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**COORDS**

# **HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER BOLOGNA**

Challenges and Perspectives

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# CHAPTER 7

## THE ANTI-NOMIES OF POST BOLOGNA HIGHER EDUCATION CRITICAL APPRAISALS ON THE “SOCIAL DIMENSION” OF THE REFORM

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*This chapter seeks to reflect critically on the (indirect) effects of Bologna's Process namely associated with the teleological orientation of what is taught and researched in high education institutions, as well as the impact of these debates in extra European countries like Brazil. Additionally it is discussed the presupposition of equality in the access and attendance of high education in the European higher education area and the issues associated with the so-called social dimension of the Bologna Process, either in a historical, or substantive perspective.*

## Introduction

Higher Education Institutions, especially Universities, have been playing and consolidating, throughout History, a crucial role in defining guidelines and models of social and scientific progress. The axiological pillars of modern societies, in particular, and the possibility they opened for the universalization of knowledge found, in universities, the essential mainstay for the promotion of Reason as the basic principle of social, political, scientific and economic organization, notably in the last three centuries.

Similarly, social transformations, *lato sensu*, have over time, in a more or less explicit or implicit way, determined a wide range of adaptations and changes in higher education institutions. These changes, however, did not call into question, at least until the last decade, the core values and organizational principles, which have historically legitimized the scientific and social role of higher education institutions, and, as such, have contributed to the consolidation of their identity. In fact, not neglecting the enormous diversity and pluralism that always existed between higher education institutions, in terms of organizational and structuring models of their teaching and research – diversity which is the translator of the heterogeneity of their own socio-political contexts and founding ideologies -, the University constituted itself as the bulwark of freedom (and, consequently, of pluralism) and of the supremacy of knowledge and science in the face of the determinants and needs of the market and politics. Knowledge held, therefore, a value in itself and not a utilitarian and cyclical value associated to functionality and employability criteria. The search for knowledge, entailing time for reflection, consolidation of ideas and sharing, was assumed as a premise of quality and construction of a consistent, consequent and coherent science. A science dissociated from assumptions of “excellence” proven

by: a) measuring what is produced, instead of the quality and importance of what is published and taught; b) the amounts of funding and “technification” of scientific research projects, instead of the prioritized appreciation of the relevance of their objectives and the effective impact they cause in terms of progression of knowledge and social relevance, and c) the publication of results, allegedly striking but quickly disseminated and quickly forgotten. Actually, results that only validate (in some cases) ratings and rankings (of higher education institutions and regions) based on impact criteria and rules that are, finally, defined by some organizations that wish to preserve their own favorable position on the rankings. Contemporary science seems to be, therefore, carried out in accordance with a kind of “contingent *poietics*”, if we consider the Aristotelian categories of human activity, as Michel Messu underlines (2015, p.77).

In fact, over the course of the last decade, it has become clear that the challenges faced by higher education institutions, following the so-called Bologna Process, are not only a set of organizational and functional readjustments but also, and above all, an axiological and normative transformation that tends to produce impacts on the identity of the institutions themselves and, consequently, on the teaching they provide and the science they develop (Gumport, 2000).

Within this scope, new values and principles, substantially different from the founders, seem to emerge in the “Bologna’s” context. Tapper & Palfreyman (2000) refer to the major challenges that higher education institutions face today, which cluster under what the authors designate by the three “M’s”: marketization, massification, and managerialism. In fact, at the heart of the Bologna process, the employability of graduates and the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European area are constituted as two of the basic and priority axes. To this end,

higher education institutions have been invested in introducing faster training processes (in shorter and articulated cycles), more focused than before on the needs of the labor market. The evaluation of the performance of higher education institutions and, accordingly, their funding has even been associated, in some countries, with the employment performance indicators of their graduates (Smith, McKnight, & Naylor, 2000; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Higher education becomes thus hostage to a set of presuppositions that are alien to it and which determine, in a more or less reactive way, its formative and investigative options (in this sense, more tactical than strategic).

A profound epistemological (and even ontological) debate is therefore required, as it has already been acknowledged by several academic bodies, teachers and researchers from various scientific areas of knowledge (Crozier, Curvale, & Hénard, 2006), and even by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The need to redefine frameworks for analysis and reflection, which allow us to construct a critical view of the ongoing evolution and, therefore, to build and consolidate new perspectives on what should be the mission, vision and values of Higher Education Institutions today, acquires all the relevance and opportunity. In fact,

[F]rom its medieval origins to its post-modern incarnation, universities are not mainly local organizations justified by specific economic and political functions or shaped by particular historical legacies or power struggles. A much broader cultural and civilizational mission has always informed higher education. Its legitimacy and development throughout history have been linked to enacting this broader mission, which today includes the

idea that universities are sites for developments that lead to social progress (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank, & Schofer, 2007, p. 210).

