

From coherence to differentiation: understanding (changes in) the European area for higher education and research

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(Early draft: Do Not Circulate, Cite, or Criticise Without Permission)

Abstract: Although the creation of a so-called common European ‘area’ for research and higher education is currently a central European policy goal, few people know what such an area entails. This paper will argue that there are at least three different ways to create this area: by adopting common standards, by collaborating, or by creating new institutions. It will demonstrate that, despite their differences, these three ways are all aiming at creating a European space by essentially increasing coherence and cohesion between universities. Yet, this paper will go further to defend the thesis that this underlying model of coherence and cohesion is currently being challenged by a new paradigm that wants to create a competitive European research and education space by increasing differentiation between universities. This paper ends by trying to anticipate possible problems that this recent shift towards differentiation may cause.

Key-words: European Research Area, European Area of Higher Education, Bologna Process, Coherence, Competition, Differentiation, European Research Council, European Institute of Technology.

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Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to say that the aim of a European research and higher education policy is the creation of a 'European research area' (ERA) or a 'European area of higher education' (EAHE). Although people in the field may be more affected by, and thus acquainted with, the process of European higher education reform known as 'Bologna', the aim that underpins this process is the construction of a common area for higher education. Particularly since the intergovernmental agreement in 1999, known as the Bologna declaration, and the European Commission's initiative in 2000 to make Europe the world's most competitive knowledge-based economy, known as the Lisbon agenda, the formation of this area has been high on the European agenda. There is a marked contrast, however, between the pervasiveness of this concept of a European area and its lack of conceptual clarity. What, then, do people mean when they refer to such a European area?

This paper will argue, firstly, that one can discern at least three different ways in which the European area for research and higher education is understood and structured: while referring to the same area, agents often mean different things by it. This paper will also show who defends which space and how these agents wish to govern it. Although it will mainly focus on the Commissions' discourse on universities, it will also take into account other voices.

Second, this paper will argue that over the past few years, one can witness a dramatic and paradigmatic shift in the way this area is understood and structured. One can describe this shift as the evolution from a model of coherence and cohesion towards one of differentiation or competition. Where the model of coherence stresses and creates similarities between different European universities, the new model focuses more on differentiation. Interestingly, this change affects all three conflicting views mentioned before. The paper then examines how, as a result of these changes, the financial and political stakes of the European education and research area are getting higher. I shall also show how this new paradigm produces new agents, a new rhetoric and new modes of governance.

Despite its objective importance in terms of budget and strategic impact, very few EU-scholars devote attention to research and education policy (in Wallace a.o., 2005 there is no chapter on this topic). While there are many interesting books on the idea of a ‘European space’ (Jensen and Richardson 2004), on the construction of a European identity (Shore 2000) and on the relationship between a European space and that identity (McNeill 2004), very little attention has so far been devoted to the area or space for research and education. True, some researchers have started to investigate the European area of higher education (think of Nóvoa and Lawn 2002 or Keeling 2004). Yet most of these existing studies examine the area of higher education and that of research separately, thus simply duplicating the bureaucratic division of labour between the respective European Commissions’ directorates general of education (DG EAC) and research (DG RTD). By contrast, this paper takes the higher education and research areas together. This is because universities are characterised by precisely the combination of education and research, which means that changes in education affects a university’s research and vice versa. The fact that the Bologna process, that traditionally only touched education, currently also reforms doctoral research, shows how artificial this distinction has become. This explains why stakeholders ask that ‘these two policy agendas urgently need to be viewed together’ (EUA 2005: 3). Taking them together may allow researchers to see the massive nature of the changes that are underway.

Fighting over European Areas for Higher Education and Research

What is a European space or area for higher education and research? The trivial answer is that it is simply a geographical area in which there are about ‘4 000 institutions, over 17 million students and some 1.5 million staff – of whom 435 000 are researchers’ (CEC 2006b: 3, see also CEC 2003: 5).² In this sense, a ‘European university’ is a university located in Europe, just as a European city is a city that can be found on the European map. However, for most agents the mere presence of institutes of higher education in the same geographical space is, in itself, not enough. Indeed, nothing guarantees that these institutions know about each other,

² ‘CEC’ stands for ‘Commission of the European Communities’

understand each other's systems or exchange information. When European ministers of education began with the 'creation of the European area of higher education' in Bologna in 1999 and the Commission one year later had the idea 'to create a European research area' (CEC 2000: 8) they meant more than just geography. In order to feel part of a larger area beyond the borders of the region or the nation-state, one should not simply be objectively on the European map, but also be subjectively connected with other people. Creating a European area, means that existing institutions at least feel, sense and know that they are part of the same space or landscape and feel connected to each other. How can this be achieved?

