

A Historical Overview of Western European Higher Education – Past Developments, Twentieth Century Reforms and Contemporary Challenges

How have the first universities of medieval times in Western Europe developed into being complex mass institutions of higher education? What steps led to such a great expansion we are witnessing today? In this writing I am going to look through the main steps of tertiary education development – not only focusing on higher education itself, but taking elementary and secondary education into scope as well, because – although definitely different systems from higher education – the expansion of lower levels give way to growing student numbers on higher level. I will highlight the effects of social, political and economic developments affecting education, and as a European aspect, discuss future challenges a 'European' education is facing.

Introduction: Conceptual Background

If we consider examining the educational evolution of Western Europe, how its roots were established in past centuries and how these roots have developed, we must start with discussing the concept of the entity of Western Europe. Western Europe is a concept of rather recent origins, reflecting the post-World War II split between those European countries that fell under Soviet domination and much of the rest of the continent. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept may have become obsolete. Contemporary Western Europe – taken in a political, cultural and economic sense – includes France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, the United Kingdom and certain small states such as Liechtenstein. Almost all Western European countries are members of the European Union (EU), although certain countries such as Norway and Switzerland have chosen not to be a part of the EU. Greece, on the other hand, has joined the EU but is rarely considered to be part of Western Europe.

Western European countries – on different levels – are intent to give a European dimension to their educational systems. However, the concept of Western Europe and a European identity is constantly transforming because many countries from Central and Eastern Europe have joined the EU at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and they are also committed to a European dimension in education.

Past Educational Developments

From the Middle Ages to the twentieth century

The European higher educational tradition traces its roots directly to the establishment of universities towards the end of the Middle Ages. These universities generally emphasized special fields of knowledge, such as law, medicine, philosophy and theology. Although the primary beneficiaries of medieval schooling were clergymen, separate schools were established where children of merchants and masters, and even females, could develop literacy skills.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the intellectuals aimed at incorporating classical humanistic studies into the curriculum, known generally as the liberal arts. Secondary schools emerged at this time, serving the needs of the rising middle class and providing university preparation, as well as a liberal arts curriculum. At the time of Reformation, primary schools were established, which were separate from the universities and secondary schools, both in terms of the pupils they served and the programmes of studies they provided. Consequently, a basic dualistic educational structure emerged, reflecting the highly stratified social structure in Europe: universities and higher schools served elites, while primary schools served the masses. By the seventeenth century, classical ideals and religious loyalties gave way to educational efforts in the name of nationalism and vernacular languages began to prevail over Greek and Latin. Many thinkers saw the advantages of popular education to address national concerns, regardless of gender or class.

In different European countries there was some variation regarding the structure of the state-run education systems. Germany created different educational tracks, which provided separate schools for future leaders of the state and for the common people. Its system tended to become the model for other countries that were establishing their own state systems. Following the French Revolution in 1789, France moved towards a universal, popular education, where citizenship was to be emphasized over religious values. Germany achieved nearly universal literacy within the dualist system by the nineteenth century, due in part to compulsory schooling. In contrast to Germany and France, education in the United Kingdom was not nationalized until the twentieth century and has historically been one of the most decentralized systems in Europe.

Even though the state gained control over the educational enterprise in all countries, it recognized the importance of the private sector. The major issue in the struggle between church and state was not so much school sponsorship, but school control. In some areas, where there are strong religious cleavages, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, the state continued to rely on the church to sponsor most of its schools. Consequently, more than seventy percent of the children in the Netherlands and 45 percent in Belgium attend private schools.

In more homogeneous populations, such as Norway and Sweden, the state has monopolized schooling to such an extent that less than three percent of the children attend private schools.

In contrast to areas such as the United States of America, which have maintained a strong separation of church and state, all European countries have continued to provide substantial financial and regulatory support for private schooling. The level of state support usually correlates with the level of state control. Private schools that receive support equivalent to public schools are usually under tight governmental control, while schools that receive less support have more autonomy.

