Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

2-5 June 2021

VOLUME I

Citizenship, Work and The Global Age

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"
Via Francesco Satolli, 30 – 00165 - Rome, Italy

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Title **Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" – Reinventing Education VOLUME I Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education 'for what' as well as 'how' and 'for whom' has become unavoidable and yet it largely remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems. Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners' mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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Citizenship, Work and The Global Age
A Premise

What is education for? This philosophical question cannot be answered ignoring contributions from social and educational sciences. The growing focus on learning outcomes should have prompted discussion on the values and aims in defining policy objectives and developing accountability systems and evidence-based approaches. Whereas for years public discourse on education has most frequently been confined to a merely sector-based perspective, without addressing the relationship (i.e., interdependency and/or autonomy) with globalised societies or to face the new challenges of contemporary's world. The relationship between education and society and the issue of aims can be observed in a new context which has seen the weakening of the society-nation equation and the strengthening of global dimensions.

The crisis born of the pandemic is more and more global and multidimensional. It inevitably obliges to ask what the post-pandemic socio-economic scenarios could be and what challenges might emerge from the transformations of education and training systems and policies. Many researchers and observers think that the most relevant of these challenges is that of inequalities between and within countries. The medium-long term nature of many of these challenges poses a complex question: does the pandemic tend to widen or narrow the time-space horizons of people perceptions, rationalities, and decisions?

For decades, the field of education and training has witnessed continuous growth in globalization and internationalization: just think of the role of the large-scale assessment surveys and the increasing influence of international organisations. Phenomena and concepts such as policy mobility (lending and borrowing) or – within another field of research – policy learning, as well as global scaling up, global-local hybridization and policy assemblage might find a useful opportunity of debate and in-depth analysis in this stream. This might also be true of the related issue regarding how comparative research must be carried out and of the relationship between some government 'technologies' adopted in the latest cycle of policies – for example, quasi-market, evaluation, and autonomy of schools and universities – and the ever more criticized neo-liberal paradigm. In this framework, without any revival of the political or methodological nationalism, a critical rethinking of the national dimension, perhaps too hurriedly assumed to be 'obsolete', can be useful also for a comparative reflection. As to our continent we are in the presence not only of globalization of educational policies, but also of their Europeanisation, due to the extent of the European Commission's strategy and its Open Method of Coordination. Beyond the official distinction between formal, non-formal, and unformal learning, it seems European initiatives and programmes shape a new policy world preparing the future of education, particularly through different expert networks, new ways of conceptualizing knowledge, and disseminating standards. On these issues there is no lack of reflections and research, some of which very critical indeed, whose results deserve to be broadly shared and discussed, too.

The equipping of the new generations with the tools – knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values – to live in a plural and interconnected world is delicate matter indeed in Europe. It is the issue at stake for the encounters – and at times clashes – between old and new visions and

forms of pluralism and secularism. Around this theme are developed educational policies and strongly heterogeneous curricula. Such topic is linked also to the variability in young people's competences and attitudes towards 'cultural otherness'.

Life-long learning is another question of notable importance at international level as it implies both a diverse temporal horizon for education and its link to the dimensions of work. And a different approach to the relationship between school and extra-scholastic (life-wide) learning is also implied. From this stems the necessity of greater investment for example in both the early years (ECEC) and the adult education. We might ask, however, how much has been done to achieve this goal, and whether it risks remaining a fascinating but largely unfinished project for a long time.

Within a general rethinking of the aims and the means at the disposal of education systems, many papers ask whether until now enough has been done to educate towards citizenship and democracy and whether various national educational systems have adopted this issue as their core mission.

A second group of questions derives from some crucial challenges – such as the dramatic deterioration of the biosphere, the climate, and the health – which impose both the necessity of rethinking this mission in a planetary context and redefining the 'citizenship' as a concept not merely national, but multi-level, that is ranging from global to local; and in our continent European, too. How deeply are our nations presently involved in the task of educating their citizens in terms of knowledge of global and trans-national issues? And are they striving to build a collective common consciousness in Europe? What help is being given in this sense by proposals elaborated and experiences promoted by international organizations or the EU?

