

Competitiveness, diversification and the international higher education cash flow: the EU's higher education discourse amidst the challenges of globalisation

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Introduction

Higher Education (HE) is believed to play a pivotal part in the process of globalisation and, as a consequence, it is being transformed, mainly within the context of a supranational union (the European Union), which has set itself the ambitious and unlikely to be reached target of becoming the most powerful and competitive 'knowledge economy' in the world by the Year 2010 (European Commission [EC] 2000). Nevertheless, as indicated in a study published by the OECD Directorate for Education (Marginson and van der Wende 2007) 'globalisation is not a single or universal phenomenon. It is nuanced according to locality (local area, nation, world region), language(s) of use, and academic cultures; and it plays out very differently according to the type of institution.' (5). Furthermore as Roger Dale (1999) indicates, while 'globalisation does represent a new set of rules, there is no reason to expect all countries to interpret those rules in identical ways, or expect them all to play to the rules in

identical ways.’ (2) With this in mind I will focus on particular aspects of the discourse and its implications for HE settings as promoted by one of the supranational organisations (the EU), which, again in the words of Roger Dale, helps create a ‘globally structured agenda for education’ (Dale, 2000).¹ The discursive contexts in which higher education policies are formulated include the Lisbon Objectives (European Council [EC] 2000; Commission of the European Communities [CEC] 2005) and the Bologna Process (Confederation of EU Rectors Conferences and Association of European Universities 2000), as well as a series of communications by the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) and the European Council (EC). Some implications of this discourse for HE and an HE market are drawn out.

Globalisation and higher education

Too much has been written about hegemonic globalisation and its impact on higher education (see Jessop, Fairclough, and Wodak 2008; Torres 2009) to rehearse most of the literature here. Succinctly, I would argue that hegemonic globalisation, with its underlying neoliberal tenets, has traditionally been characterised by the following, each of which has ramifications for the HE sector, though not to the same degree in all countries:

- a strong private sector bias – reduced growth of public spending on public education and the pursuit of other sources of funding;
- the transition of education and other formerly public goods to a consumption service (Hill and Associates 2005), with the blurring of public and private divisions – including the blurring of private and public in HE;
- an obsession with developing the countries ‘Human Resources’, a euphemism for the term ‘Human Capital’ (OECD 2007), which is often unabashedly used in HE policy discourse (EC 2006a, 23; CEC 2006a, 10), as part of re-mantling the state (Pannu 1996) into a Neoliberal or, possibly, as envisaged in certain contexts through a ‘Third Way’ politics, a Workfare state (Ball 2007), to create

the right infrastructure for investment and mobility;

- vocationalising many sectors of lifelong learning, including education for older adults (non-sustainability of pension schemes) (Borg and Mayo 2008);
- public financing of private needs (Gentili 2001) through, in certain cases, partly financing, directly or indirectly, a competitor HE market (Gentili 2005, 143) or facilitating the presence of a business agenda in public universities;
- international quality comparisons – standardisation, league tables, equivalences, harmonisation and specific emphasis on ICT and Maths and Science.² The EU, the OECD and even UNESCO have provided quality indicators in this regard, though each with different emphases (see Surian 2006). Some have gone so far as to argue that what we have, in this context, is an ‘evaluator/ive state’ (Gentili 2005, 141; Neave 2006);
- state intervention in specific sectors as manifest in recent months owing to the credit crunch and other economic setbacks.

How do the above features affect dominant policy discourse in the area? It is to an analysis of this discourse, as provided primarily by the EU, that the paper now turns.

Policy discourse

The EU’s discourse with regard to HE has been developed and consolidated over a number of years and in a series of communiqués and related documents, primarily those that follow up on the agreement of the European Councils of Lisbon, 2000 and Barcelona, 2002 to:

- render the EU the most ‘competitive’ and ‘dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010’;
- render the EU’s education and training systems ‘a world quality reference’ by the same date; and
- ‘create a European Research and Innovation Area’ (EC 2000).