Twentieth Century Reforms

School reform shifts

During the twentieth century, the major school reform issue was social justice, as advocates of change stressed the need to achieve greater participation of all young people in schooling in order to prepare them to take part more fully in the economy of the state. By the 1950s, all Western European countries had adopted compulsory education requirements, and children were required to begin school from the age of five to seven, corresponding to the laws of various countries. School quickly became obligatory for seven or eight years in age-graded schools, and the length of mandatory schooling increased in most countries. Compulsory education continued until the age of fourteen in Italy; age fifteen in Austria, Greece, and Portugal; and age sixteen in most other countries. In countries such as Germany and Belgium, students have been required to stay in school on a part-time basis until the age of eighteen. The age requirements of compulsory schooling have continued to be important, for it is in the state's interest that all citizens acquire a thorough basic education, though it has also been important that the age when students leave school coincide more or less with the age when they can enter the workforce.

Later, the focus of school reform shifted to the secondary level, once universal primary schooling was accomplished. Sweden led the way in 1949 when it adopted a plan for a universal common nine-year school. Sweden was followed by other countries, such as Italy, Norway, and France, while other Western European countries engaged in comprehensive school reforms with varying degrees of success. The German-speaking countries, for example, have been reluctant to move away from the dualistic tradition. Towards the end of the twentieth century, conservatives called the comprehensive school agenda into question, although in some countries the liberal reform agenda continued to take priority.

During the twentieth century, the curriculum debate – which had previously focused on the struggle between religious instruction and a study of the classics –

was no longer relevant in societies that were becoming more interested in scientific and practical training. Questioning the classical curriculum was initially due to the humanist realism philosophies that emphasized the importance of experience and practice in education. However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, schools recognized the need for a more expansive curriculum. As Altbach puts it, „employers have also demanded that the curriculum become more directly relevant to their needs” (Altbach, 2008). In 1974, Norway, for example, adopted eight branches in its upper secondary school structure: general education, manual and industrial studies, arts and crafts, fishing and maritime studies, sports, clerical and commercial studies, domestic arts and sciences, and social and health studies.

All European countries started to offer vocational training in addition to the general curriculum. French students, for example, chose one of the vocational or technical tracks at around the age of fourteen or fifteen. Two major vocational education models came into existence. West Germany developed a dual-system model in the 1950s and 1960s, requiring upper secondary students to attend formal school for two and a half days or one full day and to be under supervision in the work environment for the rest of the week. In contrast, the French model placed young people in formal schooling full-time until the end of compulsory attendance, when they may have become full-time vocational students. The major distinction in the two models is that German youth were exposed to the labour market at a much earlier age. In some countries, such as Norway, researchers and policy makers structured their system so that a full range of options was available. In all systems, it was difficult for students to return to a university track once they moved to vocational and technical training. As can be expected, countries have developed systems of orientation to deal with tracking issues.

Some countries, such as Norway, have chosen to harmonize general studies and vocational studies by emphasizing the practical aspects of general studies and making vocational studies more academic and theoretical. What this means is that progress was made in bringing the two worlds together by requiring that vocational studies programmes looked more like general studies programmes. This trend was accompanied by a substantial increase in enrolments of students planning to attend higher education. Beyond secondary institutions, curricular vocationalism also became a key worldwide trend in higher education to reassure a closer link between tertiary education and economic needs (Altbach, 2008).

The question of control

The role of the central government in education was another debate that carried into the twentieth century from past centuries. Contrary to previous efforts at the time of the Reformation and the French Revolution that favoured an exclusively state-controlled school, the post-World War II movement was towards decentralization of control from the state to local school authorities. Both private and state

schools tended to be centralized in terms of state funding, but decentralized in administration and management of schools. This split of control had the aim of making schools more autonomous and democratic by encouraging parental and community involvement. This trend was especially evident in Denmark, Italy, Scotland, and Spain and could have even been found in countries where education had been historically quite centralized, such as France and Sweden.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the different political forces in Europe began moving away from an emphasis on social justice to the direction of individual choice and economic advantages. The social-democrat position had attempted to be more inclusive of the needs of disadvantaged groups, including women, immigrants, and the poor, stressing cultural imperatives. In contrast, conservative efforts of the 1980s and early 1990s focused more on market-oriented policies, emphasizing school choice, privatization, and other economic aspects. In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, the issue of choice drove reform discourse into the twenty-first century.

