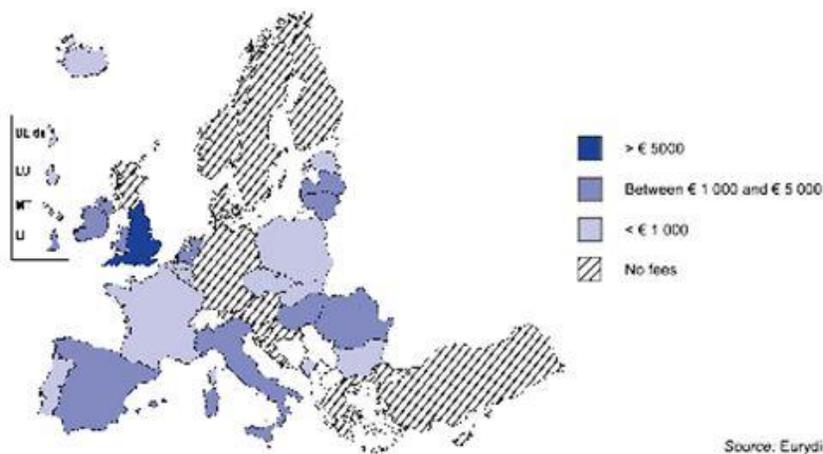




The crisis of public education: from European ideal to profit driven education

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As every year in September all around the world, many new students enrol at university. However, whether young people take this step or not does not depend simply on their preference for higher studies; the decision is increasingly influenced by their financial means to pay the fees and to cover the overall study costs, which has dramatically increased in recent years.



Source: Eurydice.

[From the Eurydice report,](#)

which annually collects data on university fees and support in Europe, we have taken the adjacent graph that shows for the year 2014-2015 the amount of full-time student fees, including tuition and administrative and additional fees for students who exceed a regular length of study for their first cycle of study.

The first remarkable aspect is the high variability of tuition fees which go from almost zero (or only consist of administrative fees) in northern countries such as Denmark, Germany, Austria, Finland and Norway, up to 1,000 EUR in France, Malta, Poland, Luxembourg, and reach the highest values in Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Netherlands and Slovenia. Particularly relevant is the case of the UK that, after the victory of the Tory party at the national election in 2010, introduced a radical reform in 2012 which tripled the amount of fees and reached the amount of GBP 9,000 (EUR 11,377) per year. These reforms provoked a massive protest among students, organised in the UK Uncut Movement and numerous university groups, as in the case of the LSE students that last year occupied their university and protested ‘against profit driven education.’ These protests continue: [there will be a national demonstration in London on the 4th of November](#)). Uncut which sees itself as part of a European and international movement does not ‘simply’ ask for free education in terms of no tuition fees and grants for all;

they propose a radically different organisation of society, based on a progressive fiscal system with high taxes for top incomes, minimum wages, abolition of zero hours contracts and reject the increasing involvement of corporations in university. They oppose the American model, where [‘the private-equity folks get cash and students take out loans’](#), a more democratic and inclusive education system, with free access and equality of opportunities.

One of the effects of the higher tuition fees in the UK has been the increase of students’ debts, with potential tremendous consequences for equality and social mobility. It is not a coincidence that one of the points of the political programme of Jeremy Corbyn, who recently became the leader of the Labour party, is exactly the abolition of university tuition fees and a public financing for higher education through direct taxation. Indeed, the rising economic pressure of a debt accumulated because of study loans, given the increasing difficulties to repay them because of worsening conditions the labour market is such that, in a recent survey conducted by an American finance site, [MyBankTracker](#), 30% of respondents declared to be disposable to sell an organ in order to cancel their student loans. On the internet, you will find many stories of [American graduated students](#) unable to repay their loans. They all express a common feeling of personal failure, economic injustice and deep social loneliness.

