

Promoting the Civic and Democratic Role of Higher Education: the Next Challenge for the EHEA?

Tony Gallagher (Queen's University Belfast)

Abstract

Over two decades the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has developed reforms on higher education on the basis of the values of freedom of expression, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, independent students' unions, and free movement for students and staff. The challenge was not helped by the economic crisis which created challenges for public funding of higher education institutions, pressure for enhanced accountability, and pressure on institutions to directly respond to economic priorities. In recent years we have also been faced with a political crisis which has witnessed the growth of anti-establishment populist politics and a level of political volatility that has not been seen for generations. This has led to a fear we are in the midst of 'post-truth' politics in which appeals are based on raw emotion amplified uncritically through social media.

Higher education institutions, from their cloistered origins to their current more public role, have always had knowledge and understanding at their heart, but that role now has to focus on more than the knowledge economy, and refocus on its civic and democratic role. The paper will argue that, in the face of current challenges, the EHEA should renew its commitment to its core principles by recognizing the importance of its civic and social role, and restating the importance of the free and informed exchange of ideas and knowledge that lie at the heart of democratic culture and society, and are central to the third mission of universities.

Keywords: third mission, social, democratic culture, truth, impact

Introduction: the growth and development of the EHEA

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has developed over a period of almost two decades to develop reforms on higher education on the basis of common key values. These values included freedom of expression, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, independent students' unions, and free movement for students and staff. A total of 46 countries worked towards this achievement until the EHEA was formally launched in 2010 and two more have since joined the process. The years since then have been difficult as the deepening economic crisis not only created challenges for public funding of higher education institutions, but also saw pressure towards greater levels of accountability and pressure for institutions to more directly respond to economic and social needs (EUA, 2015). The last few years have seen political challenges compound the situation: on one level we have witnessed the growth of anti-establishment populist politics, of the right and left; but more worryingly, there has been a trend towards non-rationalism in political debate, often characterized as the development of 'post-truth' politics. What is the role for universities in this emergent environment and does it point to new priorities for the EHEA?

At its origins the EHEA was focused on the need to increase student and staff mobility, and to facilitate employability. The primary focus of the early years of its development was on structural reforms so that a cohesive and supportive environment existed for mutual exchange and cooperation. Since this was also focused on the enhancement of academic quality and graduate employability, it was recognized that it enhanced the attractiveness of European higher education to the non-European world. Linked to this was a growing recognition, by most, of the role of higher education as a public good, although the realisation of this varied across jurisdictions, particularly in relation to funding where varying balances of public and private funding were adopted. Furthermore, and to varying extents, institutions had to convince governments on the economic and social value of higher education, both in relation to the supply of graduates and the impact of research, in contexts where the competition for resources was becoming more intense (EUA, 2003).

As work towards the EHEA developed two different pressures emerged: while there was growing acknowledgement of the importance of institutional autonomy, there were concerns in the institutions that this might constrain their innovative potential if it was accompanied by mechanistic and uniform monitoring of outputs: everyone agreed that external quality control had an important part to play, but it had to strike the right balance between assurance and control. The second area of concern dealt with the development of more differentiated roles for institutions, or rather that institutions had the degree of autonomy and the level of funding that would allow them to develop distinctive missions in an effective and strategically appropriate manner.

All of this marked an important cultural shift in higher education in EHEA: in the first phase the pressure for change had been largely top-down, focused on government action and legislation; in the next phase there was more evidence of a bottom-up pressure, as the institutions sought to enhance their quality mechanisms and development their own distinctive reform measures (EUA, 2003). This increased the importance of institutional leadership and the availability of appropriate levels of resources to effect the changes and reforms underway.

