

EAHEP ROUND TABLE ON “AUTONOMY, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASIA AND EUROPE”

HANOI, VIETNAM, 25/26 NOVEMBER 2008

The Impact of Different University Bodies on University Governance

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A lot has changed in university governance in recent times. This is one of key topics of the contemporary debate on higher education but it used to be rather marginal only few decades ago. This is a particularly hot topic when we link *university governance* to *university autonomy*.

University autonomy is much older topic than *university governance*. It has been the key issue from the very beginning of the university as an institution but its essence has been for centuries related to a rather limited area linked to teaching and research and not to governance as we understand it today. Traditionally, *university governance* was mainly an issue of university *self-governance*, that is, an issue how to organise and perform teaching and research independently – without disturbances or damage caused by external influences. Within this horizon, a myth of *ivory tower* was constructed in modern times; however, it has always been rather a myth than a reality. Since the appearance of national country states around two centuries ago, university was very much *influenced by the (national) State*, particularly in the continental Europe.

Today's concept of university governance radically differs from traditions: the conceptual shift is linked, first of all, to the societal context characterised by the *transformation from elite to mass higher education* and – as we say it today – by the transition to *knowledge society* and *knowledge economy*. The shift is also linked to fast *internationalisation of higher education*. In Europe, on one hand, *national* higher education systems as well as (so-far predominantly) national institutions tend to converge and to form “*a common European Higher Education Area*” (the Bologna Process).¹ On the other hand, these systems and institutions have to reconsider and adapt to the emerging *global higher education* and to the emerging “*global university*”. Last but not least, *limited and decreasing public funds* for higher education constituted an important factor of this conceptual shift.

The phenomenon of mass higher education and other challenges put the need for *systemic reforms* onto national and institutional agendas: not only reforms of study structures but also *reforms of institutional governance*. The relationship between university and the State was importantly changed: the conceptual shift was remarkably described (Neave and Van Vught, 1991) as a move away from the traditional »*interventionary*« towards the new »*facilitatory state*«. The Eurydice study on twenty years of reforms in European

¹ See <http://www.bologna2009benelux.org> for details.

higher education (1980-2000) found that »*the major focus of legislation and policy was the management and control of higher education institutions and in particular the financing of such institutions*« (Eurydice, 2000). These processes put an immense impact also to internal university life – to university organisation and governance.

Expanding national higher education systems and increasing higher education internationalisation brought quite a simple message already in the 1990s: effective governance in higher education requires much more *decision-making freedom* at the *institutional level* (and not only, as traditionally, academic freedom). The concept of the *autonomy of universities* moved again to the centre of discussions but in a substantially different way than in previous times: a debate on autonomy was extended in terms of organisational, managerial and financial dimension as institutions had to search for a new balance with ‘the external world’ (i.e., with ‘stakeholders’) and search for alternative financial resources.²

These processes, of course, strongly reflected *within university* as an institution. Between the 1970s and 1990s not only societies but also universities underwent profound changes; and universities had to reconsider their mission. In Europe, the most important reflection of these trends was grasped in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* – a joint declaration of hundreds of universities on university autonomy (signed in Bologna, Italy, in 1988). It has had an immense impact to contemporary debates in Europe as well as in global context; since then, it has been a constant reference point in discussions.³

Let focus here to two sentences only. First, *Magna Charta* stressed the “fundamental principle” that “*the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies [...]. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power*”. Secondly, discussing later the means, it also stressed: “*To preserve freedom in research and teaching, the instruments appropriate to realize that freedom must be made available to all members of the university community.*”

In this light, we can now turn to the impact of different (internal) University actors and/or bodies on University governance in recent times. Again, it should be stressed that European higher education systems – despite obvious progress made within the Bologna Process – are still very diverse and that there is no “one size fits all” explanation or answer to these questions. Therefore, we can only point out certain leading trends and common features.

If we leave government and (other) external stakeholders aside, we could differentiate today, broadly speaking, between *four main internal levels or actors of university governance*:

1. governing boards;
2. the rector (vice-chancellor, president);
3. a cascade of influential actors within the internal organisation of university (deans, heads, academic staff);
4. students vs. student bodies (representation).

² We skip further comments on issues of internal and external stakeholders and balance between responding to stakeholders and maintaining academic freedom as these will be discussed by other speakers later.

³ Academic as well as political representatives from all over the globe were present at celebrating the 20th anniversary in September this year, in Bologna again. See <http://www.magna-charta.org>.