The idea of social progress, emphasized by Meyer, Ramirez, Frank and Schofer (2007) among others, puts also in the first page of the discussion agenda the need of a deep reflection on the “social dimension” of the Bologna process. Since 2001, such dimension has been translated into a set of general guidelines and measures designed to ensure equal access to higher education by all students who can and wish to do so, regardless of their socio-economic background. Higher education should reflect, in this perspective, the socio-economic diversity of a given society (London Communiqué, 2007). But, as we will argue, such strategies seem to be clearly insufficient to guarantee effective equality among students. Higher education institutions have, in fact, in the last centuries, exerted a central influence on students’ personal trajectories and on the possibilities of social mobility. This is truth also nowadays. As European data (Eurostat, 2009) show,

In the EU-27, almost a third of the population aged between 25 and 34 has completed higher education. This share is increasing in younger generations in almost all Bologna countries. This increase in the number of higher education graduates particularly benefits women, who are closing the gap with men, which is often high among the oldest generation (45–64 year olds) (p. 115).

Even so, a more profound and critical reflection on the true conditions of equity in the current higher education, as well as on the paradoxes generated by the Bologna process on this matter is necessary. The mere legal, *a priori* and universal guarantee of

equality in access to higher education, while extremely relevant and translating a significant civilizational advance, cannot effectively obscure in-depth reflection on persisting inequalities, whether in the access, or, above all, in the continuity of superior studies. As evidenced by several researches (Andreu & Brennan, 2012; Archer, 2007) inequality persists in some contexts, for example in regard to what is studied and where. This brings us necessarily to the upstream social and cultural conditions of the higher education system itself, demanding debate on the broader and more substantive meaning of the concept of “opportunity” (Gewirtz 1998; Nussbaum, 2010; Tillman & Scheurich, 2013), and consequently, on the social support that is provided to students in need.

This chapter seeks thus to reflect critically on the indirect effects of Bologna’s Process, namely associated with the teleological orientation of what is taught and researched in high education institutions, as well as the impact of these debates in extra European countries like Brazil. Additionally it discusses the presupposition of equality in the access and attendance of high education in the European higher education area and the issues associated with the so-called “social dimension” of the Bologna Process, both in a historical or substantive perspective.

## 1. The antinomies in the reason of a reform

The Bologna reform was based not only on educational grounds, but also on economic and political motivations. The assertion of a growing European market in the international geopolitical chess, underlined, in the 1990s, the exigency that highly skilled people could be trained and could move freely throughout Europe. To this end, it was crucial to ensure fairly

consensual mechanisms for mutual recognition and comparability of diplomas capable of generating confidence in the quality of training offered by the various European higher education institutions. In other words, it was necessary to create a European Area of Higher Education capable of training specialists from different countries and based on unified criteria around certain standards or guiding principles of quality and comparability. Within this scope, higher education institutions began to be also parameterized by reference to their graduates' employability potential in an increasingly wider geographical area.

Thus, demographic issues became particularly acute for some Universities. A 2009 Eurydice study envisaged a reduction of around 15% by 2020 in the European students population, which would necessarily lead to major readjustments in management style and differentiation processes between higher education institutions. In addition, the pronounced aging of the teaching staff across Europe, given the baby boom generation near retirement age, may lead to a sort of "brainwar" (Sursock & Smidt, 2010) for students and academic staff. To this end, higher education institutions are investing in the conquest of the "best", in the search for adequate talents to the achievement of the strategic goal they aim to reach. Clarifying the institution's strengths and potential, and the investment in national and international marketing are, henceforth, the prerogative of universities' action in search for additional financing mechanisms and advantageous ranking positions (in fact, two elements that may feed each other).

### 1.1. Quality vs utility: Dilemma and strategic choice?

The Report *Trends 2010: A decade of change in European Higher Education* (Sursock & Smidt, 2010) examines the changes

that occurred in European higher education institutions in the course of a decade after Bologna's Declaration. As explicitly stated in the document's foreword,

Europe is perceived around the world as having developed far-reaching policies for education and research. From the point of view of European institutions, however, there is still room for improving the coordination of these two sets of policies. Historically, European universities view themselves as knowledge-based institutions that produce new knowledge and disseminate it through teaching and innovation. The links between research, teaching and innovation is a critical success factor and is all the more important to knowledge-driven societies. Therefore, the condition for successful change in the next decade requires reinforcing the links in the knowledge chain and placing universities, as institutions, at the centre of European and national policies (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p.4).

On the same Report (Sursock, & Smidt, 2010), it becomes clear those that were, from the respondents point of view (rectors of 20 European universities), the significant changes that have occurred with the Bologna's process implementation: 60% highlighted quality assurance processes; 53% reported increased cooperation between universities; 42% increased cooperation with industry, and 43% acknowledge their autonomy increased. Concerning shifts in university policy, only 28% of respondents claim to have changed their academic policy and 20% their tuition fees. In terms of impacts, 58% of universities' rectors believe that "Bologna's" impacts are very positive, for 3% the impact was null and 38% consider there were gains and losses arising from the process.