I believe that, until recently, for most people the answer to that question lay in increasing the coherence and cohesion of standards and degrees. In European jargon this cohesion is often also referred to as 'convergence' (in the field of education) or 'harmonisation' (when talking about research) and one could also use terms like 'standardisation' or 'coordination'. Given the consensus on this answer one can see it as a model or a paradigm, that is to say an 'entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community' (Kuhn 1996: 175).

Such a model or paradigm is of course an abstract ideal-typical construct, which therefore leaves room for different appropriations. I believe that in policy documents and initiatives one can indeed discern at least three different ways of conceptualising and constructing such an area according to the model of coherence. As we shall see these views also differ on the question of who should 'govern' this area (on 'governance' see for example Treib a.o. 2005).

A first way to turn a European map into a European area through coherence is obviously to create common or shared standards and points of reference. In this sense universities can only be called European universities if they share the same degrees, standards, credit systems, indicators, infrastructures and references. Once they do this, universities will start comparing themselves with other European universities rather than merely with universities in their own country. Moreover, once they share the same European standards and degrees, they will become readable and visible (and therefore accessible) for in- and outsiders. By way of

comparison one can say that European cities are cities that share for example the same currency or traffic road system, which gives them a distinct European dimension beyond their typical features.

This first attempt to create a shared European space through sharing standards clearly underpins the Bologna process that aims at a further ‘achievement of greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education’ (The European Ministers of Education 1999) through the ‘adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees’ that provides ‘a common reference’ (CEC 2005: 6). The aim then was to ‘strengthen the convergence of higher education systems’ (CEC 2003: 4), notably through the creation of a European Qualifications Network, a shared quality assurance (CEC 2005: 6-7, 11) and a European credit system (called ECTS). Further cohesion was achieved by abolishing differences between university and non-university higher education.

The creation of the European research area is equally driven by the need for ‘common references and basic standards’ (CEC 2005: 6) and the establishment of ‘a common system of reference (...) by aligning methods, harmonising procedures and comparing results’ resulting in ‘the development of a European scientific and technical reference area’ (CEC 2000: 15). To that aim ‘the collection of data throughout the Union (...) needs to be improved and statistics and indicators developed at European level’ (CEC 2000: 20). As in the economic free market, in the market of research too, the aim is ‘to simplify and harmonise regulations and administrative conditions more’ (CEC 2000: 19).

In short, students and researchers alike should be able to refer to a shared European horizon, expressed in similar degrees and comparable scientific indicators. To realise this first spatial vision, ‘soft’ or minimal modes of governance (like the ‘open method of coordination’) normally suffice, as one does not in principle need a supra-national body to coordinate national policies. As the Bologna process has shown, it is enough that national ministers of education of different countries sit together to coordinate degrees.

Yet, for the European Commission in particular this first answer is insufficient for obtaining a ‘true’ European area. For them, creating a shared space

not only presupposes sharing standards but also needs active collaboration through exchange of students and researchers. Compare with the idea that truly European cities may be created through collaboration between them, such as partnerships.

This second vision also concretely underpins European policy. In the field of education one can think of the Erasmus programme, which has advanced European mobility for more than a quarter century. Consider also the more recent idea of offering ‘more “European” courses, offered jointly by consortia of universities and leading to joint or double degrees at Master or Doctorate level’ (CEC 2006b: 10). In the field of research there is collaborative research, which aimed at ‘networking of existing centres of excellence’ (CEC 2000: 8), the creation of networks between different European countries, in order to increase collaboration between different European research teams. In sum, in this view a truly European space only comes into being when universities collaborate through exchange of students or researchers.

More radically still, the Commission supports a third way of developing a European higher education and research area, one that creates new institutions that are detached from existing national territories. As an example of such a truly ‘European’ university, one can think of the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, where academics and students teach or study after having left their national university. Similarly consider the creation of a Joint Research Centre (JRC) as an independent ‘European’ research centre, hosted by the European Commission. In the field of research, there is the dream of creating ‘virtual centres’ or ‘real “virtual centres of excellence”’ or ‘real “virtual research institutes”’ through IT tools (CEC 2000: 8, 10-1). This can be compared with the creation of new capitals (think of Madrid or Brasilia) that are meant to transcend existing regional cities and capitals. The underlying idea here is that a truly European space must be detached from existing places that have a national reputation.

These last two visions imply different modes of governance. Although it would be conceivable that different countries agree to exchange or collaborate (as they often do), it is de facto a supranational instance like the European Commission that was able to push through collaboration and exchange programmes on a

European scale. Instead of intergovernmental modes of governance, we find here a more centralised way of steering, for example in the field of research where the Commission determines which topics it wants to subsidise. Because of its supra-national nature, the creation of new institutions obviously presupposes an even more centralised mode of steering.

