HERE Annual Conference Report

Looking back, looking forward: perspectives on higher education reform

November 18-19, 2021

Online via letsgetdigital

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1. Introduction

1.1 The topic

The year 2021 marked the end of the six-year [SPHERE](#) contractual period (extended by one year due to the disruption of the programme by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020). The conference was thus the first since 2019 and the last of the series. It provided the opportunity to celebrate what had been learned and achieved, but also to reflect in more depth on the impact of the higher education reform experts (HERE) in the EU Neighbourhood countries. This was particularly timely, since the pandemic had accentuated the pressure for reform in areas such as access, learning and teaching innovation, digitalisation and quality assurance.

The conference also offered the chance to look forward. What did the future hold for the EU's new higher education cooperation programmes and what would be their priorities? How strong would be the emphasis on sustainability and greening, inclusion and inclusive mobility? How would the HERE envisage the university of the immediate future and how might it be realised? How had the dynamics of global cooperation changed and where were the new challenges and opportunities?

This report provides an overview of the proceedings and, for 2021, supplements the outcome report of the virtual study visit to Dublin City University and the report of SPHERE's webinar on greening higher education, held earlier in the year. These can be found at www.supporthere.org. The conference presentations and recordings can all be accessed [here](#).

1.2 Attendance

The conference drew 125 registered participants – academics, administrators, students and policy makers. Of these, the majority came from fourteen Partner Countries. In addition, five EU Member States were represented, as well as the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the Bologna Follow-Up-Group, the European Students' Union and the International Association of Universities.

The [letsgetdigital](#) platform was new to most participants and, despite some initial problems of access, assured smooth provision of plenary sessions. Break-out groups were enabled, as was a carrousel function which allowed participants to meet – on an arranged or random basis – in the virtual lobby. Subsequent evaluation by participants revealed that 70% considered the platform to be 'excellent' or 'very good'.

Prior to the conference,the HERE had been invited to submit articles 'looking back, looking forward'. These were posted on the [SPHERE website](#) and facilitated well-informed discussion in the conference sessions, the majority of which were adjudged by most paritipcants to be 'very relevant' to their concerns.

DAY ONE

2. Welcome session

The conference was divided into two days, each with a different perspective: looking back over the seven years of SPHERE activities; and looking forward to the potential for action offered by the new generation of Erasmus+ 2021-2027.

Sophie Beernaerts, Head of Department A (Erasmus+ and EU Solidarity Corps) in the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) thanked the SPHERE[1] team for its achievements in mediating between Partner Country governments and higher education institutions, but expressed the wish that the conference also point the way forward. This was particularly important in the present conjuncture: a new chapter had opened, prioritising green reform, social inclusion, digital education and the reform of higher education post-COVID-19. Three principles would inform the next phase of capacity building. These were: maintaining the diversity of higher education systems and provision; collaboration and co-creation, particularly on the South-South axis; and more effective inclusion of the various categories of students with fewer opportunities.

The SPHERE consortium, in the persons of **Marcus Gonzalez** (Vice-Rector, International Policy, of the University of Barcelona) and **Amanda Crowfoot** (Secretary-General of the European University Association) in turn thanked the EACEA, as well as the National Erasmus Offices (NEOs) in the Partner Countries and the Higher Education Reform Experts, before echoing the hopes and wishes for successful future collaboration.

3. Keynote address

SPHERE was delighted to welcome, as keynote speaker, **Sjur Bergan**, Head of the Education Department at the Council of Europe – one of the most influential policy makers in European higher education and with unrivalled depth and breadth of experience.

After briefly reviewing developments since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – notably the increased speed of globalisation – Sjur Bergan came early to the dominant theme of his keynote: democratic institutions were inadequate if they were not supported by a democratic culture; and it was within the education system that democratic culture and citizenship were nourished and brought to maturity.

