

Athens, 31 March 2009

Round Table discussion "Tertiary education in Greece: The preconditions for a modern university"

Organised by the educational sector of PASOK

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The search for quality: a (pre)view of 21st century education and research in universities in Europe

1. The present outlook tells us that never before has the future been as fragile and predictions as impossible. Beyond the blaming and efforts to move out from the financial and economic crisis, one should not forget the question which kind of future society we want to live in. If indeed we are leaving the neoliberal order behind, what are we moving into?

2. One of the (few) remaining legacies of the Enlightenment that still captures the collective imagination is the need and desire to invest into the future, uncertain as it is, by means of education and research. Education promises human betterment to one's children as well as being the basis for societal evolution. Research – the production of new knowledge based on science and technology – has demonstrated to be the motor of economic growth. Despite some concerns about risks associated with science and technology, they have successfully transformed our lives and there is a firm societal commitment to bring their enormous potential to fruition.

3. There have also been some profound changes and transformations of the science system beginning in 1945 with Vannevar Bush's "Science, The Endless Frontier", which initiated sustained and substantial funding of R&D activities through governments. In the 70's an influential OECD report shook up European governments to open their tertiary education system for a much higher percentage of the age cohort. This has led to the massification of universities in continental Europe, but was achieved largely without the necessary concomitant increase in public funding which has leveled off practically in every country, although the level varies greatly. Massification also led to a 'democratization' of universities, increasing over time the inherent tension with the principle of meritocracy. Universities in most

European countries are currently struggling in an often painful process of transition to adjust their structure and organization accordingly.

4. One major impact that led to a profound change in university-industry relations can be traced to the impact of the fall of Communism that coincided with the rise of neoliberal globalization. With few exceptions, industry everywhere ceased to perform in-house research (although it continues to perform development). It is now in a position to find the knowledge it needs – and the well-trained graduates it looks for – anywhere around the globe. This has led to a novel kind of competition among universities, as can be seen from the various rankings, in which European universities finish at best as bronze medal winners. Compared to US universities, they are both underfinanced and underperforming.

5. Among the main obstacles towards a restructuring/modernization of European universities three stand out:

- the fiction of legal equality asserts that all university degrees are equal, i.e. from a legal point of view the undeniable quality differences are ignored
- European universities are not sufficiently differentiated, i.e. they all aspire to be able to combine research and teaching in a universal, Humboldtian spirit, instead of sharpening their own, unique profile. Moreover, the differentiation that exists is vertical in the sense of one being worth more than another (e.g. universities in the capital vs. provincial universities) instead of seeking a horizontal differentiation
- legal strictures that limit the autonomy of universities, both financially, in the selection of students and recruitment of professors; dismal Ph.D. supervision etc.

6. Improvements include

- increased mobility of students through EU programmes have opened up a wider horizon, both intellectually and students being able to ‘vote with their feet’
- the Bologna process has opened up the national space to mobility and competition among European universities. Being a soft law, the

interpretation and speed with which 'Bologna' has been adopted, varies greatly

- more autonomy has been granted to universities in many countries, but inner reforms are difficult to achieve without additional public funding. Among the reforms are the strengthening of the university leadership. Fears of yielding influence to industry have been vastly exaggerated. The main problem has been to induce true leadership within an organization that was run in a collegial mode before and to introduce accountability at all levels (rectorate-deans-professors-junior professors-students)

7. It is still a long way towards a professionalized university, characterized by its own quality assurance mechanisms, accountability at all levels of governance and, whether one likes it or not, a full cost model. Key for the long term quality and reputation of any university is the recruitment of professors, that has to become proactive and international on a competitive basis.

8. The search for quality in the 21st century will therefore depend on the speed and direction in which a formerly elite/oligarchic university transforms itself into a modern, professionalized university. Each university must define and implement its own strategic profile. Differentiation is inevitable and must go both ways: students must be able to select what suits their needs and aspirations best and universities must be able to select the students that fit into their profile, especially at MA and Ph.D. level. Open and free access should be offered at the BA level, however.

9. In terms of research the European Research Council is setting new international standards for excellence and peer review. The impact the ERC has on universities is already visible with many universities actively starting to identify and cultivate their best young researchers and to improve working conditions.

10. *Two major challenges* stand out for universities at the beginning of the 21 century: one is demographic, the other pertaining to content. Current demographic trends indicate an aging of European societies and a decline among younger age groups, especially in the 18-24 age range. Concomitantly and compared to the rest of the world, the percentage of university graduates in Europe is decreasing. It is unlikely that the lack of

students in numbers will be made up by importing them. Brain drain still has to become brain circulation. Europe has no tradition of aggressively 'selling' its higher education to non-Europeans. Nor is it likely that universities will adopt a life-long learning model as part of their mission. Therefore, raising the quality of its higher education and to excel in research remains the only viable option to cope with the declining numbers of students.

11. The second challenge is curriculum reform, arguably the most significant kind of change a university can undertake. Having been mainly concerned with its architecture so far, the Bologna process has neglected content. What kind of knowledge should a BA graduate take with him/her upon graduation that will equip them to deal with the challenges of the 21st century in a globalizing world? What knowledge and skills are indispensable as well as far-sighted at the MA and Ph.D level? Where is the place for interdisciplinarity in teaching and research? How can the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching be improved (e.g. case-based learning, e-learning)?

12. Above all, how can we assure that the university of the 21st century will be more open towards societal expectations and its problems? While the saying "the world has problems, the university has departments" will hopefully no longer apply, the problems which many European universities undoubtedly have should not let us forget, however, that the university is one of the few institutions that has sustained the capacity of offering 'solutions' through pushing further into the terrain of the unknown and to produce new knowledge. It has the capacity of training young people to think critically for themselves and to teach them to respond to public expectations. How can the knowledge thus gained be put to good use, not only for their own benefit, but for society as well? It is up to us to decide and to act accordingly.