Finally, starting from infant and primary schools, what weight does citizenship education have in schools, what approaches are adopted and what have shown to be the most effective? What didactics are applied and what seem to be the most promising experiences? To what extent are teachers prepared and motivated and students interested in it? Universities and adult education should also play a role in citizenship education. What proposals and significant experiences can be described and examined?

The Volume also includes contributions on the relationship between education and economic systems which is a classic subject of social science. During the twentieth century, the functionalist perspective established a close link between 'school for the masses' and the construction of individuals personalities conforming to values and social objectives. Professions have then become more and more specialized and therefore requiring ever more targeted skills. Hence, the insistence on the need to train future workers in technical and technological skills, as well as more recently in the 'soft skills' climate, increasingly necessary in certain sectors of the economy (Industry 4.0). The alliance between the functionalist perspective and the neoliberal visions finds its conceptual and practical pivot in the employability conceptual frame. On the other hand, since the 1970s, critical research has highlighted that formal education system contributes to the reproduction of inequalities, confirming and strengthening hierarchies and power relations between different actors of the economic system. These lines of investigation have underlined the weight of cultural and social capital in determining school performance, but also the inflation of educational credentials as a combined effect of mass schooling and changes in the economic system. In more recent times, the fragmentation of the educational and training systems, because of the

multiplication of public and private agencies in charge of training citizens, in addition to the explosion of the non-formal and informal as learning places (e.g., on the Internet), challenges the school to maintain its primacy as a place responsible for training workers. Moreover, it questions its ability to continue to represent a social elevator and / or a place of social justice.

The issue of the reproduction of inequalities and differential returns of educational qualifications fuels lively and stimulating interdisciplinary debates: economic stagnation, mass unemployment and job instability affect the inclusion of young generations in the labour market. Recently, in the context of lifelong learning policies, the relationship between training and work has become increasingly central, but the definition of the goals of these policies is not neutral: in the neoliberal mantra it is a question of guaranteeing the adaptability, employability and autonomy of each individual, so that one can occupy a place in society according to the dominant values. There is no shortage of critical voices about this individualistic and functionalist interpretation of the Lifelong Learning vision. On the other hand, even the supporters of neoliberal-inspired policies want an inclusive training offer (from a meritocratic perspective), as it is essential for recruiting resources and supporting flexible production systems focused on knowledge.

The attention of scholars focuses on the effects of the 'knowledge society' in the educational system of European countries. In this perspective, several studies have focused attention on the orientation processes that contribute to the reproduction of inequalities as the students from the lower classes tend to orient themselves, and are oriented by their teachers, towards the vocational paths, stigmatized within the educational systems.

University delays. The Italian Academic Gap as a Media Topic

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ABSTRACT: *The journalistic discourse on university reformism is increasingly inspired by a taxonomic anxiety aimed at emphasizing the gap between top ranking universities and the others. The results of some international academic reports highlight the delay of Italian universities, whose international gap is often framed as a media topic. Academic communication intermingles with institutional empowerment of higher education, whose comparative analysis provides an insight into the wider process of accreditation, evaluation and rationalization. Hence the communicative flair of some surveys concerning the Italian university system and journalistic juxtaposition of good and bad universities. Academic quality data on tuition, research, the right to learn, internationalization and the third mission have become fundamental evaluative criteria in a comparative perspective. Some European initiatives aimed at supporting inclusion and mobility can be seen as an important chance for Italian higher education to bridge the gap narrated by the media in line with the taxonomic haste to highlight academic winners and losers.*

KEYWORDS: *University, Information, Rankings, Sociology, Comparative Education*

Introduction. Social complexity and academic communication

Media discourses on higher education usually overlook the sociological and educational complexity of academic innovation framed within the wider sociological reflection on the future of our universities. In his posthumous book, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016), Ulrich Beck provides an insight into the «politics of visibility» and the «failure of functioning institutions» of our risk society. His idea revolves around the impact of digitalization on informative strategies and educational patterns in line with a sociological effort to reveal the current transformation of the public sphere: «At the same time, the rapidly evolving, new technologies variants of digital communication are transforming the concept of the public. Consumers of news are becoming producers of news. National borders and topics are becoming less important. New communication landscapes are emerging – fragmented, individualized and simultaneously spreading out into

networks in which the power of the communication media is broken» (Beck, 2016, 133-4).

