

TRENDS IN EUROPE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the developments in the higher education sector in Europe. It addresses the specific European context in which the changes take place. It also touches upon the important trends that can be noted over the last years. A number of them have a fundamental effect on the development of the European higher education systems towards a more unified system, allowing for a significant increase of mobility among staff and students, and rationalising the educational systems.

Most of the developments in European higher education are not exclusively an internally fuelled process. They take place in the context of, or as a direct result of wider societal changes. These changes are highlighted and the following trends in higher education in Europe are discussed: the higher education market and notion of public or private good; the internationalisation of higher education; and a movement from quality control to accreditation.

The higher education system in Europe is changing swiftly. It's remarkable to see that a considerable number of institutions prepare themselves for the changes and take actively part in the discussions that leads towards these changes either caused by the global, European or national context. A larger number of institutions is not involved at all, and is not working on the changes that lay ahead. In this respect one can see a fairly sharp division between Northern and Southern Europe, where the last one is lagging behind in the implementation and adaptation processes. However, there is a saying that the last ones will be the first ones. Time will proof whether this is true in the world of European higher education as well.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the developments in the higher education sector in Europe. It addresses the specific European context in which the changes take place. It also touches upon the important trends that can be noted over the last years. A number of them have a fundamental effect on the development of the European higher education systems towards a more unified system, allowing for a significant increase of mobility among staff and students, and rationalising the educational systems.

2. THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most of the developments in European higher education are not exclusively an internally fuelled process. They take place in the context of, or as a direct result of wider societal changes. This section provides a concise overview of these changes.

The world is becoming smaller and societies are increasingly becoming interconnected and interdependent in many facets and aspects of life. The process of globalization, as this phenomenon is defined, is a process that started off a long time ago. However, it accelerated and gained momentum over the last two to three decades. Technology, in particular information and transportation technology, can be seen as the main driving force behind globalization, because it enables people, information and products to get anywhere in the world at an ever faster pace.

Although some people stress the negative aspects of globalization, others highlight the positive sides of it. But both sides agree that globalization and its effects are inevitable and here to stay. This means that individuals, organizations, governments and societies will have to deal with it. It is for example obvious nowadays that the international context is, or is quickly becoming the standard in both work and private life. In Europe this is demonstrated clearly by the introduction of one single currency by twelve countries. This exerts a tremendous effect on daily life and the psyche of millions of Europeans. Moreover, many political decisions are taken no longer taken at national level, but at the supra-national level of the European

Commission. As a result of the integration process in the European Union, many European companies engage in transnational mergers and collaboration pacts in order to enhance their influence and market share, and to enlarge their profitability.

Besides the specific integration processes within the European Union, also a strong development towards globalization beyond the European Union can be seen.

As a result, employees may no longer find their colleagues located in the office next door, but in another country. These developments towards a global community and economy requires new types of knowledge and skills.

Closely linked to the process of globalization is a phenomenon called the information society. The technological breakthroughs in information and communication technology have paved the way for a societal shift with a profound impact on everyday life. In the 19th century land and soil were considered the most important production means. In the 20th century, manual labour became a crucial factor. Today, it is neither access to land nor access to a large pool of labourers that will give companies and societies a comparative advantage, but access to information and knowledge. All developed economies claim to be or want to become knowledge societies. In these economies, the production and sale of ideas, information and knowledge gain a central position.

Because of the ever accelerating pace at which information and knowledge are produced worldwide, it is impossible for most of us to follow suit with the newest developments. This means that at individual level, it is no longer knowledge itself, but the access to information and knowledge that counts. This has important consequences for learning processes: the acquisition of knowledge is no longer the main focal point, but the acquisition of appropriate skills to find, incorporate and improve knowledge.

As a consequence there are two developments in the world of learning. Firstly, employees are no longer regarded as (expendable) means of production, but as important production capital. In the human capital theory, producing skilled and

knowledgeable persons is a central goal. In many industrialised countries, this goal is translated in education and training of people with a larger emphasis on formal and non-formal learning systems. Secondly, education is no longer confined to a formal learning period that starts when people are four years old and ends when they are between sixteen and 24 years of age. Life-long learning is becoming the norm in most industrialised countries. Employees and employers feel a growing need for a continually upgrade of skills and knowledge.