Given that the latter two visions of the creation of a European space through collaboration or new institutions presuppose centralised modes of governance, it comes as no surprise that most stakeholders and national governments reject these. The European Commission by contrast emerges as their stubborn defender. Why so? The simple answer is that this is because of the Commission's thirst for power. The more interesting answer is that the Commission's peculiar vision of a European area stems from an attachment to a deeply rooted idea that a truly European space should necessarily transcend national institutions and that it involves a detachment from one's particular national horizon. Just as the Jacobins in revolutionary France saw an opposition between one's particular background and the true national general spirit, the European Commission similarly believes that creating Europe involves a detachment from one's national background. Just as French Jacobins created practices and institutions that would actively foster such detachment notably through education (see Rosanvallon 1990: 100ff.), so the European Commission wants to create a European space through programmes of collaboration or by creating new European institutions.

Three spaces, two paradigms: from coherence to differentiation

While the fight over these different spatial views continues, I believe that over the last few years the underlying goal and paradigm has changed dramatically. I think that the paradigm of coherence is currently in the process of being replaced by a model of differentiation. What does this shift consist of? Where in the model of coordination, the final goal of a European research and higher education area consisted in stressing and creating similarities between different European

universities, more recently the focus has been more on differentiation and competition.³

It was no surprise that coherence precedes differentiation. Both logically and chronologically, differentiation and competition presupposes a minimal degree of standardisation. As the Commission writes: ‘a more coherent and compatible European framework (...) is *a condition for the readability, and hence the competitiveness*, of European universities’ (CEC 2003: 5; my emphasis). This explains why the Commission as one of the main advocates of the paradigm of differentiation today, defends at the same time an increasing coordination of standards as a condition for increased differentiation. This also explains why some see the coherence associated with the Bologna process as a tool for a ‘badly needed injection of diversity and competition into the European university system’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 38).

Yet, while differentiation necessarily presupposes coherence, coherence should not necessary lead to differentiation. While initial standardisation may be a matter of necessity, subsequent differentiation is a matter of political choice and is certainly not a natural evolution. Herein lies the whole political problem. For what is to be done once a minimal degree of coherence is achieved? Should one further distribute funds equally over all European universities to foster further harmonisation, or are shared standards and degrees only a first step to differentiate between strong and weak universities? The answer depends on which model you follow. Those defending the model of coherence will focus on what universities have in common and will want to include all universities. Those who start from the model of differentiation by contrast will focus on differences between universities and will want to foster this differentiation through competition.

To be sure, the *rationale* behind both paradigms was the need for Europe to become a knowledge-based economy. The question had always been are universities

³ I distinguish differentiation (of tasks and profiles) from diversity (of culture): while harmonisation can be compatible with cultural diversity, it does not necessarily imply functional differentiation (or stratification). Moreover, like the Commission, I use the term differentiation, although I am aware that Huisman (1995) argues that it is better to use the term ‘diversification’.

‘in a position to compete with the best universities in the world and provide a sustainable level of excellence?’ (CEC 2003: 3). Yet the answers to that question have differed. Under the model of coherence, it was believed that international competitiveness would increase through coherence alone (thus making European universities more attractive to foreign researchers and students) and by distributing more money over all universities. The paradigm of differentiation argued by contrast that coherence alone did not suffice and that, on the contrary, differentiation and competition were also needed. Funding, then, should be concentrated on a competitive basis rather than disseminated on the basis of inclusiveness.

According to the Commission, the creation of a true knowledge economy presupposes a concentration of top research in a small number of universities, rather than a distribution of research capacity over as many universities as possible, as the model of coherence would have it. Differentiation thus became the new key word. While the Commission still said that ‘the aim must be to bring all universities to the peak of their potential’ (CEC 2003: 16) it also suggested that this potential differed and that a ‘combination of *the absolute need for excellence*, the effects of the precariousness of resources and the pressure of competition, forces universities and member states to *make choices*’ (CEC 2003: 18; my emphasis). Put another way, the Commission stated that ‘Europe needs universities able to build on their own strengths and *differentiate* their activities on the basis of these strengths’ (CEC 2006b: 4; my emphasis). The Commission clearly and unambiguously indicated the implications of all this, stating that ‘the *concentration* of research funding on a smaller number of areas and institutions should lead to increased specialisation of the universities, in line with the move currently observed towards a European university area which is *more differentiated*’ (CEC 2003: 18; my emphasis, see also CEC 2005: 5). This, then, ‘requires more competition-based funding in research and more output-related funding in education’ (CEC 2005: 8).

