



The future of the social dimension in European higher education: university for all, but without student support?

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→ Introduction

One of the most relevant changes experienced by European societies over the past 40 years concerns the mass expansion of higher education and the related development of the systems of student support. The expansion of higher education in Europe has been justified by the double scope of ensuring equal opportunities (by promoting the social dimension of higher education) and by the need for creating a competitive knowledge-based economy to compete in the global market. However, the social dimension of higher education remains a rather abstract concept in European higher education, while the systems of student support are still largely managed at the national level.

This paper argues that in 2020, as in 2013, the experience of university, and the quality of this experience, will be of a pivotal importance in the lives of young people in Europe. The mass expansion of higher education represents a long-term change in European societies that is not likely to be easily reversed. However, many changes are currently taking place: the systems of student support, designed to limit the inequalities of the student experience, are now affected by austerity trends and

the consequences of welfare cuts are likely to affect the experiences of young people in university in 2020. In particular, young people risk being more financially dependent on family and labour-market sources, and this creates “differentiated” experiences of higher education. The paper also argues that, in order to reverse the forthcoming trends, we need to complete the current processes of European integration, designing systems of student support that concretely sustain the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This paper does not have the scope to expand on the cross-national differences across Europe regarding the division between vocational and academic higher education, and focuses specifically on general higher education delivered by universities. This choice also reflects the fact that, as will be explained below, the specific idea of expansion of participation in higher education promoted in Europe is essentially that of general higher education and does not focus specifically on vocational further education.

After describing the major trends in the expansion of higher education in Europe, the paper will discuss the main differences across the models of student support. The third section will describe the most recent changes affecting these systems, in particular focusing on the case studies of Sweden, Italy and England. This part will point out a convergence towards increasingly residual systems of student support that target the poorest part of the student population. Finally, the last chapter will depict a vision of young people in 2020, discussing the impact of recent policy reforms and offering an overview of the possible scenarios that could reverse this trend.

→ 1. The expansion of higher education in Europe

Despite the remarkable differences in the timing of the expansion within Europe, mass access in higher education after the Second World War is considered a truly European trend (EQUNET 2010) accompanied by changes in the political discourses: while higher education used to be an intrinsic elitist part of European education, it began to be influenced by the development of egalitarian values (Trow 2005). Higher education in Europe can now be defined as “massed higher education”: even if students that embark on higher education do not necessarily always complete their degrees, a large portion of young people experience this path of transition. The expansion of higher education reflects not only a shift in education policies, but it is also an expression of the changing aspirations and ambitions in European societies. A central goal of higher education was, in fact, improving the chances of working-class children and promoting widening participation, an idea particularly developed in the UK (Spohrer 2011). Following the terminology employed by higher education scholars, this paper uses “higher education” to refer to “academic higher education”, as opposed to vocational further education (see Powell and Solga 2010). The specific use of this terminology also reflects the fact that, as will be underlined below, processes of Europeanisation of higher education involve networks across universities, as providers of (academic) higher education.

The first European wave of access started from the late 1980s: in the period from 1987-88 to 1996-97 there was an increase in participation of at least 50% of young people aged 20-29 in the countries considered (Eurydice 1998: 139). However, the mass expansion of higher education, consisting in reaching more than 50% participation of young cohorts, is more recent and has occurred in the 2000s. On average the participation rate in many countries in the EU has

reached the 50% mark in the 20-29 generation (EQUNET 2010): from the peaks of about 65-70% reached in eastern European countries and in the Baltic countries (Latvia, Poland and Slovakia), to 60% in the Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden) and the lowest rates reached in continental countries (Austria, Belgium and Germany), showing a participation of about 40%.

The role of European policy making in promoting wider participation in higher education has been fundamental. Since the late 1990s/early 2000s European institutions have increasingly referred to the double goals-approach of widening access into higher education to improve “equity” (as a proxy of equal access to higher education) and establishing a knowledge-based economy, as in the aims of the Lisbon Agenda. The Bologna Process (2007a), designed to create uniform systems of higher education in Europe, made clear that, “The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level.” This principle has been confirmed by the London Communiqué (Bologna Process 2007b): “The student body entering, participating in and completing Higher Education at all levels should reflect the diversity of populations”. The Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategy, a framework for European co-operation in education and training approved by the European Council in May 2009, identified as emerging goals: “promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship”. The Education, Youth and Culture Council meeting regarding higher education in May 2010 also underscored the need for “promoting widened access” by supporting students financially (see EQUNET 2010).

