

The social dimension of the European higher education area and world – wide competition

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

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The seminar has not taken place at the Sorbonne University by random. The Sorbonne University was the place where the Bologna Process was initiated in 1998. And the topic itself is also very typical for the place – “*Social dimension of European Higher Education Area and World – Wide Competition*”. The participation at the seminar is quite large and comes from different backgrounds. There are more than 170 participants from 33 countries, including Australia and USA. They are representatives of Governments, higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as students. There are quite a few members of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), including its President. And this is very important. They face above their “normal” responsibility to push forward the recommendations and mutually agreed conclusions at home also a challenge to bring them into the discussion at BFUG meetings in March and April at which the Bergen Communiqué of Ministers will be discussed.

The questions in headline of the conference were: “*Is there coexistence between competitiveness and social dimension?*” “*Are they contradictory to each other or do they depend to one another?*”

Most of the speakers, including Mr. Francois Fillon, the Minister of National Education, Higher Education and Research, showed that there is coexistence between competitiveness and social dimension. And moreover – if we want to create future Europe, which will be dynamic, attractive and competitive, such Europe must be based at the principle of social solidarity. These two approaches have to be well balanced.. This Europe has to have its excellence in top research, and high quality, broad and competitive tertiary educational sector. Already in the Berlin-Bergen work programme social cohesion got the label of transversal issue covering all the action lines and principles. It is not only methodology it is an important political approach.

Mr. Guy Neave pointed out in his presentation a question – “*Is social cohesion a condition for economic development or vice versa?*” The participants of the seminar felt that in longer perspective, for sustainable development, social cohesion is a necessary precondition. And this has reflections in economy. Moreover the social solidarity and stress on social cohesion belong to traditional European values. Bologna reforms so far rather concentrated on legislative changes, implementation of reforms of study programmes, quality assurance systems, recognition tools (ECTS, Diploma Supplement) etc. We more or less have them in place. It does not mean we could stop our work, a lot has to be done, and we will only be able to evaluate in future, in some 5-10 years what an “animal” we have created. But a real step forward, we could make in Bergen, is next to the structures and means (in Berlin represented by the three priorities) move towards principles as e.g. easy mobility, and common European

values which will make European Higher Education Area (EHEA) different from similar systems using Bachelor/Master structure and certain quality assurance systems.

Massification of higher/tertiary education has become a reality and in fact it is the political decision which most European countries have already taken. Massification is also a significant challenge in terms of social cohesion. Education may well become one of the main factors in dividing societies, and also important social stigmas, since there is less and less place for those without qualifications. It means in reality not only to create equal bases for access in our legislation but also to work with those groups which usually do not enter higher/tertiary education. They have equal opportunities but they do not use them, possibly also because they are not motivated or do not know how. It starts already much earlier, at basic and/ or secondary school level. Their family surrounding does not motivate them. In reality nobody checks whether they have abilities to enter and complete higher/tertiary education. These people themselves, as well the whole society, may only benefit if proper instruments are found and right incentives use to bring them into higher/tertiary education. Anybody should try his/her talent, to use it for the highest education possible, and benefit from it regardless his/her social background. Equal access in legislative terms is a necessary precondition but far from being enough. Widening access for underprivileged groups is not only socially cohesive activity but rather action with economic importance. And it is not the full task these students also usually need some guidance and pedagogical support during studies.

This brings us to the question: Is access already a success? Meant generally, not only for underprivileged groups, for all students. The practical experience shows that definitely not as all countries face high dropout – if not generally at least in some disciplines. The social dimension of the EHEA thus should integrate the processes of access to higher education, which must be followed by different learning/ study opportunities – e.g. reasonable freedom to design curriculum, profile, the learning paths which include flexibility, professors and teachers who think more carefully about methodology. This also requires responsibility from students but they should be guided and shown their possibilities. Student body has been changing but students in any case should be treated as responsible citizens, members of the community rather than pure consumers, as Vanja Ivosevic, the President of ESIB and later on other speakers reminded us during the seminar. Furthermore students need to have certain economic standard which would enable them, as already stated in the Berlin Communiqué, *“successfully complete their studies within an appropriate period of time without obstacles related to their social and economic background”* How far have we proceeded? Do we learn from examples of good practise carefully enough?

