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Higher Education Across Europe: Contemporary Missions for Historical Institutions

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Abstract: Universities may be old institutions, but at the beginning of the 21st century they find themselves assuming new roles, such as developing the economy, contributing to social integration, fomenting cultural diversity, defending human rights, guaranteeing regional development and even protecting the environment. The complex combination of neoliberal economy, globalization and the emergence of the knowledge society has not undermined their position, on the contrary, it has led to their expansion. We thus sketch very briefly the varied characteristics of European universities today and outline the major challenges which they confront. Using a variety of case studies we look at processes of modernization and incorporation of new technologies, as well as attempts to redefine systems of evaluation and admission. We also discuss threats to their essence as autonomous research and teaching institutions, due to closer relations with the economy and its demands for highly qualified workers.

Keywords: Universities; Higher Education; Europe; Comparative Education.

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The university, as a centre for generating knowledge and teaching, has expanded greatly since the mid of the 20th century. We have now more universities in more countries with more students, more subjects of study, and more elaborated organizational structures, than ever before. In addition, the complex combination of neoliberal economy, globalization and the emergence of the knowledge society has not undermined its position, but on the contrary, has positioned it at the forefront of efforts to solve every kind of social problem. Universities are expected to develop the economy, contribute to social integration, foment cultural diversity, defend human rights, guarantee regional development and protect the environment, among many other goals.

As universities currently occupy such a high position on national, transnational and global agendas we witness an explosion with regard to research into higher education (Tight, 2012). Specialists try not only to offer insights into the important dimensions of the phenomenon such as knowledge, processes, organizational matters or quantitative structural Issues (Teichler, 2008), but also to point at different opportunities, possibilities and constraints faced by universities as they prepare themselves for the future (Barnett, 2012). When embarking on this globally recognized voyage it should be remembered that every university, in every country and in every region has its own history, traditions and contemporary circumstances. We thus witness efforts to sketch universities' heritage, challenges and goals from different regional, national and lately even single institutions' perspectives.

In Europe, where the *universitas studiourum* first emerged in the middle ages, we have, at the beginning of the 21st century, a complex landscape of universities. Up to the 18th century the accumulative growth of universities was linear. However, From the 19th century we witness an exponential growth, which accelerated significantly from 1970. As a result, some countries have relatively many old universities such as France or Italy, while others hardly have any, as in the case of Norway or Finland. There is also a big variation in size. The largest University in Germany, for example, has 60,000 undergraduates, while in Spain the number of undergraduates can reach 130,000, in some cases. The average number of undergraduate students in European Universities, though, seems to be around 50,000 (Daraio *et al.*, 2011).

There are also clear manifestations of both horizontal and vertical diversity. Horizontal diversity refers to the specific combination of subjects taught, while horizontal diversity refers to the position along different quality measurements such as scientific production or funding and is also related to the differentiation between research, teaching and vocational education. In Europe most universities are generalist, following the old model of higher education institutions. There are few exceptions, such as the UK and the Netherlands, where national policies have strengthened specialized schools of engineering and science. When it comes to sources of funding the situation is just as varied. In the UK, for example, only 47% of university funding comes from the government while most countries fall between Portugal (64%) and Norway (93%) (Daraio *et al.*, 2011).

Taking all these variations into account it is not surprising that the current efforts of European Institutions to introduce measures of standardization have led to fierce and passionate discussions (Bonaccorsi, 2014). Although Higher Education is still under the domain of European nation-states, it is increasingly

affected by international pressures. In fact, European institutions have gained a dominant position with regard to higher education policies across Europe (Keeling, 2006).

In accordance with the above mentioned international trends, several European political and economic institutions have identified universities as a cornerstone for building a European identity, as well as suitable spaces for the creation and transmission of knowledge, essential for the emerging economic model. The Bologna process (1999) and the Lisbon Strategy (2000) gained the commitment of national governments to collaborate with a European effort to transform higher education in order to achieve economic growth and a shared identity. However, enacting the corresponding policies clashed with the fact that, traditionally, European universities are oriented to educate national citizens and generally speaking lack competitiveness in international terms. In addition, in some countries they tend to suffer from stiff administrative structures and an institutional bureaucratic culture.