In the meantime, processes of integrating higher education policies have been in place, culminating in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. It needs to be underlined that the EHEA is specifically oriented towards promoting university higher education – if we consider the differences within “further” education systems mentioned previously. The EHEA is, in fact, originated from the Bologna Process, which is a network of collaboration involving universities. As argued by Powell and Solga (2010), this model has privileged general higher education systems, challenging systems oriented on vocational further education.

Also the EHEA social dimension has a three-sided rationale which mixes the two goals: enhancing equal opportunity has the potential of allowing all individuals to “have equal opportunities to take advantage of higher education leading to personal development” as “the strong social dimension is a necessary prerequisite for all students to successfully enter, carry out and complete their studies” (Bologna Process 2007a: 12). Secondly, it has the scope of reinforcing “the social, cultural and economic development of our societies” under the assumption that “inequities in education and training systems increase the risk of unemployment, social exclusion and, in the end, result in large costs to society” (p. 12). This last point emphasises, therefore, the social costs of a lack of diffusion of higher education. There is also a specific reference to competitiveness: the third rationale is that “a strong social dimension enhances the quality and attractiveness of European higher education” from other countries and continents (p. 12).

On the one hand, this double-faced argument has worked: as emphasised by the Eurostudent project (2008) the student population in Europe has become more heterogeneous in its social make-up. More students from lower socio-economic

backgrounds participate in university since its mass expansion, even though they are proportionally less represented (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). However, higher education does not necessarily lead anymore to graduate jobs and, according to recent studies, the expectations of entering into higher education to reach a graduate job are increasingly misguided. For example, the study by Bell and Blanchflower (2010) indicates the incidence of graduate youth unemployment in Europe. Also the paper by Green and Zhu (2008) presents evidence of over-qualification, job dissatisfaction and declining returns to graduate education.

The social dimension in our European universities entails not only the issue of entrance into university systems (which has been the main focus of European policy making), but also the quality of the experience of university. There is evidence in the literature indicating how the experience of higher education itself is increasingly challenging for young people. Studies in Sweden (Christensson et al. 2010) have explored the issue of well-being of young people in higher education arguing that “there are indications of a high prevalence of psychological distress among students in higher education” (p. 1), as transitional effects characterising the period of higher education. Also, a study by El Ansari et al. (2011) in seven UK institutions concluded that the level of health complaints and psychological problems is relatively high and calls for awareness of university administrations as integral to promoting the well-being of students. Student well-being is not simply caused by individual characteristics and constitutes an inherent part of the social dimension of higher education, as demonstrated by the increasing use of counseling services offered by European universities. As underlined by critical social policy theorists, student well-being is influenced by the politics and policies of higher education, by the types of student support and by the attempt of constructing individualised experiences (see Baker et al. 2006). In sum, national and European institutions cannot limit their function to “putting more young people into higher education”. Beyond enrolment rates, the quality of the experience of higher education could be affected by the presence of diffuse problems of mental well-being, which constitutes another area of interest in higher education policies.

The double-sided argument of investing in higher education to increase competitiveness and ensure social inclusion and equality has neglected the social dimension of higher education and, in particular, the role of the systems of student support in both limiting the inequalities in the university experience, but also facilitating a positive experience of university.

→ 2. Comparing the different systems of student support in Europe

The systems of student support are the natural companions of students in higher education: they have direct implications for the quality and inequalities of this experience. The experience of young people in university is and will be intrinsically affected by the possibility of financing their studies, meeting their living costs and by the types of sources used for those purposes.

Several studies, in particular in the UK, have shown that financing the experience of higher education through labour-market participation makes the experience of higher education very unequal (Metcalf 2003): those who work while studying have less time and energy to join academic and extra-curricular activities. Moreover, those students who participate more in the labour market are also more likely to

come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Metcalf 2003; Purcell et al. 2009) and this reinforces the existing inequality present before starting university. This also means that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will have a more difficult experience of higher education. Paradoxically universities aim to include more of these young people through widening participation programmes.

