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Challenges of University – Enterprise Cooperation

Even a cursory look at the European higher education landscape provides a vision of a multifaceted, dynamic relationship expressed in a multitude of forms. Thus, relationships range from simple sponsorship or retail agreements, to cooperation in providing the curriculum; from sharing of good practice, to involvement in each others' management boards.

This diversity of approaches has meant that from a student perspective, student unions throughout Europe have significantly divergent viewpoints, ranging from strongly in favour to strongly against when looking at the area of university enterprise cooperation. The reason for such difference of perspective is very much based in the national contexts of these unions, and of whether such cooperation has proved to be in beneficial or harmful when calculated in net terms.

Thus invariably students will view such cooperation with suspicion when its implementation is associated either with *policy failure* or with *failure to communicate good policy*. A number of examples will serve to illustrate this. On the communications side, the reason for closer cooperation with enterprise is often presented as a perceived need to move European universities up the ranking tables so as to be competitive. However, a closer look at the available data reveals that in fact the link between rankings and competitiveness is extremely tenuous at best. Thus, the World Economic Forum's 2006-7 Global Competitiveness Report listed Switzerland, Finland, Sweden and Denmark as the World's four most competitiveness economies, yet neither one of these countries have even a single institution in the top 25 of the Shanghai rankings.

Another, different lesson is taught by the student protests against the CPE in France a little over a year ago. Irrespective of whether in theory the CPE was a good or a bad initiative for students, the fact is that when students and young people throughout France did their personal math, it didn't realise benefit to them. There are only two possible reasons for this: either the government and enterprise failed to successfully the benefits of a good policy, or the policy was fundamentally flawed. Whichever the reason, thousands of people ended up on the streets, and university-enterprise cooperation will be viewed with even more scepticism for years to come.

In a final example, the EU Commission has promoted a greater role for industry in Higher Education by setting a target to reach 2% of GDP funding for Higher Education which is intended to be provided by public and private sources in tandem, and thus enterprise is often seen as an underutilised, potentially lucrative source of alternative financing. However, a closer look at the statistics around Europe will show that in pursuing this goal, public budgets have generally increased, although not proportionally to student numbers; many countries have introduced or increased tuition fees, though often to partially make up for a shortfall in budgets rather than to improve conditions; while enterprise in general has failed to live up to

its commitment. Thus, despite the rhetoric about increased cooperation, the public is paying more, students in many countries are paying more than previously and receiving less, while enterprise continues to reap the benefits of highly qualified graduates at little or no cost to itself. One should further note that this pattern is not repeated outside Europe, leading to only one conclusion, namely that at least with respect to enterprise, the proper policies have not been implemented to translate the target into a reality.

From a university perspective, one of their key challenges is to frame their relationship with enterprise in terms of their general aims, and not solely limit it to increasing their income. Thus for example, the choice whether to commercialise research in cooperation with enterprise should be based on a consideration of if commercialisation will help forwarding or promulgating such research, and not on considerations of which approach gives the greatest profit.

The main challenge therefore is to find areas of confluence of interest where both partners can work together in a truly symbiotic relationship. To do so, one must identify areas for possible symbiosis but also highlight potential tensions which might operate to interfere with such cooperation:

- Enhancing employability of graduates: especially within professionally oriented courses, cooperation with enterprise can lead to learning outcomes which are more tailored to particular sectors' needs. In all areas, students can benefit from the acquisition of transversal skills attractive to the labour market. The tension that arises here is one of *degree of specificity*, or rather how to strike the right balance between universities as institutions for training and as places for a holistic, character-forming education. A possible way to address this tension is to further develop the concept of a value-based education as a boon for employability¹.
- promotion of innovation, particularly through entrepreneurship: universities share a passion for innovation² with enterprise, however the latter is far more accomplished at applying the results of innovative processes in practical contexts. Some would consider the role of the universities to provide the raw material for innovation, and the role of business/society to apply it. However, a tension arises as to the preparation of the individual for such a role, i.e. the creation of the entrepreneur. Best practice has repeatedly shown that this tension can only be addressed through approaches integrating the expertise from both sides

¹ For example, a value based education imbues in participants a clear sense of responsibility, of acting professionally, of ethics, of quality of process and result, etc – such intangible features are usually found to be highly desirable in employees, but are often not the focus for university-enterprise curricular cooperation

² Universities encourage learning through the challenging of established ideas – this process can be defined as a type of innovation

- exchange of experience: simply put, this is a process by which individuals from the academic world spend some time in the business world and vice-versa, thus exchanging knowledge and experience. The tension here is obvious, consisting of two elements: possessiveness of each 'camp' over their human resources, and scepticism as to the benefits of such knowledge transfer. Thus, overcoming this tension must necessarily involve a systematic elaboration of opportunities which may be gained through such practice
- expressing social responsibility: while there has been a recognition of the social responsibility of universities for some years, the concept of corporate social responsibility is still relatively new. Thus, the corporate world can find in universities partners through which they can express this social responsibility. The tension here would be mainly suspicion at the intention of any corporate social responsibility initiative. A possible way to address it is to cooperatively establish the aims of any initiative rather than using a binary approach.

Thus, if we are to truly realise the potential of cooperation between the two worlds of enterprise and universities, we must do it in a multi-partite manner, bringing together all stakeholders and truly bringing together their views for the benefit of our educational systems and our economies. This approach has in the past been tried, with limited success, for example in the consultation on the European Institute of Technology, which after extensive consultation resulted in a nearly universally sceptical reception from the stakeholders concerned. Yet this is hardly surprising when after extensive consultation, many stakeholders found that the bulk of their concerns either had not been addressed or had been put on the backburner for addressing sometime in the unspecified future. A consultation is not a mere exercise at selling an idea, or pacifying opponents. Neither is it a process whereby the most controversial elements of an idea are removed. It is a process where different parties can put their best ideas together and this create something better than any one of them could otherwise have created. If we can truly achieve this ideal in this area of cooperation, then university-enterprise cooperation *can* look forward to a bright future.