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The Alternative – Non-state Higher Education in Europe



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Klaus Hekking

Preface

Non-state or independent universities seem to be at first sight a rather young phenomenon in Europe, compared to the USA, where they have always played an outstanding and highly esteemed role. But if we look deeper into European history, we will find that today world-renowned universities such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, or Leipzig also have emerged from non-state roots. They were founded in the Middle Ages either as church or monastic schools or as independent institutions of scholars. In the course of history, they gradually became state universities. Non-state universities therefore are not an invention of our time, but part of the European intellectual and cultural history, as Walter Rüegg, among others, pointed out in his monumental “History of the University in Europe”. The oldest, still existing, non-state university in Germany, the Technical University Georg Agricola in Bochum, founded in 1816, can look back on more than 200 years of history.

Non-state higher education has undergone an exciting renaissance in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of totalitarian Marxist tyranny in the east of our continent, in which governments sought to control society in every respect and, above all, the education of young people. This renaissance also reflects a change in views on the legitimate role of central administration in academic matters, as Guy Neave has put it in Part 1 of the above quoted “History of the University in Europe”. As a result, we now can see in almost all EU States a strong growth of non-state universities.

The structural and quantitative development of non-state higher education within the European Union is still rather heterogeneous, characterized by different educational traditions and policies of the member-states. However, with the progressing harmonization of national higher education systems with common rules and standards, these traditions will become less and scientific impact and quality of teaching more important. “Bologna Process”, “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA) and “European Research Area” (ERA) are the key words for this development towards a modern and globally competitive European knowledge industry. This process will also open up new opportunities for non-state universities and they are keen to use them.

This study is an attempt to provide a comparison of the academic mission and the political, legal, and economic conditions for non-state universities in the European Union. The main emphasis is put on the countries in which the European Union of Private Higher Education (EUPHE) is present. They are hereinafter referred to as “EUPHE-Countries”.

The study would not have been feasible without the knowledge and experience of insiders of non-state higher education in these countries. The EUPHE-Countries represent different regions in Europe and different cultures and traditions in higher education, but they have in common that their non-state education sector is already well developed. The study is complemented by a short glance on non-state higher education in the other EU-Countries. This is the first study on higher education, dealing only with non-state higher education institutions in Europe and therefore it may still be incomplete and not fully systematic.

There are some reasons for that, including insufficient public statistics on non-state universities, and different statistical systems, classifications, and terminologies in the EU-Countries. Nevertheless, considering these challenges, this comparative study initiates a better understanding of the non-state higher education sector in Europe, following the Chinese proverb: “Every great journey begins with a first step”. The growing knowledge about non-state higher education in Europe will continuously improve the quality of further comparisons.

This study is also an appreciation of the entrepreneurial commitment of civil society and its contribution to higher education of future generations through the establishment and operation of non-state universities.

Content

The European Hall of Fame of Non-State Higher Education	11
Aims of the study.....	13
Summary	17
EUPHE – Mission, Vision and Structure.....	29
Non-state Universities – the Pros & Cons	33
EU Law and Non-state Higher Education	43
The Development of Non-state Higher Education in Europe	47
The European Independent Higher Education Score (IHE Score).....	55
Country Reports on EUPHE-Countries	59
Austria	59
Croatia	64
Germany	76
Ireland	86
Poland	91
Portugal	97
Slovenia	103
Spain.....	107
A short Glance at the other EU-Countries	115
Bulgaria	116
Cyprus	118
Czech Republic	119
Denmark	121
Estonia	123
Finland.....	125
Greece	126
Hungary.....	127
Italy.....	130
Latvia	132
Lithuania.....	133

Content

Luxembourg.....	135
Malta	137
Netherlands	139
Romania	141
Slovakia	143
Sweden.....	145
Rating according to the European IHE score	149
SWOT-Matrix of the Non-state Higher Education Sector in Europe ..	151
Strategies for the Non-state Higher Education Sector in Europe.....	153
Statistics	155
Bibliography	159
Index	165
The author	169

The European Hall of Fame of Non-State Higher Education

The oldest non-state university in Europe still in operation

Georg Agricola University of Technology in Germany, since 1816

The largest non-state university

University of Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Italy with 40,000 students

The largest non-state university of applied sciences

FOM University in Germany with 55,000 students

The country with the most non-state universities

Poland with 257

The country with the highest proportion of non-state universities

Slovenia with 93 %

The country with the most non-state online-universities

Italy with 11 out of 12

The country with the highest number of non-state universities in international rankings (THE Ranking, QSWorld University Ranking, Scimago University Ranking (2020/21))

Spain with 17 citations

The country with the most students in non-state universities

France with 389.000

The country with the highest proportion of students in non-state universities

Poland with 27.7 %

The country with the highest proportion of female students in non-state universities

Austria with 61 %

The country with the highest proportion of international students in non-state universities

Ireland with 19 %

The country with the highest number of employees in non-state universities

Spain with 30,020

The country with the highest proportion of employment in non-state universities

Slovenia with 22.9 %

The European Hall of Fame of Non-State Higher Education

The country with the highest proportion of female employees in non-state universities

Germany with 55.8 %

The country with the highest budget of non-state universities

France with 2.77 billion Euros

The country with the highest share of the budget in the higher education sector

Portugal with 35 %

Aims of the study

Non-state higher education in Europe is still a “terra incognita” from a scientific point of view. The reasons for this are:

- that state-universities have traditionally the opinion leadership on all matters of higher education and that research on education is mainly concerned with the state higher education system,
- that in national education policies of most EU-Countries higher education is primarily understood as a matter of state-universities,
- that statistics on non-state universities, and thus the level of knowledge of their performance for the common good, are not very well developed.
- and finally, that the lobby of non-state universities has not yet been very effectively organized on the European level.

