Between Actors of the Bologna Process and the European Union, the emergence of the European Higher Education and Research Area

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has become a reality that is detached from the model of the medieval university. This outcome was far from obvious when the treaty of Rome was signed in 1957. Erasmus and the Magna Carta are the cornerstones of the Bologna process, which – despite bureaucratic governance but with the support of the EU – translates and allows the actors of the university to have a necessarily common approach to teaching and research.

Keywords: higher education, universities, EESR, European policy, Bologna process, Magna Charta.

The construction of the European Higher Education and Research Area (EHEA), despite the criticism it has generated as much on its aims as on its implementation and governance methods, is undeniably a European success story. There is not a single student today who does not know that his or her diplomas are recognized throughout Europe or that he or she can carry out a study mobility or a professional internship there: the Erasmus program is moreover considered in many opinion polls as a symbol of Europe (Côme & Rouet, 2013). There is also no researcher who is unaware of the necessary European dimension of his or her work, if only for funding reasons. The numerous reforms of universities in Europe, even if they have sometimes provoked strong protests, have allowed the restructuring of their training programs into three cycles and their interoperability thanks to the ECTS credit system. This opening towards Europe, together with the affirmation of their common values, has profoundly changed the image of universities and their representation: from spectators of an evolution, they have become actors in the process of construction of a common space of teaching and research, in which they want to play an essential role. As a result, they have modified their social, economic, and even cultural role. They have accompanied a massification of students, allowing many young people to enter a knowledge economy that is accepted and not imposed. They have relied on the autonomy the supposed superiority of the market model to forge links with companies in their territory and with local communities while benefiting from State and European Union subsidies, creating a new system initially called the Triple Helix, a system that has become more complex and democratic to become Quadruple and Quintuple. The EHEA is now a reality that has withstood the Brexit, the coronavirus, and the war in Ukraine (Côme & Rouet, 2017).

The homogenization of higher education in the early years of European construction: from a revisited past to a forgotten objective

However, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, there was no way to predict this evolution. In 1957, for many, the Europe of Universities as a representation of a homogeneous model was only a memory or even a utopia based on a historical reconstruction of medieval universities, *Universitas magistorum et scholarium*, gathering in the same place the masters and their students, at a time when on the European continent religious homogeneity was the rule and the University universal, even if this vision of the universal was governed by the Church and the teaching more based on transmission than on research.

This vision of a unified system was based on the inter-university wanderings of doctoral students necessary to obtain their doctorate and the use of a universal language, Latin. However, this homogeneity did not prevent the establishment of a hierarchy between the universities or even a competition based on pedagogical innovation. Thus, Sorbonne University was renowned for practicing the art of scholasticism and the subtleties of *disputatio* and attracted the greatest names in Christendom.

The irruption of secular authorities, whether cities or princes and the Reformation, which put an end to religious uniformity, put an end to this universal model if it ever really existed. Certainly, some positive elements of this myth still remain the constantly reaffirmed universal tendency, the importance given to the university community, the immunity of its members, the recognition of the title of doctor and the tolerance of the sometimes-transgressive practices of students. The fact remains that the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolutions with the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the need to train in new technologies and to improve them constantly, and above all, the increased importance of the State, led to the creation of national models of university, either by privileging the education of elites and social reproduction, as in English universities or French higher education or by advocating the need to base teaching on research, as in the German university.

The universities in the 1960s certainly had a more pragmatic objective - the training of executives - but the myth of a common historical model of the university in Europe remained, all the more so because, apart from this assumed objective and the overall unpreparedness for the democratic wave that was being prepared because of the baby boomers, they were distinguished above all by their diversity. It would be even more judicious to evoke a European multiversity where each of the existing configurations represents an assembly of fields of study and research without any apparent coherence or logic, fluctuating according to the initial models, their evolution, the choices made by the governments, the ruptures, the influences, the ideological positions but also the expectations of the students and the needs of the society. This multiversity is still present today with, for example, a rate of higher education graduates that varies from simple to double between Romania (less than 30%) and Luxembourg or Lithuania (nearly 60%). This diversity, this latent conflictuality made it difficult for the fathers of Europe to base their European model on a modern vision of what a University could be, they preferred

not to communicate on this theme, and the Treaty of Rome, therefore, does not mention the University and only left Europe with research as a shared competence, with the application of the principle of subsidiarity leaving the States free to exercise their competences only if the EU does not apply its own, which was the case for many years. Education (and therefore higher education) and vocational training are the only supporting competences for Europe. And, as a small institutional detail that adds to the difficulty of defining a homogeneous European area, when European Councils are held, research is dealt with by the Competitiveness Council, higher education is dealt with by the Education Council, and different Directorates General of the European Commission are in charge of these subjects.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the first European years did not lead to a homogenization of higher education and research. It was not until 1984 that the first framework program for research and development was set up. The European Commission alone could not move the lines, as the States did not wish to reduce their prerogatives over the University, which had been a sensitive issue since May 1968. The stakeholders did try to organize themselves at the European level, the student associations created in 1982 the *European Students Bureau*, the forerunner of the ESU, the European Students Union, and 39 European universities set up in 1984 the first European network, the *Coimbra Group*, but the situation remained globally blocked.

