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R E P O R T
on
“COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION”

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Introduction

Higher education has long been recognized as contributing to the social, cultural and intellectual life of society by improving the level of human capital. Knowledge and technology has become a major economic and social development factor. Higher education institutions have a wealth of scientific and educational potential, but it is not sufficiently exploited for economic governance processes, society and business. Structures of higher education systems or more precisely, the shape and the size of the national higher education systems, have been among the issues of higher education policy. There is a long-term trend of expansion of higher education accompanied by a continuous debate about its desirability and a perennial instability.

Over the years, the emphasis placed on issues of the shape and size of the higher education system varied substantially. Perceptions underwent continuous revisions as regards the driving forces affecting the patterns of the higher education systems.

Higher Education

“Higher education” and “higher education system” became popular terms in the second half of the twentieth century. The spread of this term had three implications. First, the use of these terms suggest that there is a macro-structure of higher education. Higher education activities and institutions in a country have something in common and are interrelated. Second, the terms suggest that the characteristic features of universities are not necessarily indicative anymore for the higher education system as a whole. Those institutions are termed universities, as a rule, which serve a twofold function: teaching and research, the latter i.e. the creation and preservation of systematic knowledge. It is widely assumed that universities in today’s meaning of institutions fostering “analytic”, “rational”, “systematic”, “critical”, “sceptical” and “innovative” thinking through teaching and research emerged from the European universities of the Middle Age. This, the term “higher” suggests a specific quality, e.g. a certain degree of cognitive rigour, an expectation that students learn to question prevailing rules and tools and understand theories, methods and substance of “academic” knowledge. During the final decades of the twentieth century, terms as “post-secondary”, “tertiary” and “third-level” gained popularity.

It is largely regarded that Europe invented the modern university as a higher learning institution and learning community. In European tradition, the universities essentially were set up to educate societies’ elites. The oldest European university, Bologna University (University of Bologna, Wikipedia), which dates back to 1088, although the exact time of founding remains uncertain, created the higher learning community that was to be emulated throughout the whole continent. England invented the concept of the residential university, where scholars living in a small community were to pursue higher learning. Oxford and

Cambridge Universities are examples of such communities. Germany created the research university. In the German tradition subject area rather than development of the student, as in the English model, received higher focus.

From national to supranational

Until the early 1990s, structural higher education policies and trends were clearly national policies and developments. International comparison was a powerful tool for understanding the national developments and for setting a framework in the search for improvement, but different decisions were made within individual countries reflecting international views of the best options, varied policy preferences as well as national contexts. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 has been a remarkable starting point for supra-national action to make the patterns of the national higher education systems more quite similar across Europe.

The European higher education system used to vary from country to country thus rendering professional and academic movement difficult. Diplomas had to be translated, courses recognized but still it was a long and often unsuccessful process. The European Union established the Bologna System as a means to achieve unity and mobility in the field of education, as it has similarly done in different areas.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, higher education institutions in Europe have been restructured in order to establish a comparable, transparent, common and/or similar higher education area called the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The establishment of the European Higher Educational Area has been a bold attempt to enhance higher education by introducing common standarts through the Bologna Process which introduced similar requirements and criteria in all the countries.

The Bologna Process

The commencement of the Bologna Process is a revolutionary accomplishment to promote cooperation among higher education institutions and to internationalize higher education in Europe. The Bologna Declaration (1999) called for creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The European Higher Education Area was envisaged as a competitive higher education zone, encouraging the mobility of student and academic staff, in which students are able to choose from a wide range of courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. With political unification and expansion of European Union, shortcomings of educational systems came into forefront of societies' concerns. The Bologna process was to integrate higher learning systems through Europe by creating the European higher education area by making academic degree quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. From the beginning, there have been three priorities of the Bologna Process: "Introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study".

