Can the University Save Europe?

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Higher education is in the position to save Europe by rendering a substantial contribution to sustainable economic growth. For that purpose higher education must strengthen its innovative power in entrepreneurship education and by focusing research more on societal problems, while being better empowered and enabled by Governments. Universities must show leadership in resolving or channeling the major societal questions. More European competition between universities in education and research would be helpful. Universities can contribute to recreate hope and optimism in Europe through more innovation in the economy.

Eurosceptism and antagonism against Europe is a form of shooting yourself in the foot: more European cooperation is essential for European countries to retain a strong position in international competitiveness. Euroscepticism can be explained by the increase of those groups in the population which experienced in the past years a loss of work security and noticed that incomes at the upper part of the distribution rose faster than those of the lower income groups. To regain confidence across the population in more Europe, Europe needs more sustainable growth and a better distribution of income. It also needs to rebuild trust in its institutions by giving more leeway to implementation by national institutions and by choosing for one language as the main language of communication, leaving translation to the member states.

This comes at a time when Europe is challenged by an economic crisis. Drastic measures need to be taken to regain sustainable economic growth. There is no alternative outside the knowledge economy for such growth. Graduates of higher education have become central in generating new jobs and new potential for economic growth. The quality of the graduates of higher education needs to improve with more attention for the enormous changes on the labor market. In higher education cognitive development and knowledge of the discipline remain important, but there needs to be more attention for entrepreneurship, working in teams, oral and written
communication, digital competencies, solution oriented and innovative thinking, working in an international environment, greater job mobility and integrity.

This demands a different way of working of the universities, with more emphasis in learning from graduates on the new demands on the labor market and with a constant adjustment of degree courses. European Union member states could and should learn from each other in installing the empowerment and enabling of universities for such flexibility. The Foundation Empower European Universities (EEU) can support this. In this foundation correspondents of all 27 member states cooperate to collect and analyze data on the impact of higher education policy on the performance of higher education, in terms of its societal contribution. In addition it is important that universities in Europe compete on the European level, so that students can choose to study on the basis of good information wherever they want in Europe on the same conditions. The universities that are attractive would be rewarded in such a competitive system. This does not require a EU treaty change but rather a different interpretation of the notion of subsidiarity.

Research funding on the European level is more efficient. A European approach to research moreover provides more room for specialization on the European level.

A European organization of higher education and research should not take place as centralization, but rather with a decentralized implementation. A European Higher Education and Research Area with competition between universities within and across borders is essential for Europe to remain competitive in the turmoil of globalization.

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