

Empower European Universities - *The State of University Policy for Progress in the EU*

December 7th 2012, Brussels, Belgium.

The State of University Policy for Progress in Europe, conducted by Empower European Universities (EEU), was presented on the 7th of December in Brussels, Belgium. Prof. Ritzen (Chair of the foundation Empower European Universities, former Dutch Minister of Education, a professor at UNU-MERIT and a policy advisor at IZA) and Dr. Cécile Hoareau (researcher at UNU-MERIT and project leader of Empower European Universities) presented the main conclusions of the research.

This presentation came in the context of a series of European meetings with Androula Vassiliou, (Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth) and Robert-Jan Smits (Director General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission) as well as during the European Policy Seminar of the Academic Cooperation Association Conference (which took place on the same day).

During the presentation, Dr. Hoareau established the key relationships identified while assessing eighteen indicators of higher education policies, performance, economic innovation and competitiveness across thirty-two European countries. The presentation also concentrated on providing a critical assessment of the thirty two countries, which were facilitated by a network of experts,

The main conclusions of the report reside in the fact that countries with highly performing university systems, as well as high levels of economic innovation and competitiveness, are also the ones with the highest levels of public funding per student and comparatively high levels of university autonomy compared the European average. Likewise, most of these countries have high-levels of research which, in most cases, is correlated with high graduate employment rates. One of the most important statements during the presentation was the fact that developing knowledge economies, centered on top performing higher education institutions can be accomplished regardless the countries' prior income. Various examples supporting the statement above can be found when looking at some of the governments of the countries analyzed which have successfully made use of existing resources (such as cohesion and structural funds) to improve their higher education systems rather than remaining static.

The questions and answers time concentrated on further key questions. One of these questions included the measure of quality in higher education (i.e. the amount of students who find a job after graduation) and the throughput of education (i.e. graduate rate and study duration). Increasing labour mobility could be incorporated in the measure of graduate employment rate).

The main recommendations drawn by the report include developing new policies focused on innovation, autonomy, funding, and quality but also to have all of them involved on a European-level long-term strategic plan.

On one hand, European Governments could adopt integrated or coordinated governance structures to promote a coherent strategy between higher education and innovation, if they want higher education to work for innovation. On the other hand, there is no reason for any European Government to decrease

the autonomy of Universities. The more autonomy can be translated into relatively high levels of graduation and employment as well as research attractiveness and productivity.

Countries with a more modest economic performance can invest in a competitive way in higher education, using structural and cohesion funds to upgrade universities and improve the performance of higher education in less economically developed regions. In any case, the funds should contribute to effectively increase equality of opportunity.

This long-term vision can only be achieved by having a consensus between universities, politicians and stakeholders in terms of objectives and means. These agreements could be deployed within the Bologna process, with EU support should go further to enrich the effectiveness of university policies in each of the EU countries.

Empower European Universities will continue to diffuse this report through a series of various presentations across Europe, including the ones which will take place in Paris (17th of January), Amsterdam (22nd of January) and Brussels (24th of January).