It is in this world of global markets and global interests, where information and communication technologies are fundamentally reshaping the way in which knowledge is produced, transferred, and shared, and where access to countries and markets has become so easy thanks to sophisticated travel possibilities, a highly skilled and continuously upgraded population is a comparative advantage. It is in this context that European higher education is being transformed from a wide variety of higher education systems towards a more unified higher education system. This counts not only for the member states of the European union. Many other European countries beyond the union have decided to adhere to this process of change.

3. TRENDS IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

This transformation is most clearly visible in three developments, that are taking place simultaneously. Firstly, the European higher education scene is confronted with a more market-oriented approach towards education and training. Secondly, the internationalisation of European higher education has been boosted by a series of agreements made at the supra-national level of the European Commission. Thirdly, the assessment of the quality of European higher education is slowly being transformed from an institution-driven national process to international accreditation. Each of these trends is dealt with in the subsequent sections.

3.1 The higher education market

Underlying the more market-oriented approach towards the

provision of education is a fundamental discussion: is higher education a public good that should be financed by national governments for the good of its people, or is it a commodity, that consumers can buy? At the global level, these discussions take place in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva regarding the Global Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

Proponents of a 'liberalization' of higher education argue that there already is a market in higher education because of the existence of private higher education providers. Subsidized public higher education institutions are distorting this market, leading to inefficiencies and an unequal choice for the customer. Moreover, by viewing higher education systems primarily in their national context, the whole move towards globalization is neglected. It should become the norm, proponents say, that there are multiple and international providers for any type of post-secondary education.

The biggest fear of the opponents is not so much that increased (and international) competition may lead to a loss of quality, but that it undermines national or institutional educational policies. It requires a whole lot of changes and will eventually turn the higher education institutions into business run organizations. In many a European country this will require a thoroughly different approach and change of attitude. The necessity of having a national educational policy is of course supported by the fact that knowledge economies are and for some time will remain the winners in the world. Whether this attitude would necessarily lead towards a firm regulation of providers and provision of higher education remains still unanswered, but many European governments nevertheless tend to be on the safe side. There choice is simple. They don't want to give up what they have now: a good public higher education system based on shared (national) values and ideas.

Another strong impetus for protecting, at least partially, the national higher education system is found in recent publications by the World Bank and UNESCO. After having neglected the role of higher education by and large in the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's, the World Bank now asserts that investments in higher education not only yield considerable returns, but that these investments will actually help build up the complete

education column from kindergarten till the university. Being a life-long promoter of privatisation, the World Bank naturally sees an important role for private education institutions and for partnerships between higher education and the business world. But these solutions would definitely need to fall within the confines of a national policy framework. In this way, at best a controlled higher education market would come into existence.

For European governments and higher education institutions, the worst-case scenario is that their educational systems are flooded with reputable providers from outside the European Union (i.e. the USA and Australia), combined with a virtually uncontrollable stream of private national providers. As one report warns: "With this global competition comes the potential danger of a highly stratified market dominated by the 'brand-name' institutions that prosper as they increase their reach worldwide, while other higher education institutions, unable to compete globally, are relegated to limited local markets." (Madeleine Green, Peter Eckel & Andris Barblan; *The Brave New (and Smaller) World of Higher Education: a Transatlantic View*; American Council on Education; 2002; p. 11).

Partly, however, many publicly financed European higher education institutions also reap the benefits of the opening up of the market for higher education. In-country, providers open up private branches, catering for the new groups in society that want to be educated at higher level as a result of the move towards life-long learning. Many institutions have also opened up consultancy and advisory branches working for and with business and industry.

