THE BOLOGNA PROCESS REVISITED:
THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has come to a turning point where a new sense of direction is needed in order to move ahead. To accomplish this, we must first look back at the past 15 years of convergence and then look ahead to new challenges, goals and strategies.

Looking back: 15 years of convergence

A common vision

In Bologna in 1999 the Ministers of Education of 29 countries agreed on a common vision of a European Higher Education Area. They found that this vision was politically relevant for their own countries and translated it into the operational goals listed in the Bologna Declaration.

The key elements of the European Higher Education Area envisaged at that time were:

- European countries with different political, cultural and academic traditions would engage in cooperation to reach a shared objective;

- European students and graduates would be able to move easily from one country to another with full recognition of qualifications and periods of study, and access to the European labor market;

- European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) would be able to cooperate and exchange students/staff on bases of trust and confidence and also of transparency and quality;

- European governments would fit their national higher education reforms into a broader European context;

- Higher Education (HE) in the European region would increase its international competitiveness, as well as enter into dialogue and improve cooperation with HE in other regions of the world.

In the past 15 years the Bologna Process, through voluntary convergence and an intergovernmental approach, has led to the construction of the main pillars of the European Higher Education Area:

- • <u>A common framework</u>, which includes the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, a common credit system (ECTS), common principles for the development of student-centered learning, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, a common Register of QA Agencies, a common approach to recognition, and a common body of methodologies and sustainable achievements produced by European HEIs.

- • <u>A number of common tools</u>, namely, the ECTS Users' Guide, the Diploma Supplement, the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Both the framework and the tools need to be consolidated or further developed, but unquestionably they have defined the shared traits of the EHEA and made it visible to other regions of the world. In achieving this result, the Bologna Process has set an example of successful intra-regional cooperation which other regions of the world observe with great interest.

The original common vision is still valid and attractive. Quality student and staff mobility and academic/professional recognition, as well as employability of graduates, are at the heart of European cooperation. The European approach to quality assurance and the correct use of all transparency tools are also considered key elements of the EHEA.

The EHEA is based on the assumption that policies and goals agreed at European level will be implemented nationally and within HEIs. It is undeniable, however, that this vision has been shared within a limited constituency of HE education actors – the so called Bologna insiders -, that it has sometimes been obscured in national reforms, and that the achievement of its objectives has been uneven in the participating countries. Therefore, it is generally agreed that the full implementation of the common framework and tools in all participating countries should be one of the priorities for the years to come. At the same time, however, there is consensus on the need to move ahead and update the common vision by taking into account new challenges.

<u>In the course of the process a number of lessons were learned</u>:

1. The original European vision was not well communicated to or not well understood by all stakeholders in HE and by other societal actors in the participating countries. Moreover, it has often been interpreted in different ways when used as leverage for national reforms, or perceived simply as a bureaucratic requirement to be complied with.

   Now we know that more efficient communication of the common European vision and broader participation is needed in order to highlight its benefits for participating countries and institutions and to develop a feeling of ownership of the goals pursued and of the results attained.

2. A clear distinction was not made between the two main levels of implementation of the vision: the national and the institutional level. This distinction makes evident that a full adoption of the structural reforms based on political decisions was only a first step, which could be completed in a reasonable time and easily controlled. The second step, implementation at the grassroots level, requires a slow process of information and consensus-building in single institutions, departments and subject areas, and is aimed at deeper cultural change. This step requires genuine involvement and the engagement of staff and students both in collegial governance structures and in the classroom. It takes more time and is more difficult to evaluate.

   Now we know that it is wise to consider the two levels separately, handle them with different approaches and evaluate them in different ways. We are also aware that implementation at the institutional level can be supported by national initiatives and incentives.

3. Student-centered learning was not always clearly recognized as the main pillar of the European degree structure and was not sufficiently assimilated and implemented by the academic community.

   Now we know that student-centered learning should be implemented in both program design and delivery and should affect the whole learning/teaching process, also through the creation of favorable learning environments. We are also aware that student-centered learning can only take place when both students and teachers are willing to engage in a constructive dialogue and in a process of cooperative learning in order to develop useful competences.