The documents deal with a variety of inter-related areas, notably lifelong learning (CEC 2001a), mobility (CEC 2004), cooperation with third countries (CEC 2001b),

the role of universities in the ‘Europe of Knowledge’ (CEC 2003), brainpower mobilization (CEC 2005), knowledge society (EC 2006a), internationalisation (CEC 2006a), modernisation (CEC 2006a; EC 2006c), quality assurance (CEC 2007), innovation and creativity (CEC 2008), governance (Education and Culture DG 2008) and HE university-business cooperation (EC 2008), among others.

A number of key words emerge from these and other related documents, as well as other documents by agencies that dwell on the implications of these policy directions, such as the Council for Industry and Higher Education (Brown 2007) and the League of European Research Universities (LERU) (LERU 2006). The key words include ‘knowledge economy’, ‘competitiveness’, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘lifelong learning’, ‘access’, ‘mobility’, ‘outcomes and performance’, ‘quality assurance’, ‘innovation and creativity’, ‘diversification’, ‘privatisation’, ‘internationalisation’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘business-HE relationships’. Once again, the list is not exhaustive but contains the key terminology on which the EU’s HE discourse rests. I will now unpack a number of these terms before critically analysing their implications for this specific sector of educational provision.

The key terms and phrases in the dominant discourse concerning the changing nature of universities in this day and age suggest a role markedly different from what had been attributed to the often invoked ‘Humboldt tradition’, an ‘invented’ tradition that has been referred to as a ‘myth’ (Ash 2008, 41) and which, in its original conception, differs considerably from what certain EU documents present as the tradition as it is being interpreted these days (a university graduate being also a researcher to function adequately in the knowledge economy) (see Simons 2006). In fact, a European

Commission 2003 document dealing with the role of the universities in ‘the Europe of Knowledge’ is explicit in this regard, thus contradicting other documents by the same institution referred to by Maarten Simons (2006):

European universities have for long modelled themselves along the lines of some major models, particularly the ideal model of university envisaged nearly two centuries ago by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his reform of the German university, which sets research at the heart of university activity and indeed makes it the basis of teaching. Today the trend is away from these models, and towards greater differentiation. (CEC 2003, 5–6)

The trend is towards a differentiated model centring around a ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ (CEC 2005), the latter a much used concept, often attributed to Peter Drucker, which, as I have shown, lies at the heart of the Lisbon treaty. It is the key concept set to place the continent’s education and training systems at the forefront of this bold EU attempt to compete with the rising economic forces in Asia and the USA and those of trans-national corporations. And HE institutions are implicated in this process, with their triple helix of education, research and innovation serving as the means for Europe to compete on high ‘value added’ terms – technology refinement and take up, cross-border association and the sustainment of complex communities (Marginson and Wende 2007, 7). The ‘knowledge economy’ and its related ‘knowledge society’ are therefore the central all-embracing concepts in the EU’s discourse concerning education, training and culture and particularly its HE discourse (Dale and Robertson 2002, 28). They appear throughout the major EU documents. The following statement sums up the importance of the ‘knowledge economy’ concept and the particular framework for education in which it is enshrined: ‘Investment in human capital though is one of the key factors for strengthening Europe’s position in the knowledge

economy and to increasing social cohesion in the twenty-first century' (EC 2006a, 26). The economic discourse regarding education and HE renders *de rigueur* the use of another important concept: that of competitiveness. Universities are meant to compete in the marketplace of knowledge. The constant references to university classifications such as those coming out of Shanghai or Spain, are indicative of one aspect of competitiveness, that which occurs among universities. Reference is here made to the arguable, though consulted, World University Rankings as produced by Jiao Tong University's Institute of Higher Education in Shanghai, the Times Higher Education Supplement rankings or the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities compiled by the Cybermetrics Lab (Centre for Scientific Information and Documentation – CINDOC), which is a unit of the National Research Council of Spain.

