technological developments, migration streams and changes in the labour market”.

This is not very far from asking me to speak about the future of the Bologna Process, and this is what I will attempt to do. I will draw on the session in the Bologna Researchers Conference in București last November that I had the honor to coordinate, and you will find four essays from this session in the publication presented here at this conference.

The future of the Bologna Process was also the topic of some of the most stimulating discussions we had in the BFUG over the past three years, at the initiative of several members and consultative members. The first discussion document was drafted by Germain Dondelinger of Luxembourg and presented by him just over a year ago, at the last BFUG meeting he was able to attend before he was struck by the illness that claimed his life on March 15 of this year. I would therefore like to dedicate this presentation to Germain.

*[Achievements, but...]*

Before we turn to the fundamental values of the EHEA and their impact on the future, let us take a few moments to look at what we have already achieved.

It is now 16 years since your predecessors met in Bologna and decided to build a European Higher Education Area “within the first decade of the third millennium”, to use the somewhat flowery words of the Bologna Declaration. By the time Ministers meet in Paris in 2018, twenty years will have passed since the adoption of the Sorbonne Declaration.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank QueAnh Dang, Ligia Deca and Andrejs Rauhvargers for valuable comments to a draft version of this presentation.

So the European Higher Education Area is a teenager. It is reaching maturity, and it can reasonably hope that its future will be longer than its past. It is faced with options and decisions that will be crucial to its future, and it needs to make these decisions on the basis of imperfect information. It needs to base the decisions on assumptions about the future in a situation where societies and economies – as well as the climate - change faster than ever before. Guesses about the uncertainties of the future cannot be based on the certainties of the past. These are dilemmas many teenagers face in making fundamental decisions about the topic that concern us here: higher education.

In looking ahead, we do not start with a *tabula rasa*. By most measures, the European Higher Education Area is a success story. It has brought 47 countries together to work on common goals for higher education, and we have been able to welcome our 48<sup>th</sup> country today. All parts of the world look to “Bologna” for inspiration and for good practice. In the classical French tragedy, the ideal was to be loved, but it was better to be hated than to be ignored. The EHEA has largely been in this ideal situation, at least if we believe that emulation is the most sincere form of flattery. It is passionately opposed by some, although not always for reasons that have to do with the goals and policies of Bologna. The EHEA has so far rarely been ignored, and one of our tasks is to make sure it does not suffer this indignity in the future.

Higher education knows that past achievement is an imperfect measure of future potential. Therefore, as we look toward the future, we must look at *what we need to do better* rather than at *what we have done well*.

I suggest we need to address three broad questions:

1. What is our unfinished business
2. What are our main challenges, and what should our main goals be, in the medium term?
3. How should we organize the EHEA to rise to these challenges and reach our goals?

*[Unfinished business]*

The European Higher Education Area is good but far from perfect. The first decade of the EHEA was characterized by strong concentration on structural reforms. Qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, the recognition of qualifications, and transparency instruments remain important elements of both the EHEA and national policy. Most EHEA members have done much to implement structural reforms but promises made are not always promises kept. You will find many examples in the Implementation Report.

Finishing what we have started and doing what we have promised to do must therefore be the top priority for the next period of the EHEA work program.

For structural reforms, this means not only adopting new structures but making sure that their purpose is known and understood and that they are implemented. Implementation is not only more challenging than setting goals. It also implies shifting the focus from the European to the national and institutional level, it means making sure academic communities and the broader public understand their meaning, and it means preventing the risk that uneven national and institutional implementation of what look like compatible structures on paper will make these structures incompatible in practice.

Since my task is, to paraphrase Henrik Ibsen, as much to ask the question as to provide the answers, I offer the following for discussion:

- What are the most urgent challenges we face in completing the reforms to which we have committed?
- While respecting the competence of each national system as well as the autonomy of each institution, how can we avoid major divergences in implementation that would endanger the credibility of the EHEA?
- How can we ensure implementation of policy goals that are less easily measurable, as is the case for example for aspects of the social dimension?

*[Challenges and goals]*

*[Preparation for the labor market]*

Europe of 2015 is different from Europe of 1999. So is the broader world, and Europe is even more dependent on the broader world today than we were 16 years ago. Europe has been through an economic crisis, and that may be an optimistic statement: many Europeans do not experience the crisis as a thing of the past. Employment depends more on education qualifications than ever before and higher education needs to become better at preparing students for a labor market that develops rapidly and unpredictably.

