

DEMANDING ENVIRONMENT, DYNAMIC ACTORS: HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TODAY

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| 45 |

Knowledge, learning and invention remain virtues today. Education is understood to be the key to a more prosperous future. This is evident, for instance, from the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, where goal number four focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Universities and other higher education institutions play a particularly important role of societal hubs, each in its unique way, just as they have in the past. What has fundamentally changed from before, and especially the times, detailed in the preceding contribution by Mohammed Elrazzaz, is the way knowledge circulates. Experimenting, reading, thinking, lecturing, debating and contesting in person, as we know them from the past centuries are currently being challenged. These changes are so powerful that the whole higher education appears to be at the crossroads. On the one hand, some of the traditions related to acquiring, nurturing and spreading knowledge are deeply rooted and resist any change. On the other hand, societal realities and technological possibilities are shaking them up.

This brief contribution outlines the key transformational forces in the higher education sector today. It concentrated on the trends that are taking place across the globe, and are pertinent to the entire Euro-Mediterranean region. This is not to say that the region is homogenous. Within and apart from the global trends, some challenges preoccupy the South much more than the North, such as institutions' ability to cope with high number of students entering higher education or low levels of student mobility flows. In the meantime, the

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North Mediterranean is concerned with other issues, such as the fact that university degree has become almost a standard and that returns on higher education investment are diminishing, creating a pressure on universities to reinvent themselves.

THE ENABLING AND INTIMIDATING NATURE OF TECHNOLOGY

| 46 |

Perhaps the most obvious trend, shaping higher education sector (much like any other sector) today, is the rising role of technology. Its presence is well evident everywhere, but its potential is far from understood and used. A primary issue is to ensure that technology and innovations taking the stage outside university walls are effectively brought to the classrooms and laboratories. How can technology gadgets be used in the learning process? On the one hand, they are capable of maximising the educational experience, increasing availability of resources and reducing costs. Enhancing learning opportunities by virtual education might be particularly important for students in view of their need to compete in a global marketplace. On the other hand, more or less sophisticated use of technology is disrupting the delivery of knowledge as we knew it. The attention of students on human relationships is diminished. The challenge is to benefit from technology, while simultaneously preserve the valuable interaction with and between students.

Overall, higher education institutions and the teaching staff mostly struggle with effectively integrating digital teaching material. Including new technological developments, such as artificial intelligence or augmented reality, seem even much more distant. The potential of distance learning and the question of how it should be integrated into traditional university programmes of different disciplines is unclear. Even when technology is included in the teaching process, the cognitive implications of this are not fully understood.

In the context of the Euro-Mediterranean regional integration, technology offers powerful tools for capacity building and knowledge transfers. Partnerships and networks have already been formed to benefit from the exchange but could be further exploited in order to enrich learning experiences North-South and South-South. The potential of using technology to empower every corner of the region and all segments of society is attractive and real. We need to lend it our full attention.



RESPONSIVE CURRICULA

The universities are alert to the external demands and feel the pressure to respond to them. Societies and markets have their needs that universities seek and are expected to address effectively. The nature of societal problems today is complex and interdisciplinary. Climate change, food insecurity, equality, sustainable development, poverty eradication, among others, invariably require inputs and interactions between a number of disciplines. Inter- or trans-disciplinarity is equally appreciated in markets, where students seek to get jobs after their graduation. But understanding the markets is an eternal challenge, especially as universities help to co-shape them, rather than only provide labour force to it.

| 47 |

Academic curricula at universities are poised to respond to the interlinked challenges. But how exactly to do that, both through the design of the courses and the entire programmes, is the hard part. Part of the problem are also teachers, who are ill-, or only partially, prepared to teach fundamentally revamped courses. Is a solution to have universities and their faculty more research oriented? The interplay of research with employability seems to be relevant but it is understudied.

The next challenge posed to the structure of curricula is the rise of adults who require re-training or actively seek new knowledge. Catering to the needs of these more mature learners has been a domain of a whole new set of institutions, but this is perhaps a loss for universities. The question of whether universities should be teaching young students only, i.e. be a one-off point in life, or a continuous avenue for learning at various stages in one's career, is important as the sector is becoming highly diversified and at least in part the mission of a traditional university is being implemented by a variety of higher education institutions. Some newcomers to the world of universities are non-profit distance learning providers, private free online course platforms and training centres specializing in particular professions. They are expanding the traditional higher education marketplace. But when they push for more individually customised and modular degrees or address immediate market needs, they are challenging the existing concept of degrees that universities have been safeguarding for a reason.

INTERNATIONALISATION AS BOTH AN INSTRUMENT AND VALUE

A final key pattern characterising the higher education sector is the pervasive international-mindedness. The so-called internationalization of



higher education implies various dimensions of cooperation between institutions: via mobility programmes of students, teachers and staff, research stays abroad, joint publication, co-taught courses and joint degree programmes. An increasing international outlook seems to have become unavoidable, generating also a stronger sense of competition among institutions for students. It is here that technology can again be brought into play, allowing people to have international exchanges in ways other than physically moving physically.

What is striking is that the ultimate purpose of this strategic orientation of institutions, almost a policy paradigm, is rarely reappraised. What exactly are the benefits and what are side-effects of greater international cooperation? Has increased internationalization affected the sense of citizenship? In the context of the Euro-Mediterranean, has there been a strengthened cooperation in the region? These questions are important for making sense of the missions of the institution we are affiliated with, and ultimately our own activity.

MOVING AHEAD

The above paragraphs have outlined very briefly some the core elements of the environment, in which the higher education institutions operate, and the dilemmas, often even tensions that they are faced with. How these will be resolved in the near and far future is far from certain. The present contribution did not endeavour to offer any foresight. It sought to show that in the complex and demanding environment, in which higher education institutions operate today, many directions and decisions are possible, apart from staying still. If anything, today's higher education landscape is an extremely varied and dynamic one as it moves ahead.

A snapshot of that exciting terrain is captured by a selection of narratives by individual institutions in the Euro-Mediterranean. Organised around the three trends, outlined in this contribution, the discussion of specific responses to the external challenges offers valuable insight into the adjustments presently taking place in the higher education sector.

