



CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS

The Social Dimension and Responsibility of Universities

Malaga, May 24 - 25

Around 150 experts come from Europe, Africa, North America, Latin America and Asia were able to meet in Málaga, with occasion of the above referred Conference of the Spanish Presidency. Based on their own debates and considering the state of the art and recent trends in the social dimension of higher education, the experts agreed on the following conclusions:

- The social dimension and equity in higher education are crucial to legitimize the process towards the European Higher Education Area. There is an urgent need to promote the social dimension in the construction of the European Higher Education Area including widening access to underrepresented groups, providing flexible learning paths in a lifelong learning perspective and granting the return of knowledge to society.
- The experts recognise the Conclusions of the Education Council on 11th of May on the Social Dimension of Higher Education, inviting Member States to:
 - promote widened access through financial support schemes for students and flexible and diversified learning paths,
 - increase completion rates through individualised support and guidance to students,
 - set up incentives and eliminate obstacles to improve the quality of learning mobility,
 - develop specific programmes for adult students and non-traditional learners.
- The social dimension of the whole university system should be mainly developed through grants and mentoring mechanisms with special attention to the less represented groups. In this sense the experts acknowledged the feasibility studies announced by the Commission to develop a community loan scheme for students.
- The social responsibility of specific universities should be fostered promoting the preparation of specific Social Responsibility programmes at institutional level, including three main dimensions: social, economic and environmental.
- There is a need to develop a vision of the European Higher Education Area and of the model of universities we would like to have in 2020, rather than launching individual actions to reach specific indicators.
- The analysis of data on access to higher education shows that expansion in access to higher education does not automatically means less inequality if the differences in access between different social groups remain. Family background, i.e. the occupation and

education levels of parents, affects school performance and access and participation in tertiary education.

- Demographic developments, i.e. immigration and growth of cultural minorities, are intensifying equity issues in some countries that face challenges in making tertiary education accessible to those with immigrant backgrounds or ethnic minorities.
- Equity understood as the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair means simply to detach origins from destiny in the access, performance and completion of higher education.
- In the Equity Triangle: Background, Talent and Opportunities, it seems that the weakest side is the Talent – Opportunities side and still the socioeconomic background determines in a great extent the opportunities to successfully complete higher education.
- In order to properly tackle equity issues there is a need to get systematic collection of comparable data and develop empirical indicator performance system to monitor access, participation, retention and success of groups identified as disadvantaged for the equity framework.
- The economic crisis is having an impact on equity through the impact on the public budgets, the demand for tertiary education in a context of weaker jobs opportunities and on the suppliers of higher education, with changes in the mode of delivery: more distance education, part-time programs and more specialisation of institutions.
- Lifelong learning strategies are normally organised outside the mainstream of teaching activities in many universities. A set of incentives should be established to help higher education institutions to set up lifelong learning strategies making higher education available during the whole life
- Universities must help to raise awareness and commitment in our society to develop a sustainable socio-economic model for the future. In addition to the provision to society with graduates with the right skills required for the labour market, universities have to provide an ethical knowledge base, responsive to the social needs.
- Universities' commitment towards the community needs to be fostered, going beyond their contribution to innovation. Knowledge-sharing with society through interaction and permanent dialogue with civil society organisations, such as schools, museums, charity foundations, etc. has to be enhanced to address societal needs.
- Universities must favour the social inclusion of the less favoured communities, like the Roma community, through the creation of cultural dialogs, learning from them and with them of their special learning needs.
- In times of economic crisis the gender issue becomes crucial. Our society can not neglect 50% of the human capital in universities.
- In the magic triangle of higher education policies and practices: Quality, Equity and Efficiency, the provision of access for everybody and everywhere to quality higher education in the most efficient way is the goal to achieve.
- The future 'Europe 2020'-strategy can offer a fruitful context to reinforce the social dimension of higher education. The objective of improving the quality of education levels with two main objectives: to reduce school drop out to less than 10% and increase the

percentage of population completing higher education up to 40%, may stimulate both the global competitiveness of Europe and the shift towards a new model of sustainable socioeconomic growth with social integration.

- Building on the announced and much welcomed initiatives like 'Youth on the Move', fostering mobility, lifelong learning and the social dimension of education, a governance model should be developed to monitor the achievements at national levels of these objectives as well as the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in Education and Training.
- This EU strategy should support institutions to develop their own social responsibility strategies as well as would help to improve the coordination and synergies between the national strategies, aligning the national efforts towards a common and shared objective,

The experts attending the Spanish Presidency Conference on The Social Dimension and Responsibility of Universities, asked the Spanish Presidency to elevate these agreed conclusions to the political level, as an input for discussions at the Education Council of the European Union.