



Prometheus Bound? European Initiatives and Trends on Higher Education and Their Association with Economic Competitiveness, Skills and Employability

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and increasing internationalization of Higher Education has clearly resulted in a persistent demand for the further transformation of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), towards competitiveness and contribution to development. What is actually in stake is the employability, while another key issue is the harmonization with the economy and the labor market. That raises, of course, a lot of issues concerning the gradual transformation of the Higher Education and the relation between Higher Education and Society at Large. Globalization has affected all the abovementioned, which is crystal clear in large scale initiatives, in Europe, such as the “Bologna Process” and the subsequent development of the European Higher Education Area, in the case of Europe. Given all the abovementioned, the present article mainly focuses on the European trends, transformations and initiatives in Higher Education, related to HEIs’ active and potential contribution to economic development and the enhancement of graduates’ employability and skills.

Key words: European Higher Education Area, EU2020 Strategy, Supranationalisation, Internationalization, Benchmarks, Competitiveness, Policy Making, Employability, Skills

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the Academia is changing all across the world, gradually and substantially detached from the Humboldt-ian, traditional, approach to University’s role and operation. According to Morley *“the rise of academic management, together with the rise of consumerism and political concerns with the exchange and use value of higher education, have produced new organisational cultures and professional priorities.....There is a more explicit concern with universities producing new workers and the values of the consumer society are now embedded in educational relationships”* (Morley 2001: 131).

This statement reflects the state of play regarding the international trends in Higher Education, as well as in Higher Education Policy agenda, which is substantially affected by the ongoing globalization, which increasingly “addresses the notion of international competitiveness” (Chiang 2018: 114) and the growing market-driven approach to Higher Education (HE). It should be noted at this point, that *“whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contributions from which political public spheres arise. The consciousness of planning, communicating, and acting subjects seems to have simultaneously expanded and fragmented.”* (Habermas 1999: 110 cited in Downey and Fenton 2003: 189). Within the context of globalization and its effects resulting (among others) in a multi-level “intensification” of social relations (see Giddens 1990: 64), we truly live in momentous times (see della Porta 2020), characterized by “deeply unequal capitalist societies, driven by profit and competition operating on a global scale” (Fenton 2007: 225). Universities are called (or even forced) to adapt in the changing demands of this context, which could result by the over-determination of Higher Education by the Economy and the Market (see analytically Papadakis 2020 and Gravaris 2005).

This trend is more than clear in the USA, where universities are under on ongoing transformation, mainly driven by the economy and labour market demands. According to Drucker (2011: 1188), *“universities became more deeply and intentionally engaged in an expanding assortment of economic development activities.... these activities include technology commercialization, cooperative research, consulting, supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, and resource sharing, in addition to the traditional missions of research and teaching.”* (UYARRA, 2010)”.

THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE EU: KEY POLICY INITIATIVES AND MAJOR TRENDS

In Europe, a major project of forming a common policy agenda concerning Higher Education is in progress: the Bologna Process aiming at the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHAE). EHAE is a configuration of common structures of the European higher educational systems aiming at their *comparability and compatibility* (Lavdas, Papadakis, Gidarakou 2006: 134), as well as at a quasi harmonization towards a joint direction (Teichler 2011: 3). The ongoing Bologna Process (even from its declaration) has marked the important, enhanced role that higher education is called to play in the achievement of a European Economy, competitive worldwide (Crosier & Parveva 2013). In September 2003, a third decisive ministerial meeting was held in Berlin. It aimed at the definition of the priorities set in previous meetings and mainly at the establishment of a quality network concerning Higher Education services (Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education 2003). Ever since, the emphasis on quality indicators and subsequently quality assurance and control is growing (see ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE 2015), while the issue of quality became gradually “the key for realizing the desired outcomes” (Lavdas, Papadakis, Gidarakou 2006: 134). It should be noted that “with the Bologna Process public policy (in Higher Education) moved from the national to the European level of policy making. It did so, as a transnational venture creating a new mode of governance based on policy networks but without being a European Union’s policy, even though the outcomes of the Bologna Process are supported by the EU” (Papadakis, Tsakanika, Kyridis 2012: 86-87). Within this framework, joint indicators were developed aiming at reflecting the learning outcomes (knowledge-skills- competences) and the qualifications (such as the

Diploma Supplement) of the students and graduates (see Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2003) and subsequently increasing visibility and accountability all across Europe (see Zgaga 2007: 36-37).

What is really important here is the specific role accredited to higher education. Higher Education is perceived as a prime mover towards the enhancement of human capital, able to change the role of Europe in the world competitive economic arena (Lavdas, Papadakis, Gidarakou 2006: 136). In fact, it seems to be considered as a product in a specific worldwide competitive market in which Europe wants to prevail, given the increasing global competition. Together with the new reality of reformed structures and the political trend that enhances the role of regional and local authorities as the units that can promote economic development and sustainability (Peters 2007: 133 and OECD 2014), a third task for the Higher Educational Institutes can be recognized. This task is the reinforcement of the economic, social and cultural development of regions and cities, in the context of the connection of Higher Education with the so- called “Society at Large” (see Nikolaou & Papadakis 2003: 5). Within this context, a new benchmark was added since 2012 in the EU2020 Strategy (which was linked to the Bologna Process), namely the benchmark “Employment rate of recent graduates” (European Commission 2018: 4). It highlights the emphasis that the EU lays on the harmonization of education (including Higher Education) to employment and the labour market. In fact, this precise target has been achieved at the European level. The average of the Higher Education recent graduates’ employment rate stood at 85% in 2019, “the highest level since 2008” (European Commission 2020a: 65), however with huge inequalities among the Member States (see indicatively European Commission 2020b: 140).