Conservative governments tried to reverse past trends, and their reforms might have been seen partly as an attempt to address discontent among parents, particularly among the middle classes, who had been dissatisfied with what they experienced as declining standards of state-provided education. In the United Kingdom in 1981, the Conservatives introduced an assisted place scheme, providing a state subsidy to poorer parents whose children had been previously less able to gain entry to private schools. Obviously, the market-oriented trend was not identical across Europe. Furthermore, some may argue that there was no significant change in education due to the ideological differences of different governments. Nevertheless, European education systems at the end of the twentieth century experienced a general movement toward further decentralization and deregulation of state control.

Towards a European education

Despite differentiation and diversification within each country, with the creation and opening up of the European Union, educational systems started to become more alike. This tendency has been in process at least since the establishment of the Council of Europe in 1949 and of the European Community in 1967. In education, policy makers thus far stressed the value of each nation's historical development by maintaining the linguistic and cultural diversity of individual European countries. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe was interested in developing a European dimension to education. The goal was not to abolish national differences in favour of a European identity, but to strive for unity in diversity. One way the Council of Europe attempted to create a pan-European identity is by organizing teachers' conferences that focus on how to avoid national stereotyping and bias in curricula and textbooks. Educational reforms started to

illustrate a move away from discovering how to be German or Italian, and instead learning how to think of oneself as European.

In creating such a 'European' education, language was one of the most important issues already in primary and secondary education. As there are a number of official languages in the European Union, most European schools decided to teach more languages and to begin teaching them as early as possible – usually at primary school. Moreover, because many European schools are decentralized and some do not even have a central curriculum; language training was one of the ways to bring the European dimension into the curriculum. Such was the case in the Netherlands, where students must prepare for the foreign language and culture component of their exams. Language instruction in all EU countries had to be developed for participation in academic exchanges in other countries, too, also contributing to create a European identity.

These exchanges have been important parts of the European dimension agenda in education, and they occur at all levels, from primary school to higher education, teacher and vocational training. The European Union project SOCRATES has been useful in improving the quality of language training and school partnerships at the primary and secondary level with the LINGUA and COMENIUS programmes (subsets of SOCRATES). Involving both EU and non-EU countries, SOCRATES have promoted the build-up of European knowledge and a better response to the major challenges facing the contemporary world. To achieve its goals, it has utilized student exchanges, cooperative projects, European networks and research studies.

Effects of compulsory schooling

Compulsory schooling on lower levels, having started in the second half of the twentieth century, directly led to expansion on a higher level, as well as triggering social and economic changes. More and more people wanted to have a university degree, as high school diplomas lost their previous prestige and uniqueness – they were no longer an entrance to the world of employment. Also to satisfy public needs, secondary schools started to function as the preparatory institutions of universities, while staying at school was a kind of solution for the individual as well as for the state to keep huge masses of young people out of the field of work, and not to increase unemployment. On the other hand, as a result of economic changes and the emergence of knowledge-based society, a bigger and bigger demand was formed to have well-trained workforce with tertiary education degrees.

On the higher-education level, all national systems grew massively in terms of student numbers, institutions, faculties and courses. Shavit and his co-authors define expansion of an educational level as a rise among birth cohorts in the proportion attending a certain school level. More precisely we can say that

expansion is the change in the proportion of the relevant age group who attend a given educational level (*Shavit, 2003*). Translating this to exact numbers in a European context: before World War II only five percent of the relevant age group attended university, whereas by the end of the century it rose to fifty percent – even seventy-five percent in some countries (*Altbach, 2008*).

Looking at data from OECD countries, it is clear that student numbers in eastern European countries greatly contributed to the overall expansion of higher education. The numbers there grew especially after the 1989 change of regimes, only in ten-fifteen years, whereas in Western Europe mass higher education evolved already from the 1960s. In Poland and Hungary, when comparing data from 1995 and 2004, it turns out that the change is almost a tripled number in Poland, whereas student number raised more to its double in Hungary. Compared to the OECD average, which showed a fifty percent rise, in Iceland, Greece the Czech Republic, Turkey, South Korea, Mexico and Sweden student enrolments grew in a bigger proportion. However, Western European countries like Austria, France, Italy, Spain and Belgium did not experience such a big expansion – mass education had already existed before 1995 there (*OECD Report, 2008b: 56–57*).