The relationship between institutionalized knowledge and digital public opinion affects the evolution of experiential paradigms of collective interactions. A digital construction of the world implies the sharing of complex forms of knowledge that newspapers and news networks try to decipher. The dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion is related to the mission of educational institutions that ought to fuel a high degree of cultural participation. This is one the most pressing issues of our digitalized communities which Beck depicts in terms of communicative shifts: «In the process, key concepts such as 'participation', 'interest' and 'integration', which were assumed to be invariant within the perspective of social change, are changing» (Beck, 2016, 134). Participation, interest and integration can be considered as three relevant cornerstones of the educational endeavor, in light of the public 'bads' stemming from progress and risk publicness. Such a sociological target revolves around the education 'bads' highlighted by the media for the purpose of emphasizing the distance between excellent and not-so-excellent universities.

Beck's analysis of risk society is deeply embedded in the controversial dimension of the public sphere, whose construction increasingly depends on the intermingling of online and mainstream narrations. Jürgen Habermas cleverly analysed the pseudo-democratic nature of these systemic shifts within the infrastructure of the public sphere, insofar as «media-based communication consists mainly in a discourse initiated and conducted by elites» (Beck, 2016, 161). The sociological reflections developed in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2009) unveil the ambiguities of media narrations, as Lee McIntyre (2018) recently did by focusing on the concept of «post-truth». Habermas (2009) dwells on the role played by some professional categories within the communicative processes producing those «reflected public opinions» inspired by accredited actors: lobbyists, advocates, experts, scientists, «moral entrepreneurs», intellectuals.

The quality press and authoritative opinions ought to inspire the public discourse on some pressing issues, as happened for the recent COVID-19 pandemic. «Politics of visibility» probed by Beck can be analysed from the media perspective adopted by Habermas and his observation of communicative lobbies: «The democratic state finds itself confronted with demands from both sides. In addition to rules and regulations, the state has to provide public goods and services for its citizens as well as subsidies and public infrastructure for various functional subsystems, such as industry and the labour market, health care, traffic, energy, research and development, education, etc.» (Habermas, 2009, 163). In case of emergency, university professors and researchers are called upon to provide the audience with reliable answers, especially in the field of health, economics, environment and technology. Thus, the consequences of modernity highlighted by

Anthony Giddens entail the urgent need to investigate our functional dependence on technological devices. By pointing out that «public opinions exert influence», Habermas (2009) focuses on the media networks and news agencies that try to shape public opinion, including intellectual and academic experts possessing the fundamental skills needed in «the forum of the public sphere». Conversely, intellectuals engaged in the media strategies may produce «an elite discourse which is fueled by the contributions of various actors» (Habermas, 2009, 165).

The journalistic attempt to draw on the 'goods and bads' of higher education is likely to be inclined to avoid elite discourses and stimulate a clearer narration, in a time marked by an arguably informative synchronicity. Such a cognitive aspect has been probed by Bauman in reference to postmodern higher education: «The permanent and continuing technological revolution transforms the acquired know-how and learned habits from assets into a handicap, and sharply shortens the lifespan of useful skills, which often lose their utility and 'enabling power' in less time than it takes to acquire them and certify them through a university diploma» (Bauman, 2001, 131). In *The Individualized Society*, Bauman (2001) cleverly investigates the social effects of our technologic shifts, insofar as they entail new professional skills and occupations. Universities have to comply with the new cognitive endeavor of the convergent society (Jenkins) featuring «fragmentation and episodicity». This is why it is important to communicate clearly the complexity of science and research, without indulging in those personal cults that Weber (2004) stigmatized a few months prior to the end of World War I.

Academic communication should be privy to self-reference, hence it should pursue collectively-shared information. In reference to the media discourse on the future of knowledge, Bauman dwells on the social impact of such intellectual endeavor involving academic actors and their communicative skills: «Whoever enters the game of notoriety must play by its rules. And the rules do not privilege the intellectual pursuits which once made academics famous and the universities imperious; the relentless, but slow and circumspect search for truth or justice is ill fitted for being conducted under the public gaze, unlikely to attract, let alone to hold, public attention and most certainly not calculated for instant applause» (Bauman, 2001, 133). Twenty years after Bauman's statements, Italian universities are trying to find their place within the globalized public debate, coping with the taxonomic simplifications and the structural delays from the past.

