

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

Some viewpoints into perspective

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Getting over with a useless opposition between economic dimensions and social dimensions of higher education development

The development of the European higher education and research area is most often justified by economic efficiency-related arguments.

And as a matter of fact, the rise of qualifications and professional competence, the strengthening up of the innovation capacity and new activities-making capacity, the improvement of enterprises' competitiveness are some of the objectives which realization is made possible by the development of a more modern and more efficient higher education and research. The emphasis put on such impacts tends to encourage the contribution higher education can have to economic boost, productivity and the competitiveness of the production and exchange apparatus. But, while unilaterally some of the expected effects of higher education development are underlined – and notably, the effects directly connected to the modernization of economic structures – they may hide the necessary reference though to the social dimensions of higher education development.

Nevertheless we have to underline the uselessness of a vain opposition between economic spin-offs and social spin-offs expected from the widening up and the building up of the European higher education and research. In reality, the development of an efficient higher education system is likely to contribute *both* to economic development **and** social development, if only strategies and projects put forward should see to take into account these two dimensions of development in a balanced way. In relation to such a perspective of linking economic and social issues together, for instance Heads of States and of governments made a statement during the Lisbon European Council (march 2000) which aimed to make Europe *'the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'*.

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Four approaches to the analysis of social dimensions of the European higher education and research area

More precisely, the way the European higher education and research area contributes to promote a social dimension and strengthen an advanced social model can be analyzed through four major viewpoints.

- First of all, the social dimension deals with *the conditions for access to higher education*. According to choices made for student detection, training and enrolment, higher education development can lead to a diversification of profiles admitted into institutions and to a genuine sociological opening up.

- Secondly, the social dimension of the European higher education and research area is reflected into *the thinking out and the implementation of measures and projects focused on arrangements of living conditions for students* all their training long. So, choices made in relation to the model about the way the higher education system should develop open up large opportunities of social support with the setting up of diversified and efficient arrangements for the support of the most disadvantaged students. The instruments used for can notably deal with financial support provided for the financing of studying and for the taking into account of subsistence costs related to the daily life of the students concerned.

- The social dimension the European higher education and research area is also at stake in *the making of schemes aiming to improve the academic work efficiency and opportunities of success for students*. Appropriate arrangements for methodological and educational support most often contribute to the struggle against social and cultural handicaps which disadvantage some groups of students while studying. Concerning schemes relating to the mentoring for academic work, formulas that enable to take into account in a flexible way learning paths, specific difficulties and behaviours of students from different backgrounds make it possible to provide differentiated and appropriate answers according to various groups of students from now on welcomed into higher education. Whatever measures being implemented, either related to a targeted effort focused on guidance, or using appropriate mentoring arrangements, or more generally testing out different ways of appropriate support, these measures increase opportunities of success for students from social groups that, until recently, did not have access to higher education. Therefore they are coherent with efforts made for the widening up of admissions into higher education.

- Lastly, the social dimension of higher education development is also decisively reflected at the end of the degree course, by *the opportunities of economic integration and access to employment* it provides to new beneficiaries from higher education learning paths. The strengthening up of opportunities of access to a sustainable employment, the best opportunities for personal fulfilment at the highest possible qualification level is in the final analysis one of the essential missions higher education fulfils for students' vocational and social integration.

Higher education development, social mobility and social cohesion

Finally, major directions for higher education development strategies can and must be designed and implemented while encompassing the objective of the students' social promotion, and above all, for those who come from lesser advantaged groups. Leading the great majority of students at the highest possible higher education level on the basis of their previous learning paths and own capacities, higher education development contributes to bottom-up social and vocational mobility and to the strengthening up of social cohesion. From this point of view, it is likely to contribute both to the strengthening up of equality of opportunities and to the widening up of integration opportunities for students with initially the lower cultural and social backgrounds. But higher education development strategies have to see to take into account though, and in a balanced way, the unquestionable dimension of economic efficiency as well as the essential dimension of social development.