

Gender Equality

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GENDER ISSUES are generally addressed with three foci in mind: a focus on individuals; a focus on the economy, particularly the labor market; and a focus on quality and productivity in industries, firms, or teams. The focus on individuals is the natural, direct approach to address these issues and is prevalent among people working at the front to improve gender equality. It is an approach of advocacy and permits discussions of various social problems. In contrast, the focus on the economy is not an approach of advocacy as such, and it is not that prominent. The focus is generally chosen when there is a discussion on untapped human resources or talent pools, or when there is a misfit between job openings and labor supply. Lastly, the focus on quality and productivity in industries, firms, or teams has become prominent in recent years and centers on the cultural aspects of work and the interplay between the various actors in the world of business.

It is this last focus we would like to dwell on in this note. In particular, I would like to discuss a thesis which states that *the pursuance of quality in the field of higher education demands gender equality*. From this perspective gender equality is a welcome — but necessary — byproduct in pursuing quality. To illustrate the thesis, I shall have to focus first on the notion of quality as far as European institutions of higher education — and in particular research universities — are concerned. This notion of quality is quite conventional and there appears to exist reasonable consensus regarding the general aims of higher education among scholars, administrators and decision-makers. Next, I shall have to address the means by which to achieve quality. Here, the range of opinions is much broader and positions are fragmented by national cultures or political positions. Furthermore, the discrepancy between shared aims on the one hand and disputed

⁰The note presents a thesis which ties gender equality to quality management (Gender Equality = Quality). The note was originally formulated in preparation of the “2nd European Conference on Gender Equality in Higher Education” (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich, September 12-15, 2000), to provide a basis for a panel discussion, but was subsequently not used. It is reissued here in slightly edited form.

means on the other might call into question the consensus on what constitutes quality. Aims are operationalized in terms of means, and these reveal in some detail what the general wording on aims might conceal. In other words, if certain means are lacking, if structures are missing, if policies are deficient, quality might not be within our reach.

What constitutes quality in European higher education, or worded differently, how can we identify quality? To answer this question we will have to look at some output indicators. Not the innards of our institutions are relevant in this context, not the way we teach, research or administer, but what we produce. As educational institutions we form, educate, train and retrain generations of professionals, teachers, research staff and faculty. Today's environment demands that these graduates are not only bright and well educated in their own field, but also creative, flexible and communicative individuals with emotive depth and broader interests. As institutions focusing on research, we want to deepen our knowledge of various phenomena, extend the boundaries of science and technology, and help in the solution of problems. In order to engage in this research, we require the same talents we try to nurture as educational institutions. We cannot produce clones with the attributes described, but we can educate a diverse spectrum of people that exhibit these attributes as a group: young and older individuals, females and males, natives and people from afar.

Do European institutions produce this output? Not to the extent they could. In comparison to our idealization of quality — and in comparison also to a range of existing institutions in Europe and elsewhere — too many institutions and higher education systems have yet a long distance to go. If we look at the internals of these institutions, at the means by which output is produced, we can identify a range of symptoms of ailments, of deficiencies. The literature on higher education is full of discussions of such phenomena. Deficiencies are primarily characteristic of tertiary education systems under stress, that is, systems which have to cope with lack of funding or retrenchment in the wake of mass higher education, or systems which are not competitive enough for other reasons. However, deficiencies are not simply caused by external factors against which managers or decision-makers in the field of higher education cannot do much; they are more a sign of maladjustment of institutions or entire higher education systems to new environments or new conditions, of inappropriate traditions still prevailing.

Maladjustment in higher education is quite a common phenomenon, but it is not easily recognized because of a lack of a competitive arena for institutions of higher education. Although higher education is seen as a motor of economic prosperity, the relationship between higher education and the re-

spective economies is rather tenuous: we cannot assess higher education by looking at macro-economic indicators alone. But we can compare higher education institutions and engage in benchmarking. If we do this, we will see that the best-run systems and most effective institutions differ in significant ways from the rest. Well-run higher education systems are diversified, not monolithic. They cater to different audiences but provide for student flows between different tiers of — or different institutions or departments within — the system. Their public service mission is dominant and institutions are managed in entrepreneurial ways. Curricula are driven by the needs of students and society, not by disciplinary paradigms. Animation and active learning take preference over know-how transfer and instruction. Research is governed by ability and talent, not by status.

If we look further into the workings of well-run systems or institutions, we shall see that academic traditions play a role, and rightly so. However, well run systems or institutions cherish traditions to the extent that they are functional in securing autonomous and prosperous entities in the field of higher education. Necessary changes may not come easy and they may require discussion over some time. But they are not blocked over prolonged periods and change management is reinforced by adequate organizational structures, budgetary mechanism and quality cultures. Well managed systems or institutions recognize and foster talent; seniors work with juniors in collegiate and mutually supportive ways; competence can be accumulated and careers can be built in a step by step fashion; career changes are tolerated or even encouraged; initiatives are spurred, not suppressed; no rigid disciplinary boundaries prevail and cross-disciplinary activities abound. In education, students are guided to institutions and areas of studies which cater to their particular abilities and interests; a wide spectrum of curricular choices are offered and advising is taken seriously; dysfunctional personal dependencies which unduly bind students or assistants to faculty are minimized; social competence is fostered and teamwork is practiced.

The higher education systems and institutions with the sketched characteristics are not utopian: they do exist now, if only in restricted populations. Our agenda here is not to reform higher education as such, our agenda is gender equality. But we may note the following: systems and institutions with characteristics as sketched pursue quality; furthermore, they implicitly provide an environment of gender equality, a space where each of us can better develop according to societal needs and to her or his respective abilities and intentions. Hence, *quality in higher education (Q) implies gender equality (E)*¹. Conversely, if

¹Q ⇒ E

we pursue our agenda by providing the humus on which gender equality can develop, we shall implicitly improve the quality of higher education institutions. Gender equality issues might serve as a testing ground for quality issues in general, as the trout, metaphorically speaking, to test the quality of the current of higher education: if gender equality gets realized, quality itself shall be attained. Hence, *gender equality (E) in higher education implies quality (Q)*² and, by implication:

$$\text{Gender Equality} = \text{Quality}^3$$

² $E \Rightarrow Q$

³ $(Q \Rightarrow E \wedge E \Rightarrow Q) \iff E = Q$