

Part 2

Higher Education Reforms in Other Countries/Regions: Europe, North America and Australia

Accountability- a fair price for autonomy? The impact of new European Quality Systems on Higher Education Reform

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Often, governments now prefer to manipulate the outcomes of higher education from the middle distance via accountability, audit and formula-driven incentives. They are lightening their policy/political load, but without vacating the field, or even necessarily withdrawing from micro-management...Perhaps HEIs are no more independent than before- it seems they are accountable to more stakeholders than ever, and often in greater detail to government- but they are more autonomous.

(Marginson, 2006:3)

The quality focus: why this particular issue at this particular time?

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 has, without doubt, been the single most important policy force shaping higher education across Europe for almost a decade. Through the Declaration, Ministers of Education from the (then) fifteen European Union (EU) member states and three Economic European Area (EEA) states agreed for the first time to work towards a common higher education area for the whole of Europe. Since the establishment of the EU, member states had been at great pains to retain control over education systems which were seen as core areas of responsibility for national governments. In fact for several decades the attention of Directives relating to 'human resource' matters were associated with training, rather than education, precisely because training was, in most countries, linked to Ministries of Enterprise or Employment or Economic Development or equivalent, as opposed to Ministries of Education.

This background makes the Bologna agreement even more remarkable. Essentially, it includes a commitment to working on common areas in the field of higher education- traditionally that part of any educational system which is most protective of academic, if not also organisational, autonomy. The combination of social and economic factors which lie behind this development is complex, but essentially relate to the major objective of securing an international competitive advantage by achieving the new goal set by EU heads of state and government in Lisbon in March 2000 for Europe to become 'the most competitive, knowledge based society in the world'.

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Co-operation in quality assurance, and hence accountability, was identified as one of the six core areas identified in the Bologna Declaration. At the same time, the Declaration was explicit in a commitment to respecting the autonomy of universities.

We hereby undertake to attain these objectives - within the framework of our institutional competences and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy - to consolidate the European area of higher education. To that end, we will pursue the ways of intergovernmental co-operation, together with those of non governmental European organisations with competence on higher education. We expect Universities again to respond promptly and positively and to contribute actively to the success of our endeavour. (EC, 1999)

At the Ministerial meeting in London eight years later- by which point the number of countries involved with the Bologna process had increased to 45- the resulting statement underlined again the "...importance of strong institutions, which are diverse, adequately funded, autonomous and accountable" (EC, 2007).

Two potentially contradictory trends can thus be discerned. On the one hand, a trans-European policy momentum towards greater, levels of co-operation, and, consequently inevitably, some degree of harmonisation. On the other hand, at least at the level of rhetoric, a concern to respect, if not even to strengthen, institutional autonomy.

This paper explores some of the ways in which these tensions are played out in practice at three levels of analysis.

Firstly, the trans-European level, looking in particular at the operation of a number of key European initiatives impacting on quality assurance.

Secondly, the national level, using the case of Ireland to examine the operation of the first full university sectoral peer review to be conducted under the auspices of the European Universities Association.

Thirdly, the institutional level, exploring how the outcomes of external institutional reviews can be incorporated in a proactive way into strategic planning processes.

Trans-European level developments

Meeting in the ancient Italian university city of Bologna in 1999, Ministers of Education of the EU states issued the *Bologna Declaration*. Building on earlier pilot work in areas such as student mobility and credit schemes, the Declaration identified six key areas in which co-operation was pledged:

- Cooperation in quality assurance.
- Compatibility of degrees.
- Two cycle structure.
- Common credit system.
- Student and staff mobility.
- Promotion of the European dimension.