Much progress had been made in the European Higher Education Area. Fundamental values of equity, mutual recognition and global cooperation had been acknowledged in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and enabled in structural reforms such as the EHEA's Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). While COVID-19 had at first forced higher education into a reactive posture,

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[1] Michael Gaebel, Elizabeth Colucci, Howard Davies, Nicole Font, Henriette Stoeber, with the assistance of Gohar Hovhannisyan

institutions had quickly become innovative, establishing hybrid learning as a valuable and enduring feature of the student experience.

What was now needed, said Sjur Bergan, was the reinforcement of the structures supporting progressive policies on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and sustainability. There was a broad consensus that higher education involved the acquisition of knowledge, the development of the individual, the promotion of democracy and a significant contribution to the needs of the labour market. But these components and their inter-relationships were neither securely institutionalised nor necessarily permanent. They were all subject to a prior question: 'what kind of society do we want?' It was crucially important, he stressed, that policies shaped structures, rather than being determined by them.[2]

4. Session 1: Generating impact from the HERE?

This session consisted of a plenary and four break-out groups. In the plenary, the Head of EACEA's Unit A.4.2, **Anila Troshani**, presented the results of the Agency's survey of NEOs' evaluation of the range of SPHERE activities in the contractual period now coming to an end. The survey, which was very detailed, had had a response rate of 72% (18 out of 25 NEOs). It had shown that:

- 61% of NEOs were 'very satisfied' with the topics chosen for the study visits.
- 72% were 'very satisfied' with the topics chosen for the seminars.
- The main outcome of these events was better information on the state of play and on innovative practices in Europe, while at institutional level the principal impact was the provision of training, skills and knowledge, notably via the TAMs and the seminars.
- The greatest impact at institutional level was felt in the areas of quality assurance and internationalisation, while impact at system level tended to vary according to national need; for example, doctoral education in Russia, entrepreneurship education in Jordan, civic engagement in Lebanon, and academic integrity in Kazakhstan.
- Regarding the degree of impact on national governments, the picture was differentiated. It ranged from a high level of collaboration and the adoption of formal measures to situations in which contact with ministries was undermined by changes in personnel or by political unrest. The latter also affected the quality of relations between the ministries and the HERE.
- The impact of SPHERE events was reinforced by the dissemination of information and good practice to relevant stakeholders, via seminars, publications and online.
- The NEOs recorded positive views of the 313 TAMs delivered by the pool of 100+ European experts. They regarded the TAMs as cost-effective and suitably tailored to national needs and work plans. 71% stated that contact between TAM experts and national HERE had been maintained after the event.
- 67% of NEOs reported that TAMs had inspired or were likely to inspire project applications outside the framework of SPHERE. Examples included CBHE projects in quality assurance (Moldova) and measures to combat plagiarism (Georgia).
- Although the number of regional TAMs was low, NEOs reported that HEREs had been able to make a significant contribution to cross-border cooperation, thanks to other SPHERE events and CBHE projects.

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[2] For an amplified and updated version of Sjur Bergan's presentation, see *University World News* at https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=202111301431115

- While COVID-19 had forced a number of events into virtual mode, and while 'Zoom fatigue' and the lack of personal contact were to be regretted, on the whole the virtual events had been well received. NEOs felt that the organisation of hybrid events was a viable way forward.
- Looking to the future, NEOs hoped for an increase in the number of seminars, more interactive events and more cross-border activities. They felt that national priorities were paramount and that these required a higher quality of contact between ministries and HEREs, as well as more sustained interventions by the TAM experts. They looked for more flexibility in HERE team-building and budget management.

The plenary was followed by **four break-out groups** on topics which had featured prominently in the repertoire of SPHERE activities since 2015 and had particularly resonated with the HERE: digital learning, the student contribution to governance, the reform of quality assurance, and internationalisation and mobility.

