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On: 15 May 2014, At: 09:32

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Lifelong Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tled20>

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Published online: 22 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: John Holford (2014) The lost honour of the Social Dimension: Bologna, exports and the idea of the university, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33:1, 7-25, DOI: [10.1080/02601370.2013.873210](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2013.873210)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2013.873210>

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The lost honour of the Social Dimension: Bologna, exports and the idea of the university

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In important respects, European ideas of the university have spread across the world. The principal ‘philosophical’ statements on which this idea of the university is based (Humboldt and Newman) assumed the people inhabiting universities—as students—would come from the youth of a social elite. The outward-facing elements of the Bologna Process, and the European Higher Education Area, aiming mainly at promoting higher education as an export business, focus on students of similar age and social status; its internal mobility dimensions have a similar effect within Europe. The social dimension of Bologna, in contrast, aimed to open higher education more across the social spectrum—though still assuming that the principal groups enrolling would be young. Bologna’s social dimension was strongly influenced by EU debates and policy approaches: while it arguably owed its origins to this fact, the social dimension’s limited success (and more recent displacement from policy, if not rhetoric) can be put down in large part to the difficulties in encapsulating complex and contested social priorities in internationally acceptable indicators, and to the EU’s valorisation of competitiveness in the Lisbon Process (particularly after the onset of recession in 2008).

Introduction

In an age when the word ‘knowledge’ is encountered more often adjectivally—in such terms as ‘knowledge economy’, ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge management’—than substantively, higher education is at the forefront of policy and political debate. ‘Never before in human history,’ Collini suggests, have universities been ‘so numerous and so important’ (2012, p. 3). A corollary of this spread has, of course, been universities’ looming larger and larger within public policy. If today we see increasing attempts to emphasise higher education as a ‘private good’ (Browne et al., 2010; cf. Collini, 2012; Holmwood, 2012), this is in part a reaction to how substantial a part universities now play in government budgets and economic, social and educational planning. This varies from country to country, of course, but to take the European Union as an example, roughly one-third of all 20–22 year olds are in tertiary education (Eurostat, 2012, p. 79),

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public expenditure on higher education forms about one-fifth of total public educational expenditure, and public expenditure per student in higher education approaches twice the level of primary education (Eurostat, 2012, pp. 88, 92).

In nearly all cases, in nearly all countries, what a university is—institutionally, if not intellectually—can be traced back to Europe. As Hayhoe points out (1999, p. 15), the nineteenth century ‘saw the diffusion of the European model of the university throughout much of the world, under conditions of imperialism and colonialism ...’. Institutions recognisably derived from European ideas of the university can be found not only in former European colonial empires—in the Americas, Australasia, Africa, India and Pakistan, the Middle East and South-East Asia—but also in countries which largely escaped direct colonisation, such as China, Japan, Turkey and Thailand, and in former Soviet republics of Central Asia. In short, the ‘western comprehensive university’ has provided a ‘remarkably successful’ and ‘almost universal’ model for higher education (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 3). Of course, to argue that universities the world over share common roots is by no means to claim that they are identical. Cunich (2012) has shown how what was perhaps the most colonial of universities—Hong Kong, at the height of empire—was shaped by many other influences, internal and external, global and local. It may, Collini suggests, be ‘the Asian model of the Americanized version of the European model, with schools of technology, medicine, and management to the fore, which most powerfully instantiates the university in the twenty-first century’ (Collini, 2012, p. 13). Nevertheless, a European idea of the university provides some kind of common root for most higher education institutions and systems worldwide.

The European idea of the university

What does this European idea of the university comprise? According to Boulton and Lucas (2008, p. 3), the remarkable success of the western comprehensive university lies in its combination of elements from two foundational contributions to higher education thinking: on the one hand, Newman’s emphasis on ‘the liberal education of an informed and critical citizen’; on the other, Humboldt’s stress on ‘the ethos of specialised research’. Wilhelm von Humboldt was (briefly) head of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior’s education section in the early nineteenth century. During

the short period from 1809 to 1810 he ... institute[d] a radical reform of the entire Prussian educational system from elementary and secondary school to the University ... based on the principle of free and universal education for all citizens. His idea of combining both teaching and research in one institution ... guided him in establishing the University of Berlin in 1810 (today’s Humboldt University) (Mueller-Vollmer, 2011)

According to Mueller-Vollmer, the structures Humboldt created for Berlin University ‘would become the model not only throughout Germany but also for the modern university in most Western countries’. Humboldt saw four elements as crucial to the university:

- Freedom of teaching and learning (*Lehr- und Lernfreiheit*). ... Humboldt was a liberal in the traditional sense. He believed in individual freedom, and therefore argued that students had as much right to choose their instructors and subjects as professors had to decide what and how they teach. This implied a radical break with any form of set curriculum.
- The unity of teaching and research (*Einheit von Lehre und Forschung*). For Humboldt ... learning is a collaborative enterprise, in which ‘the professors are not there for the students, but rather both are there for science (and scholarship) (Humboldt, 1809/1990, p. 274).
- The unity of science and scholarship (*Einheit der Wissenschaft*). For Humboldt ... there was no fundamental distinction in principle between the natural sciences and the humanities, because the concept of *Wissenschaft* applies to both. ...
- The primacy of ‘pure’ science (*Bildung durch Wissenschaft*) over specialised professional training (*Ausbildung, Spezialschulmodell*). Humboldt ... claim[ed] to understand science and scholarship in the modern sense, as processes of inquiry—‘not a finished thing to be found, but something unfinished and perpetually sought after,’ as he put it—not the discovery and repetition of things to be learned from textbooks, but an approach to learning, an attitude of mind, a skill and a capacity to think rather than specialised knowledge (Ash, 2008, pp. 41–42, quoting Humboldt, 1809/1990, p. 274).

If Humboldt was one of Prussia’s great public intellectuals at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, John Henry Newman played a similar role in mid-nineteenth century England. An Oxford theologian and cleric, he was a moving force in the Anglo-Catholic ‘Oxford Movement’ in the 1830s, but joined the Roman Catholic church in 1845 (an act which then involved resigning his Oxford post); he founded the Birmingham oratory in 1848, and eventually became a cardinal (1879). (More recently, he was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010—the first step in the Catholic church’s process towards recognising him as a saint.) In 1851, after the Irish Catholic bishops refused to support the formation of new non-denominational university colleges, Rome encouraged them to set up a Catholic university. Newman became its first president, and in 1852 delivered five lectures ‘on the Scope and Nature of University Education’; in due course, these formed the core of his book, *The Idea of a University*.

Newman saw the purpose of a university in teaching, rather than research. A university, he argued:

is a place of *teaching universal knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science. (Newman, 1907, p. ix; emphasis in original)

There were, he believed, ‘other institutions far more suited to act as instruments of stimulating philosophical inquiry, and extending the boundaries of our knowledge, than a University’. These were the ‘sort of institution, which primarily contemplates Science itself; and not students’—as examples he mentioned ‘the literary and scientific “Academies,” ... so celebrated in Italy and France’ or in Britain the Royal Society and the ‘Royal Academy for the Fine Arts’ (Newman, 1907, p. xii).

Often seen as conflicting, Boulton and Lucas argue that Humboldt and Newman should, in fact, be seen as ‘complementary’ elements fundamental to the ‘western comprehensive university’. Universities modelled on their ideas have been able to combine a ‘highly interactive social setting’ with ‘operational freedom’; this has stimulated creativity, making them not only one of the great entrepreneurial agencies of the modern world but fundamental to making that world possible (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 3).

The suggestion that Humboldt and Newman adequately encapsulate a ‘European idea of the university’ is, of course, at best a simplification. As accounts of what universities actually look—or looked—like, they show their age. The concentration on them has done an amount of violence to other important European traditions. To take two examples: in France, higher education after the Revolution was two-tiered: universities, ‘largely open to every baccalauréat-holder who wishes to apply’, now offer a wide curriculum—though they originally focused on training professionals and civil servants. In contrast, however, the *grandes écoles* recruited through ‘highly restrictive competitive tests’ (Bienaymé, 1991, p. 657). They generated an ‘intensely competitive and meritocratic’ system, ‘tempered as elsewhere by privileged middle-class access to the secondary lycées, by the ‘cultural capital’ of the bourgeois family, and by the special tutoring required to get into the *grandes écoles*’ (Perkin, 1991, p. 186). In contrast, Scotland’s universities—historically, apart from St Andrew’s, based in large towns—

were easily accessible to part-time students, who were numerous, and their curriculum, based on professorial lectures, could be taken selectively and flexibly—until the 1880s, the majority of students did not formally graduate. The universities’ urban character made them socially diverse. Fees were relatively low, there was no residential requirement, the university ethos stressed frugality and hard work rather than aristocratic dissipation, and bursaries for poorer students were widely available. (Anderson, 1995, p. 24)

Drawing on a more accessible system of schooling than England’s, Scottish universities thus acquired a “popular character” much celebrated by patriots’ (Anderson, 1995, p. 24)—and very different from the Oxonian ideal which Newman wished on Catholic Ireland.