There is, however, another side to competitiveness that ties in with the concept of the knowledge economy, namely that of contributing to the creation of a dynamic economy (CEC 2005). In arguably its major communiqué regarding the way universities should function in this day and age, the European Commission makes 'competitiveness' a key operative word. We are told at the outset that: 'at the informal meeting at Hampton Court in October 2005, Research and Development and universities were acknowledged as foundations of European competitiveness' (CEC 2006a, 2), which is indicative of the overall tenor of the communiqué. In fact, the European Students Union concluded their reaction to the document by stating that there is more to a modern university than the ability to contribute to a competitive global economy (ESIB 2006, 3) to indicate the extent to which the discourse of competitiveness pervaded this and, I would add, other EU documents concerning HE, as well as

documents that draw and elaborate on the EU discourse (e.g. Brown 2007).

With the focus on competitiveness and knowledge economy, it is hardly surprising that the discourse on lifelong learning, another key term and concept in the EU's lexicon, as stated earlier, differs considerably from that originally propounded by UNESCO in the late sixties and that had revolved around the ideas of such key figures as Ettore Gelpi, Paul Lengrand and Bogdan Suchodolski, to name but three. The concept of lifelong learning, as adopted by the EU, is closely tied to the idea of a knowledge economy and is similar to that of the OECD (OECD 1996, 2007). In its *Memorandum on lifelong learning* (CEC 2000) the Commission posits, at the outset, that: 'The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council confirm that the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society. Therefore, Europe's education and training systems are at the heart of the coming changes. They, too, must adapt' (3). Later in the same document, when outlining the vision for valuing learning specifically within a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective, the Commission states: 'In the knowledge economy, developing and using human resources to the full is a decisive factor in maintaining competitiveness' (15). The economic tenor of this document is highlighted by Bauman (2005), Wain (in Borg and Mayo 2004) and Borg and Mayo (2006). Specifically regarding HE, the Commission states that 'development of entrepreneurial, management and innovation skills should become an integral part of graduate education, research training and lifelong learning strategies for university staff' (CEC 2006a, 6). The overall discussions and references to lifelong learning deal with other issues that are relevant to the EU's discourse regarding HE, including those of access,

notably access of school leavers without formal qualifications but who learn through alternative routes (CEC 2003, 9), access of women to science and technology (CEC 2003, 19) and access to HE of people of different ages, including older adults (CEC 2006a, 7):

In addition, the contribution expected of universities to lifelong learning strategies leads them gradually to widen the conditions of access to this area of tuition (in particular to allow access to those not coming through the route of upper secondary education, through better recognition of skills acquired outside university and outside formal education. (CEC 2003, 9)

This reflects one aspect of ‘social Europe’ that contrasts with the apparently neoliberal tenor of some of its other discourse. The concern with breaking barriers to access highlights another aspect of EU policy and its discourse on education, notably that of mobility. Programmes such as Erasmus, Leonardo and Socrates and actions such as Grundtvig, now subsumed under the Lifelong Learning Programme, have allowed and continue to allow the possibility for student and teacher/academic exchanges throughout Europe (CEC 2004). For this mobility to occur, standards are to be safeguarded and the need for quality assurance³ is emphasised. This is often defined as outcomes-based (see Education and Culture DG 2008), whereas a certain degree of harmonisation and a smooth credit transfer system need to be in place. The overall emphasis in the discourse on mobility (CEC 2004), outcomes and transfer (Confederation of EU Rectors’ Conferences and Association of European Universities 2000) is linked to the notion of ‘Europeanisation’ – a Europe without barriers, also in the HE field.

However ‘Europeanisation’ that entails strategies for a greater network of collaboration, including student and academic exchanges throughout an entire continent, is

to be distinguished from that other term that forms part of the contemporary EU discourse for HE, namely that of ‘internationalisation’ (Marginson 2007). According to Simon Marginson (2007), Europeanisation ‘has one set of origins in the growth of international mobility of people and ideas; another set of origins in the international cooperation between EU countries in their economic, social and cultural activities; and a third set of origins in the explicit commitment to a common European higher education zone in order to facilitate such international activities within Europe. At the same time international cooperation in higher education is expected to enhance the global competitiveness of Europe as a whole’ (12).

