DISPARITIES IN HUMANITIES RESEARCH INITIATIVES WITHIN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Roxana ROGOBETE*,
Mădălina CHITEZ**
West University of Timișoara

* roxana.rogobete@e-uvt.ro
** madalina.chitez@e-uvt.ro

Disparities in Humanities Research Initiatives Within the European Higher Education Area

Launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, the Bologna Process aimed at bringing cooperation and policy coherence within a broader European context. However, even after 20 years of dialogue and implementing reforms, there are still disparities within the European Higher Education Area. Our paper focuses on the gap between Eastern European and Western European countries in terms of research initiatives and recognition (e.g. citation metrics) in the field of Humanities. Whether we analyse the number of funded projects or the research dissemination results, it is clear that the group of former communist European countries still struggle to gain visibility and acknowledgement. Using, among others, the Scimago visualisation and ranking tools, the study compares the scientific outputs delivered by the afore-mentioned groups of countries, debating on possible causes and suggesting solutions. However, the paper acknowledges that research visibility parameters and bibliometrics should be combined with additional measurements in order to create a comprehensive assessment of the research initiative landscape in Europe.

Keywords: *Bologna Process; European Higher Education Area; Humanities; research initiatives; Eastern European countries; Western European countries; scientometrics.*

Expansion of the Higher Education Area: benefits and challenges

Since education is an essential component in the process of building a strong Europe, the initiative of the Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, aims at bringing cooperation and policy coherence within a broader European context. The common strategies pursued in order to implement measures such as the recognition of qualifications and study periods, the implementation of international shared standards or the promotion of equality-of-opportunity values depend on the capacity of each country's government to deal with its own national circumstances and make the transition to an open educational environment.

Needless to say, Europe remains diverse regarding several aspects related to higher education. The diversity has been accentuated by the expansion rate of the different European common-goal areas: if, in 1999, "29 countries expressed their willingness to commit to enhance the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area" (EHEA) (see Figure 1)[1], nowadays there are 48 states as full members (see Figure 2[2]).

[1] See http://www.ehea.info/cid100210/ministerial-conference-bologna-1999.html [02.02.2020].
[2] According to http://ehea.info/page-full_members [02.02.2020].

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Figure 1: States which signed the Bologna Declaration of 1999

Figure 2: EHEA World Map 2020

The expansion means, as expected, more advantages for students and Higher Education Institution (HEI) teachers, a more "inclusive and connected higher education"[1], offering mobility opportunities and the possibility of experiencing other learning environments. Despite spreading the fundamental values of the EHEA, the greater the number of countries, the greater the struggle to adapt European norms to national policies. Furthermore, national HEIs need to align to the educational standards promoted by other European HEIs, regardless of their cultural particularities and geopolitical configurations. Even though researchers can benefit from mobility that can improve their scientific output by getting access to shared knowledge, there are still at least two threats that should be addressed.

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education_en [02.02.2020].

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First of all, successful researchers could be tempted to apply for positions in HEIs and other research institutions from well-developed countries, thus not being able to transfer new research methods and knowledge to their national research communities (the well-known phenomenon of 'brain drain'). Secondly, in ex-communist countries, insufficient networking at the international level and the reluctance towards reforms and new methods bring both distrust in educational changes and a complex of peripheral society (typical for closed communities used to former totalitarian systems). Both of these reasons can increase the gap within EHEA between Eastern and Western countries, the former group rather having difficulties in finding "alternative ways of governing education" (Brøgger 2019: 51).

Nowadays, the idea of rewarding performance is "deeply integrated into the governance of most higher education institutions and can take the form of performance-related funding based on a department's publications, citations (according to bibliometric indicators), and securing of external funding" (Brøgger 2019: 61). Even though funding opportunities are now more accessible to all countries, the Eastern European group is under the influence of traditional, conservative educational systems and finds it more difficult to adapt to new funding instruments, in a context of increased international competition. Keszei et al. (2015) argue that university research in post-communist EHEA countries is much less competitive compared to the more advantageous (Western) universities. This leads to a disproportion in terms of financial support received by HEIs from Europe, aspect which will be analysed in the following section of our study.

