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Maastricht research institute ROA charts European higher education

Frank Cörvers: Use of English leads to mobility and internationalisation

European universities still trail behind American ones when it comes to PhDs and publications in leading academic journals. But the race to catch up is on, says alum Frank Cörvers of the Maastricht Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA). “The switch to the bachelor/master system ensures mobility and internationalisation within Europe. A choice to go abroad is no longer automatically a choice for the US. And what’s more, increasing numbers of Americans are crossing the seas to do their studies – and get their PhDs – here. The Netherlands in general and Maastricht in particular are doing outstandingly well in terms of attracting international students.”

Last autumn in Woodstock, Vermont, 20 high-level economists came together to discuss the future of American university education. What to do about the declining intake of students from other parts of the world? How to stop knowledge leaking away in the direction of South Korea, India, China, Japan and Europe? With the presentation of its in-depth research, ROA delivered the European contribution at the three-day workshop, organised by the prestigious National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). This demonstrates once more that Maastricht University is taken very seriously on the world stage.

“An honour, certainly”, says Cörvers, head of ROA’s Department of Labour Market Dynamics. “We have been asked to map the

developments in European higher education and research. This is nothing unusual, because we have a great deal of experience with collecting data on the labour market and education. For example, for years we have been publishing national and European monitors of the labour market. Lex Borghans, professor of Labour Market and Social Policy at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEBA) and also affiliated with ROA, had the contacts in the US and asked me to join him in doing the research. With, among other things, available data from the University Library, we made an overview of all doctoral dissertations published in the Netherlands since 1674. We also looked at various aspects in other countries, including the language that dissertations and academic

journal articles have been written in during the last few centuries.”

English language

The most striking conclusion of the conference was that the US is losing ground with respect to its big competitors in Asia and Europe. “Roughly since the 1990s”, confirms Cörvers. “This has to do with the harmonisation of European continental education and research, and its increasing use of the English language. As a result, study and research possibilities on the respective continents have strongly increased. The language barrier has been lowered and this means that mobility has grown. The Netherlands was one of the first countries to take this road, in education and in academic publications. Originally Latin

was the commonest international language, followed later by the national languages, and also French and German. The switch to English means that our universities have suddenly become interesting for people from elsewhere in Europe. The pull of students to the US appears to be subsiding somewhat.”

“We need not think in terms of threats.”

Bachelor/master

Since the turn of the century the dwindling migration to the US has become even starker, not just because of the September 11 terrorist attacks, but particularly through the ‘Americanisation’ of European education. “The effect of 9/11 is not easily measurable. Certainly it deterred people and, moreover, it made it harder to get into the US. But we think that the switch to the bachelor/master system (BaMa) has had an important influence, along with the setup of PhD programmes that directly follow (or are even combined with) master’s programmes. During the Bologna conference in 1999, 46 European countries agreed to form one system with a uniform credit and assessment system. That change has come about relatively quickly: the BaMa system is now in place almost everywhere in the EU. Universities have become more transparent, and are assessed and compared with each other more and more.

“Just like in the US, actually. Students as well as researchers are served up such a broad range of possibilities. And that promotes internationalisation and mobility within Europe. Look at Maastricht, where FEBA draws more than half its students from abroad. Particularly Germans, but also people from all over Europe, as well as from Africa, America and Asia.

“Universities in the small countries and Scandinavia are leading the way in the use

of English as the lingua franca. In big countries like Germany, Spain and Italy, internationalisation and mobility are now just starting to take off. France is still clinging to its own language in publications. But that single, uniform European system of university education is developing in leaps and bounds. That the US may feel threatened, I can well imagine.”

American model

So Europe has definitively chosen for the American model – but that is not to say that the comparison is altogether exact. There are, and shall remain, substantial differences, says Cörvers. “In the US, universities differ enormously in terms of quality. From the absolute best of the best, to the very poor. In the Netherlands, we strive for a more or less similar level across the board. At least in the bachelor’s phase. That phase is of an essentially preparatory nature, and not yet strongly linked to academic research. What we now see very clearly, however, is universities profiling themselves by way of master’s programmes and research facilities. Like America, it will become less taken for granted that students will follow a master’s programme automatically at the university where they did their bachelor’s degree. Students seek out the most interesting options. This stimulates competition between universities, at both national and European level.

“Of course, along with opportunities come threats. Universities are, after all, financially dependent on their number of graduates, which means that master’s programmes are an important source of income. I foresee specialisations at universities. Maastricht, for example, has already been heavily profiling itself on the international scene with economics. But the flip side of internationalisation is that research becomes strongly internationally oriented. Only by publishing in international journals do you count in rankings.”

Research and development

So is the US really losing its lead in univer-

sity education? This questioned remained unanswered during the workshop in Woodstock. And ROA, too, stops short of making definitive predictions. “The financial crisis has hit the US hard. The question is whether enough money remains to stimulate education and research. Incidentally, however, we in Europe should not be boasting in that regard. Much less money is made available here for research and development [R&D] than in the US. The Netherlands puts up a miserable 1.7% of its national income, an ‘average Joe’ compared with the rest of Europe. This is scarcely half the percentage that we pledged to strive for in Lisbon. There, it was agreed that by 2010 Europe should be leading in innovation. Well, we’re still a long way from that. If Europe really wants to innovate and reach the top of the ladder, its spending on R&D, including the budgets for academic research, must increase exponentially. America is well ahead of us in that area. Moreover, universities there are facing up to the threats. They are very interested in how we arrange our master’s system. They will definitely enter into the competition head on.”

Frank Cörvers

studied Economics at Maastricht University, including a semester in Germany at the University of Hanover. After graduating he worked at UM as a tutor, obtained his PhD from ROA, moved for a number of years to Statistics Netherlands (CBS), then returned to ROA in 2000. There, he is now head of the Department of Labour Market Dynamics and a member of the Management Team. “ROA is part of UM, but it functions as a company that operates independently. We do contract research for governments and companies. We also often work together with the different FEBA departments. We teach at the faculty, train PhD candidates and attract ‘post’ doc researchers. This diversity and businesslike approach really appeals to me, as does the combination of academically and socially relevant research.” ROA currently has 35 employees. See also www.roa.unimaas.nl

Cooperation

With its revamped education structure, then, Europe is on the right track. “Indeed,” nods Cörvers. “But there is still a long way to go. In various academic fields English is a long way off becoming the ‘official’ language. ROA’s research shows that the sciences, medicine and economics in particular have made the switch to English. In cultural studies, law and the social sciences, national languages are usually still on top.

“In France, the developments are moving slowly. That’s a shame, because they have tremendously good academics. But because they tend to publish in French, they are less widely read. Publications count in the rankings only if they appear in internationally recognised journals. This means that a lot of knowledge stays put in France. Really, a uniform language helps move science forward. Ultimately it’s about relevant research being done that benefits the whole world. We need not think in terms of threats. Cooperation, knowledge exchange – that’s what it’s all about.”