



Realising the potential of quality in learning and teaching in higher education in Europe

Per un insegnamento/apprendimento di qualità nelle università europee

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ABSTRACT

The High Level Group is examining the barriers to and potential of the wider introduction of new modes of learning and teaching and will publish its report in mid-2014. It will shed a light on the most recent developments in the digital age and its consequences for higher education systems and institutions.

Technology is not a panacea for structural challenges in our higher education systems, but used intelligently, it can help to address them. It can serve to adapt teaching and learning to provide graduates with employable skills to boost jobs and growth. Its potential to free teachers and students alike from the 'old ways' of doing things, to move from transmission of knowledge to co-creation of knowledge, can also boost the innovation potential of higher education.

L' High Level Group sta esaminando le barriere che si frappongono alla più ampia introduzione di nuove modalità di insegnamento apprendimento e il relativo potenziale e pubblicherà il suo report alla metà del 2014. Cercherà di fare luce sui più recenti sviluppi dell'era digitale e sulle sue conseguenze sul sistema e sulle istituzioni della educazione universitaria. La tecnologia non è una panacea per le sfide strutturali del nostro sistema educativo universitario, ma usata intelligentemente può aiutare a risolverle. Può servire ad esempio per rivedere l'insegnamento e l'apprendimento in modo da fornire ai laureati le capacità necessarie per facilitare l'accesso al lavoro e alimentare la crescita.

Le possibilità che offre di liberare docenti e studenti dal vecchio modo di fare le cose e di passare dalla trasmissione alla co-creazione della conoscenza, può anche dare un impulso al potenziale di innovazione della educazione universitaria.

KEYWORDS

New Technologies, Modernisation, Teaching, Learning.

Nuove Tecnologie, Modernizzazione, Insegnamento, Apprendimento.

1. Introduction

Europe continues to grapple with considerable challenges – challenges too big to be dealt with by any one country alone: the economic crisis, unemployment, especially for young people, changing demographics, the emergence of new competitors, new technologies and modes of working. In this highly charged context, Europe needs to foreground education as a safeguard for the future – to nurture the talents and potential of people from all sectors of society, and spur on our economic and societal recovery.

For in this changing and fragile world, education not only holds the key to unlocking better jobs and greater economic growth; but the cultural, political and social deepening it offers is vital, helping to create citizens who are both rounded and grounded, who can offer steady leadership in their local, regional, national and international communities. Europe's citizens need the kind of education that enables them to engage articulately as committed, active, global citizens as well as economic actors in the ethical, sustainable development of our societies. With these concerns as the backdrop, Europe has a key role and responsibility in fixing on the right policy priorities to guide the future.

In allocating funds in the European budget for the 2014-2020 period, European governments made the wise decision to increase funding for education and research – the only spending areas that saw an increase. While governments today face hard choices in balancing their budgets, this concern to protect education and research funding needs to be reflected at all levels of policy governance, because both are keys to the future of Europe.

If Europe is to develop in a sustainable way, as a hub for innovative, high quality goods and services, we need modern education systems as an enabler of that future, as a motor for innovation, job and knowledge creation. This means ensuring that higher education institutions equip students with cutting-edge knowledge and high level, flexible skills relevant for the world of work. And it means developing diverse and differentiated education systems where different types of institutions are valued, from vocationally oriented education up to doctoral schools.

And we should offer our citizens the opportunity to be globally connected. All learners in Europe should be able to partake in international experiences. A growing number of people do not see their village, city, region, country as their labour market, but rather the European Union as a whole or even beyond our Union. Study mobility, such as through the Erasmus programme, opens young people's eyes to new opportunities. And, as I remember from my days as a teaching professor, the presence and participation on campus of students coming from other higher education traditions brings fresh and valuable insights for academic staff too.

2. Setting the scene: The growing demand for higher education

The demand for higher education is expected to grow exponentially from the current 100 million students worldwide to 400+ million by 2030, particularly from emerging economies. Even in Europe, where population numbers will decline in some Member States, higher education enrolment continues to increase in many countries; we expect that higher education attainment rates among those aged 30-34 will increase from around 36% to 40% by 2020 which meets the Europe 2020 headline target set by heads of state in 2010. In addition to this, around 500,000 first

time resident permits were issued by EU Member States to third-country nationals for educational purposes – mostly students – in 2011 (European Migration Network Synthesis Report – Immigration of International Students to the EU, 2013).