Research funding

The inequalities identified within EHEA mirror general economic issues. Reports of the European Commission admit the existence of 'lagging regions' or "low-income regions (mainly located in the eastern EU Member States)" (Widuto 2019: 5). Studies have also reported that the lack of cohesion is not resolved in the field of education and research, since there is a rift in both funding and institutional capacity: "many east European countries – such as Slovakia, Romania, Poland and Hungary – see the pay gap as worsening the brain drain from east to west, and say their researchers are often shut out of the lucrative bidding for grants. Collectively, the 13 mostly eastern countries that joined the EU since 2004 get just 4.8 per cent of total Framework funding – yet they represent 17 per cent of the EU population" (Hudson 2019).

Similarly, the European Research Ranking from 2018[1] shows that the first 10 most funded countries (out of 115 worldwide) belong to the Western European group (Germany, UK, France, Spain, Italy, The Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden) and comprise almost 25% of all research funding, with more than 50% of the projects funded. In contrast, the group of Eastern European countries totalize under 8% of the allocated funds and approximately 12% of the number of funded projects. The "unbalanced regional competitiveness regarding research potential" (Keszei et al. 2015: 170) is indeed addressed by the European Commission through strategic plans to build an "effective and efficient higher education"[2], and this not only in science and technology *per se*. In the past years, it seems that the need to return to society the results from STEM projects has increased: dealing with societal issues asks for the contribution of Social

[1] See http://www.researchranking.org/index.php?action=country [02.02.2020].

[2] See https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/effective-and-efficient-higher-education_en [11.02.2020].

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Sciences and Humanities, with their reflexive and comprehensive pathways.

For instance, the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe Programmes (proposed for the next financial framework) aim at adopting a holistic disciplinary approach, integrating "the insight of social sciences and humanities" (Kania et al. 2018: 5) as a novelty. The approach is necessary, considering that, despite the latest research-initiative trend, (e.g. period 2016-2017), characterised by an increased amount of financial resources dedicated to SSH, the number of funded projects related to this domain was still limited (*Ibid*.).

In fact, discipline-funding evaluation reveals a similar research-divide trend between geographical regions: noticeable discrepancies regarding the amount of SSH (Social Science and Humanities) EU funded projects awarded per country (see Figure 3).

Country affiliation of SSH partners - top 20 countries															
Country	DE	BE	IT	UK	ES	FR	NL	AT	Other	EL	PL	SE	DK	NO	PT
Partners	101	93	86	87	59	59	57	41	39	34	26	24	24	20	19
Share	11%	10%	9%	9%	6%	6%	6%	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Country	HU	CH	FI	CZ	RO										
Partners	17	16	15	14	13										
Share	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%										

Figure 3: Research project partners in Social Sciences and Humanities (Kania et al. 2018: 24)

A tendency has been noticed in several research-funding analysis reports: Kania et al. note that "the distribution of countries from which the partners originate is similar to Horizon 2020 overall. Seven countries from the EU-15 [Germany, Belgium, Italy, UK, Spain, France, The Netherlands] are dominating the landscape, while the member states which joined the EU since 2004 onwards, seem to be less widely represented" (2018: 5). Heilbron et al. draw a wider-context conclusion, by stating that "the globalizing field of the SSH [Social Sciences and Humanities] is thus strongly dominated by 'Western' countries, displaying a duopolistic structure, with a North American-European core, various semi-peripheral and multiple peripheral countries" (2018: 2). The situation actually follows the trajectories of groups of countries analysed by Blanchet et al., who show that Eastern Europe has the lowest average income on the continent (Blanchet et al. 2019: 26).

Such statistics make us ask ourselves whether the low research funding rates corresponding to Eastern European HEIs have to do with the quality of the research proposals, the assessment of the societal impact of the topic or the lack of innovative methods proposed. We incline towards believing that all three motives can be tackled by creating favourable conditions for the dissemination of competences in breakthrough research methods.

Comparative scientometrics

The tendency of polarisation – but in terms of impact – is shown by scientometrics related to Web of Science. Li et al. (2018: 7) argue that England, Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Spain are the most frequent countries of origin (within Europe) for papers included in WoS, from 1997

