



Conference Conversation Starter

STEPPING INTO A NEW ERA

New voices and perspectives on
Central and Eastern European
higher education



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*New voices and perspectives on Central and
Eastern European higher education*

Edited by Anna Glass

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EAIE Conference Conversation Starter
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Central and Eastern European higher education

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Foreword

Higher education in Europe presents a richly diverse landscape of national and institutional realities. This statement is certainly not news to anyone with some experience working in the region. However, in the hustle and bustle of our hectic working lives, it can be easy to either underestimate the special opportunities this diversity presents, or optimistically gloss over the important challenges facing our colleagues in different corners of Europe. As the European Association for International Education (EAIE) convenes its Annual Conference in Prague, under the forward-looking theme ‘Stepping into a new era,’ this publication aims to provide each of us with a compelling set of ideas to explore in relation to the host region for the conference: Central and Eastern Europe.

The seven essays included in this volume provide a relatively abbreviated but at the same time quite detailed and nuanced picture of a region blessed with many strengths in the academic arena, but also dogged by a series of political, economic, social/demographic difficulties that have had (in some cases profoundly) detrimental effects on the countries’ higher education systems and institutions.

Taken together, one may first be struck by the immense challenges: the recurring themes of unmonitored system expansion, lack of clear planning and vision for the higher education sector, and a dearth of collaboration, trust, and transparency as a baseline for institutional and system development. These present enormous hurdles for harnessing the full potential of higher education in any given country, but particularly so in times of financial limitations and demographic dips. At the same time, there are clear silver linings evident across the region. Many Central and Eastern European universities have a long tradition of excellence in key disciplines, prominently in the hard sciences, but also in arts and cinema, literature, philosophy and other areas. Furthermore, throughout Central and Eastern Europe, we sense there is a deeply embedded culture of respect and admiration for education and educated people. Combined with the resilience of the human spirit to ‘rise above,’ there is room for optimism. Romania, for example, stands out as a case that may, in some areas, serve as a model for others.

Stakeholders in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe are clearly working, individually and collectively, to define the challenges facing their higher education systems, as well as the solutions that will guide future development. In this process, the EAIE is more than an interested bystander, given our pan-European focus and the importance of different aspects of internationalisation to these crucial conversations. To be as relevant as possible to colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe (who, we note, are significantly underrepresented in our membership ranks), the EAIE must do a better job of understanding the needs and realities of this region of the EHEA. This can only occur if we listen, learn, converse, and collaborate meaningfully. This book offers an excellent way to move the conversation forward, here in Prague, and in our ongoing efforts to support a vibrant (international) higher education community *everywhere* across Europe.



Laura E. Rumbley
Chair, EAIE Publications Committee

Introduction

— *Anna Glass*

Policy Analyst for Higher Education, OECD, France

One of the most persistent mantras in the higher education field refers to the dissolution of the university as an ‘ivory tower’. Yet higher education events and publications on developments in the field tend to draw from and speak to a very limited circle: higher education specialists. This *ouroboros* is not unique to higher education: the same can be said of any academic discipline or area of expertise. But it is very problematic for higher education, which as a field rather than a discipline, cannot be sensibly extricated from sociology, psychology, political science, history, culture, and systems theory, to name just a few of the feeder disciplines.

This year, the EAIE chose to invigorate debates within the higher education field with perspectives from non-higher education specialists who are yet invested stakeholders concerned with the relationships between higher education and, for example, society, national politics and economics. In line with this year’s conference theme ‘Stepping into a new era’, the chapters collectively touch on key questions considered by the EAIE’s Barometer initiative, namely:

- The current state of affairs regarding internationalisation of higher education.
- Key developments and challenges in the field, especially to internationalisation, with attention to the specific historical and national developments of higher education in a given country.

Recognising the scarcity of members and therefore voices from Central and Eastern Europe within the EAIE, the 2014 *Conference Conversation Starter* is dedicated to this region. Essays were commissioned from a variety of countries (no more than one per country), with the understanding that many themes would reoccur as pivotal or problematic in more than one context. There is no denying that trends emerge across countries, as many comparative studies have demonstrated. Still, the authors of this volume were asked to explain each country’s particularities for a better understanding of how and why higher education is facing specific challenges in each setting.

An independent researcher from Albania, **Blendi Kajsiu** opens our eyes to the intricacies and intrigues in his native country's university system. Albanian higher education suffers mightily from massification without sufficient funding, political influence and inaction, nepotism, corruption and lack of quality assurance. Furthermore, Albania remains in isolation even after political transition, despite national reports to the contrary. Kajsiu clarifies why matters stand as they do and what might be done about them, if appropriate measures were to be taken. It is not a simple matter to find someone sufficiently informed about higher education who is also at liberty to offer a public critique of the current state of affairs; fortunately, Kajsiu offers both attributes for this publication.