Our education structures and our education practice must promote cooperation and interaction with the world of work. That means the private, for profit sector - but it also means the public sector and the NGO sector. Study programs at all levels must be able to integrate practice periods and give credit for non-traditional, prior learning. In some cases, we need to change structures and regulations to make this possible; in other cases we must change practice to take advantage of possibilities that the structures and the laws already offer. The Structural Reforms working group report makes a series of proposals ranging from including short cycle qualifications in the overarching "Bologna qualifications framework" through encouraging entrepreneurship and tracking graduates' progression on the labor market to providing better information to students and parents.

Two important questions for discussion, then, are:

- How can all actors – public authorities, higher education institutions, staff students, employers, civil society organizations – help prepare students for a rapidly shifting labor market requiring people who are able to combine advanced subject specific competences with advanced generic competences, such as analytical ability, communication skills, and not least the ability to learn – and to unlearn?
- How can higher education help update and improve competences through a lifelong learning process so that universities are not institutions we access only once and graduate from only once in our lives?

*[Preparation for democracy]*

Preparing for sustainable employment is of course a key purpose of higher education, but it is not the only one. Higher education is not only about the kind of jobs we would like to have and to develop but also about who and what we want to be. The main challenges Europe faces are not just economic but societal.

The most important way in which Europe has changed over the past generation is that democracy is now a near-universal aspiration. Practice does not always correspond to aspirations but those who argue against democracy as a matter of principle are usually neither

in government nor in mainstream politics. Nevertheless, we have also seen that democracy is under threat, in conflicts within as well as between countries.

Like higher education, democracy is more than institutions, laws, and structures. They are essential but they cannot function unless they are based on *democratic culture* - the set of attitudes and behaviors that make us able and willing to solve conflicts peacefully, help majorities decide while taking account of minority rights and views, respect human rights, and make it possible to live together in diverse societies. Democratic culture is not like swimming or skiing: once you have learned it, you do not forget it. It is like learning a language: if you do not practice, you lose the ability. Education is essential to developing and maintaining democratic culture, and that responsibility extends to higher education.

Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation in higher education governance are among the pillars on which the European Higher Education Area builds and they are exercises in democratic culture. Students cannot develop a culture of democracy unless they are able to practice it at school and in universities – and as citizens.

Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation are also important to the functioning of higher education institutions and systems, not least to developing the critical thinking on which our societies will depend. In other words, these fundamental values are essential to quality and they must be defended and developed not only in the face of fairly obvious but luckily not very frequent threats like the expulsion of students or dismissal of staff for political reasons. We need a continuous debate about what these fundamental values mean in modern, complex societies. How does funding influence autonomy? If a university outsources staff paid on an hourly basis to a separate company owned directly or indirectly by the university, does that institution further the academic freedom and institutional autonomy it will most likely defend as a matter of principle? The example is, alas, not borderline or exotic – it comes from a university in the EHEA<sup>2</sup>.

There are people outside of the main stream who not only argue – on the web and elsewhere – but who also inspire and commit acts of violence. On the background of the terrorist attacks in Paris in January and København in February, the Council of Europe is about to adopt an Action Plan against extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism. EU Ministers of Education met informally in Paris on March 17 to discuss the same issues. It is encouraging that in both institutional settings, education is high on the agenda. In the case of the Council of Europe, developing a framework for competences for democratic culture is an important part of the Action Plan.

Meeting the threat of violent extremism not only with stronger measures for physical security but also with more and better education is important for at least two reasons. Education cannot entirely prevent terrorism, but it can greatly reduce the number of potentially violent extremists. As important, education for democratic culture should develop attitudes and understanding in mainstream society that reduces the sense of rejection and frustration that some groups feel today. Such feelings are of course not a *justification* for terrorism and violence but they are nevertheless a part of the *explanation* – and explaining is different from justifying.

Some questions for discussion, then, are:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://faceducation.wordpress.com/2015/04/03/warwick-uni-to-outsource-hourly-paid-academics-to-subsiary/>, accessed on April 16, 2015.

- How do we ensure that academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student and staff participation remain a defining feature of the EHEA? What do they mean today and what will they mean in 5 or 10 years, as societies change?
- How can higher education help develop a culture of democracy?

[Governance]

If, after answering these and other questions, we know what we would like the EHEA to be in 2020 or 2025, how do we get there? How do we organize and govern the European Higher Education Area so that it takes account of the specificities of our individual education system yet ensure that close to 50 education systems make a coherent EHEA?

The EHEA is loosely organized and that is one of its strengths. It has made it easier for each country to find its place and to develop ownership.

One of the presentations at the Bologna Researchers Conference in November referred to the EHEA as an exercise in peer learning<sup>3</sup>. Peer learning is undoubtedly important, and no countries or institutions could confidently say they have nothing to learn from EHEA partners. But if the EHEA were to be nothing more than peer learning, would it still be the European Higher Education Area?