Like many of their American, British and Australian counterparts, continental European providers have opened up branches in developing countries and are providing joint degree courses. Moreover, several countries, like the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands now have an official government policy to attract as many fee-paying foreign students as possible. To that end, the country and its providers are heavily marketed, especially in South-East Asia. Institutions organize and participate in international education fairs. The fees that prospective clients need to pay are calculated on a full cost-recovery basis. In fact, for many higher education institutions, this type of activities in recent years has become 'business as usual'.

There is yet another perspective that needs to be added to the already complex picture. Although most European governments are cautious regarding the opening up of their own higher education market, at the same time they are, in general, financing higher education to an ever lesser extent. This seems to be in contrast with the idea that to become or to stay a knowledge economy, you need to invest in education, but governments do not cease to point out that they should not be the only ones making the investments. Because most of the returns on investment in education can be found at the individual level, these individuals and the companies at which they will work or are working, should contribute as well.

In some European countries, the above reasoning is more or less accepted. In others, like for example Germany, it is considered an unwelcome revolution. In fact, "in a recent amendment to the higher education framework act, even the implementation of student fees to those entering university for the first time is prohibited. For both German and foreign students this amendment provides conditions that are difficult to find even in former socialist countries." (Christian Bode; "Germany's position towards international market competition" in: *The Global Higher Education Market*; Nuffic; 2002; p. 20).

Linked to the above is a trend towards output-financing of higher education institutions. Providers no longer receive a lump-sum input or a defined amount per student, but they are retro-financed on the basis of the number of graduates. The risk inherent to the system of input-financing recently became painfully clear in the Netherlands, where a large-scale fraud among universities for professional education was discovered. These providers invented so called ghost students, that were officially enrolled without their knowing, or only attended marginally educational programmes. For each of these students, the institutions received a full financing based on the fact that, administratively, they could show that these students started their studies.

That is not to say, that the more market-oriented approach of output-financing is fully without risks. Firstly, it may lead to fierce competition between institutions in order to get as many students as possible. Whether this is healthy for both the

provider and the client is doubtful. Secondly, there are major concerns regarding the quality of education and the quality of graduates. If it pays to have as many graduates as possible, why not lower your standards just a bit. This of course would have negative consequences for the knowledge economy as a whole.

So, what does this all mean? Basically the following: most European governments are hesitant or even outright protective once it comes to opening up their own higher education system. They know that there is a higher education market, but they do not necessarily support the idea that they should actively make way for the forces of the market. Moreover, although many decisions are taken at the supra-national level of the European Community, the European knowledge societies in the end perceive higher education as a national interest.

Many higher education institutions are very dualistic. On the one hand, they want to keep their gained rights and positions, that are largely bound to national borders. On the other hand, they want to make use of the new opportunities that have arisen as a result of globalization, developments in ICT and the rise of new target groups. Competition is all right, as long as it does not take place in their own backyards.

This can, of course, not be maintained. It is clear throughout Europe that new, and often private providers gain an increasingly important role. These can be new privately financed organizations catering for specific groups, privatized branches of existing higher education institutions, company universities (like the Motorola University) and branches of foreign providers operating internationally. Up to now, these new providers mostly have catered for new types of clients, concentrating on e.g. MBA courses, skills training and ongoing education. The regular full-time 18-year old still has a relatively limited choice that is largely confined to the standard public higher education institutions. But this is bound to change as a result of the introduction of the Bachelor-Master structure (see the next section).

A second development that in part can be seen as response to the growing competition, is the tendency to sign cooperation pacts or mergers between two or more higher education institutions. In the Netherlands, mergers are taking two forms:

an ongoing movement of mergers of universities for professional education (polytechnics) to larger entities. Some decades ago, there were literally hundreds of mainly small providers catering for a regional target group. Today there are about 60 universities for professional education. Many of these have several regional branches. One of the biggest advantages, apart from a supposed reduction in overhead costs, is the fact that these large organizations can offer a full range of studies. Comparable developments take place in other European countries.