The student mobility has often been considered as one of the key elements of the international aspect of higher education. Because globalization combines economic and cultural change, it has created a demand for fully-equipped graduates who will become the skilled workforce in very competitive professional and academic areas. In order to meet the need for global-ready graduates, mobility programmes such as Erasmus have become one of the most substantial variables of higher education in Europe. If national governments aim to ensure themselves an important place in the swiftly changing and developing world, it is highly necessary that they follow the developments in higher education, especially regarding internationalization and student mobility. Partnership between national governments is one of the significant principles lying at the heart of the Bologna Process which is a voluntary process i.e. reforms are jointly agreed, but implementation is subject to national suzerainty. The Bologna Process has 57 parties: 49 higher education systems in 48 countries (incl. Belgium Flemish and French Community), the European Commission, and seven Consultative Members.

Major Bologna goals and instruments are:

- A converged degree structure: three study cycles of Bachelor, Masters and Doctorates, laid down in the EHEA Qualifications Framework, which is largely compliant with higher education qualifications in the EU Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.
- A joint credit system, usually the European credit transfer system (ECTS) or a compliant system.
- Mobility of students and staff.
- Internationalisation of higher education systems and institutions, the international visibility of the EHEA, also named “Bologna in a global setting” or “international attractiveness”.
- A European Dimension of Quality Assurance – based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) – so far the only institution created by the Bologna Process.
- Social dimension, lifelong learning and widening access and participation.
- Recognition of study periods, based on the credit system, and degrees, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

European higher education system is currently divided into three linear, sequential levels: Bachelor, Master and Doctorate (PhD) systems. Students do not need to continue studying at the same institution, but may decide to move to a different faculty, or even university. The degrees acquired are part of a framework that has been agreed upon by 46 countries and that promote international transparency, and mobility. In order to facilitate mobility and international curriculum development, the European Credit Transfer System was established.

The credits are attached to courses of educational programmes based on difficulty and requirements, such as student workload, learning outcomes and contact hours. This Transfer System makes it therefore, easier to compare programmes throughout Europe. The European higher educational system is regulated to follow international principles and allows and facilitates student mobility. Bologna Process was not introduced in all countries at the same time and therefore is not well-developed everywhere. Some countries are still in the early stages of its implementation but they are all continuously striving to reach the prescribed level.

The social dimension and the modernisation of higher education

The reform of higher education in Europe has been on the agenda of European cooperation for a long time. The challenge of “modernising higher education” was presented forcefully by the European Commission which emphasised that universities are key players in Europe's future and for the successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society; which needs in-depth restructuring and modernisation if Europe is not to lose out in the global competition in education, research and innovation. This approach links the modernisation of higher education to the achievement of economic and social goals in a knowledge-based economy.

In the political debate on the future of higher education, the social dimension has become increasingly important. The Council stated that increased lifelong learning opportunities, widening access to higher education for all, including non-traditional learners, and improving employability are key objectives of higher education policy both at the European and national level. The Council asked member states to establish incentives so that higher education institutions accept more non-traditional learners and improve the learning environment.

Strategic framework in education and training (ET 2020) identified four strategic objectives. The third objective is “Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship” to “enable all citizens, irrespective of their personal, social or economic circumstances, to acquire, update and develop over a lifetime both job-specific skills and the key competences needed for their employability and to foster further learning, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue”. Concretely, the Council adopted the benchmark for tertiary level attainment according to which “by 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%”. The Council further identified the main challenges of the modernisation agenda, in particular sustainability of higher education funding and diversification of higher education provision. The Council also invited member states to “promote widened access, [...] develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates, [...] and to] promote specific programmes for adult student and other non-traditional learners”.