Non-state higher education, despite its growing importance in recent times, is often still seen by politics, media and the broad public as a niche, a complement and sometimes unwanted competitor of state higher education rather than as an independent system on its own right. At the same time, it is still denounced for commercializing education and thus jeopardizing the goal of educational equity. If we take a closer look at reality, it becomes evident that these assumptions are not correct (see chapter Non-state Higher education – Pro and Cons). Indeed, they contribute with their entrepreneurial dynamics and in a vivid competition to the mobility of ideas, faculty and students in Europe and to educational diversity and permeability of the educational system. This shows among other in:

- an ever-increasing number of non-state universities supported by industry, non-for-profit associations and foundations,
- an ever-increasing range of programs which today cover all major scientific fields, whose equivalence with the courses of state-universities is ensured by mandatory quality assurance procedures and state approval,
- a steadily growing number of students and a growing market share of non-state higher education,
- a growing cooperation between non-state universities and economy, when it comes to the training of skilled workers,
- and a growing number of jobs in non-state higher education.

Aims of the study

Despite this contribution to educational diversity and efficiency, most EU-Countries, are just tolerating, but not promoting non-state higher education. The reason for this could be seen in the prevailing traditional view of European governments that higher education is primarily a public task to be carried out by state-universities. In this mind-set, non-state universities are perceived less as an enrichment, but rather as undesirable competitors.

Despite the intention to create a single European Higher Education Area (EHEA), non-state universities in the EU are still subject to very different legal framework conditions. This reaches from constitutional prohibition of domestic non-state universities in Greece to their financial support by the government in Slovenia or France, from the admission to designate non-state higher education institutions as “universities” in Germany and Austria to the prohibition of this designation for non-states in France, from the legal claim of non-state universities on state-approval of courses in the EUPHE-Countries to the right of the Swedish Government to make admission of non-state higher courses dependent on whether this is in national interest.

Higher education in Europe is ranging between the poles of central planned “state-education system” to an “education-market system”. Depending on how the individual EU-Countries position themselves between these poles, they shape the framework conditions for the establishment and operation of non-state universities. The “European Independent Higher Education Score” in this study tries for the first time to rate the EU-Countries according to how favorable conditions there are for non-state universities.

If we look at the different treatment of non-state higher education in the EU-Countries, it is apparent that there can be seen still discriminatory and distortive effects which hinder a fair competition between state and non-state universities, which should be one of the characteristics of an efficient single EHEA.

If Europe wants to maintain and extend its position in the global knowledge industry in competition with Asia and America, it should attract and educate the best and brightest talents. Higher education institutions can serve this objective best, if they are treated equally, regardless of whether they are state or non-state and measured only by their contribution to better education, research and the common good. Precondition for such a performance- and outcome-oriented higher education system is more transparency in terms of performance, results and framework-conditions under which state, as well as non-state universities operate in the EHEA. The various independent rankings and digital university portals contribute better and better to this transparency, although the non-state universities are still underrepresented there.

This study is meant to contribute to this transparency, comparing the situation of non-state higher education in the European Union. The main emphasis is on the nine EU-

Countries in which EUPHE currently is present. It is based on available data from public statistics, government reports, scientific studies and information from the non-state universities themselves.

Currently, national and European statistics on non-state higher education are still too heterogeneous to ensure full comparability throughout Europe. This will change in the years to come. The European Commission contributes to this with two digital platforms, which are open to all universities, whether they are state or non-state:

- the European Register of Tertiary Education (ETER)¹
- the UMultirank Framework²

These portals, if used consistently by non-state universities, can help to draw a somewhat more balanced picture of the European higher education system, in which the performance of non-state universities can also be better highlighted.

1 www.eter-project.com

2 www.umultirank.org

Summary

The subject of the study

In order to draw up this study on “non-state higher education” on a sound basis, we first consider it necessary to precisely define the subject of our enquiry. When it comes to non-state higher education, we often find the term “private” universities in legislation and literature, which is juxtaposed to “public” universities. We do consider this distinction as an inappropriate framing. On the one hand, it suggests that non-state universities in contrast to state-universities are not working in public and on the other hand it supports an often-heard prejudice, non-state universities primarily serve private interests. The practice shows, however, that they are as “public” as the state universities. Like them, they are accessible to all students who meet the admission requirements and are interested to attend them. Like state-universities they are regulated by the law and are subject to state supervision and quality assurance. Like state-universities they carry out their teaching activities in public and publish their scientific results to the public. Finally, like the state-universities they award publicly recognized academic degrees. What makes them different from state universities is just the fact that they are independent from government sponsorship, that they are constituted as private legal entities (foundations, associations, ltd. companies) and that they are mainly privately financed. This also cannot really be seen as “pr privateness” in terms of economic interest, since many non-state universities are non-for-profit institutions, which excludes private financial benefits for stakeholders and owners.

