

European Universities and the Challenge of Globalisation

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Abstract: The era of globalisation has ramifications both for research and technology, consequently, also for European universities. However, the authorities of higher education in Europe and Greece do not seem to have conceived the messages of our times. The myopia of European policy for higher education becomes apparent in the reforms that have taken place in the past few years.

We cannot predict how future historians will name our era, but the term “globalisation era” certainly is a good candidate. In no other historical period in the past have the various regions of our planet been part of such an extensive and continuous network of communication and exchange, and this despite the different level of economic development and the heterogeneity of culture, social organisation, and constitutional structures.

While globalisation is viewed today mainly as an economic phenomenon, it also has implications for research and technology, and, consequently, for European universities. We may discern these implications, for instance, in the progressive increase of the numbers of Chinese students in European and American universities, the repercussions of 9/11 in academic exchanges between American and European universities and the corresponding increase of students and researchers from countries that have fallen victims of the strict USA visa regulations. The mobility of

teachers, students, and researchers has increased considerably, and not only through the traditional exchange channels between European universities (Erasmus/Socrates programme) or between American and European universities. The top-eight universities in Australia, a country where higher education has developed into one of the most significant economic factors, inaugurated in 2005 an office in Berlin in order to promote their collaboration with German research, but primarily in order to enhance the possibilities of recruiting researchers. During my visit at Beijing University in May 2006, I encountered a young Swedish researcher in chemistry, for whom the university had amended its internal regulations and permitted the submission of a doctoral thesis in English. Similar phenomena will become more frequent in the next years and it is not accidental that the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) inaugurated recently an office in New Delhi, in addition to the already existing one in Beijing.

European universities – and I use the term ‘university’ exclusively for Institutions of Higher Education that do not merely transmit knowledge, but also produce new knowledge (via postgraduate programmes) – constitute a significant research motor. And if in applied research universities have to face the competition of industry, in the field of basic research they are the only promoters of research in those countries which lack national research institutions, such as the National Research Foundation in Greece (EIE), the CNRS in France and the Max-Planck-Institute in Germany.

The authorities of higher education in Europe – Ministries of Education and Research, university administrations, the relevant European research institutions for research – appear to have apprehended the messages of our times, at least judging from the relevant declarations. ‘Europe of knowledge’ has been recognised as an immediate target of European policies, and the European Union has reposed its hopes for the growth of research and technology in new institutions, such as the European

Institution of Technology and the European Research Council. All over Europe various reforms of the legislative framework within which the institutions of higher education operate take place, and even in the conservative United Kingdom traditional universities, such as the University of Oxford, seriously consider the import of practices influenced by business administration in order to adapt more effectively and rapidly to a changing research environment. In Germany, when a socialist chancellor pronounced the word 'elite' in January 2005– a taboo-word until that time –, the German universities dedicated all their efforts to claim a portion of the roughly 1,5 billions Euros that will be administered during a five-year period (2006-2011) by the Federal Government to universities, hoping to diminish the gap between the best German universities and the equivalent American as regards advanced research. However, the image of the European academic has also changed.

The stereotype of the absentminded professor has been replaced (at least in the legislators' dreams) by the research manager; instead of ivory towers, universities are perceived as carriers of innovation in economy and 'know-how'. However, if universities are to become capable of facing the challenges of globalisation, they need more than wishful thinking and declarations. What measures have been taken by the European Union, European states, universities and economic institutions in this direction?

First, the European Union seems to have recognised the importance of the mobility of academic human resources, students and teachers alike. Undoubtedly, programmes such as Erasmus/Socrates, have broadened the European students' horizons. And yet, these programs sometimes eventually function as tourist agents. The short duration of most students' stay in a foreign university, combined with insufficient language skills, often do not provide the necessary conditions for an essential and active attendance of the educational process (particularly in seminars). An initial weakness of these programmes, i.e., the fact that they were confined to

European (as if the development of knowledge takes into consideration the borders of European states), is now somewhat remedied through the establishment of a new programme (Erasmus Mundus) which brings to Europe students from all over the world.

