High quality universities with low fees: is it possible? How to choose the best university to study at?

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1. Introduction and background

In 2006, the then-Commissioner for Education, Training, and Culture Ján Figel' said, "Although they train and teach millions of people each year, Europe's higher education systems remain hampered by a number of obstacles, many of which are decades old" (European Commission, 2006), and thus signed into effect the European Commission's plan for the modernisation of European universities. Europe has long seen its public universities as near-sacred centers of knowledge formation and preservation, with faculty and students afforded special privileges by society both explicitly and implicitly. However, the landscape of higher education is changing: the ever-increasing importance of a higher education qualification in today's global knowledge-based economy is bringing students to higher education like never before, into programmes ranging from classical subjects of university study to vocationally-oriented training. And, as a part of societies committed to ideals of equality and opportunity for all regardless of background, Europe's public universities find themselves in a very difficult position, squeezed between the increasing demands placed on them and effectively stagnant public funding, and with the most fundamental values and traditions of European higher education threatened.

According to Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), the new paradigm for higher education finance in a massified system consists of finding a sustainable balance of three basic elements: quality, access, and efficiency. As such, the common European model of a centralised, state-run system oftentimes with near-open access (at least at the beginning of studies) would make the quest for quality and accountability, so important in the modern knowledge-based economy, all the more difficult. Therefore, a dichotomy has emerged, pitting the system's ability to provide 'high quality' education against its accessibility to all those deemed qualified, of course further complicated by the bureaucratic layers of the national system approach itself. Moreover, the demands of a massified system have created a need for a greater number of institutions beyond the national and regional public universities, which have come to include smaller public institutions and private, sometimes for-profit institutions. As students are now faced with a dizzying array of options for university education both in their hometowns or further afield (and even abroad), universities must strive for fair and sensible policies concerning their approach to quality, access, and

efficiency; otherwise, institutions that fail to modernise in this way risk irrelevance in students' eyes.

The recent orientation toward modernisation raises many questions, namely what *exactly* is quality in higher education? Though higher education has traditionally abstained from engaging in business-like practices, the monitoring of quality is becoming increasingly common around the world as market forces in higher education cause universities to compete with one another for material and human resources. Therefore, departments, institutions, and entire systems have become deeply engaged in defining what quality means to them and in devising means of measurement, in part catalysed by the curricular reforms of the Bologna Process. One key participant in this developing quality evaluation process is the regional and national quality assurance (QA) agencies, which establish and even enforce standards of quality across their jurisdiction. In 2005, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), a central organisational body for QA agencies across Europe, first published their "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG), establishing a Europe-wide approach to QA for the universities of the EHEA and for the QA agencies that evaluate them (ENQA, 2009). Unfortunately, though, the quality assurance process in Europe is underdeveloped and often rife with conflict of interest. In the most recent ENQA survey of its members, 46.6% of responding agencies admitted to influence from external stakeholders in their evaluations, and only 60% have any sort of student representation on their boards (ENQA, 2008).

Meanwhile, another means of evaluation and comparison of universities has emerged through the proliferation of 'league tables', or rankings. Private entities such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (AWRU) at Shanghai Jiao-Tong University, the Times Higher Education, and the QS have engaged in these exercises for several years, while newer efforts through the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE) and even the European Commission (U-Map and U-Multirank) are now gaining momentum. According to Institute for Higher Education Policy's (IHEP) Berlin Principles on Ranking, these efforts "respond to demands from consumers for easily interpretable information on the standing of higher education institutions, stimulate competition among them, …and help differentiate among different types of institutions and different programs and disciplines" (IHEP, 2006). Despite strong criticism to the rankings' methodologies (and the practice of ranking in general), academics and administrators the world over pay close attention to these rankings for the inevitable effect they will have on their institution: they can see that in the United States, the long-standing *US News & World Report* college rankings has become an

incredible power-player in American higher education for its singular ability to drive shifts in public opinion over institutions.