In some EU-Countries (e.g. Germany) the distinction is made between “state” and “non-state” higher education. This draws a more precise and realistic picture of the most relevant difference between the two types of institutions: while state universities are dependent on the government, when it comes to strategy, program, funding, governance, human resources and admission policies, the non-states are largely independent of the government in all these respects. It therefore seems more appropriate and precise, to make a difference between non-state higher education and state-higher education. Not as non-state higher education institutions we consider those, which are in the sponsorship of municipalities or regions (e.g., in Austria or Italy) or public controlled or financed foundations (e.g., Netherlands and Sweden).

Another problem regarding definition is caused by the great variety of higher education institutions. In the 1950` s, higher education was almost exclusively a matter of universities. Since then, the higher education sector has become much more differentiated in terms of institutions. Beside the universities there are today several other higher educa-

Summary

tion institutions (universities of applied sciences, academies, colleges etc.) which award also public recognized and state approved Bachelor- Master-, and PhD-degrees.

To make things comparable on the European level, we have chosen the following definition as a common denominator for the non-state higher institutions, mostly according to the definitions of the higher education laws of the EUPHE-Countries:

Definition

As non-state higher education institutions or “non-states” we consider in this study:

- universities, universities of applied sciences, technical colleges, art and music colleges, academies, and other institutions on tertiary education level, which are,
- are constituted as private legal entities,
- financed by more than 50 % from private sources,
- accredited by national quality assurance institutions,
- approved by the government as higher education institutions,
- and awarding publicly recognized bachelor’s, master and doctoral degrees under the Bologna-system equivalent to those awarded by state-universities.

Statistical problems

Public Statistics on higher education don’t reflect the actual performance and contribution of the non-states higher education institutions in an adequate manner.³ This is not just because there are different definitions, systematics and counting methods for the higher education sector in the individual countries, but also because national statistics are mainly geared towards state-higher education.⁴

Mostly, the higher education sector is considered as a holistic system, in which there is made no difference between state and non-state higher education. As a result, non-state universities are not seen as an independent system, so that the interested public (students, academic staff, science, business, politics and authorities) can only recognize their growing importance and performance for higher education with difficulty. This

3 See Kulhanek et coll., “Potentiale und Dynamiken privater Angebote und Beteiligungen im österreichischen Bildungswesen mit speziellem Fokus auf die Privatuniversitäten”, <https://irihs.ihs.ac.at/id/eprint/5406/1/ihs-report-2020-kulhanek-unger-lassnigg-dynamiken-privater-angebote-oesterreichischen-bildungswesen.pdf>.

4 Exceptions are the higher education statistics in Germany, France and Poland, where non-states are represented adequately.

study therefore treats the non-state higher education institutions as a separate and independent sector that sees itself as an alternative to the state higher education sector.

Institutional Growth of Non-state Higher Education since 2000

Undisputedly, non-state higher education has experienced a remarkable boom in Europe since 2000 in spite of the fact that higher education in most EU-Countries is regarded as a governmental task, assigned to state-universities. While in 1984 there were only 44 non-states in Europe⁵, their number increased to 100 in 1990 and to 718 in 2020 left alone in the EUPHE-Countries. This represents 45 % of all higher education institutions⁶. If you add the 292 non- state higher education institutions in the other EU-Countries, there were a total of 1010 non-states in the EU, corresponding to a share of 37 % of the whole higher education sector. Though this is a remarkable development. European non-states are still playing in the lightweight class, compared to other leading countries in higher education like South Korea (80 %), Japan (76 %), the US (55 %) and China (40 %).

The reason for this growth was not only the mass higher education and the increasing institutional differentiation of the higher education institutions, but also the increasing commitment of civil society in education, who does not want to leave higher education entirely to the government.

The highest share of non-states was recorded in Slovenia with 93 %, followed by Portugal with 68 % and Poland with 66 %, the lowest in Austria with 21 %. The different development within the EU is also related to the different political stances towards non-state higher education. They reach from constitutional prohibition of domestic non-state higher education in Greece, via a clear preference for state higher education in the Nordic Welfare-States, to a benevolent neutrality or even support of non-state higher education in Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Cyprus.

Growing Share of Enrollments in Non-State Higher Education⁷

Non-states have also performed a strong growth in enrollments in all EUPHE-Countries. Their share, which in 2000 was 1,2 % increased to 14 % in 2019, corresponding to around 1.36 million students. The proportion of female students was with 56 % slightly

5 See Guy Neave, "The place of the non-state sector", in: A History of the University in Europe Vol.IV: Universities. Since 1945 (Walter Rüegg, editor), Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.54.

6 See chapter Statistics.

7 See chapter Statistics.