CHAPTER 11

Social Diversity in Research Universities

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INTRODUCTION

U niversities were created in Europe more than 900 years ago. With determination, they have pursued their fundamental missions: research, scholarship and education. They have greatly contributed to the development of humanism, to the discovery of science and technology, to medical research. A not unimportant role has been to educate an elite, i.e. those who are willing to assume responsibilities in their social, cultural or economic environment. It would be difficult today to imagine a world without universities!

At an early stage, universities were organized along very similar patterns, with the same faculties and the same degrees. It was an exceptional time for universities: in the 15th century, students would travel along the major roads of science, from Hastings to Venice, all the way through Louvain, Köln, Heidelberg, Strasbourg and Basel... Quite unfortunately though, wars, revolutions and moving borders gradually led to diverging systems of higher education, up to the point where every single country would establish its own nomenclature and educational approach, to the dissatisfaction of those who promote a new and consensual Europe through the mobility of students as well as graduates offering their services.

Quite suddenly, as a follow-up to the events which shook the continent in the early 90s, the political world realized that universities needed to be reunified if the future of Europe was to be based on the younger generations. How would it be possible to unite a continent and to promote mobility with a variety of educational systems as rich as its cultural diversity? The impetus to concretize the new vision has been exceptionally strong and efficient: those

active in the educational world will remember the Sorbonne (1998), Bologna (1999), Salamanca and Prague (2001), Graz and Berlin (2003) as major milestones in the setting up of a new European organization of higher education which should be fully effective by 2010. With the Bologna declaration as a starting point, the whole process will have taken a little more than ten years which, by comparison with timescales proper to university life, is indeed very rapid.

On 19 September 2003, Ministers responsible for higher education from 33 European countries met in Berlin in order to review the progress achieved and to set priorities and new objectives for the coming years, with a view to speeding up the realization of the European Education Area (2003). Participants at the meeting expressed their general satisfaction, considering the astonishing progress accomplished over the four previous years; most countries have adopted new legal frameworks to integrate the Bologna Process in their educational structures. Although such a process meets wishes expressed in earlier conclusions of European Councils (2000 and 2002) aimed at making Europe a very competitive and dynamic economy, it is interesting to quote the very first paragraph of the "considerations, principles and priorities" set forth by the Ministers:

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

Such a declaration is well inspired and highly laudable, at a time when some countries might view education as a commercial good; it is also an appropriate response to the fears of those who consider the Bologna Process as a purely economic instrument. It raises, however, significant questions. While it is relatively easy to establish an inventory of European degrees, what do we know about present social inequalities in student populations? While road sheets are available to meet the 2010 objective of curriculum and degree harmonization, what should we do to reduce such social inequalities? Additionally, the Bologna Process will undoubtedly encourage the emergence of a limited number of prestigious research universities. How diversified will be the origin of their students?

The premise of the declaration is that, in a democratic country, the student population should reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the population. More precisely, in a region where a given percentage of the families live on a low income, the student population should be made up of the same percentage of children from such families. In most European countries, very low tui-

tion fees, compulsory school and study grants are obvious indicators of their will to promote equality of opportunity for every young student, whatever his or her history. What is the success of such policies and, in case of failure, what are the reasons?

In the present chapter, we wish to analyse statistics collected within a specific region and from a specific university[1]; they seem, however, to reflect a situation prevalent in Europe as they emphasize the need to reinvent some educational paths.
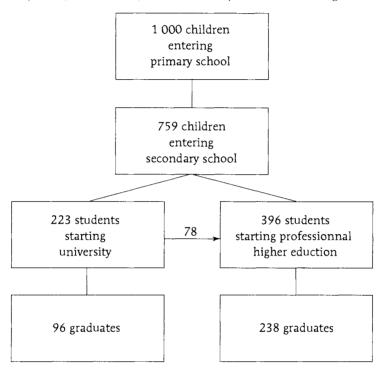
THE SAMPLE

Belgium is a trilingual country, where people speak Dutch, French and German; it is divided into three "communities", each of which organizes education on the basis of its language. The French Community of Belgium (FCB, for brevity) represents some 4.15 million people. Education is compulsory until the age of 18; primary and secondary schools both offer six-year programmes. Higher education is based on a binary system. The *Hautes Ecoles* (literally High Schools, not to be confused with the American terminology) offer professional education with mostly three-year programmes; they don't practise research. Universities offer a variety of programmes and they all base their teaching on research. In 2002, students at the *Hautes Ecoles* and the universities numbered 75,000 and 61,000 respectively.