The underlying assumption of the paradigm of differentiation is that in order to be attractive for foreign researchers and students, European universities, like their American counterparts, need ‘the necessary critical mass’ (CEC 2003: 7). The Commission explains that while the US, like the European Union, has about 4 000

higher education establishments, only 50 of these ‘account for the lion’s share of American academic research capacity, public funding in support of university research and the country’s Nobel prizes for science’ (CEC 2003: 5 n.9). For the Commission, in Europe too a ‘culture of excellence’ can exist only in ‘a few entire universities’ (CEC 2005: 5). Given that ‘high-tech businesses (...) tend to set up near the best-performing universities’ (CEC 2003: 8), concentration of research is also necessary for technology transfer.

Changing paradigms, changing discourses

Under this new paradigm of differentiation, old words acquired a new meaning. Take the central idea that in order to create ‘a dynamic European landscape’ that is ‘open and attractive’ (CEC 2000: 18) to researchers, students and investors, both in- and outside Europe, the ‘European higher education (...) needs to become “readable” or ‘more visible in the world’ and should be ‘building an attractive image’ (CEC 2005: 4; CEC 2006b: 9-10; my emphasis). With the change of paradigm, the meaning of readability or visibility as central goals of this area changed as well. Under the model of coherence, increasing visibility or readability only meant making an area intelligible through shared standards and references. The idea was that Europe had a hidden expertise which needed to be made visible or readable to outsiders through a harmonisation of standards and degrees. That was done by ‘mapping’ (existing) European centres of excellence (CEC 2000: 10).

Under the paradigm of differentiation, readability and visibility now mean making some excellent universities more visible than others through, for example, differentiated funding. Where in the old model visibility simply meant revealing existing excellence by harmonising standards, under the model of differentiation it implies actively creating excellence by concentrating funding in some highly visible excellent universities. Under the model of coherence excellence was deemed to be already there waiting to be discovered, while under the paradigm of differentiation it had to be created. Rather than assuming that Europe already has excellence the Commission now stated that at present ‘most universities (...) are ill-prepared for worldwide competition’ and that, in the future, ‘Europe simply must have a first-

class university system' or should be 'achieving world-class quality' (CEC 2003: 22; CEC 2005: 3).

To use the metaphor of light, visibility no longer meant 'bringing to light' existing excellence in all European universities by making their degrees readable and comparable, but rather to create excellence by putting the best universities 'in the spotlight', while leaving others 'in the shadows'. The light of coherence is a sun that shines over the entire European stage. Differentiation is a spotlight that picks out the best.

As the meaning of key words underpinning the discourse changed, so did its basic oppositions. The key dichotomy of the paradigm of harmonisation was the opposition between on the one hand a state of 'fragmentation', 'isolation', 'compartmentalisation', 'disparity', 'lack of coordination' of existing national systems, which needed to be replaced by, on the other hand, 'decompartmentalisation', 'better integration' and 'a more coherent approach' (CEC 2000: 7, 9, 18). Under the paradigm of differentiation, that dichotomy is turned upside down: the ideal is now differentiation rather than coherence, which is now opposed to 'uniformity'. The problem is now no longer fragmentation but rather 'uniformity and egalitarianism' which excludes those 'who do not conform to the *standard model*' leading to 'an average quality of universities' and 'an undesirable degree of *uniformity*', which is seen in terms of '*insufficient differentiation*' resulting in 'deficiencies' (CEC 2005: 3-4; CEC 2006b: 3 my emphasis).

Ominously, the Commission openly rejects 'the ideal model of university envisaged nearly one century ago by Wilhelm von Humboldt' because the trend today 'is away from these models, and *towards greater differentiation*' (CEC 2003: 5-6; my emphasis). While it still admits that 'the link between research and teaching naturally continues to define the ethos of a university (...) this link is nevertheless not the same in all institutions, for all programmes or for all levels' (CEC 2003: 18). Stronger still: 'while all institutions share certain common values and tasks, not all need the same balance between education and research (...) research should remain a key task of the systems as a whole, but not necessarily for all institutions' (CEC

2006b: 4). A recent report by a European think tank similarly states that ‘there is a growing need for diversity – for some universities with the resources to compete with the best in the world, and for others to meet regional and local requirements in a first-class fashion’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 15).

It is hard to tell when exactly the paradigm of coherence was challenged by that of differentiation. In fact, one could even argue that from the very start of the creation of a European area for education and research, the language of differentiation was already present in the documents. Yet, as in the case of visibility, words mean different things here. In the Bologna declaration of 1999, for example, there was already talk about ‘increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education’. Yet, this was then interpreted not in terms of increasing competition between European universities, but rather as an argument to boost the competitiveness of all European universities vis-à-vis the United States and Japan. Under the paradigm of differentiation, increasing the competitiveness means making the very best competitive at the expense of others. To be competitive with universities outside Europe, then, universities need to compete inside Europe first.