However, when we look at the reforms of higher education introduced by the so-called “Bologna protocol”, the myopia of European policy of higher education becomes visible. The intentions of those who designed the “Bologna protocol” were honest, but their idea naive. The observation that studies in European universities are impermissibly long, the structure of their study programmes is heterogeneous and the equivalence of the degrees, which they grant, is ambiguous has led to the decision to establish in all European universities study programmes with a maximal duration of eight years (3-4 years Bachelor, 1-2 years Master degrees, 3 years doctoral thesis); this decision must be implemented in 2010 at the latest. To expect that by homogenising the designations of degrees and the duration of the study programmes also the level of education will be homogenised – and at the same time raised – all over Europe and that the mobility of students and researchers will increase is naive. The homogenisation concerns only the visible surface of academic training, leaving the substance unchanged. The Bologna protocol does not affect, e.g., differences in secondary education, the admission process in universities, their infrastructure, the recruitment and evaluation of teaching staff, the rate between students and teachers, the payment or not of tuition fees, the content of study courses which have the same title etc. To name but one example, in universities such as Heidelberg, Cambridge, Leiden, Florence, and Oxford, a study programme in ancient history (BA+MA), can include modules in classical philology and archaeology, but also in papyrology, epigraphy, and the history of law. Not many European universities provide similar conditions, and yet they grant degrees with the same designation.

The problems do not only consist in differences in quality, which will not be

abolished, or in differences in the content of study programmes with the same designation. The significant problems consist in the imposition of a rigid system, which does not meet the specific demands of the different disciplines. Some disciplines require the learning of languages, studying abroad, and internships, which cannot be compressed within a three or four-year Bachelor. In Germany, the efforts to introduce particular types of studies or certificates (e.g., propaedeutical years, Bachelor with International Supplement etc.) met the resistance of the Ministries' bureaucratic. The bachelor degrees, which usually only last three years, necessarily have narrow specifications. Otherwise they would not be in a position to offer the required credits within the preset time of six semesters – the more so, given the insufficient teaching staff. These time limits (6 semesters) are so narrow, that they essentially prevent students from leaving their university's programme for a semester or two, in order to attend another university abroad. If a student nevertheless decides to study abroad for one or two semesters, he knows that he will not have the opportunity to attend those courses, which take place during his absence. The courses, which he will take in another university, will rarely correspond in content to the ones he will have missed in his home university. As all recent statistics indicate, the homogenisation of study programmes has a contrary effect than the one originally desired: it decreases students' mobility during their undergraduate studies. Unfortunately, all warnings have been futile.

There is yet another problem, which has hardly been discussed, showing the lack of foresight on the side of those who are responsible for higher education in Europe. The Bologna protocol views Europe as a continent cut off from the rest of the world; it takes into consideration only European universities, disregarding the consequences of this reform for the international relations of European universities. There is, e.g., no consideration on whether American universities will admit students with a three-year (and not four-year) Bachelor degree to their Masters Programme.

European universities hastily create new study programmes, wasting the resources of their best teachers and researchers, without examining whether these new programmes correspond to the needs and demands of students who did not happen to be born in the old continent, but in Australia, China, Latin America, India, or Vietnam. Thus, the Bologna protocol is a monument of an anachronistic spirit, which denies taking into account the reality of globalisation and the presence of a global, extremely competitive academic market. With study programmes planned without any awareness of the academic developments in the USA, in Australia and in those countries or Asia, which host some of the best research intensive universities (National University of Singapore, National Taiwan University, Tsingua etc.), European universities will lose the battle for recruiting the best researchers and postgraduate students, the battle for the production of new knowledge.

If Europe's policy of higher education appears cumbersome and short-sighted, the policies of the states is even worse. European states observe with great concern the 'brain drain', mainly towards the USA. But their passive and whining attitude simply worsens the situation. European governments should realise that globalisation does not mean 'brain drain', but a circulation of brains. If they want their economy and research to be one of the winners in this increased circulation of producers of knowledge, they will have to change their laws on immigration and the recruitment processes allowing their universities to recruit human resources not only from within a state or from other European countries, but from all over the world.

The ability of universities to intervene in the current developments are limited due to the economic constraints burdening all European universities and particularly those, which are oriented towards research. Their resources are limited – resources are always limited, and the entire history of mankind would have been different, if resources had been unlimited. The demand for a somehow bigger percentage of the gross national income being spent for higher education cannot be the only solution.

The solution consists in the independence of research-intensive universities from state funding and in a greater flexibility in adapting their research to current developments. Stanford University, for example, was in position to invest enormous sums in genetic research, as soon as this sector's potential emerged. Most European universities have difficulty in re-orientating their research, because almost all their resources are already blocked (for the payment of personnel, maintenance of infrastructure, funding of already approved research programmes). Whenever they wish to conduct research in a new scientific field, they are unable to make this possible by redistributing the already insufficient resources; so, they have to go through the time-consuming process of submitting applications to national research institutions, the European Union, and Ministries. By the time the application has been approved, the research of the American competitor has already advanced.

