

Higher Education in Europe: National Systems, European programmes, Global issues. Can they be reconciled?

When it comes to higher education and research, there is no European model. The times in the Middle Ages when students could travel from one country to the other studying in the universal language of the time, Latin, are distant. The emergence of the Nation-State against the dominium of both the Pope and the Emperor, the development of national aristocracies, bourgeoisies, languages and culture has also meant the progressive decline and decay of universities conceived as universalities. For sure, there were international and European exchanges, but most of the time this was the reserved domain of a few privileged minds corresponding or travelling across borders in spite of state controls.

Some kind of renaissance started in the 19th century each country following its own pattern and exporting it to countries of its area of influence (and later to its colonies). One of the key issues at that time – the 19th century – was to adjust the missions of universities to the new needs of states and societies radically challenged by scientific innovation and political revolutions. How to make sure that higher education was able both to train the people required by the new economic and public needs and at the same time to promote research and innovation? Two centuries ago, the challenges were quite different but the key questions were very similar to those of today. The answers which were then provided should not only be seen in a historical perspective since the chosen solutions at that time are still framing most of the existing university systems in Europe. The puzzle of the time is still very much ours: how to reconcile two basic functions different but complementary, that are education and research? The answers at the time were predominantly national and remained so more or less up until the 1980s.

Since then the national paradigm has been challenged by two new phenomena: the Europeanisation process on one hand, and globalisation on the other hand. Today I would like to examine these three somewhat conflicting issues and wonder if they can be reconciled.

I. The 19th Century Heritage: National Systems in Competition

For the sake of the argument I have organised this presentation around what I consider the three main models of universities. The first one advocates the fusion between teaching and research within universities. The second one instead privileges the separation of these two functions (research and education) while the third is much more blurred and borrows from various experiences and traditions¹.

1. Fusing Research and Teaching Missions

This is essentially the model which was developed in Germany under the impulse of Von Humboldt. Through the reform of the university of Berlin in 1810, Humboldt emphasised forcefully what he called “the university of research *and* teaching”, and, as a natural consequence of its unity underlined the drastic changes which should come up as a consequence in the relations between teachers and students. “The

¹ The first part of this paper draws upon a previous lecture delivered at University College, Dublin.

university teacher is not any longer teacher, the student not any more learning but the latter researches himself and the professor only directs and supports his research". This team spirit characterised by a quasi-egalitarian relationship has become for a part reality. No doubt that research teams in the German system have been and remain partially a strong feature of the university organisation. Prestige, power, and resources are often recognised in relation to the size and the importance of the research team granted to the professor. PhD students are the junior assistants of the *Doktorvater* who, far from the quasi-egalitarian ideal, is the uncontested baron of the team.

This fundamental relationship is still very much alive and remains at the basis of the German system's ideal and organisation. It has also been very influential on the rest of the Continent contributing to the progressive transformation and adaptation of the old university systems or of those influenced by the French Napoleonic reforms. It also contributed to the evolution of the British views, even if the link between research and actual teaching was never emphasised with the same strength than in Germany for a long period of time. The influence was stronger in the U.S. with the introduction of the PhD in the 1870s and the recognition that research was one of the most important missions of universities. However, the German model was affected by reverse trends: the access en masse to universities, which entailed extensive recruitments of professors, the mobilisation of enormous resources, the dilution of the teacher – student relationship, implied that priority should be given to teaching over research. Well-funded research teams tended to become a rarity rather than the norm, according to the wealth and generosity of each land-based university system.

On the other hand, highly privileged and selective units were protected from this demographic and economic revolution by securing excellent research conditions, major resources and avoiding most of the teaching load. The Max-Planck Institutes, where research at the highest level is concentrated, are privileged islands in the academic ocean. They remain linked to the university system (which delivers the diplomas) and some doctoral or post-doctoral teaching/training is provided, but they are outside the "normal" academic world. At the same time, they embody the Von Humboldt dream of the research team, while constituting the main and important exception to his vision of a university intimately combining research and teaching. In other words, they are closer to the tradition of an intellectual division of labour between academies and universities which has prevailed in many countries.

