

MODERNIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES: THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE AND THE MODERN PROJECT

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Abstract:

In the 21st century, modernization of higher education systems has become a crucial component of national development strategies, particularly in developed regions such as the European Union. This paper explores the transformative processes undertaken in European higher education institutions, with a special focus on the MODERN project—an EU-funded initiative designed to enhance leadership, governance, and management in the sector. The article highlights how policy frameworks, strategic integration, and collaborative platforms contribute to a more adaptive, knowledge-driven economy. The study also discusses the systemic challenges and innovations associated with higher education governance and the institutional response to globalization, technological advancement, and economic integration.

Keywords: higher education, modernization, European Union, MODERN project, university governance, Bologna Process, education reform, knowledge economy, institutional management.

As developed nations continue integrating their economies and social systems within broader geopolitical frameworks such as the European Union, higher education has emerged as a key strategic tool for fostering innovation, economic resilience, and social cohesion. The European Commission has repeatedly emphasized the centrality of education, research, and innovation in realizing its broader objectives, as seen in numerous high-level policy documents and initiatives.

The Strategic Importance of Higher Education Modernization

In Europe, universities are no longer confined to traditional roles of teaching and basic research. They are now considered central actors in shaping a knowledge-based economy. The competitiveness and global relevance of national education systems are closely linked to their ability to implement strategic reforms and enhance institutional capacity. Modernization thus encompasses multiple dimensions—academic, administrative, technological, and financial—each vital for improving the responsiveness of universities to external challenges.

The MODERN Project: Objectives and Framework

Launched under the ERASMUS program, the MODERN project (European Platform Higher Education Modernisation) represents a cornerstone initiative in EU efforts to reform university leadership and governance. The project was developed in response to the fragmented and often inconsistent training and advisory services available to higher education managers across Europe. Under the leadership of the European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU), MODERN brought together 10 core institutions and 26 partner organizations, including universities, research centers, and professional associations specializing in higher education governance. Between 2008 and 2011, MODERN systematically analyzed existing governance training programs across Europe and their alignment with the actual needs of universities.

The MODERN project provided structured platforms for the dissemination of best practices and innovative management approaches. It emphasized short-term and long-term training opportunities for both young professionals and experienced administrators. The thematic focus areas included:

- Strategic institutional governance;
- Regional innovation;
- Quality assurance mechanisms;
- International integration;
- Financial sustainability;
- Knowledge transfer and commercialization.

A series of thematic conferences and analytical reports were organized as part of the project's outputs. One significant report, prepared by scholars

Harry de Boer and Jon File from the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, examined both internal and external dimensions of university governance reforms.

MODERN promoted peer-to-peer learning and the piloting of innovative training modules to improve governance competence across institutions. This approach not only facilitated knowledge exchange but also contributed to the overall professionalization of educational leadership throughout Europe. These mechanisms enhanced institutional adaptability and resilience in an era marked by global competition and policy shifts.

Broader Context: Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy

The European higher education modernization movement gained significant momentum in the late 1990s, most notably with the 1999 Bologna Declaration. The declaration aimed to enhance compatibility, comparability, and competitiveness among European higher education systems. The 2000 Lisbon Strategy further reinforced these objectives by envisioning a unified, knowledge-driven European economy. It called for integrating fragmented national education frameworks into a cohesive regional system capable of supporting economic growth and social development. Despite notable progress, several challenges persist in aligning governance reforms with the diverse institutional and national contexts across Europe. The variability in legal frameworks, administrative traditions, and political priorities has often complicated implementation. However, the continuous support from EU institutions and cross-border collaborations has provided a stable foundation for ongoing reform. Although the diversity of the European higher education system has long been regarded as one of its key strengths, coordinated efforts toward greater transparency, quality, growth, efficiency, and excellence are considered essential for transforming Europe into a global leader in education and the economy. The 2007 Modernisation Agenda identified the modernization of education, research, innovation, and higher education institutions as central pillars of the Lisbon Strategy. Achieving these goals, however, requires appropriate governance structures and mechanisms.

In this context, the European Commission has increasingly emphasized the critical role of universities in building a knowledge-based society and economy. As the Commission noted: “Europe must strengthen the three

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fundamental components of the knowledge triangle—education, research, and innovation. Universities are pivotal in all three areas.” The Commission also observed that governments are struggling to keep up with rising costs in science and education, which hampers the delivery of high-quality teaching and cutting-edge research. Since 2003, one of the most pressing concerns facing European universities has been a lack of competitiveness. The main criticism lies in their underutilized potential to drive economic growth, enhance social cohesion, and generate high-quality, high-volume employment opportunities.

