

HERE Annual Conference 2017
EU and its neighbours: Higher education policy and cooperation
Brussels, Belgium – 11-12, December 2017

OUTCOME REPORT

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Context

The 2017 HERE conference was an occasion to take stock of the HERE activities and to look at national and global higher education development trends. The conference focused in particular on the regional, bi-lateral and bi-regional policy frameworks that shape and enable higher education reforms, exchanges and collaboration, which also contribute more broadly so social and economic development and have an important political and diplomatic function.

In this regard, the conference considered the relations between Partner countries and the EU, based on both the EU Neighbourhood policy and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), to which all EU and many HERE counties adhere.

It showcased how the work of the HERE contributes to the implementation of objectives developed and agreed under those frameworks. HERE participants had the opportunity to learn about the results of Technical Assistance Missions (TAM) in the different countries and regions, and discuss the relevance of their outcomes for higher education systems, also with regards to societal challenges and international relations.

As the conference pre-empted a new contract phase for SPHERE (Centralised Support for HERE), starting in 2018, it also reviewed the past HERE activities and projected how to improve the action in the coming three years. This included a discussion on how the previously mentioned policy dialogue frameworks could be leveraged to contribute to national reforms and institutional development.

The conference was hosted in Brussels so as to promote the work of the HERE across different policy areas of the EU and optimise the participation of European policy makers.

Objectives

- Take stock of the HERE activities from 2017, and more generally the achievements and lessons learnt since 2015;
- Provide HERE with an opportunity to showcase national activities and results to an international policy audience;
- Assess explicit and implicit goals and priorities under ongoing regional and interregional policy frameworks (European Higher Education Area, EU neighbourhood country policies, etc.);
- Discuss the goals of the EU's [Renewed Agenda](#) and its potential relevance for the context of the countries neighbouring the EU;
- Demonstrate in particular the role of HERE in the Bologna Process and Bologna-like reform development and implementation;
- Frame the HERE activities within the context of EU-Partner country policy commitments and processes, so as to demonstrate their relevance and added value;
- Highlight the role of student HERE in contributing to HE reform;
- Define goals and strategies for the SPHERE contract 2018-2020: how can the HERE be best supported and empowered? How can their work be best promoted to better contribute to overriding policy frameworks?

Opening speeches: Context setting and policy frameworks

Martine Reicherts, Director-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), European Commission, opened the event, citing a new communication from the European

Commission [Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture](#), which – among others – promotes the idea of a European Education Area. She indicated that this is an opportunity, and that initiatives like the HERE may have possibilities to benefit from new political frameworks within Europe and a heightened emphasis on education in general, as a means to reach economic, political and integrationist goals.

Lesley Wilson, Secretary General, European University Association (EUA), in her opening address “The role of human capital investment, higher education and research in supporting development in Partner Countries”, traced the history of European progress in the higher education sector at regional level and argued that, though not in the political spotlight initially, Europe has made extreme strides in the past three decades and even become a reference point for many world regions. The foundation of this has been the prioritisation of people-to-people exchange, which has so encapsulated the Erasmus programme and subsequent European Union programmes such as Tempus. She argued that higher education has proven to be a powerful instrument for promoting the exchange of ideas and values and contributing to more open societies, as well as being of crucial importance for political, social and economic reform processes in many regions of the world.

Claire Morel, Head of Unit, International Cooperation, DG EAC, presented the main components of the EU’s recent communication [‘A renewed EU agenda for higher education’](#) which stresses excellence in skills development, inclusive and connected systems, HE and innovation and effective and efficient HE systems. She highlighted a number of EU actions that would be enhanced under this strategy: new incentives to improve graduate tracking systems, such as through a [European graduate tracking](#) initiative, an EU ‘STE(A)M’ coalition, stressing fields and skills where the EU has needs (which would also emphasize the role of arts as a key study area and transdisciplinarity) and a number of new measures under Erasmus+, including digital work placements and a pilot for a ‘European student card’. The latter is part of the more recent [‘Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture’](#) Communication, announced in Gothenburg in November. Also announced in Gothenburg were political plans to establish a ‘European Education Area (EEA)’, though it is still being fleshed out how this will be implemented. The EEA would stress mutual recognition of school and higher education diplomas, training across borders and the intersection of different education sectors. This new process, deemed the ‘Sorbonne Process’, leaves a number of questions and speculations to higher education stakeholders in EU Member States, but also to those in EU neighbouring countries, e.g. how it would relate to the Bologna Process and how it would affect countries outside of the EU.