2. The Separation Option

Contrary to the German attempt to link the two functions, many countries on the Continent have chosen an option which has, for instance, very much been argued for by Cardinal Newman when he set up what became University College Dublin – that is, a clear division of labour between the universities in charge of teaching and academies or ad hoc bodies in charge of research. However, the situation is more complex reflecting the radical differences existing between the Anglophone world on one hand (characterised by differentiation within the system) and the Continental tradition where the Napoleonic model of academic centralisation has often prevailed.

In fact, in most continental countries this strict division of labour was put in practice rather late and mostly after the Second World War. Indeed in France for instance, where the Napoleonic model was imposed in a radical way, the fundamental division

was not so much between teaching and research but between the university system on one hand and the professional schools in charge of educating and training the future civil servants of the State.

It is a well-known and documented fact that over time the so-called “*Grandes Ecoles*” in France acquired influence and prestige because of their special relationship with the State apparatus, while the universities lost most of their autonomy as well as their ability to address the challenges of the time. Fierce criticism was expressed after the fall of the Second Empire. Some critics went so far as to declare that the French defeat in 1870 was not so much a military one but an intellectual/academic one *vis-à-vis* the German system. And that was the basis for the creation of Sciences Po in Paris, which was then emulated by the London School of Economics which more or less took the same model. However, nothing substantially changed and very little research was done both within the universities and the *Grandes Ecoles*. It was only after the Second World War that the Fourth Republic governments put in place an impressive centralised system of research institutions either specialised (atomic energy, health, space, food) or umbrella-type (*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*). These organizations were created aside from the universities and their members were full-time researchers with no teaching obligations.

At first, the system was quite successful as it was the first attempt to efficiently organise and to generously fund research along specific programmes set up by the State. The system was also attractive for bright young academics that were left aside by a more conservative university system. It was more open to foreigners and political refugees while universities were reserved to nationals. It offered the advantages of a secure and meritocratic national structure, in line with the preference at the time of the majority of people, political parties and trade-unions. However, over time, the system became increasingly rigid, bureaucratic and inefficient while exacerbating the tensions with the universities.

Today, the *summa divisio* which presides over the organisation of teaching and research remains valid in France. However the borders are blurred. Many CNRS teams are located in or associated with universities. They are often led by university professors. Most of the researchers wish to teach graduate or post-graduate students and many of them get an *habilitation* to supervise PhDs. In parallel, any university professor who wishes to get a decent academic career must pursue some research activities even if the type of systemic pressure that many academics face in other countries is ignored in the “*douce France*”. The main divide remains between *Grandes Ecoles* which are fundamentally selection systems – dramatically selective, absurdly selective – before entering the State-controlled job market and the universities.

There is no doubt about the fact that this statist model based on the separation of teaching and research is facing a deep crisis not only in France, but in the other countries which adopted a similar pattern. The failure is even more obvious in the countries where an authoritarian regime – like those of the former Socialist States - added full political control over a centralised, bureaucratic and rather inefficient system. Once a French Socialist Minister nicknamed the education system as a mammoth that he should make slimmer. He failed, having forgotten that mammoths do not adjust, they only die.

To sum-up: the combination of the separation principle with a centralised, bureaucratic system of management is both unmanageable and inefficient, in spite of adjustments which blur the model by borrowing bits and pieces from the alternative solution. There is no doubt about the fact that this option is sub-optimal. But the problem remains: how to reform when the capacity of resistance would require a revolution?

3. Change through imitation

The third model is a model made of incremental adjustment, and which borrows partly from these two ideal types. The two models which have been experimented in continental Europe have gone through transformations over the past 50 years, and there is no such a pure model nowadays.

The same has occurred in Britain, Ireland and in the United States where the elitist, meritocratic college has been challenged by many factors such as the need to better include research, to accommodate more students, to reconcile efficiency and quantity with quality.