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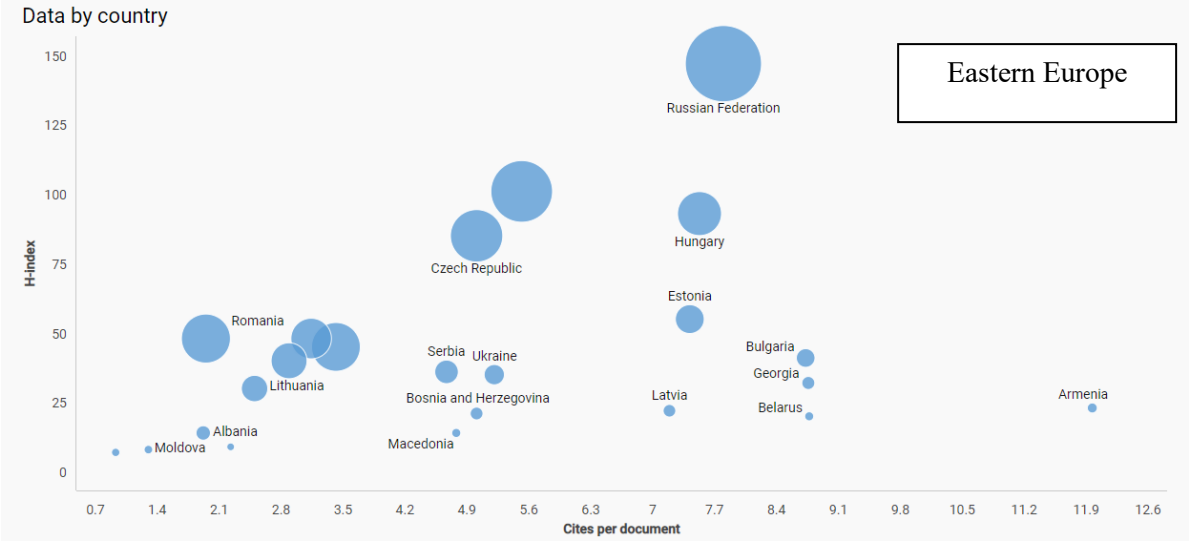
to 2017. Moreover, among the top 10 JCR subject categories, all are related to health, medicine or computer and information science (*Ibid.*).

The bibliometric approach is "scientific in nature" (Ochsner et al. 2016: 4), especially when we intend to evaluate regional tendencies and to identify areas where excellence in research is conducted in the Humanities.

For example, a quick look at the Arts & Humanities citation index per country group indicates a massive difference in research dissemination results. If the H index for Eastern European countries is 224, citation metrics for the Western European countries are three times higher:

H index	Documents	Citations	Citations per document
224	84905	418409	4.93



H index	Documents	Citations	Citations per document
760	519502	7196564	13.85

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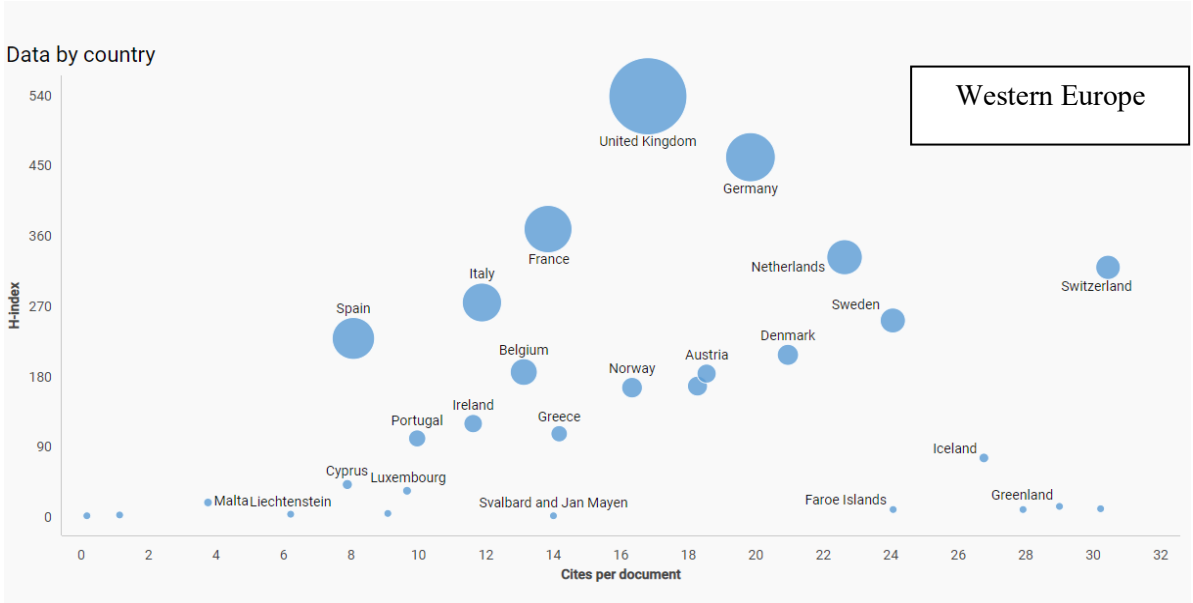

