

Marek Kwiek: *Reforming European Universities and Reforming European Welfare States: Parallel Drivers of Change?*

Introduction

Higher education has been largely publicly-funded in its traditional European forms. Its period of the largest growth coincided with the development of the post-war welfare states across Europe. The massification processes in European higher education were closely linked to the growth and consolidation of European welfare states. Currently, massification (and universalization) processes in higher education are in full swing across Europe – while welfare states are under most far-reaching restructuring in their postwar history.

Despite changes in the governance, management and funding of European universities that have been taking place for the last thirty years, European policymakers seem systematically focused on further structural changes in their national higher education systems. European-level developments and European-level and global discussions powerfully support these reformist attitudes.

On reading national governmental and international reports, transnational and EU visions, we can conclude that profound transformations of both the higher education sector in general and of the sector of research universities in particular are still ahead of us (EC 2011). The “modernization agenda” of European universities is strongly linked to wider organizational changes in public sector services.

“Transformation” is different from three other forms of change (adjustment, isolated change, and far-reaching change): “The depth of the change affects those underlying assumptions that tell an institution what is important; what to do, why, and how; and what to produce” (Adriana Kezar 2003: 31-33)

We are discussing here links between reform agendas and their rationales in higher education and in the welfare state. Lessons learnt from welfare state reforms can be useful in understanding higher education reforms, and we see the links between the two under-researched.

Assuming that higher education services have traditionally been state-funded welfare state services in postwar Continental Europe, welfare state reforms debates as a background to higher education reforms debates are a significant missing link. We intend to fill this gap and explore possible links between the two largely isolated policy and research areas.

Permanent processes of reforming universities in the last two or three decades do not lead to their complete reform. They rather lead to further, ever deeper, reforms across Europe. As Jürgen Enders and colleagues (2011: 1) put it recently, “nowhere today is higher education undergoing more substantial change than in Europe”.

While arguments in favor of reforms vary over time and across European countries, today they seem to be becoming increasingly homogenous, especially at transnational levels represented by the OECD and the World Bank. The two organizations have been major providers of analytical frameworks, definitions, large-scale comparative datasets and their extended analyses of pensions, healthcare, and higher education in the last decade.

Higher education in Europe has been under powerful reform pressures and in the last three decades and the changes were always viewed as dramatic, critical or fundamental. Reforms increasingly, and throughout the European continent, tend to produce “further reforms”, as shown in the organizational studies (Brunsson 2009: 91; Brunsson and Olsen 1993). Despite relatively convergent global and European-level arguments for reforms, there are different directions of current and projected academic restructuring in different national systems and different directions of their implementation (Kwiek 2013).

We expand the traditional scope of the “welfare state” term and instead of focusing on what some term its “semantic core” (such as old-age security or healthcare), we discuss one of its “sub-fields”: education (Nullmeier and Kaufmann 2010: 89).

Consequently, recent paradigmatic changes in viewing welfare state futures are seen here as inevitably linked to possibly paradigmatic changes in viewing higher education futures. Historically, the dramatic growth of higher education coincided with the dramatic growth of welfare states in postwar Europe. Now the restructuring of the foundations of the latter may change the way both policymakers and European societies view the former.

What Stephan Leibfried and colleagues term “the golden-age constellation” of the four components of the modern nation-state (the territorial state, the constitutional state, the democratic welfare state and the interventionist state) is threatened: “different state functions are threatened to a greater or lesser degree, and subjected to pressures for internationalization of varying intensity” (Hurrelmann et al. 2007b: 9). One of the dimensions of the “golden-age constellation” under renegotiations today are higher education policies.

Therefore we move back and forth between the institution of the university and the institution of the state: problems perceived and solutions sought for the latter institution bring about problems perceived and solutions sought for the former institution.

New ideas leading to changes in the overall functioning of the state and public sector services in Europe can have far-reaching consequences for the functioning of European universities because of, among others, their fundamental financial dependence on tax-based state subsidization.

Higher education as a welfare state component

Transformations to the state, and the welfare state in particular, are viewed here as powerfully affecting – both directly and indirectly – public higher education systems in Europe. The two major dimensions studied are financial arguments and ideological arguments for further reforms in both wider welfare state services and higher education.