In *Group 1* **Nazokat Kasymova** (Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies) presented a case study of the take-up and use of digitally enhanced learning in Uzbekistan. Her presentation showed how e-learning and the digitalisation of higher education had been introduced in response to the 2015 SPHERE seminar on ICT-based learning. She regarded the use of digital media as a huge opportunity for Uzbek HEIs. Several TAMs had followed the seminar, exploring more targeted topics such as curricula and libraries; there were also several Erasmus+ projects. These contributed to peer and institutional learning and led to institutional and legal reforms. Uzbek HEIs, as a result, had been able to switch relatively smoothly to online and blended provision during the pandemic. The "DIGITAL Uzbekistan 2030" strategy, subsequently launched in October 2020 by presidential decree, addressed e-governance, digital industries, infrastructure, and education. Conference participants stressed that such rapid change required investment in staff development.

In *Group 2* **Cristina Voroneanu** (Erasmus Students Network representative in Moldova) reported the results of a survey showing that students placed a high value on the quality of higher education and the role it played in allowing them to access well-paid employment. In Moldova, however, these conditions were not sufficiently embedded; in consequence, graduates migrated to Western Europe in large numbers. Those with experience of Erasmus+ mobility were particularly well placed to enter foreign labour markets. In the speaker's view, there could be no quality education without student participation – participation which was meaningful only if supported by formal representation in institutional governance. The challenge was to secure the democratisation which would raise students' motivation to participate, but the prior condition of this was the creation at institutional level of student organisations strong enough in numbers and in focus to influence the authorities and to effect change.

In *Group 3*, **Iryna Zolotaryova**, from the Ukrainian National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, described the QA reforms in Ukraine which had led to the setting-up of the National Agency and the development of the external QA framework. With significant support from international projects, the Agency had begun work in 2019 and already had accredited nearly 4,000 programmes. The speaker cited the crucial role of TAMs, the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance, as well as several Erasmus+ projects, in enabling Ukrainian stakeholders to establish the Agency and secure its independence from the Ministry of Education and Science. The next necessary steps for the Agency were the development and implementation of institutional accreditation; the establishment of "Independent accreditation institutions"; the regulation of the procedure for recognition of international accreditation; and the development of a model of engaging foreign experts in accreditation. It was hoped that this would lead to the deeper integration of Ukraine in the EHEA.

In *Group 4*, **Tamar Sanikidze**, of the Georgian National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement, stressed the importance of considering internationalisation as a means to wider ends, such as enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. Many projects had built the capacity of HEIs in Partner Countries for internationalisation (staff training, opening International Relations Offices, developing protocols and guidelines). It was now time to make these fully operational. The importance of actions and policy development at national level should not be under-estimated. This had been particularly important in Georgia, which now had a new internationalisation strategy. It was noted, however, that national strategies were often not followed up and monitored; this could become an essential role for the HERE going forward. Prior to the pandemic, there was already a growing focus on internationalisation at home. COVID-19 had shifted the focus towards the internationalisation of learning and teaching. Many academics had, by default, begun to engage in collaborative online teaching as a result. There was now an opportunity to look for stronger integration of learning and teaching, digital and international strategies. There remained nevertheless the need to boost appropriate faculty training in order to mainstream good practice.

5. Session 2: Impact - a reflection on the Technical Assistance Missions

This session looked at the achievements of the TAMs – not from the NEO or HERE side, but taking points of view from three TAM experienced experts: **Volker Gehmlich** (Germany), **Melita Kovačević** (Croatia) and **Bryan Maguire** (Ireland). Chaired by Michael Gaebel of the SPHERE team, the panel came to the discussion from different perspectives – learning and teaching, doctoral education and quality assurance, respectively – but were broadly in agreement on the basic principles. These are best summarised as follows:

- A successful TAM works to the benefit of both the target audience and the expert. The Partner Country benefits, assuming that the topic is appropriate and feasible and that the outcomes are sustainable. The local stakeholders play a key role in this respect. The expert, meanwhile, gains in personal experience while also being able to bring information on the Partner Country back to the home institution or agency.
- It is important that the expert does not teach or impose. The principle of peer exchange has to be respected. *In vivo* interaction is paramount, which suggests that any virtual participation be planned in advance and its effect on the face-to-face dialogue be carefully monitored. The presence of a person in high authority, such as a minister or a rector, requires similarly sensitive management. Greater participation by students, on the other hand, is to be encouraged.
- The experts agreed that TAMs require detailed preparation, taking into consideration the local context, the heterogeneity of the audience, and the extent to which – in the view of the NEO – any reform initiatives might prove less than welcome to some stakeholder groups. When TAMs involve a team of experts, it is desirable that they consult with each other beforehand. Follow-up, if requested, is as important as preparation.
- On the question of duration, one expert had a clear preference for one and a half days, on the grounds that this incorporates a social occasion in which contact is intensified and collegiality reinforced.

6. Session 3: Impact – reflecting on the global pandemic as a change accelerator, lessons from the HERE action and Erasmus+

Day 1 concluded with a further panel session focusing on the impact of COVID-19. The three panel members were: **Elena Gorbashko**, Vice-Rector for Research, Saint-Petersburg State University of Economics, Russia; **Mira Vukčević**, Full Professor, University of Montenegro, Montenegro; and **Yoav Fridman**, Head of Research and Innovation Authority, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Israel.

Their discussion was chaired by **Hilligje van't Land**, Secretary General of the International Association of Universities. She began by summarising the findings of IAU's follow-up (not yet published) to its survey of the global impact of the pandemic, pointing out the negative effects on funding levels and on staff workload. While the shift to online learning and teaching had been substantial, there had been no significant deterioration in the quality of research collaboration. On the positive side, there had been an intensification of community engagement. Of the four global regions addressed by the survey, Europe was among the least disadvantaged and the most resilient.

The panellists reported that their systems and institutions had responded innovatively to the initial setbacks, whether by intensifying contact with small and medium-size enterprises (Russia) or by promoting new start-ups (Montenegro). Networking had been facilitated and best practice shared, even in systems which were highly competitive (Israel). In Montenegro, where tourism revenue had collapsed, the challenge was perhaps the greatest, but it had grown more solution-driven and had taken advantage of the improved possibilities of outreach to rural students. Digitalisation presented a steeper learning curve there than in other systems; notwithstanding this, Montenegro had succeeded, with government, in bringing the Lifelong Learning strategy into law.

DAY TWO

7. Session 4: Universities without walls

Day 2 began with a panel discussion chaired by **Michael Murphy**, President of EUA, and focused on the themes developed in EUA's searching probe into the coming decade, *Universities without walls*. EUA's vision for 2030 adds a fourth mission to the established three (learning and teaching, research, and civic engagement): looking both back and forward, universities are expected to develop a key role in preserving cultural heritage and sustaining it by the deployment of new technologies. They will remain learner-centred, innovative and open to international collaboration. Realisation of the vision relies on strong institutional leadership and continuing provision of adequate funding to assure universities' autonomy, diversity and accountability.

Reflecting on these perspectives were **Tine Delva**, heading up the European Universities Initiative in DG Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (DG EAC), European Commission; **Jakub Grodecki**, Vice-president of the

European Students' Union and responsible for ESU quality assurance policy; **Chafic Mokbel**, Acting Secretary General of the Research Council, University of Balamand, Lebanon; and **Aleksandra Nikolic**, Minister for Science, Higher Education and Youth, Sarajevo Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tina Delva set out the main lines of the European Strategy for Universities that the Commission will publish in January 2022. While not seeking to impose particular missions on universities or on categories of universities, it will encourage them to become more responsive and flexible in the face of the post-pandemic challenges – greening, digitalisation, inclusion, and democratic citizenship. It will promote the use and the recognition of micro-credits, thus giving new impetus to its lifelong learning strategy.

She noted that the EU will continue to regard the internationalisation of higher education as an important instrument of soft power; to this end, it will seek to empower universities, enabling them to engage in deeper transnational cooperation.