The model of differentiation in action

This new model of differentiation is mainly at work in the ‘communications’ by the Commission, which have propagated it since 2003 (if not earlier). Yet the model was practiced in policy initiatives as much as it was preached in those communications. What, then, were the implications of these policy initiatives at different spatial levels?

Let us take the creation of shared standards first. Where under the paradigm of harmonisation shared standards were used to enhance coherence between different institutions, under the new model standards are used to differentiate between them. Consider the creation of instruments for quality assurance, whereby universities evaluate themselves or are evaluated, which fosters competition and differentiation. The Bologna process itself is also affected by the Commission’s

interference, which leads to ‘a growing stratification of the higher education sector in the EU’ (Keeling 2006: 214).

Even more crucially and more significantly at this first level was the creation of a European Research Council (ERC). The aim of this ERC is to apply the same standards to all researchers. Yet, the standards are those of excellence rather than the lowest common denominator: ‘unlike earlier EU contributions to science funding, it will allocate research grants purely on the basis of peer-reviewed excellence’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 5). Needless to say that when researchers from particular universities enter into a Europe-wide competition with excellence as its sole criterion, this will lead to an increased competition and differentiation. Moreover, such an ERC will ‘set up benchmarks against which the best researchers in Europe can measure themselves’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 57).

The new model also affected the second spatial level. The creation of a European space through collaboration now also aimed at excellence. In the field of research there was the intention of creating so-called networks of excellence (NoE) and integrated projects (IP) (CEC 2003: 10, 18). In the domain of education there was the start of the Erasmus Mundus programme at the Master level. Unlike the classical Erasmus programme, the Erasmus Mundus programme presupposes a selection of the programme as well as the participants on a competitive basis ‘in order to attract to Europe some of the world’s best students’ (CEC 2003: 11). Where for traditional Erasmus programmes almost all universities could participate, Erasmus Mundus programmes are selected on a competitive basis.

More so than in the classical Erasmus programme, the Erasmus Mundus programme defines the European space in terms of detachment or disconnection: the idea behind the programme is that students only enter a European space when they are confronted with different European cultures, which is why the programme requires them to pursue their studies ‘in at least two European countries’ (CEC 2003: 11) during one academic year. While the US’s Fulbright scheme, which is Erasmus Mundus’ main example, forbids a stay in more than one institution, under Erasmus Mundus such a stay in at least two Member States is a key condition. Just as in collaborative research, a European space is seen as the negation of rootedness

in a national space and culture. Entering a European space means detaching oneself from national cultures. It remains to be seen if such an uprooted ‘European’ experience where students from outside Europe are confronted with two or even three different cultures during one academic year (while classes are taught in English) will not leave them confused rather than enriched by a ‘European’ experience. All the same, in this sense Erasmus Mundus combines the two views of European space: from the organisers’ perspective, it aims at collaboration, while from the participants’ viewpoint it involves an experience of detachment or disconnection.

The third vision of a European space in terms of detachment is now also interpreted in terms of differentiation. Consider the Commission’s recent idea to create a European Institute of Technology (EIT) (CEC 2005: 12; CEC, 2006b: 2, 11) as a European counterpart to the MIT. Unlike the paradigm of coherence, the EIT wants to concentrate excellence. Yet rather than concentrating excellence in a small number of existing universities – which could be the outcome of an ERC – the EIT wants to concentrate research in a separate European institute. Although the project has recently been toned down (CEC 2006c), the Commission initially wanted that excellent universities would ‘second’ their best researchers to a European institute where they would remain for several years.

A new model, new modes of governance

This new model changed the balance of power between existing players. Where the Bologna process aiming at coherence was mainly led by the Ministers of Education of member states ‘together with (...) non governmental European organisations’, the model of differentiation is clearly guided by supranational agents, specifically the European Commission. More generally, the autonomy of universities vis-à-vis both national governments and the Commission is bound to increase under the new model. While cohesion still requires a nation state to implement common standards, the model of differentiation by contrast necessitates the state to give up its control over universities and increase their autonomy.

At the same time the new model also created new players. As to advocacy organisations, the Bologna Process is monitored and steered by the European University Association (EUA), while the paradigm of differentiation is propagated by more 'selective' advocacy organisations. Where the EUA represents about 700 European universities, its more 'selective' counterparts like the League for European Research Universities (LERU) (founded in 2002) only represents 20 (from 'Oxbridge' to Leuven and Heidelberg) while the IDEA league (founded in 2005) only represents 5 of the best 'technical' research institutions in Europe (amongst its members are Imperial College London and ETH Zürich). Both the LERU and IDEA 'leagues' explicitly represent the interests of top research universities and thus defend the paradigm of differentiation. A differentiated European area thus also causes a differentiation in advocacy groups.