Pero Lučin and **Snježana Prijić-Samaržija**, both higher education insiders in Croatia but each with insights from their respective medical and social sciences backgrounds, describe the inadequacy of student mobility programmes and the strategic planning that has been developed to address it. Internationalisation of research appears to be more sustainable, thanks to external funding opportunities but, as in many countries, lack of autonomy prevents institutions from being flexible and responsive enough to fulfil the roles expected of them.

Philosophy professor **Dimitrios Dentsoras** identifies a striking contrast within Greek society between pride in higher education (science, international fields of knowledge, and individual academics) and dissatisfaction with the University (national, public, political institutions). Dentsoras also sees the Greek higher education system as a mirror of the country as a whole: a rich historical tradition remains valuable, yet is constrained within an undeniably inefficient and dysfunctional system. The challenges to reforms in Greece are astounding, yet some measures could be reasonably taken, perhaps to advantageous effect. Dentsoras recommends, for example, allowing private higher education within the national system and serious investment in higher education as a valuable commodity for the state.

László Dinya approaches the topic after a long career within and outside of higher education. He sets out the socio-economic context of higher education in Hungary as background for the current main dilemmas, namely: the foreseeable massive funding cuts to higher education and the new legislation being introduced this summer that will effectively eradicate institutional autonomy.

Xhavit Rexhaj and **Natalia Kolnik**, both from AAB University in Prishtina, paint a rather bleak picture of higher education in Kosovo. Similar to Greece and Albania, the infiltration of politics into public universities is widespread and corrosive, impeding academic values and the meritocracy of scholarship. The only country not officially part of the Bologna Process, Kosovo is nonetheless committed to the recommended reforms. Unfortunately, the system, like the country, is in a long process of transition marked by instability and, in the case of higher education, only superficial implementation. The universities strive to provide quality and integrate with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but require a deep and significant shift in mind-set about higher education to succeed.

Ligia Deca, a higher education insider and current student of political science, offers an illuminating perspective on the three phases of development Romanian higher education has undergone since 1989. Her synopsis shows clearly why Romanian higher education is a

stand-out in the region, due in part to the long tradition of political attention and strategic leveraging of international agencies. Currently, however, it seems that internationalisation of higher education is not viewed as an opportunity for multicultural understanding or social engagement, but primarily as an economic or foreign policy imperative. With different rationales for internationalisation at institutional and national levels, higher education policy is at the mercy of prevailing political interests. As in every country described in this volume and many that are not included herein: Romania lacks a coherent internationalisation policy that would help stabilise structures for meaningful reform.

The volume concludes with a philosophical perspective by **Isidora Jarić** on internationalisation reforms in Serbia. Jarić reflects on modern-day uncertainties about the power of collective action through institutions. As a social agent, the university has an important role to play in society, yet this role is undermined by nefarious dealings and lack of transparency between actors shaping the society of the future.

All together, the chapters reveal a cacophony of challenges confronting higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. Global trends such as massification, funding and quality are fundamental problems almost everywhere, but the swift political transition these countries experienced in the 1990s left them without the means to quickly develop strategic solutions. The intersections between national politics and higher education are rife with tension, unsurprising in a region where political and legislative instability has been a hallmark throughout the modern era. This will not change as we 'step into the new era', so a clear understanding of the histories and complexities of each country is paramount.

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe also face particular challenges when it comes to internationalisation of higher education. Internationalisation does not mean the same thing to countries with small (and in some cases decreasing) populations and localised languages as it does for larger, more influential nations. International students in these countries are usually limited to students from neighbouring states, or students from diaspora populations who still speak their original mother tongue. For many of these higher education systems, mobility and internationalisation primarily mean brain drain, so incentives for internationalisation used in Western Europe are less than convincing for academics who remain in this region. It seems apparent that countries in Central and Eastern Europe have to develop their own, tailored solutions to the challenges of internationalisation. For example, with coherent higher education policies, national (niche) specialisations could be developed to attract students and academics from around the region and beyond. Croatia is already doing this to a certain extent by concentrating on tourism, fed by the rich experience of the coastal country. Romania may be filling a similar role in the region with medical and healthcare education programmes. By concentrating on world-class systems, as recommended by Hazelkorn (2013), rather than a couple of world-class-aspiring universities to appear in global rankings, higher education systems in this region could better serve their countries and people, economise expenditures and ensure high quality provision.

Overall, the dominant commonality among all chapters is a sense of existential crisis: what will become of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe? No one knows just how higher education should be shaped or best delivered to respond to the needs of societies today and in the future. Nonetheless, the authors who contributed to this volume describe – and demonstrate – unmistakable passion and commitment to higher education issues in each

country. It is also notable that, despite the problems and shortcomings treated herein, these authors are admirable graduates of the national education – and in most cases also higher education – systems they depict. The critical views expressed cannot be mistaken for nihilism: there is much to be retained and salvaged of pre-Bologna institutions and traditions in every country. Each country has its successes and cautionary tales for implementing reforms, which will hopefully be used to inform the next era as well.

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