The use of Newman and Humboldt to provide ideal types of ‘the university’ also ignores major theoretical contributions from North America (cf. Flexner, 1930; Kerr, 1995; Veblen, 1918); it has, however, now achieved considerable currency, particularly in debates about the purpose of universities. Two recent contributions (Boulton & Lucas, 2008; Collini, 2012) use the question *What are*

Universities for? as their titles. Answering it, they treat Newman and Humboldt as classic—even foundational: their ideas ‘have dominated western thinking about the functions of universities’ (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 3). Humboldt’s model for the University of Berlin ‘set the standards by which provision and achievement elsewhere were measured’ for most of the nineteenth century: universities ‘came to be seen not simply as the nurseries of future clerical or administrative functionaries, but as centres of “the higher learning”’ (Collini, 2012, p. 23). Newman’s *Idea of a University* (1907, but first delivered as lectures in 1852, and in circulation under various titles from 1854: cf. Turner, 1996, p. xiii) ‘has remained a constant point of reference’ in debates about the purpose of higher education ‘right up to the present’ (Collini, p. 40).

Humboldt and Newman can indeed be useful; they can certainly provoke heated and (sometimes) illuminating debates about the purpose of universities. But what matters for present purposes is that their ideas—or, more accurately, highly simplified versions of their ideas—remain part of the common language of debate about purpose in higher education. As Ash points out:

Public debate on higher education reform today is dominated by a variety of competing, highly simplified views about what higher education institutions, particularly universities, are or should become. To a surprising extent, these views are based upon even more highly simplified characterisations of university history. The claims in question ... are accepted ... not only by politicians or university rectors and presidents seeking convenient rhetorical formulae for ... important occasions, but also by many specialists in higher education policy research or in social studies of higher education. (Ash, 2006, p. 245)

One of these claims (or ‘clichés’) is what Ash calls ‘The Humboldt Myth’—he explains why ‘it remains so powerful’ despite the fact that it bears ‘very little relation to realities on the ground, especially in German-speaking Europe’ (Ash, 2006, p. 245). Similarly, while denying that *The Idea of a University* ‘at all closely’ describes universities today, or provides ‘arguments which are likely to be readily effective in their defence’, Collini argues that it retains some ‘power to stir us into recognition of something which we cannot quite name’ (Collini, 2012, pp. 59–60). Higher education policy-makers and university leaders seldom specialise in the history of universities, but they appreciate the need for appropriate allusion. ‘Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist’, Keynes (1936, p. 383) famously wrote: in higher education, Humboldt and Newman, clearly defunct, play some similarly defining role.

We can see this in the contribution of two—particularly reflective and informed—senior university leaders.¹ ‘On the one hand,’ Boulton and Lucas argue, universities

train students to go out into the world with both general and specific skills necessary to the wellbeing of society; they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in

realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit. (2008, p. 3)

Their first sentence is—to borrow Keynes’s word—‘practical’ Newman; their second ‘practical’ Humboldt. What is missing is any notion that the university should have a challenging—as against a functional—social role. Although Boulton and Lucas counsel that universities ‘must be wary of simply accepting the premises of that [i.e. public] policy as a whole truth’ and ‘should not be rushed by a combination of inducements, urgency and regulation into accepting an identity proffered them from their ambient world’, but should rather ‘engage’ with ‘their ambient world ... to define a commonly accepted purpose’ (p. 7), their suggestions as to what this purpose might be are defensive.

This, of course, reflects themes which lie at the centre of Newman and Humboldt. As Collini points out (2012, p. 43), what has led to Newman’s influence is his ‘defence of the ideal of “a liberal education”’, combined with the ‘seductive charm’ of his prose:

Over and over again, Newman’s silky prose characterises the effect of a liberal education not in terms of what students learn or even of the acquisition of any particular set of skills, but in the relationship in which they come to stand to their knowledge, the manner in which they dispose of it, the perspective they have on the place of their knowledge in a wider map of human understanding. ... In the structure of Newman’s argument, the opposite of being educated is not so much being ignorant as being one-sided, in the grip of partial knowledge, over-zealous and lacking in that calm meditateness which is the mark of philosophic cultivation. (Collini, 2012, pp. 49–50)

Despite his assertion that the aim of the university is ‘intellectual, not moral’ (Newman, 1907, p. ix), liberal education, in Newman’s university, happens in a ‘community, a cross between a Greek *polis*, an aristocratic club, a philosophical seminar, and a cultivated salon’; its aim is ‘the shaping of the whole person, the early stages of a life-long course in self-cultivation and character-formation’ (Collini, 2012, p. 47). Thus Newman himself:

Let it be clearly understood, I repeat it, that I am not taking into account moral or religious considerations; I am but saying that that youthful community will constitute a whole, it will embody a specific idea, it will represent a doctrine, it will administer a code of conduct, and it will furnish principles of thought and action. It will give birth to a living teaching, which in course of time will take the shape of a self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genius loci*, as it is sometimes called; which haunts the home where it has been born, and which imbues and forms, more or less, and one by one, every individual who is successively brought under its shadow. ... [R]eal teaching ... tends towards cultivation of the intellect; it at least recognizes that knowledge is something more than a sort of passive reception of scraps and

details; it ... never will issue from the most strenuous efforts of a set of teachers, with no mutual sympathies and no inter-communion, of a set of examiners with no opinions which they dare profess, and with no common principles, who are teaching or questioning a set of youths who do not know them, and do not know each other, on a large number of subjects, different in kind, and connected by no wide philosophy, three times a week, or three times a year, or once in three years, in chill lecture-rooms or on a pompous anniversary. (Newman, 1907, pp. 147–148)

