

# **Some Remarks on the Transition from the Elite through Mass to Universal Model of Higher Education: a Challenge for Europe**

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It has been obvious since the very beginning of the mankind that education is crucial for the prosperity, even survival, of individuals and societies. Following varying social and economic needs, the education has undergone many changes over centuries, notably over the last century or slightly less. A particular role has been played by higher education which we are concerned with.

Our point of departure will be some general works on higher education, notably by the late Professor Martin Trow from the University of California, Berkeley. In particular, he discussed a crucial issue of the transition of the higher education from an elite one, meant for a few chosen ones, to the one serving the “mass market” which has been implied by deep social and political changes mainly after World War II but also by growing needs of business and industry.

First, we examine the essence of the traditional university systems, mostly in Europe, with an almost millennium long tradition, but then also duplicated by, for instance, the oldest American universities exemplified by Harvard or Yale. They have been meant to serve more gifted (and usually rich enough) young population to learn some non-vocational, more sophisticated and intellectually challenging skills, often not used for making living. This has been an elite type higher education system.

That elite type higher education has become more and more criticized, even violently, and has had to undergo changes as a result of a need for the access to higher education by more and more people from less privileged classes, and who has had to use the education for making their living, i.e. to learn some more practical skills. This has more and more implied changes of the curricula towards more vocational-oriented ones, departing from the traditional elite universities.

World War II was the turning point that has implied a crucial change of the very essence of the university system as the needs of war, and then quickly afterwards the Cold War, have triggered a forced refocusing of the functioning of universities, emphasis on the development of new and useful technologies, financing through various projects, founding new “useful” schools and departments, emphasis of research and publications, etc. This has triggered an even greater vocational orientation. Moreover, more and more young people, with higher aspirations and ambitions have demanded access to all kinds of schools, notably colleges and universities that should guarantee them careers. A mass type higher education model has been born.

This fundamental change of the university system: from the elite one of the past, of a relatively low scale, to the new, mass access type, open to more and more young people, has had a tremendous impact and has called for radical changes, notably related to the transition to either free or semi-free higher education. As a result, the number of students has increased rapidly, doubled in the 1960s and 1970s during just some 5 years. The percentage of young population enrolled in higher education institutions from ca. 4-5 % just after World War II, increased to ca. 10-20 % in the 1960s-1970s, reaching ca. 30% in the beginning of the new century, and constantly growing, with the goal set at 50% or more for a not so distant future.

The above mentioned mass type higher education has not however responded to all needs of the modern world, and it has soon been obvious that a next phase of development is needed which may be called an universal access education. It has much to do with the Internet and

Web technologies that make the access to information and knowledge to everybody, practically free of charge, from any place, at any convenient time, etc. This will certainly revolutionize the higher education system but we will not discuss this in more detail, concentrating mainly on the mass type higher education.

In virtually all countries the mass type higher education system dominates and there are some common aspects that are widely accepted; this may be exemplified by the so called Bologna Process launched in 1999. Without going into details, it basically introduces a three cycle degree higher education system for: (1) undergraduates, (2) graduates, and (3) doctoral graduates. What is important is that the above degrees have been meant to be granted at a wide scale, and quicker than in traditional systems. This is clearly a perfect example of a mass type higher education system, maybe in its extreme version.

This system does better reflect needs and aspirations of the modern European young population, and is also attractive from a political point of view as it somehow “promises” to so many young people the access to the “elite” in the sense of being able to enter a relatively small circle of “privileged graduates”, all that in a shorter time than before.

However, since not “all that glitters is gold”, there has been some critique of the above system, and we will just mention some of them that concern the third, doctoral degree, that may be relevant to the academics. First, a “school like” (courses, labs, etc.) process of granting the PhDs, as opposed to slower and longer procedures of a more personal “student – mentor” relation from the past may not be proper for those who plan to pursue an academic or research career which needs more time and a wisely controlled, highly individualized mentoring.

On the other hand, the essence of that ideas has been that a larger number of PhD students than before have been meant to enter business and industry who should be looking for more qualified collaborators. This reasonable idea, and in general the planned increase of the number of PhDs, would however require deep structural changes in both the education system and even social attitude, not to speak about costs. First of all, this novel policy would call for more opening positions for the PhDs at all kinds of higher education and research institutions, notably state and governmental. Unfortunately, in very many countries this has not happened. Moreover, what concerns the PhDs who want to pursue a career in business, industry and administration, the situation depends on what we have called a social attitude. Namely, in

some countries it is normal that a PhD works for, e.g., a bank or local administration, but there are many countries in which this is an extraordinary situation or does not happen. These and other undesirable effects have seriously diminished positive effects of that ambitious three degree system. Basically, the jobless rate among the PhDs “produced” at a higher than ever pace is too high to be acceptable from the social and economic point of view.

After that brief analysis of various aspects of the transition from the elite to the mass type higher education, we will then briefly summarize our personal opinion about the pros and cons, and some remedies of the present, almost universally accepted and implemented mass type higher education system. They will certainly touch upon just some aspects we consider important.

First, maybe one should somehow rethink the very idea of such a rapid expansion of higher education. It is true that, as some people vividly advocate, there is a need of the so called knowledge based economy that will determine the future of the world, and this implies a growing demand for highly qualified workforce, possibly including the PhDs. As true as it is, it neglects that fact that even in the foreseeable future the economy, in virtually all countries, will both be “knowledge based” but also more traditional, using “knowledge” but not really being “knowledge based”. This should be taken into account while developing higher education policies. Notice that there are many countries who have tremendously limited more vocational, technical skill oriented “lower level” higher education institutions, have not paid any attention to the development of modern high school level institutions, and even discouraged young people to enter schools of less than a higher education type levels. These countries have then as a rule tremendous problems with the unemployment rate among young people. On the other hand, some countries who have not done this, exemplified by Germany or Switzerland, have been able to keep the unemployment at a low level. These countries, what is important, while developing those more vocationally oriented higher education have not sacrificed top universities, and also make the way for gifted individuals possible up to the highest education levels. We think that such a type of a higher education system, more practice oriented yet not stopping opportunities for reaching even the highest academic levels for those individuals who are gifted and motivated enough, could provide an answer for many countries in these difficult and tumultuous times.