

## The EU'S Higher Education Discourse and the Rest of the Mediterranean\*

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The Union for the Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Project is likely to kindle debates as to what initiatives ought to be taken in order to develop a common Higher Education and Research Area. Many research initiatives have been taking place around the Mediterranean, including the development of a number of research journals focusing on the area and the setting up of research networks and societies focusing on different areas of research including comparative education. The idea of a common Higher Education and Research Area is indeed quite interesting. The larger Mediterranean requires some kind of entity that can help sustain projects in the area, though I do have a few concerns regarding what this might entail. The last thing one desires for this area is a new form of cultural imperialism through a higher education discourse from Europe that places emphasis on internationalization, competitiveness and privatization, in short the ingredients for a neoliberal framework for higher education and lifelong learning in general.

The EU policy discourse is partly an attempt to provide a modicum of direction for and regulation of universities which have suffered in this part of the world in many ways. Many of the shortcomings of Southern European universities have been highlighted in the national press of several countries, not least being the need to reform what are perceived as archaic structures. Even universities located in the south of the Mediterranean were judged to be in need of reform. As is often the case in a situation when a "jobs crisis" is being presented as a "skills crisis", educational institutions are made the scapegoat and, therefore, the potential panacea for many existing ills: unemployment, lack of attraction of foreign investment, Islamic radicalization of youth and so forth. Pressure is placed by the Breton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank) on these countries, such as Morocco, to reform their higher education and vocational sectors. These situations make it attractive for Europe to extend its higher education space to incorporate countries from the rest of the Mediterranean. In Turkey, for instance, the Bologna Process is an important reference point in the policy discourses on higher education reconstruction in the country (Gok, 2009). Some of these countries had indeed served as the venues for "trial runs" with regard to, say, the Bologna Process (e.g., Morocco), currently being adopted throughout the EU. There is the danger, therefore, that standardization and harmonization become key words as the so-called "Bologna gospel" continues to be spread to the rest of the region within the framework of Euro-Mediterranean, or rather EU-non EU Mediterranean relations. Would these countries, including countries like Turkey, be allowed to develop their

own institutions on their own terms and in harmony with the specificities of their own cultures, geographical location and social and economic needs? This would be the challenge for any cooperation in this regard where countries from different sides of the region, EU members or not, are allowed to participate in a process of exchange and policy “reinvention” on their own terms.

Simply extending the dominant EU discourse across the Mediterranean would be just another form of Eurocentric domination and invasion. As with the situation concerning the market-driven HE discourse in Europe, I would caution against any project that promotes guidelines characterized by a “one-shoe-fits-all” approach, an approach that rides roughshod over different traditions in the interest of harmonization. One ought to guard against this proposed Mediterranean Higher Education Project becoming the vehicle for the expansion of the European space into North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, with the universities in these regions simply becoming institutions that internalize the image of their European counterparts (Sultana, 1999: 35) – a higher education institutional version of Frantz Fanon’s “black skin in white masks”?

Such a form of “cultural invasion” would also give rise to the suspicion that one of the main purposes is to facilitate the process of enticing potential labour power and students towards Europe and its universities. European higher education institutions are being called upon to engage in internationalization, apart from Europeanization. Internationalization entails attracting students from outside the EU fold to EU universities as these universities are being exhorted to compete with their US counterparts in this regard. The USA enjoys the lion’s share in terms of attracting foreign students. International students from outside the EU are meant to enhance the universities’ and HE systems’ stature in the world. They are also intended to provide the cash, which will enable European universities to compete with their USA counterparts, such fees becoming a significant source of revenue and foreign exchange. Universities and HE institutions are being encouraged to compete in a lucrative world-student market and increase their share of the takings (Mayo, 2009) and non-EU Mediterranean countries can prove to be a valuable and sizable market here.

The dominant EU discourse also promotes the idea of diversification. This includes having different types of universities:

1. First Division players dedicated to research.
2. Teaching universities.
3. Regional development universities.

Do we need a separation of this kind? Should teaching be separated from research and international research contributions from regional development issues, so crucial to many parts of the Mediterranean? Short shrift seems to be given, by this sort of separation, to a concept that owes its origin to a country in the Mediterranean, albeit one which lies on the European side of the region. I refer here to the Ancient Greek concept of “praxis”, which entails action and reflection, theory and practice, none of which ought to be separated. Quite welcome for a few universities in this region is a Higher Education Project that enables them to provide an effective

contribution to the surrounding communities, local, regional or national, without losing their international vocation as producers and disseminators of knowledge.

The other major issue that emerges from the EU discourse, as well as the larger global neoliberal discourse, is that of privatization and the market. Large supranational organizations such as the EU promote this market-driven regulatory function (Dale, 2008). In this scenario, public and private boundaries in higher education, and other areas for that matter, are blurred. The State engages in policy-making and other action in concert with other agencies and organizations, including NGOs (governance rather than government), either through loose networks or through partnerships (“heterarchies”) (Ball, 2010). Partnerships in this proposed Mediterranean area might well involve agencies from outside and possibly from the EU itself, working in tandem with national states (Ball, 2010). Privatization (Sultana, 1999: 22-24) is also a feature of a scenario in which the State becomes a “competition” state (Ball, 2007), helping to create or sustain, or both, a higher education market (Darmanin, 2009) as part of a market for lifelong learning in general. This has been occurring in many countries of the Mediterranean for quite some time. One did not need to anticipate the creation of a Mediterranean Higher Education Area for neoliberal tenets to creep in. They have been there for quite some time, assisted in certain cases by the adoption of military action (e.g., the 1980 coup in Turkey). In many countries of the Mediterranean, privatization of higher education results in lecturers, who are underpaid in public institutions, boosting their income by teaching part-time in private universities to the detriment of research since most of their time is taken up by a double teaching shift. It is a way by which the State helps sustain the private competition sector, underpaying its employees in the public sector and allowing the best qualified to be hired by the private sector on a part-time basis and being paid part-time rates. This strikes me as being a “win-win” situation for public and private employers, but much to the detriment of research and possibly quality as a result. What contribution can a Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Project, such as that being contemplated, make to assist academics in countries lying south of the Mediterranean to remedy this situation, getting rid of the economic shackles, to become an integral and visible part of the world academic research community?

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