Among the issues identified by the European Commission are the persistence of inequality and uniformity trends in many national higher education systems, an excessive focus on narrow disciplines and traditional teaching methods, and insufficient demonstration of world-class outcomes. Nonetheless, the Commission underscores the importance of enhancing the quality and appeal of European universities, strengthening human capital, and ensuring internal coherence while preserving the diversity of higher education systems. Such advancement inevitably demands deep governance reforms in the sector.

In response, the Council of the European Union adopted a new resolution on November 23, 2007, titled “Modernising Universities for Europe’s Global Competitiveness.” The resolution once again emphasized education, research, and innovation as the foundational elements of the Lisbon Strategy. It built upon the ideas articulated in several previous Commission Communications, including:

“Efficient Investment in Education and Training: An Imperative for Europe”

“The Role of Universities in the Europe of Knowledge”

“Mobilising the Brainpower of Europe: Enabling Universities to Make Their Full Contribution to the Lisbon Strategy”

“Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation”

The resolution reaffirmed that modernizing higher education and research is a critical step toward strengthening Europe’s global competitiveness. Yet, success in this endeavor will require overcoming a range of economic barriers. Undoubtedly, the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations, the Lisbon Strategy, and the Modernisation Agenda are not the only forces that have

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shaped European higher education institutions. In many Western European countries, reforms began as early as the 1980s, with today's transformations deeply rooted in those earlier efforts. These reforms have centered on redefining the relationship between the state and higher education institutions, expanding institutional autonomy, and reinforcing quality assurance and accountability. These themes were explored by Neave in the context of the “evaluative state” and further documented in Eurydice’s 2000 report on “Two Decades of Reform in Higher Education.” Processes of globalization, international integration, and privatization have also significantly influenced the current state of higher education. Notable developments in this context include the emergence of international academic programs and consortia, the introduction of tuition fees, the attraction of external research funding, and the establishment of private higher education institutions. Nevertheless, when seeking to identify a common factor underlying the current wave of European higher education reforms, many observers point to the increasing complexity of higher education systems and their growing exposure to market forces.

The abovementioned political initiatives have largely aimed to introduce market mechanisms and modern management practices into the higher education system. Concepts such as “accountability,” “New Public Management,” and “network governance” have taken center stage. These approaches are gradually displacing traditional state-led oversight and collegial models of academic governance. Government intervention is now being replaced by institutional governance focused on enhancing efficiency and responsiveness to the evolving needs of society. This shift is reflected in the introduction of new accountability mechanisms designed to ensure and guarantee quality. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to produce knowledge of practical relevance and to provide education aligned with contemporary demands. Some researchers, however, view these processes as being of a coercive nature.

As competition intensifies and institutional autonomy expands, universities are compelled to adapt to the expectations of diverse social groups—including students, employers, industry representatives, and other stakeholders. Currently, higher education institutions in Europe are predominantly funded by public sources. However, available statistical data

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reveal that European countries are struggling to match the level of investment directed toward education and R&D—particularly from the private sector—when compared to regions such as the United States, with the gap continuing to widen. In response, the European Commission recommended in its 2002 and 2005 strategic documents that member states double their overall investment in R&D and increase the share of industry-funded research from 56% to 66%. Nonetheless, achieving these goals has proven difficult, as economic instability makes it challenging for governments to provide adequate incentives to attract private sector investment in scientific research. In the education sector, cost-sharing policies have at times sparked negative reactions, as they may reduce access to higher education for certain socio-economic groups.

New EU member states, as well as countries participating in the Bologna Process but not yet part of the European Union, often operate under economically challenging conditions. The process of integrating into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requires a nuanced approach that takes into account varying cultural values, economic policies, organizational structures, and levels of gross domestic product. Despite these complexities, national governments remain the primary actors influencing higher education systems. They play a decisive role in establishing legal frameworks and shaping financial and administrative incentive structures. The success of reform efforts thus depends largely on the effectiveness of these incentive systems and the responses of key stakeholders—including students, faculty, industry representatives, and others within their sphere of influence. Ultimately, the success of higher education reforms is evaluated based on their acceptance, practical implementation, and the social and economic outcomes they produce within their respective contexts.

Conclusion

The modernization of higher education in Europe exemplifies how targeted policy initiatives, combined with institutional collaboration and strategic leadership development, can enhance the quality and relevance of higher education. Projects like MODERN demonstrate the importance of structured capacity-building efforts in achieving long-term educational reform. As

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Europe continues to evolve as a knowledge society, the modernization of higher education remains both a priority and a challenge.

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