Access and mobility are now to occur beyond European or strictly EU borders as part of the drive towards competitiveness with respect to universities in the USA, as clearly indicated by Jan Figel, the EU Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism (Figel 2006, 4). The quest to render European universities visible on the world stage, in keeping with the quest for a much desired supremacy in the global knowledge economy, has led to schemes in which partnerships are established with ‘third countries’, including those in Latin America through the Alfa programme (CEC 2001b, 6). However this drive is being intensified to attract more non-EU fee paying students to European universities (CEC 2006a, 10) and thus compete with the USA, which has hitherto enjoyed the lion’s-share of foreign student recruitment and whose universities and research institutions surpass those of Europe in attracting ‘top level’ students and researchers (CEC 2003, 21).

This immediately raises the issue of ‘diversification’, a key term in the EU discourse on HE. There is talk of diversification of students in terms of age (lifelong

learning), EU nationals from different countries (through mobility structures) and students from outside the EU. It is argued that there should be diversification of provision throughout the HE system itself, diversification of universities and other HE institutions. Some institutions are meant to be 'big league' players serving as world class research institutions, some are meant to be purely teaching institutions while others are meant to have a regional focus, that is to say, to gear their teaching and research to regional development needs. The EC communiqué of 2006 states explicitly that not all institutions need to strike the same balance between education and research (CEC 2003, 18; 2006a, 4). The Commissioner in the area is, however, less prudent in the way he makes the same point:

In the US, the huge levels of research funding are overwhelming[ly] concentrated on around 100 research intensive universities and fewer than 250 institutions award postgraduate degrees ... Europe's universities should be allowed to diversify and specialise: some must be able to play in the major league, but others should concentrate on regional or local needs and perhaps more on teaching. (Figel 2006, 7)

The discourse points to a scenario smacking of a hotel star classification system (Borg 2005, 31). The diversification, however, does not end there. The biggest source of diversification is the existence of public and private institutions in an HE market, even though the distinction is rarely clear cut. There is a strong element of hybridisation as funding policies, including those of the national or federal state, often serve to sustain the market. Private universities benefit through state funding policies, with students eligible for scholarships and other funding. So called private universities like Oxford and Cambridge are said to provide a public good. Also Scott (2007) argues that although there are private HE institutions in Britain, they are incorporated in what he calls a nationalised system of HE through a series of nationally imposed classifications,

methods of evaluation and quality assurance mechanisms. In Italy, for instance, any private university that is approved of by the Ministry of Education is considered to be and designated as public and receives funding from the State and communal and regional entities. The total funding for private universities by the State amounts to 14.3% when compared to the 73% allocated to state universities.⁴ The same applies to certain Catholic universities, such as the biomedic Catholic campus in Rome and the Catholic medical school San Raffaele in Milan.⁵ In contexts such as these, the relationship between public and private is complex. The issue of privatisation concerns not only the nature of some of the universities that play their part in the market but also the sources of funding provided to both public/private institutions. A document on governance by the Education and Culture DG (2008) demonstrates the way different funding strategies are being pursued and refers to the promotion of diversification in this regard, with reference to loans, donations and contract research (19).

The major emphasis that can be seen in the EU's HE discourse is the forging of university-business partnerships. Last year (2008), the first European Forum on cooperation between Higher Education and the Business Community took place (CEC 2008). The communication on the modernization of universities and HE institutes underlines the importance of a 'structured partnership with the business community', although this comes with the rider that 'the public mission and overall social and cultural remit of European universities must be preserved' (CEC 2006a, 6). This partnership is meant to create opportunities for the sharing of research results, intellectual property rights, patents and licences and allow for placements of students and researchers in business, thus enhancing the career prospects at all stages of the

students' career and creating a better match between HE outputs and job requirements. It also can help convey, according to the communication, a stronger sense of 'entrepreneurship', another key HE term which is intended to enable persons to contribute effectively to the competitive economic environment described earlier (CEC 2006a; CEC 2006b; EC 2006b).⁶

Entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. This supports everyone in day-to-day life at home and in society, makes employees more aware of the context of their work and better able to seize opportunities, and provides a foundation for entrepreneurs establishing a social or commercial activity. (CEC 2006b, 4)

The area of business HE, including university, partnerships, in which entrepreneurship is exalted as a highly prized virtue, has characterised the HE scenario in the country often identified as the EU's major competitor in the field – the USA – as the writings of Henry Giroux and associates have indicated (Giroux and Searls Giroux 2004; Giroux 2007). With respect to the USA, Commissioner Figel points out that Europe lags behind the USA in terms of the GDP percentage spent on HE but points out that the difference 'consists pretty much entirely of private funding' (Figel 2006, 4). In 2003, total HE expenditure within the EU was estimated at 1.14% of the GDP (Education and Culture DG 2008, 17).

The issues of entrepreneurship and economic success in a global competitive environment place the emphasis, as indicated in the above definition of the former term, on creativity and innovation, two more key words in the EU discourse with obvious ramifications for HE provision. Creativity is considered by the Commission as a "driver" for entrepreneurial and social competences' (CEC 2008, 5). Documents

focusing on this aspect of the EU discourse – creativity – have already been produced as everything seems to be geared to this year, 2009, which has been designated as the year of creativity. The competences involved include ‘mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology’, ‘digital competence’, ‘learning to learn’, ‘social and civic competences’, ‘sense of initiative and entrepreneurship’ and ‘cultural awareness and expression’ (CEC 2008, 2). The emphasis on Maths, Science and Technology is in keeping with the discourse of the Lisbon objectives (Vella 2005). The issue of innovation is taken up in a study by the League of European Research Universities (LERU 2006). This study compares the way research is used in Europe with the way it is made use of in the USA and Asia. It is argued that better use of research is made in the USA and Asia than in Europe. The study underlines the discourse of competitiveness in a global economy, which is the EU’s main discourse with regard to HE. All the other concepts in the EU discourse in the area tend to stem from there.

Critical analysis of the EU discourse on higher education

Migration of policies

The discussion thus far has been at a general level. Yet what renders the whole process interesting is the manner in which policies migrate to countries within the EU fold or others that have strong ties to the EU. There is a whole process of lending and borrowing taking place (Sultana 2008) and adjustments have to be made depending on context. The issue of internationalization strikes me as being one area where adjustments are made in the policy migration process. And it is here where the hegemony

of English (see Macedo, Dendrinou and Gounari 2003; Deem, Mok and Lucas 2008) makes its presence felt. For instance, Finland, like many other EU countries, wants to substantially increase its percentage of foreign students studying in the country. This requires Finnish universities and other HE institutions to teach more courses in English. A development plan by the Ministry of Education set this process in motion (Kaiser et al. 2006, 16). English is already taken for granted in the neighbouring country of Sweden, which therefore places emphasis on non-English modern languages in its HE admission decisions (42). Portugal, by contrast, seeks to internationalise by virtue of two policy strategies: universities can offer courses and students can take exams in a language other than Portuguese, while national universities are encouraged to offer joint degrees with foreign universities (38), something that other EU universities are doing (the University of Malta offers joint Master's degrees with American universities).

However, where the system is very variegated, the transfer of policy becomes more complicated. Take the situation in Germany, where a 1994 constitutional change favours the Lander as opposed to the Federal government in certain policies. This renders German HE more diverse and less easy to monitor (Kaiser et al. 2006, 28).

Meanwhile in France, the Bologna process brought about a change among universities in terms of offering a three-cycle system of Licentiate, Master's and doctorate. This policy did not transfer, however, to the Grandes Écoles, which have persevered in their own way of doing things and of developing their own curricula (Chevallier and Paul 2007, 162).

The other issue that comes into play when discussing policy migration between

EU countries is the weight of tradition or, as Jussi Valimaa (2007) calls it, the traditions and historical layers in the HE system and universities. These are not extinguished easily and have a bearing on the type of interaction between the novel or the recently imported and the old. Valimaa indicates how new policies imported in Finland from the EU and elsewhere will need to be modified in a manner that reconciles these policies with other policies that have a longer history in the country.