We all face, at all levels, the challenge how to get more money into the systems of higher education. The public funds have been declining on one hand, on the other the numbers of students have grown significantly. The system of education must compete for funding with other sectors – e.g. health or social affairs. Unfortunately in this case there could easily be the social aspects which suffer. Following the opinion of the experts gathered here part of funds, which comes to the higher education system, should regardless if from public or private resources, be invested into social dimension. We should realise that finances or systems of funding are not our goals themselves. They make much more sense if they serve as a mean used for establishing more comprehensive frameworks, taking into account also social dimension of our future scenarios. Making equal opportunity must be *“a fundamental building*

*block*¹ of the EHEA, which we want to create till 2010, and far beyond this date. The pressure for cost-sharing in higher education will increase and students and their families will be forced to greater share of costs on education – direct as well as indirect (e.g. living costs and expenses during studies). And as presented here grants are rather replaced by loans. Mr. Schnitzer reminded us about the huge differences in the countries where the EUROSTUDENT research has been undertaken. In some cases only 5% of students can afford to take loans as they would not be able to pay them back. In European Union students sometimes move to countries with more friendly systems of HE which also often offer better employment possibilities (“job mobility”). All these aspects mentioned have to be researched through the prism of equal opportunities and social cohesion. Sometimes when thinking about social systems, we rely only on public funds and usually consider social dimension as almost exclusive responsibility of the government. Definitely it is an important public responsibility but not exclusively. The conference on Public Responsibility, as mentioned by Prof. Dionyssis Kladis, clearly pointed out that there are shared responsibilities. There is **public responsibility for higher education and research** and there is also **public responsibility of higher education and research which creates irreplaceable role of HEIs as well as students**. And this responsibility of HEIs and students was also mentioned several times by the speakers here.

To bring the topic of the social dimension and equal opportunities into Bologna process is now very important. In Berlin our priorities were based on structures, quality assurance and recognition, bases, on which we can build EHEA. But they are not our goals themselves. They are necessary means how to achieve quality higher education, which will be attractive and could compete at any level. And this will not be possible without social aspects being taken seriously and becoming our priority. For the future if we speak about quality in higher education social dimension and equal opportunities should become important signs of it. How to achieve it is not an easy task. It requires co-operation at all levels – at institutional, national as well as European level All countries have to work on it, it could not only be privilege of the rich ones. International organisations as ENQUA, EUA, ESIB, EURASHE and others active in quality assurance at European/ international level should be active and promote best practices which could be shared.

Social dimension of the EHEA will be one of the values which would make the area truly European. The tasks we face are extremely complex and they are no simple solutions. There is long list of questions which were formulated at our seminar. It started already with the definition of social cohesion, or social dimension within the Bologna Process. The working group 2 tried to find an answer: “*The social dimension includes all provisions needed for having equal access, progress & completion of higher education (i.e. first, second, third cycle).*” Mr. Cohen saw it in four dimensions: *access to higher education – incl. lifelong learning opportunities, development and implementation of “well being” conditions for students, making schemes aiming to improve the efficiency of academic work for opportunities of success of students during studies with special attention to underprivileged groups, employability of graduates.* Most of these aspects were also stressed by Prof. Eric Froment, the President of EUA.

Let me mention some more questions formulated by the experts: *What means social cohesion on European level e.g with respect to differences among European countries? How to reduce this gap? And do our policies tend to it in practice or do they work opposite? Do we create*

¹ See the recommendations from the Official Bologna seminar on Public responsibility, organized by the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, September 2004

several speed Europe? The situation in different parts of Europe varies significantly. It varies in the old EU and new EU countries and even more if we look beyond EU. E.g. it concerns percentage of GDP devoted to HE (less than 1%) but also GDP as such is significantly different, quick and strong changes in some parts of Europe leading to some kind of instability including funding, lack of experience in application of various funding models, sometimes the changes are limited and conditioned by the political “wing” being in power. How shall we answer these challenges in the future?

Mobility is in the very core of the Bologna Process and easy mobility is one of the basic principles of EHEA. It is only logical that when speaking about social solidarity and about social dimension of the Bologna Process, mobility is discussed. And not by random mobility was the priority of the Dutch EU Presidency and the follow up has been organised. Where are we now? In reality the poorer countries cannot afford to support mobility of their students. It has severe consequences – e.g. only children from rich class can travel and study abroad or if those gifted are offered a scholarship they usually stay in the country with better conditions. And this aspect is even deepened when there is a competition between HEIs and/or national systems to attract either those gifted individuals or to attract foreign students who are paying and thus bring significant income for the institutions. This means that there is a legitimate fear of brain drain from “teaching – intensive” area of South – East in the direction to “research intensive” area in North – West².

As Bologna reforms of structures will have been implemented a new type mobility will have appear. It was called at this seminar “vertical” mobility and will be international as well as national. Students after having finished their first degree (Bachelor’s) will move to another university to study the higher (Master’s). Or to study Ph.D. after completing the second cycle, This mobility will also bring a lot of challenges, especially the transition between the first and second cycle. Moving from one to another HEIs in the same or very similar discipline already signals problems and what about if it will be bigger shift between disciplines? Some students also pointed out that Bologna could be misused to reduce access to the second cycle and stressed that this access must stay open and be merit based, without any financial obstacles or “*numerus clausus*.”