4. It was not fully realized that moving towards common goals with 47 countries implies a number of tensions between different aspects of the convergence process. Here are some of them:

- A pan-European approach vs. national diversity

  The construction of the EHEA is a supranational endeavor resulting from a jointly developed common vision. In converging towards common principles, frameworks and tools, all participating countries have had to change their national systems in some ways. They have done so because they saw the added value of operating in a larger international area. But resistance to change was to be expected both at the national and institutional level, especially where the common vision had not been well communicated and/or was not well received. National academic traditions, legitimate interests and priorities often hinder, slow down or distort the European project. The governing bodies of the process must ensure that it maintains its supranational nature and at the same time generates sufficient added value for each country to be willing to continue to be committed to it. We know that this balance is a moving target and mutual trust is an essential element to achieve it.

  The pan-European character of the process should be enhanced, its added value for national policies should be made more visible, and steps should be taken to involve the entire academic community – teachers, students and administrative staff - in elaborating the concrete paths toward its realization.

- Process vs. outcome

  In the past 15 years two different understandings of the common endeavor have co-existed: participation in the Bologna Process and achievement of the EHEA. These two understandings often emphasized different aspects of what was being done - process and outcomes - and carried with them different expectations which were or were not met. The main difference is that a process may take time to complete and is often difficult to describe precisely, whereas outcomes are more visible and easily measurable. It follows that processes are not always identified and supported, while outcomes are more easily recognized and appreciated – or criticized.

Both outcomes and processes are essential elements of the construction of the EHEA and they should be considered and evaluated as related elements of the whole.

- Top-down vs. bottom-up approaches

A top-down approach to reforms generally involves the use of legislation, regulations, incentives and sanctions to direct HE activities at any level. However, room for bottom-up feedback, proposals and initiatives should also be provided, allowing for a more flexible approach and for the active involvement of institutions, practitioners and students in the implementation of such reforms. In order for them to take ownership of the process, they should be given the autonomy to act on their own responsibility, while proper monitoring can be ensured by an agreed approach to QA.

Both top-down and bottom-up approaches should be implemented and encouraged, so as to facilitate a positive interaction and the achievement of the reforms.

- Common standards vs. flexibility

When 47 countries with different backgrounds move together towards a common goal, benchmarking and evaluation are needed in order to define the minimum standards required for full participation and identify the level of convergence reached by each country. This raises the issue of how to handle cases which do not meet such minimum standards. Since the EHEA is not a regulatory body, it cannot impose sanctions. What kind of flexibility should there be in such cases? Should processes as well as outcomes be taken into account? Should more time be allowed for completing the processes, and peer learning opportunities be provided by other partner countries?

Minimum standards for participating in the EHEA should be defined, but ongoing processes should also be evaluated, and peer learning opportunities should be provided.

Cooperation vs. competition

In the European HE tradition cooperating generally means joining forces with partners, developing synergies and raising funds together with a view

to provide better education. Competing is generally intended as trying to achieve better quality and more visibility than other institutions/departments in order to get more/better students or a larger share of the scarce funds available. The two aspects, however, are not mutually exclusive, as - for example - joint programs based on European inter-institutional cooperation show.

Healthy competition within the EHEA does not exclude strong cooperation, and both are needed to ensure quality, visibility and attractiveness in the global HE world.

- Global vs. regional

    If the EHEA is viewed as a world region interacting with other world regions, there seems to be a dynamic tension between cooperating within this region and developing links with regions beyond it. However, the two tendencies could be articulated in such a way as to complement each other. Similarly, some institutions see their role as global players and are more interested in cooperating with global partners, while others find it more useful to concentrate on regional cooperation. Since the two levels are not incompatible, they can become mutually reinforcing.

    Various schemes of global/regional cooperation can be devised on the basis of specific national/institutional needs, policies or missions.

Now we know that all these tensions need to be recognized and managed as dynamic forces of the process.

Looking ahead: new challenges, new goals, new strategies

In the current world situation HE has a key role to play, in Europe and beyond, for the development of new societies. Our achievements in the past 15 years – building the foundations of the EHEA and activating a dynamic cooperation process – should give us the confidence to develop a new common vision: responding together to the challenges that HE has to face at the present time, engaging our energies, creativity and resources in the development of common approaches for the pursuit of common goals.

