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European university reform

Ten propositions in search of an answer

What for the US has been a tradition of collaborating with a prosperous private business world, for the Europeans risks turning into an acceptance of the dictates of the economy. Romanian academic Ioana Bot on the "entrepreneurial university" and other myths of Bologna.

1. European university reform as defined by the Bologna Declaration (the "Bologna reform") copes more efficiently than the traditional European system with the pressure from US universities on the world academic market.

Indeed, this was one of the main justifications for adopting the Declaration and undertaking the reforms. But as yet there are no studies analysing the results of the reform vis-à-vis competition with US universities. Seen from the "grassroots" of the lecture theatre, nothing seems to have changed in the relationship between "us the Europeans" and "them the Americans". French, German or Italian protest movements in the past two to four years do not demonstrate academics' trust in the efficiency of the new system.

2. This system of educational organisation is better suited to the entrepreneurial type of universities — private establishments relying on funding from top-level business and industry.

Perhaps. The North American experience seems to indicate this. However, if that is the case, what needs to be reformed is an enormous number of cultural practices which make up the old European tradition and which justify and favour the "Humboldtian" university dedicated to advanced research and free-thinking independent of the market. Obviously, the European universities — which are endemically underfunded because, more often than not, they rely on state sponsorship — are now looking to secure investment from more attractive economic sources. During times of crisis, however, the situation is much more complicated.

What for the US has been a tradition of collaborating with a prosperous private business world, for the Europeans risks turning into an acceptance of the dictates of an economy with short-term objectives such as: "Give us 1,000 electrical engineers next year, because that is all we will need, and we will give you the money for that!" The result will be a university lacking in vision and long-term scientific and ethical structures, from which those branches of learning which are of no interest to the business world may disappear — the study of dead languages, art, history and more. It is a poor reflection of the US entrepreneurial model.

3. The graduates of this university system are better prepared for academic excellence such as is needed for cutting-edge research, subsequent advanced studies, etc.

Not so. If the Bologna reform means structuring the curriculum according to the by now famous 3B2M3D model — three years for the Bachelor's degree, two for the Master's, three for the Doctorate — and the content of the courses is redesigned primarily in response to the demands of the labour market, then we would be forced to agree that the number of years spent studying is no guarantee of excellence; that the doctoral period is too short for adequate training at an advanced level; and that since the main engine of scientific excellence is not the immediate market, the training for fundamental research is not encouraged by the new system. In fact, at the moment it is difficult to evaluate the relationship between the restructuring of the educational process and the improvement of specific content — a "better" way of teaching such and such subjects). In other words, one could "learn properly" even in the old system, were the quality of the lecturers, the teaching and the ethics involved adequate.

4. Graduates of this university system can find their place within the labour market more easily.

Yes and no. Graduates of the first three-year cycle do, perhaps, find a job more quickly because they can mainly aspire only to jobs that have no decision-making power, are precarious and poorly paid. Such jobs have always been more plentiful and university graduates are now no longer overqualified for them. For the more senior posts such as secondary school teacher, doctor, engineer, analyst, IT specialist etc., one has to continue with some form of advanced study for a number of years, just as one did under the old system.

5. The Bologna system encourages the professional insecurity of young employees on the labour market.

It does not; it merely loses some of its menacing aura of failure. The system allows students to take a break from their studies whenever they wish and take them up again after longer or shorter periods away from the university. The flexibility of this system is meant to make it more adaptable to the twists and turns of individuals lives, in which completing one's studies is the academic equivalent of a personal existential project. The novelty would be that neither one nor the other is "officially" penalised anymore; as though one were exonerating the "good-for-nothings" from feeling guilty — perhaps.

6. The degrees obtained in this system are more readily recognised by other universities that have adopted the same system.