In the period before the formal launch of EHEA therefore, there had already been a significant shift in the educational paradigm across Europe. Higher education had become more student-focused and appeared to be better able to respond to a growing variety of student needs. Greater dialogue had been established between institutions and their stakeholders, not least parents, students and employers. Engagement with employers was important in helping institutions respond to the demands of the lifelong learning agenda. This meant they were better able to respond to the needs

of society and the economy. As important, they were also able to respond in an agile manner to the changing needs of society. Finally, internationalization loomed ever larger as a priority, not least as the world became more connected with the growth of the digital economy.

By 2010, in other words, European higher education institutions had created unifying elements shared across 46 different countries, despite their diverse national, cultural and institutional contexts. Employability and mobility had moved to the forefront of concerns, institutions had attracted a more diversified student body, and they were generally more inclusive and responsive in the policies they adopted (EUA, 2010).

Facing challenges

The years since then have provided significant challenges. The deepening economic crisis constrained levels of public investment in higher education, while at the same time the institutions faced ever-increasing pressure to respond to pressing economic priorities and enhance existing university-business partnerships. The growing trend towards professional education highlighted the increasing recognition of the importance of the knowledge economy, but at the same time, pressure for marketization carried with it the risk of a narrowing concern with utilitarian priorities. As had always been the case, institutions faced multiple pressures and priorities, and perhaps have been faced recently with navigating increasingly choppy waters. Prior to the development of the EHEA institutions had had to face such challenges and crises in distinctive ways, but the development of the EHEA had created a context within which these challenges could be faced strategically, and in a transnational way, because of the degree of structural cohesion the EHEA had established. In part because of this, the public and civic role of higher education has perhaps never been more important, or more evident.

This is timely because, in the wake of the economic crisis, we are now faced with a political crisis that is not simply European, but has taken on a global dimension. We have witnessed the growth of anti-establishment populist politicians and parties, of the left and right, and this has produced a new level of political volatility. When this is allied with a rhetoric evincing a growing disdain for establishments, of many kinds, some fear we are in the midst of a 'post-truth' politics in which appeals are based on raw emotion, and these are, in turn, amplified uncritically through social media. Higher education institutions, from their cloistered origins to their current more public role, have always had knowledge and understanding at their heart. We have already seen how the concept of the knowledge economy has become shorthand for the new demands of a digital world and highlights the contribution of higher education to economic growth, but the role of knowledge and understanding in higher education may now also have an important civic and democratic role. Higher education should become the site of a singular truth, as a response to the fractious clamour that has emerged across many societies. Rather, higher education may need to restate, and to some extent re-imagine, the importance of the core principles upon which the EHEA was built: in the face of contemporary challenges, these principles can be seen to encourage dialogue, the sharing of different perspectives, and a constructive approach to disagreement and decision-making.

The common framework established by the EHEA has provided institutions with the opportunity to realize their innovative and entrepreneurial potential. To date this has been most evident in the positive role higher education has played in promoting economic growth and prosperity, in widening access and participation in post-compulsory education, and in providing opportunities for retraining and renewal in the face of rapidly changing economic circumstances. It has perhaps been less effective in articulating values. If we take this opportunity to restate and re-imagine the core principles of the EHEA, we might now focus on the importance of the civic and social role of higher education, restating the importance of the free and informed exchange of ideas and knowledge that lie at the heart of democratic culture and society, and shift our gaze towards the third mission of universities.

The civic and social role of higher education

There has been some consideration of these issues in previous discussions and it is perhaps best to begin from this base. Bergan (2015) asked whether the EHEA had achieved all it set out to do and had lost political interest as its focus was increasingly administrative or bureaucratic: was it, he asked, no longer perceived to be 'innovative and politically interesting?' (Bergan, 2015: 728). He pointed out that the development of the EHEA had proceeded in stages, from the launch, through development, then stock-taking and consolidation. Initially there had been a high priority towards agreement on structural reform, which had then been followed by a focus on implementation. This did not mean that other policy areas were unimportant, and Bergan cited issues such as academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and student participation, as key underlying values established and promoted by the EHEA. He also suggested that the social dimension had been on the EHEA agenda for a considerable period, even though there were different interpretations on what it meant, and hence problems in identifying clear commitments to take this agenda forward. This was particularly evident in the 2015 implementation report which showed that, while there had been rhetorical commitment to achieving social priorities, only a minority of states had actually set quantified goals as a basis for measuring progress (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015)