Leading up to, and following on from this Declaration, the European Universities Association (EUA) published a series of Trends' Reports based on documentary analysis, survey responses and stakeholder interviews (for an overview of the evolution and changing focus of these Reports, see Purser and Crosier, 2007). The Trends III Report on the progress on implementation of the Bologna Declaration drew the significant, albeit unsurprising, conclusion that the Bologna process was in fact was acting as a mechanism for the stimulation of more *far-reaching reforms* in higher education (EUA, Trends 2003). The significance of this conclusion lay in the fact that it was based on extensive qualitative analysis across universities of EU member states. The conclusion was unsurprising to the extent that to many observers the 'reform agenda' for universities had for some time, in the eyes of many Ministers of Education, explicitly or impliedly, been *the* underlying objective.

Two years later, the Trends IV Report (2005) marked the half-way point to the target date of 2010 set for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. Overall, by that stage, the 'vast majority' of institutions stated that they viewed the Bologna process as an opportunity to "...reflect upon and review their own programmes and teaching, and find that this has acted as a catalyst to internal reforms (EUA Trends, 2005: 28). The Report goes on however to highlight important differences "...regarding the effect of the Bologna reforms on quality".

At some institutions, it was noted that the Bologna Process, with its external pressures and benchmarks, helped to focus and drive forward reforms by enabling targets to be set to improve quality to be reached more quickly. However, at other institutions, it was felt that improvements in quality had not been considered strategically or in central policy-making, but that curricular reforms had rather been dominated by structural discussions concerning which course units to offer at what level. (EUA, 2005: 28).

This reflects at a European level a tension- well described in the literature on quality at national levels- between externally generated *compliance* versus internally generated, and hence, more meaningful, *intrinsic* quality systems. This tension is also apparent in the elaboration of associated developments, for example, the guidelines for quality assurance developed by the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA, 2005).

It is interesting to look at the case of the UK as, since the 1980s, it stands out as one of the- if not *the*- European countries to lead in the introduction of highly structured approaches to the development of quality and accountability systems (Brown, 2004; Williams, 2007; Slowey, 2007). In reviewing that experience, at one end of the spectrum, several analyses of the impact on institutions conclude that, for most, quality is largely about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to any effective transformation to make it more intrinsic (Morley, 2003; Harvey and Newton, 2004). On the contrary, however, the findings from a recent empirical case study of three universities in England, Holland and Italy suggests that while some “undesirable” effects could be observed, on balance evaluation exercises can assist in achieving “...important and knowingly orientated organisational impact, as well as to spark off processes of organisational change in the sense of improvement” (Huisman, Rebora and Turri, 2007:24).

Clearly, complex interactions are at work and no single, linear outcome is to be expected. In order to explore these matters further, the next section looks at how quality issues associated with European developments have been playing out in recent years at the level of one particular national system.

The national level: a European review of the Irish university quality system

The current legislative framework for Irish universities is enshrined in the Universities Act of 1997. The term ‘university’ is protected in law, and universities are responsible for internal quality assurance with responsibility for external quality assurance in the hands of two bodies, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) (Walsh, 2006). The former carries responsibility for channelling core funding- largely for teaching- to the universities and other designated institutions. The latter was established in 2003 and has been a legal entity since 2006. The Governing Authorities or equivalent bodies of the seven universities have approved devolution of certain areas of responsibility to the IUQB which has an independent Chair, along with external stakeholder representation on the Board.

In 2003, the Irish Department of Education and Science invited the OECD to undertake a review of higher education in Ireland with terms of reference to evaluate the performance of the sector and to recommend how it might better meet Ireland's strategic objectives for the sector. This review covered the seven Irish universities along with Dublin Institute of Technology and the Institutes of Technology. The major focus of the final report was on the challenge of supporting a contemporary high quality higher education system in the absence of tuition fees (OECD, 2004). Here Ireland was in the politically, and financially, unusual situation- possibly unique in Europe- of having moved in the 1990s from a system which had previously included a fee element paid by individual students (or by the state, where a student's/family income fell below a certain level) to one in which tuition fees payment by full-time students had been abolished. (In passing it is interesting to note that the situation for part-time students, and other non-traditional learners, not uncommonly, had been given little serious consideration despite the evidence of changing profiles (Schuetze and Slowey, 2000; Slowey and Watson, 2003).