Interestingly, the gap between the more inclusive and more elitist policy organisations is not as wide as one would expect: all seem to adhere to the new model of differentiation which again suggests that there is indeed a paradigm at work. Even the more inclusive EUA states that 'universities accept that there is a tension between its necessary strengthening of research universities and the need to ensure resources for research-based teaching in all universities' (EUA 2005: 4).

Although most agents involved agreed on the new paradigm of differentiation, the traditional differences on the European area between the Commission and these advocacy groups, old and new, continued. Once again two concepts of a European space conflict: a space in terms of common standards and infrastructures (this time serving differentiation and excellence) was again opposed to a European space as transcending existing national universities. As before, all agents agree on the first spatial vision: just as almost all endorsed the Bologna process in the model of coherence, all now support the creation of a research council (ERC) in the new paradigm of differentiation. Yet when it comes to the more ambitious visions of a more integrated European space the Commission and the stakeholders part company. Just as almost all advocacy organisations welcomed the ERC, so they almost unanimously rejected the 'European MIT' (the EIT) precisely because it was a separate institution, which was only defended by the Commission.

Critics of the Commission's more radical view of the European area may argue that true differentiation is incompatible with the Commissions' more 'integrated' and controlled, 'top-down' views. While very few doubt that the ERC (like the National Science Foundation in the US) is an efficient 'bottom-up' way to benefit differentiation, competition and 'excellence', many doubt the efficiency of a competition in which the Commission interferes. While the Networks of Excellence require lots of paperwork, are policy driven and not responsive enough to science (Lambert & Butler, 2006: 44), the Erasmus Mundus programme, accepts only universities who already collaborate. All this means that truly excellent universities (like 'Oxbridge') are reluctant to apply to these programmes that then risk becoming excellent in name only.

Although old oppositions surface again, governance in the new paradigm of differentiation differs in crucial ways from that of coherence. Generally speaking, the stakes under the paradigm of differentiation have become higher. Unlike the paradigm of differentiation, the model of harmonisation was simply less contentious and in that sense less political. This is hardly surprising, for who would object to increasing coherence of standards? This is why the Bologna process is often seen as an example of harmonious policy making where all stakeholders are involved, thus showing that multi-level governance with forty or so ministers and an equal amount of stakeholders around the table is indeed possible. Typical for coherence is also its inclusiveness: Erasmus and the Bologna process, for example, have as their goal to include as many institutions as possible and use hardly any internal competition for quality. In the field of collaborative research, too, there was de facto a marked absence of competition for excellent research teams. Instead a wide range of European research institutes participated, mostly evenly spread between north and south, west and east.

The model of differentiation is not only more political because funding is differentiated on a competitive basis, but also because the available amount of funding is higher. The paradigm of coherence had no other incentive than the binding signatures of ministers or the award of relatively small scale grants to students under the Erasmus programme. True, the Marie Curie grants and

collaborative research involved a considerable budget. Yet the budget that is used to propagate the new model is considerably higher. The ERC will get its own budget of around 1 billion Euros a year, while the Erasmus Mundus grants (to which, surprisingly, only non EU citizens are entitled) are higher than those of the traditional Erasmus programmes. The presence of funding as a mechanism of governance, then, means that the impact of the paradigm of differentiation is likely to be even higher than that of coherence.

Yet, as the debates get more political and the stakes get higher, consultation, and thus contestation, paradoxically diminishes. Indeed, the bottom-up consultation that had still characterised the model of coherence (think of the Bologna process), is now replaced by a top-down mode of governance. The creation of the ERC and the EIT was implemented fast and without much consultation. Despite a massive rejection of the idea of an EIT by various stakeholders and consultative bodies inside and outside the Commission (e.g. Sanders, 2006; Lambert & Butler 2006: 5, 58-9; LERU 2005), the Council and Commission initially went ahead with the idea. Only recently has the Commission moderated it, probably because some member States protested.⁴

How can we explain that, as the stakes get higher, consultation diminishes? A cynical explanation could be that when the budget increases, the space for democratic consultation decreases. Multi-level governance within the Bologna process is all well and good, but when huge EU budgets are involved, control is more centralised. Yet I believe that this is only part of the story. The relative consensus on this top-down policy can also be explained by the language that is used to legitimise the creation of a differentiated European area. I believe that the new paradigm of differentiation legitimises itself through a permanent 'rhetoric of emergency'. The origin of and driving force behind this rhetoric lies in the Commissions' so-called 'Lisbon agenda' which wants to make Europe the most competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010.

⁴ Even the influence these member states retained over the Bologna process or over the collaborative research is now replaced by institutions such as the ERC or the EIT that are autonomous from either the Commission or the member states.

