

European trends in Coherence in higher education

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I'd like to start by thanking EURASHE for the invitation to join this extremely interesting conference. I'm not sure if the European University Association, as the representative organization of universities and rectors conferences in Europe, is perceived as "Big Brother", the "Opposition" or as "partners in crime", but in any case I think it's vitally important that we work together on a number of developments in higher education reform that concern all our members.

I would first like to consider a couple of paradoxes regarding the European Higher Education Area. The first is to observe how fast and far things are evolving in Europe with regard to implementing the Bologna Declaration, yet at the same time the political reality of "European Union" seems to be becoming far less certain. It's true that the Euro has so far generally been considered a great success - especially with those of us who spend a lot of time traveling throughout Europe - but this is the exception that proves the rule in recent times. The Irish have rejected the Nice Treaty, forthcoming enlargement seems to be viewed even by the most ardent Europhiles with trepidation rather than optimism, and the general political move in Europe towards the right and even the far right that we have been witnessing in recent months - including the Dutch elections this week - is certainly not helpful in establishing positive framework conditions to advance the harmonious coming together of European nations.

Yet despite the overall European context, it is clear that we are also witnessing in higher education – not a sector which has been immune from conservative thinking over the past few hundred years – radical changes to systems and structures, and a process of convergence in the direction set out in the Bologna Declaration.

This paradox may in part be explained by pressure to reform coming from forces outside Europe – especially the economic impact of globalisation on higher education. Nonetheless it is essential that reforms continue to be pursued with enormous energy if the many incoherent aspects not only of the higher education landscape, but also of European political and social reality, are to change for the better.

Although in higher education a path has been set towards greater convergence, and hopefully coherence, it sometimes seems as if some of the most important questions have been left to one side.

What kind of higher education system or systems do we actually want to develop in Europe, and who do we want to benefit from them?

Despite the rhetoric of politicians, there is probably not as clear a consensus on these fundamental questions as there undoubtedly is on the need to create a European Higher Education Area – and this is the second paradox: despite the lack of a common agreement about what and whom our higher education systems are for, a need to reform higher education structures is nevertheless widely shared throughout Europe.

As change is happening so fast in so many areas, it is important not to lose sight of these basic, fundamental questions. It is often now taken for granted that to meet the demands of a knowledge society we are moving irreversibly in Europe towards genuine mass higher education. Whereas higher education in the last century was mostly reserved for a small percentage of Europeans, the twenty-first century has been billed as the coming of the knowledge society where higher education for all will become a necessity. It isn't unusual to hear governments talk in terms of achieving 50 – 80% participation in the coming years, and the assumption is often that this expansion will continue until everyone is provided for. Just as the dawn of the twentieth century saw near universal primary and secondary education in Europe, so the dawn of the twenty-first century will take us towards universal higher education.

Yet the reality of expansion, rather than this rose-tainted vision, raises questions. For example, who are the newcomers to higher education, and who is still not participating, and why not?

I don't have time to address this question into detail, but in all countries, factors such as income and parental experience of higher education are extremely good predictors of participation, and in general terms it is clear that it is Europe's middle classes who have provided the "new" intake to higher education. Meanwhile the continued exclusion of the poorest and most marginalized in society remains unaffected by expansion.

The classic explanation of these phenomena is that in Europe we live in democracies, and everyone has equal opportunities for education. All that is happening, according to this view, is that more opportunities are being created and more will be able to benefit. In this context, we often hear brave new words about lifelong learning, and the seemingly endless possibilities for personal and professional fulfillment offered by the changing educational arena - open and distance learning, e-learning, work-based learning etc. Some have new opportunities now, others will have them tomorrow.

However, governments may want to expand participation in higher education, but they certainly don't want to pay for it. The argument usually runs that taxpayers wouldn't agree to increases in their taxes to pay for education - and since they're

never given the option, this just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We're moving increasingly to a perception of higher education no longer as a public good, but as a market commodity to be purchased by the individual. The logic is that individuals who invest in their higher education will benefit in economic terms throughout their lives, and therefore they should pay the costs.

Of course it is true that the individual will benefit, but if education is viewed as a commodity, it has to be recognised as a very particular kind of commodity. Whereas the purchase of most commodities means transferring goods from one individual to another - and global capitalism is based upon the principle that the poor transfer goods to the rich for as little as the rich can get away with paying - the purchase of education doesn't function in the same way. For example, if I learn a language not only am I able to communicate for my own benefit, but others who were previously unable to communicate with me can now do so. The benefit is two-way.

Higher education therefore clearly provides benefits not only to individuals, but also to employers and society, and it is therefore all the more disturbing that so-called mass higher education today is not for the masses, and indeed will further disadvantage the weakest in the future. Although we are certainly living increasingly in a knowledge-based society, we are also getting deeper into what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck described at the beginning of the 90s as a "risk society". For Beck, risk is regarded as the probability of harm due to technological or other processes, and therefore the risk is often manufactured, and fuelled by the uncertainty of knowledge society. Clearly in an environment where those who have the least opportunities for higher education will be at greatest risk, we should beware of the consequences of providing more opportunities for some, whilst denying those same opportunities to others.

Merely increasing participation in higher education may not ensure social and economic progress: it may even impede progress by further isolating some groups who do not have access, and whose position is relatively weakened by the fact that most others are gaining skills and qualifications.

In Europe, we should also look at this phenomenon not just within countries but also between them. For example, what will be the long-term effects of the widening educational gap between the countries of former Yugoslavia (Slovenia excepted) and Western Europe? Such questions ought to concern us rather more than they currently do.

We also have to recognise that equal opportunities in education will not be achieved by making the same requirements for everyone irrespective of circumstances. To take the example of student finance, arrangements which are the same for all will always be regressive. Finance is a barrier to participation only to those without adequate resources, and the less you have the more you will be affected. If governments really want to widen, rather than merely expand, participation to ensure that those from low-income groups are not discriminated

against, they would have to ensure that student finances are distributed in inverse proportion to ability to pay. Unfortunately this concept does not underpin student funding in most of our countries. Neither does it inform European-wide education support programmes.

The rhetoric and reality of lifelong learning also often seem to be at odds with each other. For whom are lifelong learning opportunities actually being provided? In many countries, it seems that those who are benefiting from such opportunities tend to be those who have already experienced higher education. Priority is thus given to second helpings of higher education rather than a second chance for those who have missed out. Meanwhile, a lot of what passes for lifelong learning is in fact mechanistic re-training for those whose jobs have disappeared or will soon disappear. This particular reality of lifelong learning can seem more like lifelong misery.

It is clear that with greater needs and challenges to be faced, we also need to increase the diversity of institutions and provision. We need large and small institutions, multi-disciplinary and specialised, research-led and teaching-led, different modes of delivery and teaching methods.

There is, however, a danger that if these kinds of developments are pursued with little consideration of social goals as well as economic goals, certain institutions will remain highly selective and elitist while the others will be left with the mission of being "inclusive". This is the kind of higher education ghetto that we would do well to steer clear from as we shape the European higher education area.

Thank you for your attention.