At the same time, Europe faces an acute skills deficit. 20% of our workforce is low-skilled. Education and training are still not fostering and developing the digital competences necessary for the current economy and society: by 2015, 90% of jobs will require at least a basic level of digital skills, while in 2012, 49% of Europeans had low or no digital skills.

The Programme of the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) from the OECD has demonstrated worrying variances in skills levels of graduates across Europe. In some countries higher education graduates have only gained a year or two of skills compared with upper secondary graduates. In others upper secondary graduates score as well as or better than higher education graduates elsewhere.

And above all there is a funding squeeze: the economic crisis is putting pressure on educational financing. The cost of education for families and individuals is likely to increase. Current constraints in public budgets push countries and education institutions to look for other sources of financing.

These projections and developments call for action and raise several questions: Will our higher education institutions in Europe and beyond be able to cope with such a massive growth of the student population? Can the quality of higher education be sustained in the face of this quantitative leap? Will there be sufficient funding for that massive expansion of higher education?

3. The work of the high level group on the modernisation of higher education

In the light of this backdrop, the European Commission established in September 2012 a High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education with the mandate to discuss three pressing subjects in higher education. The first was how to best promote quality in teaching and learning. The report¹ of the group was presented in June 2013 to the public. It highlighted that teaching skills are key for higher education systems faced with the dual challenge of taking in ever more students while raising the quality of education. In our research and discussions with policy makers, stakeholders and institutions, it became clear that only a minority of countries have structured or continuous didactical and pedagogical preparation of college and university teachers.

There are some exceptions, though. The high level group heard from a number of higher education institutions and policymakers about their advanced experiences in promoting quality teaching and learning and their initiatives to promote teaching skills as core to academic standing.

Taking inspiration from these beacons of good practice, the report of the group developed realistic and transferable recommendations for higher education institutions, Member States and the EU on how to best improve the quality of teaching and learning. The report took into account the different starting points of countries and institutions and offers a tool box of instruments to pave

1 The full report of the High Level Group on “Improving the quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe’s Higher Education Institutions” can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf

the way to a Europe where outstanding teaching and learning informs high quality higher education.

The group came up with recommendations to close the gaps they observed: proposing for example certified pedagogical training for all teaching staff by 2020 – interestingly, a measure introduced by the Dutch government last summer; governmental and institutional strategies to support and improve the quality of teaching and learning; a recommendation that institutions take teaching performance into account in the entrance, progression and promotion of academic staff; as well as to place teaching on an equal footing with research, not only in career terms, but to ensure that both missions combine in a way that good teaching is always informed by the latest research results in any discipline.

4. New modes of learning and teaching in higher education

But learning and teaching do not happen only in the lecture hall or library. Technology – in theory at least – frees teaching and learning from the constraints of time and space. Recently, we have witnessed an active, global (and sometimes rather hyped) debate, on new modes of learning and teaching in higher education, namely massive open online courses, small private online courses, the better use of ICT and open educational resources in our education systems.

The European Commission took up this debate and published in September 2013 a strategy paper² on Opening Up Education which sets a political framework for the potential use of new modes of learning and teaching in the European Union.

Opening Up Education has a powerful central message: technology is not a panacea for structural challenges in our higher education systems, but used intelligently, it can help to address them. It can serve to adapt teaching and learning to provide graduates with employable skills to boost jobs and growth. Its potential to free teachers and students alike from the ‘old ways’ of doing things, to move from transmission of knowledge to co-creation of knowledge, can also boost the innovation potential of higher education.

Interestingly, the findings of the 2013 Time Invention Poll underlined that a good education system, including world class universities, is a vital precondition for fostering a culture of inventiveness. But this poll also revealed that the academic profession was rated as only middlingly inventive; and education was seen as the least likely sector to produce inventiveness in the future. So, higher education is seen as providing people with skills that enable innovation – but not as a place where innovation happens!

