

**Jo Ritzen:**

## **“A Chance for European Universities”**

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The book “A Chance for European Universities” arrives in a critique moment for Europe, which missed the goal of being the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, as established in Lisbon Agenda at the beginning of the millennium. Overall, Lisbon declaration emphasized the role of universities in its agenda, but nevertheless, the common tendency of budget cuts in higher education within different European countries in addition to governance and organizational issues have determined the failure of competitiveness of the European universities. Even though the scenario looks very disappointing, from the title the book delivers a clear optimistic message of “a chance for the European universities”. It provides a sense of alert on the European higher education landscape withdrawn, inward looking with lack of ambition, and it identifies a series of steps in restoring the Lisbon vision by contravention to the under-financing of European universities and by developing the “innovative” university.

The firm standpoint of the author, on the past, present and future state of the European universities, can be deduced from his long experience as a scholar involved in the economics of education, public finance and policy, as well as policy-maker at national and supra-national level. Jo Ritzen has served as President of Maastricht University from 2003-2010, Vice President at the World Bank and Minister of Education, Culture and Science of the The Netherlands. The book benefits widely of his broad and long experience in higher education, offering a comprehensive overview of the actual inhibitors of European universities’ competitiveness and giving tangible future grounds of action.

European universities are far from providing the basis for the sought European economic development. The author reports the overall inferiority of the European universities compared to the U.S. and the emerging Asian universities which clearly demonstrate to have perceived the importance of higher education as the best way to develop talent and economic growth, by doubling the expenditure for students than Europe. Still, there is a chance for the European universities to empower their role of creating a viable, creative, social and innovative Europe. The author analyses the grounds of the European universities’ ineffectiveness and inability to fully exploit their true potential and identifies several steps to innovate higher education by:

- finding a path towards sustainable and flexible differentiation between universities, in order to integrate a full spectrum of students and meeting the highly heterogeneous demand for educated manpower;
- reaching higher rates of internationalization through the use of English as a central language of teaching, research, administration and students service.

The author highlights the looming talent crisis in Europe catalyzed by demographics shifts and the European lack of attraction of students within and outside its borders, while the demand for specialized labor force is increasing. He advances the “European Statute” as a new avenue to enhance intra-European mobility. The European Statute requires that 10% of the European member countries universities to be governed and financed by European funds and by EU legislation by 2020. It would increase student mobility and facilitate cooperation between universities operating under the same statute;

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- stopping the continuous financial budget cut without providing room for additional finance. The role of private finance, other than tuition fees is rather limited in Europe, but students grants and loans can be an important contributor to universities equity. The student grants and loans system should be applicable Europe-wide rather than to single countries.
- assuring the transparency and quality of education, starting from internal controls of universities to a comparable rating of the degree courses offered by universities.

The above arrangements affect competition and cooperation between European countries, but the effects without a common legal framework can be adverse. The author advocates the convergence to a quasi-private legal framework treating universities as private entities even though they remain public, in order to ensure autonomy and empowerment to the universities' staff in providing the best possible solutions.

The book sheds light on the past, present and future challenges of the European universities. It analyses from different perspectives the actual inert state of the higher education system in Europe and identifies a succession of different factors that have determined its slack progress. Moreover, it gives significant insights on possible actions plan to undertake in order to revive the European universities landscape. This significant and unique contribution of this book, makes it addressable not only to scholars and students, but policy makers and specialists concerned with European universities governance, policy, financing, curricula planning, internationalization.