Play to Win: Higher Education debate at the European Parliament

Brussels, 29 April 2019

The European Association of Higher Education Institutions in Europe (EURASHE) organised on 29 April 2019 an Afternoon Debate in the European Parliament as part of an action of the EP to raise interest in the May 26th European elections. The debate gathered crowds of students, officials and representatives of European umbrella associations active in higher education.

A wide range of ideas and suggestions where put forward or touched upon by speakers, panellist and members of the audience. Below a short overview of elements that merit further reflection.

1. European values

European higher education should distinguish itself from more mercantile (US) and more state-driven (China) systems, by playing European strong cards such as affordability, accessibility, diversity and high quality provision overall.

First of all, higher education should help students acquire civic and democratic competences. Young people need the tools to become well-informed, value-oriented and critical citizens as well as skilled and flexible professionals. This can be done through curricular content, by providing training on media literacy, for instance, and by involving civic society in the learning experience. Students should be encouraged to work on real-life local and global challenges, such as environmental damage and social injustices.

Common European values should also guide the way higher education institutions are organised as communities of teachers and learners. Is academic freedom guaranteed? Is student admission organised in an equitable and non-discriminatory way? Is staff recruitment open, transparent and merit-based?[1] Is the assessment of learning fair and objective? Are students and staff involved in decision making? Is there a plan to help ensure that - one day in future - the student body entering and graduating at your institutions reflects the diversity of populations in your region or wider catchment area?[2]

2. Future skills

Life and the labour market are full of uncertainties. Higher education should help our citizens to cope and become more resilient. In order for them to do well in life, we should encourage learners to choose combinations of technical knowledge, related to certain occupancies, STEAM competences, languages, critical and systemic thinking, ethics, entrepreneurship, digital skills as well as the soft skills that a person needs to communicate and collaborate successfully with others.

Digital skills training should enable our learners to process data flows effectively, use artificial intelligence and collaborate with robots at home and on the work floor.

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[1] The OTM-R package is based on the Charter & Code for researchers, a contractual obligation in Horizon 2020.

[2] Commitment made by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the Paris Communiqué of 25 May 2018 (Bologna process).

In all this, we should not forget the human factor, giving due attention to aspects such as attitude and character training. Most of all, the initial training provided by our institutions should stimulate curiosity and an active learning attitude throughout life.

3. Future systems

Higher education at present is too rigid and does not address the skills mismatch we see on Europe's labour markets. Our systems do not reach and serve all potential learners. We should organize an active outreach to women and underrepresented groups and cooperate more with schools in this endeavor.

Higher education should also be more embedded in the local and regional ecosystem. It should foster innovation in collaboration with business and provide tailor-made training solutions for workers and the unemployed, who still face many barriers. Acknowledging prior learning should be facilitated on a much larger scale.

Effective higher education offers students a wide range of both theoretical and work-based learning experiences, ranging from pure classwork, to dual learning bachelors, to industrial masters and doctorates. Such offering should include professional development internships, career guidance as well as start-up creation and mentoring facilities.

Learning in future will vary from person to person and from programme to programme. Students will become co-creators' of their own learning experience and thus contribute to the higher education eco-system throughout their entire life.

Not all students will have the wish or the capacity to complete a full bachelor or master programme (or indeed do a doctorate). Many of them could nevertheless benefit from engaging in some form of recognised learning experiences at those levels.

Efforts in this regard would include easily accessible preparatory programmes, foundation courses, short-cycle programmes as well as guidance- and counselling services. Next to full degree programmes there should be easily accessible modules (micro-credentials) that are recognised on their own (badging) and as a part of stackable degree programmes. Full use should be made of online and blended learning options.

Major shifts are expected to take place in higher education, moving away from mere knowledge transmission to competence training. A highly likely scenario is the 'lifelong learning university', which will offer personalised learning paths and a steady flow of short courses for the joy of learning and to update and upgrade the workforce.[3]

Reference tools, developed in the Bologna context, have helped to enhance the quality and comparability of study programmes, notably the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the system of qualifications frameworks at European (EU/Bologna), national, sectorial and subject area level.

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[3] https://about.futurelearn.com/press-releases/the-european-mooc-consortium-emc-launches-a-common-microcredential-framework-cmf-to-create-portable-credentials-for-lifelong-learners