

Alpbach Higher Education Symposium  
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Session: Times They are a-Changin' -  
How Societal Trends Impact European Universities

### **Can Universities Re-energise Europe?**

Sir John Daniel

#### Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here and an honour to challenge you in this first session. We are here because Europe is at a crossroads.

This is a year of significant anniversaries but our task at this part of the Forum is to ask whether universities are equipping us for the changing world that Europe now faces.

I shall not present a rosy picture. The international media often present Europe as an ailing or sick continent, pointing to three serious problems.

First, the continent's economy is lacklustre and produces too few jobs, especially for young people.

Second, democracy is weakening at the European level and many citizens no longer agree with its core theme of closer union.

Third, at least in higher education we import technological developments from North America rather than pioneering them ourselves.

#### Jobs

Let me take these one by one. First jobs! This was the cover of an issue of *The Economist* newspaper last year. The article included this chart showing the desperate problem of inactivity among young people. Some regions have it worse than Europe but the situation here is grave enough.

This map shows the unemployment rates of young people country by country. We are in Austria, where the rate is less than 10% but look at Greece and Spain where it exceeds 50%. Here are the same figures again with a ranking of countries. It does make one wonder what happened to the economic convergence that European union was meant to foster. The question for us is what are universities doing to counter this terrible problem?

#### Democracy

Concerning democracy there are two issues. The first is the steady decline in voter turnout – although to be fair it held steady at 43% in the elections earlier this year. The second is the strong performance, in certain countries, of parties that reject some of the

basic principles of the European project, notably ever-closer union and the free movement of people.

### Technology

Turning to the area of technology in higher education there is a simple question. Must Europe always be a copycat, notably of what happens in North America?

The big question for this Forum is whether universities can re-energise Europe. Can our universities, some of them founded at the beginning of the last millennium, guide us into the challenge of this new millennium? Putting the question in a more pragmatic way, can they implement the reforms necessary to address contemporary challenges?

### The Bologna Process: A Fudge?

Sadly, the track record is not encouraging. For 15 years Europe has been trying to put in place a Bologna Process and a European Higher Education Area with the aim, declared in 1999, of ‘creating the most dynamic and attractive higher education system in the world’. This was billed as a major shake-up of the existing system.

It has engaged governments, associations and institutions in many meetings over the years. But what has been the outcome?

Five years ago Gilder and Wells<sup>1</sup>, in their article *Bologna “Unplugged”*, 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.’ I shall summarise their conclusions, which are that this reform has been a massive fudge on at least three dimensions.

First, they allege that the splitting of university programmes into three cycles has been little more than a formal exercise. I quote: “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 or their fitness for purpose, particularly the relevance of the 1st-cycle degree to the labour market”.

Second 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 programme, they are told... 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... if the three-degree cycles had been redesigned

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<sup>1</sup> 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

properly, this would be clearly evident and evidenced by the existence of accurate and relevant learning outcomes”.

As this quip from a university rector suggests, credits is the third area of fudge. As the authors allege: ‘a system of credits has 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... 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, 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 subverted the purposes of the Bologna Process. Yet this reform was intended to create more employable students, an imperative that has only become more pressing since Bologna was launched in 1999!

#### Are MOOCs a Revolution?

I conclude with some brief remarks on technology.

I shall focus on Massive Open Online Courses – MOOCs, which Europe is importing from North America.

The first MOOC was offered in Canada in 2008. But they hit the headlines when elite US universities like MIT and Harvard began enrolling hundreds of thousands of learners in MOOCs in 2012. Other US universities decided that if Harvard was doing MOOCs they must be OK. So a flock of institutions followed suit. This led to great diversification so that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC became variable and negotiable.

Europe joined the euphoria in the last year. And is now contributing a share of the thousand plus MOOCs on offer worldwide.

There are various European MOOC initiatives. But Mathieu Cisel, who is doing a Ph.D. on MOOCs, finds that in Europe they suffer from a lack of innovation and coordination. Worse still, you hear Europeans echoing the American press of two years ago and claiming that MOOCs are a revolution in higher education. This is not true for two reasons.

First higher education does not do revolutions. Three examples.

The Humboldtian notion of the research university may have seemed like a revolution in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but was soon absorbed into the steady evolution of higher

education. The same was true of the creation of Land Grant universities in the US later in the century. And in the last century the establishment of the Open University in the UK was slow to affect universities generally.

Another reason is that MOOCs are not really higher education. The most important power that societies give to their universities is the authority to award degrees and credentials. Anyone is free to organise teaching and learning. Most MOOCs do not lead to credentials and they will not be a really significant contribution to higher education until they do, especially in employment related areas.

MOOCs are, however, serving a useful function in pushing mainstream higher education in new directions. They are making all universities take online learning seriously. They are encouraging the offering of shorter courses and they are stimulating universities to form partnerships with commercial companies in order to create the organisational infrastructure needed to offer regular programmes online at scale.

#### Concluding Question

I shall leave it there, repeating the question I started with. Can universities engage in the genuine reforms necessary to help Europe recover some economic, political and technological zest?