

# Seminar on the “Social dimension of the European area of higher education and world-wide competition”

## Workshop 3- Social dimension and social cohesion

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a) Excellence and inequalities in higher education

b) Student roles in the changing university

c) Higher education in European disadvantaged areas

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### A) Excellence and inequalities in higher education

Higher education has been traditionally devoted to the elite formation, particularly to the ruling class and more particularly to the public administrators. Consequently, this goal implies differentiation in the structure of the system and its selective function through procedures aiming at the recognition of talents: **Meritocracy**.

This way of functioning has been challenged when systems of education have been conceived as the (best) way for **social mobility**.

In the Sixties systems of education have been criticised for reproducing and not reducing social differences (Bourdieu & Passeron). Educational credentials have been discovered as for granting at best relative but not absolute social mobility (Collins).

In our societies there is a stable tension between **egalitarian** drive and **competitive** procedures. And there is also a basic difficulty to officially (publicly) justify differences; particularly toward the young generations (youth being rather the age of equality).

At the same time, we are facing a large de-legitimation of the concept (and the use) of authority in all (public and private) social organisations, together with the decline of trust on the regulating (equalising) impact of the market. The result is a general escape in the private domain (consumption), and/or a diffuse trust in luck or fraud or in examples of individual boldness (impudence) and arrogant self-assertiveness.

Under these circumstances, what the **school (university) role** should be?

First of all, it is convenient that the public system of (higher ) education will keep the role of training the ruling class, since it is the medium better apt to transfer specific values.

Secondly, the public system of education can regulate competitive impulses through pedagogical processes rewarding performances with equity. More generally, meritocracy can be better administered in school (university) if combined with components of solidarity. Namely, through a policy aiming at the reduction of disadvantages produced by cultural backgrounds (family). This policy can affect particularly elementary and secondary school levels. They are extremely expensive and require a real change in pedagogical methods (Paulo Freire et al.); very difficult to be implemented.

Traditionally, in all systems of education in Europe there is a principle of equality informing the first (compulsory) level which is progressively substituted by a principle of differentiation, at secondary and tertiary levels, when education has to be linked to professionalisation and thus to different paths providing professional competencies.

**The Bologna Process** (the reform called LMD in France, 3+2 in Italy, or Bachelor-Master elsewhere) seems to have pushed ahead - till the second level (Master) - the point in which the logic of differentiation intrudes and overlaps the one of equality. Besides the rationale linked to the changing in the labour market, this trend implies the social need for a large e generalised educational background to be granted to practically all citizens (as a sort of right of citizenship).

If this is true, two kind of consequences are implied. First of all, the **quality** of the education provided by the institutions; and secondly, the level of their **productivity** by them, namely their rate of degrees granted and of students dropping out.

Reforms introduced by the Bologna Process have been charged to produce a lower quality of education, particularly at the first level but this reaction (coming in general from the more traditional sections of the academic world) has been predicted some thirty years ago by Martin Trow as an inevitable by-product of the shift from the elite to mass higher education system.

More crucial seems the productivity of higher education systems.

One of the basic purposes of the Bologna agreement was the reduction of the wastage of talents, namely the rate of dropout in the European higher education systems. It seems that the way of trying to reach this goal should avoid the easy short cut of the excessive simplification of required performances as instead proceeds from the changing attitude of the academic institutions towards their students.

## b) Student roles in the changing university

More precisely, one has to realise that there are **several kind of students** attending higher education and that the majority of them are different from the traditional university students who were basically future intellectuals, possibly members of the ruling class, and therefore dedicated to their studies, following the way of life of their models largely represented by their own professors. Students today mainly have a much more **instrumental and utilitarian approach** to the university, are unsure

about their professional and social future, and are inclined to combine their role of student with other (both leisure and/or working) activities. Hence, what has been changing is the relationship between students and the university as an institution and, correlatively, the relationship between students and academics. The implications of this change of university customers can be combined with the growing of university activities in its process of opening up to different social needs and of looking for additional financial resources. In one word, the introduction of the multiversity model has broken the model of the university as a community (Lucas).

A community cannot be created (or rebuited) simply by law. And if the reduction of dropout's rate has to be pursued with some hope to succeed it seems crucial to start from taking care of social actors' characters and demands.

In this respect, some **policy proposals** can be sketched.

Universities should provide services differentiated according different categories of customers, in terms of (i) flexible timetable for classes; (ii) accommodation for non-residents; (iii) on-line courses for students with working activities; (iv) programs and structures for non-studying activities; (v) initiatives connecting theoretical approaches with practical experiences (stages).