Bergan went on to suggest that the EHEA has had two important functions. The first of these was that it provided a formal framework for the establishment of a set of coherent and compatible policies and a set of good practices. Drawing on this, the second function he highlighted was that the EHEA acted as a learning community in that the good practice it developed was available to all. He concluded his chapter with a note of optimism in that he looked forward to the development of a new phase of action in which the EHEA would 'develop from adolescence to full maturity' (Bergan, 2015: 740), but with the backdrop of the 2008 crash and the subsequent financial challenges facing higher education, he was unclear what form this new direction might take.

He did, however, offer some hints. He linked a future debate on European higher education to a debate on the future vision we had for European societies, a debate that would 'need to be philosophical and practical at the same time, since it will need to establish a clear connection between principals, policy and practice.' (Bergan, 2015: 739). He went further by quoting the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul who suggested that a successful and dynamic democracy was one in which citizens were 'boisterous, outspoken, cantankerous' (cited by Bergan, 2015: 739). A similar intent had animated some US higher education institutions to rediscover the civic role embedded in the land-grant tradition, particularly at a time when the level of voting by young people was very low (Benson et al., 2007; see also Plantan, 2002) and the strength of democratic culture was believed to be diminishing.

This essentially political turn for the EHEA could mark an end to the inward gaze which has largely, and probably appropriately, characterized its work to date. It might offer the possibility of a deeper and wider engagement with society as a whole. It might be possible, for example, to take the idea of a learning community and move it beyond the dissemination of good practice, not least because this implicitly assumes that, for any given problem, someone somewhere has already solved it, and the task is simply to 'find' it and tell it to everyone. This concept, or approach, may be appropriate for administrative or bureaucratic challenges, but the grander societal challenges we currently face are better thought of as 'wicked problems' which are difficult precisely because they offer novel challenges to overcome (Kolko, 2012; Hannon, 2007). For these 'wicked problems' the concept of best practice is of limited value. Rather than looking over our shoulder at what others have already achieved, 'wicked problems' require us to look over the horizon, to imagine and construct new solutions, probably based on knitting together different elements of a new solution held by a diverse

network of participants and amplifying the strongest signals. The appropriate concept for this approach is the idea of 'next practice' and its primary value is that it encourages us to think seriously of ways we can create space to encourage innovation.

Some of the wicked problems have been with us for an age, including climate change, social injustice, inequality, healthcare and drug trafficking. These are social or cultural problems that are difficult or impossible because they engage incomplete or contradictory knowledge; involve large numbers of people and opinions; impose large economic burdens; and are not unitary, but rather are interconnected with other problems. In our current period we also face the challenge of social cohesion, as societies cope with massive population movements arising from disasters or wars; the rise of populist political parties; the denigration of expertise; and a new promiscuity in the way too many deal with the concept of truth. Some of these may be a legacy of postmodernist relativism, in which every view is deemed to be authentic, or older notions of multiculturalism which rigidify community identities at a cost to the right of individuals within the communities to assert their own voice. The Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue offers an alternative view, based on the importance of dialogue and promoting the value of change. Flecha (1999) went even further to argue not just for the value of intercultural dialogue, but also for the importance of hybridity as the underlying dynamic for progressive change. Flecha criticised multicultural approaches which, he suggested, tried to protect minorities by reifying and fixing group identities and, unwittingly, fell into a trap set by modern racists who no longer claimed one group was superior to another, but rather simply suggested groups were, and should be, entirely separate. Flecha (1999) made the case for intercultural dialogue and the creation of dialogic space between groups so that sharing and learning could take place, thereby providing the basis for the growth of hybrid identities.