A comparison between these results and the assessment obtained in *Trends 2015* (Sursock, 2015), the percentage of respondents who consider the impacts very positive rises to 59%, however the percentage of mixed appraisals decreases (from 38 to 30% of the respondents) and responses of indifferent impact increase, from 3 to 5%. On the *2015 Report*, the context data are particularly emphasized, namely the economic crisis (highly important for 43% of respondents: notably in the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Ukraine) and the low demographic growing (highly important to 32% of the responding institutions, particularly in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovakia and Ukraine).

Although illustrative, these data do not add much to the understanding of what is at stake when identifying the more or less positive impacts of the Bologna process, nor on the meaning attributed to reforms and content of ongoing adaptations. Very little is known, as the reports themselves acknowledge, about what the European higher education area is or should be. The scarcity of debate has even led to some ambiguity between humanistic objectives and technocratic purposes at the heart of the Bologna process. In fact, an ambiguity that has determined in an indelible way, over the last decades, European higher education development.

The attractiveness of the European area in the formation of qualified “human capital” and the competitiveness (especially with Northern American higher education institutions) have become, in reality, key features on the European political and economic agenda, in line with the assumptions of the Lisbon Strategy (2000). In fact, it explicitly inscribes the goal of creating the “most dynamic and competitive economic space in the world”,

based on knowledge. Europe would, thus, be able to ensure simultaneously sustainable economic growth, job creation and social cohesion. Higher education transmutes into a crucial instrument for this endeavor.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in a Report published in 2006 (p. 9), points out that “higher education, in a context of globalization, has begun to show the characteristics of a market” (cit. in Lima, Azevedo & Catani, 2008, p. 17).

Taking over a competitive edge in the global market is, in effect, explicit in various documents framing the Bologna reform. Higher education institutions hence become, first and foremost, producers of well-trained and flexible professionals to respond to the challenges of the market. It is therefore consistent with the underlying philosophy of the reform that the various choices made are oriented towards guaranteeing employability, measuring and auditing procedures, strategic planning and economic efficiency (within the organizational management of universities itself). Principles derived from the industrial universe, which in their essence do not relate to the founding values and concerns of university education, are henceforth explicitly included in the context of higher education. The credit transfer system, for example, does not only convey a confidence assumption on the quality of skills acquired by the student in a “partner” higher education institution. It also enables saving financial resources since it becomes unnecessary for the same training module to be taught at the student’s higher education institution of origin. The same implicit purpose lies in the recognition of professional experience and in the awarding of joint degrees, allowing the assignment of educational costs by various institutions and, as such, reducing the actual cost per student.

Concerns for economic rationalization, standardization and measurement of procedures (paradoxically aggregated under a rhetoric of “quality”) are, essentially, transversal to the various axes of the Bologna process and tend to determine choices made regarding, for example, what should be taught and how. This way, appropriate criteria and inherent processes in assessing the quality and consistency of teaching and research (essentially dissociated from external pressures and utility concerns) can be, in some cases, put in a secondary place. This does not mean that economic sustainability of higher education institutions and employability of their graduates should not be considered as important elements of reflection. However such concerns shouldn’t be prevalent in substantive options on contents to be taught and on science to be developed. These should stand on its own. As the mathematician Henri Poincaré stated, at the beginning of the twentieth century (1905), science is worth for science, it is not moldable to relativistic perspectives and mere pursuit of solutions. *“On ne peut même pas dire que l’action soit le but de la science; devons-nous condamner les études faites sur l’étoile Sirius, sous prétexte que nous n’exercerons probablement jamais aucune action sur cet astre?”*(Poincaré, 1905, p. 241). The main focus of scientific knowledge is not the solution, but the questioning, is not certainty but the methodical doubt. Applicability is not an end in itself, but only a possible product. In the same way, Michel Messu (2015) points out, in the book *De la Méthode en Sociologie*,

La science ne se réduit toujours pas à ce qu’elle permet de produire concrètement. Sa fin n’est pas le «produit» lui-même, mais le savoir qui s’y réalise, la théorie qui en rend raison. Partant, sa fin ne connaît pas de marque d’arrêt. Elle s’accomplit quand la science se fait. L’activité

scientifique est en quelque sorte sa propre fin et n'admet aucun terme, aucun point final. Et sûrement pas celui représenté par le produit qu'elle a contribué à réaliser (p. 77).

However, with the Bologna's process implementation, higher education institutions and the science produced and disseminated by them, are especially linked to the effort of innovation as well as economic and social development. "Higher education institutions are increasingly viewed by policy makers as 'economic engines' and are seen as essential for ensuring knowledge production through research and innovation and the education and continuous up-skilling of the workforce" (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p. 14). Useful knowledge is thus one that can be applied and produces measurable and adequate results for the fulfillment of the goals of economic growth.

The teleological dimension of higher education emerges at this level as the inescapable debate. Sjur Bergan (2006, *cit.* in Sursock & Smidt, 2010), for example, highlights as aims of higher education, four essential objectives conceived as a whole, reinforcing and complementing each other: "preparation for the labor market, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, personal development and the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base" (*cit.* in Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p. 31). From the author's point of view, the purpose of personal development has been neglected and became invisible at the core of the Bologna process while other objectives are only considered in a scarce and incomplete way. A much deeper and multidimensional reflection on the present purposes and challenges of higher education is, therefore necessary.