Yes and no. Since enacting the Bologna reform does not mean a standardization of the degree-issuing process at European level, the problem of state universities — and they are the majority in Europe — recognizing foreign degrees continues to be decided by bilateral agreements reached between nation states. The compatibility between study programmes could facilitate this recognition but does not automatically trigger it. As for private universities, which are dominant in the US, they are free to recognize whatever degrees they choose. Their criteria are highly diverse and tend to favour the actual competence of candidates rather than the university they studied at.

7. Adopting the Bologna system will in the coming years significantly reduce the brain drain of the exceptionally gifted from Europe to educational and research establishments in the USA.

Let us not kid ourselves. Studies carried out in the past decades show that radical measures must be taken in order to put a stop to this exodus; nevertheless, the primary reason why really good specialists and exceptionally gifted students choose the route to North America is not its university curriculum but its attractive academic system. This is much better funded, decentralised, free of gerontocratic structures, more mobile and willing to invest in fundamental research, including in those areas that are not immediately linked to economic profit. European universities are still deficient in these areas and the initiatives taken in reforming university research (see the recent French case) are at best questionable.

8. The Bologna reform has failed, it has to be radically changed or we must go back to the structures so recklessly abandoned.

This is what many of the leaders of protest movements in the past few years in western Europe have contended. Even those academics known as "reform experts" admit that the new system presents very little flexibility and its ad hoc readjustment uses quick fixes rather than long-term solutions. But at the moment, in the current economic climate, the costs of further reform or restoration are unacceptable.

9. The Bologna reform is the result of profound reflection on the part of decision makers in European higher education on the necessity to modernize the universities of the old continent in order to cope with the challenges of today.

It may well have started this way, as an "act of reflection", with all the complexities, imponderables and unsolvable riddles that entails. However, because it was imposed and implemented from the top down, academics have perceived it as a compulsory restructuring justified with the words "by order of the EU", words which in this case are not being used only in the Mioritic world,¹ a world where legislative change precedes the reflective act or, more often than not, cancels it altogether. Academics did not feel they were involved in the reform, they merely had to put up with its implementation. The most dangerous consequence is that they continue to feel as though it were a foreign body, a creation of some "Brussels bureaucrats", activists and executives within higher education management.

10. The Bologna reform is better equipped for mass higher education, which is what we need today if we are to raise society's overall level of professional training.

We need to be careful here. Quantity is never, by itself, a guarantee of quality. A university that provides higher education for the masses and is an institution for the academic elite at one and the same time is an illusion: unable to assume both these roles simultaneously, it risks ending up performing neither. If universities are redesigned to be post-secondary, fast-track professional schools, their elitist component will be lost; and, if day-to-day welfare is to be assured through the efficiency of a middle-class well trained in a wide range of professions, then significant scientific, technological, cultural progress has to be expected exclusively from the intellectual elite. Wider access to higher education is a natural goal but it must not be demagogically mistaken for an

increase in quality in the educational system.

And an urban myth

Urban myths — more than an unconfirmed rumour, less than an unquestionable reality — have not failed to circulate in the academic world. They usually express confused fears and intuitions but manage, fragile though they are, to name "untold" things through stories. The one with which I wish to end my comments on the Bologna reform has been doing the rounds of international academic meetings for the past 10 years. It says that from the beginning, the initiators of reform did not wish to improve the higher education system but, on the contrary, to put on the market insufficiently trained young graduates who would require an additional period of training to become real specialists and who would initially have only short-term jobs with small salaries. Nor would they present any threat to the older generation, particularly that born after World War II. These "baby boomers" are now getting close to retirement and by keeping their current positions and raising the retirement age, they would be less costly for economies now confronting a crisis. The overwhelming majority of those who are responsible for the creation and implementation of the "Bologna reform" belong to that generation.

¹ One often comes across the designation "spatiul mioritic" (Mioritic world) for Romania. It was devised by the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga who was inspired by a well-known ballad, "Miorita". While the phrase has often been used to conjure up a romanticised, high-flown image of Romania and Romanians, outside compulsory school curricula it can often be used sarcastically and as a term of abuse; there is little doubt that the second meaning is intended here — trans.

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