

EU policies matter in education

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Abstract

From the Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community to this year's Budapest-Vienna Declaration, over Bologna and Maastricht, thousands of students have been moving around and studying in Europe and even further afield. Would this have been possible without the impact of the EU policies on Education? Would the fantastic increase in the newest communication and transportation tools over the last decades have achieved the same results, *i.e.* a higher education area with more comparable, compatible and coherent systems in Europe andworldwide.

Key-words

Sorbonne, Bologna, Maastricht, Mobility, Curriculum development, Virtual courses

*The hardest thing about education is to be ambitious enough
(Stephen Heppel, in 'Future of Education')*

Currently, mid August 2010, the official letters/e-mails with the dreaded sentence “we regret to inform you” or those leading to an explosion of joy “we have the pleasure to inform you that your application has been successful”, are dropping in at the International Offices' letterboxes of many Universities and University Colleges.

Having a quick look at the results of the successful applications (here limited to the centralised action of multilateral projects/networks for Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig) of this year we notice titles like:

“The virtual Anti-bullying –Village for Kids”, “Sharing European memories at School”, “European literacy and Citizenship education”, “Mapping University mobility

of Staff and Students”, “Sustainable know-how in intercultural learning in Student Placements and the knowledge transfer to Enterprises”, “Employability: learning through international entrepreneurship”, “Comparative study of European and national-level policies and practices on academic mobility”, “Professional driving – more than just driving! Qualification requirements and vocational training for professional drivers in Europe”, “Innoguide – innovation in LLL Tourist Guide Training - Tourist Guides as partners for a sustainable, diverse and exciting Europe”, “Qualification of seniors coming from restructuring sectors for the intergenerational knowledge transfer”, “Financial literacy competencies for adult learners”...

In all fairness, would you, as a teacher/lecturer have thought yourself to bring forward one of these topics? What would have been the reaction of your Head or Dean on signing the application, if the potential incentive of funding would have been lacking? If this incentive was missing would you have been looking for at least two other European partners (and for some sub programmes up to more than thirty partners) to establish the partnership for the project or network?

In fact the titles of these successful projects (giving a very limited information of course) are attractive: these are topics of everyday life, but by going in-depth and in-width with other partners with other cultural backgrounds makes it all so much more exciting and brings in a comparative flavour that would be missing if you did the same exercises completely on your own or with the support of an institution in the neighbourhood. The impact would have been limited to a PR stunt for the local school recruitment area.

Did you notice also that the European buzz-words linked to the current policies are included in practically all the projects mentioned? Employability, intergenerational knowledge transfer, adult learners, virtual learning, citizenship, sustainable development, entrepreneurship, comparative study, intercultural awareness....

Education was formally recognised as an area of European Union competency in the Maastricht Treaty which established the European Community in 1992.

In the EU system, Education belongs to the “subsidiarity” principle, i.e. the principle which ensures that activities best managed at national, regional or local level are funded at the most appropriate level and that the Union does not intervene. But on the other hand the EU influences directly the European Higher Education Area by investing (approx. 7bn euros) in education projects as part of its (2007-13) learning programme. A variety of projects cover everything from schools and adult learning to vocational training schemes and assistance for students who wish to study in another EU state. The idea is to help EU countries improve the skills base of their workforce, equipping them to remain competitive with countries such as China and India, in areas such as

bio-engineering, pharmaceuticals and high-technology manufacturing. Programmes also exist to enable easier comparison of qualifications between countries, as this would give employers more confidence to recruit from other member states.

The European Union has so two different types of instrument to increase the quality and openness of the education and training systems of the EU's Member States: on the one hand as explained above a substantial programme to support exchanges, networks and mutual learning between schools, universities or training centres as well as between the political authorities responsible for these areas in the different Member States. But also a set of policy instruments through which EU countries are encouraged to develop their own education systems and to learn from each other's successes.

This means also, if one wants to have access to EU money a basic principle has to be followed! Paraphrasing Luke 20:25: "Well then," He said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to the EU what belongs to the EU....". In other words, if a project developer wants EU money, he/she has to play the game by the rules set out by the EU money holder....and these are nicely written in the guidelines of the programmes. And that's where the development of EU policies and recommendations comes in, as the guidelines for handing in good applications are based on these policies.