In the European context thus, universities are expected to respond to social demands of economic competitiveness and the forging of common values and principles. They are expected to generate new answers in terms of novel forms of education, research and development. The ultimate goal is to convert Europe into a significant global actor in a fast changing knowledge society.

The Framework Programme Horizon 2020 has pointed clearly at the relevance of Higher Education Institutions as stakeholders in the research and development arena. 30% of European researchers develop their work in the universities, and 80% of the fundamental research in Europe is done in the universities. Therefore, universities are essential for a knowledge-based economy, the key strength of European economy. This formulation, nevertheless, threatens one of the most important features of universities since their creation: their autonomy.

In order to establish collaboration and build cooperation between higher education institutions and the economic structure, the European Commission has oriented research using a financial strategy:

Their [universities] funding should be improved, bureaucratic meddling in their activities abandoned, and their relations with industry fostered. The Commission was mandated to draft plans for modernization of European universities (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). Great expectations are thus placed upon universities by the EU and national governments (Raivio, 2008, p. xii).

Taking into account this new scenario several questions have been posed. Can European universities in the 21st century keep their old ideal of education,

research and independence? The complex process of Bologna, Lisbon and Horizon 2020 has given rise to a restructuration of teaching and learning, but «also on the unknown long-term consequences this process is expected to involve owing to the many connections between university degrees and professional careers, academic training and social status ascriptions, and the potentials for innovation inherent in universities and the knowledge-based or technology-based economies of the future» (Schriewer, 2009, p. 32).

With regard to research the message in current scientific policy is oriented towards «development», and the role of researchers is to create innovations, and new technologies «In this depiction, knowledge is produced and then traded. Education is represented as a product, the researcher as a manufacturer, the student as a consumer, and ECTS credits as the ‘currency of exchange’» (Nyborg, 2005). The Higher Education System has been transformed into a scientific and technological activity, oriented to an economic outcome (Keeling, 2006).

Another important question that can be asked is if the different European universities are in a similar position with regard to taking on these challenges:

the Commission’s re-reading of the Bologna Process in the context of its Lisbon objectives for research primarily benefits the big players — «old» Member States with established elite universities, and the existing top research institutions. Competitive funding (...) will principally benefit some «quality» institutions and some individuals. The encouragement by the Commission of the convergence of the Bologna Process with the priorities of the research agenda has supported a growing stratification of the higher education sector in the EU. Instead of consolidating across the field, the European Higher Education Area is in consequence being broken up along new lines of differentiation (Keeling, 2006, p. 214).

This special issue titled: *Higher education across Europe: contemporary missions for historical institutions* includes contributions looking at how universities have been adapting to the rapid changes of contemporary society from the mid 20th century to the present. The postindustrial economic logic, the vast increase of information in society and the augmenting interconnectedness across the globe present a real challenge to universities’ mission.

In the European context the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which has permitted the integration of states with political and social traditions radically different from the principals represented by the EU, has to be taken into account. The first two articles in this special issue deal with two such cases: Latvia and Hungary. In the case of the article by Indra Dedze, and Zanda Rubene drawing from the educational borrowing as a policy strategy developed by Steiner-Khamsi G. (2002) the authors provide an illuminating analysis of universities in Latvia from the 1950s to the present. They show that during the Soviet period there was

mainly an import of a ready-made external model. Nevertheless, there was also a process of modification of certain higher education components according to the needs of the local education system. Since 2004 though, when Latvia was integrated into the European Union, we witness a process in which educational policy ideas are borrowed, transformed and internalized into the local education policy and institutions.

In the case of Hungary, János Ugrai, analyses what he characterises as «hectic changes in Hungarian public education and, relatedly, in teacher training». He does not only analyse higher education, but also looks at a specific field of academic training, that of teacher education. He demonstrates that by the 1990s Hungarian education system became one of the most progressive ones in Eastern-Central Europe. However, due to the opposing trends of the past decades, the current situation manifests clear indications of the conservative, and strict state governance established in Hungary, making it an atypical case in the European context. Nevertheless, he emphasises that Hungarian teachers have accumulated a highly diverse knowledge, as well as an extensive international professional social capital. This permitted, in the case of teacher training, an adaptation to competence-based training of the great numbers of students planning to enter the teaching profession.