Other recent traditions had to give way in view of anomalies caused by the issue of student mobility. The case of Austria and its open admissions policy stands out here. Because German students found it easier to enter Austrian universities than their own German ones, a change had to be brought about, in accordance with the EU Treaty, to the Austrian regulations regarding admission to universities – *universitatgesetz*. Additional exams before and during studies are now mandatory for all students irrespective of their origin (Kaiser, et al, 2006, 13).

The foregoing examples are indicative of the complexity of the policy transfer issue within the EU. Many exogenous and indigenous factors come into play and, in certain contexts, it could well turn out to be a case of old habits die hard, as in the case of the Grandes Écoles.

Neoliberal tenor?

Much of the tenor of the discourse concerning universities in Europe, as captured in many of the keywords in the EU's HE documents, is neoliberal, which constitutes the major ideology underlining hegemonic globalisation: 'Neoliberalism is the political form of globalization' (de Souza Santos, in Dale and Robertson 2004, 151) This discourse, admittedly, must also be viewed alongside the discourse of 'social Europe'

as manifest in the concepts of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘social cohesion’. The neoliberal tenor exalts the market and has turned education from being conceived of as simply a public good into also becoming a consumption service. Higher education is no exception. Higher education is being regarded as a terrain increasingly characterised by privatisation, profit making and competitiveness. It is an ideology that is gradually leading to the ‘businessification’ (Allen et al. 1999) of HE, perhaps not yet on the lines already manifest in the USA, where universities are being corporatized and the knowledge they produce and disseminate is being commodified (Giroux and Searls Giroux 2004).⁷

The triple Helix

The much augured forging of links between universities, other HE institutes and business, with a view to providing a better match between degrees and jobs, between research and the imperatives of a ‘knowledge intensive’ economy, besides the implication by the EU Commissioner that privatisation can be the one factor that can enable Europe to bridge the gap with the USA in terms of GDP expenditure on HE, suggest that the European HE sector is being led down the business route. The extent to which a specific EU member state would pursue this route will probably be conditioned by the politics of the government at the helm. Some favouring a ‘third way’ politics are likely to contribute to the creation of a ‘competition state’ HE market scenario involving private and public provision or hybridisation with respect to both. Others, such as Berlusconi’s right wing government, would clamour, as it recently did through the utterances of Minister Gelmini, for universities to consider becoming private foundations (Ballio 2008; ESIB 2008), a suggestion that, coupled with the announcement of

cutbacks in the Italian elementary school system, led to a reaction on Italian campuses (ESIB 2008) and in the Italian press regarding the demise of the university ‘as we once knew it’.

A shake up?

Whatever the ‘take up’ in different member states, we are confronted by a discourse that could have the merit of trying to shake up the HE education sector in various parts of Europe to, among other things, enable it to rid itself of some of its traditional shackles. There have been allegations of nepotism (Calabro 2008; Viviano 2008) and ‘feudal systems’ (Carlucci 2008) in the university system of certain countries. The European discourse, however, reflects the EU’s general position regarding education and the so-called knowledge economy. It is a discourse that continues to be vocational in which much of what is valued as learning is narrowly competence-based (Batini 2008; Mayo 2008; Surian 2008) and tied to economic interests, reminiscent of Message 4 of the EU’s Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Bauman 2005; Wain, in Borg and Mayo 2004, 22; Borg and Mayo 2006).

HE business partnership

The emphasis on a structured partnership between HE and business tends to undermine the notion of autonomy that is given importance in the EU’s discourse concerning HE. It seems as though the concern is with freeing academic autonomy from the shackles of government bureaucracy to allow institutions the flexibility necessary to compete in the global HE marketplace on the basis of knowledge, research and innovation. It seems, however, that what applies to the State does not apply to

business. The European Students Union rightly argues that ‘The call for an increase in private funding puts university autonomy under siege’ and can lead to a ‘situation where the need for private financing imposes a research agenda on the university, directed by the business community’ (ESIB 2006). The students’ union sees this as ‘more than conflicting with striving to ensure real autonomy’.

