

Features and Future of the Network Society:

The demographic, technological and societal context of higher education

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Abstract

The network society is an amalgam of technological, economical, political, societal and cultural developments which, taken together, form a new context for our European societies and for higher education within these societies. The idea of a network society is an attempt to make sense of the changes we are in the middle of.

After explaining the theory of the network society, we go into some basic features of European societies that form the context in which the network society develops. More in particular, we discuss demographic, technological, and societal evolutions. Throughout, we point out their consequences for higher education and the European Area for Higher Education.

The network society requires highly qualified knowledge workers and knowledge producers. But the population of Europe, and the young population in particular, is decreasing. This will lead to less students in higher education, unless older age groups will participate more in higher education or unless immigration can compensate the loss of enrolments. The consequence might be a decreasing number of students and shortages of higher education graduates on the labour market.

The number of graduates in maths, science and technology is increasing, for a large part as a result of the growing female participation. More in general, the ICT availability and use are growing. But there are important differences within the EHEA. ICT availability and use are high in Western Europe, but much lower in South and Eastern Europe. Moreover, inequalities exist amongst Bologna countries with regard to equipment for modern networking. Again West and East are on opposite sides. And the same goes for the standard of living. Although the Bologna countries have similar targets with regard to the EHEA, the available means to attain these targets are clearly unevenly distributed. The goal is to create one area for higher education, but there seem to be different areas within the EHEA. It seems important to increase the development of societies and diminish the distance between income levels, because this enhances the availability and use of ICT and networking. But on the other hand, societies seem to reach a saturation point with regard to the relation between wealth and ICT: at a certain level of wealth, other factors come into play. Hence the importance of targeted policies, for instance to promote science and technology (in education, but also in research as with the EIT).

Social and cultural factors are still important in the network society. For instance, new forms of communication strengthen existing patterns of inequality because the wealthy and educated are far more likely to use them. Along the lines of education, skilled and unskilled work are divided and lead to divisions in the kind of work, the organisation of work, etc. In the current context, the network society reproduces the socio-economic divide.

One of the main challenges in furthering the European Higher Education Area will be not only to make progress with the implementation of its goals, but to ensure that this implementation succeeds in achieving the goals for all.

