



THE EU AND THE WORLD: NEW CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

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Increasing the potential of young Europeans through the
creation of interactive universities

by

Anna Łomża, Kornel Koronowski

University of Warsaw

POLAND



Anna Łomża

anna_lomza@hotmail.com

Kornel Koronowski

kornel@koronowski.eu

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In the last years we all heard about protest of young Europeans. The most recognizable ones occurred in Spain, where people from *Movimiento 15-M* blocked Peuerta del Sol to complaint about over 40 % rate of unemployment among young people. European universities have a great role to play in decreasing this tragic statistics. In this paper we present ideas of the modernization of educational system on the European level in order to prepare graduates who could success in their professional career.

1. Easy access to information concerning the labour market demands

In order to make the cooperation with employers fruitful and to successfully achieve the long-term objectives of interactive universities, it is necessary to provide students with an access to information concerning the labour market demands on a regular basis. Young people should be aware of the ongoing development of the labour market – this means that they ought to have a deeply-rooted conviction that only a continuous improvement of their qualifications and ability to flexibly adjust to the needs of employers will provide them a successful professional career. Why is that so important? Taking a closer look at today's students we may easily notice that most of them begin their studies without a thorough consideration about their future employment prospects. Typically, the decisive role is played by their interests and secondary school examination results. What is more, after their admission, only few of them have “an idea for themselves”. Therefore, this leads to really high level of unemployment among recent university graduates. It is difficult to admit that only ambitionless, unenterprising and immature students are to be blamed for such sad state of affairs. In part for sure, but a huge responsibility should be borne by inefficient systems of education in the European Union member states as well. A proper solution to this problem are interactive universities, which take care of providing young people with valuable knowledge with regard to the employment opportunities.

How does the perfect interactive university look like when it comes to an issue of an access to information about the labour market demands? In our opinion, one of the fundamental structures are the Centres of Human Resources, having its branch offices at every faculty. Their crucial role is to convince students that theoretical knowledge gained at university must be supplemented with practical experience. The Centres are responsible for

creating and replenishing the databases with internship and job offers, which are then made available for all those who are concerned about their future professional life. Moreover, they regularly organize so-called preparation courses conducted by qualified staff, which's main goal is to enable students to enter the labour market successfully. Their schedule should include: faultless construction of the Curriculum Vitae and covering letter, an interview and assessment centre, psychological tests. These courses are approachable as often as possible, but participation in at least one of them is a mandatory component of the studies' program at each faculty – students receive an evaluation. A very important aspect is the promotion of the Centres of Human Resources. We may now find such type of offices at many universities, but unfortunately, their activities leave a great deal to be desired and students are often unaware of their existence. Prominent role is to be played by the European Union here – through financial support for the establishment and promotion of such Centres. It is crucial to harmonize higher education systems in the European Union by projects of such kind, because this will lead to bridging the differences between universities (so that students will not want to study only in capital cities, where universities are generally better developed in this matter). Students should begin their studies with a conviction that as graduates they will have no serious problems with finding a well-paid job. The Centres of Human Resources are a good step forward.

Referring to the aforementioned thread it is important to underline that a picture-perfect interactive university effectively reaches potential candidates and acquaints them with possible career paths after graduation. In practice this means the multilevel cooperation based on three facets: candidates – universities – employers. Such cooperation may bring only positive outcomes, because: a) high school graduates will not have any serious problems with choosing their prospective fields of study; b) universities will accept candidates interested in particular domain, not random people; c) employers will be aware that universities educate their worthy future employees. All these issues boil down to comprehensive information policy, which will foster better educational and professional choices.

2. Cooperation with small and medium enterprises, big corporations and NGOs

Imagine a situation when students on the last year of their studies are not looking for jobs but are employers themselves. European students have splendid ideas and universities should provide them with greatest possibilities to enhance their chances for success. European Union should establish a facility responsible for creating an academic business incubator in

every European university. In those places students, who would like to test their entrepreneurship skills would be given a small grants for their projects and would be provided with needed knowledge. Young lawyers to be could be responsible for taking care of the legal aspects of those projects. Moreover, also the practitioners, with decent experience, who own small and medium enterprises or are leading NGOs could be encouraged by for example preferential tax provisions to spend their time with the students and become their tutors. They would be responsible for providing young entrepreneurs with needed knowledge and information.

Cooperation with business should be also present on technical universities. In technology parks the potential of youth could meet professional demand from the companies. Technology parks would be small R&D centers where young people could test their skills and work on the projects led by specialists from the private sector. It would be beneficial for both sides because not only students would be able to test their skills in specialized surrounding but also the companies could find best students to work for them in the future. R&D centers could be financed partly by the companies which could for example invest 1% of their taxes in this kind of talent incubator.

