

# A panel discussion: the European Educational Research Association's role in Europe – now and in the near future

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## Introduction

The panel discussion at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in September 2014: 'EERA's role in Europe – now and in the near future' with the authors of this report, took as its point of departure the article 'EERA: a participant or an agent in European research policy?' (Moos and Wubbels, 2014).

In this article, we stated that the European Educational Research Association (EERA) is an agent in the Europeanization and internalization process, working – intentionally or not and willingly or not – on harmonizing educational research internationally, all over Europe and in the European Union (EU). Furthermore, the EERA has been working on influencing research politics internationally, in Europe, in the EU and at the national levels for the past decade.

The links between global development and local practices in universities and schools have become tighter over the past two or three decades through transnational agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU. They are important players in the

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governance chains from these agencies through national authorities to local institutions. They most often cannot make use of 'hard or explicit governance' that exercises direct power or steering. They realize their influence through 'soft governance', the 'open method of coordination', as the EU names it, or 'the peer pressure' in the OECD vocabulary (Moos, 2009). Influence is exercised through *discursive power* that intends to change our understanding through international comparisons, suggestions, networking and numbers like indicators or accreditation, or the presentation of 'best practices'. In this arena and in this sense, the EERA functions as a transnational agency – internally with member associations and researchers – that can make use of soft governance instruments: first and foremost by establishing platforms and supporting networks of educational researchers from all over the world.

At the same time the EERA increasingly and actively raises its voice – externally – in the European research policy arena that is centred at present around the Horizon 2020 strategy. By constructing discursive links in the chain of governance, the EERA simultaneously produces conditions and frames under which educational researchers work in the European research field.

In the panel we intended to discuss in what ways the EERA has been and continues to be a participant in the construction of an international and European educational research identity, either in line with EU strategies or as an agent in opposition to EU strategies.

In the above-mentioned article we identified the EERA's identity-history from the beginning in 1994 until today. In the first years the EERA was a loosely coupled group of national associations with national identities, but from the beginning of the 20th century there were strong tendencies towards seeing the EERA as a collaborator of the European Commission (EC). This trend changed over the years, partly because EERA membership has grown from 12 national associations to 35 associations today, many of which are from countries that are not members of the EU. Relations to the EC also changed as the Executive Board and the EERA Board found that the general research policies and funding programmes of the EC left less and less space open for social sciences and humanities (SSH), and educational research, in the struggle to deliver solutions to economical and societal challenges.

Therefore, the Board took a number of initiatives: the first initiative was, together with network convenors and other SSH associations and communities, to produce strong arguments against the general EC trend (e.g. Moos et al., 2013). Secondly, and prompted by the interest from many new national associations and groups of researchers to join the EERA, the Board decided to expand the boundaries for associations eligible for joining, from Europe to 'a Greater Europe' with 48 nations. Two more initiatives are being discussed as this is written: one is to open up for a new membership category, of associations not domiciled in Europe. Another initiative is to discuss and agree on an EERA Mission description, which describes the EERA identity on the basis of research and societal values, not on geography.

We see – from a governance perspective – the EERA developing from being a non-governmental organization (NGO), working to establish a European space for scientific exchanges, towards continuing this track and adding an active, outgoing political function in relation to transnational and national governance.

The panel and therefore also the contributions from our three guests – unfortunately Philippe Keraudren, EC, Directorate General for Research (DGRTD), could not contribute to this text – was structured around the following four questions.

- What can the EERA do to help European educational research survive in a world of challenges?
- How can the EERA expand its member community?

- How can the EERA integrate efforts for multiple diversity (in themes, theories, methods, values, etc.) into an EERA identity?
- How can the EERA be European/distinct/special?

## A view from the humanities

*Poul Holm, Professor, Trinity College Dublin and Chair, European Consortium of Humanities Institutes and Centres and a member of The European Alliance for Social Science and Humanities, (EASSH)*

I want to thank the EERA for inviting me as a non-educational specialist to reflect on some questions that I believe are highly relevant to many research fields of the humanities and social sciences.

The first question asked seems straightforward enough: *What can the EERA do to help European educational research survive in a world of challenges?*

The obvious answer to me is: Now, research thrives on challenges so what is the problem with challenges? Funding is another matter of course... but on reflection there is more to the question.