Within Bologna's framework, the orientation towards the formation of "human capital" adapted to the new demands of the

globalized labor market is, as previously mentioned, embraced as paramount. The theory of human capital, developed especially within the scope of the Chicago School in the 1960s (Schultz, 1963), focuses on the assumption that education is a fundamental element in the creation of skills to increase the possibilities of human productivity. In this sense, education would be an investment in individuals and their competencies, aiming for the development of society and economy.

Associated with this perspective there is a strict conception of competences whose origins lie in the traditions of a functionalist and behavioral approach. These traditions emerge in areas such as management, human resources, vocational and career guidance (Mulder, 2007; Sultana, 2009), particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. In this context, “performance culture”, established as the nodal element of training and learning strategies, was associated, for that purpose, with processes of measurement and standardization of behavioral indicators to the detriment of more complex and dynamic approaches. Goals were, therefore, focused on the appreciation of what individuals should be able to do (Melton, 1994) in terms of more or less standardized and measurable descriptors. Thereby, obtaining satisfactory performance results (Jessup, 1991) was the crucial factor for weighing the importance, or irrelevance, of educational efforts. However, during the last decade of the last century, the very concept of competence began to be re-equated and, through this, educational guidelines, centered on mere functionalist and static approaches, deeply questioned (Brown *et al.*, 1994). The main criticisms revolved around the impossibility of understanding, through simplistic logics, complex activities and behaviors, or the influence of personal values, professional frameworks, group processes and environmental influence (Barnett, 1994; Hager & Gonczi, 1996). Other criticisms denounced the underlying reductionism

of measuring learning objectives by means of results, which are conditioned by predetermined ends, in a kind of “mechanical teaching for testing” (Bates, 1995).

The rhetoric of competences and skills is still pivotal within Bologna process’ framework. Based on the same thesis of human capital theory of the 1960s - education as an essential element in the creation of skills to increase the possibilities of human productivity -, the new guidelines underline higher education’s relevance for the formation of active and skill full agents able to fit in a global economy and respond adequately and effectively to its challenges. An economy based on knowledge and innovation as advocated by Europe 2020’s strategy, following the preceding Lisbon Strategy.

Designing educational programs driven mainly by economic functionality preoccupations is, however, as it was already mentioned, profoundly reductionist. As the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) points out, that way it is only considered a portion of how citizens develop.

The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups and nations in the context of an understanding of the world’s economy and the history of many national and group interactions is the key to enabling democracies to be able to deal responsibly with problems which we are currently facing as members of an interdependent world (Nussbaum, 2010, p.9).

The antinomies underlying the Bologna process and the consequent paradoxes inherent to its goals and the practices it intends to develop become thus clear: on one hand, the purposes of knowledge and science *per se*, on the other hand, the goals of functionality and employability. On one hand,

quality as substance, on the other, quality as a procedure. On one hand, theoretical knowledge, on the other, know-how. Although we can discuss the simplistic dichotomization of these assumptions, it allows to analytically underscore, above all, the current transmutation of higher education's basic principles, in orientations of instrumental, technical and performative focus.

This component associated with the weighting of higher education's goals and the kind of citizens it helps to produce seem to be, in our perspective, one of the essential dimensions in a more complex reflection on the Bologna process and the balance that can already be achieved on it.

## 2. Bologna's debates in extra European contexts: the case of Brazil

Bologna's process gathered, in the Brazilian context, controversial positions for or against it. This is mainly due to higher education reform initiatives considered more targeted for privatization since the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

In the midst of higher education reform - in fact in parallel with the reform of the State itself continued in the Lula da Silva government (first mandate: 2003-2006) - such initiatives were materialized through PROUNI (University for All Program, 2005), REUNI (New University, later Program for Restructuring and Expansion of Brazilian Federal Universities, 2007), PNAES (National Student Assistance, 2010), and FIES (Student Financing Fund, 2001).

The governmental discourse was that PROUNI, REUNI and PNAES would allow a democratic expansion of access to and permanence in higher education, with a significant increase in

the number of students from lower income social classes in public universities. For that, affirmative policies, for example quotas for students of public schools, black, and Indians, were putted in action since then (Brazil, MEC, 2012). Other favorable argument about the Brazilian higher education reform underlined that it would ease student's internal and international mobility. Lima (2003) points out that in 2003 more than one million students studied in private institutions. The number of enrollments in the private network (1,808,219 students) grew thus three times more than in the public one (887,027 students) before the reforms.

Additionally, the argument of the preparation of universities for 21<sup>st</sup> century societies was presented, overcoming the "Humboldtian paradigm" in the transmission of knowledge linked with research, and the need to change the ways of thinking and preparing the youth for the future.