The OECD approach is typically structural and policy orientated. In a separate exercise, the funding body for Irish universities, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in collaboration with the universities acting through the Irish Universities Quality Board, commissioned the European Universities Association to undertake a sectoral review of Irish universities. This involved an intensive peer review exercise involving teams drawn from senior academics from across Europe and North America. Site visits were conducted with each of the seven universities, generating individual reports and culminating in a broader, sector-wide report.

The EUA approach could be characterised as being more 'bottom-up' than that of the OECD review, starting at the institutional level and working up to the national level. The basic questions focussed on four areas:

- What is the university trying to do?
(Mission, aims, objectives and their appropriateness, how the university positions itself locally, nationally, internationally.)
- How is the university trying to do it?
(Processes, procedures, practices in place and analyses of their effectiveness.)
- How does the university know it works?
(Feedback systems, in place, in particular quality monitoring and quality management.)
- How does the university change in order to improve?
(Strategic planning, capacity and willingness to change.)

The process itself comprised five steps:

1. Institutional self-evaluation process at each university.
2. Self-evaluation reports produced.
3. Two site visits by EUA review teams.
4. Report to each university through IUQB.
5. Crosscutting sectoral report from EUA to HEA and IUQB.

The review pointed to several areas of development, however the general message was that the system was robust and moving in the right direction. In relation to quality matters, the Report concluded that

...[the] Irish universities have established a quality assurance system which is functioning, well organised and now yielding results. In doing so, the universities have gone well beyond legislative requirements...and have put in place a system which holds much promise for the development of higher education in Ireland...Many universities elsewhere in Europe and further afield could learn from the Irish experience. (IUQB, 2004)

Follow-on activities included responses from each university to its peer review report, plus two further updates in September 2005 and June 2006. Throughout this process it is interesting to note that there was a major focus on *transparency*. The full contents of all of these reports are in the public domain and available through the IUQB web site.

So how do these developments at the European and national levels play out at the institutional level? To what extent are individual universities little more than the passive recipients of externally developed policies? Or, to what extent can they shape their environment and future in innovative and proactive ways? In the next section we take as an example the case of an Irish university which sought to adopt the latter more independent approach- using the findings of the EUA institutional review and the national sectoral evaluation, supplemented by the input of internal and external stakeholders, in the development of a new Strategic Plan.

The institutional level: using institutional evaluation to support strategic development

The EUA methodology is based on an approach which is, *inter alia*, 'improvement orientated', 'respectful of diversity' and evaluating on the basis of 'fitness for purpose'. The institutional approach emphasises university responsibility for quality of programmes and units (both academic and support) with appropriate internal review systems.

In the case of Dublin City University (DCU), as with the other six universities in Ireland, the EUA evaluation was conducted over 2004. The first stage in the process involved the production of a self-assessment report. As is often the situation with reviews of individual units and programmes, this arguably proved the most important part of the exercise. In DCU, staff and students throughout the institution were involved in the development of the self-assessment through various Working Groups. It is important that quality systems are owned if the 'compliance culture' noted above is to be avoided. In this context Duke suggests a simple test of ownership is whether quality audit is "...driven mainly by a desire for improvement, that is to say quality enhancement, or by fear of inspection and bad news in the media" (Duke, 2002: 100).

In DCU, the nature of the self-assessment was commented on very favourably by the EUA peer review team for the open approach which had been adopted both to its production and to the content, which made a genuine attempt to be self-critical. They commented that the quality review system "...enjoys a high level of constructive acceptance among the university community. The President has encouraged a healthy and open climate for the quality review...The process is generally considered effective with many important benefits to be obtained, especially during the self-assessment period" (DCU, 2007).

The second stage in the process involved an extensive visit by the peer review group. The quality of the peer review team is clearly important for the credibility and successful outcome from what is an intensive and time consuming process: the EUA teams are carefully selected to provide a good balance of backgrounds and experience. (The University then had an opportunity to comment on the peer report for matters of accuracy before it was finalised).