The first source of inequality in the experience is linked to the resources that young people receive from their family which are, by definition, highly affected by their backgrounds. Continuing studies into university means a protraction of the status of dependency of young people on the family. Catan, referring to the extended transition involving higher education, asks provokingly who is supposed to “shoulder the continuing need of young adults for material, financial and institutional support during this extended period of dependence?” (2004: 3). According to the Eurostudent data (2008), often the family meets these increasing costs of participation in higher education, creating a paradoxical effect of postponing independence and adulthood and reinforcing inequalities. Moreover, often the family cannot meet these costs and, therefore, this inability to provide additional sources of income limits the experience of higher education, as well as the possibility of entering into higher education.

The systems of student support managed at the state level have been introduced with the precise aim of permitting equal access to all students. The European Higher Education Area refers to the social dimension; however, due to the existing diversity of the 45 countries that have joined the EHEA, the working groups of the EHEA have refrained from reaching a specific consensus on how to define the social dimension. While processes of Europeanisation are in place in the higher education area, the “social dimension” of higher education remains managed at the level of the nation state. As underlined in one of the official documents of the EHEA:

In many countries, state support is provided to students and their families in order to alleviate financial barriers to higher education. Public support schemes which provide direct monetary support to students vary across the Bologna countries... Within the Bologna Area, the proportion of public expenditure on tertiary education dedicated to both forms of support (grants and loans) ranged from less than 5% to more than 20% in 2005 (Eurostat 2009: 13).

In particular, we can identify several regimes of student support which group several countries showing the same characteristics. Those “regimes” represent ideal types of models of student support and follow the tradition of social policy research. For example, Esping-Andersen (1990) has notoriously identified different welfare regimes: social-democratic, continental and liberal, which show different characteristics and are based on different social policies. Following the same tradition, Walther (2006) has identified different models of youth policies in Europe, including social inclusion, labour market and education policies.

Similarly, those models have been tested recently in higher education policies by Willemse and Beer (2012): by exploring decommodification and stratification in university policies, they have found discrepancies with the traditional division found in Esping-Andersen (1990). Despite those differences, identifying models can serve as an analytical basis for reflecting on the comparative difference of student support in Europe: processes of harmonisation and Europeanisation of higher education are not having an impact on the distinctive models of student

support which reflect the different “cultures” of student support in higher education in Europe. These models emphasise that young people in higher education in Europe have a different experience and that systems of student support do contribute in shaping their lives in higher education.

The models can be confronted by looking at several aspects of the social dimension in higher education:

- The level of fees: this dimension varies greatly across Europe. In some countries, fees represent the main expenditure for young people wanting to embark on higher education (liberal countries). However, this is not an issue in Nordic countries, for example, where domestic students do not have to pay tuition fees.
- The instruments (or tools) of policies: higher education costs (fees) and living costs (accommodation, books, and so on) are often met with the tools of student support, in particular with loans or grants. Grants are the first instrument used in constructing systems of students support. Some countries have introduced loans since the early development of their systems (for example, Sweden), while others have introduced them later on (for example, in the UK they were introduced in 2004). The use of grants and loans has a different impact on the experience of young people: while grants represent forms of support which do not need to be repaid, loans have a long-term impact and influence the income of young people after higher education, as those forms of support need to be repaid. Loans represent essentially a “bet” on young people’s futures, in the specific sense that systems of loans are based on calculations on the future income of graduates. While their capacity of being repaid in a time of high graduate unemployment is currently challenged, loans have been increasingly used to support students in Europe. In some ways, loans have been a way to avoid strict targets in selecting the recipients of student support: even the most generous welfare states of the Nordic countries have not been able to afford universal systems of support based solely on non-repayable grants. On the contrary, systems of loans have been offered to the entire student population to enlarge the scope of systems of student support, offering convenient interest rates. The impact of loans is a double-edged sword as they ensure the universality of the systems of student support, but they can represent a risky bet in a time in which graduate unemployment is particularly high. Moreover, the reliance on loans may discourage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, therefore, could represent a barrier to university entry.
- The degrees of universalism and means-testing: although this might seem a very technical aspect, it has direct implications in the everyday lives of young people. This is a dimension of comparison that tells us if the systems of student support are giving a contribution in the form of grants or loans to all young people as students (universal forms), or to young people on the basis of their family background (means-tested) or of their income from their participation in the labour market, in the case of independent and mature students. There is no unique view on this in Europe: some systems treat young people as completely independent individuals, detached from their family (typically Nordic countries), while other models size the contribution on the basis of the family income, under the assumption that the family still contributes to sustain young people during higher education (Eurydice 1998: 115).
- The levels of student support (settings): this dimension looks at how generous those systems of student support have been in supporting young people in higher education. While some systems of support cover all educational and living costs, other contribute with “residual” forms of support. Who is going to cover those increasing costs? Two main forms are used by young people in higher education: family sources, both in the form of cash, but also by avoiding paying accommodation costs (for example, opting for living with parents during higher education), and the sources coming from participation in the labour market. An increasing number of students enter into the

