

Introduction to the theme

1. Rationale, background and expected outcomes

The Forum is an experts' event aiming to explore the wider context of ten years of European Higher Education modernisation and reform. It aims to explore issues beyond the established views of the main agencies involved, in particular by consideration of the views of a wide range of stakeholders.

We hope that outputs from this event will provide one of the more valuable inputs into higher education reform strategy for the next ten years.

A central purpose of the Forum is to offer a platform for an open discussion on higher education reform in Europe and in the neighbouring countries. It offers the opportunity to raise important questions related to EU-led higher education reform process which are not normally voiced at Bologna Process ministerial conferences.

The Forum gathered European higher education experts including representatives of international organisations, European higher education authorities, higher education policy centres and universities, and a number of individual experts.

Dubrovnik Forum is one of the regular events sustaining the "Novi Sad Initiative". Along with celebration for the 10th Anniversary of Bologna Process and the EU modernisation agenda this year we have another Anniversary, although significantly less important ... five years of Novi Sad Initiative. Therefore the Forum will also provide an opportunity for discussion of the role of bottom-up processes in the course of the creation of European Higher Education Area.

2. Logistics and main axes for discussion

The event will last three days and will have six sessions: two plenary sessions and four round tables. A special Panel co-located with Forum, devoted to mobility of PhD students under the umbrella international organisations, NGO's and foundations, will take place at the end of the event.

Each round table will have an introduction and a number of expert inputs with the ultimate purpose to provoke discussion.

I trust that we all share the awareness that an open discussion will be the best policy to make EU higher education reform much stronger and more productive.

Generally speaking Round Tables have

- to review basic ideas and 'modus operandi' behind the EU modernisation Agenda and Bologna Process and the way the higher education reform has been carried out;
- to assess the impact of the ten years of reform and the validity of indicators; and
- to explore the extent to which genuine voices of Higher Education institutions have been heard .

A special attempt will be made to consider critically the impact of higher education reform in the EU and WB on the next 10 years to 2020 in two parallel sessions.

There are several future scenarios for higher education development, the core elements of which already exist in contemporary structures.

Decisions taken today and in the next few years will define how the future develops. Slowly it is becoming clear that any prescribed and enforced future that does not have significant involvement from the higher education institutions themselves, would gradually transform Higher Education into a weakly-creative market driven service with limited research capability.

Instead, we should rely more on the internal evolution of Higher Education secured by a sensible list of values, with possible crossovers in due course.

3. Few observations concerning the Bologna Process

The official assessment of the Bologna Process has been made against its stated goals only and not against essential quality indicators, and therefore it is not clear yet what is its real wider impact on Higher Education. Nevertheless it is certain that this process provided a fresh chance for all EU and the neighbouring countries participating in Bologna zone, including the Western Balkan Countries, to participate from the very beginning in the restructuring and harmonisation of the higher education system on a global scale.

Officially, the Bologna reform is a voluntary process of "connecting" national reforms. Still, there are no doubts that it is a top down initiative - from voluntary participation to monitored coordination. The, whole Bologna Process has been from the very beginning in hands of Ministers with variable enthusiasm from the university side. Decision-making mechanisms within the Bologna Process allow that some vital decisions concerning Higher Education can be made and imposed without any consent from the Higher Education Institutions. The question asked by Pauline Ravinet in her article, "why European countries feel increasingly bound by their commitment to the Bologna Process" could be therefore rephrased as "why Higher Education Institutions feel increasingly frustrated by not being properly heard and not properly involved".

This Forum certainly is not going to give floor to those, in particular from academic community, who take Bologna process as an excuse for doing nothing to improve situation in their local higher education environments.

Still, there is major concern that this so called voluntary process increasingly become an issue of dogma - any national higher education has freedom to decide whether to join the process or not, but cannot question it.