The United States pioneered that movement by introducing the PhD programmes at the end of the 19th century linking teaching and research at the highest level of university training. Britain, by contrast, was slower and remained for a long time attached to a shorter university training period. Getting a PhD was not seen as a pre-condition for an academic career, leaving the research dimension in a rather inferior position vis-à-vis the teaching and pastoral role of academics, in particular in the most traditional and prestigious colleges.

The more eminent place of research in academia was influenced in the United States by other factors such as: the importance given to research in career evaluations (“Publish or Perish”), the facilities granted to professors for their research programmes, the large and diverse range of funding facilities, the close relationship between the private sector and the researchers whose successful prototypes have been MIT or Caltech. All these features have recently contaminated the European systems but not in a uniform way. Each university system has picked up bits and pieces according to needs, fashions and what I will call creative (mis)understandings. Each system has reacted its own way to the graft of these foreign imports on the existing structure. Each of these changes has triggered expected or unexpected reactions. Today it is probably difficult or impossible to refer to a model as we used to. There is a wide consensus within the academic community but also in the policy world about the need to associate teaching and research as closely as possible within the university. To my knowledge, today no one advocates the separation model, which survives only because it seems too difficult to change it radically. However, the apparent consensus on the intimate relationship between research and teaching might be jeopardised without realising it, because of the unexpected outcome of some policies. I will take a recent example that I borrowed from the Times Higher Education of last week or two weeks ago. They mention a report of the Society for Research into Higher Education which underlines a recent trend in Great Britain: we do not know what it will produce, but they note that in less than a decade, the number of teaching-only posts grew from twelve thousand to forty thousand and the proportion of academics considered as research active for the purposes of the RAE fell from 66% in 1995-96 to 58% in 2001–2002. These figures confirmed my

personal intuition that there might be a big risk of developing a two-tier system in many British universities: an upper class of well-paid senior researchers and a vast cohort of junior teaching slaves.

In other words, we are trying to muddle through while being left with a certain number of dilemmas that I would like to address now. Europeanisation is the first of them.

II Europe Steps In

More recently, the universities in Europe have been affected by tremendous demographic changes without being able however, to make the adjustments that such a challenge would have required. In most countries, the dominant values and characteristics of the system remain in place: free access to the university for those granted the high school degree, absence of tuition fees in most countries, lack of adjustment to the needs of the market, benign neglect vis-à-vis crucial issues such as the percentage of dropouts, the time to degree, the career development of the alumni. An egalitarian philosophy and views informed by utopian or unrealistic ideals of the past contributed once again to make the university system an archetype of social conservatism under the disguise of academic freedom. The generous aspirations of 1968 far from triggering a university renaissance contributed further to the decline and decay of the institutions of higher education in most European countries.

The answer to the massification of universities was more quantitative than qualitative: Students entered even more massively into inadequate systems, professors were hired by the thousands, more money was poured into institutions unable or unwilling to reform themselves. This incapacity has many explanations: the university system within the national borders was too centralised in most cases, too statist, too heavy to be reformed from the top. The capacity of resisting change was enormous and very few positive incentives could be offered to those who could have been the instruments of change.

Can Europe, I mean the European Union, change this situation? Probably not, in spite of efforts which can have marginal effects, especially if these are combined together with parallel pulls and pushes.

Brussels has practically no power in the field of education and this field is jealously defended by the Member-States as the embodiment of their national – read “different” – cultures. The European Commission however has tried to go around this prohibition by setting up some policies related to its own needs and objectives and by invoking some catch words such as: freedom of circulation, competitiveness, etc. Some of these initiatives have a limited impact on the universities as such but have contributed to change perceptions and to modify the environment: the creation of Jean Monnet Chairs for instance but, even more, the launching of the Erasmus programme have accompanied and accelerated a trend: the growing, even if still limited, circulation of students throughout Europe.