Perhaps more than anything else universities should provide opportunities for students to **exercise active roles** in their process of learning: in this respect, a instructive example is given by the student evaluation of teaching activities ("customer satisfaction" as it has been called). This initiative looses its positive impact if its consequences are not visible to the customers themselves.

Implementing this policy is not going to be an easy and simple endeavour since it seems extremely hard to fill the gap between teachers and students (demonstrated from the weak participation of the latter to their representatives' elections in the university structures); while not the majority of the academic staff seems ready to cooperate to this process (Tavernier).

A relevant aspect of the attitude society and higher education institutions have towards students refers to the **public student support**. Policy supporting university students varies in the European countries. It involves both direct costs of study and students' cost of living, the former referring to the administrative costs and specifically to tuition fees. A comparative analysis in several European countries shows that situations are very different, while student fees represent everywhere only a small proportion of the costs students (and institutions as well) have to face. Policies of public financial support have changed very frequently in the last decades in European countries with a different emphasis on grants, loans and combination of the two.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this comparative analysis is related to the different notion of **students' role in society** which affects the public student support. Four types of student roles have been detected: (i) in cases where students are regarded as *responsible citizens* the State provides extensive financial support. In

those countries (basically Nordic countries) they live on their own and do not pay student tuition fees; (ii) in cases where students are regarded as *young learners*, public support is available only in case of parents' financial need. This subsidiary policy can be found in several Central European countries like France, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Austria. In general students pay university fees with the exception of those receiving public aid; (iii) another model consider students as *members of their original family* still living with their parents and being economically supported by them. In those countries (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece) the public financial support takes care only of severe needs since it is the family which is supposed to take care of his children's education; (iv) finally there are cases (United Kingdom, the Netherlands) in which university students are considered as *investors* in their future career. Consequently they are required to contribute substantially to the cost of their education (even though their contribution remains far from the real cost of their studies) with a higher level of tuition fees. Public support is diffuse and takes mostly the form of loans (Schwarz & Rehburg).

This typology suggests that Europe is facing a variety of policies supporting university students, which are from one side affected by local constraints like the dimension of university students enrolled (varying from less than two hundred thousand to millions), or by the crisis of the welfare systems (the foreseeable consequence being the increase or the introduction of student fees and the shift from grants to loans); while from the other side public policies seem representative of national interpretations of the role of higher education. Under these circumstances - and considering the ten countries that recently joined the E.U. - it seems difficult to expect a common European policy of student support arising in the next few years. In addition, this variety of national situations might very well create some **problems to a larger exchange of students.**

### C) Higher education in European disadvantaged areas

In the European disadvantaged areas higher education has crucial roles to play which will be effective only on certain conditions and in the frame of a broad and comprehensive developing policy.

Globalisation without limits can widen the gap between central and peripheral countries as between developed and underdeveloped areas inside the same country. In developing areas the role of the university could be easily the catalyst centre of a federation of institutions and organisation aiming both at cultural and economic development. In this way it could interpret more coherently some of the new roles and missions university will play in modern world. In that situation, the university key role has to be related from one side to society and particularly to the labour market in order to produce the professional figures needed by the local economy, and from the other, to the entire system of education providing the best possible training to teachers, and coordinating a network of education and training structures.

One of the crucial needs is related to the **quality of the higher education system** which in developing areas has to be of first class in terms of services offered (combination of teaching and research facilities) in order to attract academic staff of high quality and to avoid excessive brain drain.

The traditional appeal of the best scientific areas toward the peripheral countries is now reinforced by the mechanisms of the globalisation without control (Altbach). The shrinking of the state support to higher education and research gives room to several initiatives of commercialisation of knowledge and higher education. Multinational education companies and special university branches from English speaking countries are entering an international market of higher education products, while GATS and WTO policy is bound to guarantee market access to these products and institutions. This trend, while changing everywhere the traditional role of the university, will have a serious impact on peripheral countries (and developing areas inside economically unbalanced countries) preventing the development of a local system of higher education and a correct relation between universities and local needs, with special reference to the strengthening of civil society.

### **Policy Proposals:**

- Governments – especially from South and East-Central Europe - have to retain control over higher education, supported by international institutions like E.U.(and perhaps the World Bank).
- Special care should be given to underdeveloped regions in order to facilitate the creation of networks among higher education institutions with the cooperation of private and public companies.
- Incentives should be given to peripheral areas and countries in order to introduce and reward programs aiming at the reduction of cultural and scientific gaps like the so called “digital divide”.

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