The Swedish Presidency of the EU in 2009 was the one that forcefully put the Grand Challenges in the European policy focus. The Lund declaration of 2009 defines the field in this way: 'Challenges must turn into sustainable solutions in areas such as global warming, tightening supplies of energy, water and food, ageing societies, public health, pandemics and security. It must tackle the overarching challenge of turning Europe into an eco-efficient economy'. The declaration further states that Europe must

...use knowledge as a tool to turn problems into opportunities and progress. Such processes have to be articulated in the context of Research, Education and Innovation communities, and be based on the understanding of the interaction between "bottom-up" and "top-down" initiated research.

The EU research-funding programme of Horizon 2020, adopted in 2013, may be seen as a practical outcome of the Lund declaration. However, in the intervening years of financial austerity the vision of thinking in terms of Grand Challenges has shifted the focus from the long term to the immediacy of job creation. Innovation has taken centre stage at the expense of Research and Education and it is now often stated that research is the objective of the European Research Council, while Horizon 2020 must focus on rekindling economic growth.

Lots of observations may be made on this change but I shall confine myself to two: the role of bottom-up processes and the question of the long term. In both of these it seems to me that the EERA may play a crucial role.

Horizon 2020 is clearly a top-down funding programme. The wording of the programme was proposed by the EC and developed through a series of consultative steps – some open and others through opaque steps – and finally voted on by the European Parliament. In that process it is clear that the recommendation of bottom-up interaction was lost. In some fields a select group of researchers got a chance to develop the language, but in most parts of the SSH there was a disconnection. For three years, since early 2011 to the final vote, the SSH community was locked in a fight to keep at least a token funding for questions such as the inclusive and reflexive society in the programme. That struggle ended in partial defeat as the direct SSH funding is halved in Horizon 2020 relative to FP7. That in itself is sad, but in terms of the lofty ambitions of the Lund declaration it is even more to the point that the SSH were simply disconnected from developing the thinking around the grand social challenges.

I believe I can speak with some authority on the process, as I chaired the METRIS report in 2009 for the EC where we outlined the potential of the SSH for societal challenges. Since 2011 I

have been the spokesperson for a consortium of humanities research institutes and directly involved in the establishment of the European Alliance for the Social Sciences and Humanities. Throughout this process these organizations maintained an optimistic and proactive attitude, firmly believing that a consistent and credible interaction with the Commission might have some bearing on the outcome. I have to say that at this point in time it seems that the outcome was meagre. The process remained top-down and extremely selective in terms of voices heard. Even when the Lithuanian Presidency in 2013 called the first-ever conference of the SSH to weigh in on Horizon 2020, it became clear that the Commissioner and her representatives had made up their minds. Regardless of the actual wording of the programme, it seems to me that the basic recommendation of the Lund declaration was lost. The Commission did not welcome the bottom-up interest, which was shown not least by the fact that more than 25,000 SSH researchers signed a petition in favour of the SSH. The concern shown by all the signatories might have turned into excitement and interest in the research programme, but instead turned into disappointment and disillusionment. In this regard I fear that we have suffered a mental setback in the SSH community that may be detrimental to the ultimate success of Horizon 2020. If the best researchers feel disenchanting with the European research agenda, it is everybody's loss.

The second point is about the long term. Research cannot ever be about the problems of today and yet the dominant criterion for the success of the Innovation agenda is the creation of jobs here and now. In that light, research may seem a waste of money. Large infrastructural projects are much more likely candidates of immediate success. Grand challenges such as the ones identified in Lund are not, however, of the here and now but questions of the long term. Horizon 2020 short-circuits the research agenda by essentially using the language of grand challenges as thematic categories for short-term objectives. The European Research and Innovation Area should be about investing in solutions that will work on the decadal rather than the annual scale – solutions for 2025/2050 rather than for 2020. Unfortunately, short-termism seems to be the language of the calls for proposals. European society suffers huge long-term opportunity costs by not adequately drawing on the investments already made in building up the world's single largest community of SSH researchers.