The key features of Humboldt, therefore, are freedom of scientific research and autonomy in teaching; for Newman, students, and their liberal education and character formation, are at the heart of the idea of the university. Newman was trying, as Collini puts it, ‘to scare off the proponents of utility’ (2012, p. 48); Humboldt thought professional training inappropriate. What both shared, however, was an assumption that universities were for an elite, and one not so much intellectual as social in character: as Ash remarks, Humboldt’s ideals were ‘created for a university at which at most 1% of a given age group studied’ (2006, p. 248). Neither questioned that university staff and students should be male. And they also—a fact seldom thought worthy of comment even today—assumed that university students would be young: the university was, in an important sense a ‘finishing school’, intellectual and cultural.

To summarise the argument so far, a European idea of the university lies behind ideas of the university across most of the world; but the—still resonant—European ‘foundational statements’ about the nature and purpose of the university assumed that its function was to serve the (male) youth of social elites.²

Bologna: a European idea(l) for global higher education

The importance today of the European ‘idea of the university’ is not just accidental, nor even a mere by-product of American, or even Asian, succession to European hegemony. ‘Europe’—the European Union, several of its member states, and many of its universities—is now deliberately promoting a European model of higher education across the world. British universities and the UK government are perhaps most prominent in activities such as recruiting students from outside Europe, and opening branch campuses abroad (Brooks & Waters, 2011). The UK government has estimated that in 2011/12, ‘overseas students studying at higher education institutions in the UK paid £3.9bn in tuition fees (net of scholarships) and £6.3 bn in living expenses’ (BIS, 2013, p. 32), and there are—so the government argues—‘few sectors of the UK economy with the capacity to grow and generate export earnings as impressive as education’ (BIS, 2013, p. 3).³ But other European countries are also seeking

to increase their share of international students. France is considering a change to legislation which would allow France’s public universities to offer courses in foreign languages. The aim is to make French universities more attractive to foreign students (and complements another legal change from last year which lifted restrictions on

foreign students' right to work in France). Similarly, the Netherlands has over 1500 international study programmes available, 75% of which are taught entirely in English, and Germany are becoming increasingly competitive by offering courses in English and providing job opportunities for international graduates. (BIS, 2013, p. 32)

In explaining how it supports British higher education institutions' international growth, a recent UK government publication refers to its engagement in 'multilateral agreements, networks and initiatives to promote UK qualifications and to improve mutual recognition internationally'; including the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Convention (under UNESCO and Council of Europe auspices) on the recognition of higher education qualifications in the European region, as well as to 'bilateral discussions' with various countries (BIS, 2013, p. 45).

The major European-level initiative in this area is the Bologna Process—now 'rebranded' the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Bologna's concrete aims, according to the original Declaration (signed in 1999 by European ministers of education), included achieving adoption, across Europe, of 'a system of easily readable and comparable degrees', incorporating 'two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate', based on a system of credits. These credits were seen as crucial in improving student mobility across Europe; they would also make staff mobility easier. 'Comparable criteria and methodologies' for quality assurance were also central, along with a rather vague call to promote 'the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development', institutional cooperation and integrated study and research (European Ministers of Education, 1999).

From the outset, the Bologna Process emphasised the importance of establishing a 'European area of higher education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and the Continent's overall development'. It was explicitly framed in terms of European integration: 'the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe' (European Ministers of Education, 1999). An important element of this was mobility of students within Europe (promoted, for instance, by the EU's successive Erasmus programmes). However, this integration was not simply inward-looking:

We must in particular look at the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education. The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions. (European Ministers of Education, 1999)

In the years since, this external face of Bologna has become increasingly prominent. 'At its inception,' the EHEA website *now* implies, the central purpose of the Bologna Process was 'to stre[n]gthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European higher education' (if so, its significance was carefully concealed). As Robertson (2009) has argued, the Bologna Process and the EHEA should be seen as 'ambitious global strategies' (p. 77); they are not simply a mechanism to achieve uniformity within Europe, but a model designed

to transform higher education globally in the European image and the European interest.

However, a key—and until quite recently often overlooked—feature of the global market in higher education is its social nature: by and large, it attracts social elites (or those aspiring to upward social mobility); it attracts young people. International education ‘enables high-aspiring middle-class students to have a “second-chance” at success overseas’ (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 132); international student mobility has been ‘structured ... by social class’ (Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012, p. 119). As Findlay et al. point out, research suggests that student mobility can be interpreted as the outcome of ‘individual decisions reflecting personal characteristics such as gender, socio-economic background, language competence and personality’. However, these may be ‘reinforced by propitious circumstances such as speaking a foreign language or, conversely, be negatively affected by inhibiting effects such as coming from a less privileged social background’; ‘selectivity by social background’, typically ‘exaggerated for students seeking to study away from their parental home’, is likely to be further ‘magnified’ among students studying internationally (Findlay et al., 2012, p. 119).

