Does EU really matter in Higher Education Reforms and Changes?

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“After remaining a comparatively isolated universe for a very long period, both in relation to society and to the rest of the world, with funding guaranteed and a status protected by respect for their autonomy, European universities have gone through the second half of the 20th century without really calling into question the role or nature of what they should be contributing to society. The changes they are undergoing today and which have intensified over the past ten years prompt the fundamental question:

Can the European universities, as they are and are organized now, hope in the future to retain their place in society and in the world?"

(Commission 2003: 22)
Why HE is important

- Tool for improving economic conditions of society
- Powerful tool for social mobility
- for a long time has been, and in many countries still is, financed almost totally by the State
- is the system through which the quality of a social system is improved (there is almost overwhelming evidence that education improves parenting skills, makes a person less likely to commit crimes and improves health, to name but a few benefits)
- Education improves individual life chance
- HE is committed to research
- HE is also, though not the only one, committed to select and to teach the élites
Higher Education ideosyncracy

- HE systems are historically deeply-rooted in their own countries

- HE institutional arrangements have been differently modelled following different national meaning and trajectories (distinction between unitary and binary systems)

- Deep path dependency influencing the implementation of the recent (NPM, neo-liberal) reforms.
Tremendous pressures for change coming from (knowledge) Society (1)

- Increasing participation rates (the long way from elite to mass, and the universal education)
- Increasing diversification in the educational demands (general education, specialized education, life-long-learning, distance learning courses, internationalisation of courses; training to research)
- Strong demands for knowledge generation
- Strong demands for providing training and technology development for community
- Strong demand for generating economic development
Tremendous pressures for change coming from (knowledge) Society (2)

- Increasing participation rates (the long way from elite to mass, and the universal education)
- Increasing diversification in the educational demands (general education, specialized education, life-long-learning, distance learning courses, internationalisation of courses; training to research)
- Strong demands for knowledge generation;
- Strong demands for providing training and technology development for community
- Strong demand for generating economic development

- **HE under pressure since 3 decades**
  (but public funds are decreasing)
In the last 2 decades European higher education national systems underwent many relevant changes. Some of them have been induced by Europeanization (Bologna declaration + Lisbon Agenda). Some of them have been national answers to national problems. Some of them have been induced by international trends and challenges. The causes of changes are surely disputable but nobody can deny that they changes happened and not only incrementally.
The list of changes is very long.

1. **Governance** underwent radically changes by law in some countries (The Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, German Lander, France).

2. **Evaluation** of research is now nationally pursued in almost all European countries

3. **Quality assessment** and quality assurance is now implemented

4. Public funding to universities is now based on lump-sum mechanisms (part of it is based on **performance** evaluation)

5. The **B-M-PhD** organization is now the common format of European countries (EU’s and also non EU’s)
6. More competition (especially for research money and for reputation) is now working both at the national and at the international level.

7. Universities are asked to be more accountable respect to the social-economics needs.

8. More relationships with industries in research.
Europeanization of HE

- **Europeanization** is one (not the only one, obviously) of the drivers of the changes. In Europeanization:
  
- **Bologna** meant the pressure for homogenization of the curricular structure (B-M-PhD), for the institutionalization of quality assurance and for the creation of EHEA
  
- **Lisbon** meant more competition, quality assessment, pressure to more institutional accountability and for more responsible institutional governance.
  
- The **ERA**, started by an initiative of Commission in 2000, is part of this project and it has found a pillar thanks to the building up of the European Research Council
An opportunistic Europeanization?

The specialistic literature has observed that the results of this process of Europeanization, especially those regarding the Bologna/Lisbon goals are only apparently convergent.

The common impression is that Bologna and Lisbon have been used as legitimation resource for national reforms and thus that their constitutive principles have been interpreted following the national traditions.

So B-M-PhD structure seems to be only formally similar all around EU (but the substance seems to be remained very different).

So, the Lisbon script’ principles (institutional accountability and changes in governance, life-long learning, mobility, employability, filling the funding gap) have been only partially implemented and always through the national lenses and policy legacy.
- Without Lisbonization of Higher education national government had have more resistance in reforming their HE systems and less point of reference respect to where to go....

- Paradoxically, the best proof of the relevance of Lisbonization in influencing the behavior of national States is in what has been written in the Council Conclusion on the New 2020 Strategy (17 June 2010): “These recommendations shall be fully in line with relevant Treaty provisions and EU rules and shall not alter Member States' competences, for example in areas such as education” (I.4)

(in the original proposal of the Commission the word ‘education’ recurred 38 times; in the approved final document only 6. But ET 2020 approved by the Council in 2009)
Is Lisbonization Over?

- The risk is that States come back to follow only the internal pressures, and the inherited traditions, respect to Higher Education. So Lisbonization could be remembered only as an instrument to change national paths.

- States seem to be very worry about to undergo external (also EU) influences in the management of their Education and He systems and so they decided to limit the formal recognition of EU strategy (goals, objective, instruments) for the next decade.
But effects are happening and things cannot come back

- But it is clear that some principle are working inside national HE systems, although with different intensity.
- The Bologna and Lisbon principles are working and by this they are creating effects.
- For example, through the assessment of research is increasing the consciousness of institutional diversity inside the same HE system.
- Universities are building up international and European networks based on similar mission and interest for the future.
- The internationalisation of the teaching (which means to offer degree courses totally taught in English) is increasing
But effects are happening and things cannot come back

- The internationalisation of research is increasing (thanks also to the format asked for by the Framework Programmes).
- Rankings are developed also at the national level. Transparency for the potential student is increasing.
- So it is very probable that in the future an European Higher Education Area will exist.
- But it will not so homogeneous as many think.
A multi-level and multifunctional EHEA

- Because the structural pressures on universities and national HE systems, in fact is more probable that a process of trans-national differentiation will happen. That is:

- **EHEA** will be constituted by a diversified system, in which universities will form 3 or 4 groupings: EU top-universities (quite similar the US research universities); national research universities; national teaching universities; local universities (more committed to finalise teaching and research to the development of their own territories)

- The national States role will be that to try to have a significant representation of their universities in the top-level group.
The race is already started…

- So the race is started even if many policy-makers, inside and outside universities, have still not heard about it.

- International networking, clear vision of their own sources and possibilities, farsighted institutional leadership could help universities to be owners of their future without waiting for the reaction of their national governments.

- The race is started, and universities should decide at which level to play.

- Never forget that many levels MEAN many possible prizes.
The real problem is if this race will be functional or not to the common needs of European society.

Without an EU steering, dis-functionality will prevail.

Is this what we really want?

Can an un-steered race really pursue the collective (EU) good, and reach all what EU peoples would need from their universities?