

International conference on
Funding of Higher Education
Yerevan, Armenia, 8-9 September 2011

Conference report

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Summary

*The present report summarises the **main conclusions** of the **first major international conference on funding of higher education** organized in the context of the Bologna Process. Furthermore, the report puts forward **two recommendations** for the consideration of policy makers with responsibilities in the area of funding of higher education, at national or European level. In particular, these recommendations are meant to contribute to informing the discussions in the Bologna Follow-Up Group in preparation of the April 2012 Bologna Ministerial Conference.*

Context and objectives

The conference was organized by the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia under the auspices of the Polish-Armenian co-chairship of the Bologna Process and supported by the World Bank.

Over 100 participants attended, including government officials from member countries of the European Higher Education Area, representatives of the European Commission, Bologna Secretariat, intergovernmental and non-governmental international organizations active in higher education, as well as national and European student organizations, and university administrators.

The conference aimed at providing a platform for exchange of experiences regarding issues related to funding of higher education in the European Higher Education Area, in particular by exploring new **knowledge about and practical experience with financing mechanisms** in higher education. It further aimed at identifying concrete aspects regarding **the role that financing policies and mechanisms could play in achieving efficiency, equity and quality in higher education**. Finally, while focusing on issues of funding of higher education, the conference intended to contribute to developing a better, **shared understanding of larger developments within the Bologna framework**.

Conclusions

The participants noted that although the Bologna Process is more than ten years old it is only now for the first time that a major international conference on funding of higher education is convened in the framework of this Process. They commended the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science for this initiative.

Despite the fact that funding of higher education has been explicitly listed as one of the priorities of the European Higher Education Area/Bologna Process since the Leuven 2009 Ministerial Conference, no progress has been made to date in articulating concrete objectives or policy guidelines for operationalising what otherwise remains a generic and rather abstract priority. It appears that the

explicit inclusion of the topic of funding in the list of Bologna priorities (2009-2012 Work Plan) remains largely a place-holder, as it continues to lack minimal elaboration that would help support and orient actual work in this area.

The main conclusion of the conference was that, as a policy area, **funding of higher education is a severely underdeveloped dimension of the Bologna Process.** While remarkable progress has been made in other areas/Bologna action lines, such as in promoting compatibility of degree structures, quality assurance, or even student mobility, at European level, with a few exceptions (*e.g.* Erasmus program of the EU) it is very difficult to identify any initiatives in the area of funding of higher education that were meant to support or were derived from the overall objectives of the Bologna process. In fact, this situation points to what could be called a “**funding gap**”, understood as a **policy gap**: while the project of the European Higher Education Area put forward many **European-wide objectives and actual initiatives** in higher education, existing policies and mechanisms regarding funding remain almost exclusively national, or sub-national. There is a widening gap between the increasing European scope of the developments in higher education stimulated by the Bologna process (such as trans-national student mobility, or student loans for foreign nationals) and the mostly scattered, national efforts to support or respond to these developments and associated challenges by putting in place appropriate funding policies and mechanisms. Moreover, it was also observed that **systematic efforts to understand conceptually this policy gap are largely absent.**

The participants presented a wealth of excellent recent national and institutional initiatives and experiences regarding funding of higher education. It became clear, however, that there is limited or no “European course”, let alone coordination, in this area.

Recommendations

In order to ensure continuing progress of the Bologna Process, for the benefit of all member countries and in full respect of their diverse models and national realities, it is important to start addressing this funding policy gap.

At this stage in the evolution of the European Higher Education Area it appears important to make a strong and also substantive statement regarding the relevance of funding of higher education in the framework of the Bologna Process; it is important to move beyond the vague, place-holder recognition of funding as an “ingredient” of the process, and attempt to provide guidelines to orient practical future efforts.

To help achieve this, **two recommendations** are being put forward:

- 1. Re-affirm public responsibility for funding of higher education in the context of the Bologna process.**
- 2. Stimulate the creation of a European space for dialogue in the area of financing of higher education.**

Public responsibility does not mean that funding must come exclusively from public/state sources. Rather, it means that the state should be responsible for a regulatory framework that ensures efficient mobilisation, allocation, and use

of financial resources in higher education, consistent with larger policy goals and principles. While Europe has at present and will preserve in the future a large diversity in the area of funding of higher education in terms of national situations, specific challenges, approaches, and solutions (e.g. share of private vs. public provision in higher education), it is also possible to identify common public policy principles and goals to be considered when designing regulatory frameworks for financing of higher education. Such goals and principles include among others: education as a public good; concern for equity, access, and quality; need to consider the multiplicity of goals promoted by higher education policies (economic, social, national, European, etc.); sustainability; accountability and transparency.

The creation of a European space for dialogue in the area of financing of higher education could help bridge the funding policy gap. Its creation could draw inspiration from the good precedent in the area of quality assurance. While 10-12 years ago the quality assurance landscape in Europe was totally scattered, a common European space for dialogue in this area has emerged, respecting diversity while making possible and stimulating joint work and advancement. This "space" consists of a European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and, not less important, an increasingly common European quality assurance vocabulary. Clearly, funding of higher education is in many ways different from quality assurance. Still, the model of a "European space for dialogue" in this area could be achieved. It would allow systematic and coordinated efforts to collect and exchange data and information on funding; sharing of good practices and success stories; learning from unsuccessful efforts and initiatives; joint efforts to conceptualize challenges (national, European, global) regarding funding of higher education; eventual common targets/benchmarks; designing new funding mechanisms to support the advancement of the European Higher Education Area (e.g. jointly developing new, better mechanisms for funding mobility); developing and testing new concepts and tools (e.g. student vouchers).

The conference effectively highlighted the importance of funding of higher education in the broader framework of the European Higher Education Area. The clear identification of an existing "policy gap" along with specific recommendations for the policy makers could represent a successful first step in tackling challenges related to funding of higher education in the European Higher Education Area.