A similar reasoning is followed by some 'traditional' universities and some universities for professional education. Whereas the first type of university historically provides academic and scientific education and research, the second type offers professional and applied education and research. By merging the two, the combined organization can offer a very complete range of studies, from post-secondary practical training to PhD studies. This enforces their position on both national and international markets.

A third development is that many providers are looking beyond national boundaries for strategic alliances. Joint degree programmes, in which students do part of their studies in several countries, are an accepted phenomenon, especially since the introduction of ECTS (see the next section). The reciprocal exchange of students and staff members has been stimulated greatly by means of the European Union higher education programmes, like Socrates / Erasmus / Leonardo. But more and more, higher education institutions are also looking beyond Europe for collaboration.

The result of all of these developments is, that, in fact, higher education institutions are operating more and more as businesses, differentiating their income base, spreading their interests and protecting their assets. The higher education market already is in full swing.

3.2 The Internationalisation of Higher Education

Over the years internationalisation in higher education has been attributed different meanings. Though internationalisation is as old as there were universities or institutions for (higher)

learning. In the middle ages and up to the late 19th century professors and students alike wandered from university to university to teach and learn. The phenomenon got a boost in the final decade of the last century, when the mobility of staff and students took a high flight. However, in the world the meaning had different connotations.

3.2.1 The English speaking world

In the USA, UK, Canada and Australia for quite some time internationalisation meant opening up the higher education system to an increasingly international student population. Internationalisation in this Anglo-Saxon context meant merely the recruitment of students from other countries that enrolled in a course that in itself was still very much focused on preparing students for the local, that is American, British, Canadian or Australian labor market. Initially, very little attention was paid to the specific needs in curricular, logistical or socio-cultural matters of this international student corpus. In fact there was very little international besides the presence of aliens.

When the numbers grew also the experience grew, and in many schools it was realized that having a significant number of international students in house requires special facilities and services.

The idea that the contents of courses also might need adaptation developed only much later. Today, one sees a stronger awareness of the specific needs of international students with regard to curricular matters, and in a further commercialization of education these are more seriously taken on board than ever before.

3.2.2 The continent of Europe

On the continent of Europe, internationalisation developed in a different way. Here, the character of internationalisation was initially a matter of international contacts and mobility of staff and students. With help of European programmes like Erasmus, Socrates and Leonardo and national stimulation programmes, many schools entered into friendly relationships with institutions

across the continent. The exchange programmes triggered the mobility of staff and students in both ways and laid layers of cooperation. In the same time that within the European Union member countries were stimulated to get acquainted with each other, the political systems in the Central and Eastern European countries changed dramatically. The European Commission and many governments in the member states of the European Union quickly set up programmes like Tempus, TACIS to get the neighbors on board of the internationalisation train. The success of all these Intra-European programmes laid the basis of programmes that aimed to foster the relations between Europe and other parts of the world as well. With many countries agreements were achieved to make the international exchange of staff and students possible in financial ways. In this way programmes like Alfa, AIBan, Asia Link were created.

But besides the EU-funded programmes many governments in the European Union decided that they too needed to support the internationalisation at institutions at home. In particular in the Northern European countries funds were made available to stimulate the international exchange of people with the aim to enhance the knowledge of the other member states, and to prepare young citizens for employment on a much broader labor market.

In some countries, like the Netherlands, a special system was created in the early fifties to help the young independent nations in Africa and Asia with highly specialized courses conducted in English, Spanish or French and of a relatively short duration. Moreover, the courses were strongly geared towards the needs of the sending countries. The model was taken over by a number of other countries where English, Spanish and French were not the local language of instruction. Today in quite a number of EU-countries one can see a considerable number of English taught courses that concentrate on the international education market as a result of a strong urge to recruit international students on the world market, with the overall aim to earn money, to fill in empty places and to scout talent.

3.2.3 New developments in Europe

In the home courses a new development took place in Europe.