labour market during university to meet their living costs and are often employed in non-graduate jobs. Contributions from the labour market, family and the state vary a lot across European countries. The Eurostudent (2008) study shows the comparative variation in the role of the labour market and the family in student income: in eastern European countries such as Slovakia and Czech Republic, labour-market sources are fundamental (respectively 92% and 72% of student income); countries in which the contribution of family sources is more important are southern European countries (Portugal and Greece show an incidence of 72% and 69% of family sources over total student income) and continental countries such as Germany (58%) and Belgium (56%).

All these dimensions allow us to identify four different systems of support that partially overlap with the welfare regime division found by Esping-Andersen (1990):

- Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway): in these countries the state is particularly generous in supporting young people in university and offers a combination of grants and loans which cover almost all students. As underlined by Schwarz and Rehburg, most students in these countries have independent housing and “they are considered to be mature people who go their own way, with financial assistance from the public” and also as “self-responsible investors” (2004: 531).
- Continental countries (France, Belgium, Germany and Austria): the state in these countries has an important function of providing systems of student support but with a specific logic: “the parents are responsible for the education of their children and the State will only intervene if parents are not or not sufficiently able to pay” (Schwarz and Rehburg, 2004: 531). In this system, young students are regarded as young learners. The role of parents is particularly important in providing accommodation or covering accommodation costs, while the level of fees in these countries remains quite low.
- Southern European countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece): the state provides forms of support in a residual way only to the students that need it the most. The main role in student support is guaranteed by students’ families. For this reason, young people in university here are still considered “children sheltered by their families” (Schwarz and Rehburg 2004: 531). The level of fees remains low or non-existent.
- Liberal countries (the UK): in these countries, the level of fees is particularly high, and students are considered “investors’ of their future careers” (Schwarz and Rehburg 2004: 531). Many students receive public support that is means-tested and dependent on family income. Moreover, students often actively participate in the labour market during higher education (Table 1).

Table 1: The characteristics of the different models of student support in European countries

	Nordic	Southern European	Continental	Liberal
Fees	No fees	Medium	Medium	High
Grants	Universal	Very residual	Medium	Only students below a certain threshold
Loans	Universal	Not diffused	Not diffused	Means-tested
Participation in the labour market	From medium (Sweden) to high (Finland)	Low-medium	Low	Medium/high
Family contributions	Low	High	High	Medium

Table 1 sums up some of the qualitative differences of the systems of student support; these systems are embedded in the history of the welfare state and in the cultures of student support across Europe. Therefore, understanding how young people will live in the future implies understanding how these long-term systems are evolving. Will the current crisis harmonise these systems? How do processes of Europeanisation taking place in higher education impact on these systems?

→ 3. Looking at the future: the impact of recent policy changes

Several commentators have recently discussed the impact of current trends of welfare state retrenchment and the turn to austerity affecting European welfare states (Taylor-Gooby 2012). Some of those scholars have also foreseen the existence of a “neoliberal revolution” (Hall 2011) taking in place in Europe. While the analyses of the impact of public cuts might differ, there seems to be an agreement in the scholarly debate regarding the presence of a European trend of public cuts after the economic crisis affecting European welfare states and, in particular, southern European (Spain, Italy and Greece) and Anglo-Saxon welfare state models (the UK) (King et al. 2012).

