

Alpbach Higher Education Symposium
2014-08-20

Session: Times They are a-Changin' -
How Societal Trends Impact European Universities

Can Universities Re-energise Europe?

Sir John Daniel¹

Introduction

We offer universities three challenges. First, can universities contribute to a healing process now that Europe stands accused as a 'sick continent' economically and politically? Second, can European universities implement genuine reforms for this purpose? The Bologna process is not an encouraging precedent! Third, are MOOCs the long-awaited technological revolution in higher education?

A sick continent?

The term 'sick man of Europe', much in vogue since World War II, has been applied variously to the UK, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Russia, Greece, France and, most recently, to the European Union itself. Some commentators call Europe a sick continent, pointing to lacklustre economies and recent elections where many citizens opposed the 'ever closer union of the peoples of Europe' – at least as currently pursued. The EU's recent difficulties in applying sanctions to Russia and agreeing on the appointments of European commissioners confirm the malaise.

Are universities part of the problem or part of the solution? They have enjoyed and benefited from closer European integration. Academics visit other European countries more often than they did 30 years ago, but is academic progress symbolic or real? I was frustrated, when I headed the UK Open University in the 1990s, to find that the success of a research proposal to the European Commission depended less on the quality of the project than on getting institutions in a wide variety of countries to sign it. No doubt research collaboration across borders has increased, but have we paid a price in efficiency or quality? I simply pose the question.

But today's major challenges are employment and technology. The unemployment of young people is a worldwide problem – but particularly acute in Europe. Technology is transforming the way we live, but European universities seem content to ape North American developments such as MOOCs.

¹ Chair, International Board, United World Colleges; Senior Advisor, Academic Partnerships.

Europe's universities need reforms to address these issues but their track record of implementing change is dismal.

Can universities implement real reforms?

In 1999 Europe aspired to create 'the most dynamic and attractive higher education system in the world' through the Bologna process. What has happened since then?

The current level of collaboration among universities is qualified as 'revolutionary' in official documents. However, five years ago Gilder and Wells², in their article *Bologna "Unplugged": Uncovering the Base Track of a Major European-Wide Higher Educational Reform Initiative*, assessed the implementation of the Bologna Process 'without the rhetoric, without the technocratic lingo, jargon, tweaking and manipulation which renders it a resounding palatable success story.' We shall summarise their conclusions. Please disagree later in the session if you think the picture is better today.

Discounting the official discourse, these authors consulted stakeholders. They found that many did not really believe in the Bologna Process, smiling and nodding about in public, but quietly sneering at in private. The practical consequence is that the implementation of Bologna has been largely fudged, particularly in three areas.

1) ...and then there were three!

According to Gilder and Wells, 'some of the Bologna 46 have crudely and mindlessly simply sliced up their previous two-cycle university degree structure into three parts, artificially creating three qualifications out of the same study period as was historically traditional for their system. To date, little consideration has been given to the content of each level's qualification, their fitness for purpose (e.g. 1st-cycle degree relevant to the labour market)'

2) ...'employability' – a word untranslatable in most European languages

This fudge has eviscerated a key purpose of the Bologna process, which is to enable students to go directly into the world of work with a 3-year Bachelor's degree. However, to quote the authors, 'once they are in a program, they are told, implicitly if not explicitly, that the 1st-level degree is actually not worth anything... Those who promulgate this myth are of course technically correct, for the simple reason that the new 1st-cycle degree was often never re-designed in the first place... Students are thus urged to study on to the Master's level if they are to be really qualified, thereby effectively ensuring the status quo of yesteryear, to the students' great chagrin. Furthermore, employers also believe the Bachelor's degree is substandard (if not worthless), and are encouraged to do so by academics'. And later: 'if the three-degree cycles had been redesigned properly, this

² E. Gilder and P. J. Wells (2009) Bologna "Unplugged": Uncovering the Base Track of a Major European-Wide Higher Educational Reform Initiative, *American, British and Canadian Studies: Academic Anglophone Society of Romania*, pp. 114-131

would be clearly evident and evidenced by the existence of accurate and relevant learning outcomes’.