The integration of the EU made both governments and institutions aware of the need to train people for a broader market. Graduates should find easy access to the labor market across the member states. That put a toll on the content of the courses and the training of the new generations. Adaptations of the curricula, the study materials, the pedagogical methods and new elements like traineeships, secondments, the study of other languages, and practical work were incorporated. Moreover, all this was placed in a much more international context than ever before. In this way, internationalisation not only comprised the meaning of mobility, but also the meaning of a truly international outlook of the courses on offer for both home and international students.

3.3 From quality control to accreditation

A final development, that is closely linked to the two trends described in the previous sections, concerns the assessment of the quality of education. With the introduction of market forces in higher education there are major worries regarding the impact the emphasis on financial benefits and quick gains might have for the quality of the offer. Also the move towards further and more profound internationalisation leads to questions about the validity and added value of nationally oriented quality control systems.

In addition to the decisions EU regarding the introduction of the Bachelor-Master structure (laid down in the *Bologna Declaration* signed by almost all European ministers of education), it was agreed upon that the European Union member states would strive to introduce accreditation as a mechanism to assess the quality of higher education.

At this moment, quality control in most European countries is more or less an internally organized and executed process. Umbrella organizations of higher education institutions or government agencies have set up independent quality assessment organizations, that are approved of by the respective ministries of education.

The Netherlands system, which has been copied by several other nations, works as follows. Quality assessment is always

organized per discipline. Each provider within a discipline that is under scrutiny (every five to six years) writes a so-called self-assessment report. This report forms the basis for a visit of a team of independent peer reviewers, commissioned by the quality assessment body. The peer review team writes its own public report, containing conclusions on the discipline as a whole and on each of the providers. When the peer review team finds that a provider and his offer are seriously defective, they must advise the Minister to draw a 'yellow card'. This means that the provider in question will receive an official warning that his study is considered below standard. The provider will then have to write an improvement plan and will have to implement this plan before the next round of quality assessment takes place. There are thus no direct financial consequences of a negative review. Coupled to the quality control function is a quality improvement task. This means in practice that most of the times, the peer review committees will make recommendations regarding the improvement of some aspects of a study programme.

Apart from the obvious advantages of a system that is supported and largely carried out by the providers themselves, there are several disadvantages to be noted. An important one is that the system has a tendency to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once the first round of quality assessments has taken place, everybody more or less knows 'how things work'. This means that the next time, you can anticipate. This effect may become stronger exactly because everybody knows each other. Second, the international comparability of quality assessment, based on an internally fuelled system is not very good. Third, the fact that there are no (direct) financial consequences in case of a negative assessment may lead to a partial disregard of the recommendations of the peer review team.

It is believed that the introduction of accreditation can alleviate some of these problems. It should be clear that accreditation does not replace the current systems of quality control in Europe. In fact it uses the outcomes of these systems as input for the accreditation process. The main differences compared with the current situation have to do with the international comparability and the consequences of being accredited.

When the European education ministers agreed upon the

introduction of accreditation, it was envisaged that, in time, the national accreditation schemes would be combined to become a pan-European accreditation structure leading to a full comparability of the quality of higher education across countries. Up to now, however, the introduction of national schemes has met with some difficulties leading to different solutions in different countries. Moreover, the pace at which accreditation is being introduced varies considerably. This means that conservative estimates are that it may take at least 10 to 15 years before a European accreditation scheme will be functional.

The most important consequence for providers is that accreditation will have direct financial impact. Although accreditation, like the old system of quality assessment, is based on past performance, the accreditation is given for years to come. In the Netherlands, it has been agreed that, when a study programme does not receive an accreditation it will not receive central government funding. This may lead to a change in behaviour of institutions and most likely create a stronger adherence to quality control.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The higher education system in Europe is changing swiftly. It's remarkable to see that a considerable number of institutions prepare themselves for the changes and take actively part in the discussions that leads towards these changes either caused by the global, European or national context. A larger number of institutions is not involved at all, and is not working on the changes that lay ahead. In this respect one can see a fairly sharp division between Northern and Southern Europe, where the last one is lagging behind in the implementation and adaptation processes. However, there is a saying that the last ones will be the first ones. Time will proof whether this is true in the world of European higher education as well.