Bologna’s model of mobility also, of course, encourages and supports spatial mobility in higher education within Europe. Indeed, this is one of its key contributions to the European project. However, as Powell and Finger argue, it ignores ‘the social selectivity of spatial mobility’ (2013, p. 270). In the Bologna declarations and communiqués (1998–2012), they found the ‘dimensions, benefits and effects of spatial mobility’ have been largely ‘taken for granted’, while ‘both its social selectivity and its effects on social mobility’ have been ‘understated’ (Powell & Finger, 2013, p. 270). In sum, the Bologna Process, insofar as it is an exercise in the marketing of European higher education outside Europe, in attracting students from abroad to European universities, and in encouraging mobility for students within Europe, seems unlikely to challenge the socially elitist nature of the European university.

The social dimension: origins and evolution 2000–2007

As the Bologna Process evolved, however, it sprouted a ‘social dimension’. This began in 2001, when the Prague *Communiqué* ‘supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility (regulations etc.) [*sic*]’ and recognised that

Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life. (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2001)

It also called for the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to arrange seminars on the social dimension, and on lifelong learning (European Ministers of Higher

Education, 2001). Although the nature of this social dimension remained ill-defined, the next meeting of ministers in Berlin (2003)

reaffirm[ed] the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm[ed] their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2003)

This represented an important shift for the Bologna Process. For the first time, it acknowledged that higher education had responsibilities of a broader public kind, and pointed to a conceptualisation not in terms of making higher education more efficient, or more European, but of improving its 'social characteristics'. The initial association with lifelong learning suggested, perhaps, some sense that universities should be looking outward, beyond the 'traditional', post-school, student group.

The introduction of a 'social dimension', and the language in which it was expressed, clearly followed the European Union's growing concern, in the early years of the century, with social inclusion and cohesion. These were the days of the Lisbon European Council, which adopted the '**new strategic goal** for the next decade: *to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*' (Council of the European Union, 2000, §5; emphases in original); and although in retrospect the Lisbon Process appears to have given emphasis to 'competitiveness' rather than 'cohesion', the Council called for 'mainstream[ing] of inclusion' in Member States' education and training policies, and for 'priority actions addressed to specific target groups (for example minority groups, children, the elderly and the disabled)' (§33). The Commission's Report on the *Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems* (CEC, 2001) reported that member states 'stress[ed] the role which the education systems must play in developing social cohesion, and in attracting people with difficulties or from minorities into learning so that they can be enabled to play their full part in society' (p. 4). It called on 'all parts' of education systems 'to become more democratic and more welcoming in their attitude to learners' but suggested this applied 'particularly [to] higher education' (p. 7). And it recommended that

if education is to fulfil its role of providing all individuals with an equitable entry point into society, it needs to do more than just attract and retain the interest of people from all backgrounds (and increasingly at all ages) to the learning process. It needs first to ensure that its content is adapted to the needs of the various groups involved; and secondly, that the picture of society which it conveys, through its curricula, through its teaching materials, is that which society itself would wish—for example, in areas such as equal opportunities, or the fight against racism or discrimination. (p. 8)

That Bologna's social dimension was a child of its time should not, however, blind us to its significance. The Bologna Process was moving, as it turned out quite rapidly, toward a system of shared frameworks in higher education policy and administration. This was to lead to the formation of a EHEA (in due course officially 'launched' in March 2010). Within this framework, and probably as a result of the Bologna Process's almost symbiotic relationship with the European Commission, a social dimension seemed firmly entrenched.

How did the Bologna's social dimension evolve? As a review of the first decade of the Bologna Process noted, it 'remained without a systematic approach and clear definitions of its means and goals for a long time' (Westerheijden et al., n.d., p. 52). We have seen that the term was introduced into Bologna at the same time as lifelong learning, and in the early years the two seem often to have been quite closely coupled, at least in the language of ministerial *communiqués*. By 2005, however, this association had receded; the Bergen *communiqué* reaffirmed the commitment to the social dimension, though in rather general terms, and made no link to lifelong learning:

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. We therefore renew our commitment to making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2005)

The London *communiqué* of 2007 reaffirmed the social dimension: higher education 'should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, [and] reducing inequalities'; policies should 'maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society' (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2007, p. 5). However, it also gave the dimension specific meaning—and this focused almost exclusively on the social composition of the student body:

We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity. (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2007, p. 5)

This was, of course, an important aim: the socially exclusionary character of many universities and higher education is well established. However, it fell well short of any radical reconceptualisation of the nature of higher education and its institutions.