2. University rankings and journalistic evidence

Italy hardly ever finds its place at the top of international university rankings, whose results are often framed as a journalistic topic. The annually Reports published by the most important academic rankings in

the world (Academic Ranking of World Universities, Times Higher Education World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings) follow several indicators of didactic and research performance, including highly-cited researchers and papers. These ratings shed light on Italian university slowness and delays, as the media emphasize – in a so-called comparison – whenever ratings are presented to the press. Hence follows the opportunity to focus on the Italian academic gap seen as a media topic, with emphasis on the delays of our universities in terms of functional efficiency and public financing.

The sociological analysis of the media rhetoric inspiring some journalistic reports emphasizes the narrative paradigms focused on the drawbacks of our universities, with particular regard to educational rights. Several articles point out that in Italy taxes are higher than in other European countries, loans and scholarships are rarely provided, male students graduate more than female and investments in higher education remain low. Moreover, the number of graduates is low and the dropout rate is high. This is what journalists, scholars and academics often denounce in newspapers and on television, referring not only to the international university ratings, but also to the Eurydice network, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Eurostat Reports. These documents confirm that the Italian academic gap is more than a mere journalistic issue and has to be considered as a consequence of structural and political delays.

Media analyses of Italian university delays fuel the public discourse on investments and innovations. The journalistic relevance of the academic gap concerns both the national context and international scenarios, as *la Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24 Ore* rankings highlight in reference to the gap between universities in the South and in the North of Italy. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have inverted this negative trend, since excellence may have a journalistic impact that makes it possible to gauge merit and research quality. Italy ranks fifth for COVID -19 research according to QS World University Rankings. This means that Italian research excellence can journalistically black out the chronic delays afflicting the higher education system at large, as periodically indicated both by national and international rankings and reports and newspapers.

The aforementioned journalistic dimension of the academic discourse can be observed in some recent articles highlighting Italian university delays. On March 23 and May 18, 2021, Milena Gabanelli and Francesco Tortora published two long reports in the *Corriere della Sera*, both focused on the juxtaposition between affluent and poor universities. The former is entitled *DAD, tasse (e tutto il resto): ecco perché l'università italiana è in coda all'Europa* (E-learning, fees – and everything else -: why the Italian university system comes last in Europe). The report draws attention to the high fees that Italian students have to cope with, despite the extension of the 'no tax area' (total

exemption) that the Italian government approved in 2020 through the so-called '*Decreto rilancio*': 165 million euros have been allocated in an effort to lower university taxes in conjunction with 40 million euros aimed at implementing the public supplementary fund for university scholarships (Lombardinilo, Canino, 2020).

Italian students pay high fees, as Gabanelli and Tortora (2021b) explain by quoting Eurydice Reports. Eurydice is a network of 40 national units based in 37 countries belonging to the Erasmus+ programme, whose task is to clarify how education systems are organized in Europe and how they work. According to the Eurydice Report titled *National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2020/2021*, Italian students pay on average 1,628 euros each year. In the first-degree courses, fees fluctuate between 200 euros and 2,721 euros depending on family income. In the second-degree courses fees can be as high as 2,906 euros. In the academic year 2018/2019, fees were paid by at least 72.5% of students who enrolled in the first-degree courses, whereas in the second-degree courses that rose to 74.6%. Others were exempted because ~~of~~ their family ISEE (Indicator of Equivalent Economic Situation) gave an income lower than 13,000 euros. In spite of the increase in funding for scholarships, Italy remains one of the few countries with the lowest availability of funds for scholarships. In the last three years an average of 7,000 students did not benefit from scholarship regardless of eligibility. A major distinguishing feature of Italy concerns the so-called 'honour loans'. In Germany 12% of students resort to public loans, while in the Netherlands and England the figures are 54% and 94% respectively. In Italy, students with scholarships are less than 1%.