There is a complex interplay of influences between institutions and their environments. Universities are perfect examples of the powerful connectedness between changes in institutions and changes in the outside world (from which they draw their resources, founding ideas, and social legitimacy).

The institution of the university in Europe may thus be undergoing a fundamental transformation – along with the traditional institution of the state in general, and the welfare state in particular. Institutions change over time, and social attitudes to institutions change over time, too. What we may term “university attitudes” in European societies today may be studied in parallel to recently studied “welfare attitudes”. Stefan Svallfors’ large-scale comparative research project on “welfare attitudes” considered the following issues:

Attitudes toward the welfare state and other public institutions should be seen as central components of social order, governance, and legitimacy of modern societies. They tell us something about whether or not existing social arrangements are legitimate. Are they accepted only because people see no alternatives or think that action is futile, or are they normatively grounded? Are institutions considered to be fundamentally just or not? (Svallfors 2012: 2).

In a similar vein, questions about the existing social arrangements in higher education today, leading to ever deeper structural reforms, are about these arrangements’ legitimacy, justice, and normative grounding (or about higher education’s institutional “raison d’être”, Olsen 2007b).

Institutions and their supportive discourses

As it seems, the power of the modern university in the last two hundred years resulted from the power of the accompanying discourse of modernity in which the university held a central, highlighted, specific (and carefully secured) place in European societies (Rothblatt and Wittrock 1993, Wittrock 2003).

Any relocation of the institution in the social, cultural and economic architecture of European nations requires a new discourse which legitimizes and justifies it and sustains public confidence, without which, in the long run, it is hard to maintain a high level of public trust (and, consequently, a high level of public funding).

Therefore, the struggles over future forms of the institution are also, perhaps above all, the struggles over discourses which legitimize its place: in the last decade, those struggles have intensified and for the first time became global, with the strong engagement of international and transnational organizations and institutions.

To a large extent, the future of European universities and of the levels of their public subsidization will depend on the social and political acceptance of legitimizing discourses currently produced around them, especially at supranational levels increasingly accepted in policymaking communities across Europe, with stronger or lighter “national filters” (see Gornitzka and Maassen 2011). Early formulations of those discourses are already being translated into national contexts, fuelling reform programs in many countries (postcommunist new EU members being prime examples of national

translations of OECD reform recommendations, see Kwiek 2013). Widely accepted supportive discourses for public universities seem to be still in the making, amidst the transformations of their environments (Välismaa and Hoffman 2008).

The whole idea of the welfare state is under renegotiations, and the conditions for access to, and eligibility, for various tax-based public services are under discussions. It is increasingly related to possible individual contributions (co-funding and private policies in healthcare, multi-pillar schemes in pensions, and cost-sharing in higher education).

Transforming governments have been following in the last two decades the rules of a zero-sum game: higher expenditures in one sector of public services or public programs (pensions or higher education) occurred at the expense of expenditures in other sectors of public services (healthcare), programs or public infrastructure (roads, railroads, law and order etc.).

The financial dimension of changes in both welfare state and higher education seems crucial, especially that costs generated by all welfare state components and each of them separately cannot be easily reduced. Carlo Salerno formulated the dilemmas from the perspective which links resources to changeable social expectations. Salerno discussed an increasingly influential model of the university as a “service enterprise” (one of Johan P. Olsen’s four models):

Society values what the University produces relative to how those resources could be used elsewhere; ... The “marketization” produces a set of relative prices for each [service] that reveals, in monetary terms, just how important these activities are when compared to issues such as healthcare, crime, social security or any other good/service that is funded by the public purse. It does nothing to reduce universities’ roles as bastions of free inquiry or their promotion of democratic ideals; it only recasts the problem in terms of the resources available to achieve them (Salerno 2007: 121).

The higher education sector is a good example here: it has to compete permanently with a whole array of other socially attractive forms of public expenditures. In postcommunist Europe (much more than in Western European countries), the sector has to successfully compete with social needs whose public costs have been permanently growing. The ever fiercer battle between the claimants continues and can only intensify in the future.

Viewing state subsidization of higher education in the context of other competing welfare state claimants to the public purse introduces the “doing more with less” theme to the higher education reform agenda (Hall 2010). State-funded services and programs have traditionally included healthcare, pensions, and education; but today the costs of healthcare and pensions are expected to be escalating in aging Western societies while education, and especially higher education, is increasingly expected to show its “value for money”.