The social dimension: measurement and stagnation

That students should ‘reflect the diversity of our populations’ is, of course, itself an aim susceptible to diverse interpretations. ‘The devil,’ it is often said, ‘is in the detail’; in early twenty-first century European policy-making, the devil has been in the measurement. The Lisbon Process had spread the apparatus of measurement (indicators, benchmarking, and so forth) across all areas of EU policy-making; this applied to education no less than other areas (cf. Hingel, 2001; Holford, 2008). The Bologna Process, supported by the European Commission, and working groups populated by civil servants and heads of higher education institutions increasingly managed by ‘key performance indicators’, ‘targets’ and the like, followed suit. The 2005 *communiqué* began this process by asking for the development of ‘comparable data’ on ‘the social and economic situation of students in participating countries as a basis for future stocktaking’—which would ‘have to take into account the social dimension’ (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2005, p. 5). By 2007 ‘the need to improve the availability of data on both mobility and the social dimension across all the countries participating in the Bologna Process’ had become a ‘priority’, and Eurostat and Eurostudent were asked ‘to develop comparable and reliable indicators and data to measure progress towards the overall objective for the social dimension ... in all Bologna countries.’ (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2007, p. 6)

In 2007, therefore, Bologna had a skeletal definition of the social dimension, and was beginning to flesh this out—but principally through identifying what could, and what could not, be measured. As in other cases (Holford, 2008), this presented profound problems, both technical and political. On the technical side, the various sources of data were based on different timescales, and had varying geographical coverage and relevance to the social dimension of higher education (Eurostat & Eurostudent.eu, 2009, p. 37). A case in point was ‘under-represented societal groups’: definitions varied from country to country, and the number of such groups identified ranged from more than five (in respect of categories for monitoring student participation in Austria, Georgia, Germany and the UK) to just one (France, Luxembourg and Sweden ‘consider[ed] as potential under-represented groups only students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds’) (Eurydice, 2010, p. 28). Of course, the technical was often linked to the political. As Eurydice pointed out:

The differences in approach to identifying under-represented groups illustrate that this can be a highly sensitive area, making pan-European comparison *impossible* in practice. For example, interpretations of the concept of ethnicity vary greatly both between and even within countries, and the term ‘ethnic group’ is therefore not fixed in the same way as, for example, gender. Instead, the concept is historically contingent and national perceptions, categories and approaches may be formed in relation to, for example, changes to national territories after the two world wars, colonial and post-colonial history or recent conflicts. It is therefore no surprise to find that a considerable number of countries in Europe make no attempt to identify the ethnic status of students (and indeed, this

may be prohibited by national data protection legislation) while other countries consider such a categorisation as a necessary tool to understand societal development. Sensitivities and potential risks of stigmatising effects can also be encountered in relation to other under-represented groups—including people with disabilities. (Eurydice, 2010, pp. 28–29; emphasis added)

The approach taken to attempt to solve the problems of indicators was in the spirit of the Open Method of Coordination. BFUG appointed a ‘special working group’ comprising ‘representatives of ten countries and eight other organisations’⁴ (Eurostat & Eurostudent.eu, 2009, p. 37). The group reviewed ‘existing data ... and evaluated data gaps’ relating to the social dimension. In due course, they selected indicators (for the 2009 report) based mainly on

the[ir] relevance ... for analytical purposes, the effective availability of data (including the possibilities of differentiation) and the reliability of data collected. After consultation with various institutions providing quantitative and qualitative data on higher education, Eurostat and Eurostudent proposed a list of indicators that was discussed and then agreed upon within the Bologna Follow-Up Group working group on data collection. (Eurostat & Eurostudent.eu, 2009, p. 37)⁵

But the Eurydice report’s language was telling: ‘differences in [national governments’] approach to identifying under-represented groups illustrate that this can be a highly sensitive area, making pan-European comparison impossible in practice’ (Eurydice, 2010, p. 28). The word ‘impossible’ did not suggest a way forward—even a difficult one. Using indicators in a research report—surrounded with methodological caveats and explanatory footnotes—is a very different matter from securing agreement for indicators which will be used to compare national performance on a public stage. This strategy therefore proved—at best—a very qualified success, and the sheer complexities of definition—and monitoring—of the social dimension seem to have contributed to a reduction in its prominence in the Bologna discussions.

The ministerial *communiqués* of 2010 and 2012 therefore contain fine words of continuing commitment, but little by way of specific proposals. In 2010, the ministers ‘underline[d] the role the higher education institutions play in fostering peaceful democratic societies and strengthening social cohesion’ (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2010, §8), and promised to ‘increase our efforts on the social dimension in order to provide equal opportunities to quality education, paying particular attention to underrepresented groups’ (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2010, §11). Two years later, they announced they would ‘step up ... efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning’ (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2012, pp. 1–2). When it came to practical proposals, however, the 2012 *communiqué* is testament to how little they had to offer: ‘We encourage the use of peer learning on the social dimension and aim to

monitor progress in this area' (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2012, p. 2).