Higher education policies and the systems of student support are an integral part of the welfare state (Willemsse and Beer, 2012). The trend of austerity might lead to an increasing convergence towards a European model characterised by a higher role of the market – therefore towards a liberal model. Outside these general trends, higher education shows specific features. The case of student support seems to fall into what Hacker (2004) called a case of privatising risk without privatising the welfare state, in particular due to the fact that European social policies have offered “incomplete risk protection in an era of dramatic social change”, in this case of dramatic expansion of the participation of young people in university. Hacker’s (2004) contribution has emphasised how processes of welfare state retrenchment have to be assessed by looking at the exogenous pressures on the welfare system. In this case, the exogenous pressure is represented by the sustainability of the system in the context of mass-expanded higher education. Several changes have affected the systems of student support; in particular the fact that higher education systems have not changed dramatically nor adapted to mass access into higher education in the 2000s has already made those systems incapable of answering to the increasing needs of young people in higher education. This problem has affected, in particular, the models of student support that, as we have seen before, are not universal, but target the poorest part of the student population: in these cases, the conditions for eligibility have become increasingly hard to meet and the system of support itself has become even more residual.

Outside these medium-term changes, the systems of student support have been challenged by the last reforms that occurred after the economic crisis. For the scope of this paper, I will briefly summarise a few policy changes affecting three countries which belong to three different models of student support in order to show how these changes have affected various systems: Sweden, England and Italy.

Sweden has not introduced major reforms regarding the systems of student support for Swedish nationals. However, the overall system without fees (both for Swedish nationals and EU, but also international students) has been challenged by the government bill “Competing on the basis of quality – tuition fees for foreign students”. According to this bill, which was passed in 2009, higher education

remains free of charge for Swedish citizens and citizens of an EU/EEA state or Switzerland, but third-country students pay tuition fees as of the autumn term 2011. Although this reform does not affect systems of student support that, by definition, are dedicated to Swedish nationals, it signals a change in the funding principles of higher education. The specific change in the direction of quality is that the introduction of fees for third-country students would be a part of the new funding system of higher education: the Higher Education Minister Tobian Krantz proposed and approved the new quality system for which the introduction of third-country fees would release SEK 500-600 (€55-66 million) available for top-performing universities. This reform signals a shift regarding the attention towards competitiveness. This decision was followed by protests in the higher education systems, culminating with the decision of the university chancellor Anders Flodstrom to resign from the National Agency with an open letter. The conflict is motivated by the measure of the quality of higher education (on student independent work, without taking into account “the content and examination of the training”) and a shift towards performance indicators. The shift towards liberal principles of competition and performance is certainly a sign of changes in the social-democratic Swedish system, even if the level of grants and loans has remained stable and the Swedish system is, comparatively, still one of the most generous for young people in Europe.

Most direct changes in the system of student support have occurred in England and in Italy. In England, the system of loans was introduced in the 1990s and, since 2004, graduates are able to take loans, not only for covering their living costs, but also to cover their tuition fees. Therefore, students in England often take both maintenance loans (if they are not entitled to a grant) and tuition loans. The most recent changes introduced after the crisis concerned changes in the level of “generosity” of the system and of student support. The system of grants, guaranteed to everybody in Sweden, is residual in England: a grant of up to £2 800 for incomes below £25 000. The original goal of the last reforms was to make the system more “progressive”, but the final result is that the system has become more residual: for students with parents earning up to £25 000 there is a slight rise in the maintenance grant of £27 per month (BIS 2010). Families with income up to £42 000 are now entitled to a partial grant – the threshold has therefore decreased (it used to be £50 020 per year) and the system is becoming increasingly residual. However, the most radical change introduced in England by the coalition government revolves around the dramatic rise in the maximum levels of fees (from £3 290 to £9 000). This change risks increasing the level of debt taken by young students in a system which is already reliant on diffused forms of loans to sustain both tuition fees and living costs of young people in higher education.

In Italy, the system of student support has been reformed after the economic crisis on two different occasions. The first reform took place during Berlusconi’s government in 2010 with the “Gelmini Reform” (Law 240/2010) which created a “Fund for Merit” (Article 4) to “award the most deserving students” with a national test. This “Fund for Merit” has been funded by private funders, but also by state resources previously used for the most disadvantaged students (from the “right to study” funding, in Italian: *diritto allo studio*). As underlined by several scholars, the existing form of student support for the most disadvantaged students has become increasingly residual after the mass expansion of Italian higher education (Prato 2006). Not only is entering into this system particularly difficult, but many students who are eligible do not get grants and bursaries due to the lack of resources available at the regional level, creating the peculiar phenomenon

of “entitled students who cannot benefit for lack of sources” (in Italian: *studenti ideonei non beneficiari*). The reform introduced by the Gelmini Reform represented, therefore, a change in the scope and goals of student support, transferring the scarce resources available to the most disadvantaged students to students who have achieved high levels of performance (Antonucci 2011).