It may be expected to cut its costs, according to the zero-sum logics of competing services and programs (especially under the fiscal crisis) and to draw ever more non-core non-state funding. The increase in the share of non-core non-state income in European universities has already been substantial, as various comparative data show (CHEPS 2010, Shattock 2009).

The welfare state after the “Golden Age” of the 1960s and 1970s entered an era of austerity that forced it “off the path of ever-increasing social spending and ever-expanding state responsibilities” (Leibfried and Mau 2008: xiii). Similarly, public higher education and research sectors in Europe also stopped being a permanent “growth industry” (Ziman 1994), with ever increasing numbers of institutions and faculty. The transformation paths of welfare state and higher education show close affinities.

Financial pressures, ideological pressures, and changing social beliefs

The first type of pressures on public services is financial. The costs of both teaching and research are escalating across Europe, as are the costs of maintaining advanced healthcare systems (Rothgang, Cacace, Frisina, Grimmeisen, Schmidt, and Wendt 2010) and pension systems for aging European populations. As Alex Dumas and Bryan S. Turner (2009: 50) argue,

pensions imply a social contract between the individual and society. ... It is well recognized that the welfare states of Europe have rested on an explicit social contract between generations.

Any changes in the contract will produce both winners and losers among different welfare state components. Some of state responsibilities in some policy areas may have to be scaled down. One of possible areas for social renegotiations is clearly the mass public subsidization of higher education. Even though their outcome is still undetermined, in many European countries the pressure to invest more private funding to higher education through fees and business contracts has been mounting.

The second type of pressures on public services is ideological. It comes mainly from global financial institutions and international organizations involved in the data collection and analysis of broader public sector services. They tend to disseminate the view – in different countries to different degrees – that, in general, the public sector is less efficient than the private sector; its maintenance costs may exceed social benefits brought by it; and, finally, that it deserves less unconditional social trust combined with unconditional public funding. Public perceptions of the public sector in general (just like public “welfare attitudes” towards public sector services) may gradually influence public perceptions of European universities.

So alongside with dealing with financial pressures, universities simultaneously have to deal with the effects of changes in the beliefs of European electorates (both “welfare attitudes” in general and what we might term “university attitudes”), of key importance for changes in positions of leading national political parties.

Conclusions

First, public higher education worldwide is a much less exceptional part of the public sector than it used to be a few decades ago: both in public perceptions and in organizational and institutional terms (governance and funding modes). This disappearing – cultural, social, and economic –

exceptionality of the institution of the university will heavily influence its future relationships with the state which, on a global scale, is increasingly involved in reforming all its public services.

Second, further reforms of higher education systems in Europe seem inevitable, as the policy communities promoting changes are global in nature and their recommendations are similar in kind throughout Europe. The forces of change in Europe seem structurally similar, although they seem to act through various “national filters” (Gornitzka and Maassen 2011). National governments still have considerable power in shaping the regulatory frameworks and incentive structures (Enders et al. 2011: 8-9) but national and international policy thinking about higher education becomes increasingly convergent. Mass (and often universal) higher education is no longer a dominant goal of governments as it has already been achieved: there are many other, competing, social needs, though.

Third, it is increasingly difficult to understand the dynamics of possible future transformations in European higher education without understanding the transformations of the wider social world. In particular, transformations to the state in general, and European welfare states.

Fourth, the notion of the increasingly competitive nature of public funding made available to different public services is very useful: the allocation of public resources among competing public services is increasingly based on understanding of comparative and relative advantages of various options. Social outputs of spending in one policy area are increasingly assessed against social outputs of spending in competing policy areas.

And finally, it is hard to imagine that the university would not follow transformations of all other public sector institutions and of the foundations of modern European welfare states. New ideas of functioning of the state indirectly give life to new ideas of functioning of universities – which in Continental Europe have traditionally been heavily, in both teaching and research, dependent on public funding. The dynamics of current reforms of European welfare states can be mirrored in the dynamics of current reforms of European universities. We suggest here that the better we understand the former, the better we understand the latter. Which provides fertile ground for both higher education research and higher education policy research.

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