One of the effects of the Italian situation is the low number of graduates and the high drop-out rate. According to Eurostat (*Europe 2020 education indicators in 2019*) only 27.6% of young Italians between 30 and 34 years of age have completed tertiary education. At the other end of the spectrum is Cyprus (58.8%), Lithuania (57.8%), Luxemburg (56.2%), Ireland (55.4%), Sweden (52.5%) and the Netherlands (51.4%). Only Romania ranks lower than Italy (25.8%). In almost all European countries female graduates are more than the male counterpart. The drop-out rate is highest in France (about 1,1 million in 2016), Italy (523,000), England (404,000), Poland (201,000), Spain (174,000) and Germany (165,000). These results show that in Italy investments are low and the distribution of earnings is unequal, as in 2019 Italian public expenditure on higher education was 0.4% of its GDP, far behind France (1.1%), Germany (1%), Spain (0.8%) and the EU average (0.9%) (Eurostat, 2020).

Gabanelli and Tortora's reports show that Italian low investments in higher education can be considered as a media topic featuring the criticalities of the academic sphere and the distribution of public funds. Sometimes international rankings shed light on our research excellence in some specific fields. A few days prior to the first lockdown (February

27, 2020), ANSA published an online Report titled *Italian universities top rankings. Sapienza ranks top in classical studies*, which claims that «the performance of Italian universities has improved in this year's newly released edition of the QS World University Rankings, which focuses on leading institutions by region and subject» (ANSA, 2019). In 2019 Italy came fourth in Europe – after Great Britain, Germany and France – and seventh in the world for the total number of universities included in the most-consulted global rankings worldwide.

Ben Sowter, responsible for research and analysis at QS, underlined that the Italian trend was «noteworthy», also in the light of the «fierce global competition» in the international academic world. Nonetheless, the positive result was reported as the OECD warned that Italy ranked eighth for the number of emigrants, including one-third who are university graduates. Sowter pointed out that «other countries are increasingly benefiting from this investment as Italy is struggling with a brain-drain phenomenon» (ANSA, 2019).

3. Eurostat, OECD and the Italian dropouts in higher education

Italian university backwardness in higher education expenditure and dropouts are emphasized not only by OECD's reports *Education at a Glance*, but also by the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). The news press released on *Europe 2020 education* indicators emphasizes that «the EU has reached its tertiary education target», namely 0.2 percentage points away from the target for early leavers. The Europe 2020 strategy's target is that at least 40% of 30 to 34-year-olds in the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) should have completed tertiary education by 2020 and by reaching 40.3% in 2019, the EU crossed that threshold. In 2002, when the Report was first published, the percentage was 22.5%. There has been a steady increase ever since and more significantly for women (from 23.7% in 2002 to 45.6% in 2019) compared to men (from 21.4% to 35.1%). In 2019, at least half of the population aged 30 to 34 had completed tertiary education in Cyprus (58.8%), Lithuania (57.8%), Luxembourg (56.2%), Ireland (55.4%), Sweden (52.5%) and the Netherlands (51.4%). Conversely, the lowest percentage belonged to Romania (25.8%) and Italy (27.6%).

Higher education institutions have to cope with the distancing restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the dawn of the second lockdown in Italy in September 2020, OECD presented the *Education at a Glance 2020* Report, highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the inadequacies and inequalities in education systems around the world. The Report provides comparable national statistics measuring the state of education worldwide. Although there is uncertainty about the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education expenditure, governments have to cope with the allocation of

public funds as tax incomes decline and healthcare and welfare costs rise.

This is a major concern, according to the Report, «as many of the professions that formed the backbone of economic and social life during the lockdown hinge on vocational qualifications» (OECD, 2020). According to the Report, young adults today are less likely to attain an upper secondary vocational path than their parents were and more likely to achieve an academic university degree. Unfortunately, earnings are also lower: adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification have similar earnings to those with an upper secondary general qualification, but they earn 34% less than tertiary-educated adults on average across OECD countries.

Governments should enhance their efforts to make vocational education and vocational qualifications more attractive to young people. «This should include enhancing work-based learning and strengthening ties with the private sector. Currently, only one third of upper secondary vocational students take part in combined school and work-based programmes on average across OECD countries» (OECD, 2020). Any decline in enrolment of international students for the next academic year will erode the core education services universities offer, but it will also indirectly undermine the financial support they provide to domestic students, as well as research and development activities.