Going back in time, a very interesting document is the Memorandum on Higher Education by Dr Finbar O'Callaghan, who played a most influential role in Ireland in promoting non-university higher education (see Tony White, Investing in People, Higher Education in Ireland 1960-2000, IPA, Dublin, 2001). Dr O'Callaghan was consulted by the then called European Communities about Higher Education and the vision and strategies it could develop to increase the efficiency of Higher Education. We are talking Brussels, 5 November 1991. Interesting to read are also "The Responses to the Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community" by Pierre Tabatoni (November 1993) and Jean-Pierre Jallade (December 1993).

We are at that moment in the very early nineties – with European economies at different paces. The Western European states had, for some years already, linked their economies with a huge increase in shared infrastructure and cross-border trade. Since 1986 we were 12. The economy of the former COMECON countries had suffered greatly due to the massive cost of the Cold War. After the fall of the Berlin wall, most Eastern European countries were struggling with GDP and living standards very much behind those of the Western neighbours.

The memorandum comes in at a time when the COMETT programme was already functioning. It was designed to stimulate contacts and exchanges between universities and industry (July 1987). This programme was rapidly followed by the ERASMUS

programme, which promoted inter-university contacts and cooperation, as well as substantial student mobility (as, in 1989, did the “Youth for Europe” programme, the EU’s first youth exchange support scheme). These programmes were adopted by the EU countries but with considerable support from the European Parliament .

This was the memorable time of the ICP’s (Interuniversity Cooperation Projects), and the period also of the first discoveries that educational civilisation existed not only in the home institution but also across borders, this being the case certainly for the so-called Polytechnics. It was the period of lifelong friendships with colleagues in the EU countries. It was the period that sending students abroad was only done under the wings of that same friendship. Communication was done by snail mail. It was only the second batch of exchange students who used the fax. Internet and mobiles came in so much later. But it was also the time of reflecting: are we going international or is the shadow of our local spire sufficient to our needs? Why should we do this?

The memorandum came in timely and presents and explains the position of the Commission of the European Communities on issues of higher education. In establishing the context for the memorandum it notes population and labor market changes. It identifies a series of actions which could be taken and raises a wide agenda of issues which argue for a stronger European dimension in planning and functioning than existed at that time (1990) in higher education.

It also identifies the Commission’s role as a catalyst and facilitator of cooperative and common action in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and respecting a diversity of provision. Critical areas discussed include participation in and access to higher education, partnership with economic life, continuing education, open and distance education, and the European Community dimension. The contours of the European dimension are defined and include student mobility, cooperation between institutions, Europe in the curriculum, the central importance of language, the training of teachers, recognition of qualifications and periods of study, the international role of higher education, information and policy analysis, and dialogue with the higher education sector. Compared to to-day’s policies: very much ahead of its time, I would say!

In the meantime the Tempus programme was adopted by the Council in May 1990, to promote educational exchange and cooperation between educational institutions inside the EU and those outside. The idea behind Tempus was that individual universities in the European Community could contribute to the process of rebuilding free and effective university systems in partner countries; the programme was an immediate success and by 1993 the number of participating countries had grown from five at the start to eleven. The programme was subsequently enlarged to include the Newly Independent States

of the former Soviet Union; again to include the countries of the Western Balkans and finally to cover the Mediterranean countries.

Tempus was followed by a series of smaller programmes built more round the mobility of academics towards the EU. These included the ALFA/ALBAN programmes with Latin American universities; the Asia-Link programme; and others, like Edu-link, sometimes time-limited. A number of these appear to have been set up as a means of development assistance rather than with the development of universities as such, an impression strengthened by the fact that they were managed by the European Commission's development assistance service EuropeAid rather than (like Tempus or Erasmus Mundus programme) by its Education and Culture department. Bi-lateral cooperation has also been encouraged with Canada, US, Australia, Republic of Korea, Japan, New Zealand, ...

Finally, in 2003 the European Union launched the Erasmus Mundus programme, a project to ensure the place of European Universities as centres of excellence across the world; to attract the best students from around the world to Europe; and to enable partnerships between European universities and those in other countries.

As from 2007 all the education and training programmes were brought together in one single programme: the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. This programme comprises separate sub-programmes for schools, universities and higher education, vocational education and training, adult education, teaching about the EU in universities (Jean Monnet) and a 'horizontal' programme for policy development. We are neither to forget the separate FW7 programme with its numerous sub-calls linked to research.