We have seen that the EU's foregrounding of social inclusion around the turn of the century gave impetus to the early development of Bologna's social dimension; in much the same way, the EU's emphasis on indicators, measurements and benchmarks, and the 'working group' culture of its Open Method of Coordination, helped shape how Bologna operated. By the same token, however, external events, and the shifting emphases of EU policy, have played their role. From late 2007, the world economy encountered a succession of crises; these quickly led to recession across Europe. From early 2010, the crisis took on a particularly sharp character within the Eurozone. In this context, the stress in EU social and employment policies on 'flexicurity' became even more pronounced. This decentring (or, more charitably, reconfiguring) of social inclusion within EU policy thinking, which had begun in the mid-1990s in employment policy involved transferring the 'burden of labour market adjustments ... to the individual employee or welfare recipient via activation policies'; attention 'shifted from the provision of social protection to the promotion of employment' (Salais, Rogowski, & Whiteside, 2011, p. 1) Flexicurity was 'born as an alternative concept to "[labour market] flexibility only"' (Auer & Gazier, 2011, p. 34), responding to a perceived need for (or at any rate, the actual emergence of) more flexible labour markets—without departing too far from established EU traditions of welfare and social dialogue. It is, as (Auer & Gazier, 2011, p. 27) point out, a 'vague' concept: 'It suggests something that is always desirable (achieving a flexible and secure state of the economy and the society) without indicating how to deal with concrete problems that need to be addressed.' (Auer & Gazier, 2011, p. 27) The 'common principles' of flexicurity arrangements 'comprise new contractual arrangements, active labour market policies, life long [*sic*] learning and a modern social protection system (which itself is composed of an array of policies)', preferably arrived at through 'social dialogue between the social partners' (Auer & Gazier, 2011, p. 35). As the European Commission argued:

high unemployment rates ... discourage workers and lead to premature withdrawal from the labour market and to social exclusion. Flexicurity policies are the best instrument to modernise labour markets: they must be revisited and adapted to the post-crisis context, in order to accelerate the pace of reform, reduce labour market segmentation, support gender equality and make transitions pay, (CEC, 2010, p. 2)

Although the specific forms in which this policy direction took effect has varied significantly by country (and, in particular, according to the nature of their welfare regimes and labour market structures), the broad direction has been given by the idea of 'modernising' labour markets around the principle of flexicurity. As Powell, Bernhard and Graf (2012) have argued, at 'the core of the European model [of skill formation] lies the notion of individual competence or capability ... paired with the flexibility to adapt to the oft-noted knowledge society and changing labor market conditions and concrete demands' (Powell et al., 2012, p. 248).

The need for large and rapid reductions in public spending has increasingly dominated member states' governments, affecting virtually all policy areas: strategies for social inclusion requiring support from public expenditure have been at a discount. Arguably, the trend to flexicurity can be seen through this lens: in the absence of affordable policies for social inclusion, mechanisms have been sought to encourage (and if necessary coerce) the excluded into employment. It can be little surprise that, in this environment, the social dimension slipped down the Bologna agenda. In tune with the narrowing of EU targets under the 'Europe 2020' strategy—focusing more on those seen as essential to competitiveness (Holford & Mleczo, 2013)—policy-making activity for the social dimension of Bologna has receded. The BFUG has 'streamlined' its work structures for the 2012–2015 period, reducing the number of working groups. Policy activity on the social dimension has been combined with lifelong learning into a single working group. If, as the EHEA website insists, this 'allow[s] a close interaction between and better implementation of the interlinked policy issues',⁶ the result may be a stronger incorporation of lifelong learning into a social perspective on higher education; a pessimist might anticipate a stronger alignment between social priorities and the demands of competitiveness—paralleling the decline of discourses of citizenship and equity in the lifelong learning field.

In effect, therefore, the Bologna Process developed its 'social dimension' at just the time when the nature of 'social Europe' was being profoundly rethought, and in the direction of shifting responsibility onto the individual citizen—*qua* employee, welfare recipient or student. This of course sat easily with the Bologna Declaration's original target of 'a system of easily readable and comparable degrees ... to promote European citizens['] employability' (European Ministers of Education, 1999)—probably its principal focus during its first decade. The emphasis on individual responsibility also fitted Bologna's conception of mobility 'as spatial flexibility to move horizontally between cultural spaces rather than vertically in terms of social advance or socioeconomic status differences within stratified societies' (Powell et al., 2012, p. 247).