The appendix to the draft Yerevan Communiqué includes measures suggested by the Bologna Working Groups. They were discussed by the BFUG and we agreed on most. There was, however, one proposal from the Structural Reforms Working Group that gave rise to a surprisingly heated debate: the proposition that the BFUG Co-Chairs and Secretariat could offer assistance to countries for which the Implementation Report indicated that there were serious issues with the implementation of one or more commonly agreed commitments.

We found a compromise formula, but questions remain. If we want other regions of the world to take qualifications from the EHEA seriously, we need to demonstrate that institutions issue comprehensible qualifications within compatible qualifications frameworks? If we want other regions of the world to take quality assurance in the EHEA seriously, we need to demonstrate that quality assurance in the EHEA is in fact carried out in accordance with the ESG, a revised version of which you will adopt here in Yerevan. And if we want other regions to be inspired by the EHEA, we need to show that we take our own commitments seriously.

We will face discussions about how we can organize the Secretariat to make it less dependent on a single host country and how to improve the work of the BFUG so that BFUG members combine political vision and technical implementation. Not least, BFUG members need to maintain very close contacts with their political leadership – or in too many cases *establish* such contacts.

These are important issues but the deeper issue we need to address when we discuss how the EHEA should be organized is this:

- how diverse can the European Higher Education Area be and still remain credible?
- what is the right balance of what we have in common and what is specific to each of us?

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Harmsen: “Future Scenarios for the European Higher Education Area: Exploring the Possibilities of “Experimentalist Governance”, in”, in Adrian Curaj, Liviu Matei, Remus Pricopie, Jamil Salmi and Peter Scott (Eds.) (October 2015, forthcoming). *The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies*, Springer Open Access, pp. 779 – 797.

To paraphrase words that were spoken more than 150 years ago in far more dramatic circumstances, we need to conceive a European Higher Education Area that can long endure.

*[Conclusion]*

These questions of *how?* and *what?* bring us back to the *whys?* with which we started. Why do we need higher education? And why does Europe need the EHEA? After all, structures and reforms make little sense if we do not know why we need them and what we try to achieve with them. If we want to know whether we do something well, it helps to know what we are trying to do in the first place.

Exploring the *whys?* of education can keep us busy for a long time. I would simply end by two observations. The first is perhaps my favorite quote on education, which comes from the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi. He says that if we want to find the answer to the question “what kind of education do we need?” we first have to answer another question: “what kind of society do we want?” I would add: *society*, not just *economy*.

The second observation is on the place of the Yerevan conference within the Bologna Process. I would argue we have had four phases in the development of the European Higher Education Area<sup>4</sup>:

- The first phase, - at Sorbonne in 1998, in Bologna in 1999, and Praha in 2001 - launched the march toward the EHEA. It was an exciting phase but also a relatively easy one, since ministers could focus their attention on setting goals that would be achieved a decade hence.
- The second - in Berlin in 2003 and Bergen in 2005 - was one of development. It saw the adoption of the ESG and the “Bologna” qualifications framework as well as the accession of 12 new countries, including our host country here. The EHEA became truly European. At the same time, there was a sobering realization that if the EHEA was to be based on its members achieving their stated goals by 2010, one also had to assess the progress members made toward those goals. This was the origin of the stocktaking reports
- The third phase - London in 2007, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 and Budapest and Wien in 2010 – was one of consolidation. Some new initiatives were launched, but as 2010 drew nearer, attention focused on fulfilling commitments already undertaken rather than defining new objectives.
- The fourth phase came with the establishment of the EHEA in 2010 and the București conference in 2012. In this phase, the EHEA continues to develop, but at the same time there is diminishing political interest in the EHEA, higher education is affected by the financial crises – which admittedly began already in 2008 – and there is considerable uncertainty as to how the EHEA should develop further.

Our challenge here in Yerevan is to give the European Higher Education Area a new impetus, to make this conference mark a new beginning, and to ensure that we can speak of the uncertainty of direction and the lack of political interest in the EHEA in the past rather than in the future tense. It is, in short, to make sure Yerevan marks the start of a fifth phase in the development of the European Higher Education Area.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a shortened version of the description found in Sjur Bergan: “The EHEA at the Cross-roads. The Bologna Process and the Future of Higher Education”, in Adrian Curaj, Liviu Matei, Remus Pricopie, Jamil Salmi and Peter Scott (Eds.) (October 2015, forthcoming). The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies, Springer Open Access, pp. 721 - 736