The panellists endorsed the principle of international collaboration, but stressed that thought must be given to the framework in which future networks might be built - disciplinary, linguistic, regional or according to other criteria. They pointed out that at a time of paradigm shift the involvement of future cohorts of students in governance, quality assurance and curricular co-creation was imperative. Finally, in the interest of social cohesion they highlighted the need for 'universities without walls' to develop a more porous interface with the vocational and technical education sector.

8. Session 5: What's in store for Erasmus+ 2021-2017?

Carried over from Day 1 was the presentation by **Elizabeth Colucci** (SPHERE team) of the SPHERE report on the [Structural Impact of Erasmus+ Capacity Building Projects on Higher Education Systems in Partner Countries](#). The SPHERE team had conducted surveys of project coordinators and partners, as well as of ministry officials, and had organised nine national online focus groups. Impact at national level had been felt primarily in the internationalisation of higher education, but also in the development of new laws, structures and processes for quality assurance, for example. At institutional level the main impact lay in the corresponding demand for staff development, as well as in the creation of new university structures, services and protocols.

Respondents took a positive view of the Capacity Building programme: they had found that it favoured a partnership, consortium-based approach and strengthened the structural impacts on HEIs – more so than was the case with investments by other funders. Moreover, the continuity provided by NEOs and HERE gave the programme a longitudinal memory which helped identify future project synergies.

However, while it was clear that positive outcomes had been scaled up and disseminated, it was also evident that effective systems for measuring and evaluating impact were not always in place. *Post hoc* impact assessment is not simple: projects evolve in complex and dynamic contexts and the full range of their outcomes and long-term effects cannot easily be circumscribed. Moreover, in the case of Erasmus+ CBHE projects, the origin, and thus the impact of many, can be traced back to the days of the TEMPUS Programme.

The report's recommendations concerned an enhanced role for ministries, a more flexible approach to priority setting, greater involvement of NEOs and HERE, and the design of less rigid project frameworks by the Commission.

The plenary then turned to the Commission's plans for the new generation of Erasmus+. **Filip Van Depoele**, Head of the Unit C3 for International Cooperation in DG EAC, first reported on the volume of activity in the year 2014-20; it included over 750 CBHE projects and around 270,000 short-term staff and student mobilities. The current period (2021-27) would strengthen international cooperation, while remaining firmly aligned with the EU priorities of greening, digitalisation and inclusion. Overall funding would rise from EUR 1.8b to EUR 2.2b, although Central Asia would see a substantial fall. While Russia, the Eastern Partnership and the Southern Mediterranean would retain broadly level funding, the Western Balkans would enjoy a 50% increase. (Globally, there would be a substantial shift of emphasis towards sub-Saharan Africa.)

For CBHE and international credit mobility (ICM), the first call (for 2022) was imminent. In addition to the three priorities mentioned above, CBHE would focus on citizenship and employability. Alongside the existing Partnerships for Transformation and Structural Reform Projects, it would feature a new third strand fostering access to cooperation in higher education, specifically targeting students with fewer opportunities and institutions in the least developed countries and in the remote areas of others.

The ICM budget, meanwhile, would rise from EUR 959m to EUR 1.064b, with a similar pattern of redistribution to that of CBHE. It aimed to be more flexible and simpler to manage, with new scope for blended learning and less rigid specifications for doctoral students. Technically, mobility funding would be limited to Partner-to-Programme placements. However, Programme Country institutions operating under a different budget heading had the discretion to use 20% of their KA 131 funding to support Programme-to-Partner mobility.

Finally, the pilot programme of virtual exchanges developed in the Southern Mediterranean would be extended to Russia, the Eastern Partnership, and the Western Balkans.

In support of all the above, NEOs were to continue in existence and HERE teams would be set up in 2022.

9. Session 6: Parallel sessions on mobility and inclusion, and on higher education and greening

The first group considered ICM and, specifically, the SPHERE study of the mobility of disadvantaged students from the Partner Countries, published in 2020. **Howard Davies** of the SPHERE team briefly recalled its findings and recommendations, while referencing the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy and looking forward to the publication of the Programme Guide for 2022 and the ICM call, which unfortunately had not been available in time for the conference.

