

Chapter 3

Europe 2020: Will Higher Education in the European Union be a Catalyst for a More Dynamic, Prosperous Economy?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to enhance academic and policy-maker understanding of the European Union's (EU) evolving higher education system by providing context and an overview of some of the major higher education initiatives currently being implemented as EU higher education adapts to turbulent economies, unstable political systems, and rapidly changing social structures. The recognition that higher education is the driver of a country's knowledge-based economy has impacted higher education policies at a national and supranational level. Divergence among the EU member states in their organization of higher education, and the emergence of challenges which go beyond national frontiers, has proved the catalyst for developing a cohesive policy and strategy for EU higher education delivery. Initial efforts to increase European influence in national higher education policy began with the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and continued with the Bologna Declaration (1999), the Lisbon Strategy (2000), and finally the EU 2020 strategy (2010).

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, Europe, and other advanced economies, “new wealth is now being created more by information, management, services, and technology than by the mainstays of the preceding industrial revolution: agriculture, heavy industry, and manufacturing” (Fallon, 2012, p. 713). This

new economy depends upon stable, democratic governments and a citizenship educated with the knowledge and skills to meet known and unknown societal needs in the 21st century. European higher education reform has been sped along by several Europe-wide processes and has given rise to a series of ambitious goals and objectives designed to ensure “long term European pre-eminence as both

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a knowledge producer and transmitter” (Enders, De Boer, File, Jongbloed, & Westerheijden, 2011, p. 1). The recent economic downturn in several member states has made addressing these issues even more crucial. American higher education reform and the need to maintain knowledge-creation parity with other developed and developing countries have been championed by the US government and President Barack Obama. In 2010, speaking at the University of Texas, President Obama told the gathered audience that “in a single generation, we’ve fallen from first place to 12th place in college graduation rates for young adults. Think about that. In one generation we went from number one to number 12.” Setting the stage for a US 2020 strategy, President Obama made it known that his goal was to raise the college graduation rate to 60 percent in 10 years (2020). President Obama’s rationale for the increased graduation rates? “We also know that in the coming decades, a high school diploma is not going to be enough. Folks need a college degree. They need workforce training. They need a higher education.” President Obama’s plan to meet that goal? A three-pronged strategy of making college more affordable, revising college programs to ensure that they are more relevant to current market demands, and making sure existing students graduate.

This chapter is organized as follows. We start by outlining the EU political context and explaining how higher education institutions are placed within this context. We then delineate the decisive steps in European cooperation and integration in the field of higher education. This will set the stage for the subsequent analysis. We outline the processes (Bologna Process, Lisbon Strategy, and EU 2020) that are contributing to increasing similarity of European higher education systems by examining the concrete objectives set for the construction of a common European degree structure. Finally, we discuss how EU efforts to dramatically restructure and improve upon institutions of higher education, at the national and supranational levels, are influencing US policy and its efforts to improve its own educational system.

THE EU POLITICAL CONTEXT

To fully understand EU higher education policy it is necessary to understand 20th-century European history. After the immense destruction of World War II the overall European target was to create a common zone with economic and political integration. European politicians wanted, above all, to end international strife, foster social harmony, and promote economic well-being (Dinan, 2004). The six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) launched the EU by signing a treaty in 1951 to establish the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and a second treaty in 1957 to establish the European Economic Community (EEC). These six countries took a leap of faith by agreeing to exercise some of their powers in common. The treaties establishing the EEC sought to establish a common market in which goods, capital, services, and people could move freely from one EEC country to another.

However, while the founding members shared an evident political will to move towards common policy in a variety of fields, there remained numerous barriers to the free movement of capital, services, and people. Member states agreed to share sovereignty or national authority in certain policy areas but retained considerable national control through the European Council of Ministers (ECM) (also known as the Council of the European Union), a key EU decision-making body. The ECM is a distinct entity consisting of national leaders and the Commission president and is the most powerful body in the EU today.

A European Parliament (EP) was established to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the Community. Today the 754-member EP is a key EU institution. Although the EP does not formally initiate EU legislation, it plays a significant role in the EU’s legislative and budgeting processes and works closely with the two other main EU bodies, the European Commission and the ECM. Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time.

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