3) ... *‘we are a university, not a bank’*

As this quip from a university rector suggests, a third area of fudge is credits. Gilder and Wells again: ‘a system of credits has already been adopted in the Bologna 46, regardless of the lack of curriculum reform, regardless of an avoidance of learning outcomes and regardless of any concrete reform in the purpose of each degree cycle. Somewhat magically, a system of credits... has been introduced almost across-the-board. Reflect on that achievement for a moment: degree contents have not, by and large, changed; degree purposes remain as they were, for no one can agree on new learning outcomes, yet credit weights have deftly been assigned to each course. How did that happen? Did someone wake up one morning and say “this course is worth 10 credits and that one 32”? Based on what? Did they just divide the number of courses for each qualification by the total recommended for each cycle? Unfortunately, these questions are rhetorical ones, because that is exactly what happened. Three degrees were “demanded” by policymakers, three degrees of 180, 240 or 360 credits were produced forthwith.’

Unless things have changed dramatically since Gilder and Wells’ 2009 research, we can only conclude that European universities have largely perverted the purposes of the Bologna Process. Yet this reform was intended to create more employable students and facilitate their transfer between institutions. These imperatives have only become more pressing since Bologna was launched in 1999!

MOOCs are not a revolution!

As regards technology we shall focus only on MOOCs, not because they are the most important innovation *per se*, but because they have made universities everywhere take the online world seriously. Canada pioneered the first MOOC in 2008 but they made news headlines when US universities offered them in 2012 using a more conservative model. Since then even sober papers like *The Economist* have joined the breathless media coverage about a revolution in higher education. Although the frenzy has now abated somewhat in North America, MOOCs are still the flavour of the month in Europe to judge by a MOOCs summit held earlier this year in Lausanne.

MOOCs are not a revolution in higher education for two reasons.

First, higher education progresses by evolution, not revolution. Three examples make the point. Two hundred years ago Wilhelm von Humboldt urged institutions to be more research focused. Considered revolutionary at the time, Humboldt’s ideas are now seen as just one step in the evolution of academe. The same goes for the Morrill Act creating the US Land Grant colleges and universities. These institutions taught practical subjects in response to the industrial revolution – hardly the academic revolution that some feared. Most land-grant colleges are now large public universities offering full curricula. In the

20th century there was talk of revolution when the UK Open University opened. We see now that technologies were revolutionising the communications environment around higher education but not the institutions.

Second, MOOCs are not a revolution in higher education because they are not really higher education! MOOCs touch on each of the three academic functions of teaching, research and service without being fully aligned with any one of them. A vital element of the teaching function is assessing and credentialing students, which is the most important power that societies give to universities. Yet most MOOCs do not lead to credentials.

Their significance lies in the trends that MOOCs have initiated and accelerated. They have greatly boosted interest in online learning. However, most MOOCs still rely on a small team of overworked (and often overwhelmed) instructors and assistants desperately trying to put order into large operations that are already complex – even without the requirement of student assessment and credentialing. This approach is not sustainable.

Institutions must combine the lessons gleaned from MOOCs with the standard practices of open, distance and online learning in order to present courses that lead to credible and useful credentials. Offering credit courses at scale is perfectly possible, as open universities have long demonstrated. But that requires teaching and learning systems based on the principles of division of labour, economies of scale and specialisation. Adopting them will solve another major problem of MOOCs – the absence of a viable business model. Students will pay for credit courses, although in an online learning system the fees can be lower

Most universities will require help to make this transition, whether they evolve into online teaching gradually, one programme at a time, or attempt to transform the whole institution quickly. There are many examples of successful partnerships between universities and companies, such as *Academic Partnerships* (to which the author is an advisor), to implement such changes. In concrete terms this requires that the university be sovereign in matters of curriculum and assessment standards, while the business partner concentrates on making the processes and the technologies work.