He then introduced **Madina Karsakpayeva**, the country representative of the Erasmus Alumni Association (EMA) in Kazakhstan and joint coordinator of the EMAbility project in the framework of the E+ Student and Alumni Alliance (ESAA). She holds an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's degree in Inclusive and Special Education, having studied, and navigated by wheelchair, in the UK, Norway, and the Czech Republic. As the first Erasmus Mundus

alumna with a disability from Kazakhstan, she elaborated on the challenges posed by high-cost Programme Countries, the variable standards of accessibility particularly in older university buildings, and the difficulty of developing a sense of belonging in foreign host institutions.

In group 2, participants heard a presentation by **Marlène Bartes**, responsible for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) in unit C2 of DG EAC. She gave an overview of the part to be played by higher education in Commission's cross-cutting Green Deal.

Environmental sustainability was clearly marked as a priority, both in MSCA and in Erasmus+, where the overall available funding stood at EUR 6.6b and EUR 26.2b respectively. Beyond the essential task of awareness-raising, the programmes would promote green travel in the mobility actions and monitor their carbon footprint. Hybrid project implementation would also feature prominently. DG EAC had produced abundant guidelines, central to which was the MSCA Green Charter, by which project participants would be obliged to abide.

A case study by **Ahmed Abu Hanieh**, of Birzeit University in Palestine, and a look back at the SPHERE seminar on greening, by **Henriette Stoeber** of the SPHERE team, completed the context for a full discussion. The topic is a new one for most HERE, although there exist pockets of interesting practice relating to sustainable campuses, research and teaching for climate change, as well as national sustainability platforms. The HERE in general felt that greening should be given a higher profile in future activities.

10. Session 7: The Bologna Process, 'global engagement' and impact in Partner Countries

In the final panel session of the conference, the attention shifted from the European Commission to the Bologna Process. What had been its impact on the Partner Countries and on three higher education systems in particular?

Irine Darchia, Head of the Higher Education and Research Department in the Georgian Ministry of Education, and Associate Professor at Tbilisi State University, reported that every higher education reform in Georgia had been stimulated by Bologna, the most significant of these being in the field of quality assurance and accreditation. In addition, substantial advances had been made in the introduction of new disciplines and in the priority given to the social dimension. All the reforms had been enshrined in national legislation.

Morocco had been one of the first Partner Countries to re-fashion its higher education provision on the Bologna Process, thanks in large measure to the influence of France. Progress nevertheless had been slow – notably in the qualifications framework, credit accumulation and transfer, and institutional autonomy. The quality assurance agency remained under the aegis of the ministry and the concern for the social dimension had been overtaken by the employability imperative. Its greatest challenge, in the view of **Khalid Jaafar Naciri**, former President of University Hassan 2 in Casablanca, lay in mainstreaming and disseminating project outcomes; he gave learning outcomes as an example.

In contrast, legislation in Uzbekistan was recent and its application to join the Bologna Process was pending. **Nazokat Kasymova**, of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, noted that a national strategy was now in

place and that the challenge would be to introduce reforms that would prove sustainable. One positive factor was the gradual movement of HEREs into positions of responsibility and influence.

The discussion was wound up by **Kathy Isaacs**, representing the Bologna Follow-Up Group. She reminded participants of the Global Policy Dialogue which meets regularly in parallel and simultaneously with the ministerial summits. It had performed an important mediating role, broadening and deepening dialogue between regions, and had been especially influential in embedding student-centred learning and credit accumulation.

11. Conclusions

There were no formal conclusions to the conference – the conference had itself been the conclusion of seven years of successful collaboration. Instead, the participants exchanged warm votes of thanks and looked forward to a further round of capacity building in Erasmus+ from 2022 onwards, reassured and encouraged by the commitments made by the Commission and the Executive Agency. The door to the post-Covidian age was open.