Some of the **present challenges to the EHEA** are listed below together with some suggested approaches:

1. How can the EHEA facilitate the **implementation of a student-centered approach** in all systems and institutions?

Suggested approaches:

- increasing academic staff awareness of the benefits of such an approach for learning and teaching, and providing opportunities for peer learning in all subject areas;

- ensuring that learning and teaching, as well as students' involvement in curriculum development, are properly included in both internal and external quality enhancement processes;

- recognizing good teaching performance and using it as one of the criteria for career advancement;

- providing broad opportunities for lifelong learning and for the recognition of prior learning in order to meet the individual needs of learners.

2. How can the EHEA ensure **-** through public responsibility and adequate funding from public and private sources **-** that **HE be a public good for the** benefit of all in our modern, complex and rapidly changing societies?

Suggested approaches

- highlighting the responsibility of European political and institutional leaders, academics and student organizations for transferring global values into HE, educating responsible citizens for new societies and aligning their competences with societal needs;

- promoting an open debate and cooperation on questions concerning global issues, such as unemployment, poverty, exclusion, conflict, etc.;

- guaranteeing the accountability of HEIs to stakeholders and society at large, the quality of educational provision, and the reliability, clarity and relevance of information, in order to generate trust in national and European HE;

- improving social inclusion and enhancing opportunities for access, success and international mobility for under-represented and disadvantaged groups of students; monitoring progress in ensuring free access to HE for all groups of learners.

3. How can the EHEA respond to **demographic changes** (e.g., ageing population), migratory movements and requests for new citizenship?

Suggested approaches:

- promoting an open debate and cooperation on issues related to demographic changes and their impact on European societies;

- providing relevant education to a diversified student population (e.g., young and adult learners) also through appropriate lifelong learning activities;

- facilitating the recognition of academic/professional qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, according to transparent criteria;

- providing adequate learning opportunities to immigrant students for the full development of their human and intellectual potential and the achievement of citizenship.

4. How can the EHEA contribute to **scientific research**?

Suggested approaches:

- promoting approaches to learning, teaching and assessment that enhance critical and creative thinking;

- strengthening the links between education and research, and promoting research-based learning in all cycles and in all disciplinary areas;

- encouraging the design of doctoral programs suited to developing broad transversal and interdisciplinary competences, as well as the necessary specialization;

- facilitating dialogue between science and society and cooperation between HE and enterprise.

5. How can the EHEA make the best use of the opportunities offered by **technological developments** for learning and teaching?

Suggested approaches:

- ensuring the achievement of technological skills at an appropriate level by teachers, students and administrative staff;

- promoting the beneficial use of technological innovations in learning and teaching (blended and distance learning, OER, MOOCs, etc), including the provision of lifelong learning opportunities;

- ensuring that the use of technological innovation in learning and teaching is properly included in both internal and external quality enhancement processes.

6. How can the EHEA, as a global player in higher education, react to **conflicts** between countries and **political extremisms** within countries?

Suggested approaches:

- promoting continuous policy dialogue and strategic partnerships with other regions of the world, especially with those that are developing common HE areas;

- encouraging scientific cooperation within the EHEA and with other regions of the world, because common academic culture facilitates understanding and trust;

- fostering the internationalization of HEIs by supporting networking and stable partnerships, mobility of academic and administrative staff as well as joint programs at all levels (including doctoral studies);

- encouraging student mobility at all levels by avoiding overregulation and rigidity of the systems and increasing the flexibility of study programs; promoting the mobility of teacher training students, in view of the key role they will play as educators of new generations of students and potential multipliers of international/intercultural competences.

7. How can the EHEA face the challenges of **the current economic crisis** and turn them into new opportunities?

Suggested approaches:

- supporting innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship in HE, encouraging teachers and students to develop such qualities and apply them to new activities;

- enhancing the employability of graduates through an ongoing dialogue with employers and the implementation of competence-based programs, and following up their career development;

- developing a dialogue between governments and HEIs on how the funds available can be most useful and on new models of funding;

- making full use of all the accomplishments made in the past years, in terms of networks, active academic communities, methodologies, project outcomes, tools, etc..

These difficult challenges can be best approached at the EHEA level – both by governments and stakeholders. A political engagement of the EHEA Ministers is needed to develop the common strategy which can create the conditions and indicate the directions for shaping the future of HE. In this context, all possible synergies should be developed and all national and European actors invited to act in a complementary way. Together we are stronger. And, on the basis of the lessons learned in the first 15 years, we are now better prepared to work together.