Conclusion

Recent research has shown that social cohesion and inclusion have been more often discussed in the EU's Copenhagen process (for Vocational Education and Training) than under Bologna, where 'fostering a social dimension remained rather abstract' (Powell et al., 2012, p. 245). This is no doubt partly because 'VET is more tightly coupled to labor markets and includes more of the social dimension (cohesion, disadvantaged groups) than does HE' (Powell et al., 2012, p. 248). The external face of Bologna—encouraging outsiders to study in Europe, and other areas of the world to adopt European norms and structures of higher education—has been prosecuted with far more intent than its social dimension, which has been undercut by major technical and political difficulties. The nature of debate has also been constrained by the socially elitist assumptions of Humboldt and Newman—so frequently deployed in as reference points in philosophical-programmatic discussion of the purpose of higher education in Europe and across the world.

The central argument of this paper has been that, in important respects, European ideas of the university have spread across the world. The principal ‘philosophical’ statements on which this idea of the university is based assumed that the people inhabiting universities—as students—would come from the youth of a social elite. The outward-facing elements of the Bologna Process, and the EHEA, aiming mainly at promoting higher education as an export business, have attracted students of similar age and social status. The social dimension of Bologna, in contrast, aimed to open higher education more across the social spectrum—though still assuming that the principal groups enrolling would be young. Bologna’s social dimension was strongly influenced by EU debates and policy approaches: while arguably it owed its existence to this, the dimension’s limited success (and more recent displacement from policy, if not rhetoric) can be put down in large part to the difficulties of encapsulating complex and contested social priorities in internationally acceptable indicators, and to the EU’s valorisation of competitiveness in the Lisbon Process—particularly after the onset of recession in 2008.

Notes

1. At the time they wrote, Geoffrey Boulton FRS, FRSE, was vice principal and regius professor of Geology and Mineralogy at the University of Edinburgh. Sir Colin Lucas was warden of Rhodes House and a former vice chancellor of the University of Oxford (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 2).
2. The uniformly male nature of higher education was, of course, significantly eroded, beginning in the late nineteenth century and developing apace in the later twentieth century. Higher education is also, of course, considerably more ethnically diverse than either Newman or Humboldt would have conceived possible. Despite extensive expansion of numbers participating in higher education, however, the student body remains strongly socially skewed.
3. Strictly speaking, the BIS paper was issued by the government for England; it contained the following statement: ‘Education is a devolved matter and this is a strategy for England. The strategy does not commit any of the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom to any UK-wide actions or policy positions. Where the stated actions have implications for UK-wide delivery bodies, this is without prejudice to the individual policies of the Governments of the United Kingdom. As we deliver this strategy, we will work closely with the devolved administrations on our areas of shared interest, particularly where this involves delivery bodies and other organisations with a remit that goes wider than just England. Research policy is not a devolved matter and research councils offer UK wide support.’ (BIS, 2013, p. 2). However, the entire document is framed as about ‘UK’ education; England is in any case much the largest UK jurisdiction; and the policies of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments in respect of *international* higher education are broadly similar to those of the UK government.
4. The members came from Luxembourg (chair), Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Switzerland, the UK, Eurostat, Eurostudent, Eurydice, European Commission DG EAC, Education International, the European Student’s association, the European University Association and the Academic Cooperation Association.
5. The indicators are listed and defined in Eurostat & Eurostudent.eu (2009, pp. 233–252). They were: net entry rate by age; female entrants by field of education; entrants at ISCED 5A as a percentage of qualifying graduates of secondary schooling (ISCED 3A and 4A); students with non-traditional routes to higher education as a share of all; ISCED 5A students, narrow definition—2006; percentage of students studying part-time, by age group (15–29, 30+ and all); de facto student status: students with full-time status by size of elective; workload for study-related activities per week, ISCED 5A—2006; percentage of individuals having completed higher education, according to the educational background of their parents (low, medium and high); public expenditure allocated to tertiary education, as a percentage of GDP and of total public expenditure; expenditure on tertiary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student, with and without expenditure on research and ancillary services; higher education institutions’ income from private sources (households and other private entities) as a percentage of all public and private sources; students’ monthly contributions to higher education institutions, in nominal and comparative amounts, ISCED 5A—2006; students’ monthly contributions to higher education

institutions, in percentage of total expenditure of students living away from their parental home, ISCED 5A—2006; public financial aid to tertiary students, by type (loans and grants), as a percentage of public expenditure on tertiary education; income sources (job, state and family) as a percentage of total student income (students living away from the parental home), ISCED 5A—2006; composition of public support to households (direct/indirect cash support—non-cash support), ISCED 5A—2006; deviation from state support for average student according to the educational level of students' fathers (low or ISCED 0-2 vs. high or ISCED 5-6), students living away from the parental home, ISCED 5A—2006; mobility in enrolment and in graduation; enrolment abroad during the course of normal studies, by educational level of fathers, ISCED 5A—2006; main barriers to studying abroad, ISCED 5A—2006; percentage of persons with tertiary education, by sex, age group and/or field of study; net entry rate and gross graduation rate; completion rate; unemployment rates; income of employees; qualification vertical mismatch.

6. <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId = 12> (accessed 7 October 2013).

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