So what can the EERA do? As education researchers, the EERA could try to resurrect the language of the Lund declaration, which explicitly talked of Education alongside Research and Innovation. Indeed, we will never have a sustainable human society if we do not raise the next generations to embrace the facts that we shall have to live with climate change, radically extended life expectations and global cultural encounters. We are still only at the beginning of a digital revolution that will be as challenging as the Copernican revolution. Yet, our education systems remain largely unchanged and, if anything, predicated on increasing inequalities and thereby losing enormous pools of talent.

The second question asked is: *How can the EERA expand its member community?* As an outsider I cannot really address that question but the question of course immediately begs the counter question: why would you? The answer to that question is really simple and I can provide it. As the deplorable saga of Horizon 2020 shows, we do need to show our numbers – both through individual membership organizations and through large alliances such as the European Alliance for the Social Sciences and Humanities. The fact that we had 25,000 signatories to the petition in 2011 for Horizon 2020 was a considerable success, but when we consider that the field of SSH likely is a community of at least 350,000 people the limitation of our reach is apparent. Even more so, if we want to have impact at policy levels we need to sustain our membership support and reach not just for a one-off event. So I wish the EERA every possible success in expanding its member community not just for its own good but also for the good of European research and education.

The third question again is not easy for me: *How can the EERA integrate efforts for multiple diversity (in themes, theories, methods, values, etc.) into an EERA identity?* As an amateur

I can only venture a simplistic response based on my impression as a citizen who wants to draw on the lessons of educational research. In this as in most other SSH fields the problem is the old Kissinger question: who has the phone number for Europe? The EERA could help establish such a port of call. Educational research seems to me fraught with widely divergent schools of thought and philosophies of learning. Obviously, such differences are productive in many ways and will not go away. On the other hand, politicians and citizens have a legitimate expectation of researchers to come up with best-possible responses to questions of learning and educational systems.

In the most positive reading the Horizon 2020 programme foresees mainstreaming the SSH across all societal challenges. What is lacking is a clearer articulation of how this might happen. The EERA might therefore propose that Horizon 2020 create Integrative Platforms as spaces for the networking, capacity building and execution of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects, helping to bring together experts from all fields of science and scholarship, to identify, review and achieve knowledge breakthroughs in matters of human motivation, learning, behaviour, policy and action.<sup>1</sup> Integrated platforms are known in fields such as business and learning. In the world of big data, the Integrated Digital Platform is key to collecting and analysing marketing trends and patterns. In the world of education, Integrative Learning is a theory that helps students make connections across curricula and develop multidisciplinary understanding. Why not develop an Integrative Platform for Educational Research?

The research agenda for an Integrative Platform would embrace several collaborative research projects, provide researcher training and research infrastructure and develop a policy interface. I believe the time is right for such social innovation in our own research environments. It might be just the right formula for the top-down, bottom-up agenda envisioned by the Lund declaration. A Platform might learn from the experience of developing the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). Just like the SSH, EMBL developed in a research environment that did not require the big infrastructure like the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and there was therefore considerable resistance and scepticism against the creation of a European facility. In the end, EMBL helped create larger projects and facilitate new risky research questions. In the world of the SSH a social network facilitated by a European entity might help to overcome what Rosi Braidotti (2010) has aptly named the methodological nationalism of country-specific research practices.

I believe a strong belief in the social relevance of the SSH is exactly the answer to the last question: *How can the EERA be European/distinct/special?* Europe is special on the global scale – despite all the problems that we are only too aware of – in that our political beliefs and values rest on a strong tradition of enlightenment and a (relatively) proactive response to the grand social challenges. In a world that is increasingly afraid of itself and where post-secular forces of darkness are gathering it is vital that the EERA articulates a rationale for education research for coming generations equipped with competitive as well as citizen skills.

## **What can the European Educational Research Association do to help European educational research survive in a world of challenges?**

*Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana and EERA Council Representative for The Slovenian Educational Research Association (SLODRE)*

It has been often repeated that the situation across European countries is quite different, but nonetheless the feeling that present times are not very friendly neither with researchers in social sciences in general nor with educational researchers in particular, is rather evenly present everywhere. The

challenges are manifold. Firstly, there is a lack of financial resources. Educational researchers are directly related to the public sector and they can only marginally hope for support from ‘the economy’, as it is always against recommendations in today’s government policies. However, the challenges are not only due to austerity measures. They are also linked with the position of research in the social and educational sciences in today’s societies.

