

Foresight 2020: International Forum on Higher Education Reform

On 28 – 30 September 2010, participants from a variety of European countries and institutions, and with a range of experience and responsibilities in the European Higher Education Area, gathered in Dubrovnik on the invitation of the Universities of Novi Sad, Universities of Zagreb and the Regional Cooperation Council. The aim was to hold an open, critical and constructive discussion on the state of higher education in Europe on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Bologna process and five years after the launch of Novi Sad Initiative. The event also offered the opportunity to post a contribution to the further development of the European Higher Education Area, aiming to provide valuable inputs in the course of tuning higher education reform strategies for the next ten years. The event also paid attention to developments in higher education in the Western Balkans region.

The participants agree the following conclusions for consideration by all involved in, and concerned by, the development of the European Higher Education Area:

Preamble

Having regard to:

- The official launch of the European Higher Education Area at the Ministerial Conference in Budapest and Vienna, 11 and 12 March 2010 after a decade of unprecedented higher education reform across Europe;
- The fundamental importance of higher education to personal, social, cultural and economic development and in particular to the development of future knowledge- based society.
- Increasing demands for harmonisation of national qualification frameworks and needs for removing obstacles to student mobility and progression across Europe and beyond.
- Emerging changes in technology where science, as a genuine, vibrant part of higher education, pushes forward new developments.
- The public responsibility for providing a higher education system able to meet societal demands and to respond to emerging global challenges.
- Increasing demands for professionalisation in the public management and administration of higher education.
- The vital role of student evaluation and the evaluation of external stakeholders in assessing how far higher education is meeting societal expectations.
- The widespread hope that the European Higher Education Area can anticipate the needs of a wide range of future, potential students.
- The importance of regional cooperation in the course of enhancing the realisation of the European Higher Education Area.

The following questions, some of which were already raised by the Novi Sad Initiative, require attention if a higher education area which can better serve the needs of European societies is to become a sustainable reality:

Questions

1. How to maintain long-term strategy when countries have short-term reactions to political and economic realities?
2. How can European societies and governments be persuaded that investment in higher education would be the best investment for the future – especially at a time of economic downturn?
3. What kind of legal framework could best strengthen higher education institutions, and provide them with the balance of autonomy and accountability needed to address the range of today's societal and global challenges?
4. How can quality in all aspects of higher education be effectively enhanced whilst avoiding burdensome bureaucratic procedures?
5. Could the framework for discussion and decision-making in the European Higher Education Area be improved to ensure that European commitments are more effectively implemented at national and institutional level?
6. How can the higher education system be protected from undue government involvement which could damage irreparably that which it most needs to cherish – an independent, innovative, higher education system?
7. How can more relevant, accurate and comparable information be gathered and used to inform evidence-based policy that serves the development of the European Higher Education Area?
8. How to manage in the future an imminent contradiction between the fact that higher education is inherently international while funding and legislation still remains mostly national?
9. How can regional cooperation be developed to play a full role in enhancing the realisation of the European Higher Education Area?

Principles

- Governments, higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders throughout Europe should work together in a spirit of partnership and solidarity based upon mutual trust and confidence;
- Higher education institutions must be empowered and trusted with real functional autonomy to respond effectively to societal demands through excellent and relevant education (focused on achieving deep student learning), research and innovation;
- Effective quality assurance, involving external evaluation, is required to assist higher education institutions in delivering their multiple missions;
- Higher education institutions must be fully accountable for the very substantial public and private funds devoted to support their mission;
- Traditional academic freedoms must be safeguarded against the encroachment of short term market-led constraints on Higher Education
- The role of higher education includes contributing to knowledge, innovation and a strong civil society and must not be reduced to serving European economic ambitions only.
- A shared vision for a sustainable and global future should impact on all students across the EHEA through recognition of environmental and ethical issues in the curriculum.

Proposals: Looking forward to 2020 and beyond

The goal of an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area remains the most important aspiration and challenge for the next decade. A very rich output of the discussions of Dubrovnik Forum has confirmed again that there are many facets of the issue of structural higher education reform. Any attempt to summarise these discussions in a concise manner, would compromise their comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, we agree that the following two paragraphs of the London Communiqué, taken in a slightly rephrased form, convey beautifully the main message of the event:

1 As the EHEA continues to develop and respond to the challenges of globalisation, **we are aware that the need for collaboration will continue beyond 2010.**

2 We understand that 2010, which marks the passage from the Bologna Process to the EHEA, has to be seized as an opportunity to reaffirm commitment to higher education as a key element in making our societies sustainable, at national as well as at European level. **Year 2010 has to be taken also as an opportunity to reformulate the vision that motivated Europe in setting the Bologna Process in motion in 1999** and to make the case for an EHEA underpinned by values and visions that go beyond issues of structures and tools. **We also see 2010 as an opportunity to reset our higher education systems on a course that looks beyond the immediate issues and makes them fit to take up the challenges that will determine our future.**

This message of the London Communiqué 2007, which we reaffirm here, seems to be partly forgotten or neglected in the later stages of Bologna Process and we are very much convinced that it should be placed high on the agenda.

We are living in uncertain times, and face many common global challenges that can only be tackled across national boundaries. The success of the European Higher Education Area is vital for all our futures and to provide a safe passage from post-industrial society to an era of knowledge based economy. However, countries, higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders now have important choices to make. The reforms that have taken place over the past decade provide the foundations to build a European Higher Education Area that benefits us all. Yet these are just the first steps, and there is much more to be done. **If we continue to work with intelligence, responsibility and determination towards the creation of an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area, and ensure a proper degree of internal freedom inside the process, we may succeed.**

The Western Balkan countries are formally committed members of the Bologna process, and all are currently engaged in implementation. This is a unique opportunity to participate in the positive restructuring of national systems to create an inclusive European Higher Education Area that benefits all citizens and countries. More could be done in the region to realise these potential benefits. **We therefore strongly encourage higher education authorities from the Western Balkan countries to make joint efforts in profiling a Regional Roadmap in higher education**

development, thus improving regional cooperation and the sharing of good practice, while maintaining positive aspects of local, national and regional cultural diversity.

We, the participants of the Dubrovnik Foresight 2020 Forum, are convinced of the potential of the higher education community to create a European Higher Education Area that provides opportunity and inspiration for all. If this vision is to be realised, it will be not only as a consequence of high level decision-making, but more importantly as the outcome of effective implementation and action in countries and institutions. **Governments should put much more trust in higher education institutions, rather than relying on global market forces.** Higher education institutions and their stakeholder communities therefore need to take centre stage. Public authorities must ensure that they have the opportunity and the capacity to do so.