The new priorities of public policies all over the EU are reflected not only on the principles embraced by the higher education policy agenda but furthermore on the relation between different policies, promoted by organizations and interest groups (Hay, Lister, Marsh 2011: 24). In conclusion: just as in almost any educational reform, a *ritual* is organized (Popkewitz 1982: 5- 29). The *rhetoric* is constituted by *discursive practices*, that focus on both the development and the modernizing role of the University. These discursive practices are activated (by supranational organizations, academics and interest groups) in order *to legitimize* the new paradigm of the Higher Education and the new patterns of its contribution to socio- economic development. Within the framework of the (recently completed) EU2020 Strategy (2010-2020), and subsequently the new European education policy (Work Programme Education & Training 2020) Higher Education Attainment and Graduates’ Employability were clearly prioritized, as well as linked .

More specifically: The initial planning stage and the first steps of the ‘EU2020’ implementation process in the fields of education and training (including Higher Education), have retained their focus on reskilling and have also emphasized the need for even greater flexibility and supranationalisation (Papadakis 2016: 92). Within this context, one of the benchmarks added was the one related to Higher Education, namely the “Tertiary Education Attainment (TEA) target, that aimed at increasing the percentage of the population aged 30-34 with tertiary-level qualifications to 40% by 2020” (Papadakis 2018: 198). We should mention that this point, that for the first time, two of the basic benchmarks- priorities regarding education and training were included in the core European strategy- i.e. EU 2020- as headline targets (Papadakis 2016: 93) and more specifically the indicators concerning early education and training leaving and Higher

Education (European Commission 2010: 5; European Commission 2011a: 7). The tremendous increase of youth unemployment during the onset of the financial crisis can adequately explain why some of the most important EU2020 education and training policy tools pertain to the link between these two distinctive yet interrelated fields and employment. Despite the decrease of youth unemployment since 2013, when it reached historically high levels, it is worth mentioning an observed increase by 4.1 % at the 2015 respective level (19,7%) compared with the pre-crisis 15.6 % in 2008 (Eurostat 2016a). In short, 4,454,000 young people aged 15-24 were unemployed during the prior mentioned period (2015) (Eurostat 2016b). Therefore, it is not surprising that the transition from the Lisbon Strategy to the EU2020 was primarily characterized by the adoption of the employability indicator/ benchmark ("Education for Employability") and its direct correlation to Education, Training and Higher Education (Council of the European Union 2009: 4; European Commission 2011a: 10, 56, 59 & 70-76). This indicator "is organically entwined with several parameters such as the transition process from education and training to employment, measured by an average of employment rates 1, 2 and 3 years after graduation from various education levels, with special regard to low skilled young people (European Commission 2011b: 7-8; Papadakis, 2016: 70). The employability benchmark and more precisely the correlation between education, training, Higher Education, lifelong learning (LLL) and employment is a multi-parametric indicator which includes 6 sub-indicators/ thematic areas (inter alia older workers and low skilled people participation in lifelong learning). The emblematic importance of the EU2020 Strategy framework for education and training becomes profound as it has been pursuing, right from its very beginning, the objectives of the reduction of youth unemployment and the development of related skills and qualifications through VET, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning (LLL) (European Commission 2012a: 2-3; European Commission 2012b).

It should be noted, that progress is continuing in the headline target for tertiary educational attainment (TEA), since the EU has met its target of raising the rate of tertiary educational attainment to at least 40% of the population 30-34 years (European Commission 2020a: 45). Specifically, in 2019 "40.3% of people aged 30-34 held a tertiary degree (European Commission 2020a: 45).

Additionally to the abovementioned expansion of Higher Education and subsequent increase of Higher Education Attainment rates), the employment rate of recent graduates aged 20-34 amounted to 78.2% in 2016, increased by 1.3 percentage points compared with the 2015 respective rate (76.9%), by 2.2% in comparison with the 2014 equivalent (76%) and by 2.8% set against the 2013 rate (75.4%) (European Commission 2017: 65; European Commission 2016: 28). It further kept on increasing and in 2019, it stood at 80,9%, only 1.1 percentage points below the EU benchmark of 82% by 2020, which "was still at its highest level since 2008" (European Commission 2020a: 65). There is an explicit correlation between the education level and the employment rates, clearly in favor of the Higher Education graduates, comparing to the medium- and low- skilled (see Eurostat, LFS, cited in European Commission 2020a: 67). Thus, significant disparities are recorded regarding the employment percentage of recent graduates between Member States, in correlation with education attainment levels, a finding which is consistent with Member State divergence pertaining to youth unemployment rates (see European Commission 2020a: 66).

CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

It has become clear that the new policy priorities, at the EU level, focus on the strengthening of the close connection of Education, Training and HE with employability. However, according to the European Commission “some countries continue to suffer from the effects of the crisis on the employment levels of recent graduates” (European Commission 2019: 65). In spite of the above-mentioned initiatives, youth unemployment remains remarkably high (despite the decrease since 2014) in Southern Countries, heavily affected by the Crisis and the Recession, such as Greece, Spain and Italy (see Papadakis, Drakaki, Kyridis, Papargyris 2017: 8- 10 and analytically European Commission 2020a: 65-66).

Additionally, it should be noted, at this point, that clearly the younger people and especially the ones with less qualifications and skills face enormous difficulties to be integrated in the changing labour market. As Andy Green (2017: 7) points out, “*the 2007/2008 financial crisis and the ensuing recession and austerity dramatized the situation of young people because they were the age group which was hardest hit in terms of rising unemployment and declining real wages*”, while also having been at the leading edge of labour market reforms, including greater casualization in several jobs (Green 2017: 7).

Further the ongoing economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to affect the young people’s employment rates (see European Commission 2020a: 65), which poses a new challenge both to the HEIs and the public policy complex.

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