

Global and European trends in the development of Higher Education as a social service and consequences of the massification and universalization of higher education for the regional labour markets (Bologna, EHEA and beyond)

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1 Introductory notes

Is the global trend toward the rapid expansion of higher education a productive or counterproductive development for the achievement of a sustainable mode of economic growth and the steady improvement of the quality of human capital? Or, putting it in the wording of another (functional) paradigm, does this trend serve the increased productivity of labour forces, enriching their skills and enhancing outputs?

Formulated like that, the question would be reminiscent to the famous assumingly rhetoric question for the scholar competition of the Academy of Dijon in 1750, whether the Renaissance of the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals. The prize-winning essay - known as The First Discourse - was presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who gave a surprisingly negative answer to the question, laying the first foundation stones of his philosophy of naturalism.

Departing from the Dijon's call and preserving the power of Rousseauist critical scepticism, one can rhetorically and practically ask, what for is the rapid expansion of higher education good or bad? Is this a natural or imposed development? Is that an objective and sustainable long-run trend or rather a kind of transient "social fashion"? Is there a measure of sufficiency of higher education in a society (or what would be a criterion allowing to state there is not enough HE in a society or there is too much of such education)? Does the expansion (massification and universalisation) of HE contribute to the improvement of societal morals, wealth and happiness? Do the "optimal" balances exist in a society for HE enrolment and attainment? These were the substantial philosophical questions, to which Rousseau, Humboldt and Newman, as well modern liberals, neo-liberals, conservatives and various streams of Marxists would have given different, if not contradictory answers.

2 Background statistics: rapid expansion of higher education and gradual growth of the related sectors of employment

2.1 Rapid expansion of higher education: an overview of background statistics on HE enrolment and attainment

Whether one likes it or not, the societal trend definitely goes this direction and the majority of secondary school alumni in EHEA countries are opting for tertiary education: the average gross enrolment ratio - GER - scores for EHEA at 65% in 2014, as compared with just 18% half a century ago and 56% in the decade 2001-2010. This means that nowadays more than one half of secondary schools alumni in EHEA are entering the tertiary education institutions. These average values vary heavily per region and individual countries: thus, the GER figures for 2014 range from 21% in Azerbaijan to 109% in Greece or 92% in Finland).

The dynamics of HE enrolment is very expressive in the EHEA region: during the last 50 years, or in the course of life of just two generations, in EHEA, the GER (gross enrolment ratio) has grown 3.6 times during 1970-2014, from the modest 19% to the convincing 65%; the most impressive growth can be observed in the Southern region among the OECD members, where GER has increased 4.9 times, from 16% to 78%. The related growth rate in NIS countries remains quite modest, although it starts with the highest position in the region: 41% to 55%. The unbeatable champion in the league would be the United States with almost doubled GER that has grown from 51% in 1970s up to 92% in the current decade.

The HE attainment rate of the adult population grows accordingly, reaching by mid 2010s the average value of 25% for the whole group of EHEA countries in the sample with a minimum value of 11% in Portugal and the maximum rate of HE penetration of 59% in Russia.

With no exception, the trend toward the continued gradual growth of HE attainment over the last decades is obvious. The leaders here are NIS cluster as well as the US and Japan. The proclaimed in the EU's Strategy "Europe 2020" operational target of ... "increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020" (Commission 2010) seems to be quite achievable, at least in the Northern EHEA region that is approaching by the level of the tertiary education attainment the values of the USA and Japan (as well as the NIS region). In all EHEA regions the numbers of HE graduates keep growing based on the widening of the accessibility of HE systems, but also due to the increased subjective motivation of the population to obtain a tertiary education.

Most of the ongoing debates on the practical implication of HE becoming a mass-education, would refer to the works of Martin Trow, who was discussing the critical turn toward the universalization in the US' system of HE of 1970s (Trow 2010). As Voldemar Tomusk, the modern European critical philosopher and sociologist of education summarizes,

... Trow looked at US higher education as it had been expanding from a highly elitist system where only some 5 percent of the age cohort group had access to it to a universal system, where 50 percent or more had access to post-secondary education, identifying a qualitative shift at the point of 15 percent access. At that point higher education is no longer seen as a privilege, but as a right; turning into an obligation at the next juncture of 50 percent access. (Tomusk 2016)

This consideration brings us to the next quasi-rhetoric question, whether the higher education is indeed becoming a universal (basic and granted) human right, or would rather remain a socially supported "window of opportunities" for all people who aspire that (see, for instance (McCowan 2012), (Holmwood 2011) and a student appeal of 2003 against the "commodification" of higher education by Stefan Bienefeld (Bienefeld 2003)).

3 Social dimension of higher education and its operationalisation

The philosophers and social activists may continue their debates trying to capture the essence of the momentum, but the practitioners of HE have already established a pragmatic mid-line discourse. Thus, a concept of Social Dimension of Higher Education (SDHE), along with its "sister-principle" of Life-Long Learning (LLL), were introduced and adopted as important aspects of the Bologna Process in "wider Europe". Declared as one of the governing rules for EHEA, the SDHE principle was most clearly defined in the London Communiqué of 2007 of the conference of EHEA Ministers responsible for higher education:

We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity. (EHEA-Ministerial-Conference 2007)

[It should be remarked in brackets that the above formulation literally replicates the observation of Trow of 1970s with regard to the USA, according to which the massification of higher education serves a democratic goal - "to achieve a social, class, ethnic, and racial distribution in higher education reflecting that of the population at large" ((Trow 2010), quoted from (Tomusk 2016)) and the EHEA ministers have promoted Trow's sociological consideration into a governing principle.]