With a different perspective, **Julia De Clerck-Sachsee**, Adviser for Strategic Planning, European External Action Service (EEAS), spoke about the ‘Global Strategy’ of the EEAS and the perceived role of education in this. The Global Strategy is premised on several key areas: security,

resilience, global governance for the 21st century and 'shining a light', which ultimately entails the responsible engagement of media, education institutions and others, as well as a need to return to fact-based decision making. Higher education underpins many elements of this strategy and is a key piece of a more integrated approach to addressing conflict.

Parallel regional round tables

Each round table consisted of introductory presentations from the European Commission (one or several relevant DGs), framing commitments and concrete follow-up initiatives, ranging from skills/employability to initiatives to address the migrant/refugee crisis, etc.. This was followed by a concrete case study or commentary from a HERE country participant and an external expert (a short presentation citing concrete national reform and cooperation activities that have contributed to the agenda in that region/country) and then a moderated discussion.

Round table 1: EU-Southern Med dialogue on higher education and research

Chair: Thomas Jorgensen, Senior Policy Coordinator, EUA

Speakers: Christophe Masson, Policy Officer, DG NEAR, European Commission, Nicolas Patrici, University of Barcelona, Yasser El Shayeb, Head of National Erasmus+ Office, Egypt

The Participants addressed a number of key questions regarding the state of HE reform and development in the region, and the role of EU funding programmes and of the HERE. Participants began with a brainstorm on the primary purpose of collaboration in higher education and listed: a) Diplomacy (Creating Links between countries) b) Exchanges c) Building up clear policy framework for a region with a distinct identity d) Addressing common policy challenges like immigration, water and energy, e) Finding a common language to match capacities, f) Enhancing Ministry capacity to legislate effectively in HE and research.

It was then discussed what had changed in the last ten years of cooperation with the EU:

- 1) More cooperation has been generated but this has also resulted in raised expectations towards the EU; More funding would be needed to meet the need and demand of the HE sector. Project funding has become more competitive, especially in Erasmus+.
- 2) Multilateral cooperation has increased, opening more opportunities and diversified cooperation.
- 3) Project cooperation has resulted in discovering strengths and weakness, which has led to increased and better cooperation.
- 4) The relations between countries have improved drastically on many fronts, through the media and political state of affairs seems not to follow suite.
- 5) Capacity building of universities has made great strides but there is still much to be done for research.

In terms of what can be done moving forward, participants recommended to:

- 1) Define mutual priorities for the region, yet respect the realities and diversity of the region
- 2) Encourage more south/south cooperation
- 3) Concentrate on employability / youth employment: 600,000 jobs will need to be created in the near future. In particular, cooperation initiatives should concentrate on skills and social development. They should reach beyond HE and TVET and strive to improve employment policies and the link between employment and education policies
- 4) Budget support should be given directly to HEIs and not necessarily to central governments, given certain instabilities and conflict.

Round table 2: EU-Eastern Partnership (EaP) dialogue on higher education and research

Chair: Howard Davies, EUA/SPHERE Team

Speakers: Kamila Partyka, Policy Officer, DG EAC, European Commission, Thomas Estermann, Director, Governance, Policy and Public Funding, EUA, Olena Kozievska, Deputy Head of the Secretariat, the Parliament's Committee for Science and Education, Ukraine

Participants discussed how creating Interlinks between HE and research is critical and an important challenge for EaP region:

- 6) The EaP 5th Ministerial Summit in Brussels (November 2017) once again highlighted the need for joint vision and intensified cooperation in bringing HE and research into the mainstream.
- 7) In EHEA broader framework, the level of reforms and commitments by EaP member states varies. Belarus is a particular challenge as it is the newest signatory country, requiring a specific roadmap and timetable for reforms.
- 8) Empowering youth is the key policy area and tool for the region. The new education and youth package for EaP promotes enhanced youth employment and civic engagement. The main focus is on tackling youth unemployment, improving education systems, modernizing teaching and learning, and enhancing commitment to the Bologna Process (BP). Digitalisation is high on the agenda as well, since there are huge gaps in digital skills of EaP youth. As a tool, an EaP European School will be established to assist the above process and enhance the quality of education for youth.
- 9) Creating an action oriented mind set is one of the biggest challenges of education systems in the EaP, hence the heightened focus on entrepreneurship and University-business/enterprise cooperation. Cross fertilisation between Universities and research is necessary (Horizon 2020 and future framework programmes directed to innovation and commercialisation of knowledge results are supportive instruments)

- 10) Values and integrity in HE should be well understood in terms of actions (Erasmus+, in particular CBHE projects, are important instruments, though regional competition to win projects is very high)
- 11) There is a need to analyse education systems in the EaP to understand the basic infrastructure, funding and investments by the national governments. HEREs are expected to help by conducting supportive studies and lobbying their national governments for investment in sustained sector analysis.

The session also examined specific project results within the context of higher education reform in the region, such as the Tempus ATHENA project, coordinated by EUA (including 3 EaP countries: AM, MD, UA). This project resulted in the development of autonomy scorecard in governance in higher education institutions, which was further referred to and built upon in various governance workshop/seminars (e.g. TAM seminar in Armenia). It was concluded that when addressing governance and management issues, focus should be made not only on the legal aspects but mostly on the institutional level, and how to implement change. Policy roadmaps with concrete actions are being produced (ATHENA is one clear example) to facilitate this process.

It was recommended by the NEO-Ukraine that each HERE could support ongoing capacity building projects by taking on 'curator's' role. Multiplication of best practices is required in all EaP countries to boost the visibility of reforms. Building the capacities at the Ministries of Education and Science should not be forgotten. University HR/Staff development at middle management level should be targeted as a segment group. Regional HERE events are welcome as a means to do this.

[Round table 3: EU-Central Asia dialogue on higher education and research](#)

Chair: Piia Heinamaki, Project Adviser, EACEA

Speakers: Gianpaolo Suriano, Policy Officer, DG EAC, European Commission, Edith Read, International Cooperation Officer, DG DEVCO, European Commission, Nazokat Kasymova, Professor, Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan, Ann Katherine Isaacs, Professor, University of Pisa

The participants discussed the current situation and initiatives that are already in place, such as:

- EU's CA strategy (2007) – education being among its priorities
- Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP) – which supports EU-CA policy dialogue
- Ministerial meetings in Riga (2015) and Astana (2017)
- Erasmus+ projects in Central Asia
- The TEMPUS project TUCAHEA – Introducing the Tuning approach and building the premises for a Central Asian Higher Education Area

- Technical Assistance Missions as a means to address national policy priorities (example of Uzbekistan)

A large part of the discussion focused on giving feedback on the Central Asian Education Platform. This platform, financed by the European Commission, aims at enhancing cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, as well as regional cooperation between Central Asian countries, on reforms in higher education and in vocational education and training. While participants agreed that the activities of the Platform have improved with time, criticism was expressed regarding the lack of consultation of NEOs in the planning of activities, the low relevance of some of the selected topics and the lack of synergy with the HERE activities.

In order to increase the relevance of the CAEP activities, it was recommended that the project management communicates more closely with the NEOs and HEREs, in order to look for synergies and organise possible joint events. It was also suggested that CAEP should make use of the results of good Tempus / Capacity Building projects and present these at the platform events. Another proposal was to organise evaluation / harmonisation activities of qualifications frameworks in Central Asia.

The Tempus project TUCAHEA was presented as an example of good practice of a policy relevant regional Central Asian project. This project involved all five Central Asian countries and helped the partners to implement the Tuning methodology by adopting competence-based quality tools for the planning and delivery of degree programmes. The feedback from the audience was very positive and confirmed that the TUCAHEA tools have continued to be used since the end of the project in 2016. The intra-regional student mobility launched within this project also still continues between some of the partners.

In general, more structural projects addressing policy relevant topics would be needed in the region. The participants also expressed their interest for more regional HERE activities, through regional Technical Assistance Missions for example. Intra-regional mobility schemes would also be welcomed, if the necessary funding is made available.