4. Current scenario for higher education development

The higher education development scenario which prevails today is very much connected with EU policy in Higher Education. It is focusing on the use of "new public management" tools including market forces and financial incentives as it is described in the Scenario 3 in the OECD Report from Athens Ministerial Meeting 2006. This is basically a bureaucratically driven higher education vision where Higher Education Institutions are primarily publicly funded, with an apparent autonomy of institutions (whatever that means) and with an international focus. In this model "Higher Education Institutions have taken advantage of foreign education markets, the deregulation of tuition fees, the patenting of their academic research and their growing financial links with local and international industry to diversify their funding sources". This model basically relies on bureaucratically driven Quality Assurance Procedures, generally speaking ensuring only a quality threshold and not related to real quality of Higher Education Institutions. Although this "new public management" model looks a rather realistic scenario for today, it has no great potential for the future.

Speaking market language, in this scenario, Higher Education is "selling itself too cheaply" and limits itself to a position of service provider as the "key to economic development". I trust my younger colleagues Anna and Bert will be happy to provide more arguments for this statement in their interventions during the event (Anna is PhD student of the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College and Bert is Chairperson of European Students' Union).

5. Who represents Higher Education Institutions - and a path less travelled?

The proliferation of higher education associations shows clearly that there exists no genuine voice representing Higher Education Institutions.

The European University Association and the European Students' Union play an important role and have made substantial contributions to higher education reform but unfortunately they are both too close to the Brussels establishment to be able to achieve significant shift from the official mindset. Other associations and trade unions (the International Association of Universities, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, Education International) also have their own niche in this business but none of these provide the whole picture and a genuine voice for the higher education sector.

Higher Education currently is desperately divided along several lines with no genuine voice outside and no credible representation. Still, there is a path, although less travelled, which does have potential for the future. It leads to a global self-organisation and self-regulation of Higher Education Institutions free from abuse from local, national, economic, religious and military ambitions. This is much more than networking ... it presumes that there is a strong credible institutionalised voice of Higher Education Institutions. I trust that the some attention will be paid to this issue during this event.

Concerning the perspectives of such development it is most intriguing that Governments put much more faith in the free market and its self-regulation than in free higher education and its self-organisation and self-regulation.

Continuous enhancement of quality, as a vital part of higher education, presumes genuine involvement of Higher Education Institutions and should be an inherent part of its internal organisation.

6. Short term and long run strategies

In the short term, the consequent implementation of "new public management" tools in Europe and the Bologna zone looks like good strategy but this requires

1. The professionalisation of the public management of higher education including the transfer of most of the power (except those related to some strategic decisions) from ministries to professional intermediary policy, planning and funding bodies not directly connected to the Governments.
2. granting much higher level of autonomy to Higher Education Institutions which include financial autonomy and autonomy of ownership
3. encouragement of Higher Education Institutions to embark on global open networking and self-organisation ignoring political, religious and national borders
4. paradigm shift in the philosophy of Quality Enhancement (moving average instead threshold)

Also, there must be instruments in the higher education system to prevent an inappropriate use of the power of the purse to constrain academic freedom and self-regulation. Outside legal matters, money is the main mechanism used by the state to control Higher Education and university autonomy

7 Epilogue

I will conclude this Introduction to the Forum Theme with two quotes from the keynote speech given by Tom Boland, Chief Executive of Higher Education Authority of Ireland at the Dubrovnik Conference three years ago.

"One of the concerns of those of us who work in higher education is the maintenance of an appropriate separation between higher education and governments"

"The current preoccupation with higher education and its central role in economic and social development potentially holds a danger: a danger that in its quest for accountability and reassurance, government will weaken the walls of separation which in many countries for centuries have protected the higher education system from undue government involvement;

and in doing so government will damage irreparably that which it most needs to cherish – an independent, innovative, higher education system”.

Being at the turning point of higher education reform in Europe, with ten years of intensive campaigns behind and a perspective of another ten years of very much the same policy ahead, a question arises whether it is right time for letting in some new ideas into the current ruling political agenda.