(1) In the last century or two, university governance was mainly divided, on one hand, to *self-governance of the academic disciplines* as professional communities (with lean organisational support structures) and, on the other, to the *state authority* (law, finances, often also approving leadership, professors, etc.). In Europe of 19th and 20th century, universities were the key pillars of nation/state building; from this point of view, they were treated as “entities of the state”. With devolution of state authority in most of European countries in recent times a need has appeared to reconsider, reconceptualise and modernize the institutional governance. In recent legislative reforms in a number of European countries we can observe a trend towards lay participation in governance matters and to the creation of governing boards (boards of trustees or similar bodies). Their main purpose is to preserve and protect the institutional integrity as well as to strengthen the institutional accountability.

(2) Processes of change reflect also in the role of rector (vice-chancellor, president). For centuries, rector was understood as the “*primus inter pares*” – equal among equals of the academic oligarchy, as the peak representative of academic self-governance. In the last two decades, his/her position was pushed towards the “*chief executive*” of the university but not neglecting his/her traditional role. Thus, this position is often “pressed” today from two sides: a pressure of collegial academy on one side and a pressure of academic enterprise on the other. Rector has to search for optimal balance between them. Today, universities should not afford themselves to close from outside world (“academic autarky”). On the other hand, executive power per se does not constitute legitimacy. Therefore, rector should carefully consider a full cascade of actors and organisational levels (academic bodies) within the institution.

(3) Differently than commercial enterprises and other organisations, governance at universities is a highly distributed function. Real authority is often exercised at the grass roots and, therefore, faculties (schools, departments) are “intermediate arenas in which formal authority of the governing body ... must be reconciled with the informal influence of academic guilds” (Scott, 2001). The principle of *partnership* (stressed very much today in relation to “stakeholders”)⁴ should be applied also in relation to “internal stakeholders”: governance can be really effective in the interaction of the different actors within the institution. However, it is often difficult to achieve a good balance and today universities in Europe are still searching for “golden means”. There are cases of extreme decentralisation (weak central university bodies and strong, almost independent faculties). There are also cases of extreme centralisation where almost all decision making power rests with rector and central bodies. Both extremes do not contribute to what we call “good governance”. Fortunately, there are also cases where an equilibrium has been achieved and these cases represent cases of good practice.

(4) Last but not least – *students*. There was a traditional belief that students should study and not interfere with university governance. In recent times, this belief has been strongly challenged and even rejected. Within the Bologna Process, student representatives (ESU – European Student Unions) have taken their role in a serious and responsible way. In many countries and institutions their contribution in terms of governance has also proved constructive. Within recent legislation reforms student representatives are entering

⁴ Partnership is also a distinguished principle within the Bologna Process.

university bodies. The picture is not the same everywhere in Europe but the trend is obvious. Cases of good practice show that it is not only an issue of good governance but that it should be also considered in a broader aspect. If we bear in mind that the mission of university today is not only to prepare students for their future jobs but also for their active participation in democratic societies than their involvement into university governance serves also as means to this end.

Let's conclude. Ten or fifteen years ago, the challenging key word in Europe was "harmonisation" – e.g. harmonisation of higher education systems. It was often (mis)understood as a plea for *uniformity*; there were a lot of criticism against it. It seems that it has been replaced until today by *diversity*. Diversities should not be simply understood as potential contradictions or even conflicts; in modern times, we have learnt that *diversities can coexist*. If we shift back to our theme: there are various types of higher education institutions and there are diverse higher education systems; all of them are legitimate in so far as they are "easy readable", "comparable" and "compatible" (terms from the Bologna Declaration) and as they rest on similar higher education philosophies, cultures and values. The idea of university autonomy is one of them. Yet, university autonomy is neither a magic stick nor neutral tools which cure any pains.

It is similar with *governance*: it is not a neutral technical matter but is founded on types of institutions and/or higher education systems, that is, on *conceptual and cultural backgrounds*. Therefore, the concept of *higher education governance* is neither uniform (finished, unproblematic) nor indisputable. It is connected with several open questions, problems and dilemmas. They are, very probably, even more hot within university discussions than in our societies at large.

Asking these questions and disputing existing dilemmas enable us to identify potential collisions that could affect higher education – and to leave this concept open for further reconsideration by never treating it as a final one. Discussing open questions and dilemmas is a good way of keeping both concepts vital and influential within universities and in our societies at large. Our roundtable could also contribute to these goals.

References

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