This position is also multi-layered. On the surface, it is evident for example in the media that devote some space to ‘science’. In such cases, the latest achievements of nanotechnology, information technology, medicine and perhaps some spectacular themes from the space research stand at the front. In the media, social sciences do not act as ‘science’. It seems as though there is a wide belief that the only STEM (science, technology, mathematics) is the factor of social progress and entitled to taxpayers’ money. Educational research enters headlines in media only with topics such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies and university ranking. The dimension in which education research is linked to educational policies is much less visible to the general public.

The source of major problems that researchers meet sooner or later is often at this point. As long as their work can be seen as predominantly instrumental, for example, the collection and compilation of data, these problems do not occur yet; they strongly increase with interpretations and theorizing – here significant disagreements between the research and the decision-making sphere are possible. When the feeling that the opposite side penetrates into ‘our’ area starts to increase either in one or in another sphere, misunderstandings can become harmfully strong. In such situations a question about ‘usefulness’ of research is often quickly raised.

In short, the key issues that affect ‘the survival of educational research in a world of challenges’ can be summarized in three points: to address the relationship between research and policy in the most transparent way; to improve information and increase awareness of the problems and achievements in educational research in the broad public; and last but not least, to achieve a more friendly treatment of educational research by those who make decisions about funding.

These general conclusions require further consideration when putting them in the different environments of individual nation states. In this respect, for example, the smaller and newer countries, such as many in Central and Eastern Europe, are in a much more specific situation. Here, associations of educational researchers are relatively young or even do not exist yet. As long as the critical mass of researchers is low (and in a small country it is low by definition), communication among them is performed at the level of individuals who usually do not feel much need to work in a formally organized association. Their research work and achievements are not thereby compromised; at least they believe so.

However, in the contemporary period, these countries have been challenged by two processes, which strongly influence the traditional behaviour of researchers. On the one hand, the number of educational researchers started to expand at the national level, which is certainly gratifying. (It is only embarrassing that material conditions of their work do not increase proportionally and that their situation has worsened over recent years.) On the other hand, the process of Europeanization – and internationalization of research in general – brought great challenges: the micro-community of researchers in a small country has started to gain power in a direct (at home) and indirect (international teams and consortia) way.

Today, we often hear that we live in a challenging world in which national borders are losing their traditional importance. This also concerns national research communities, in particular smaller ones. National educational research can only survive if it is firmly connected to a much wider area, so it is geographic as well as conceptual. In ‘a world of challenges’ it needs the EERA to ‘survive’. National research communities need an active international association that links researchers from different parts of the ‘world of challenges’; an association that makes all

members stronger, more influential. We all need an association that allows for better articulation of our responses to the ‘world of challenges’, not only at the European but also at the national and local levels.

*How can the EERA integrate efforts for multiple diversity (in themes, theories, methods, values, etc.) into an EERA identity?* We need to ask first how to strengthen the identity of educational researchers in general. Not only researchers but also educational practitioners are faced with a similar problem: how to integrate a number of distinct professional societies in one or more broader and general associations: how to shift the identities of teachers of *mathematics, language, history*, etc. into the *teachers’* identity. It is similar – although not the same – in research: themes, theories, methods, values and, last but not least, research traditions can differ a lot from a network to a network of educational researchers. First of all, it is very important to recognize these differences and to avoid their arbitrary abolition. Educational research is enforced in different perspectives, using different methods, etc.; what potentially connects individual networks with each other is, of course, a wide and complex field of education. Therefore, we all have our own ‘first research identity’ and only as the second step we can start developing our ‘second research identity’.