In the background of this defense of the ongoing reforms is also the assertion of the state's inability to sustain the cost of federal universities. In this sense, between 1995 and 2002, in a compression policy, investments in federal universities were reduced by 30% (Pena-Vega, 2009).

Nevertheless, the reforms triggered a heated debate within teachers and their organizations, and among students, but not within the National Union of Students (UNE). This organization and its leadership, considered to be co-opted by the government (Vieira, 2015), directed its critics, not to the reform ongoing, but to the operationalization instruments of it in the Brazilian higher education system. These were considered instruments of coercion and a synonym of loss of autonomy of public universities, as well as of reduction of financial means or resources. In fact, it was considered that these factors could condition the improvement guarantee in the quality of teaching, research and extension, the quality of the structures of the

campuses, the hiring of teachers and the promotion of the existing ones.

The most compelling argument against the reform is however related with its ideological representation. Accordingly to several authors the reform is associated with “a new colonialist movement” and “a new division” in the trade of educational services (Dias, 2009; Santos 2009). However, despite the freedom that each country, ministers and university communities have had in deciding to approve or reject the principles contained in documents without legal force, the reform of higher education in Brazil inspired by the European Bologna Process is now a reality.

The “New University” proposal (materialized by the Decree 6.096, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2007) aims to “create conditions for the expansion of access and permanence in higher education, at undergraduate level, for the better use of the physical structure and human resources existing in federal universities” (REUNI, 2007, Art. 1º). In the background this reform intends also to stimulate the concurrence between federal Universities, associating the increasing of financial resources to the presentation of reform plans and the definition of measurable goals. In fact, the so called New University reform, pointed out by some authors (Almeida Filho, 2007) as the sheepish miscellaneous between European and Northern American Models, although considered necessary to surpass some of the structural problems of the Brazilian higher education system, must be aware of the risk of “transforming public universities at Liberal Arts Colleges, failing to achieve the standard of first-class USA universities” (Lima, Azevedo, & Catani, 2008, p. 27)

Actually, the balance of results and perspectives after some reforms points to the expansion / internalization of public universities, but also to an exponential growth of private

universities<sup>1</sup> and distance education, as well as adaptations and enlargement of physical structures and some public recruitment of new teachers. However, the academic restructuring did not reach yet 50% of institutional projects in terms of innovation: training in cycles, common basic training for all undergraduate courses, basic training in one or more major area courses, interdisciplinary baccalaureate in one or more of the major areas, baccalaureate with two formative itineraries, according to the types of initiatives pointed out by Ramalho Filho (2009). Moreover, the idea contained in the defense of intra, inter and international mobility did not yet, in fact, promote equality, but rather equivalence, a principle that does not materialize the universalization of public higher education. Within this scope, another “social dimension” conception in high education systems cannot be neglected: the one that is associated with what is mentioned in official reform documents as the component of equity and social justice in higher education.

### 3. Social dimension in the Bologna process: Limitations and paradoxes

During the first years of Bologna’s Process implementation, the technical-operative dimension was established as the reform’s priority. The design of procedures, guidelines and instruments, whether related to the process of articulation of higher education in the European area (system of accumulation and transfer of credits, transformation of curricula, definition of transversal learning competences for areas of study, etc.), or concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Data on the number of public and private institutions in the country make clear the direction and intentionality of the higher education reform inspired by the Bologna Process: between 2001 and 2010, Brazil had 67 public higher education institutions and 1,208 private ones, while, in 2010, public institutions reached 99 and private ones reached 2,100, (INEP, adapted by Araújo, 2015).

the functional and organizational model to be adopted by different Higher Education Institutions (in particular the so-called quality assurance system), was, in fact, at the heart of the initial concerns. This process, which is more political than academic, has been largely determined by supranational bodies and heavily governmentalized, without a clear and sufficient public debate. The participation of educational institutions in decision making and in influencing the process was scarce (Lima, Azevedo & Catani, 2008). The technical and methodological dimension of “how to do” overlapped the deontological and hermeneutic dimension of “why to do”, with what implications and with what sense. The reform’s substantive and social components were thus transferred, at least in the first stage of the Bologna process, to a secondary and grey area of uncertainty.

Although the first reference to the so-called “social dimension” of the Bologna process surfaces on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2001 on the Prague Declaration, it remains overshadowed by the emphasis on evaluation, the definition of comparable academic degrees to enhance student mobility within the European Higher Education Area, the need for students to participate in the process and the attractiveness of students from other regions outside Europe. The Communiqué of the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP), released on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001, is clear in explaining these priorities as central objectives for the creation of a real European Higher Education Area: student and graduates mobility, employability and greater competitiveness within the European Area and by reference to the other global blocks. Such objectives would be achieved through readability and comparability of academic degrees, by creating a compatible and comparable system of credits (ECTS and Diploma Supplement) and a process of quality assurance of courses and education systems through cooperation in evaluation processes (EPHE, 2006).