The contribution of the EU to the Europeanization of research is more important. Substantial funds are available for multinational teams competing for resources directed according to programmes or priorities. Networking becomes a full-time activity with its advantages and drawbacks. One of the most valuable contributions

has been the creation of Marie Curie Fellowships or Professorships. More recently new initiatives such as the creation of the European Research Council or the European Institute for Innovation and Technology have further increased the role and influence of the European Commission. This effort on one hand has an immense value: it allows the circulation of young scholars throughout Europe, it strengthens the possibility of attracting students and professors from other countries, it offers a generous source of funding in particular for countries where research is under funded. However there are serious limits and defects to these policies: most of the funding up to the recent creation of the ERC was directed by a top-down approach; both submission of the proposals and their management in case of success are extremely cumbersome and bureaucratic; evaluation processes are disputable given the magnitude of the task, the oversubscription in most programmes, the extreme centralization of the process, the lack of universally-accepted standards of quality in Europe. (We do not have the equivalent of the American culture about what is recognised as a quality publication.)

On the whole, the influence of the European Union on the national university systems would have been rather limited if they had not combined with other factors going in the same direction, and some snow-ball effect can be observed. Several factors indeed have contributed in “Europeanising” the university reform agenda. I will limit myself to underlining some of them without claiming to be exhaustive.

The first one has been the reform of the British universities. When the radical transformation of the university system started under Margaret Thatcher’s government, most academics in continental Europe were shocked and appalled by the methods and the content of the reform. It is true to say that had they been applied in Continental Europe, it would have probably triggered an upheaval and in my own country a revolution. But little by little the British shake-up has inspired most of the ongoing reforms in Europe: more competition between universities, professors and students; more attention to the individual and collective performance; more thorough evaluation of teaching, research, funding and results; more market mechanisms in the delivery of a fundamental public good. Many of these features have been borrowed by Northern European countries and even in minor ways by Germany, Spain, Italy and other countries. Needless to say that the radical-heroic style of Mrs Thatcher has often been watered down when reaching the Continent, but it remains that Britain has been a place of inspiration and stimulus for the reformers of old and new members of the European Union.

The second factor I would like to mention is the so-called “Bologna Declaration” process which foresees the organisation of higher education according to the rule: 3+2+3. I have to confess that I have been a bit puzzled by the success of this declaration. One might wonder if this can be attributed to the apparent simplicity of the formula or because it was helping national authorities to push for reform in the name of European harmonisation and free circulation of students. Whatever the explanation, one can observe that all universities in Europe have entered into a process of reform based on that model. I am a bit more sceptical about the result. Many universities have simply put new labels on old realities and in some ways made the system even more complicated. The two-year Masters programme in particular has produced an inflation of supply which would not resist a thorough market-oriented evaluation. A lot could also be said about doctoral programmes to be completed in three years. Personally in social sciences I don’t believe it is possible. This objective might be realistic in some disciplines (science perhaps) but

unattainable in others unless quality standards are considerably lowered or – and this a hidden option in more and more universities – the PhD programme is *de facto* structured over four years, by considering the second year of the Masters as the first year of the doctoral programme. That is the way that academics have played around, in many countries, with these 3+2+3 structures.

Many universities have been convinced to adjust to these European norms, created in that case outside the EU framework, partly because of the impact of the Erasmus programmes. Universities have become more aware of and more sensitive to the many problems and difficulties in welcoming for short periods of time (6 months or at most one year) students with very heterogeneous training, traditions and background and in adjusting different ways of teaching and marking exams. In France for instance, if you get 15 (out of 20, which is the maximum), this is considered a marvellous mark. In Italy if you don't get 20 out of 20 you are a failure! People have realised that there are different traditions: most universities in Europe have become aware of their heterogeneity and of the drawbacks related to differences, which most of the time, do not provide added value. Plurality of views, methods, approaches and organisation might be extremely enriching when properly assessed and viewed as a way to be more efficient, innovative and cutting-edge. Diversity is a problem when it is the mere outcome of reform laziness and conservatism. From this point of view the plea for distinctiveness and protection of local cultures is a too convenient fig leaf to hide the preference for the status quo.

