

Abstract

Up until 2010, reforms were relatively coherent across Europe, owing to a number of European-wide processes. However, the lingering impact of the 2008 financial crisis, combined with international rankings, resulted in a fragmented policy landscape and a relative “loss of appetite” for European policies. If managed judiciously, a new European initiative has the potential of bringing the continent together again.

The reforms took place in the broader context of major transformations in the higher education landscape.

European Higher Education: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Since 1999, Europe’s universities have undergone considerable transformation and renewal processes. These transformations are a response to changes in the global, European, and national environments, and the result of intentional change initiated by states, universities, or both.

Looking Back: 1998–2010

Looking back at the past twenty years, the salvo of deep changes in Europe came in 1998, when French Minister of Education Allègre invited his British, German, and Italian counterparts to a ceremony at the Sorbonne, where they pledged to initiate higher education reforms together. The other European countries clamored to join in. The Bologna Process was thus born, in a context where the growing importance of globalization, the knowledge-based economy, information and communication technology, internationalization, quality, and entrepreneurship were identified as major change factors.

The responses to these trends translated into state-driven reforms, albeit in many cases at the (more or less discrete) prodding of rectors. Although the focus and shape of reforms depended on the country, there were some common elements that were framed by the European Union’s “modernization agenda” for universities. The top four national reforms concerned quality assurance, research policies, institutional autonomy, and funding. Other, less frequent, changes included governance reforms and new academic career models.

The reforms took place in the broader context of major transformations in the higher education landscape. Some countries—mostly in Central and Eastern Europe—saw a significant increase in participation rates, associated with a substantial growth in the number of (mainly private) institutions. Other countries—mostly, but not only, in Western Europe—saw mergers of universities or the creation of consortia, in an effort to increase universities’ national and international impact. With the first international ranking in 2003, which revealed the superiority of US universities over European universities, this took on a sense of urgency.

The scale of reforms in that first decade cannot be underestimated. In many countries, universities implemented more than one reform at a time, managing massive changes resulting from the Bologna Process, while responding to growing pressures

linked to high unemployment rates, and striving to improve their research capacity and international impact.

These reforms have reshaped the internal organization of universities. For instance, doctoral cycle reforms led to the establishment of new structures (doctoral schools) and new processes (cosupervision). The momentum created by the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area resulted in the blossoming of partnerships among universities and between universities and the private sector. The changing nature of European and national research funding schemes, combined with greater emphasis on internationalization, resulted in a growth of administrative services in universities, often at the central level, and the professionalization of administrative staff. Greater autonomy improved the quality of university leadership and universities' strategic capacity to sharpen their institutional profiles and increase their international attractiveness. The development of internal quality assurance processes was identified as the most important internal change by 60 percent of the institutions responding to a European survey, notably those with the strongest international aspirations.

The Recent Period: 2011–2020

The second decade of the century began under the dire consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and the rising tide of illiberalism, leading to limitations to institutional autonomy. In some countries, a demographic decline led to a shrinking of the private higher education sector, while aging populations increasingly weighed on public finances. The weakening of European policies and a sense that the Bologna Process was perhaps on the wane resulted in a diversity of national approaches, albeit with some common elements: budget tightening, increased workloads, and casualization of academics; and greater stress on learning and teaching and on labor-skills development. A variety of funding instruments became popular, foremost among them performance-based funding.

The lingering impact of the financial crisis, combined with ongoing concern about international rankings, resulted in a number of national “excellence initiatives” providing concentrated funding to a selective set of universities.

Looking Forward: 2021–2030

The third decade is starting under an even darker cloud. As the economic situation was beginning to improve, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and constituted a full-scale stress test for everyone and every organization around the world, including universities, their students, and their staff.

COVID-19 has not been the only disruptor. Others change drivers comprise the increasing role of new actors (for example, third-party education providers and EdTech companies), and new trends affecting all three university missions. Examples include digital transformation and its consequences on graduate attributes and the organization of learning delivery, as well as the growing importance of experiential learning, short cycle degrees, microcredentials, and stackable badges. Notable trends within research include the Open Science movement; the push for, and resistance against, limiting research to innovation; the rising importance of translational and interdisciplinary research; and the move toward qualitative research assessment. The UN Sustainable Development Goals and the environmental crisis are stimulating universities to think of ways to integrate all three missions through challenge-based teaching, research, and societal engagement.

While these global trends must be addressed by all universities around the world, a declaration by French President Macron in 2017 served as a reset for European university cooperation. The “European University Initiative”, which funds 41 university alliances across Europe, has the potential of both addressing these global trends and injecting new momentum through coherent policy approaches. Though very recent, this initiative has reenergized what was thought to be a weakening Bologna Process by revealing the need to change national regulations in order to unlock the potential of these strategic alliances. Yet, this initiative involves only 5 percent of European institutions, enrolling 20 percent of European students (284 universities in 31 countries). A majority of institutions and students remain outside this scheme, and some countries are not participating at all. It will be crucial to avoid leaving them on the side of the road at a time when bold changes are required of all. ▲

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A longer version of this article was published in the Expert Voices series on the European University Association website.