In contrast, the social dimension of the Bologna process was emphasized by students on the 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2001 within the framework of the Student Göteborg Convention. In the Declaration issued by the National Unions of Students in Europe, students advocate the need for a combination of quality, accessibility and diversity in European higher education, a “Europe without boundaries for its citizens”. At this level, conditions and social implications underlying the access and attendance of higher education are of particular relevance to the students, who demand the cooperation and responsibility of the States in this domain.

In effect, it were the organizations representative of the students that have most critically positioned themselves regarding Bologna’s process technical and mercantile approach as well as the oblivion of the lack of equity at its core. For example, on the Report produced in 2007 - *Bologna with Student Eyes* (ESIB, 2007) - it is precisely underlined the difference between the marketing of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area and the real possibilities for mobility and payment of studies by a considerable proportion of students from third countries or from countries with significant economic differentiation within Europe. Mobility grants have, in fact, been decreasing, always demanding a considerable co-payment from families (especially if mobility operates between countries with very different socio-economic levels). Similarly, tuition fees (even in public universities) reach, in some countries (as is the case of Portugal), increasingly high values that try to get close to the “real cost” per student. Students are, in this sense, consumers of educational services. In fact, on the ground of increasing the quality of education and services to students in some European countries there has been an increase in the costs of attending higher education, particularly in the last decade, which can turn into a relevant barrier to equitable access to higher education for all candidates. Nevertheless, the various

countries that form the European High Education Area have very distinct realities on this matter at the level of the first cycle of studies. In some cases, free studies, such as in the Scandinavian countries; in other cases mandatory payment of tuition fees, such as in Portugal.

To this end, the paradox between a discourse that proclaims “higher education for all”, in conditions of equity and justice, and a practice that tends to favor differentiation and competitiveness has been emphasized for a long time. In fact, although these concerns regarding equity in higher education were highlighted in 2001, it was only in May 2005 (at the Bergen Conference) that social dimension was recognized as an inherent axis of the European High Education Area, being assumed as a necessary strategy to promote its attractiveness and competitiveness:

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. We therefore renew our commitment to making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. The social dimension includes measures taken by governments to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects and to provide them with guidance and counselling services with a view to widening access (Bergen Communiqué, 2005, p.4).

This orientation was defined even before the Bergen Conference, at the seminar “*The social dimension of the European Higher Education Area and world-wide competition*” (Paris,

January 2005), in which the premises of what is known as the social dimension of the Bologna Process were refined:

The social dimension includes all provisions needed for having equal access, progress and completion of higher education. Enlarging the existing gap between different parts of Europe should be avoided, and at the national level the gap between those who benefit from higher education and come back later in life and those who never make use of this possibility should be closed. Participants agreed that:

- strengthening the social dimension of higher education is one of the conditions for making real a knowledge society, which implies increasing the number of graduates from higher education through lifelong learning;
- social and economic background should not be a barrier to access to higher education, successful completion of studies and meaningful employment after graduation;
- taking into account the social dimension of the EHEA both at the national level and the European level contributes to the creation of a coherent, balanced and competitive European Higher Education Area (Bologna Seminar, 2005, s.p.).

Taking as a concern the overcoming or minimization of obstacles to a successful learning path, as well as the access to quality higher education for all students, regardless of their socio-economic starting conditions, the definition of actions and measures to meet this target was defined and shaped in national contexts according to their needs and specificities. The definition of such global strategies - for instance, through the collection of comparable data (via Eurostat, Eurydice and Eurostudent) - and national guidelines was explained at the London Communiqué (2007).

This strategy emphasized the importance of collecting comparable and reliable data on students, widening participation, identifying underrepresented groups of students, undertaking peer learning activities between countries of the EHEA, and designing adequate teaching and delivery methods to cater for the needs of all students. (Infosheet, 2014-2016, p. 2).

In this Communiqué (and, in its continuity, in the one of Leuven, in 2009) the aim is to ensure the representation of the diversity of all social groups in the frequency of higher education and define key issues for the achievement of the social dimension in the EHEA. These issues are based on six cornerstones (Eurostat, 2009):

1. Equal opportunities for access, participation and completion of higher education (anti-discrimination legislation covering higher education; fair and transparent admission rules);
2. Extension of access to and participation in higher education (outreach programs for underrepresented groups, flexible learning pathways, and recognition of prior learning, in particular of a professional nature);
3. Improved completion rates and quality of education (provision of academic services: guidance, study resources, teaching and learning methods, retention measures as a flexibility strategy, etc., provision of social services - counseling, targeted support for students with special needs and “non-traditional” students);
4. Participation of students in the government of higher education institutions (measures to ensure student participation, for example, in course and program evaluations);

5. Financing to start and complete higher education (adequate and coordinated national financial support systems; targeted support for disadvantaged groups);
6. Monitoring (systematic and periodic collection of student background data, employability graduate tracer studies).

To this end, a set of actions and procedures were established in 2012 (Bucharest) aimed mainly at reducing inequalities through measures and services directed to students, duly adapted to the specificities of national contexts and based on the general “*Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020*”<sup>2</sup>: counseling and guidance; flexible and diversified learning strategies (provision of part-time courses, accredited internships, distance learning through the use of ICT, open and creative educational resources); support to teachers’ work (pedagogical methodology, continuous scientific deepening, guarantee of academic freedom) for a better monitoring of students’ individual development; recognition and accreditation of students’ previous experience (namely professional), peer learning (e.g., encouraging entrepreneurship), among others.