Universities should cooperate with business enterprises also in order to respond to current market needs. This collaboration would result in updating study programs. This should not occur too often in order not to introduce unnecessary confusion among students and candidates, but for example every 5 years (if needed). Many fields of study require knowledge which is as up-to-date as possible. Interactive university ought to provide students with theory and practice that are useful for them right now and that will be useful for them while they will be looking for a job – not ones that are present only on paper of old textbooks. Adoption of such an assumption forces the universities' development and ceaseless improvement. A suitable solution that will greatly facilitate such pursuit of modernity is the international cooperation of universities in terms of consultancy of their programs of studies. Educational institutions should be linked to local markets on the one hand, but make use of the achievements of scientific and research centres across the whole European Union on the other. Interactive universities should become members of a very special pan-European forum of academic and business cooperation. The method to create it is to establish networks of permanent deliberation among universities' authorities. It should not provide too serious unification of curricula, but the mutual aid and benefiting from the other's experiences.

3. Balancing between teaching soft and hard skills

Cooperation with business is essential but in our opinion some reforms of the methods of learning are also needed. European universities are geared to teach what could be called theoretical knowledge, hard skills. Unfortunately, not enough attention is given to provide the students with the opportunity to develop their communication skills, personality and leadership skills generally understood. How this goal could be achieved?

In our opinion European universities should verify the curricula and grant extra points for student involvement. In this way the future employers could easily validate student's creativity or contribution by analyzing her or his previous accomplishments like participating in student government, organizing conferences, participating in interesting projects, championships or events. We find it unfair that students, who make more than just spending time in the library are not encouraged to continue it but, sometimes, punished because they are not able to devote so much time to learning than their colleagues. In this way European universities are not creating future leaders but bookworms with a great baggage of theoretical knowledge.

Moreover, students should be provided with additional classes on soft skills which would empower their communication skills and group cooperation which they would find indispensable during future work. They could also learn this skills during cooperation in study groups or presenting part of the discussed material on every class which would not only give them the opportunity to practice soft skills but also demand bigger involvement.

European Universities should become the real centers of self-empowerment To achieve this goal in our opinion the overall grade for the period of studies should be based in 80 % on the results from the exams and in 20% on the student involvement.

4. LLP-Erasmus as an opportunity to increase the employability

As students who have experienced the benefits of international exchange programs such as LLP-Erasmus, we cannot ignore this important element, which of course should become one of the foundations of each interactive university. As the statistics show, *in the 2010/11 academic year, 231 410 students went to another European country to study or*

*train*¹. For comparison, ten years earlier, in the 2000/01 academic year, this figure was equivalent to 111 092 – so this means an increase of 108% during ten years². We believe that this favourable trend should be maintained. However, it is worth mentioning about the significant disparity between the total number of Erasmus students who opt for the “studies” and “traineeships”. In 2010/11 it was absolutely evident – 190 498 went for studies, whereas only 40 912 for work placements (traineeships)³. This is a negative tendency that needs to be changed as soon as possible. The European Union should allocate more funds primarily for promotion of the traineeships within the Erasmus program, because probably the lack of knowledge among students is the main reason for such phenomenon. Universities eagerly encourage young people to travel abroad to study, but very often neglect traineeships, which might be even more beneficial taking into account future professional career. What is more, a step in the right direction would be an attempt to balance the unequal proportions between the member states in terms of number of leaving and arriving students. Top receiving countries have been the same for many years: Spain, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy. Maybe it is worth to convince students about the attractiveness of the Central Europe countries as well?

In case of students who prefer the “studies” option, but undertake a part-time job during their stay abroad, it is necessary to appreciate their effort by awarding them additional ECTS credits. It would definitely be a positive stimulus so they would want to make the most out of the time spent in another country. Erasmus is our great success, but we should not forget about its rather negative perception among some groups in the society. Its opponents claim that its main goal is to enable students to escape from everyday life by six months of partying. It cannot be denied that for some people Erasmus is simply a time for break from demanding and difficult studies at their home universities. Implementation of the system of additional ECTS credits for taking up a job would motivate them to spend these six months maybe more fruitfully.

¹ *Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends. The European Union support for student and staff exchanges and university cooperation in 2010-11*, [in:] http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/higher/erasmus1011_en.pdf [11.05.2012]

² *Erasmus Program – review of statistics*, [in:] http://www.erasmus.org.pl/sites/erasmus.org.pl/files/Erasmus_statystyki%20na%2025-lecie.pdf [11.05.2012]

³ *Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends. The European Union support for student and staff exchanges and university cooperation in 2010-11*, [in:] http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/higher/erasmus1011_en.pdf [11.05.2012]

A significant issue to be improved are the mechanisms for recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. It is necessary to take up actions to enhance the use of documents such as Europass, which consists of Curriculum Vitae, Language Passport, Europass Mobility, Certificate Supplement, Diploma Supplement. Today it seems to be just one of many European Union's projects that ordinary citizens are not familiar with, although its goals are very noteworthy. Similar situation can be seen in case of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Such valuable initiatives should take the form of directives, not non-binding recommendations. In the face of many ridiculous European directives meticulously regulating almost every area of our lives, it may seem strange that such matters are left without effective regulation. In order to enable young people to develop their professional potential, it is essential to get rid of any obstacles that prevent them from improving their skills, both in their home countries and abroad.