

THE RELEVANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND THE KNOWLEDGE DRIVEN ECONOMY: EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION

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Abstract

The article is historically rooted in the ideals of European universities, but the aim is to analyze current changes. The main research question of this paper is: What is the relevance of higher education for Europe in the (new) era of knowledge society and knowledge driven economy?

The article begins by analyzing 'Knowledge Society' and its related concepts 'Knowledge Economy', 'Learning Society' and 'Information Society'. The analysis is followed by a discussion on the changing relationship between higher education and society through the topics of private and public goods and 'world-class universities'. Attention is also paid to the main 'Zeitdiagnose' – namely Mode 1 and 2 and the 'Triple helix' – and to academic capitalism and entrepreneurial universities as more empirical approaches to recent changes. One of the main aims of zeitdiagnose theorists is to highlight the changing social role of higher education, and how this change is connected to changes in knowledge production in universities. However, empirical analyses challenges the picture painted by Zeitdiagnose. Situations in universities are complex, conflicted and routinely elude many theoretical abstractions.

In chapter four, the focus is on the knowledge society as a political goal in national, regional and global contexts. At the level of nation states the Knowledge Society can be seen to have taken on distinct forms. There can be seen three alternative routes to the knowledge society: 1) Silicon Valley – a market driven, open society (USA), 2) Singapore – an authoritarian model of the knowledge society and 3) The Finnish model – an open, welfare-state-based knowledge society. This typology highlights the variety of possible ways of defining, approaching and using knowledge society as a political goal. In the European Union, however, European employment strategy is foregrounded in the documents, the main emphasis focusing on how the knowledge-based economy can promote employment in Europe. Quite naturally, education and training are prominent. However, the promotion of knowledge-based economy is a crucial objective in creating the European Research Area.

The fifth chapter changes the perspective and analyses changes inside higher education challenged by the topics of ICT, knowledge production and the training of professionals of the civic society. Higher education institutions can have a role in all innovation processes through collaborative research and development projects, and through the physical mobility of students from higher education institutions to enterprises and public sector jobs.

The last paragraph sums up the themes of the paper and opens a perspective to the future of European higher education.