However, any discussion of quality, whether it is for the further opportunity of the best and brightest students or for the vocational and citizenship training of average students, inevitably comes back to one single question: how do we pay for it? For a very long time, the countries of Europe have held tightly to the social philosophy of public higher education for the public good, in other words that educating young people at the public's expense is worthwhile because the knowledge gained by those individuals will ultimately benefit communities and the greater society. Therefore, many young people are able to undertake university-level study at little to no direct cost to themselves thanks to financial support for academic enrolment at a public institution as well as living costs. However, national governments have not substantially increased allotments to public higher education budgets to accommodate the growing number of students, and for that reason it is becoming increasingly easy to find in Europe's public institutions overcrowding and outdated resources along with decreasing per-student spending. Back in 2004, the Lisbon Strategy stated that European countries should spend at minimum 2% of their GDP on higher education; as of 2008 only four countries—the Nordic countries—had reached that level (European Commission, 2008). And now, in the midst of worldwide economic recession, higher education budgets are even more at risk; in fact the European University Association (EUA) found in a recent study that of 25 surveyed countries, 13 planned to cut higher education funding at least mildly (EUA, 2010). To cope with these shifts in public funding, universities are increasingly evaluating alternative sources of income to fill in funding gaps, and the establishment of tuition fees is one such means. As of the 2007/08 academic year, 13 European countries have no fees to attend a public institution, 9 countries have fees of less than or equal to EUR 500 per year, and 8 countries have fees greater than EUR 500 per year (CESifo, 2007), but changes are underway in light of tough economic times and fundamental policy shifts.

How to create high quality university programmes while maintaining a democratic commitment to equal access and affordability has become one of the fundamental questions that European institutions must grapple with in their attempts to modernise and maintain relevance on a worldwide scale. Europe's universities lag behind the other highly developed areas of the world in some key statistical indicators at least loosely correlated to quality: for example, according to this year's OECD Education at a Glance, per-student spending in the US and Canada outpaces any European OECD country by a substantial margin (OECD, 2010). And, as much as rankings can be construed as an indicator of quality, the highest

ranked European university in this year's AWRU list, which weighs prominence of scientific publications, stands at 22 (AWRU, 2010). On the other hand, though, Europe is succeeding in attracting international students in part because of its unparalleled affordability, as it is in retaining its own students within the bounds of the EHEA as well. Also, European universities are not creating a student debt crisis as is developing in the US and, to a smaller extent, in Canada (Tompor, 2010). European ministries of higher education and the hundreds of institutions they oversee find themselves at a crossroads: on the one hand, it is becoming increasingly clear that for many institutions in many parts of Europe, the old ways of doing things are severely hindering their ability to provide an education relevant to the needs of twenty-first century students. Yet, on the other hand, European public higher education is unique in the world for its commitment to democratic access and its genuine sense of greater purpose in society. Policymakers, university administration, and students alike must work together to find a way to grow a culture of quality among European universities while still maintaining a strong public commitment to the financial (and emotional) support of higher education, such that young people throughout Europe — regardless of their own ability to pay for it — can earn a higher degree and return benefit to their society later in life.

2. Outcomes of the students' discussions

At the UNICA Student Conference 2010 in Rome, a total of 23 students representing the universities of the capitals of Europe gathered together in the group debating the student perspective on how to balance quality and access in European universities of the twenty-first century. Just as universities across Europe present a widely varied picture of this situation, the students participating in this particular forum similarly brought an array of experiences and opinions to the discussion. Over the course of the four forum discussion sessions, the students became acquainted with each other's points of view and by the end of the conference the group had reached some common conclusions that make up the student perspective on fees, quality, access, and university choice.

During the first day of the conference, discussions were primarily focused on discovering the differences of experiences and opinions that the students brought with them to Rome. Following our first session's introductory presentation by the Italian representative in our forum, the group set to work getting to know the current landscape of funding and quality assurance systems in their respective home countries. To do so, students were split into two groups so that they could be exposed to the widest variety of perspectives at one time but with time efficiency in mind. Students were asked to share with their group their country's

overall student fees structure (if applicable), the availability of grants or loans for shortcomings in individual funding, the current political climate toward public higher education support, and the effect of the worldwide economic recession on their country's higher education finances. Right away it was clear that the students had very different points of view, mostly depending on their country origin.