Shift in power

For all the talk of safeguarding universities and HE institutions from bureaucratic constraints, recent practice in universities both in North America and Europe has led to a shift in power from the academic sector to the bureaucratic sector, not least because of the requirements among EU member countries of harmonisation processes, the obsession with what Lyotard calls ‘performativity’ – everything to be translated into easily measured outcomes – and other modes of conforming to the Bologna process.

This too impinges on the university’s autonomy. For, as Pablo Gentili (2001) points out:

It has been widely noted that evaluative processes generate funding priorities that – as they reward ‘the best’ and punish ‘the worst’ – themselves turn into powerful normative criteria. These become a kind of unofficial curriculum, which regulates and strongly influences the pedagogical decision making of educational institutions. Evaluations, in this case, not only ‘evaluate’; they also establish criteria for planning and goals which must be implemented and met in order to avoid punitive measures in the future.

Knowledge economy?

Furthermore, the current emphasis on the need for a ‘knowledge economy’ has been perceived, in certain quarters, as an attempt by private enterprise and industry to construct a ‘skills crisis’ in Europe rather than a ‘jobs crisis’ (Marshall 1997, 59).

Higher education is therefore expected to respond to this ‘skills crisis.’ The Canadian sociologist, D.W. Livingstone (2004) provides data from his own country that

support the criticism concerning a misplacement of emphasis (substituting a jobs crisis with a skills crisis) and challenges the claims of those celebrating the arrival of the ‘knowledge-based economy’. Drawing on a report by Lavoie and Roy (1998), Livingstone (2004) writes:

In spite of fairly rapid growth over this period, knowledge workers still made up less than 10 percent of the labour force in 1996. While details of this occupational classification may be disputed, it is clear that the vast majority of the Canadian labour force continued to be employed in jobs that require fairly routinized transmission of data, processing of goods or provision of personal services. (8)

He argues that the existence of a learning society is not supported by compelling empirical evidence to convince one of the existence of a knowledge economy. This vision is also not matched by the necessary concomitant economic reforms:

... that address basic dimensions of work reform, including the *redistribution of paid work time* to reduce current polarization and the *democratization of paid work* to give more workers’ greater opportunities to apply their extensive acquired knowledge... (Livingstone 2004, 20, emphasis in original)

Transfer of skills

In a discussion of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and the documentation of examples of best practice with regard to this document, attention was drawn to ‘the intimation that the skills required for success in the market economy are the same skills necessary for active citizenship’ (Borg and Mayo 2006, 23). I would now draw attention to the intimation, regarding the linkage of creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation, that the qualities and skills required for social life are those required for economic success and vice versa. After all, the Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism argues that ‘the competences required by the jobs of the future are very much the same as those required by the citizens of the future’ (Figel 2006, 3).

Internationalisation

Perhaps the most serious recommendation made in arguably the most important communiqué from the Commission with regard to the modernisation of universities and HE institutions (CEC 2006a) concerns the much augured process of internationalisation. There is a whole series of communications leading to this, starting with the communication concerning third countries (CEC 2003). International students from outside the EU are meant to enhance the universities' and HE systems' stature in the world. They are also intended to provide the cash (generally exorbitant foreign fees charged by 'big league' players), which will enable European universities to compete with their USA counterparts, such fees becoming a significant source of revenue and foreign exchange. Universities and HE institutions are being encouraged to compete in a lucrative world-student market and increase their share of the takings. In a world characterised by the constant flow of labour and prospective labour from South to North, European universities could well be creating barriers, especially financial ones, for access to universities by migrants and their offspring. Furthermore, they could well be contributing towards the Third World and Eastern European brain drain by possibly creaming off that small percentage of foreign students who, for a variety of reasons, fail to return to their country of origin.