Managed well, new modes of learning may also help usher in equity gains in higher education, by introducing greater flexibility into learning (part-time, on-line, distance learning) and alleviating costs for institutions, students and families, by supporting and enhancing the usage of Open Educational Resources. However, the jury is still out on this one, based on the experience to date with MOOCs, where the majority of people signing up are mature learners who already have a higher education qualification.

2 <<http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/education-technology.htm>>

The debate about new modes of learning continues – and there are some signs that European universities and policymakers are acting on the challenge. But it is not yet the case that academia – even if it has thrown off its ivory tower image – is demonstrably at the forefront of change.

Digital technologies are today an integral part of how most people interact, work and trade. We must not shy away from these changes in education, but instead harness their potential. In doing so, we need to explore how online learning can be an integral part of the way higher education is delivered – as it already is in many institutions – including in terms of its recognition, accreditation and quality assurance. Since higher education today is already chronically underfunded, it would be naïve to simply ask for more money for introducing new modes of learning and teaching in our higher education systems and institutions. Rather the funding for new modes of delivery should become an integral part of the mainstream financing package for our universities and colleges. Higher education institutions know best what fits their profile and how they can allocate the necessary funding for it.

That does not mean that governments and policy makers can hold back and leave it all to the institutions. We still need the right policy frameworks, incentives and programmes to support developments by institutions, teachers and learners. The European Union has already made a step in the right direction: Ensuring that all educational materials produced via funding from the new Erasmus+ programme are made freely accessible to all citizens, on the principle that anything paid for by public money should benefit the public more widely.

In the light of this debate, the High Level Group is examining the barriers to and potential of the wider introduction of new modes of learning and teaching and will publish its report in mid-2014. It will shed a light on the most recent developments in the digital age and its consequences for higher education systems and institutions.

As in our first report, we will aim to make sound recommendations on how policy makers, higher education institutions, teachers and students can make best use of the potential of new modes of learning. I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of our reflections, but I think it is possible we will see more an evolution than a revolution, a complementary development to the existing formal and non-formal systems and a potential tool for reviving lifelong learning in higher education, which so far is often more lip-service than reality.

Given the speed and depth of the technological revolution thus far, it is almost impossible to predict what is around the corner in education. No matter what technological developments will take place, we will still have learners and we will still have teachers. Though their respective roles may evolve, they will still continue to engage with each other in the learning process. Teachers need to be prepared to use new ways and modes of teaching, as do learners. The foundations for a successful application of all these new modes have to be laid early, from pre-primary education rather than waiting for upper secondary or higher education. And most importantly, we need to ensure that technology does not reinforce social divides, where the already advantaged are advantaged even further. MOOCs have been flagged for their accessibility – available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. We have to be sure this translates into better learning and better life opportunities in reality.

5. So what can be done? And who has to do it?

The High Level Group on the modernisation of higher education already gave 16 recommendations on how best to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our last report. These recommendations were focused on the role of higher education institutions, Member States and the European Union. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, however – and that is as true of our latest theme of digital learning as it was of the first report. The responses of universities and colleges in Europe will certainly be as diverse as our higher education landscape is across and within the 28 member States of the European Union. Yet I am sure that Europe, Member States and higher education institutions have to act. And that it is time to act now. For, despite the efforts made in several countries of the European Union, European higher education systems are more often followers rather than leaders in the current process of change. And governments will always want to weigh up the pay-off between governmental steering and the need not to constrain innovation and creativity coming out of higher education institutions.

Still I believe that taking a European overview of where governments may choose to act can be helpful. We may want to alert governments to consider taking initiatives on a number of enablers for digital learning and teaching, looking for example at issues such as:

- How up to date are government higher education strategies to using the full potential of new technologies in their higher education system?
- How open are existing quality assurance, recognition and certification regimes to taking account of the specificities of digital learning and teaching?
- How adaptable are funding frameworks to financing adequate infrastructures, and developing and applying new modes of learning and teaching?

These thoughts will be further fleshed out in the high level group. I look forward to a report that that will give useful pointers to paths all stakeholders in higher education can take to lead our societies into a more digital, more flexible and more empowering future.

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