

## Report from session 4. The Social Dimensions of Higher Education

Brieuc Delanghe, Fédération Des Etudiants Francophones (FEF).

Smarties and creativity.

This is how I could sum up the session we had on Social Dimensions on Higher Education this morning.

Our first speaker, Chris Brink from the Stellenbosch University, South Africa introduced three theses concerning Social Dimensions of Higher Education. In order to do that, Brink developed a critical viewpoint about the workings of universities today. Indeed, our Higher Education institutions are too much focused on answering the question: what are we good at? For example, how many of you explained at your colleagues during this very own convention how your university is relevant in the fields you are working in? Don't take me wrong, it is part of the game and it is essential in order to build professional relationships necessary to improve research and knowledge. But how many of you already asked the question: what are we good *for*? Answering this question is bracing an effective Social Dimension.

For his first thesis, Chris Brink discussed the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Politicians wanted to make a bunch of countries within the country, which every one of them having their own cultures and universities. To be honest, coming from a tiny little country called Belgium, this situation sounds very familiar to me. But think about a pack of smarties, what is the point about those sweets if you are sorting the greens with the greens, the blues with the blues and the yellows with the yellows? What is the purpose of fractioning multiculturality? What is the purpose of a university without diversity? Quality needs diversity.

But what is Quality? Is it excellence? Is it the criteria defining the university ranks? For Brink, excellence is not enough, because we are no talking anymore about thinking, but rather about outputs. But universities have responsibilities, or should I say must have responsiveness.

Think about the water supply crisis in Cape Town last year. Four universities are located in the city area, three of which having a water research institution. None of them made this crisis a priority in their research. None of them was responsive. Well responsibility requires responsiveness. It is not about what you are able to give, but rather about what society needs.

Our second speaker, John Storan from the University of East London, answered the following question: is the Social Dimension of the Bologna process lost in translation? Being a student in Linguistics and Literature, I was immediately triggered by this title. Translation is about bringing notions from one culture into another, without have per se prior knowledge in the target language. This is of course the case when we are talking about the Bologna process: how can we translate features of social dimension into policies and practices in Europe and beyond, with each country having its own specificity? Without any surprise, the process is very complex. It was in 2007 in London that a communique mentioned clearly for the first time what social dimension should be by stating the following: "Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society." Nearly 13 years later, we still haven't achieved this goal, nor at European level, nor at national level. Storan concludes by referring to the Paris communique, where ministers stated that the social dimension need to be strengthened, and the population of our universities should mirror the diversity we have on the Old Continent. In other words, the ivory tower of knowledge should be made accessible

to every community.

In order to have a better vision about the stakes of the process in the coming decade, 5 panelists explained us their vision of the process. Nino Schmidt, co-chair of the social dimension group was joined by Pietro Fochi, a social entrepreneur Youth delegate at the United Nations, Florian Rampelt, deputy Managing director of Hochschulforum Digitalisierung and Andrea Bühmrhamm, Vice-President of the university of Göttingen. Concerning the digitalisation as a tool of social dimension, Florian Rampelt discussed how digital technology should be better used as a complementary instrument and contribute to the accessibility of Higher Education. Unfortunately, even if digitalization is a reality nowadays, not much has been done at the moment. Bologna Process beyond 2020 should focus on digitalization.

Andrea Bühmrhamm discussed how inclusivity is a key element within a geographic area. For Bühmrhamm, inclusivity goes along with Transformative Network. The aim is to transform the central region in order to become a more diverse hub of an inclusive organization. In order to do that, a distinction between functions and capabilities is made, where capabilities are opportunities to function. The functioning of a university is crucial to make social inclusivity. And in a period where right-wing extremism is growing all over Europe, time is running more than ever before.

For Nino Schmidt, the priorities of the coming years can be summed up as following. The BFUG should focus on relationships between the various communities and the university stakeholders, where the university is not presented as a charitable donor, but as an actual partner. Therefore, it is crucial to improve bottom-up interactions and to focus on collaborative learning rather than competitive performance, as we tend to do nowadays. In other words, a university should become an area of development. Therefore, we should start speaking about social dimensions on the plural. We are not only talking about social justice, we are talking about lots of opportunities where we can act via social innovations. So, the agenda after 2020 is all about engaging communities.

Students will of course play a central role in this process, which is staring right now. To quote Pietro Fochi: "we want not to be the future, we want to be the present. We want to be at the table, helping to deconstruct the society in order to rebuild it with its real diversity." He emphasizes the fact that the STGs shouldn't be used as an advertisement for universities, but rather as a standard at the basement of the social fabric of every university. Therefore, it is crucial that we involve NGO's, established communities and social enterprises in the teaching curriculum. By doing so, a university will automatically open to the diverse world.

I heard lots of nice words this morning, and the future that is presented looks bright and full of promises. But it is fundamental that we focus more on the social dimension within the Bologna process, making it as important as the three key commitments. Therefore, I am asking you today to emphasize your speeches heard here in Bologna by actual deeds. It is your duty and your responsibility to break down the ivory tower of knowledge and to make our Higher Education institutions a safe and comfortable learning place for every smartie in this world, whether if they are green, blue or yellow.

I thank you for your attention.