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HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER BOLOGNA

Challenges and Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

After the nine hundredth anniversary of the University of Bologna, which gives name to the reform implemented in the last two decades, several changes occurred in the European space of higher education, either in what concerns the philosophy underlying its scientific, social and educational aims and responsibilities, or in what refers to the ways in which these aims can be operationalized, in terms of: the structure and duration of training, the pedagogical strategies, the link between study cycles, the relationship between research and teaching, among many other aspects.

In fact, the so-called Bologna Process was embodied in a set of agreements and prerogatives that culminated, in 2010, with the creation of the European Higher Education Area, having as one of its central objectives being the guarantee of a relatively homogeneous structure of academic degrees, facilitating the comparability of training and accreditation systems and thereby encouraging the mobility of students and graduates. The result was, in fact, a profound, yet not uncritical, reform in European higher education. Today, almost two decades after the signing of the Bologna Declaration (June 19, 1999), the reform merits a more critical, conscious and informed reflection not only on the metamorphoses unleashed and their impact, but also on the new challenges facing higher education in Europe and around the world.

The signing of the *Magna Charta Universitatum* by the Rectors of some of the most prestigious European Universities, in 1988, marks a first step towards a voluntary membership in view of a transformation of higher education aiming at: first, a closer rapprochement between the University and the social and economic contexts; second, a better articulation between European higher education institutions and the research they are developing. Within this scope was implicit a questioning and an attempt to overcome a higher education system anchored in rigidified and often anachronistic knowledge, searching for a higher, quality of the teaching-learning processes – the pedagogical dimension – and its adequacy to the specificities of the European space.

Despite the several benefits that arose in higher education following the Reform, namely the increasing in international mobility and knowledge exchange, there is also an acute awareness that several changes deserve today a much more profound reflection and revision. The quality assurance and the consistency of apprenticeship preserving the identity of university knowledge in contemporary societies is one of the main challenges, discussed in several contributions in this book.

Currently, the higher education reform has been appropriated by political systems, becoming not only a central point of the political-educational agenda and rhetoric since the 1990's, but also an essential strategy for stressing the assumptions of European competitiveness and “effectiveness” inherent to the Lisbon Strategy. With the signing of the Bologna Declaration by Ministerial initiative this “passage” from strictly academic concerns to political and technical matters was achieved. Several examples may be highlighted concerning this subject: the association of financing systems to higher education institutions with criteria of effectiveness and efficiency in their

management; the determination of knowledge parameters and learning contents by priority criteria of utility and functionality for the labor market; the comparability between institutions (translated into international rankings, often with debatable and allegedly universal criteria), based on quantified and quantifiable results; the competitiveness between institutions and teachers henceforth evaluated, not only by criteria of pedagogical and scientific quality, but also by systems of recognition (not always translators of quality), are just a few paradigmatic examples of the politicization of the Bologna process and the possible loss of focus on what is essential: a University oriented by universal and humanistic values, as teleological and axiological references of its existence and of the respective activities and axes of its development. To this end, it is necessary to preserve the assumptions embodied in the *Magna Charta* of the Universities: their scientific independence, in the fields of education and research, in the face of political and economic power; the close link between research and education so that it can respond more adequately to social demands and scientific advancement; freedom as the fundamental pillar of teaching and research and the nuclear principle of the University; the universality anchored in the tradition of European humanism and translated in the search for a universal, non-autistic knowledge, but a promoter of mutual apprenticeship and cultural pluralism.

Therefore, to think about Bologna's Process today is mainly to recover and rebalance its initial purposes and to assume, in a way of critical reflection about its constitutive ambiguities: the sense attributed to the student's autonomy; the comparability of grades and accreditation systems very differentiated; the meaning of quality, and the paradoxes and perverse effects of its operationalization – for example, the rhetoric of functional skills for employability; the “productivist autism”, that is to say, a

scientific production enclosed in an impact publication logic, thus destined almost exclusively to the academic community, evaluated by itself and for itself; and the ‘comparative dissonance’, based on the weighting, under supposedly equivalent criteria, of non-equivalent elements (in particular, comparison and evaluation of higher education institutions and research units without regard to its contextual specificities and constraints).

