

Report: ECER 2010, University of Helsinki, Finland

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Helsinki Lutheran Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland
Photo: Daria Luchinskaya

The European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in 2010 took place at the University of Helsinki, Finland, from the 23rd to the 27th of August. ECER is an annual conference of the European Education Research Association (EERA), which consists of 23 national and regional research associations across Europe. This year's theme was Education and Cultural Change, which emphasised the necessity for higher education institutions (HEIs) to take the cultural context into account when implementing policy, and looked into the ways in which the cultural context has been changing.

I presented some of my MPhil research findings at the Conference and was fortunate enough to receive a St Anne's Conference Grant to support the cost of my trip.

The distinguished keynote speakers attending ECER 2010 were Floya Anthias, Professor of Sociology and Social Justice at Roehampton University, London; Fazal Rizvi, Professor at the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, US; Lisbeth Lundahl, Professor at the department of Child and Youth Education, Special Education and Counselling at Umeå University; and Marie Verhoeven, Professor in Sociology, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, and senior researcher at GIRSEF (Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Socialisation, Education and Training), University of Louvain, Belgium.



Conference presentation at the University of Helsinki, Finland
Photo: Daria Luchinskaya

This summer I completed my MPhil in Russian and East European Studies at St Anne's college. My thesis evaluated recent reforms in Russian higher education (HE), tracing the continuity and developments in this area of policymaking since *perestroika*. One of the most recent reforms has been Russia's participation in the Bologna Process and the subsequent changes in the higher education structure. Russian university degrees are being restructured in the Bologna two-cycle fashion – from a five year Soviet Specialist's degree to a four year Bachelor's and a two year Master's.

Earlier this year I carried out fieldwork in Moscow to collect students and staff attitudes to and perceptions about the changes in the HE system, and this research formed a part of my thesis chapter.

My conference paper explicitly considered the way students and staff in Moscow appraised the reforms. All respondents were aware of the changes in the degree structure, but just over half were aware of the Bologna Process per se. The attitudes to the two-cycle system fell roughly into three groups: those who were positive, cautious, and negative about the implementation of the reforms. The positive group was more orientated towards the West and employability. The cautious group was concerned about the implementation process – that no real change was happening, and that the old system was being eroded without an effective replacement new system. This group also reported concern about Russian employers' and public perceptions of the Bachelor's degree, which is frequently viewed as being an incomplete and inferior qualification to the Specialist's degree. The negative group itself viewed the Bachelor degree as incomplete education, and expressed preference for the Soviet-type education.

During the conference I attended Research in Higher Education Network sessions. Of particular interest was the symposium on Higher Education Graduates in the World of Work. The presenters looked into factors contributing to graduates' employability, considering aspects such as field of study and type of university, gender, socioeconomic background, in-depth assessments of the situation in a particular country, or taking a comparative perspective. With such a variety of views and findings, no clear conclusion was reached. However, the session gave me a lot to think about, and has influenced my decision to go on to do a PhD in Employment Research.

I am very grateful for the financial assistance provided by St Anne's College to help me attend the conference, and to the CEELBAS studentship which funded my MPhil degree and fieldwork.

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