

Press release 04/12/12

Maastricht and Brussels, Release date 07th of December 2012

‘Empowering’ university policies improve our economies

Empower European Universities, a Maastricht-based foundation, and UNU-MERIT Economic and Social research Institute on Innovation and Technology of the University of Maastricht, present an assessment of European higher education policies and their contribution to the economy *The State of University Policy for Progress in the EU*

‘Empowering universities through an appropriate regulatory environment and resources is key to innovation and competitiveness’ says Prof. Ritzen, Chair of the foundation Empower European Universities, former Dutch Minister of Education and Professor at UNU-MERIT as well as policy advisor at IZA. ‘The report shows that European governments can do much more to enable universities to do better in research and education, which is central to the European knowledge economy’, adds Prof. Ritzen.

Prof. Jo Ritzen and Dr Cécile Hoareau, researcher at UNU-MERIT and Project leader of Empower European Universities, will present this report during a series of European meetings to Androula Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Robert-Jan Smits, Director General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, and during the European Policy Seminar of the Academic Cooperation Association Conference on the 7th of December.

This report about national higher education policies in Europe is based on establishing relationships between eighteen indicators of higher education policies, performance and economic innovation and competitiveness across thirty two European countries and country descriptions facilitated by a European-wide network of leading education experts.

It is timely in a context of intense budget negotiations and uncertainty regarding the future of European education, research and innovation.

But seventeen European Governments have reduced their public budgets for higher education, thirteen restricted financial aid programs for students, and five have restricted autonomy since 2008. ‘These changes could have long-term consequences for knowledge economies’, says Dr Hoareau.

The findings however demonstrate that:

- The countries with highly performing university systems and the highest level of economic innovation and competitiveness are also the ones with the highest levels of public funding per student and comparatively high levels of autonomy in European terms, namely Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden - and Cyprus given its high level of funding per capita until 2008.

- Most of these countries have high level research and Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden also have high graduate employment rates.

The following findings show clearly that the report does more than confirming the relationship between countries' prior economic advantage and university performance:

- When considering graduation rates at the same time as employment rates, the top performers become Switzerland, Malta, Slovakia, Poland and Romania.
- Developing a knowledge economy centered around highly performing higher education institutions is not a question of countries' prior income.
- Some Governments have made use of existing resources such as cohesion and structural funds, so that they can improve their higher education systems rather than remain static.
- Other more advantaged countries receive a lower assessment than their level of GDP per capita would presume.

Commissioner Vassiliou underlined the importance of university autonomy as a means of delivering responsive, high quality higher education systems. "Autonomy is a fundamental requirement for successful and well-managed higher education systems. But it must be balanced with clear internal and external accountability, principally between the universities and the stakeholders they serve. In this context, I welcome the contribution of this report to the on-going debate on modernizing the funding and governance of higher education in Europe," said the Commissioner.

With around 20 million students over 4,000 institutions, the future of universities is undeniably linked to the future of European youth, and it is the responsibility of European Governments to secure this future.

It is on this basis that leading figures of education across the world, including former Ministers Prof. Jon Panaretos, Dr Eduardo Grilo, signed a manifesto in 2010 in order to set up the foundation Empower European Universities, which commits to fighting for better universities in Europe, by developing evidence-based policy research and recommendations.

According to Lady Blackstone, former Minister of Education in the UK and life peer at the British House of Lords, this report "provides valuable evidence on the need for more autonomy for universities in many higher education systems in Europe". She hopes that the report "will be widely read, particularly by policy makers and politicians responsible for higher education."

The feeling is shared across Europe. 'We are entering into a new era of mapping the terrain of Higher Education within the European Union, which will greatly enhance our decision making capacity based on evidence', claims Professor Petros Pashiardis from the Open University of Cyprus.

This is certainly the motivation of Empower European Universities. The foundation aims to repeat the research in 2014, in order to continue to take stock of national policies and identify trends.

An embargo version of the report is available on the website of UNU-MERIT at: <http://www.merit.unu.edu/publications/>
For more information on Empower European Universities, please also click on: <http://www.empowereu.org>

The elaboration of this report was possible thanks to the support of Educational Testing Service, the support of the Dutch Scientific Research Council; the University of Aarhus; the Central European University; Maastricht University and in particular UNU-MERIT as well as all the EEU correspondents and friends who made the elaboration of this report possible.

Note for the press

Representatives of the press are welcome to attend the presentation ceremony on 7th of December, Club de la Fondation Universitaire, 11 Rue d' Edgmont 16-45-1815, Brussels. A review copy of the report is available on request, please email eeu@merit.unu.edu.

The Empower European Universities communications and media department can be contacted for further press related question by e-mail communications@empower.eu.

The UM Marketing & Communications Department can be contacted on +31 43 388 5222 or at pers@maastrichtuniversity.nl . For urgent matters outside office hours, please call +31 6 4602 4992. Press releases issued by Maastricht University can be found at www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/pers. Please refer to the Web Magazine for other interesting research being carried out at UM and follow the University of Maastricht on Twitter: [@MaastrichtU](https://twitter.com/MaastrichtU).