‘First’ and ‘second’ research identities in such areas as educational research (but this is not the only such area) can still be in conflict. It might be possible to find cases where a certain ‘first’ identity is directly offered as ‘second’ – for others. However, the second identity can only be ‘meta-identity’. Hegemony of one or another ‘mainstream’ disciplinary paradigm would surely harm and endanger the breadth and productivity of current educational research. Such hegemony would dangerously reduce the potential for the operation of a general research association as the EERA is. Fragmentation in research must be avoided; social sciences could – and should – apply part of their knowledge on the understanding of themselves. Breakthroughs have been very often achieved due to divergence and not convergence in views. We cannot imagine today’s research achievements in the field of education without contributions, which come from different disciplinary fields and from different research perspectives. Understanding and accepting this reality can provide bases on which different research groups and networks can connect diversities into unity.

The ECER is a good example of this. Over the last two decades, the number of participants has increased fourfold; the number of the EERA’s networks has also greatly increased, thus importantly enriching educational research perspectives. Today, there is a large number of specialized research associations and networks (and it is good that they exist) with excellent results, but nevertheless this is something they cannot achieve. The difference between specialized education research conferences and the ECER is that at the ECER we may also join discussions, which we cannot at specialized conferences. At the ECER we (can) meet with colleagues who enrich our views and our understanding of educational and related research topics. In this respect, the ECER has great synergetic potential that we must continue to increase. However, we can ask a question: to what extent do we actually take advantage of this opportunity? To what extent is the EERA perhaps still a mechanical sum of its networks – networks that can exist independently of the others? This question could be worthy of discussion at one of the forthcoming conferences.

With this, I have responded to only one aspect of this question. Active interdisciplinarity and networking between researchers from different fields is just one of the ways towards strengthening the identity of the EERA. The substantive aspects mainly determine this first option: themes and theories, dialogue and controversy, etc. Yet another option is offered in the strategic aspect: all the fields of educational research face and confront ‘a world of challenges’, which was mentioned in the first question. This ‘world of challenges’ is often threatening. An individual researcher or a lonely research community can feel lost in this situation. Especially in the current period – which

will not change much in the coming years – we can significantly enhance the EERA's identity with relevant strategies to answer the 'world of challenges'. At this point researchers from different – and sometimes quite remote or marginal areas of educational research – are standing very close one to another. They need each other.

*How can the EERA be European/distinct/special?* The EERA is part of a global educational research community. Therefore, the first principle should not be to claim how distinct and special it is, but to address all those research questions that are important for the international, global scientific community and that can benefit the international community in the broadest sense. The EERA will provide its European specialty by addressing these global issues from the European perspective and from European research and cultural traditions.

In addition to the role that the EERA plays in the global research community, it should not forget a role that is more specifically European (this does not mean that this dimension would not attract colleagues from other regions of the world). The *Idea of Europe*, including the educational and research Europe, which was so impressive a quarter of a century ago, has started to raise several and severe concerns over recent years. Also at ECER 2014 we heard many speakers who share a belief that the predominant ideology of neoliberalism makes many problems for the idea of 'common space' – the educational and research European area. For the sake of 'Europe's health' more than just a 'common market' is needed. Europe needs to reconsider and to develop its cultural dimension – a cultural dimension that will suit the 21st century. Educational research can make a significant contribution to this point. We must turn to the future.

## Summing up

In our (Lejf and Theo's) view we see that Poul Holm underscores that the EERA must challenge the EC thinking from top-down to more bottom-up; the association must explicitly talk about educational research and get the EC to do the same; and we should develop an integrated platform for educational research through entering into collaborative research projects, focusing on researcher training and infrastructure, and on building policy interfaces in order to overcome the methodological nationalism.

Pavel Zgaga cautions us to work on producing more transparent relations between policy and research through more national associations with EERA relations. We should work on our researcher research identities, and remember that most breaking research is build on divergence instead of convergence of opinions, on active interdisciplinarity and networking, and on addressing global concerns from a European perspective.

Taken together we see that what the EERA does today and what the association plans to do in its strategies, as outlined in the beginning of this paper, is in line with the advice given by our guests: the EERA needs to accept being, and work even harder on being, a European and international agent in relation to policy makers, agencies like the EC and Parliament and the OECD and UNESCO, and researcher communities and individuals from educational research and from other fields of research. A major challenge will be to find legitimizable balances between shared, international work and perspective and national, local interests and perspectives.

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## Note

1. Integrated Platforms is proposed as one way forward by Holm et al. (2014).

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