All of these measures are, however, designed, according to the spirit of the Bologna process, as strategies of attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Area. According to the underlying rhetoric, concerns about reducing inequalities in access and attendance of higher education increases skills and benefits not only students but society as a whole and its social and economic cohesion. This would generate social justice by guaranteeing equal opportunities for all, not only in access to

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<sup>2</sup> Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020: [http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/Widening Participation for Equity and Growth\\_ A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020 .pdf](http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/Widening%20Participation%20for%20Equity%20and%20Growth_-_A%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Development%20of%20the%20Social%20Dimension%20and%20Lifelong%20Learning%20in%20the%20European%20Higher%20Education%20Area%20to%202020.pdf)

knowledge, but also in the access to employment in societies that require ever more specialized and differentiating levels of qualification.

This formal manifestation, although being an important step in promoting greater equity in terms of access and attendance at higher education, has thus been driven by purposes upstream of social concerns and, as such, has not elicited the debates that would allow appreciate to what extent some of the reforms implemented do not generate or increase (new) inequalities.

An equalization of opportunities is usually associated with measures to compensate for unequal starting conditions, for example through programs of positive discrimination (e.g., specific social support or definition of quotas for certain population groups, as in the Brazilian case). However, these programs and measures do not fail to raise a number of questions that should be considered in a deeper reflection on social justice and policies designed to achieve it. Namely, the perverse negative discrimination effect of positively discriminated groups, or even the absence, or limitation, of real impacts on the transformation of starting conditions, largely marked by supra-individual and / or supra local inequalities. In this perspective, social justice promotion policies can not only focus on higher education, nor have a palliative or merely regulatory focus, but rather embody holistic and complex prerogatives in the basic socio-economic context. Policies that support reconciliation between work and higher education or between family, work and study (for instance, for young parents) are paradigmatic examples.

A study developed in Spain, by Marina Elias Andreu and John Brennan (2012), stresses that the reforms stemming from the Bologna process may actually boost mechanisms of inequality considering the distinct way the entry and attendance of higher

education are experienced<sup>3</sup> by students from socioeconomically differentiated environments and, in particular, student-workers.

The economic crisis, accompanied with the exponential increase of tuition fees in some European countries (even in public universities as in Portugal) are, in fact, inevitable elements for a more complex reflection on the real possibilities of access and attendance of higher education. Many students have to work in order to attend higher education, which distances them from university experience and impairs their involvement and the construction of their identity as students (Andreu & Brennan, 2012). Additionally, although there are legal mechanisms in various countries to ensure student-workers' rights to attend classes and assessments, this status is not demanded by many students who fear losing their jobs. Many others cannot even access such status since they do not have a signed work contract. There are, consequently, processes of social and economic structuring, which are previous to the access mechanisms to higher education, and that end up conditioning not only equity in terms of access, but, above all, equity in terms of attendance and conclusion thereof.

Data on the social dimension of access and attendance to higher education in 2009 (Eurostat, 2009), although with significant improvements, also reveal - despite the limitations that statistical studies always present due to their extensive tendency and consequent loss of specificity and relativity in the analyzes - countless structural conditioning factors:

Increasing participation in higher education is sustained by high percentage of qualifying graduates of secondary schooling. However, in a few countries, entrants in higher education represent less than 60% of qualifying graduates

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<sup>3</sup> Even the choice of which university to attend is driven by selective premises.

of upper secondary education; when measured directly, the share of students from non-traditional routes entering higher education stood at 15% in England and Wales, but amounted to less than 12% in other countries for which data are available; countries show very marked differences on part-time studying. The share of part time students ranged from less than 10% of the overall student population to slightly more than 50% in Sweden; age is a key determinant when analyzing part-time studying. In fact, at EU-27 level, almost half of students aged 30 and over are part-time students, while this is far less widespread among younger students. The level of education of parents still has an impact on success in higher education; in some countries, less than 10 % of those whose parents have a low educational level graduated from tertiary education; the continuing transmission of disadvantages through family backgrounds tends to affect men and women equally; however, the situation is improving; young people from low educational family backgrounds have better chances of graduating than their elders did in the past (Eurostat, 2009, p.45).

In fact, Andreu and Brennan's study (2012), previously mentioned, and others (ESU, 2015), show that, in the student's opinion, higher education is actually characterized by major elitism. This conception, which seems paradoxical by reference to the assumptions of the Bologna reform, reveals a set of elements that emerge in the hidden side of this process.

Instrumental rhetoric and rapid training, in reality, leave behind a group of students less prepared to respond to such demands. If we add to this aspect some additional factors - the increase of taxes and fees; the association (which occurs in some countries) between

social support and merit (linked to school “success”); the most restricted system of prescription of enrollments; the requirement of continuous attendance of classes that hampers the maintenance of employment, among others - the conditions for the accentuation of some iniquities seem to be uplifted, in counterpoint with an official discourse increasingly anchored in the appeal to social justice in higher education (Andreu & Brennan, 2012).