Most recent reforms have affected the system of student support indirectly; in particular the main changes have been introduced in the spending review of Monti’s government in 2012, with the scope of limiting public spending in higher education as well. These changes have affected the levels of fees for a specific category of students who do not complete their degree in the years originally established (*fuori corso*). Those students, who are often working students (in Italy part-time degrees are offered by a minority of institutions), will face an increase of their fees which will be used to finance the general system of student support (Laudisia 2012). While the system of student support is becoming more conditional, regions are facing a scarcity of funds from the state, which is reflected in an increase in the level of taxes paid by all students to finance the system of student support (Eurydice 2011).

The changes described above seem to contradict the recent statements of the EHEA on the social dimension that should be promoted in the following way: by making higher education accessible to all, but also by supporting living costs faced in higher education. The last working groups of EHEA state in fact that “[s]tudents should have appropriate studying and living conditions, so that they can complete their studies within an appropriate period of time without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (Bologna Process 2007a: 13). Moreover, more resources should be put into higher education to create systems of counseling and allow widening access. Finally, “[g]overnments should take measures to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects with a view to widening access” (Bologna Process 2007a: 13). All these aspects seem currently overlooked as per the last report from the Eurydice network (2011) on modernising higher education, which presents evidence of ongoing cuts in the public resources devoted to student support in higher education.

The most striking contradiction between declarations and European policies comes from the “social dimension of student mobility” which is directly managed at the European level. In the declarations of the EHEA it is argued that “mobility should be promoted by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement” with particular attention to students (from the Bologna Declaration). Due to the lack of available funding, the Commission on Education and Training has proposed a new “Erasmus of All” programme (2014-2020), which proposes the introduction of an “Erasmus Loan Guarantee” for Masters students in Erasmus (European Commission 2011). Shifting the instruments, in a time of economic crisis, from grants to loans risks increasing the high level of debt already taken by young people in higher education. In fact, young people face increasing problems in paying back these loans due to the high level of youth unemployment and lower incomes of graduates. This proposal has been in fact opposed by the European Students Union which argues that loans will not cover the costs of some of the most attractive destinations for students in Erasmus and will affect students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, discouraging their mobility (ESU 2012).

→ 4. Lives of young people in higher education in 2020 and what we can do about it

The condition of young people in higher education in 2020 will be highly dependent on the impact of the last reforms described in the previous pages. In a climate characterised by increasingly residual forms of student support, decreased public spending, higher competition and funding for a few excellent students, the experience of higher education risks becoming increasingly differentiated. Entering into higher education will not only be more difficult, but will also have different implications for young people, depending on their socio-economic backgrounds and their capacity to afford higher education and face the living costs associated with this experience. In other words, the varieties of the student experience (Ainley 2008) will be multiplied.

In those countries affected by an increase of student fees, as in England, one possible consequence feared by analysts was an immediate drop in the enrolment rates. The data show that while higher education enrolment has dropped (between 1% to 8% in different countries) this drop has not been dramatic and, counter-intuitively, it has mainly attracted students from middle classes and lower-middle classes (UCAS 2012). These students, as in the description of the liberal system above, are likely to get fewer grants from the system which is increasingly targeting the poorest and are therefore going to suffer more than others the impact of the recent changes which push them to take on higher levels of loans (Guardian 2012a).

The important element to underline is that the mass dropout from higher education has not taken place in the countries affected by the shift towards higher personal costs of higher education and this is unlikely to happen in 2020: as affirmed by Welby (Guardian, 2012b) it is not the fear of debt that stops poorer students from going into university; some of these students are already excluded a priori from access to higher education. Moreover, participation in higher education represents a major cultural change in Europe. Higher education is now seen as a fundamental step to reach a certain level of "employability". Allen and Ainley (2010) in *Lost generation?* describe entering into higher education a race not to climb down the ladder: the labour market is increasingly competitive and access into higher education represents the essential step to compete in European labour markets. This does not mean that graduates will be able to achieve graduate jobs as they face the risk of underemployment; certainly, this competitive race increases the discrepancies between university graduates and young people who have dropped education studies. Most importantly, these policy changes will not be without consequences for the experience of higher education itself. Young people are going to have more debts, more loans and increasingly rely on family sources to face the costs of higher education. Debt influences the post-university lives of young people and potentially future labour-market choices. Young people are also likely to participate more in the labour market during their studies in order to face the increasing costs; with the scarcity of jobs available to graduates, young people in higher education will risk getting stuck in low-skilled jobs.

