

There are four main actors of public policy making in the European Union, the territorial states, the regions, the institutes of the European Union, and the autonomous networks. In the past decade the role of autonomous networks has been increasing in the European Union. As a result, the European Union has become a "network society" using the term of Manuel Castells. According to Castells, "networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture" [Castells 1996].

We can distinguish between three types of networks:

- physical networks,
- institutional networks,
- socio-cultural networks.

Transportation networks – such as highways and railways – belong to physical networks; Institutional networks can be represented with hotel and retail chains or multinational firms. A classical and prominent example of socio-cultural networks are the European Universities.

Opinions diverge on the issue whether the University of Bologna or the University of Paris was the first European university – both founded in the 11th century. In Bologna it was the students who united in fraternities ("universitas" in Latin), whereas in Paris the teachers created an "universitas magistrorum". Whichever was the first European university, it is certain that the establishment of universities has become one of the most enduring cultural innovations in European history.

After the period of antiquity, cathedral schools and schools in monasteries were the first educational institutions. Their task was to educate the priests. They were managed by the church and these educational systems were autonomous from the political powers. These schools had laid the foundations for the establishment of the universities in the Middle Ages. These universities were independent of the dynastic states. They formed the "republic of the learned".

Both the University of Bologna and the University of Paris established a series of universities all over Europe. The university in Padua for example was established by students and teachers coming from Bologna. The University of Oxford was established by the faculty of Paris. The "republic of the learned" was connected together through extensive and intensive intellectual relationship of students and professors. They tried to obtain and provide knowledge to the benefit of their own or of their host country. After World War Two university education essentially increased. It was not the privilege of an exclusive elite anymore.

Universities in the reunited Europe form a network of higher education and research, a European educational and research space. They are linked together through extensive intellectual exchanges. Students and professors move intensively and frequently between universities of different countries, contributing to the creation of a European academic community.

The European universities represent a set of autonomous networks that play an increasingly important role in public policy making in the European Union as well. They have become influential actors besides the member states, regions and other institutions at the EU level. Universities represent socio-cultural, institutional and physical networks at the same time. First of all, universities are social and cultural networks, fulfilling their basic task, increasing knowledge via teaching and research. Second, universities, whose relationships are based on formal agreements and contracts, are institutional networks binding together different segments of cultural life. And third, universities are physical networks, consisting of constructions, lines and channels facilitating the transmission and transformation of information.

After World War Two, education and research increased both in scope and in general importance all over the world. The quality of higher education and research is a major factor influencing the international competitiveness of the European Union, both of the public institutions and private enterprises. Research and higher education are conducted in international networks, different places of higher learning and research centres are linked to each other through a net of cross-border relations, both formal and informal. Formal cooperation among universities has increased spectacularly. There are hundreds of agreements covering cooperation in various areas, including the exchange of students and professors, bilateral and multilateral research projects and joint publications. Informal and personal contacts among academics and students have been significantly increased due to the revolution in information technology and telecommunications that resulted in a growing number of international workshops, symposia and conferences.

The Bologna Declaration has opened a new period in the cooperation of European universities. It is well-known that the Bologna Process aims to establish a European Area of Higher Education by 2010. According to the Declaration, the following objectives have to be attained by 2010 in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate: Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree.
- Establishment of a system of credits – such as in the ECTS system – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by the receiving universities concerned.
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement. Students should receive easier access to study and training opportunities outside their home country. Teachers, researches and administrative staff should get recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, with European co-operation in quality assurance without prejudicing their statutory rights.

- Promotion of a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

In May 2001, 32 Education Ministers met in Prague to sign the Prague Declaration which added three key themes to the Bologna Process:

- lifelong learning;
- involving students;
- attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area to other parts of the world (including the aspect of transnational education).



In this special edition of our journal, representatives of various universities from all over the world share their ideas and concerns related to the topic of universities as autonomous networks. All contributors have one thing in common: in the past decades they have developed contacts with Corvinus University's Faculty of Economics in education and research.

The contributions deal with different core issues. Among others they are as follows:

- the role of the universities in public policy making in the EU;
- experiences with and the future impact of the Bologna process;
- the influence of higher education and research on the international economic competitiveness of Europe;
- universities as special types of autonomous networks;
- the main historical trends of the networks of universities;
- formal and informal cooperation in the 'republic of the learned';
- from exchange of experiences to institutionalised partnerships, the dynamics of cooperation;
- the increasing role of research in improving the quality of teaching;
- the impact of the information technology and telecommunications revolution on the types and forms of cooperation.

The special edition provides an overview of the most important results in the implementation of the Bologna principles and objectives. The main trends of the overview can be sum up as follows. European Universities have achieved their objectives mainly through

- modernizing courses and programs with the aim of developing competence and promoting student self-confidence in order for them to function better in their job or profession;
- linking research and development work;
- the development of innovative teaching practices that encourage independent learning among students;
- involving a higher number of junior and postdoctoral researches;
- ensuring the high-quality functioning of the library information technology system and better access to information resources;

- promoting inclusion in international research networks and international projects;
- increase student exchanges with the aim of making it possible for each student to spend one semester abroad by the end of the second level;
- establish a system of quality that will clearly define individual responsibilities and a timetable of activities on the level of the Universities.

REFERENCES

Castells, Manuel [1996]: *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.