Another article that looks specifically at the case of teacher training in the framework of higher education is Emiliano Macinai's article dealing with Italy. Macinai reviews secondary teachers' training in Italy in the last 25 years. He looks especially at the organisational and political conditions that shaped schools and teachers' professionalization. He stresses that we are witnessing the spreading of the perception of schools as companies and that this has clear implications for teacher training. As a result, he offers a model of teacher- researcher which is based on: responsibility, anti-dogmatism and dissidence. He then moves on to talk about «The teacher-intellectual: the school as agora of the polis» drawing on the thought of Dewey, Milani and Chomsky. Based on a teacher training experience at a university level he thus suggests an Italian version of universal critical thought.

Belen Espejo and Luján Lazaro are also concerned with the economic influence on higher education, in general, and in Spain in particular. Starting with an analysis of the corporate university, their article explores the relationship between traditional universities and capitalist economy. The authors claim that university governance systems in Spain are actively contributing to the consolidation of economic policies. They show the mutual strengthening dynamics in which the EU and universities reinforce each other, both on the discursive as well as on the organizational level.

The fact that universities today are assuming their third mission – the contribution to society, is analysed in Patrícia Santos's article. Santos, using Portugal as a case study, looks at how the new economy demands new functions from the Higher Education System. The traditional two missions of the universities have been teaching and researching. Recently, the third mission has acquired outstanding importance. Santos points out that doctoral education has a new orientation, not just related with the long established scientific research, but also with the qualification of the workforce of the 21st century. Therefore, doctoral education has become part of the third mission of universities, changing the structures of the traditional system and the structure of doctoral programs. In the paper she tries to answer several questions: what are the main lines of European and national policies affecting this level of education? How has the doctoral education changed in Europe? What new forms of doctoral education have emerged and with which functions? Do these new functions have an impact in terms of recommended knowledge and skills? How far is it possible to combine academic and business values and meanings in socialization and training of researchers?

Janine Kiers, from the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), in The Netherlands analyses in her paper a new way of teaching and learning: MOOCs. She comments on the fears and promises that they have inspired and points out that they compel us to change our academic concepts. For example, the passing rates cannot be applied in this kind of courses, as students who enrol, may be looking for a certificate, but for something else. At the same time, MOOCs have an effect on the traditional universities: on the one hand, her team has perceived that some teachers have started to include online materials in their campus courses, updating the learning objectives and aligning them with learning activities and assessment. On the other hand, MOOCs attract students, not just to the MOOC itself, but also to other courses and degrees offered by the university. As we are becoming lifelong learners, Universities have to adapt and offer different new ways of teaching and MOOCs can be one of them. She claims that those who catastrophically prophesy that MOOCs are «the end of education as we know it», are not able to see their strong and positive impact on innovating education and its organisation.

The new scenario also forces to design new standards aimed at evaluating Universities. As Wendy Robinson and Angelique Hilli state in their paper, in the case of the UK, the classification of Universities in the future will not be based only on the well-established «Research Excellence Framework» (REF), but on a new «Teaching Excellence Framework» (TEF). The motive of the new framework is to be able to make comparable judgements across universities about the quality of teaching and the student experience, using a range of common metrics and determining the allocation of funding and resource. The TEF shows a renewed

interest in teaching excellence in higher education, and universities, based on this new system, will be classified as outstanding; excellent; and meets expectations. The new classification has very important consequences for universities in terms of the fees that they can charge. But the metrics applied have not been without controversy. In the paper, the authors show the outcome of an empirical study which examines how research-intensive universities in England evaluate, assess, value, reward, and align institutional activities with a renewed focus on high quality teaching.

And yet another challenge that European Higher Education system has to face is the decreasing number of national students and the increasing number of foreign students. Cecile Hoareau McGrath and Michael Frearson analyze how universities are looking for foreign students as a way of alleviating the reduction of the population due to demographic decline. They claim that some changes have to be conducted in the admission systems to higher education. They study the European admission systems in perspective, taking into account the regulation of student mobility and the migration flows in Europe. Hoareau McGrath and Frearson compare the European case with systems such as the US, Australia and Japan, and argue for the creation of an information-sharing EU registry on admissions practices for mobile students.

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