True, this rhetoric of emergency is used by the Commission as early as 2000 when it declared that ‘the situation is urgent’ (CEC 2000: 24). It increased even further when the model of differentiation started guiding European policy. Ever since, the European area for research and education is depicted as being in a permanent state of emergency. In almost all Commission documents the dramatic weakness of European research and education vis-à-vis the US and Japan is emphasised. This rhetoric became particularly strong when in 2004 for the first time an attempt was made to offer a global ranking of the 500 best universities in the world in what became known as the so-called ‘Shanghai’ ranking (Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2004). This ranking has been used ever since by the European Commission to legitimise its call for ever more drastic action (for example in CEC 2005: 3 n.10). Almost simultaneously another global ranking by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2004 came to similar conclusions. Why were these rankings so alarming? Tony Blair gave the answer to that question in the European Parliament in June 2005 when he declared that ‘of the top 20 universities in the world today, only two are now in Europe’ (Blair 2005). Blair modestly omitted the fact that those two were in fact British, so that, with the words of the Commission, ‘apart from a handful in Britain, there are no European Union universities in the top 20 in the world and relatively few in the top 50’ (CEC 2005: 3). Such a desperate state, goes the line, requires and legitimises desperate measures.⁵

Perhaps it is this rhetoric of a state of emergency which explains why the Commission is given such a strong mandate in this field and why it can operate in a swift and top-down way, as opposed to the more bottom-up procedures that were characteristic for the implementation of coherence. This is surprising given that initiatives propagating differentiation such as the ERC ‘have caused alarm in some EU countries, concerned that the drive for results will mean that EU money is pumped into elite institutions with the best research records mainly in Britain, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands’ (Laitner 2005). Yet although many member states have reasons to believe that an ERC would go against their national interests,

⁵ It was perhaps no coincidence that Tony Blair used the rhetoric of a state of exception not only in European research policy but also in foreign politics.

the Council has nonetheless supported the Commission in its creation of differentiated European space. However, it remains to be seen how things will evolve once the ERC starts working. Will member states in the south and the east accept a differentiated European landscape? Moreover, one can wonder if these countries are not ‘trapped in a vicious circle: they will get no more money unless they reform; and they cannot reform without more money’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 20 see also 38, 47, 55, 60, 65).

Epilogue: ‘future research’

Some may object that this paper limits itself to examining the official discourse without actually researching how people experience changes in the European space at the grassroots level. One could for example ask if the Bologna process’s official intention to increase mobility, did not de facto decrease it, because its rigid study structure may hinder student mobility. While it is true that an analysis of texts by the Commission does not tell us if and how they are implemented and experienced at the grassroots, I believe that it is equally true that such analysis also precedes events at that level and can therefore identify tendencies that have not yet been implemented in practice. Despite all post-modern doubts about the idea of a ‘centre’, it remains true that most policy starts at a fairly limited policy level and is only afterwards implemented in reality. First there was the Bologna declaration and then the process, not the other way round.

For that reason, conceptual analysis may offer us an ‘early warning system’ to inform us that an educational earthquake may be underway. Only now, many years after its inception, millions of agents in the European area are coming to terms with the consequences of the Bologna process. If we wait till the model of differentiation is visible in the field, then agents and policy makers alike may (again) be caught off-guard by decisions they may not have foreseen or may not approve of. This, then, is the paradox: while we can only now see what the implications of a process such as ‘Bologna’ are in practice, it is precisely for that reason too late now to change dysfunctions. So, although conceptual analysis differs from an examination of what happens at grassroots level, it may still critically

anticipate consequences at that level. How, then, can we try to anticipate consequences of the paradigm of differentiation?

First, we can obviously try to anticipate consequences by looking at the US, as an area which is organised according to the model of differentiation and hence one the Commission constantly invokes. One problem we can observe there concerns the social role of the (social) sciences on which the Commission had always taken an ambiguous position. On the one hand the Commission suggests that universities should be more open to society and should ‘explain at home and abroad the specific value of what they produce for learners and society’ (CEC 2005: 4). Similarly, the Commission complains that ‘communication between scientific specialists and non-specialists is much needed but often absent’ (CEC 2006b: 8). This openness to society ranges from developing policy oriented research to being ‘open’ to society and the market at large (e.g. CEC 2005: 8) leading to a ‘cross-fertilisation with the business-community and with the wider society’ (CEC 2006b: 4).