Additionally, processes and mechanisms of social support vary substantially between contexts, presenting students from different countries distinctive challenges and coping possibilities. Social support, in the form of scholarships, exemption or public subsidization of tuition fees (when they exist), or others, which differ from one country to another, tend to focus on criteria that are either compensatory, sometimes universal, or meritocratic, sometimes mixed, as in the Portuguese case that associates the compensatory logic - proof of resources - to the meritocratic logic based on evidences of “school success”.

In another dimension, the autonomous student paradigm, core element of Bologna’s reforms, raises important issues in terms of equity, especially in a context of mass access to higher education. The so-called “student-centered learning” stems from a set of assumptions that are, in fact, mere rhetorical devices. Firstly, because they disregard the difference of backgrounds, experiences, skills and expectations of the various student profiles; Secondly, because they do not take into account the actual possibilities for teacher monitoring and mentoring of students; Thirdly, because they do not attend the differences regarding quality of previous education and the knowledge then acquired or not; Fourthly, because they place emphasis on what students want and can learn rather than what they should learn. And what they “should learn” is far beyond utilitarian and provisional knowledge.

As already mentioned in the first part of this chapter, higher education should, above all, stimulate curiosity and provide the basis for critical and complex thinking. In this sense, knowledge of historical-philosophical framework, for example, is essential. Thus, student-centered learning cannot be more than a methodological component, adaptable to the goals and contents of what needs to be taught. Moreover, it cannot assume as an *a priori* premise student's full autonomy to learn and set apart what is important or not. In fact, as Leathwood (2001) states, in pedagogical terms, many students, from the United Kingdom, "in the first year felt that they had been expected to be 'independent' too early in their studies and that they had been left to sink or swim" (*cit.* in Andreu & Brennan, 2012, p. 107).

Hence, the application of reforms to different contexts without the necessary adaptation and anticipation of adverse consequences may lead to situations of greater inequity vis-a-vis a system and a European context that applies the same evaluation gauge without considering the starting distinctions.

#### 4. Final remarks

Higher education tends to be directed nowadays - and Bologna, in spite of all the possibilities and advancements it presents, has enhanced such risk - towards the swift development of adaptability skills in different socio-professional frameworks. From a global competitiveness' perspective, promoted in various European and international instances, higher education risks progressively to be reduced to mere logics of learning to produce, learning to undertake, and learning to succeed.

An education that produces more development and, potentially, greater social justice, has to be conceived as an act of liberation, a

space of interconnection and cultural learning capable of founding and consolidating a new conception of life and humankind. In this sense, in itself, education (and high education certainly) is both an end and a means. An end, as an essential instance in the acquisition of knowledge; a means of reducing inequalities of origin and building adequate opportunities for access to desired social and economic positions. Inherently, school, and higher education in particular, is an instance of social mobility. In Pourtois's (2006) perspective, this means giving universities an essential purpose: to contribute to the formation of more responsible people, involved in building a more just society, and as such, a vector of social transformation. Underlying these assumptions is the classical question - should higher education prepare for integration into the world as it is, or as it should be? (Pourtois, 2006), or such concerns are and should be oblivious to the basic concerns of higher education?

Educational policies in this regard need to be conceived and evaluated as driving the neutralization of the weight of social disadvantageous circumstances, as well as strategies of empowerment and construction of skills and opportunities, and also of deep and complex formation on the cultural and ethical bases of life in society. In other words, the school and the university cannot be guided by a merely instrumental perspective, which tends to devalue all non-econometric knowledge, for example associated with the humanities and the arts.

In contrast, educational institutions cannot ignore the production of knowledge essential to the demands of today's world, most of which are functional. Even because such a fact would tend to penalize especially the most disadvantaged population, and consequently it would, in another way, replicate basic inequalities (Albuquerque, 2015). Nevertheless, a number of queries emerge, but the answers involve a profound complexity.

The transformation of post-Bologna university training into a rapid and essentially utilitarian preparation for labor market integration does not fail to raise relevant issues, either as regards to the consistency of basic training and the respective depth of knowledge (cultural, philosophical, artistic), or regarding the suspicion of subjecting higher education to market demands and, as such, its transformation into a production institution of technicians and not of professionals and conscious citizens, capable of thinking and acting ethically and globally, in an increasingly complex and plural world.

In our view, as we have tried to advocate, scientific knowledge should not be guided by normative or utilitarian presuppositions or by moral orientations. Its rationale must be the development of scientific curiosity and rigorous data, axes that are not constrained by reference to short-term and instrumental dimensions, but which allow simultaneously to understand and overcome them. In the same way, social conditions and equality in the access and frequency of higher education institutions should be seriously taken in consideration in the European area in the name of a real consistent and cohesive Europe of knowledge and mobility.

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