The Report was generally very positive, providing an endorsement of the University's existing strategy. The key suggestions for action to emerge from the review covered five broad areas.

1. *Link with mission and strategy*, including recommendations to develop a succinct mission statement and to broaden the student profile
2. *Teaching and Learning*, including recommendations to continue to develop modularisation, more structured approaches to obtaining student feedback and a review of teaching and learning to link with learning outcomes
3. *Research*, including recommendations to expand numbers of postgraduate students and build upon existing extensive external partnerships.

4. *Quality assurance*, including recommendations to strengthen, and make explicit, links between different existing forms of internal quality assurance processes, to align review process with strategic planning, and to identify University-wide thematic issues for review in the future.
5. *Management and governance*, including the recommendation to make a more explicit link between quality review outcomes and strategic management

The University welcomed the general thrust of the Report. The recommendations were regarded as useful and seen to build upon the issues raised in the self-assessment. A detailed response was prepared and approved by the Governing Authority. Most importantly however, account was taken of the peer review findings in the preparation of the next Strategic Plan which covered the period 2005/8.

The subsequent Plan included eight overarching strategic objectives, the achievement of which was elaborated through four detailed component strategies, the Learning Innovation Strategy, the Research Strategy, the Community Engagement Strategy and the internal Communications Strategy (DCU, 2007).

This experience shows that external reviews, when conducted using a collegial, but independent, peer review culture, such as that adopted by the EUA, can provide a constructive, external and practical input to the mainstream planning process of a University. Strengths of the EUA process include the strong emphasis on self-evaluation, and the emphasis upon a European and international dimension to the quality assurance of higher education. It is also important to note that the EUA is independent of national agencies, government evaluation programmes and has a non-profit approach. The primary concern is the development of the particular mission of the university concerned. It is not linked to the allocation of funds, or short-term control function on behalf of public authorities- arguably both a potential strength, and potential weakness.

Conclusion: learning from quality assessment...and higher education research

This paper set out to illustrate how, at their best, peer review quality systems can make a valuable and constructive input to the processes of planning and strategic development of universities- without compromising the important principle of autonomy. Such systems are, however, just one part of the picture. Another important, and complementary, input arises from the evidence generated from higher education and institutional research (Watson and Maddison, 2005).

A recent evaluation of the outcomes of two major research projects in the UK on the impact of research on higher education suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, despite universities being research based institutions, they do not appear to demonstrate this when it comes to drawing on research findings on their own activities (Deem, 2006).

Despite the widespread rhetoric at national and European policy levels of a commitment to 'evidence based policy', Deem's analysis of the empirical data points to some resistance amongst academic-managers to taking on independent, academic research findings associated with *their own work* in managing universities. The author suggests this may be partly associated with the (relatively low) status of higher education research as an academic field, but also she suggests it may be associated with the lack of appropriate training provided for many senior academic managers.

The role of academic managers is increasingly important in ensuring that autonomy is not compromised by accountability requirements (for example, Scott, 2000; Watson, 2000; Shattock, 2003). These issues and tensions are not new. Investigating different perspectives of quality over a decade ago, faculty and students tended to interpret quality in terms of the quality of the student experience, employers focussed on employability, whereas governments attempted to use concepts of quality as a means of controlling higher education (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Writing at the same period, the eminent higher education researcher Martin Trow expressed serious concerns about the dangers of "over zealous, programmatic, external quality assessment".

In his view, the nature of institutional leadership is important in mitigating such effects.

...the greatly strengthening administrative leadership of Universities which has grown out of the movement I have called 'soft managerialism' is the best defence of university autonomy, and in current circumstances nearly its only defence. (Trow, 1994:42)

European governments voluntarily choose to engage with the Bologna process, and universities and university bodies play an active role in shaping its development at European and national levels. At the institutional level, it appears that Trow's 'soft managerialism' as a strategy for protecting, if not actually enhancing, autonomy in the context of strong external pressures, continues to offer the best way forward.

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