Yet on the other hand the Commission also states that ‘universities should be funded more for what they do than for what they are, by focussing funding on relevant outputs rather than on inputs’ (CEC 2006b: 7). Yet the more output is measured in (and by) the social sciences, the more those researchers tend to publish in highly specialised journals. This in turn means that they will be less likely to publish for a wider audience (as this is not acknowledged as relevant ‘output’ in most rankings) and that they will be less likely to develop more general positions addressing a wider audience (as these seldom conform to what is required in specialised journals) or simply have less time to communicate to a larger audience (Lipsett 2006). In short, this risks undermining the ‘public mission and overall social and cultural remit of universities’ (CEC 2006b: 6).

Here the European Commission risks reproducing the paradox that characterises its admired American example: while the US has the best research universities in terms of output, its universities host arguably less ‘public intellectuals’ in the social sciences than in Europe. The question will thus be if the paradigm of differentiation will not lead to a ‘neutralisation’ of the social and

political role of academics in the (social) sciences, and if, in so doing, Europe risks not losing one of its typical cultural values in the name of an American model that may be particularly deficient in this respect.

But we can, secondly, also learn positive lessons from the US like the importance of access. A differentiated area is hard to reconcile with the idea of ‘automatic right of access to university studies’ (CEC 2003: 14) as it normally implies a diversification of students on the basis of intelligence. Yet such a differentiated landscape also means that universities need more money, which almost inevitably implies that tuition fees will be introduced (Lambert & Butler 2006: 4). This in turn signifies that there is a risk that some of the best students from a less privileged background will no longer be able to study. A differentiation will then reflect differences in wealth rather than in talent.

If a diversified European space really wants to attract the best rather than the richest, then it therefore needs an extensive system of grants, like in the US or the UK. The Commission indeed emphasised that ‘it is crucially important to maintain the excellence of teaching and research (...) while still ensuring broad, fair and democratic access’ (CEC 2003: 6, 13-5; CEC 2005: 10). Against common opinion, the Commission argues that ‘tuition fees could in practice provide better access for students from lower income groups if the incremental funds were recycled into a sound aid system’ (CEC 2005: 8). Put more bluntly: the ‘use of the access argument to justify free higher education for all university students is simply a piece of middle class special pleading’ (Lambert & Butler 2006: 52). The Commission concretely suggests that ‘where tuition fees are introduced, a substantial part of the funds should be redistributed as income-contingent grant/loans aimed at guaranteeing access for all, and as performance-related scholarship aimed at encouraging excellence’ (CEC 2005: 10).

Although the Commission did acknowledge the problematic issue of existing and future issues of access, in its most recent communication (CEC 2006b), it however ignores it. Moreover, most governments or advocacy groups who are (slowly) implementing the paradigm of differentiation did not follow the Commission’s earlier advice for compensating talent-based grants (partly financed

by tuition fees) for the less well-off. All this is worrying, as the European diversified space risks become more unequal than its American counterpart, where excellence is at least in part combined with an extended grants scheme.

Another thing we could learn from the US, as the Commission admits, is fostering certain values and practices in higher education, such as valuing interdisciplinarity, fundamental research, autonomy and career prospects for (young) researchers and so on (Lambert & Butler 2006: 44; Ingdahl 2006; CEC 2003: 8-9; CEC 2005: 9). Yet although a successful implementation of differentiation requires such values and practices, implementing this will be very difficult.

A third and final way to predict problems is by focussing on areas in the European area where this new paradigm is already implemented. In this case the UK can serve as a laboratory, as it has already implemented the Commissions' requirement for 'more competition-based funding in research and more output-related funding in education' (CEC 2005: 8), the results of which can now be observed. One striking result is that teaching becomes objectified in terms of 'output' (rather than the process) and as a result that it risks becoming less important than research. This comes as no surprise. In reality, 'competitive funding (...) based on institutional evaluation systems and on diversified performance indicators' (CEC 2006b: 8) de facto means attributing funding on the basis of research output which means that teaching becomes less important than research.

This too is worrying. While the US has the best research universities in the world, when it comes to quality of undergraduate teaching top European universities particularly in the UK, are arguably better. Think of Oxbridge and its unique tutorial system, which involves top researchers offering small-scale tutorials for undergraduates. Yet, precisely as a result of 'more competition-based funding in research and more output-related funding in education' (CEC 2005: 8), this undergraduate teaching system and the colleges that provide its unique context are currently under threat. For if careers of academics depend increasingly on the research output rather than the commitment to undergraduate teaching and university life in general, then such commitment risks being undermined. This is just one telling example of a tendency to measure research and teaching which is not

limited to the UK alone: what happens in the UK today may happen in the rest of Europe tomorrow. I believe that it is the duty of social scientists not only to analyse existing evolutions, but also to remind people about possible (negative) consequences of policy initiatives. Given the gap between the dramatic paradigmatic changes in the European university landscape and the universities' own lack of research on these changes, an appeal for more research is justified.

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⁶ 'CEC' stands for 'Commission of the European Communities'

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