A recent study devoted to the student population in the FCB contains a diagram which illustrates the movement of students between their entrance in primary school and the end of their educational trajectory; it is shown in Table 1 (Droesbeke, Hecquet & Wattelar, 2001). Every year, some 50,000 children in FCB enter primary school. Out of 1000 children, 759 students undertake secondary school while 630 of them obtain their six-year certificate. Beyond that level, 89 interrupt their education, 223 register at the university and 318 at the *Hautes Ecoles* (the latter also receive 78 students who leave the university system). Eventually, 96 students complete their university curriculum while 238 obtain a degree from the *Hautes Ecoles*. It is interesting to note that, at the freshman level, universities in FCB fit the UNESCO definition of "mass universities", since they register more than 15 % of a student generation; the situation is different at the other end, where only 9.6 % obtain a degree. We note however that 334 students out of 1000, or 33.4 %, obtain a degree from higher-education institutions

The question raised is the possible correlation between the curriculum of these students and their families' socioeconomic situation. Or else, is there a

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1 The present chapter is based on a report prepared in 2001-2002 by a joint commission of the Université catholique de Louvain and the MOC (Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien).

Table 1. Path followed by 1000 students entering primary school in the French-speaking community of Belgium. A number of students leaving primary or secondary school choose professional training.

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┌─────────────────────┐
│    1 000 children   │
│      entering       │
│   primary school    │
└─────────────────────┘
          │
┌─────────────────────┐
│    759 children     │
│      entering       │
│  secondary school   │
└─────────────────────┘
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223 students starting university	396 students starting professionnal higher eduction
96 graduates	238 graduates

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relationship between their parents education level and their own progress on the educational scale? Answers to such questions are essential when one analyses the evolution of the university population over the last 35 years: in 1967, 33,000 students were registered at university in FCB, while today they amount to 61,000. One may wonder whether, despite political efforts towards democracy, access to university education has followed the desired trend. It is not easy to answer, because of the lack of systematic surveys using the same questions over long periods of time, which would allow us to make a precise diagnosis and measure social progress in education. A partial response is provided below on the basis of surveys by A. Beguin (1976) and L. De Meulemeester (2001) devoted to the student population of the French-speaking Université catholique de Louvain (UCL, located in Louvain-la-Neuve).

UCL has some 20,000 students, i.e. one third of the student population in FCB, and offers programmes in all disciplines. Systematic studies have been undertaken since 1968 with first-year students; crosschecks with more general but less systematic surveys allow us to claim that our observations

globally apply to the student population of FCB, although local differences are evident. The central location of FCB in Europe and its average economic situation suggest that these observations make sense within a European perspective.

SOCIOECONOMIC ORIGIN OF THE FATHER

It is customary to classify professions into three categories: modest, average and high. Typically, small farmers, labourers and railroad workers belong to the first category, qualified employees and teachers to the second, holders of a liberal profession to the third. The same categories have been used for many years in inquiries conducted at UCL.

Table 2 shows how the distribution of the students' fathers along these categories has evolved between 1967 and 1999. One observes significant changes between 1967 and 1986: the proportion of students originating from a high socioeconomic category rose from 31.6 % to 40 %, while those from modest and average categories were decreasing somewhat. No significant change was observed beyond 1986. Such a table provides little information if the evolution is not compared to that of the general population. This is difficult to measure because national statistics do not refer to same categories, as they are relevant for the whole Belgian population. However, surveys of the workforce published by the National Institute of Statistics allow one to compare the percentage of students from modest socioeconomic origins with the percentage of men aged 39 to 59 years within the Belgian population.

Table 2. Percentage of students' fathers belonging to so-called modest, average and high socioeconomic categories from 1967 to 1999.

Year	1967	1986	1996	1999
Modest	21 8	20.4	17.0	17.6
Average	42 2	36.2	37.2	34.2
High	31 6	39.8	40.9	41.2

Table 3 shows that in 1967 the percentage of men belonging to the modest class was about 50 % while only 22 % of university students were born from a father belonging to the same group. The ratio between these two percentages has improved somewhat between 1967 and 1986, but it has stagnated ever since: students from the modest socioeconomic class are underrepresented at the university.

Table 3. Percentage of the male population belonging to the modest socioeconomic category from 1967 to 1999 compared with the distribution of students' fathers.

Year	1967	1986	1996	1999
In Belgium	51.0 (in 1970)	37.4 to 40.8	37.0 to 39.9	36.1 to 38.5
Students' fathers	21.8	20.4	17.0	17.6

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF THE PARENTS

We call first-generation students those who register for the first time in higher education. Quite fortunately, extensive data are available on the level of education of the parents of such students; UCL has collected them for many years at registration time. Additionally, global statistics on the educational level of the Belgian population are also available. We limit ourselves to the analysis of data collected in 1999; they are representative of an essentially static situation.

The first line of Table 4 shows the distribution of the educational level of men aged 39 to 59 in 1999 within the Belgian population. The second line shows the same distribution among the fathers of students who registered for the first time at UCL in 1999. Quite clearly, these lines highlight major differences.

Table 4. Distribution in % of the educational level in 1999 of the male Belgian population and of the fathers of new students; *I: primary school, II: inferior secondary school, III: superior secondary school, IV: professional higher education, V: university.*

Level of education	Unknown	I	II	III	IV	V
Belgium		19.9	25.9	29.3	14.4	10.5
Students' fathers	4.6	3.2	8.4	14.7	26.7	42.4

While some 20 % of the male population have not gone past primary school, only 3 % of the students' fathers belong to that group. At the other extreme, while 10 % of the male population hold a university degree, 42 % of the first generation students are sons and daughters of a university graduate. Such a situation is not new: in 1986, the Belgian male population counted 6 % of university graduates, while 37 % of the students had a father with a university degree.