In the afternoon of the first day, the students dug deeper into the issues at hand by way of rotating small group discussion. Students were divided into "teams" of three, and the teams rotated to form changing discussion groups of six. The questions progressed in complexity so that each further discussion among the groups built on the conclusions of the previous round; furthermore, because the students changed groups for each question they were able to have small-group discussions with every other person in the forum over the course of the afternoon. In each round, the students were given time to debate within their small group, and then they summarised their conclusions (or disagreements, in many cases) for everyone in the room. Oftentimes all the groups gave similar answers, yet in the instances of disagreement between groups further debate ensued. Also, the forum chair provided thought-provoking questions and contrary points of view at this time for the students to consider. Questions during these rounds of debate began with discussions of quality: what it means in higher education, how it could be defined and measured, and what elements of it are most important for students before and during their time in a university. Next, the issue of quality was balanced against that of fees and overall education finances: whom higher education benefits, who should pay and how to incentivise efficiency, how universities could gain greater financial resources, etc. And finally, students were asked to brainstorm ways in which they and other students can act to best advocate for their point of view.

The second day of the conference was spent taking the disagreements from the previous day and turning them into common conclusions and consensus. Prior to the morning session, the forum chair had compiled the main discussion points from the previous day and from the students' pre-conference abstracts, and had divided the points into the three categories first established during the presentation by the forum's Italian representative: quality, rankings/evaluating universities, and fees. The students were split into three groups to review one of the lists of key points of previous analysis. Within these lists, there were redundancies, contradictions, and elements acceptable to some students but not others; each groups' responsibility was to work through these difficulties to reach consensus. However, given the wide range of viewpoints within each group, the final consensuses that emerged were unfortunately quite general. Nevertheless, the secondary conclusions, though not agreed upon by all, were still useful for breadth of information.

By the last session, the forum's conclusions were fairly clear, though they were boiled down to the most essential (and least controversial) elements. The students divided themselves into two groups to formulate the forum's contribution to the Rome declaration and to design the final presentation. The students constructing the declaration contribution worked diligently to transform the forum's complicated and controversial topic into a direct and clear statement of the students' most important priorities for the issue, though debate continued until the last possible minute. Those working on the final presentation decided that the most accurate way to portray the work of the forum was to show the level of differences and disagreement among the students; they created a video in which impromptu interviews with other conference attendees highlighted the varying scenarios of funding and fees and the vague nature of assessing quality. Overall, the students arrived at a straightforward yet meaningful consensus that reflected all of their widely varying experiences and points of view, and that also represents a highly relevant and important viewpoint in the question of how to balance higher education quality and accessibility.

3. Key Points and Conclusions

The topic areas of this forum — quality, institutional assessment, and fees — are interwoven and interdependent. However, it is possible (and, in many ways, necessary) to separate the issues for closer analysis. To directly answer the forum's topic question, the students unequivocally believe that it is possible to have high quality public universities with low fees, but as was revealed through the group's debates the exact means to reach that end have to be determined country-by-country, even institution-by-institution. With transparency and efficiency as drivers, European institutions of the twenty-first century must strive for the highest possible quality according to their stated sense of institutional purpose and roles they fill in their societies, whether it is to compete for the best and brightest students in the world or to faithfully educate and train the youth of its local community. Yet this must also be done with constant attention paid to the ability to access such education for all those qualified. At their very core, European institutions of higher education are important foundational bodies for an open and democratic society; the governments that oversee them and the taxpayers that fund them must be continually reminded of this value so that public commitment, both financial and emotional, remains strong.

3.1 Defining and Building Quality

Higher education as a social institution long operated with a very simple internal assumption of quality: those responsible for imparting the education particular to a university — i.e. the academics — had been trained and credentialed by the university itself, and therefore universities were only bound to their own sense of quality, not any concrete measure or characteristic. However, with the proliferation of institutions and the introduction of market forces into higher education, outside perspectives on what constitutes 'quality' in higher education have grown in importance. In most industries, the striving toward 'quality' is comprised of first outlining the desired outcomes and then measuring the degree of achievement of those pre-stated outcomes. In higher education, though, the definition of desired outcomes (and even less, how to measure them) is a complex matter that has yet to be fully mastered. Many institutions and independent organisations, even employers, have come up with their own codes of what quality means for university education. The term 'high quality' is a most certainly relative one, with the answer depending on the person to whom the question is posed.

