

# PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: AUTONOMY, LIBERTY, EQUALITY AND PARTICIPATION

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*The Conference of European Ministers' Responsible for Higher Education was held on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of April in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve. The result was a communiqué which attempts to clarify the direction which the so-called '2020 Bologna Process' should take, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) of the next decade. The preamble to the text contains phrases that try to express what they were trying to achieve. The objective of the EHEA is, 'to ensure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes such as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation'.*

It would not be easy to argue with this declaration of intent. It can be seen as the initial step in a process that generates great expectations. It would be positive if we all recognized that the process is not one that can be applied immediately, with haste and without the participation of the entire university community. Nevertheless, declarations are one thing and the actual transformation of the university system is another. The use of grand words hide some more worrying realities that accompany the process: *'The necessary ongoing reform of higher education systems and policies will continue to be firmly embedded in the European values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and*

*social equity and will require full participation of students and staff'.*

The defence of the universities' autonomy does not appear very believable when, in reality, a situation of dependency on commercial links with business is being strengthened, without any debate as to what such a development will bring with it. This dependency is proposed for reasons of its social function, but it entails other obligations. Autonomy is at risk when one sees that the financing of universities themselves will depend on the private sector. Now that we are in the middle of an economic crisis, the word 'competition', so favoured by neoliberal ideologues,



should cease to have the fascination it once had. What is now presented to us as a market is not able to decide which departments receive the necessary financing. Academic autonomy and liberty cannot end up in their hands.

Autonomy is also in doubt when it comes to changing the management of the university system. In the latest report the *Fundación Conocimiento y Desarrollo* (Foundation for Knowledge and Development) recently presented in Barcelona to the country's political, academic and economic authorities, it was suggested there is a need for reform in the management of universities, alongside a supposed strengthening of

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their autonomy. The report concluded with a call for the need to provide governing boards or councils with a growing presence of members from outside the university. Among the most relevant functions of these governing boards or councils would be to elect the rector, either directly or by choosing between names proposed by bodies re-

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The UAB campus has been the home to an emblematic work of art since 1999: The Four Columns by the Valencian sculptor Andreu Alfaro



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The *Universitat de Barcelona*'s main building was the scene of demonstrations against the Bologna Process

lated to the university. Their job would also include the dismissal of the rector, when necessary. A strengthening of the power of the executive bodies was also proposed. These would consist of the rector and their board, generally elected by the rectors themselves. As far as the rest of the academic positions are concerned, the rector's team assigns the deans of faculty and these in turn elect the department and research centre heads directly or via the corresponding associated bodies, such as faculties or departments. As the report explicitly acknowledges, this implies a modification of the role of the associated bod-

ies that represent the academic community, which is to say the university board. It also reminds us that in some countries, such as Denmark, they have disappeared altogether.

Let us examine one of the other grand phrases: social equity. Despite the fact that it can be considered a well-established European value, it is worth remembering what it truly means, and what it means in the university context. While the sons and daughters of the working class call at the doors of the university and manage to enter, the initial years of degrees have almost become

a prolongation of secondary school study. This means that real university education has been gradually moved to masters and doctorate courses, in which the new elites are consolidating themselves. One need look no further than at what currently figures on the curriculum vitae of the elite and the cost of the majority of these masters, whether here or abroad, and then compare this with the professional options available to university graduates (whether on completion of a reformed course or not). This all has to do with social equality, as the formulas 4+1 and 3+2 are imposed on all degree + post-graduate courses. It also has to do with leadership, with the configuration of the hegemony, one of the universities' traditional functions.

As the Leuven Conference communicated recognises, participation is fundamental for any process. However, the Bologna Process, as it is known, has not counted on a sufficiently high degree of participation by those implicated in the matter. It is right, therefore, that the ministers responsible for higher education call for 'the full par-

ticipation of students and staff'. When faced with the protests that the process has originated among students and the teaching staff, the political and academic authorities have repeated time and again, in a form of self-criticism, that they have explained the reforms badly. More information was needed, swiftly giving rise to the appearance of publicity campaigns.

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However, there is a great deal of confusion between information and propaganda, and also by what we mean when we say participation. The vast majority of students and lecturers have not taken part in the process up to now, although many of them are prepared to do so. We should make the most of the opportunity.

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