Additional resources, which would grant such flexibility, can be only provided by endowments. The efforts of European universities in fundraising are characterised by a fundamental mistake: universities try to find funding for a specified topic (a building, the funding of an academic chair or a certain programme) and not the increase their endowment. Thus, academic research, which receives funds from the private sector, largely depends on market demands, i.e., on the sponsor's needs. The most significant discoveries have been, however, not the result of applied research, but of basic research – i.e., research which takes place without having determined in advance what it seeks and what it will discover. And it is precisely this kind of research (basic) that suffers more from the lack of resources. Universities, including Harvard, which believed that they could predict which direction research would take and restructured their resources based on this criterion, i.e. strengthening certain sectors while suppressing others, realised that this was a tragic mistake. The development of knowledge is not predictable. This is why research-intensive universities need flexibility and autonomy.

I should remark in passing that the establishment of private universities, currently under discussion in most European countries, will have no impact on research. Contrary to American private universities, supported by robust endowments, which allow them to grant scholarships and recruit the best postgraduate students, the funding of European private universities mainly by means of tuition fees renders them ‘traders of knowledge’ rather than producers of knowledge.

The problems resulted by the lack of resources can partly be met through the reinforcement of collaboration between academic institutions. Today, universities that are in position to maintain a wide spectrum of disciplines – from Archaeology to Zoology — are limited. No university, either in Europe or in the rest of the world, represents all fields of knowledge. The number of universities, which are forced to limit the spectrum of their disciplines because of shortage of funding, increases continually. The usual victims of such curtailments are the so-called “small disciplines” (small in numbers of students and personnel, not the breadth of the areas they cover), such as the history of art in East Asia, Baltic languages and literature, museum studies, Assyriology etc. The danger that certain disciplines may disappear completely is visible, as decisions to this effect are taken without any coordination by the leadership of single universities. All over Europe chairs of Medieval Latin, Papyrology and Indo-European Linguistics are being discontinued, even though each of these disciplines is essential for research in others disciplines. The study of medieval history and the history of medieval art, for instance, is not possible without medieval Latin. This problem does not only concern the humanities, but also certain natural sciences, particularly some areas of geology. There are also fields in the humanities, such as Chinese and Japanese language and culture, Slavic languages etc., that contribute to the study of completely heterogeneous sectors, such as political science and economics. The collaboration of universities with complementary resources and

needs can make the preservation of a wide spectrum of disciplines possible in a period of financial difficulties. Precisely for this reason, certain European universities (Heidelberg, Leiden, Paris, London) founded the European League of Non-Western Studies, aiming at a better collaboration in Non-European studies. Their study programmes are conceived as a kind of a virtual campus. A serious obstacle in this direction is the unwillingness of a lot of people to accept the fact that English has established itself as the basic language of communication and research. Their fears are unfounded. As Latin did not eliminate the various national languages in the Middle Ages, the use English will not have this effect either. When we know on which occasions and for what reason we use a language of communication, such a language is a facilitator and not a threat. The collaboration between universities can also help them establish joint centres to provide information and recruit students in countries such as China, India, and other Asiatic countries, which have already become a basic source of recruitment for the postgraduate programmes of advanced universities.

What position do Greek universities hold towards these developments? How do they participate in the international academic market, except for sending their best graduates to the USA and to the best universities of Western Europe? Universities with limited economic resources and insufficient infrastructure sometimes invest in sectors, in which they have relative advantages because of a particular profile; in these disciplines they can compete successfully even with the most advanced. Similarly, Greece should place an emphasis on disciplines, in which it has an advantageous position and in which it can create a particular profile due to its history, geographical position, infrastructure, natural conditions etc. Unfortunately, in Greece the well-intentioned sponsors would rather associate their names with an opera house, a museum or a hospital rather than with a university. And I ask myself: why should they change their attitude, when for more than two decades the policy of higher education has been dictated by every parents' worry to see their children study, even when their

children are unfit for higher education, by the interest of householders to rent their studios to students, and by the souvlaki-seller's devout desire for turnover in a provincial city that a foolish policy has selected to host a "university"? What Greece needs is a change of mentality, if we wish that investment in higher education – a higher education, which produces new knowledge and does not simply conduct professional training – pays back.

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