For students, the vagueness of the term 'high quality' remains. However, there are several clear and measurable factors that students deem as highly relevant to the discussion. Defining and building quality, as was agreed upon by the students, is an integral aspect to the modernisation of higher education throughout the EHEA. First, the students felt that even though there would certainly be variation from field to field and from institution to institution, some important factors that signified 'quality' to them are their employability following graduation, their unencumbered mobility for study or training, their opportunities for self-development and personal growth, their ability to partake in practical studies alongside theoretical studies, their access to research-based teaching, and their university's comprehensive adherence to international standards (such as the ECTS). Also, students felt that a spirit of innovation and effective use of technology was generally correlated to institutional quality, as was the degree to which faculty evaluation and use of financial resources was transparent and open information. And lastly, another factor that was important to some students in this discussion of quality is the institution's worldwide prominence. However, not all students felt this was a useful indicator of quality.

Students see several trends afoot in various areas of the world that they feel would drive forward quality improvement efforts in European higher education institutions. The first and most important of all of these is that European institutions would benefit greatly from greater autonomy and less bureaucratic dependence on national or regional governments. Through the development of dynamic administrative structures within institutions, universities would be able to adapt to changing times and new generations of students more effectively.

Parallel to this, the students also felt that allowing for competition among institutions within a national system would boost the overall quality of all institutions in that system, regardless of institutional profile or purpose; if pushed into competition for resources, both material and human, institutions will generally do their best to secure them. Also, innovation and investment in new technologies is crucial for the modernisation of institutions and for their ability to compete in the global higher education market; such a change, while perhaps requiring greater resources now, could result in cost savings in the future. This effort would have a simultaneous benefit of improving the attractiveness of public institutions to highly-qualified potential faculty and staff. Overall, the students stressed time and again the importance of transparency and efficiency in university operations, which also serves to the building up of cultures of quality in higher education institutions.

One last but very important element of the quality discussion is the role of quality assurance (QA) agencies in the strengthening of European higher education. As previously mentioned, the degree to which quality assurance agencies are autonomous and independent in their evaluations varies throughout the EHEA. Therefore, the students unanimously believed that the only way for the quality assurance agency system to build any sort of credibility and utility is through complete independence from institutional or governmental affairs. Moreover, the results of such QA exercises are not widely available or even understandable; such results should be published in clear language and be available to all via the internet. Finally, permanent student representation within such QA agencies, as well as their active participation in the actual QA process, would give students meaningful enfranchisement in the quest for quality.

3.2 Judging Quality and University Choice

As higher education expands on a global scale and an ever-increasing number of students search beyond their local community for education, the ability to compare institutions has become indispensable. Currently, the most widely used means of this is through 'league tables', or rankings. However, these rankings have not yet solved the previous-raised question of how to measure (or even how to quantify) intangible things such as quality of instruction, faculty engagement, likelihood for success following graduation, etc. Instead, they turn to more easily quantifiable things such as research output and per-student spending. Overall, the students were opposed to university rankings as they currently exist; instead of promoting genuine improvement, the rankings incentivise universities to make superficial changes that push them up a numbered list. Moreover, most of the components

of such rankings are of little use to students in choosing a university, and on top of that the information about a school that goes into its ranking calculation is frequently unavailable.

The students were encouraged by the shifts in methodology made in the U-Map and U-Multirank efforts, yet in their opinion further evolution is necessary to create a tool for institutional comparison truly useful to students in their university choice. First, institutions should not be regarded as monolithic, homogenous entities with a single standard of quality throughout, as this is simply not the case. Instead, comparisons should be made by programme or department so that the student knows the relative value of the programme they are considering. Second, elements that students consider most useful should be incorporated into these comparisons: post-graduation employment statistics, student mobility (both in-coming and out-going), commitment to internationalisation (international collaborations and opportunities for faculty and students), teaching quality (gauged by frequent student opinion surveys), per-student spending, and availability of financial support.