Figure 4: Citation metrics for Arts & Humanities by country groups (Eastern versus Western Europe), adapted from Scimago (2019)

The disparities regarding research impact can also be noticed by the visualisation of the charts associating H index and citations per document, capturing tendencies in different countries. For 2018-2019, differences between the UK and Romania, for instance, show that, although the number of citations per document are quite similar, the H-indexes for Arts & Humanities are five times higher in the UK. Also, the "scientific production" is more than 15 times higher in Romania, which can also be the result of "publication patterns [which] are rooted in scholarly traditions" (Kulczycki et al. 2018: 480).

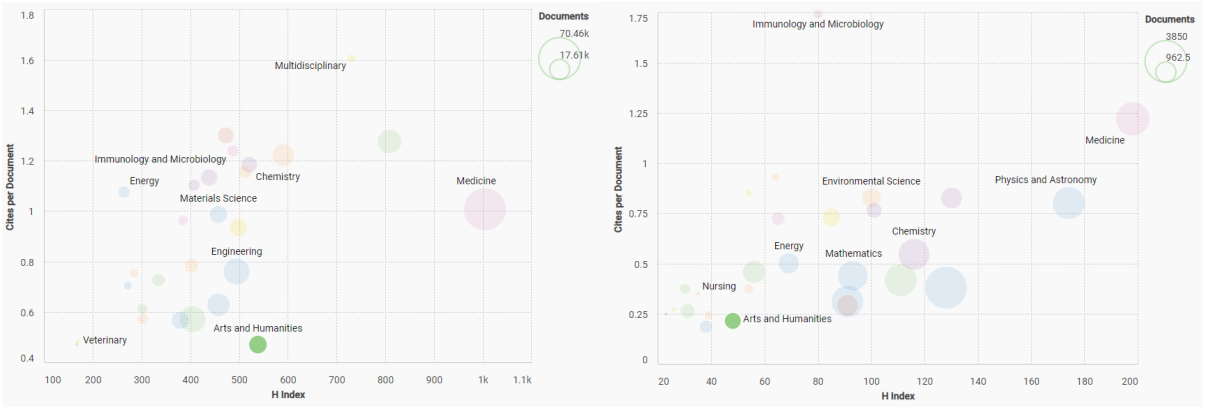

Figure 5: Scimago citation metric charts (2018-2019) for UK (left) and Romania (right)

However, generalizing research evaluation and measurement criteria for all the disciplines is unfair: it is indisputable that life sciences and Medicine will be better covered by publications than the field of Arts & Humanities. For instance, out of 18574 journals and conference proceedings registered in *Scopus* for 2016, 4571 are related to Medicine, while only 1888 refer

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to Arts & Humanities subjects (see Figure 6 with journals and conference proceedings registered in *Scopus*).