Thus, in the mix of EHEA/European Commission practices, SDHE is understood, on the one hand, as a matter of achieving the targeted social coherence and inclusion in European societies by the means, inter alia, of securing greater equity and justice in the access to HE education for the underrepresented social groups. This is declared as a specific target for HE governance, just as a social aspect of any policy, in this case, of national and international policies with regard to the higher education; this is a very pragmatic and utilitarian political approach to the issue. On the other hand, SDHE is simultaneously interpreted as a matter of securing the well-being of and sufficient support rendered to HE students thus allowing them to pursue their studies and accomplishing the program without any sufficient social or economic obstacles; this stands for other practical sets of distinct economic, social and pedagogical measures.

SDHE is a relatively new currency in HE policies that has been introduced into the EU's and EHEA's policy agenda in early 2000s, starting from the EU's Lisbon Agenda the related Communiqués and Declarations of EHEA's Ministers responsible for higher education and the Lisbon Agenda's accessor, The Europe-2020 Strategy adopted in 2010 (Commission 2010). This is a practical response of HE stakeholders to the growing trend toward the universalization of higher education in the majority of EU and EHEA countries, when the on-going gross enrolment rates clearly exceeds the Trow's symbolic benchmark of 50%.

The mass and - as a next step - the universal higher education comes not in place of, but rather in addition to the "traditional" elitist modes of higher education (Trow 2010), when the absolute majority of secondary school alumni enter higher education institutions in merely all European countries.

4 The additive principle for the construction of modern HE systems

Let's call this societal trend of the combination of the mass HE and elitist HE under the single umbrella of the common national HE systems that include public, private and corporate higher education institutions (HEIs), the *additive principle* characteristic for the modern systems of HE. This principle would assume the combination of elitist and egalitarian modes of HE, meritocratic and social approach to students' achievements, defensive strategy for advanced learners or protective strategy for deprived groups. HE study programs build upon these seemingly contradictory principles may be implemented within one university, or accommodated in different HEI with particular emphasis on one or another mode, aspect and strategy.

The common qualification frameworks and quality assurance measures (actually, the hard cornerstones of the Bologna process) must provide with the necessary unification allowing the coexistence of these HE modalities within a national HE system, commonly accessible for all willing aspirants.

Thus, since the societal demand for HE grows for a variety of social, political and technological reasons, the supply of HE services increases accordingly, the participation in HE widens, and the new social reality emerges in the higher education. This reality requires adjustments to various aspects of HE policies, such as funding schemes, needs for the unification and standardization, stricter quality control, etc. The social dimension of higher education constitutes one of such areas that need to be brought into coherence with the new HE realities.

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I will skip in this paper several sections of my extended essay dedicated to the detailed conceptual analysis of HE statistics and the detailed graphical presentation of the outcomes of this analysis and the consideration of practical implications of the equilibriums between the HE attainment rates and the related (or not related?) absorption capacities of national and regional labour markets. - These informative charts and graphs will be shown in the course of

the presentation.

5 Conclusions

Coming back to the initial questions of the article, whether the total widespread of higher education is for good or for bad, one can conclude that there is no black-and-white answer to this question. The question is not a merely rhetoric exercise, it is rather pragmatic question and the answers are multiple and colourful.

Yes, the massification and universalization are good things under the conditions that the related HE education policies (a) do not undermine quality of higher education programs and their outcomes, (b) increase human potential and social cohesion, (c) are implemented under the conditions of a real demand on the side of top qualification sectors of the labour markets.

At the same time, the such development can be seen as a waste effort if it (a) leads to the lowering standards of higher education, (b) destroys meritocratic motivation of participants and users, (c) is implemented in the conditions of over-supply of graduates in particular fields.

In the long-run, if the HE attainment rate will be approaching the ever higher values, and the labour market's demand for the qualified work force will not grow accordingly, the danger exists that the saturation of the labour market with HE graduates will turn into the situation of over-production (excessive supply) of graduates, which supply is not met by the related demand of the market. Many features of such unfavourable situations can be observed in the last decades in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. The effects of such development would be the social and economic devaluation of HE degrees (at least, in the sector of mass-education), lowering quality of the offered HE programs, increased brain drain (intellectual migration) and "brain-waste" (downshifting).

In this article I have not discussed the issue of the correspondence of the factual qualifications of graduates and the actual demands for certain hard and soft skills, areas and degrees of their qualifications, such as fields of specialization, or the academic level of the obtained HE degrees. All these aspects are very important factors of the efficiency of higher education that have been left aside in this article. Instead, I was speaking about the aggregate indicators that would illustrate the certain trends in the regional EHEA equilibriums of HE graduates and the related qualified jobs.

The author shares the point that the massification / universalization of higher education should not be seen as a societal goal per se. The turning of the higher education into mass and practically total education, accompanied by its diversification, is a characteristic feature of the objective trend of the development of all modern societies. And yet it does not necessarily lead to the purification and improvement of morals, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau has once reasonably noted on a similar occasion.

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