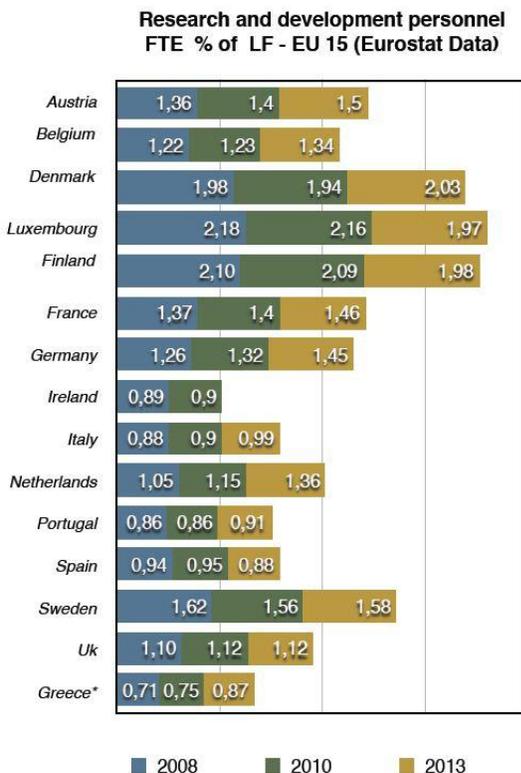
The effect of austerity measures on public education

For a long time, Europe has provided a different image, putting at the basis of its integration project the dissemination of education. However, the crisis and the blind application of austerity measures has hampered access and quality of public education, given the huge cuts in social spending recorded in many countries. [As reported by Eurydice](#), in 2009 many countries, especially central eastern Member States, followed by Spain and Italy in 2011, immediately reacted to the crisis by reducing the total education expenditure, whereas others, in particularly northern countries, maintained it stable or even slightly increased it. The level of education spending is one of the main political issues on which Europe’s voice is no longer audible, not taking into account a few rather weak and useless recommendations.

As a result, public access and support to university studies in EU Member States have remained the same in recent years or significantly worsened, as in the case of Italy, Portugal and the UK. Furthermore, loans have replaced grants in many countries as a way of financing studies. WE should also mention a case like Estonia where students who achieve 30 [ECTS](#) per semester and 60 ECTS per year do not have to pay fees, but if they achieve fewer credits, they can be charged by the university ‘for each missing ECTS’, as if the amount of knowledge contained in each credit was measurable directly in monetary terms and costs.

There is another important point: the amount of public funding dedicated to higher education does not only impact the level of tuition fees and the number of grants available, it also has important consequences for research activities at universities. In a recent article, published on an Italian website, [the author made a comparison between two universities](#): Cambridge, usually in the top list of best world universities and Pisa, an Italian university which figures among the best at national level, but has a lesser ranking in international classifications. In analysing their internal structures and funding systems, the author highlights the main difference in terms of ‘revenues for research’ allotted to the two universities: the Research Council (which receives

funding from the UK government's science budget) gives Cambridge a significantly larger amount than what is assigned to Pisa by the national Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR). Even if the initial discussion was aimed at outlining the doubtful objectivity of international rankings of top universities, which depend on a controversial choice of criteria, it is certainly interesting to consider how the progressive reduction of public funding dedicated to universities can negatively affect the innovative capabilities of countries in terms of research and development.



In fact, if we look at the amount of research, we can again notice significant differences across EU Member States which are usually also reflected in different innovation performances in terms of patents or incidence of high technology sectors in the overall economy. Since 2008, the annual compound growth rate of higher education researchers has been negative or very low in countries most affected by the crisis, which are also the countries recording a lower percentage of R&D personnel (that contains also higher education researches¹) over the labour force, as reported in the adjacent graph. Clearly, this trend contributes to widen national differences as well as differences among European countries on several dimensions regarding their development and level of inequality, which underlines once more the failure of the convergence process towards EU2020 targets.

¹) Definition from Eurostat: R&D personnel include all persons employed directly on R&D, plus persons supplying direct services to R&D, such as managers, administrative staff and office staff. The measure shown in this table is total R&D personnel in full time equivalents as a percentage of the economic active population. N.B. for Greece we have taken 2007,2011,2013.