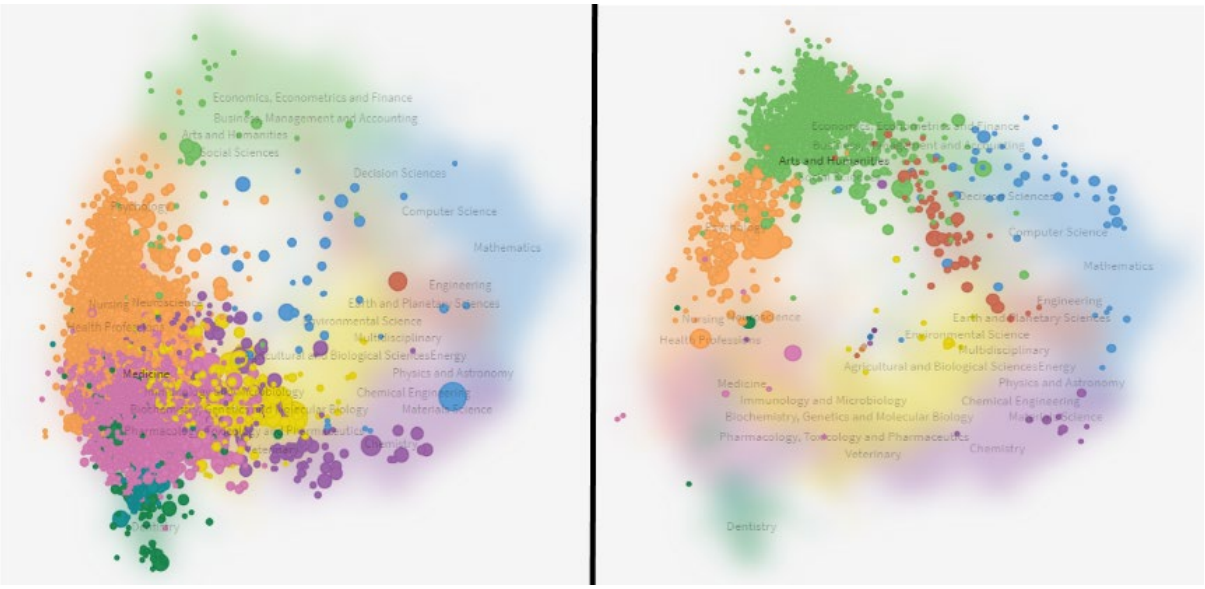

Figure 6: Scimago Shape of Science - journals and conference proceedings registered in Scopus in 2016, covering Medicine (left) and Arts & Humanities (right)

Nonetheless, "there is no reason for the Humanities to remain 'with their backs to the wall' or to give up all hope in the face of the supremacy of the natural sciences and engineering" (Krull and Tepperwien 2016: 178). Another argument suggesting an unfair comparison between discipline parameters is the nature of the field of the Humanities itself: it is primarily preoccupied with the analytical and discursive perspective upon societal development, being a "reliable compass in times of rapid change" (Krull and Tepperwien 2016: 178). This means that research assessment in the Humanities cannot be done on pragmatic and objective criteria as in the other domains.

Progress in research parallels progress in Bologna

There is rather a consensus that Western and Eastern Europe develop asymmetrically, and more and more criticism is directed towards HEIs from Eastern Europe: "Eastern European public universities vegetate in isolation from their societies" (Peshkopia 2014: 542), "most Eastern European universities became shapeless behemoths, able only to produce mass graduations and unable to produce quality graduates and/or any other quality services for their communities" (Peshkopia 2014: 549).

Furthermore, regarding the disciplinary group of the Humanities, perceived as "reflexive discipline(s)" (Weingart and Schwechheimer 2007: 8), or "non-cumulative which means that creativity, progress and excellence are much harder to determine. Judgments about the value of specific contributions and the creativity of their authors are often contradictory, varying along the lines of schools of thought." (Weingart and Schwechheimer 2007: 7).

Nevertheless, science should be quantified in some way or another. That is why we can consider rankings based on citation metrics or amount of funding relevant for the success of the

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Bologna Process implementation, since it is acknowledged that the general aims are quality assurance and standardization. At the same time, such parameters contribute, to a certain degree, to the implementation of the internationalisation strategy at the HEI level (through access to standard education, mobility programs), also an important objective of Bologna.

Some solutions

Remarking the "fragmented character" (Brøgger 2019: 56) of the Bologna rate and success of implementation, decision makers should focus on closing the East-West gap within EHEA and ERA (European Research Area). If innovation potential (according to Lomachynska and Podgorna 2018: 264) needs a set of resources (scientific, human, technical, financial, economic or information-based), it is clear that researchers themselves cannot solve all the pieces of the puzzle.

In the Humanities, at least, the scientific objectives can be achieved following several paths: more applied research, even though studies show it is less cited than fundamental studies (see Rafols et al. 2016: 3); more interdisciplinary research, in order to come out of the periphery of sciences; engaging with future emerging technologies, "to develop new tools and paradigms leading to new socially interactive media, the combination of social sciences and humanities with neuroscience, engineering and computing is required" (Kania et al. 2016: 77); more collaborative articles and activities, and more networking in general, because there are numerous initiatives that are similar, but not inter-connected; synergies between individual and group research. All these strategies can be implemented with the help of institutional and national education and research policies.

Moreover, dedicated EU funding programs (such as the old Marie Curie International Reintegration Grants IRG), focusing on either, or both, areas that need particular support, Eastern European HEIs[1] and the Humanities disciplines, could contribute massively to the reduction of disparities between European regional groups.

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[1] See, for example, the strategic-initiative research funding program financed by the Visegrad Fund (https://www.visegradfund.org/apply/grants/).

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