Table 5. Rate of success in % of the first year at university as a function of the educational level of the father and of the mother; the indicated levels are the same as in Table 4.

Level of education	I	II	III	IV	V
Students' fathers	26.1	33.9	36.3	40.8	55.4
Students' mothers	18.8	35.5	32.3	48.0	60.5

It is thus obvious that, today, the chances of a child entering university are intimately related to the educational level of his or her parents; further statistics at UCL show that the same can be said about its chances of passing first year at the university. The first line of Table 5 indeed shows the rate of success of the first year as a function of the educational level of the father. The second line is even more revealing: it shows the influence of the education of the mother on the success of first generation students. While the rate of success varies between 26 % and 55 % with the father's diploma, it ranges between 19 % and 60 % when one considers the educational level of the mother.

To summarize, what were the chances for a child born in 1981 in FCB of entering university in 1999 and passing first year? The answer is given in Table 6. Statistical data show that 50,500 children were born in 1981 in FCB; on the basis of the first line of Table 4, we know how to distribute the educational level of their fathers. Eighteen years later, 9,500 students entered the university in FCB; on the basis of the second line of Table 4, we can again show their distribution as a function of the father's education. We calculate that the chances of getting to university were respectively 3.2 % and 79.6 % for children born from fathers who had completed primary school or the university. What were their accumulated chances of entering university and passing first year? We use the first line of Table 5 and obtain the last two lines of Table 6. The respective chances were 0.8 % and 44.1 %! Taking into account their mother's education would enhance the discrepancy.

Table 6. Chances of entering university in 1999 and of passing their first year for children born in 1981 as a function of the educational level of their father; the indicated levels are the same as in Table 4.

Level of education	I	II	III	IV	V
50500 children	10050	13080	14797	7272	5303
9500 students	319	836	1464	2659	4222
ratio (in %)	3.2	6.4	9.9	36.6	79.6
successful first year	83	284	531	1085	2339
ratio (in %)	0.8	2.2	3.6	14.9	44.1

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The final data of Table 6 are astonishing: they show that an educational system based on the best intentions may lead to unexpected results; in FCB, as in most European countries, primary and secondary schools are essentially free and compulsory, higher education is heavily subsidized and generally open to everyone. Such modes should favour equality of opportunity. It is, however, obvious that students from a modest socioeconomic origin are less present in higher education. Who are those who miss the university? First, those who can't register because they have not completed secondary school; they represent 37 % of a generation. Secondly, those 9 % who complete secondary school, but decide not to pursue their education. Finally, those who drop out of higher education.

Further research is needed on the reasons that govern these trajectories. One may wonder why so many students don't complete secondary school. One might argue about a deficit of social and cultural conditions in favour of intellectual work, lack of information, of experience or advice, or else the absence of horizons other than their initial social condition. The "non-choice" of higher education, more frequent in the modest class, may also originate from many factors such as school trajectories in options which do not favour the pursuit of higher education or the cost of expenses related to education. Erroneous representations of student life, of the chances of success, of perspectives for the future or, in some cases, the mirage of material success without education should also be mentioned.

The relationship between the rate of success in first year and the educational level of the parents is also of major concern. The objective assets of a student with ideal working conditions, with the necessary equipment and without financial worries are considerable. Additionally, the moral support of parents who have gone though the "system" and their awareness about how it works can be very helpful. Finally, it is clear that the type of school attended at an early age has a major influence on the educational path.

In a way, nobody is directly "responsible" for the inequalities described above. We observe an inexorable segregation that develops all along the educational trajectory, with its apex at the university. The phenomenon is not recent. It is another manifestation of the reproduction of elites described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1985).

The Bologna process in Europe might however enhance the inequality. It is clear that, in the future, a number of students will want to obtain their bachelor's degree in their home country and pursue their education in another. Such paths are likely to become more accessible to those who benefit from more favourable socioeconomic conditions.

What should be the role of research universities? Should they simply accept a situation for which they do not consider themselves responsible and pursue their secular task, or should they react? It seems obvious that, in order to fulfil its humanist mission, the research university should undertake programmes towards a better integration of society into their student body. Among a number of possible paths, they should:

- Collect data about their own students and evaluate the progress of social integration and equality.
- Offer their scholarly competence to the political world in order to detect the anomalies of the educational system and elaborate solutions.
- Cooperate with secondary schools and help them to open horizons for those who have not yet discovered them.
- Create paths of "second chance" for those who wish to return to education. They should also offer bridges between various levels of education. In particular, they should promote the use of information technologies to that end.
- Devote special attention to first-year students who are not aware of the university system and its methods. In particular, modern pedagogical initiatives based on individual and group activities may not be familiar to everyone.

These are general trends that universities could follow, although selective and targeted actions should also be considered. The path to social equality in the education of the elite (as defined in the Introduction) will be long; it is however indispensable as part of the reinvention of the research university.

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