The future strategy for education and training in Europe is based on 2 key European Commission documents:

- The Europe 2020 Strategy, which aims to further develop growth and job creation by focusing on key policy areas including education. EFEE closely follows the flagship initiatives ‘Youth on the move’ and ‘Agenda for new skills for new jobs’ and the forthcoming EC policies and funding possibilities.
- The Education and Training 2020, which is a strategic framework adopted in May 2009. The strategy targets all levels of education and training and includes 4 main objectives: Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship and enhancing creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Within the EHEA, countries have committed to the goals which requires that the student body should reflect the diversity of the populations and that the background of students should not have an impact on their participation in and attainment of higher education. The goal of providing equal opportunities to quality higher education is far from being reached. With regard to gender, for instance, some imbalances have reduced over time but nevertheless continue to exist in most countries and across the EHEA as a whole. The greatest gender imbalances exist between different fields of study. In some fields, such as teacher training or social services, men are strongly under-represented. In other fields, such as computing or engineering, women are strongly under-represented. Policies aimed at achieving gender balance in higher education are therefore likely to be most effective if they take study-field-specific imbalances into account. Another central concern of the social dimension is whether immigrants and children of immigrants have the same opportunities to participate in and attain higher education as native students. Data shows very clearly that in nearly all countries, an immigration background is negatively associated with higher education attainment. Foreign-born young adults are more likely to quit education and training at an early stage and less likely to participate in tertiary education than their native-born counterparts. Keeping in mind European Union’s Europe 2020 strategy and its target that by 2020 at least 40 % of young people (aged 30-34) should have completed tertiary or equivalent education; whether increasing overall participation will also result in a more balanced composition of the student body remains to be seen.

Mobility and internationalisation

EHEA countries present very different situations with regard to internationalisation and mobility, especially when looking at their individual mobility flows and the level of engagement in internationalisation activities. Most countries encourage the internationalisation of higher education through their steering documents. However, more than half of them lack a national internationalisation strategy or guidance to the various stakeholders involved in the internationalisation process. Higher education institutions in many countries also lack comprehensive internationalisation strategies, although they are

increasingly engaged in internationalisation activities such as joint programmes/degrees. Many countries have not adopted national quantitative targets for different forms of mobility. There is no doubt that the trend for internationalisation is growing, and that this offers great potential for higher education institutions in the EHEA. However, lack of funding as well as inflexible national legal frameworks may hinder development in some countries. Student mobility rates show slight increases since the 2012 Implementation Report, but still only a minority of students benefit from such experience and mobility for under-represented groups would need greater attention. There is considerable evidence of significant national action to strengthen mobility, but monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact of these measures is lacking in most countries. It is not clear whether the EHEA collective target of 20 % mobility by 2020 can be reached. Funding is perceived by ministries and students alike as the biggest obstacle to increased mobility. For both student and staff mobility, it will be essential to focus not only on numbers, but also on the quality of mobility. This implies investing in information services, monitoring experience, ensuring that recognition and evaluation processes operate fairly, and making changes in light of experience.

Conclusion and the role of the Parliaments

South East Europe is a region with a dynamic population enrolled in higher education. Many countries in the region have mature higher education systems and others are striving to achieve the highest standards in higher education. European integration process constitutes an indispensable factor in this regard. Accession negotiations include chapters on education as well and countries in the region are trying to adopt the EU acquis in higher education by initiating reforms in order to modernize their higher education systems. Bologna Process, on the other hand, is the manifestation of the joint will of those countries coming together to promote cooperation among higher education institutions and to internationalize higher education in Europe. All but one of the SEECP participants are parties to the Bologna process which aims to integrate higher learning systems through Europe by creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) thus making academic degree quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. The high level of participation by the SEECP participants to the Bologna Process is remarkable and promising for the future of the higher education system in South East Europe. Parliaments of the SEECP PA can play an active role in supporting governments to adopt relevant reforms in order to comply with the requirements set forth by the Bologna Process. Relevant parliamentary committees on education can serve as an important platform for the inclusion of higher education reforms in to the legislative process. Parliaments of the SEECP PA can encourage relevant authorities to participate more actively in the Bologna Process, especially the mobility programs such as Erasmus+. In line with the social dimension of the Bologna Process, Parliaments of the SEECP PA should play a pioneering role in ensuring that all parts of the society regardless of

their social, economic and political backgrounds receive higher education. SEECP participants will undoubtedly reach high standards in higher education by means of reforms initiated in line with the European integration process and Bologna Process. SEECP Parliaments will continue to be an integral part of the process by providing a platform for the realization of relevant legislative reforms in higher education.