[Round table 4: EU-Western Balkans \(WB\) dialogue on higher education and research](#)

Chair: Michael Gaebel, EUA/SPHERE Team

Speakers: Albert Sese-Ballart, Policy Officer, DG EAC, European Commission, Zlatan Buliko, Professional Advisor, Federal Ministry of Education and Science, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The session opened with two perspectives on the dialogue between the EU and WB. The EU policy perspective was provided by Albert Sese Ballart who presented the upcoming activities

related to the WB, and finally outlined the new strategy for the WB. In addition, two initiatives were noted:

- RYCO – a regional youth cooperation office in charge of funding projects of mobility for pre-HE;
- WB Platform for Education and Training, whose priorities are to initiate dialogues, promote regional cooperation, and identify areas of improvement.

Zlatan Buljko outlined different venues for the facilitation of the dialogue. He stressed the Regional Cooperation Council and its Strategy for South East Europe, whose main aim is to increase GDP and the scope of highly skilled workforce in the region. In addition, he also introduced several other initiatives:

- Regional Research Association;
- Regional Economic Area;
- Education Reform Initiative;
- Research and Innovation Roadmap for EU.

Three major issues incited a fruitful discussion in the group: Primarily, the evaluation of EU assistance in the WB revealed different interpretations of the visibility and scope of the progress that WB countries had made. It was agreed that in order for progress to be clearly marked, the EC needs to design measures that respect the intricacies of individual states in the WB. Furthermore, there has been a pronounced need for the support of the research infrastructure in the WB.

Secondly, the ratio of incoming and outgoing mobility was discussed and led to several recommendations. In order for partner countries to increase their incoming mobility, following steps should be ensured:

- increased language competences of students, teaching and administrative staff;
- increased attractiveness of the offered courses;
- innovation in teaching;
- recognition of qualifications;
- easily accessible catalogue of courses.

Thirdly, the issue of recognition of qualifications was a point of discussion, particularly regarding which aspects should be considered in recognition decisions (study period, ECTS, and/or learning outcomes) and who is in charge of recognition (the ministry or the HEIs). Several participants reported a prolonged wait in the process, especially during the authenticity check with the corresponding HEI. Another major issue is concerned the differences between the qualification frameworks in different countries. Nonetheless, the group agreed that:

- Recognition should be a facilitating process;
- No further recognition bodies are need; those that exist should be enhanced and their roles clarified;

- A national register of valid diplomas would expedite authenticity checks;
- overcoming of these difficulties is often a political decision.

Building the knowledge triangle as a means to address societal challenges

This session entailed two presentations from the European Commission, one regarding what the EC does to support entrepreneurship and also university-business cooperation (**Gauthier Grousset**, Policy Officer, DG EAC, European Commission) and one addressing the impact and uptake of the Horizon2020 programme particularly in associated countries in the Western Balkans (**Bernhard Fabianek**, Policy Officer, DG RTD, European Commission). This was followed by a presentation on research capacity in the Western Balkans (**Michael Gaebel**, EUA/SPHERE Team), where the findings of a forthcoming HERE Study were presented. Through extensive surveying and interviews, as well as literature review regarding research output in the various WB countries, the study identified a number of difficulties related to research capacity building: Many institutions lack centralised support to research teams to develop research proposals. It was highlighted that for Horizon2020, for example, the preparation of a research proposal often fell in the hands of one individual. The study emphasised the need to build institutional capacities and structures to manage research, support the internationalisation of institutions more generally, which could implicate the research field and, relatedly, link research more concretely to teaching.

A case studies from **Mira Vukcevic**, HERE and Professor at the University of Montenegro, echoed these findings. She presented the results of a project that developed research evaluation methods (EVAL-INNO) in the SEE region, which targeted both institutional and policy level evaluation of research projects and proposals.