Finally, I will mention a third factor related to the two first ones I have mentioned: a growing awareness by all involved actors of the new challenges universities have to face. This process is helped by professional and academic organisations as well for that matter as by the European Commission itself. For a long period of time, professionals and academics were organised only at the national level and worldwide. In fact, only the national institutions were taken seriously and had an impact on policy issues. The worldwide organisations were viewed as too heterogeneous and too politicised to be considered seriously. In fact up to the Nineties, most of these gatherings were characterised by their low standards and their propensity to reproduce the political divisions inherited from the Cold War and the decolonisation process.

The Europeanisation of the professional organisations started in the Seventies, and I would like to mention one crucial example, that being ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research), whose base is at Essex University – probably one of the leading cases in transforming parochial scientific communities in a truly Pan-European organisation. This example has been emulated by many and today, professional or academic communities which are not structured at the European level are a very rare exception indeed. It does not mean that they have sided down the traditional national organisations. But they have contributed to what has been sometimes labelled as “regulation through information”. Progress is made through better knowledge and comparison. It is there that the European Commission adds its own contribution. Being unable to intervene substantially in Higher Education policies, the only remaining option is to disseminate its views through various White or Green Papers often inspired by the most dynamic organisations or universities and strongly influenced by non-European examples, in particular from North America. Globalisation becomes a key element of the game, and that is the third factor I would like now to consider.

III Globalisation as Engine of Change

It is a banal observation to underline that everything has become global. There is no sector of economic, social, political life which remains immune from this phenomenon. However, the speed and the depth of that process vary greatly from country to country, from sector to sector, and there are several reasons which explain such a differentiation. The first one is related to the engine of the phenomenon itself. Being mainly a market-driven trend, it is obvious that those countries or sectors which have been totally or partially insulated from market mechanisms will be less affected than those which are run according to the laws of supply and demand. Secondly as in any process of change there are leaders and followers or laggards. Rules, standards and good practices are fixed by the leaders according to their views, preferences and interests. And in that case, adjustment, even if difficult, will be less painful than in those countries where rules and traditions are set up by others and where they are transforming followers. A third category might be constituted from countries or sectors which have to build from scratch and are not burdened with the legacies of the past – e.g. parts of Eastern Europe. A fourth category might be made from those which lack so much these human and financial pre-conditions to compete that they are excluded from the very beginning. In other words, globalisation affects everybody but in very different ways by creating different classes of competition.

In order to play in the top league, several conditions are required.

The first one is obviously the willingness to enter into the competition and to play according to the rules of the game. It implies a mobilisation of all parties involved: administrators, professors, students. This explains why the global option is more easily introduced when the academic institutions are already used to some forms of competition at the national or regional level as happens in the Anglo-American world. In other countries and in particular in continental Europe, such a vision represents a sea change, since it radically challenges the principles of equality and uniformity at the basis of most university systems in Europe. In these cases, competition has to be introduced by disguise, or by setting up limited exceptions. In my own country, for instance, there is a striking contrast between the business schools, which are on the market (several of them are among the 10 best European business schools according to the Financial Times ranking), on one hand, and the university system which considers formal equality of diplomas and the lack of selection at university entry as sacred cows that no government is able to touch upon. And I have to be very frank: I don't see how this kind of issue will be tackled by any government, left or right. I have no solution to offer.

The second factor is the ability to enter into the competition. In my view two assets are crucial: autonomy and resources. The tremendous success of the American universities lay in their capacity to act, to move, to adjust, and to innovate with the minimum of bureaucratic impediments. Benchmarking techniques and rankings take their full value only if the actors can be responsible for the choices and decision they made. From this point of view, most European universities possess a limited autonomy as very few governments and academics are ready to face the price to be paid for freedom, that is, the possibility of failure. Too many university actors tend to prefer the wish of Alice in Wonderland “all should have prizes”. Unfortunately,

autonomy and competition are less benevolent but this is the price for attaining excellence.