All these concepts - the nature of truth, the role of identity, the place for experts and expertise, the value of dialogue - coalesce around the core business of higher education, which is knowledge and understanding. But the important point lies in the way knowledge and understanding is generated and used, and the way in which universities engage with the wider society within which they are based.

In previous discussions on the EHEA this issue was perhaps most clearly addressed by Pausits (2015) who asked whether a modern university in a knowledge society had a third mission alongside research and teaching (Rangaa and Etzkowitz, nd). There was, he recognized, increasing discussion on the idea of a third mission in which social priorities were manifest and the university consciously shifted from any remaining vestiges of an 'ivory tower' to engage more pro-actively with society. In an echo of Bergan, Pausits suggested that the advocacy of a third mission would take the university from being a 'community of scholars', which all its implied images of cloisters and enclosures, to become a 'community of practice', but one in which practice had a more overt impact on society.

In some contexts this third mission was quite tightly defined: he points out that in the 1970s the German Education Council defined continuing education as the third mission, or pillar, of universities. Another version was embodied in a more interdisciplinary and application-oriented approach to science, in which the production of knowledge was geared towards socially or economically relevant activities. Pausits does not make the connection, but this echoes the late 19th century land-grant universities of the United States, or the civic universities of early 20th century United Kingdom - in both cases they took on a commitment to regional impact and, often, a commitment to applied science and technology.

More recently this commitment to local impact has been characterized by the Triple Helix notion in which academic, political and business interests work collaboratively to promote wealth production and economic growth (Ranga and Etzkowitz, 2013). In this concept universities have a key role in national innovation and regeneration, through knowledge transfer partnerships, the production of a

steady stream of highly qualified graduates and the commercialisation of knowledge. From one perspective this is a university response to increased demands for accountability for public investment in higher education. Alternatively it could be seen as an enhancement of existing commitments to research and teaching, while producing new social partnerships and income streams. As Pausits points out, the key underlying principle here lies in the application of knowledge outside the academic environment (Pausits 2015: 272). He goes on to illustrate this development by looking at the examples of the Russell Group of research-intensive universities in the UK and the Prime network among European universities. Interesting, most of the discussion on this engagement is seen as changing the scientific, economic and social relations between universities and society, although as Goddard and Vance (2013) have pointed out, the economic focus of this activity has, to date, been more significant and better embedded, in comparison with the social agenda.

There have been attempts better to institutionalise the social agenda by using the concept of a Quadruple Helix (European Committee on the Regions, 2016), in which 'citizens' provide the fourth leg. Goddard and Vance (2013) suggest that the social agenda has been the weaker leg because the measures to support it have not been as wide-ranging or strong as those developed to support economic initiatives. Furthermore, they are often based on short-term or ad hoc funding; they can be difficult to embed in academic programmes; and they are not as well recognised by government or in policy. Specific initiatives have been put in place, such as the priority attached to widening participation, the development of community-based teaching programmes, the encouragement of outreach measures such as volunteering, and the development of new methodologies for applied research in communities. All this stands in marked contrast with the much larger-scale economic partnerships in which universities and business work with city or regional authorities on ambitious programmes for economic development or regeneration: such initiatives tend to be larger not just in scale, but also in ambition and longevity.

Conclusion: a new social and civic focus for the EHEA?

Is it possible that the EHEA could take on the task of developing innovation on the social agenda and build new understandings of the civic and social role of higher education, and in so doing take the social agenda from being a miscellany of tactical initiatives to create a constellation of practices united around an ambitious strategic theme?

