

Chapter 1

Citius, Altius, Fortius: Mobilising the University for the “Europe of Knowledge”

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ABSTRACT

The European Union’s Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010) set a bold vision of a “Europe of Knowledge” where universities are seen as central actors. A modernisation agenda of universities has been promoted in recent years, focusing on the contribution of the sector to reaching regional and national economic goals. This chapter takes stock of ongoing national reforms across 17 European Union countries. Data pertaining to two key elements—societal relevance (in the form of university-industry relations) and scientific excellence—is analysed. The author discusses the findings in the light of conceptualisations surrounding the relevance-excellence nexus in higher education, as well as current policy dynamics and scholarly debates across the region. The chapter concludes by recommending future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Recent reform efforts in European higher education (HE) have been characterised by a strong emphasis on the fulfilment of policy (economic) agendas. As a consequence of a wider process of ‘regional integration’ (Amaral et al., 2010), a wide variety of endeavors – intergovernmental, supranational, and national - have been undertaken. These do not only aim at enhancing the compatibility (convergence) of HE systems across Europe (Kehm et al., 2009), but, most notably, are seen as significant steps as to propel the region to play a major role in a highly competitive, global,

knowledge-based economy. Significant scholarly attention has been paid to the impact, at the national level, of convergence efforts across Europe (Musselin, 2009; Hsieh & Huisman, 2012; Corbett, 2014), as well as on the repercussions brought by the so-called ‘modernization agenda’ in European HE (Maassen, 2009; Enders, de Boer, & Westerheijden, 2011), most notably in the realms of governance and funding. These efforts have partly been driven by the strategic goals set forward in Lisbon in 2000 (Gornitzka, 2007).

This chapter contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts towards mapping out the degree of change in European HE. It does so by illuminating policy

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efforts and strategic initiatives, both at the supranational and national levels, geared towards making universities cornerstones of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’. Given the nature of this inquiry, a special attention is given to the prominent role of influential supranational actors, like the European Commission, in help shaping a region-wide reform agenda for the sector. From an empirical standpoint, two policy areas are analyzed in detail: (a) efforts to increase the interaction between universities and industry, in the context of external calls for enhanced responsiveness and societal relevance; and, (b) strategic initiatives aimed at promoting research excellence and foster the global competitiveness of European universities.¹

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section provides the background for the study, with a particular emphasis on the prominent role played by supranational discourses and strategic initiatives. This is followed by a novel conceptualization regarding the relevance-excellence nexus, and by the empirical section. Towards its final stages, the chapter discusses the findings in the light of the conceptual framework adopted as well as the literature, and concludes by suggesting new avenues for future research inquiries.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ‘EUROPE OF KNOWLEDGE’

In Europe, policy makers’ interest on the socio-economic role of HE systems and their core actors (universities) precedes the current era. The sector has been part and parcel of the main components characterizing the ‘European Agenda’ for more than half a century (Corbett, 2005; Gornitzka et al., 2007, p. 195), both in areas pertaining to teaching (e.g. student mobility) as well as research (e.g. framework programs). Notwithstanding, it is undeniable that, in the last decade alone, increasing inter-governmental efforts geared towards the creation of an *European Area for Higher Education* (EHEA) and for *Research* (ERA) have paved

the way for a bold set of reforms at the national level. Historically speaking, the European summit of heads of States (held in Lisbon in 2000) represents a turning point. Facing increasing pressures resulting from sluggish economic growth, high unemployment, and a decline in global competitiveness, policy makers articulated a bold vision for the region’s future.

The Union must become [by 2010] the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. (European Council, 2000)

In 2004 a new European Commission, led by former Portuguese Prime Minister José Manuel Barroso, reinvigorated the importance of substantive reforms across Europe, in light of the Lisbon strategy. The setting of the new Commission coincided with the mid-term review of the progress, by individual member-states, of the Lisbon objectives. For the first time a sense of real crisis surrounded the discussions in the corridors of Brussels (Kok, 2004). In a joint effort, the European Council and the Commission highlighted that, “the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms” (European Council 2004, p. 2). Amongst other things, it was expressed that synergies between EHEA and ERA should be forged, thus bringing the (inter-governmental and voluntary) Bologna process and the (supranational) Lisbon strategy a step closer to one another (Keeling, 2006; Capano & Piattoni, 2011). In 2003, and for the first time, the Commission explicitly referred to the vital role of universities in the context of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’.

Given their central role, the creation of a Europe of knowledge is for the universities a source of opportunity, but also of major challenges. Indeed universities go about their business in an increasingly globalised environment which is constantly changing and is characterised by increasing com-

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