OECD Reports highlight the functional complexity connected to the harmonization of higher education initiated by the Bologna Process. To the fore is the challenge of quality learning and teaching within the tertiary education system: «The Process also includes areas of broader societal relevance, such as the links between higher education, research and innovation; equitable participation and lifelong learning and links to higher education systems outside Europe» (Biggs, Tang 2014, 8). Such an ambitious structural improvement needs new and more effective evaluative strategies capable of assessing the efforts of higher education institutions from a qualitative perspective. Furthermore, internationalization implies communicative skills aimed at promoting a real comparative analysis without indulging in sterile taxonomic speculations (Cappa, 2019). This is why it is possible to mull over on the «controversies and negotiations» of Italian universities, by taking into account the growing importance of students' performance: «Thus, student performance indicators have created new areas of visibility in academic work and, consequently, new areas of attention, intervention and continuous improvement» (Romito, 2020, 512).

Communication and evaluation are the hallmarks of a wider reformist process involving universities at large. Academic resilience concerns both didactic and research activities, in spite of the new functional innovations that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth: «To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent learning environments so that digitalization expands and complements, but does not replace, student-teacher and student-student relationships» (OECD, 2021). Italian

universities make no exception especially in light of their comparative backwardness, oftentimes highlighted by the media.

Conclusions. Towards a new dimension in European higher education

The media attention to Italian academic criticalities sheds light on the informative impact of university rankings, whose taxonomic patterns feed the journalistic explanation of higher education challenges. The Italian academic gap concerning public expenditure, early dropouts and international mobility turn into a newsworthy topic also fuelled by the OECD and Eurostat reports that annually provide an insight into the comparative scenario of higher education. Hence follows the informative anxiety highlighting the gap between higher education institutions, as Gleick (2011, 403) points out: «another way to speak of the anxiety is in terms of the gap between information and knowledge. A barrage of data so often fails to tell us what we need to know».

University reformism has to be framed within the sociological debate, insofar as the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply changed the academic didactic strategies and, in the meantime, the public perception of risks within the digitalized public sphere (Turk, 2008). Universities need to provide students, staff and researchers with the skills needed in an ever-changing labour market – where the demand for highly skilled workforce – as well as navigating the green and digital transitions. In order to do so, cooperation across higher education institutions must be boosted (Willets, 2017; Palomba, 2008).

The challenge of inclusion and mobility is supported by the European Commission in order to stimulate systemic growth of the whole European higher education organization, as the recent initiative for a new dimension in European higher education shows. On 17 May 2021 the European Council adopted conclusions on the European Universities initiative, bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education. The initiative, launched by EU leaders in 2017, will be fully rolled out during the EU's 2021-2027 financing period, so as enable students, staff and researchers to move seamlessly between partner institutions to train, teach and do research.

With their conclusions, ministers encourage member states and the Commission «to make sure that the initiative remains central to building a European Education Area by 2025, inspiring the transformation of higher education in the EU and helping to achieve the ambitious vision of an innovative, globally competitive and attractive European Education Area and European Research Area» (EU Council, 2021). As a result, the Council invites member states to take advantage of all available funding possibilities, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility (the EU's post-crisis budgetary instrument), with the aim to develop «European Universities».

Ministers also recommend more cooperation between education authorities, higher education institutions and stakeholders. They therefore suggest exploring the need for, and viability of, joint European degrees within the alliance of «European Universities». A cautious approach to joint recruitment schemes for teachers and researchers should be promoted by «European Universities», aimed at effective «multidirectional» and «balanced» brain circulation across Europe, along with improved quality research and teaching careers, particularly for young researchers.

The Ministers also pointed out that the initiative is showing its first results as – according to a recent survey – members of the first 17 «European Universities» perceived that being in an alliance helped them to navigate the COVID-19 crisis and would allow them to recover faster by sharing resources and strengths. Such a political effort requires the full involvement of European higher education institutions which have to support a real functional harmonization and cope with the rapid transformation of the social sphere in the era of digital connectivity: «Thence the relevance of transversal competences and soft skills. But the need is ever stronger to form new generations for new and complex futures» (Moscati, 2021, 411).

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