

## **„IT IS TRUE THAT A SOCIETY THAT DOES NOT INVEST IN ITS EDUCATION IS VERY SHORT SIGHTED”**

**INTERVIEW WITH GEERT BOUCKAERT, PROFESSOR AT THE KU LEUVEN GOVERNANCE INSTITUTE, PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES**

***Jenei György:* As Professor of public management at KU Leuven and as former President of EGPA, the European Group for Public Administration, what is your opinion about the achievement of the European higher education in the world at your professional field? What is the main strength and what is the main weakness of the European higher education?**

*Geert Bouckaert:* The evolution of the capacity and the performance of the academic community in the European Educational Space in general, and in the field of administrative sciences, in the broad definition of politics/policies, management/governance has grown significantly. Before our field was national and isolated, now it is European, even international, and comparative.

There are many reasons for this very positive evolution. Let me mention some.

Obviously, Erasmus programmes, first for students, then also for academic staff, have been a great success. Even with some disequilibrium in the fluxes, this is predominantly due to the teaching languages, the numbers are really significantly. The European Commission has even increased the budget since it is one of the most tangible services offered by 'Europe' to its population. It is also such experience that young people never forget, it is one of the best ways to make sure that our students are also European citizens. Also, the exchange of staff is important. I have been teaching in many European universities, including in Budapest, first at Corvinus, then at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences. It always is a great experience, and many of my colleagues value this opportunity highly. It creates a community of public administration in Europe.

Then there is research. Major European programmes such as, first FP7, then H2020, and now the next generation of major calls, but also the COST-Actions which are financing research networks in Europe, have had an immense impact on the quality, the visibility, and the impact of this research in Europe. In combination with national money, it creates a strong model to finance research. Several of these programmes require that Europe is fully covered, and that all countries have a fair chance to be part of networks. In my experience, Central and Eastern Europe has benefitted from these programmes. Organisations like NISPAcee have contributed to researchers in CEE countries to increase their chances to participate, to organise, to be visible, to publish, to create a culture of conducting research, especially comparative research, where we can learn from one another. This also allowed to establish more professional doctoral schools, where most effective a social science logic was applied, and with much stronger PhD's, also in English.

As a consequence, European researchers in the field of public administration, became more numerous, intellectually stronger, and with a range of European voices which were dialoguing with e.g. American positions. Major American or Anglo-Saxon journals now publish a lot of European work, or research conducted by Europeans, or with European cases.

I think that most of the European public administration teaching is research driven, research conducted by teachers, and on national and European and comparative cases. That makes it very strong teaching. That makes strong students and strong civil servants.

However, we should not rest on our laurels. Research and teaching in public administration should move forward and not just follow realities, it should anticipate realities and challenges, and prepare the next generation. There are the Sustainable Development Goals. Our administrations should be made ready to realise these by 2030. It is our responsibility to contribute to this with our teaching and research. There is increased diversity in our societies, and cultures do matter. Here too, we should make sure that our research and our teaching is part of the solution, which means that we need to remain relevant. It means that we should have a strategic vision on what to research, and what to teach our students and our civil servants. Copy pasting the past, will not work anymore.

**JGY: How can the achievement of the European higher education increase significantly, and what kind of incentives are used by the KU Leuven?**

*GB:* In line with the previous answer, I think, in many European countries there is an awareness that 'brains' are our asset, and through teaching we should make sure we do not lose them and prepare them for the future. We should also attract actively clever students (brains) from other countries and regions.

One effort made by KU Leuven is to make sure that no students fail unnecessarily. It means that we created an infrastructure to keep as many good students on board as possible, by supporting them to succeed. It also means that gender issues are on the agenda to make sure that women participating in studies in all types of programmes.

A second issue is a matter of supply and demand of programmes. We are strongly encouraged, again in line with a European agenda, to be innovative and to generate new Advanced Master Programmes. That is the reason is why we are very active in being present in Erasmus Mundus Programmes. We are actively supported by the University to take the lead, or to join existing consortia. The last initiative is our multi-institutional program Erasmus Mundus Master of Science in Public Sector Innovation and eGovernance which is a program on digital governance offered by KU Leuven, the University of Munster, and the Technological University of Tallinn. Since big data and digitalization of the public sector are most likely one of the most important reform trends for the future public sector, we need expert who combine knowledge in public administration and public management on the one hand, and information systems and eGovernance on the other hand. We believe, that this new, very unique programme is delivering those experts.

A third issue is quality of teaching. Even if quantity is important since it feeds the budget, we need to focus on quality from a sustainable point of view. Ignoring this will affect the numbers in the long run, or even in the not-so-long run. Accreditation is an important vehicle. Leuven always was playing a frontline role in organizing accreditation organisations in the field of public administration. EAPAA, the European Association of Public Administration Accreditation, is important, even if we do not need it from a purely legal point of view. However, to use a European bench to look at programmes is essential. Our University pushes us to have these international logic, even for national programmes.

**JGY: It is a usual argument for the backwardness of the European institutions compared to the US is the underfinanced, worst material condition of research and education. Do you agree with this concept? What do you think, what is the best policy option to change it? To raise the tuition fee or to raise a direct budget support?**

*GB:* Let me say that my experience is not that Europe is behind in general and certainly not vis-à-vis the US, in general, but certainly in the field of public administration.