And further concerns have been expressed - *Shall we retain the momentum the social dimension has gained in Berlin? Or are we already losing it? Are there signals which need to be recoded?* The questions also paid to lifelong learning paths. *Are the inclusions of flexible LLL paths really taking place?*

And to make the whole thing more complicated prof. Kladis put even more aspects together and stressed competitiveness, attractiveness and excellence being one side, as social cohesion, public responsibility and academic values & principles the other side of the same coin.

In spite and possibly also due to these facts the participants of the seminar see **the political approach to create socially cohesive EHEA as the only solution**. As the issue is so complex that to step ahead means **shared responsibilities and actions undertaken at all levels of the system**.

At European level the enlarging of the already existing gap between different parts of Europe should be avoided. On contrary a certain solidarity is necessary and all possibilities have to be used. E.g. under the Tempus programme – it is at least a modest concrete way how solidarity can be performed.

At national level

² CHEPS scenarios

- Enlarging the emerging gap between those who benefit from higher education and come back during their full life and those who have never used this possibility must be stopped and hopefully decreased in future;
- Examples of good practices and ways how to make them a reality should be sought when there is success in motivating the traditionally disadvantaged groups and if they are successfully guided through higher education according to their talent and abilities;
- Social dimension and equal opportunities should become part of internal and external evaluation as well as accreditation/certification procedures;
- Discussions between higher education institutions and the employers in which both sides listen to each other and build on exchanged knowledge should be stimulated leading thus to better understanding of new structures and employability of graduates.

With the full respect to academic freedom and institutional autonomy and the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for quality the **HEIs**

- Should take into account, when designing restructured study programmes, the diversified needs of contemporary student body; without any negative impact on the quality of programmes and/or their graduates, the programmes should have diversified learning outcomes, lead to reasonably diversified competencies as well profiles, should enable students graduation at their highest possible level and thus minimise the student drop.
- Should listen to the employers and needs of society and balance them with the academic quality, with the aim of enhancing sustainable employability of their graduates at the national as well European labour market;
- Should take social dimension and equal opportunities as important signs of quality in their performance and find appropriate ways how to include them into their internal evaluation;
- Should make flexible learning paths including searching of possibilities of recognition of prior learning an integral part of their activities
- Should create proper systems of guidance and counselling for their students.

The international organisations in the spheres of their missions should create platforms where the best practices how to bring social dimension into Bologna Process and how to make equal opportunities a reality could be shared;

From the presentations and discussions it is possible to conclude **that the participants of the Conference urge Ministers meeting in Bergen, in May 2005, to make social dimension a priority for 2005 – 2007**, and most probably also beyond. The famous statement from the Lisbon European Council in 2000 declaring the necessity to make Europe “*the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*” has a second part, as Mr. Cohen has reminded us, and it is much less quoted, that Europe has also to have the potential of “*of*

sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". The issue is complex, it is de facto a political approach and goes beyond the sector of higher education or education. However several speakers have stressed that Ministers responsible for higher education are part of the Governments and should at least try to initiate actions. On the basis of this the Conference, in particular, **recommends that Ministers**

- **Acknowledge that, beyond Bergen, the process of building European Higher Education Area should improve its social dimension and recognise it as the priority for 2005-07; they realise that national authorities, higher education institutions and students are the guarantees who can in common make it a reality. They ask the BFUG build on existing initiatives and to organise an analytical study based on collection of comparable data on social and economic situation of students in all Bologna Member Countries and report back at the next conference in 2007.**
- **As the basis for sustainable policies in higher education in Europe Ministers will stimulate creation of comprehensive frameworks within their countries as well as at particular institutions for funding the objectives of social equity and equal opportunities for all citizens, using for this purpose all sources of funds, public as well as private. They call higher education institutions as well as national authorities to undertake actions to create socially cohesive system of student grants (including mobility grants) and loans. Social background and economic level should not be a barrier to access to higher education, successful completion of studies and employment in "matching" jobs after graduation.**
- **Acknowledge that social dimensions and equal opportunities are important signs of quality of higher education, they urge higher education institutions as well as national quality assurance agencies/organisations/consortia, to elaborate quality assurance mechanisms, internal as well as external which will integrate the social dimension including all aspects of living and studying conditions and relate them to the multiple outcomes of higher education. They furthermore call international organisations as ENQUA, EUA, ESIB, EURASHE and others active in quality assurance at European/ international level to promote best practices.**
- **Realise that easy mobility is a key principle of EHEA and aware about many obstacles it brings and challenges to be overcome - between different groups of Bologna Member Countries as well as in particular countries themselves, which are connected with new structures in higher education systems, with economic, social and linguistic issues, legislative frameworks and immigration and security policies, they call upon the BFUG to organise an analytical study on these issues in all Bologna Member Countries and report back in 2007; they furthermore call the national authorities to undertake all possible steps to ease the visa procedures for foreign students and scholars.**