Benson et al (2017) offer an example of how this might be achieved when they talked about strategic engagement by universities in their local communities, using the example of the Netter Center in the University of Pennsylvania: 'When the entire university is engaged – human, academic, cultural and economic – enormous progress can be made at improving the communities in which they are located'. Benson et al (2017) have taken this forward by arguing that the social imperative is far from being a new imaginary, but rather it can be seen as a fulfilment of the Baconian commitment to a form of science that sought to engage with real world problems, and more immediately helped lead to the formation of the Royal Society (Bryson, 2010). Ball (2010) showed how Bacon criticised the 'blind fumbings of uninformed practical technologies' which he compared to the 'mindless task of ants'. By contrast, he suggested, Bacon argued that true scientists 'should be like bees ... which extract the goodness from nature and use it to make useful things.' (Ball, 2010: 299).

The formation of the Royal Society was a key moment in the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. This, in turn, contributed to the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the demise of absolutism in Europe and the rise of democratic societies. This argument offers a philosophical and practical lineage at the heart of the purpose of higher education.

More prosaically a similar commitment to ambition can be seen in recent developments in higher education in the United Kingdom. Since the turn of the millennium UK universities have been obliged to undergo a research assessment process in which the quality of their research is evaluated and the judgements used as the basis for distributing core research funding to the institutions. Until recently the main criteria upon which research quality was based reflected traditional research metrics, such as the level of external research grant income attracted, the number of postgraduate research students graduated, and the quality of research publications and other outputs. For the last exercise, carried out in 2014, a new criterion based on research impact was included, and has been enhanced for the next exercise in 2021. This criterion was meant to reflect the value gained by society from public investment in research. Research impact, which was clearly delineated from traditional academic impact, comprised a number of elements, including economic and societal impact, and more particularly was linked to a wider initiative on public engagement. The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) was established to lead this work and it has promoted a Manifesto for Public Engagement for universities to allow them to commit to the exploration of new forms of engagement with society:

Manifesto for Public Engagement: 'We believe that universities and research institutes have a major responsibility to contribute to society through their public engagement, and that they have much to gain in return. We are committed to sharing our knowledge, resources and skills with the public, and to listening to and learning from the expertise and insight of the different communities with which we engage.' (NCCPE, 2010).

There has also been an attempt to locate this initiative within the DNA of higher education by exploring how the role of knowledge has been generated, used and changed over time:

- academic knowledge: knowledge generated by and for the university
- knowledge transfer: knowledge made more accessible to those outside the university
- knowledge exchange: recognize others have valuable knowledge and work in partnership
- knowledge co-creation: universities and publics co-creating knowledge

The traditional image of the cloistered university, protected from the whims and fashions of the society around it, sits very clearly in the first level of this continuum; the civic universities, with their regional and technical mission, sit within the second level; the modern economic imperative sits somewhere between the second and third levels; but it is in the fourth level that the possibility of transforming the nature of the relationship between universities and societies can be seen.

Following Benson et al (2017) it takes the social and civic mission of universities to a higher level by linking it to a commitment to democratic action. This could take the form of a commitment to engage with society to address the persistent wicked problems that limit the life-chances of so many citizens and deny them the fulfilment of a good life. This would imply the promotion of innovative spaces for developing and testing creative solutions. The development of 'next practice', as opposed to 'best practice', further implies the need to tap into new sources of knowledge and experience, including the wisdom of a much wider range of stakeholders and communities outside higher education.

It could also take the form of actively encouraging a democratic culture among our students as many will go on to take leading positions in society. The challenge of a 'post-truth' world suggests a priority should include teaching our students the value of discernment and critical judgement, so that they will not simply be consumers of information. Rather they should be encouraged to hone their skills in critical engagement, questioning and challenging what they are told, and developing a commitment to actively testing, and not just accepting, the truth-value of claims. Our 'post-truth' world is

characterized by the rise of populist politics and the promiscuous claims to truth that have emerged in its wake. It is fuelled by the echo-chamber of social media. The digital age has created an explosion of knowledge which should be liberating, but only if it accompanied by the ability to use it critically. That is perhaps the biggest wicked problem we currently face, but it is one in which universities should play a central role. It is a challenge which EHEA might take on as its next central purpose.

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