From Erasmus and Magna Charta, factors of incommunication, to the Bologna Process and emergence of EHEA

This situation changed with the establishment in 1987 by the Commission of the Erasmus system with an objective of 10% of students in mobility (increased since the Rome conference in 2020 to 20%) and especially the signature by 388 rectors and presidents of universities of the *Magna Charta Universitarum*, with a name reminiscent of the medieval model, which claims the autonomy of universities as a place that produces and critically transmits culture, fundamental academic freedoms (research, training, teaching) and above all the absence of borders in the quest for knowledge, i.e., openness to others and interaction between cultures. This demand for mobility and openness was the trigger that enabled us to move from a situation of acommunication, where none of the stakeholders in the European space took into account the wishes of the others, to a situation of incommunication proposing a common horizon, the creation

of a European area of higher education and research as part of a Europe of knowledge, a factor of social and human development, and a guarantor of democratic governance, an area in which students, teachers, and researchers could, reminiscent of the medieval university, travel freely. Of course, none of the stakeholders had the same reading or the same representation of this space, each one thinking that they would find their interests in it: the Universities an increased autonomy, a recognition of the importance of their role in this new knowledge society; the students, a training adapted to the new conditions of the job market, the possibility of a new way of life but also a listening to their daily concerns; the governments, a method to reform their own university system by putting forward Europe and the European Commission, an excellent way to reinforce its role and to pursue the European construction.

In 1998, the Sorbonne Declaration, signed by the four Ministers of Education, French, Italian, German and English, followed a year later by the Bologna Declaration signed by 29 states and the European Union, launched the Bologna Process (BP), which allows organizing this incommunication (Côme, 2011). The BP is adapted to this challenge, it is intergovernmental but organized mainly by the host country of the conferences held every two or three years and which lead to declarations, both milestones in the process and roadmaps to achieve and improve the common goal of an efficient and competitive EHEA. It is also a participatory and continuous process. Indeed, it is not only appropriate to participate in the conferences; members are invited to participate in a process follow-up group, the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), comprising representatives of the 48 member States, representatives of the universities (EUA, European University Association), and the professionalized higher education institutions (EURASHE), teachers and students (ESU). This mechanism sometimes appears bureaucratic due to the low representation of stakeholders in the field (universities, teachers, students), which discourages their participation and effective involvement in the process, especially due to the important role played in the BFUG by the representatives of the Ministers (present only at the conferences), but also by the role played by the "Bologna experts," appointed by the governments and responsible for drafting the press releases issued after each conference. This quasi-bureaucratic control is compensated, fortunately from the point of view of communication, by the voluntary and flexible nature of the process. Indeed, the commitments and recommendations made by the States at the time of their accession and during the conferences are not part of a normative obligation, as could be a treaty, it is a "flexible" right that applies whose implementation and pace of installation

are the responsibility of each country. It is a voluntary commitment by each state to continuously reform its own higher education system to make it fully participate in the EHEA, but taking into account its culture, its model, and the evolution that will be required of it. This goes far beyond the principle of subsidiarity; the Union does not oblige or intervene in any way, nor does it have the competence to do so. It supports the initiatives and projects set up within this framework, in particular by financing them, with special support for research and mobility, or by facilitating structuring from the bottom up, in particular by supporting the creation of the EUA or, more recently, by supporting the initiative launched by the French President Emmanuel Macron on the European Universities, a grouping of universities across borders. It also allows for the dissemination of tools to achieve the objectives defined in each declaration, notably proposing a European qualification framework with an 8-level grid, a European reference framework for quality assurance in education and vocational training. To measure the effectiveness of the implementation of the EHEA, the EU has created a multidimensional mapping of the institutions that are part of it, U-Multirank. The objective is to be able to compare universities without being subject to the diktats of world rankings, such as Shanghai (Rouet, 2022). The States knowingly commit themselves to participate in this process and to evolve their own higher education systems to achieve their goals through their understanding of their mutual interests in doing so. This understanding is based on their beliefs and information sharing. This shows that incommunication is necessary for the deepening of the Bologna Process. But beyond States and governments, the march toward EHEA also depends on incommunication among all BP stakeholders. It is largely due to these interventions by non-governmental stakeholders that conference communiqués regularly emphasize that higher education is a public good, that the inclusion of socially, economically or physically disadvantaged students is a fundamental mission of universities, and that tuition fees must be limited. In the end, it seems necessary for the EHEA to remain a positive humanist project that these situations of incommunication continue...

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