And by this time, nearing the end of 2010, and mid-term for most of the European educational programmes, we do not speak any more about interregional or transnational exchanges, but all attention is focused on globalisation, and this in its different meanings. Mars seems though to be the limit....

How is the world at present? We are 27 in the EU, speaking 23 official languages, using 3 alphabets. More countries want to join, and Education is ahead with Turkey a longstanding partner in the education projects. Croatia and Switzerland are also joining now, and there are loads of opportunities for "third countries" to join the projects. The Ministerial EU Conferences work now with two chairs (EU country and non-EU country: at present Belgium and Albania, next semester Hungary and Andorra). We have a Eurozone, a euro stronger than the dollar, we are aware that 911 is a daily reality for a series of countries, we are at the same time aware that the arms' lobby is not to be underestimated, we know about the Kyoto protocol, we are unhappy about Copenhagen, we tried to read the introduction to the Lisbon Treaty, we read online the daily news of

India, China, Aljazeera. In short we know about the “world” thanks to the wonderful development of communication technologies.

And then there is the crisis! How do we counteract it? Europe 2010 becomes now Europe 2020.... Financial markets have failed us, we have a high number of unemployed people, so it is time to look for new jobs and...new skills. Europe was lagging behind the US at one time? What was missing? competitive skills, that’s why the policies were geared at creating the knowledge-based society. Innovation and Creativity, University and Enterprise....and to-day? We are heading towards Europe 2020!

The crisis is a wake-up call, the moment where we recognise that “business as usual” would consign us to a gradual decline, to the second rank of the new global order. This is Europe’s moment of truth. It is time to be bold and ambitious (José Manuel Barroso-3/03/2010).

The Europe 2020 strategy put forward by the Commission sets out a vision of Europe’s social market economy for the 21st century. Reading the documents of the Commission and the Council, buzz words continue to crop up: **smart, sustainable and inclusive**. That’s the way economy has to develop delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. The Commission is putting forward seven flagship initiatives to catalyse progress under each priority theme:

- “Innovation Union” to improve framework conditions and access to finance for research and innovation so as to ensure that innovative ideas can be turned into products and services that create growth and jobs.
- “Youth on the move” to enhance the performance of education systems and to facilitate the entry of young people to the labour market.
- “A digital agenda for Europe” to speed up the roll-out of high-speed internet and reap the benefits of a digital single market for households and firms.
- “Resource efficient Europe” to help decouple economic growth from the use of resources, support the shift towards a low carbon economy, increase the use of renewable energy sources, modernise our transport sector and promote energy efficiency.
- “An industrial policy for the globalisation era” to improve the business environment, notably for SMEs, and to support the development of a strong and sustainable industrial base able to compete globally.
- “An agenda for new skills and jobs” to modernise labour markets and empower people by developing their of skills throughout the lifecycle with a view to increase labour participation and better match labour supply and demand, including through labour mobility.
- “European platform against poverty” to ensure social and territorial cohesion such that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are enabled to live in dignity and take an active part in society.

Looking at this set of flagships we are aware that we in education, can, as international officers, help out the different departments and faculties of our institutions, to be the lead ship in a fleet of vessels (this means handing in successful applications). We just have to wait the directions/guidelines of the new priorities, the new rules of the game as set out by the EACEA, the Executive Agency for Culture and Education (see: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/index_en.htm).

A lot has already been published.

- **The Commission:** Here we are in the midst of the essential elements to benefit from the financial support of the EU (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc36_en.htm and http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc1120_en.htm)
- **Many reports and studies** by the Commission itself:
 - like “Study on Key indicators on Social Inclusion and Efficiency, Mobility, Adult Skills and Active Citizenship – 2006” (http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/moreinformation139_en.htm)
- Not to be forgotten: **the Barometers** giving an insight in the public opinion: *e.g.* Entrepreneurship in the EU and beyond - A survey in the EU, EFTA countries, Croatia, Turkey, the US, Japan, South Korea and China (May 2010) (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)
- **CEDEFOP** (<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/16435.aspx>)
- **Eurydice:** http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/about_eurydice_en.php
- **The Years:** Intercultural dialogue, Against racism and combating poverty, Volunteering,
- **Commission Staff working documents:** *e.g.* Progress towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training – Indicators and Benchmarks – 2009.
- These “EU” documents find their “applied” version in studies and papers, produced for example by:
 - ACA: <http://www.aca-secretariat.be/index.php?id=4>,
 - EAIE: <http://www.eaie.org/publications/>,
 - EUA: the TRENDS report: Trends VI: A decade of change in European Higher Education – March 2010
 - EURASHE: ‘10 Commitments for EHEA in 2020 - Vision and Strategies’
- and then we have also the **Commissioners** for Education themselves, like Viviane Reding (Erasmus Mundus), Jan Figel (EIT) and now Androulla Vassiliou. Read her priorities linked to a very realistic analysis of the current situation in Higher Education: http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/vassiliou/about/priorities/index_en.htm and listen to the Press Conference 15/09/2010 on “Youth on the Move”.
- Initiatives have also been developed by **the networks of universities and university colleges** like EUA, EURASHE, ACA, starting obviously with the Sorbonne Joint

Declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (May 25, 1998) leading to the Bologna Declaration and the so-called Bologna Process (see: <http://www.ehea.info/>)

- EAIE, NAFSA, ASEM, CHEPS regroup also **internationalists and study centres**.
- The **national education units** like DAAD, NUFFIC, CIMO, SUI, EPOS, AEF, FLAMENCO, and so many more, do their utmost to provide assistance to the local international officers and are a real asset in the decentralised actions.
- Interesting are also the publications of the **Students' networks** like ESN. Having 3 million students on the move in 2012, needs more support than at present, and not only financially, but also concerning administration, recognition of study or placement periods, joint or double/multiple degrees and also plain support!
- On top of that not to be underestimated the work of the **Bologna experts, the Tuning specialists** and the **Quality control organisations** like ENQA

To come back to the initial statement: Do EU policies matter in Education? Yes, they definitely do. The EU has the necessary incentives to encourage emulation among institutions (and not only ranking- wise) and helps assuming responsibility towards students and staff, which is the core business of the CEO's of Education. The International Officers have to second them through the labyrinth of guidelines of the various programmes. It would (wishful thinking?) be good to have a regrouping of programmes with more coherence for the financial and administrative criteria? Will there be an encouragement for a longer duration of the projects? Will the programmes be simplified? (this is certainly a dream!).

Two things to focus now already on:

ET2020 (Education and Training) is very much in at present, based on strategies for **smart, sustainable and inclusive growth** through: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

This means also focusing on vocational training, on adult education, on multidisciplinary, on multifocus interregionalism, on multi-actor challenges, on multi-ethnicity. How otherwise develop "new skills for new jobs", in the aftermath of the crisis. This all ought to lead to a new concept (buzz word already?) "**world class education**".

And the other is "Youth on the Move" flagship initiative: the aim is to enhance the performance and international attractiveness of Europe's higher education institutions and raise the overall quality of all levels of education and training in the EU, combining

both excellence and equity, by promoting student mobility and trainees' mobility, and improve the employment situation of young people.

Although this all can be found on the web: http://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/news1646_en.htm, it is good to have a go at it immediately as the guidelines will be based on these resolutions of the Council:

At EU level, the Commission will work:

- To integrate and enhance the EU's mobility, university and researchers' programmes (such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and Marie Curie) and link them up with national programmes and resources;
- To step up the modernisation agenda of higher education (curricula, governance and financing) including by benchmarking university performance and educational outcomes in a global context;
- To explore ways of promoting entrepreneurship through mobility programmes for young professionals;
- To promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- To launch a Youth employment framework outlining policies aimed at reducing youth unemployment rates: this should promote, with Member States and social partners, young people's entry into the labour market through apprenticeships, stages or other work experience, including a scheme ("Your first EURES job") aimed at increasing job opportunities for young people by favouring mobility across the EU.

At national level, Member States will need:

- To ensure efficient investment in education and training systems at all levels (pre-school to tertiary);
- To improve educational outcomes, addressing each segment (pre-school, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary) within an integrated approach, encompassing key competences and aiming at reducing early school leaving;
- To enhance the openness and relevance of education systems by building national qualification frameworks and better gearing learning outcomes towards labour market needs.
- To improve young people's entry into the labour market through integrated action covering i.a guidance, counselling and apprenticeships.

We have this way our new checklist at hand: smart, inclusive, sustainable, quality, mobility, qualifications, recognition, ranking, benchmarking... coherence. Do enjoy writing your next application(s) leading to world-class education!

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