The role of the HERE in Bologna Process implementation

David Crosier, Higher Education Coordinator, EURYDICE presented the latest developments in the Bologna Process and highlighted some issues and questions:

- The Bologna Process has been oriented towards the notion of implementation, as it is felt that many countries lag behind.
- However, this is a difficult concept: Sometimes reforms are achieved on paper but have not reached deeper into the system yet. This can be due to a number of factors:
 - Lack of understanding of the reforms;

- The interruption of the reform process with new societal challenges (for example, migration) and other challenges taking precedence;
- The general feeling of governments that implementation is ‘up to the universities now’;
- Complacency and the notion that ‘we have already done Bologna’.
- This is of particular relevance to the non-EU countries in the EHEA and the new entrant countries like Belarus, which need sustained political will across the EHEA to continue to drive the process forward.
- There is discussion regarding whether Bologna will continue as such or perhaps change to focus on new priorities. D. Crosier commented that it would be a shame if the process ceased to focus on more difficult issues like the ‘social dimension’. While access, retention and student diversity, for example, are harder areas to measure at European level, they are inherent to the current needs of European higher education.

A panel with three HERE representatives commented on Bologna implementation in their countries and the role the HERE have had. For **Irine Darchia**, Associate Professor, Tbilisi State University, Georgia, and **Darkhan Akhmed-Zaki**, Director of the Department of Higher and Post-Higher Education, Ministry of Education and Science, Kazakhstan, Bologna has helped to transform and modernise the HE sector from the immediate post-Soviet time. Despite difficulties in some areas of implementation, the reforms made in quality assurance, for example, as well as the attention drawn to teaching and learning and lifelong learning, have been critical.

Though not formally part of the EHEA, Egypt (presented by **Youhansen Eid**, Head of the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education, Egypt) has emulated a number of Bologna reforms. The experience with the European Standards and Guidelines for QA, for example, has directly impacted the quality evaluation standards in the Egyptian system and the attention given to institutional quality units.

A subsequent panel was held on ‘**HERE and Bologna Promoters: Common agendas**’.

Three long-term Bologna experts/promoters participated as well as two HEREs, presenting current working dynamics and discussing prospects for collaboration and for working more together.

The following points were made:

- It is extremely unfortunate that the Bologna Promoters are now structured and financed only via national teams, without the possibility to work together across countries. The example of the German Bologna experts is a noteworthy one, in that international experts from different European countries have been chosen to be on this team. Generating ownership for the EHEA also depends on the exchange of expertise across

countries. HERE still have this possibility and should capitalise on it. It was suggested to open up HERE activities to Bologna promoters as much as feasible, to encourage more interaction. As an immediate consequence, Bologna Promoters will be invited to join the TAM expert pool and also to participate in some events.

- There is a continued need to work on ‘implementation’ of policy reforms at the level of universities, a task to which Bologna promoters and HERE can contribute in a very systematic and sustainable fashion. At the same time, in many countries, HERE also support national level policy making, e.g. in terms of drafting legislation and generating political consensus. This double mandate of the HERE, as a bridge between policy and practice, is thus key.
- In general, the role of HERE and Bologna promoters was found to go far beyond the actual Bologna reforms, as they are also in a key position to help identify new challenges and needs in the HE sector, that may go beyond present frameworks.

Student engagement in policy reform

Elizabeth Colucci, SPHERE Team, presented the results and recommendations from HERE activities addressing student engagement. This included a seminar in Lviv, Ukraine on the ‘ESG in practice’, a seminar in Almaty, Kazakhstan on Student Engagement a study visit to University of Edinburgh on quality culture. **Chafic Mokbel**, Professor, University of Balamand, Lebanon, presented the work of the Lebanon HERE team and the recent survey that has been done to identify key challenges and needs in HE reform in Lebanon. Greater student engagement and student ownership of reforms was stressed as a way to give new impetus for change.

A Student Panel then took place with **Katrina Koppel**, member of the Executive Committee of ESU, **Rasmus Åberg**, of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), **Kateryna Shalayeva**, Alumnus of Erasmus Mundus and former President of the Eurasian Chapter of the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association, and Student HERE - **Nicolai Loghin**, National Students Alliance of Moldova.

The following recommendations were made:

- Students in HERE teams play an important role, as should be seen as equal partners.
- Preferably, students who are affiliated to or work with national and institutional student representative bodies should be opted into the HERE teams, as this can have a much larger impact.
- They can undertake joint projects with university leadership and ministry representatives.
- In countries where there may not yet be a legitimate national student representative body, HERE teams may think to work with international networks like ESA or EMA, that have members across all HERE countries.