Supporters of social equity – a defining trend in the twentieth century, also fuelling the spread of mass education – thought that participation in education gives a chance for poorer, less advantageous students to catch up. Equity received a more significant role, referring to the equity of access (the chances of admission) and equity of outcome (supporting graduation from a higher education institution or taking advantage of such graduation in the field of work) (*OECD Report, 2008a: 76–78*). However, does schooling the masses – especially on the higher level – really lead to more equity and does it reduce social class inequalities? As Raftery and Hout put it in their article, inequality between a disadvantaged and a privileged social group exists in attaining a given level of education unless the advantaged group reaches saturation of that level. Preceding such saturation, the advantaged group will always be better equipped to take advantage of any new and attractive educational opportunity. Under these circumstances, social gaps may not only persist, but even grow. When the privileged group 'stops' – has exploited its opportunities, has saturated – the less advantageous group has a chance to catch up. In any other case the social differences do not decline (*Raftery and Hout, 1993*).

Consequently, it is not surprising that when governments aimed at reducing social inequalities through education, they might have experienced processes pointing to opposite results. While applying the principle of equity at the input (accepting less advantageous students, in numerous cases with worse results), an even wider gap could show at the outcome (graduation), as through the years spent at university, the smaller differences had continuously grown, since the more privileged group could take advantage of educational and other opportunities during this time better.

Contemporary Challenges

Milestones of tertiary education development

While university reforms in the twentieth century were few, limited in scope, and rarely applied, fundamental changes are beginning to occur in the early twenty-first century. The most far-reaching reform agenda is related to the Bologna Declaration of 1999, signed by twenty-nine European countries. The declaration aims to establish a common framework of readable and comparable university degrees, including both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This framework will be relevant to the labour market, will have compatible credit systems, and will ensure a European dimension. In Italy, for example, the new higher-education system has a cycle that lasts three years and leads to an undergraduate degree, a second cycle that lasts two years and leads to a postgraduate degree, and a final three-year programme resulting in a doctorate. Within these general constraints, universities are given great autonomy in terms of programmes and administration.

The development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is another major innovation, meant to enhance cooperation between universities. It suggests the development of a process for determining curricular transparencies and equivalencies of grades, course credits and degrees. ECTS enables students to receive credit in their home university or to transfer permanently to the host institution or to a third institution, mainly by generating transcripts that translate the different educational systems into an internationally recognized document.

Motivating student exchanges has also become a major policy issue. ERASMUS is an exchange project under SOCRATES that allows university students to participate in exchanges at universities throughout the European Union and receive credit at their home university. The creation of the ECTS renders such an exchange possible for students who may not have the time or finances to take courses that will not count towards their degree. This cooperation between universities does not necessarily mean that they will become identical, but it does suggest the importance of transparency, as well as trust that other universities are equal in quality to one's own. This trust must also be extended to a mutual recognition of diplomas at all levels of the education system, which puts pressure on the various countries to maintain acceptable standards.

Issues that need to be addressed

Some of the immediate challenges for Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century are to include those surrounding educational mobility. Educational exchanges are sometimes not possible financially. Although in principle students can freely occupy available places in member states with identical fees and financial aid, grants from the home country are not always available for studies abroad. Furthermore, language skills will need to be further valued and developed

if exchanges are to be reciprocally appreciated and practiced between countries of the European Union and possibly other countries on the European continent and elsewhere. Europeans will need to make special efforts to improve language skills in order to encourage the maximum success of exchange projects.

There are many countries in the European Union – especially in Middle Eastern Europe – where this issue needs to be addressed quickly and severely. In Hungary, for example, it is a huge problem that many students cannot receive their degrees exclusively because a compulsory language exam certificate is missing. Some say that this condition of graduation should be abolished – but wouldn't this mean giving up on quality? Language skills should not only be important when passing a language examination, but also during university years. A student should be expected to use at least one foreign language through their studies – otherwise how could they do research, read literature or utilise foreign sources while studying? Needless to say, thus, Hungarian students lag behind their European fellows in taking part in student exchange programmes.