We increasingly see the phenomenon that US researchers and students want to come to Europe. We also see that in the US the students are covered with debts and loans. The European systems are more democratic and accessible, it is financially much more affordable. The cutback management of many American universities is affecting teaching and research negatively. Actually, many Americans have a positive perception of European Public Administration.

Money makes a difference. However, money does not always make a difference. I know institutions that are less wealthy, but much more innovative and creative, and therefore more attractive.

It is true that a society that does not invest in its education is very short sighted. If the consequence is that the country's intelligentsia is leaving, then this country will reduce its sustainability significantly. So, direct budget allocations are essential. We are lucky, in Belgium and Flanders, since budgets for research and teaching have actually been increased, even if there was cutback management by all levels of government. Increasing tuition fees is possible in some cases. It should not damage democratic access. It may be differentiated across levels of teaching or programmes. If fees are increased it should also be to the benefit of the students and the teaching, and not just for the purpose of an internal university tax to cover its fixed costs.

***JGY:* What kind of tools is used for the scientific leading of the University? What is the relationship between the will of the supporter and the academic leaders? Were there any clash between them and if it were how has been it solved? Are there scientific directions determined by the leaders, including rector or other academic leaders and how does it harmonize with the academic freedom?**

*GB:* The formal title of a university professor in Flanders is 'ZAP' which stands for 'Zelfstandig Academisch Personeel', which means 'Autonomous Academic Personnel'. We are responsible for this autonomy, and we are accountable for being 'autonomous'.

The university leadership is clearly leading the scientific activities of the professors. It does so in two ways, first, in a formal and procedural way, for example make sure that the management of the research teams happens in a professional way (e.g. personnel and accounting). Second, there are serious investments (coaching, advice and council) to make sure that research activities (such as applications) of professors are successful. It is excluded that this leadership would interfere with content.

The university has a considerable research budget which is allocated internally, in a transparent, and professional way. For that purpose there is a Research Council which consists of colleagues (internal, for major funding and also externals), which are supported by a secretariat. The listing of the proposals by the Research Council are formally approved by the Rector's Bureau without any intervention. All calls are open calls, without a specific theme. The university recently also wanted to support some content topics for research and reserved some additional funding for that, e.g. 'sustainable health systems'. Also these project, which have a small share of the budget, were allocated according to purely scientific criteria.

There have been some conflicts, mostly on ethical issues. Let me tell you about our famous case: we are a catholic university, when the late Rector Desomer, from the medical faculty, opposed the Pope and ultimately, he did not phrase it the way I'm doing now, he claimed the right

to conduct certain research at the medical faculty. There was another case, where a researcher helped destroy a genetically manipulated potatoes field. She was suspended because there was a legal action by the prosecutor. To my knowledge, we never had a case where the university leadership threatened, reduced, or opposed academic freedom. During the Second World War, the Nazis closed the university, since they obviously couldn't handle academic freedom.

At our university we also have several professors who are active in different political parties in a range of positions, majority and opposition. This has never resulted in claims to affect academic freedom.

A final potential line of conflict is between the commissioner of research, e.g. the public sector, and the researcher. In some cases there have been research results which did not please the commissioning party. This has been the case for the position of Flemish vs Francophone issues, or the evaluation of policy measures, e.g. recently on poverty figures, or on diversity policies. In some of those cases the solution exists to have different reportings for different audiences (commissioner, and international scientific). This is mostly the case for a more consulting type or action research type of research, not for other research.

**JGY: You know very well the academic world in CEE countries. What is the main difference between the academic life in these countries and the Western European ones, referring to the working habits, working culture? What do you think how, what kind of policies are able to decrease these imbalances?**

*GB:* As president of EGPA, I have started the dialogues between EGPA and NISPAcee to share experiences and ideas. It is my opinion that differences are not necessarily imbalances. In many cases, the differences are due to legal frameworks, or to language, or to path dependency, or to a disciplinary dominant culture. In fact, and I have said that publicly, the dialogue between East and West, even if this is still necessary, could be overruled by the imbalance between North and South.

It is also clear that in CEE countries there are several centres of excellence. If there are less of them, it is also because of financial reasons.

Shared research projects, research networks, and exchanges of researchers are essential. I also think that a shared platform of centres can make a huge difference. I think that the Leuven/Budapest connection, this bridging started in 1992, is already active for 25 years, this connection is a great example of how a shared long term strategy works. All words count here: shared, long term, strategic. We should continue to build these shared long term strategic visions together. In this way we will make progress together, in Europe.

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He is Professor at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute (Faculty of Social Sciences) of the KU Leuven, Belgium. From 1997 to 2012, he was the Director of its KU Leuven Public Governance Institute. His fields of research and teaching are Public Management, Public Sector reforms, Performance Management and Finance Management. He is also visiting Professor at the University of Potsdam (Germany). He is a member of many editorial boards, including PAR, JPART, and PPMR.

Geert Bouckaert received several international awards in recognition to his scientific contributions in Public Administration. Professor Bouckaert published many books and articles on Public Management and Public Administration Reforms.

Our birthday greetings to professor Geert Bouckaert are on the back cover.