The students had very clear objections to not only the methodology of current ranking schemes, but also to the very idea of a numbered ranking. Again, the worry is that universities will only make changes motivated by the desire to move up a number of positions in the ranking. Also, the singular rankings do not reflect relative strengths and, more importantly, weaknesses of any given institution. Further, the degree of difference between institution number 10 and institution number 30 may be minor in real life, but the repercussions of such a difference in ranking could be significant — it would affect prestige, ability to attract students and faculty, etc. Therefore, the students proposed a tool for university comparison that more closely resembled a 'band-based' index, similar to a bond credit rating system. In this system, universities would fall into clearly delineated and hierarchical categories (such as AAA to C, as with bond ratings), but within a category universities would not be differentiated in a hierarchical fashion. Categories could be designed to reflect different institutional purposes so that similar institutions are only compared with one another. Something similar is already underway with the U-Map and U-Multirank actions; however, if these tools are to be useful to students they should include the factors listed previously that will truly help students with their own evaluations of institutions.

Finally, even though students are increasingly looking beyond their hometowns toward institutions better suited to their aspirations, traditional factors in university choice still very much apply. Students decide which university to attend by, as they called them, the "Four F" factors: family, friends, fame, and finance. Family input still figures largely into students' university choice, and the vast majority of European students still stay fairly close to home

for their university education. Friends also influence decision-making, as oftentimes students want to be stay close to high school peers. The other two factors, fame and finance, are rapidly increasing in importance — for some students, these two factors far outweigh the other two. Now that once-equal public institutions are diverging in their reputations and their offers of support, students must weigh these factors in their decision-making. Students from financially stable families may be able to afford the university of their choice regardless of the cost; however, the real concern in this development is of course the students who cannot afford it yet are still deserving and qualified. Ultimately, these four factors will persist as drivers of student decision-making, but with the shifting landscape of institutional differentiation and public financing, student priorities in decision-making may change.

3.3 Student Fees and the Nexus of Quality and Cost

Aspirations of high quality (regardless of what exactly that means) among European public institutions reflect a key evolution in the modernisation of higher education. Clearly it is no longer sufficient for institutions to merely expect students to come to them; students now have choices in where to attend university, so institutions must work to attract and retain students in order to guarantee a continued existence. However, rising financial needs of institutions due to expanding enrolments and increased expectations have so far been largely unmet by generally stagnant public financial support from national governments. As such, students strongly believe that the potential for high quality institutions in Europe does not rest upon a movement away from public financing, which would certainly include tuition fees; instead, students believe that high quality institutions, from the most highly-regarded national university to the community-based vocational training institute, are of such high value to society that sufficient public funding — the one just, equitable, and democratic means of funding — is absolutely necessary for their continued relevance. This will require an unwavering commitment on the part of governments and taxpayers to the democratic mission of public higher education, with access for all those qualified. Therefore, it is absolutely possible to have a high quality institution with low or even no fees—it simply contingent upon a conscious commitment to public support of higher education.

In the current worldwide economic crisis, the vulnerability of public higher education funding has become all too clear. For that reason, reform in how exactly funding is approved may provide more stability. Students agreed that multi-year funding contracts between national governments and institutions, or even funding offset by a few years, would allow institutions to better predict and plan for the amount of money they are due to receive. Even if there is sufficient funding on the part of government, however, institutions must act with keen

efficiency and transparency so that they money they are given is fairly and logically spent. With the further development of independent quality assurance (QA) systems in Europe, the QA process could take on a key role in the evaluation of institutional expenditures and make recommendations for streamlining processes and cutting wasteful spending. The QA agencies are uniquely positioned to evaluate financial efficiency across departments and, more importantly, across an entire national system; also, QA agencies are (or will hopefully be) closely attuned to worldwide best practices in the unique challenges of public higher education funding. Most importantly, though, financial efficiency and transparency is just as important a part of the development of a 'quality culture' in European public higher education as curricular reforms and other modernisation efforts.

Even though all students agreed on the importance of a philosophical commitment to public higher education funding, any step beyond that was highly controversial. Some students hold firmly to the concept of no-fee public higher education; however, other students have seen a very different reality of public higher education and as such are open to other possibilities for diversified funding. Other possible streams of funding include charitable donations from corporations or individuals, further support from the European Union, income from research and patents, and (as a last resort) student tuition fees. Charitable donations and income from research can be fraught with ethical challenges, namely over-influence of corporate interests, potential for corruption, and unequal distribution of funding heavily favouring fields with strong business ties. Nevertheless, these alternative forms of income are an un-tapped resource for European institutions; in particular, charitable donations on the part of alumni could be particularly successful if philanthropy is incentivised through means such as income tax deduction schemes.