In addition to developing students' language skills, schools are also facing the task of dealing with the social and economic demand for people who are technology and information literate. Schools themselves must learn to cope with an ever-changing world, where people have to learn how to adapt rather than to learn a stable and firm body of knowledge. Schools need to remain current so that they can help students respond to contemporary requirements and satisfy the needs of an ever-changing labour market. On the higher education level, open distance-learning universities exist in numerous countries to help students adapt to change by way of professional and technological training. These universities need to continue to be developed to accommodate people in the workforce who would like to update their skills, or students from other countries who do not have access to adequate universities, but who cannot necessarily live abroad or reside on a university campus for extended periods of time.

Universities must also try to accommodate social needs and requirements to a greater extent, and these include shorter and more specific courses. People, who may already be working, need to change professions as a result to economic changes, or just need to update their knowledge in order to stay on the labour market. Life-long learning is an essential idea the European Union promotes, however, people need to find the means to achieve it. Tertiary education institutions can join in such programmes – also ensuring a long-term future for them.

Although for many institutions there is a struggle to survive, to attract enough students, other universities have been facing an unprecedented rise of enrolling student numbers, bringing along a strong need to change in many aspects: administration, educational methods, training of staff and infrastructure. The spread of a mass education has more significant effects on society, as more and more people are involved in it. Governments must also consider the economic

aspects this changing higher education is bringing along, with its effect on the world of work, but questions of social equality and mobility, social cohesion and integration need to be addressed, too. In addition, knowledge-based society requires a new kind of tertiary education accommodating students' needs to a greater extent.

In addition, EU members must address more systematically the issue of greater compliance in the recognition of diplomas and certification between countries. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, have even suggested the granting of double degrees between the national institution and an associated institution. University overcrowding and high unemployment throughout Europe are not simplifying the dilemma, and there is a concern that the costly expansion of the university may lower the quality of education and lead to the devaluation of degrees.

These issues need to be considered throughout Europe, because the greatest challenge for many countries, perhaps to even a greater extent for the smaller ones, is to preserve national differences in the creation of a European unity. As various countries from Central and Eastern Europe have also become part of the European Union, and borders are fading on a global level, new social, economical and financial challenges are arising. Recognizing and respecting institutional differences may be keys to the success in efforts to establish a unity in diversity in Europe – while creating universities flexible enough to accommodate new social, scientific and economic needs may ensure a firm basis for higher education in the future.

Summary

In this study I examined the steps through which Western European education has transformed: starting from the elite institutions of the Middle Ages to mass education in the twenty-first century. Compulsory schooling on the lower level greatly contributed to rising student numbers at universities. Behind such change various social, economic and political reasons lie: need for social inclusion and equity, birth of knowledge-based society, changing world of work, needs of employers, or globalization, just to mention some. Today, governments and institutions have to learn to cope with this situation – present in Western Europe already from the 1960s, in Central Eastern Europe only from the 1990s. This appears to be a complex task, as there have been many reforms and initiatives – yet no universal solution has been found which is applicable to all countries. Each of them must work within its own circumstances, trying to find the best solution for its own conditions – though there is also a strong motivation to co-operate within the framework of a European education promoted by the EU. Unquestionably, there have been easy and hard times in the history of tertiary education in Western

Europe, there are strong initiatives in institutions to reborn and become what they have never been: changing universities within the changing concept of higher education.

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A nyugat-európai felsőoktatás történeti áttekintése – A kezdetek, 20. századi reformok és mai kihívások

Hogyan alakultak át először a középkorban megjelenő nyugat-európai egyetemek komplex felsőoktatási tömegintézményekké? Milyen tényezők játszottak szerepet abban a nagyméretű expanziós átalakulásban, amelynek ma szemtanúi lehetünk? Ebben az írásban áttekintem a felsőoktatás átalakulásának főbb lépéseit – nemcsak a felsőoktatásra koncentrálva, hanem kiindulva az általános és középfokú oktatásból, mivel – bár eltérő rendszerben működnek, mint a felsőoktatás – véleményem szerint az alacsonyabb szinteken tapasztalható létszámnövekedés expanziót generál felsőbb szinten, egyre nagyobb tömegeknek nyit utat a felsőoktatásba. Kiemelem a különböző társadalmi, politikai és gazdasági folyamatok hatásait a felsőoktatásra, illetve részletezem, mit jelent a nyugat-európai oktatásban az „európai” aspektus, és milyen jövőbeli kihívásoknak néz elébe.