Access in a social Europe

Access becomes an important issue here and it is laudable that much importance is attached to breaking down barriers for women, minorities and traditionally disenfranchised groups to enter HE institutions and pursue courses in the much heralded

areas of Maths, Science and Technology. It is also laudable that importance is given to the universities' and HE's extension and short course programmes in keeping with the spirit of lifelong learning. It is equally laudable that the EU places emphasis on broadening access to HE institutions among school leavers. This has positive implications for reforms within the secondary and higher secondary school systems, reforms intended to do away with or minimise stiff selection processes and streaming (Borg 2005, 32) purported to be based on meritocracy when, in effect, they constitute a process of social selection. To my mind, this is the most noteworthy aspect of many of the communications when viewed from the perspective of social equality and justice, which once again attests to the existence of a 'Social Europe'. With regard to women, however, the discourse is restricted to career advancement and individual mobility (Morley 2008) – very much a traditional liberal-bourgeois concept. There is little about reconfiguring universities and other HE institutions to become inclusive of different ways of knowing, including women's ways of knowing (Barr 1999) – transforming them from patriarchal bastions into more gender and ethnically inclusive institutions.

The public sphere

Finally one way in which universities can engage in a meaningful process of access is by re-conceiving of their role as not simply being there to boost the economy, 'knowledge intensive' or otherwise, but also to contribute to a regeneration of democracy and the public sphere (Giroux and Searls Giroux 2004). In keeping with the EU's promotion of the concept of 'active citizenship', not one in which the individual is reduced to the intertwined roles of producer-consumer reminiscent of Marcuse's one

dimensional citizen, we require institutions that support the efforts of those who have traditionally been swimming against the current by seeking ways and means of extending their roles as educators outside the university. They seek to build alliances with activists and popular educators in the wider communities, among youth, children and adults, doing such work against all odds and in the face of much risk in view of the fact that such community involvement is rarely rewarded in department reviews or, for instance, the research assessment exercise that takes place in Britain, despite the fact that ‘contribution to the community’ is listed as one of the criteria for promotions in a number of universities.

We often come across attempts by academics to engage the academy in popular education, to forge partnerships with grassroots activists, as evident in the Ontario based project, NALL (New Approaches to Lifelong Learning) or PEN (the Popular Education Network), coordinated from Edinburgh. These and other initiatives in various parts of the globe can provide signposts for future directions that a truly vibrant HE institution can take, as a result of which educators, in and outside the academy, can act beyond the traditionally perceived boundaries of their work, culture and social location to join forces with others (and here the question that arises is: on whose terms?) in the quest for a substantive democracy. And such a democracy would be ill served by a discourse reflecting an obsession with the corporatized HE scene in the USA. This seems to suggest that the image of the ‘competitor’ has been internalised to such an extent (reflected in the constant references to what American universities do, in communications by the EU and its commissioners) that one wonders whether it is this very same competitor that is indirectly shaping the

discourse for higher education in Europe.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Alessio Surian (2006) for exposing me to this phrase by Roger Dale.
2. As far as the EU's Lisbon Agenda goes, emphasis is placed on Maths and Science for immediately productive purposes (Science for industry and not for traditional occupations such as Architecture, Pharmacy and Medicine – Vella, 2005, 145).
3. See the European Parliament and Council Recommendation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Official Journal L64 of 4.3.2006. There have also been consultations in the context of the European Qualifications Framework (CEC 2006a, 10).
4. I am indebted to Professor Anna Maria Piussi of the University of Verona, for providing me with useful documentation for this point. Cantiere srl – Ufficio Stampa Università IULM.
5. See Wikipedia, l'enciclopedia libera. Finanziamenti alla Chiesa cattolica in Italia. Cantiere srl – Ufficio Stampa Università IULM.
6. According to Baldacchino (2008), people from a selection of small jurisdictions in Europe, many forming part of or being EU member states, did not seem to have honed their entrepreneurial skills through their educational systems.
7. Neither has there been any talk of matching research output with military concerns as in the USA. Dwight Eisenhower referred to the situation in the USA when coining the phrase 'military-industrial' complex. It has been reported that he used the phrase in what was a modified famous speech of his. In the draft, he is believed to have referred to the 'military-academic-industrial complex' an expression that was later also used by Senator William Fullbright (Giroux, 2007, 14–15).

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