The present book aims to highlight the importance and gains of the Bologna reforms, but also to reflect on the unfulfilled promises and the technical and substantive ambiguities that they may bear. A necessary debate in a moment of profound reflection on the pertinence, place, consistency and usefulness of the knowledge produced in higher institutions and on how it is disseminated and replicated. In the background a renewed discussion on the cultural and normative patterns of contemporary societies: what kind of knowledge is being produced today? How the relationship between teachers and students has changed? How the issues of plurality and respect for difference are placed in contexts of greater mobility and internationalization? How the equity in access and attendance of higher education is ensured within greater pressures for effectiveness and comparability? These and other issues are addressed in the various chapters of the book.

In the first chapter, Ana Souto e Melo discusses the transformations in the role of Higher Education and the teaching strategies focused on students’ skills achievement. As the author underlines with Bologna Process a new paradigm emerged based in labour market skills training. The chapter presents the main results of a comparative case study on the impact of this process on a course taught in two Portuguese higher education institutions through the opinion of participants and analysis of institutional documents, highlighting, in particular, the valued skills in the current course.

In the second chapter, entitled *Quality as politics and as policies and the importance of instruments*, Amélia Veiga and António Magalhães intend to discuss the development of European higher education quality assurance politics and policies. The argument presented by the authors is that the principles construing the politics of quality assurance at the European level are being diluted in the enactment of quality assurance policies, practices and their instruments. This is a case of goal displacement with regard to the major political objective of a more integrated higher education in Europe. Discursive institutionalism allowed identifying the role of normative and cognitive ideas in the shift from the centrality of ultimate political values to instrumental ideas reflecting proceduralism. This shift illustrates the process of goal displacement of quality assurance policies coordinated at the European level.

The subject of quality in the EHEA is also discussed in chapter three, authored by Sandra Milena Díaz López, Maria do Rosário Pinheiro and Carlos Folgado Barreira. From the conceptualization of what quality implies and taking into account the important role of discourse in the implementation of ways to view reality, and consequently, in social transformation processes, this chapter offers an analysis of different dimensions of quality underlying EHEA discourses. The presented analysis identify two main tendencies of quality: discourses promoting an excision between quality and equity, calling for an understanding of education not as a product but as a right

Chapter four, authored by Eliana Nubia Moreira, debates the search for a new meaning in the act of teaching, learning and research, in an attitude that transforms, learning from living experience, reflecting on the paths that the phenomenological method points to didactic-pedagogic in higher education and contributing to the understanding of subjectivity, from which

emerge aspects of the human being singularity and its essence as a possibility of reading the reality, the phenomenon and the lived experience, without forgetting the objectivity that permeates it.

In the chapter five, Jorge Lameiras presents a historical evolution of the transformations in the Portuguese higher education system after 1974, showing that during all the period economic issues have been present in discourse and practices about higher education, either as the essential issue of funding to assure the sustainability of institutions, or as a contributor agent through knowledge transfer to increase productivity and economy. The author defends however that, in Portugal, Bologna Process triggered a reform of the higher education system, from legal framework to pedagogical methodologies in the classroom, and so it is an opportunity to improve quality and deepen the identity of higher education institutions.

In the sixth chapter, António Gomes Ferreira and Luís Mota present the evolution of the educational policy on the initial training of educators and teachers, namely with respect to recruitment, training structure and the professional profile in Portugal, taking also into account the contemporary processes of “Europeanisation” and its impact on the nation-state and its educational policies.

The seventh chapter, authored by Cristina Pinto Albuquerque and Ana Cristina Brito Arcoverde, presents some critical appraisals on the ‘social dimension’ of the Bologna’s Reform. The main purpose of the chapter is to discuss the presupposition of equality in the access and attendance of higher education in the European higher education area and Brazil, as well as the issues associated with the so-called social dimension of the Bologna Process, both in a historical and substantive perspective.

In the eighth chapter, Liliana Moreira and Rui Gomes present some data concerning the mobility student profiles of

a university located at a central country (University of Groningen, in the Netherlands) and a semi-peripheral country (University of Coimbra, in Portugal). Data show that the mobility and regular students differ in terms of country of origin and family education capital. The profiles allow a clearer explanation of the differentiating characteristics of the student population and are important landmarks for new research on academic mobility.

In the last chapter, Elmer Sterken presents an optimistic view on the Bologna process, underlining its potentialities in the framework of internationalization and defending that academic development benefits from cooperation and collaboration. The author states also that the European universities should work on inclusion – making all students feel welcome in their system – and activation – getting students in an active mode in the educational process.