As student tuition fees are seemingly inevitable in some parts of Europe, it is of utmost importance that care be taken in the development of policies and actual practices so that equal access to a university education remains the absolute highest priority. First, any instatement of tuition fees or fee increases should be set according to a clear economic index, whether it's a nation's purchasing power of individuals, GDP, or inflation. Second, any tuition fees and individually-bore living expenses should be backed up by ample and flexible financial support schemes, which primarily should be constituted by partial to full need-based grants. If student loans become part of such support schemes, it is absolutely necessary that national- and European-level safeguards be put in place to protect students from predatory lending; the European Union could even create a system of interest-free student lending so that any necessary loans will be portable and ethically supplied. And third, some national systems have instituted fees as punishment for poor academic

performance (or grants as rewards for excellent performance); national governments, institutions, and quality assurance agencies must monitor faculty actions for conflict of interest in the grading of students to avoid foul play in this realm. In the eyes of some students, the introduction of a slight, nominal tuition fee accompanied by partial to full grant funding for those who cannot pay accomplishes the goals of diversification of income streams and incentivisation of efficiency in student degree completion, yet it still provides a means for equal access to public higher education. Alternatively, students could be charged fees as the consequence of insufficient progress through their degree: normal semesters would be free while overage semesters would involve a tuition fee charge.

Overall, national government involvement in public higher education is changing as modern society continues to evolve. As universities demand more autonomy in order to better manage their operations and build cultures of quality and innovation, national governments should not respond by decreasing interest in the affairs of academia; instead governments should shift their attention to preserving the democratic nature of European public higher education. This could include active preservation of less profit-driven fields such as the humanities, unwavering support of individual students and their ability to afford a university education, and even investments in information technology and research facilities for future benefit. It is possible that universities may have to turn to alternative sources of funding to supplement public contributions; however, with a strong public commitment to the democratic philosophy behind public higher education and an institutional focus on efficiency and productivity, such a need could potentially be delayed or avoided altogether.

4. Recommendations

In the matter of balancing the high quality imperative with democratic access and affordability to all, the participants of the UNICA Student Conference 2010 recommend:

To university rectors:
- Advocate for the societal value of public higher education that is accessible to all
- Create dynamic administration structures and means for greater autonomy, and increase transparency in use of financial resources
- Commit to efficiency improvements and sustainable enrolment figures and invest in new technologies and innovation, especially as a cost-saver for the future
- Require "lifelong learning" or training for faculty and staff on current best practices
- Value and publish student surveys on teaching quality and advising resources
- Continue implementation of the ECTS and other international standards (e.g., ESG)
- Focus on employability for after graduation through advising, training programs, etc., and emphasize practical learning alongside studies of theory
- Avoid over-linkage of student performance and fees to avoid faculty conflict of interest

- Investigate private investment in higher education but with utmost concern for ethics, and distribute funding equitably among departments

To national policymakers:

- Make investment in higher education a political priority and prioritize public higher education spending for democratic access
- Allow autonomy of institutions
- Commit to efficiency improvements
- Allow independence of quality assurance agencies, promote enforcement of European Standards & Guidelines and require quality assurance agencies to collect student opinions—and to use them
- Balance fees, when necessary, with sufficient, low-risk support schemes and adjust fees, when necessary, to indices such as GDP, inflation, etc.
- Use fees, when necessary, to promote efficient degree completion (overage semesters)
- Reform funding schemes to multi-year or future-distribution contracts and create tax incentives for individual philanthropy to higher education

To European policymakers:

- Enforce European Standards & Guidelines, particularly independence of QA agencies, and facilitate and further incorporate student participation in QA process
- Consider factors important to student's university choice in the design of a Europe-wide ranking
- Create consumer protections for students, especially in their use of loans and consider creation of Europe-wide zero-interest student loan system

To fellow students:

- Motivate each other to action in questions of quality and fair funding
- Demand participation in QA process
- Take surveys seriously so that they are a useful tool

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