Another asset is crucial: money. There are few cases where excellence does not go hand in hand with wealth nowadays. Obviously, as the American primary school system testifies, money is not enough. The American primary school system is extremely costly and extremely inefficient. But the illusion that in the modern world excellence can be reached without resources is an illusion only convenient for the Treasury. If market mechanisms are introduced in the functioning of universities or in the selection of students, it would be rather surprising not to apply them in the running of libraries or IT facilities, professors' salaries, etc. One cannot have one's cake and eat it. Here one must underline the contrast between the political rhetoric at work in Europe and the day to day reality. Most politicians in Europe insist that more money should be allocated to education and research, but very few put their money where their mouth is. Similarly, private sponsors are few and alumni in Europe do not feel particularly committed to their *alma mater* when it comes to donating. Funding remains mainly governmental in Europe and this is a major limitation. Not so much because of the public nature of the resources, but because of its relative importance in the total budget of universities. Obviously there are exceptions to this overall situation such as the wealth of Oxford or Cambridge or the contribution of crucial foundations such as, in Great Britain, the Wellcome Trust. But on a European scale, these are very exceptional and limited cases. In spite of these intrinsic difficulties that European universities have to face when entering into the globalisation game, there is no alternative as one of your famous former Prime Ministers would have said. If the choice is between playing the worldwide game and being relegated to the local leagues, no doubt that every higher education system, every university should have no hesitation in setting up strategic direction and choices.

Obviously this has considerable implications. It implies:

1. attracting the best students through negative (selection) and positive (grants) instruments;
2. attracting the best teachers and administrators by offering the best possible conditions and setting up thorough processes of evaluation;
3. internationalising both the student intake and teaching faculty (I have to say, Great Britain from this point of view is much ahead of the rest of Europe);
4. attracting researchers and post-doc fellows on a worldwide basis and with no national bias or discrimination.

If we consider all these requisites, Great Britain is the most advanced European country in that global trend. British universities benefit from two crucial assets which are not naturally given to other European universities: the proximity to the American system which allows a continuous stream of exchanges and information on one hand; the "natural monopoly" of English as the only international language of the academic community.

These two conditions are more difficult to match for non-Anglophone countries. But the time might be close when the declaration of a former French Minister for Education will become true. As he put it "English should not be considered as a foreign language". On a still limited basis, this can be observed in several European countries and in many Masters or PhD programmes in Europe. More and more

publications are made in English only. It will take still many years before English becomes the “Latin” of the modern world, but it is already the case in research. At that stage the mobility of students and professors will become a true reality and not the privilege of a tiny minority. Studying in one’s own country might become as strange as for a New York student to consider only New York State universities as the natural option. Time for this free circulation of academics is not yet ripe, but we are on the way. But we should also emulate the US in what has been so crucial in their success; in other words try to attract the best students from all over the world.

Let me conclude by underlying how fascinating and challenging are the evolutions ahead of us. Over the past years I have personally experienced these formidable transformations in my institution, the European University Institute: we have tried to emulate the doctoral training offered by the best universities and have worked hard in order to improve our completion rate and our time to completion. We are proud today that nearly 90% of our students complete their PhD and that the average time is 4 years. By international standards, this is quite an achievement but we have to work harder and harder to still improve both the quantity and the quality of our scientific output. On another front, we do believe that the future of Europe is in its capacity to attract the best brains as the US did after the Second World War until now. In the US, 40,000 students get a PhD every year but more than 60,000 post-doc fellowships are granted and two-thirds of the beneficiaries are foreigners. Many of them will remain and work in a country wise enough to offer them the best working and scientific conditions. At EUI we have launched a modest but still important post-doc programme along the American experience. This year we received 980 applications from 96 countries for the 70 grants or so offered by the Institute.

And I do hope that there will be more and more post-doc programmes of that kind set up in Europe, because this is still a drop in the European ocean. But our dearest wish is that in the near future Europe will become an attractive alternative to the American offer. It is not only a question of resources. It means that the European universities, while keeping their distinctiveness and flavour, become truly global in recruiting students, fellows and professors. They have denied their own vocation when they identified themselves with local, parochial or national identities. There is no contradiction in being both European and global, in particular in the field of education and research. If universities still believe in their founding principle – *universitas, universality* – they should not have a single instant of doubt or hesitation. Their salvation is globalisation.

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