

Interdisciplinarity and the Project of the European Higher Education Area

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For the last 15 years, remarkable developments in higher education in Europe have been influenced, when not simply triggered, by ambitious, sometimes continent-wide initiatives and projects. The most important of these has been the project of the European Higher Education Area, implemented through the Bologna Process. The project of the European Research Area is another important initiative worth mentioning in this context. During this time, Europe has in fact witnessed the emergence of a formal, although not static or strictly circumscribed, transnational policy framework for higher education, with particular, even unique features. In turn, this evolving policy framework had a real influence on national or institutional policies and practices in higher education, although to different extents in different countries or thematic areas.

Some of the most remarkable developments here include a complex set of new policies, concepts, institutions, tools and practices in the realm of student mobility (a matter that has been put at the very top of the European political agenda, as reflected in the current overall strategy of the EU, Europe 2020, thus transcending in terms of public relevance and public recognition the area of higher education proper); new approaches to quality assurance reflected in new concepts, tools, institutions, and practices. To give just one other example, and speaking specifically of graduate education, the very concept of graduate (and post-graduate) education is a contribution of the Bologna Process. Graduate education on continental Europe did not exist before and it is a result of the Bologna Process.

The list of examples in key aspects of higher education influenced or triggered by European initiatives and projects could continue. One question that could be asked, speaking of “key aspects,” is whether the European transnational policy framework and the new European space for policy dialogue in higher education has generated any significant developments or advancements with regard to interdisciplinarity.

The answer appears to be that any such influence has been rather limited in itself, and also when compared with other key areas or concepts. There is very little research on this topic (e.g., on the influence of the Bologna Process on developments with regard to interdisciplinarity) but to the extent it exists, it appears to support this conclusion.

Looking at what has been called “the policy of interdisciplinarity” at the European level, one could see that the importance of interdisciplinarity is occasionally recognized, or at least stated, in key documents representative for the European framework. The Berlin Ministerial Communiqué (2003), for example, is one of the most important moments in the series that

followed the original Bologna Declaration. In this Communiqué, the ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna countries “emphasise the importance of research and research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education more generally.” This is a rare mention, however. Moreover, more operational documents, initiatives, or regulations, that were supposed to help put in practice such general policy statements lack any reference to interdisciplinarity. Such is the case, surprisingly, with major documents like the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance adopted in 2005 (based on an initiative started exactly in Berlin in 2003), or the European qualifications frameworks for higher education (2005) and for lifelong learning (2008). In short, the European policy framework appears to include recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary, but a systematic effort to translate this generic principle into more concrete policy recommendations or initiatives appears to be lacking.

It is true, however, that scattered initiatives do exist, and they are occasionally important. For example, the inclusion of a separate principle regarding interdisciplinarity in the Salzburg principles for doctoral education, representing the attempt, with practical consequences, at developing a European model of PhD education (2005, revised in 2010). As another example, both policy and operational in nature, the European Research Council, one of the most important European Union institutions created directly under the auspices of the European Research Area project, decided to allocate a portion of its funds to support specifically interdisciplinary research.

We could characterize this situation as being largely a failure of the European policy framework in higher education (and research as well) to promote or stimulate important, innovative, or major new developments with regard to interdisciplinarity, the opposite of what has happened with other important key aspects of higher education and research. If this were true, we could ask what is the explanation for this failure, and what lessons we could learn from the perspective of a genuine concern for the promotion of interdisciplinarity in Europe. Some answers have been provided already in the existing literature, at least indirectly. Obstacles to promoting interdisciplinarity could be of a conceptual or, at other times, institutional nature (see, for example, Hark, 2007). In Europe, as in other parts of the world, the very concept of interdisciplinarity is a confused and confusing one, sometimes acting as a “magical sign,” easily acceptable to everybody, at least at the level of rhetoric even for proponents of completely opposed ideologies, for example, but so incoherent and lacking substance that it becomes an “empty signifier.” The supra-national, European space for dialogue in higher education does not appear to have contributed to bringing any conceptual clarification, again, as opposed to other conceptual areas. The “institutional” obstacle has to do with the continuing strength of the disciplinary approach, both in training and research, in particular publication. There are individual attempts to overcome this obstacle in Europe, with a series of European journals that are interdisciplinary by design or explicitly promote publishing interdisciplinary research. Also, there are PhD programs in many universities that have the term “interdisciplinary” in their very name.

A most general explanation however, which could be advanced at this point as a hypothesis, is that matters of interdisciplinarity in higher education, including promoting new and more

effective approaches, might not be possible to address properly through large projects, through trans-national initiatives like the Bologna Process involving ministries, parliaments, or pan-European institutions. Instead, this might require reflection and initiative by other actors, primarily higher education institutions themselves.

Works Cited

Hark, Sabine. (2007). Magical Sign. On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity. Graduate Journal of Social Science. Vol. 4. Special Issue 2