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The Changing Attractiveness of European Higher Education: Current Developments, Future Challenges, and Major Policy Issues

The paper focuses on the different senses of the attractiveness of European systems and institutions for students, academics, the labor market and the economy, drawing attention to emergent tensions between different university stakeholders. Universities need to be attractive to increasingly differentiated student populations but also need to be attractive workplaces and provide attractive career opportunities for academics. Both public and private institutions are under multi-faceted pressures to change today. In the times of the imminent reformulation of current welfare state systems in most parts of Europe, attractive systems will be able to balance the negative financial impact of the gradual restructuring of the most generous types of welfare state regimes in Europe on public funding for higher education. Ironically, the more successful public entrepreneurial universities are today, the bigger chances of letting them follow this entrepreneurial direction in the future are. The promotion across Europe of a more substantial inflow of both private research funds and student fees can be expected. The possible redefinition of higher education from a public good to a private good is a tendency which may further undermine the idea of heavy public subsidization of higher education as the economic rationale for higher education is changing. The expected developments may fundamentally alter relationships between university stakeholders, with the decreasing role of the state (especially in funding), the increasing role of students and the labor market. The expected differentiation-related developments may alter the academic profession in general, and have a strong impact on the traditional relationships between teaching and research at European universities.

The major policy issues include the following: (i) how to combine the attractiveness of European universities to different stakeholders whose expectations from increasingly differentiated higher education get substantially changed; (ii) how to meet the needs of students, the labor market and the economy without fundamentally transforming university traditional values; (iii) how to combine the (necessary) restructuring of higher education systems towards meeting new (mostly economic) needs with the traditional values associated with academic teaching and research; (iv) how to attract the best talent to the academia amidst the deteriorating job satisfaction and changing working conditions of the academic profession; (v) how to view the traditional unity of academic teaching and research in universities in the context of the prioritization of research areas and the concentration of research funding; (vi) what is the wider impact of changing public and political mood (increasingly regarding the university as private good) on the future of cost-sharing (student fees) and academic entrepreneurship in research funding; (vii) to what extent higher education policies in Europe are becoming part and parcel of much wider social (political, ideological and philosophical) public sector policies, and how the uniqueness of the university sector vis-à-vis other public services could still be maintained in the future; and (viii) how can the "European dimension" be saved as part of the attractiveness of European higher education to other regions of the world in the context of market-related changes to universities worldwide which are global in nature, similar in kind, and not specific to Europe. The paper draws from both research and policy literature and puts European higher education in both global and transition countries contexts.