The future of university is likely to be affected by the conditions of the labour market: in times of crisis and high youth unemployment participation in higher education remains high. We do not know if in 2020 Europe will still face a period of economic crisis, but if this is the case, policy makers will still encourage participation in higher education. From a policy point of view, having young people

in higher education, and particularly in university, may represent a cheaper solution than spending on unemployment policies. Moreover, a high rate of young people in higher education translates into better youth unemployment figures, as is currently the case.

At this point, the reader will think that the image of young people in higher education in 2020 I am depicting here looks hopelessly gloomy. While the assessment of the current policy changes does not lead to an encouraging view, one can still explore alternative scenarios. First of all, the policies set up in many countries can be reversed in the next few years by counter-reforms that increase the level of spending in higher education and develop systems of student support.

Furthermore, an essential room for manoeuvre is represented by the increasing scope of European policies in this area. The discussion on systems of student support is likely to be increasingly European, as demonstrated by the institutionalisation of the EHEA. This is not necessarily positive: as recently underlined by Garben (2012), many reforms in the field of higher education and in the direction of public cuts have been implemented via soft law in an environment of democratic deficit, while social aspects have been largely neglected in European policy making. The basis for more participatory reforms in higher education, as argued by Garben, has to be found in EU law. In 2020 I foresee, perhaps optimistically, a higher political participation in European policy making in the field of young people and higher education and the creation of European tools to defend the social dimension of higher education. As put by Garben (2012: 26):

Although “the weight of Europe” is deployed to push reforms into an economic direction, it is not Europe or Europeanization *per se* that forces a neo-liberal view on educational affairs. It is very well possible to aspire to a strong and unified Europe, without borders for educational mobility and with an active role in educational policy, also for non-economic reasons.

Higher education is becoming an essential part of the political debate and this is likely to be even more the case in 2020. Many young university students have joined European protests against austerity, in particular in southern Europe (Guardian, 2012c). This means that university settings and student unions are also transforming politics, as they are providing new spaces of political exchange and they are becoming important actors in shaping the political socialisation of young people. To a certain extent, they are also replacing traditional actors in political socialisation, such as trade unions. Student protests focus on specific politics and policies adopted at the European level and they do not oppose Europe and EU institutions *per se*; on the contrary they tend to show patterns of Europeanisation and forms of transnational collaboration while their discourses reveal a European vision of higher education. In 2020, this process of integration will further develop leading to an increasing development of common European discourses in student politics and in higher education policy making. Policy makers are challenged to include these new actors in the policy arena, rather than seeing these political manifestations as outsider elements.

Finally, we are now in a situation in which the specific role of university has changed: from a place for the elite, universities have become massed systems for young people looking for better job prospects. At the same time, European policy making has almost entirely neglected the systems of vocational training which establish a closer link between education and the labour market. At

the same time, universities have been transformed from providers of academic knowledge to enhancers of employability, as if they were massed systems for vocational training. As I have analysed with other colleagues in a forthcoming paper in *Queries* for the Foundation of European Progressive Studies (Antonucci et al. 2013), there is no automatic link between putting more people into higher education and increasing the level of employment. This depends, in fact, also on the creation of graduate jobs via labour-market policies and on the presence of supply-side policies. While it is not possible to foresee what will happen in 2020, the hope is to develop universities as places detached from the primary function of leading to better labour-market outcomes and which focus on their social role of guaranteeing to everybody a chance to learn. This includes the possibility for young people to study what they like, not what is likely to get them a job or pay back their loans, and for enjoying their experiences in university without facing the burden of not being able to meet their study and living costs. While this might be a risky argument to support in times of high levels of youth unemployment, it is driven by the positive (and maybe naive) hope that the experiences of young people in higher education in 2020 will be better than those of young people in 2013.

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