Editorial

The Anatomy of Autonomy

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Introduction to the Theme

This thematic issue of *Higher Education Policy* includes a set of papers, initially presented at the 2006 ‘Institutional Autonomy Revisited: National Dimensions, Cross-regional Experiences’ symposium and complemented by a paper submitted independently to that journal, but addressing the issues at stake. The 2006 meeting was organized by the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) and took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, December 8–9. The symposium’s background document argued convincingly that perceptions of and views on institutional autonomy might differ considerably from country to country, given — for instance — different perceptions of the role of the governments in higher education affairs. And, bearing in mind that societies change over time, it is not surprising to see that perceptions of institutional autonomy change over time as well, changing perceptions that may have considerable impact in the day-to-day activities of the higher education institutions. Given these dynamic changes over time and across higher education systems, there is sufficient reason to continue to pay attention to the phenomenon of institutional autonomy and related issues, such as academic freedom and accountability.

In the old days — but for some higher education systems not so long ago — when governments were the helmsmen steering public sectors, issues around institutional autonomy were mostly settled by national legislation. Although almost any government would — at the rhetorical level — support or pay lip-service to the idea of institutional autonomy for higher education institutions, governments also realize that higher education institutions fulfil or contribute to certain national objectives. From this perspective, governments have a point in setting certain limits to institutional autonomy. The ideal situation would be that governments put trust in institutions to carry out their designated public roles without government intervention, but it seems — whether one likes it or not — that governments were not and are not convinced that leaving it all up to the higher education institutions themselves would be wise. This can best be illustrated by looking at the funding of higher education. To be able to make the right decisions about spending the taxpayers’ contributions, governments need to be sure — or at least have certain insights into — how funds are best allocated and as such are legitimated to question or to control flows of funds and the spending of these funds.

But governments not only interfere by means of the power of the purse. They intervene in matters of institutional autonomy by setting rules to secure the quality (assurance) of higher education, by regulating the programme supply, by playing a role in appointments and in deciding on salary levels of staff at higher education institutions, by defining how institutions should be governed, etc. As will be obvious, governments have dealt with these issues in very different ways. For example in some countries, governments still play a decisive role in what programmes can be offered by individual institutions whereas other governments leave this to the institutions themselves. Other governments condition the freedom: programmes can be offered (and will be funded) as long as the institutions meet the quality assurance criteria.

Recently, the situation around institutional autonomy has become more complicated. Without aiming to give a complete overview, I would argue that the main — and interrelated — drivers for the increasing complexity are: the rise of accountability and the increasing pressures from other stakeholders than government. Although governments have stepped back and given more leeway to their higher education institutions in recent years or even decades, this process of gradual retreat has been accompanied by processes of increasing accountability. Institutions were given more freedom, but with strings attached. They received more space to manoeuvre, but with the brief to seriously account for their activities and results. The second development is that the monopoly of the state has often been broken down by the introduction of market mechanisms. This change may have led to more freedom in certain respects, but at the same time has invoked restrictions. The invisible hand of the market seems to have tangible impacts: students behave more like consumers and customers and consequently can be more demanding. The demands of students and other stakeholders force higher education institution to carefully address these, sometimes at the detriment of what they consider to belong to the core of their institutional autonomy. Institutions may still decide on how they organize their research and teaching activities, but at the same time have to take into account that their customers need to be properly informed, that customers have the right to complain, that clients that commission research may (try to) impose limits to what is to be investigated and how the research process should evolve, that institutions do not discriminate, that they live up to the safety and health regulations, etc. Not surprisingly, serving many masters — all of them rather assertive — may lead to tensions, dilemmas and problems.

This Issue

Precisely these dilemmas, controversies and changing dynamics are taken up by the contributors to this issue. The first article is written by Jamil Salmi,

coordinator of the World Bank's Tertiary Education Thematic Group. He discusses the phenomenon of institutional autonomy being exchanged for increased accountability to governments, while at the same time institutions have to try to respond to market demands. He convincingly argues that autonomy is meaningful only to the extent that it actually empowers institutions in a responsible way. The second contribution is by Agneta Bladh, now Rektor at the Swedish *Kalmar Högskolan*. She discusses the changes in institutional autonomy in Sweden, which she has witnessed from different perspectives (State Secretary for higher education and research, Director General of the National Agency for Higher Education) and argues that there is an important role for leadership to deal with issues around institutional autonomy. Ingrid Moses, Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Australia addresses the developments in the past two decades in her country, paying attention to the following topics: staff, students, curriculum and teaching, academic standards, research and publication, governance and administration and finance. Her analysis leads to the conclusion that the level of autonomy of Australian higher education institutions has been eroded. The fourth contribution is by Alvaro Romo de la Rosa, Secretary General of the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP). He compares development in the area of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in North and Latin America and nicely illustrates the similarities and — historically contingent — differences in approaches to autonomy and freedom across the continents. The final article in this issue is written by Terence Karran, University of Lincoln, UK. He embarked upon an impressive journey to try to map the level of academic freedom across 23 members of the European Union. Using five parameters, he presents the state of the art in the countries. His overall summary shows the considerable diversity across the member states, ranging from countries with high overall levels of academic freedom (e.g. Finland, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Spain) to those that lack these levels (e.g. United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Malta), echoing empirically the central statements of the IAU/IAUP's symposium background paper.

This issue is completed by two independent papers submitted to the journal. António Magalhães and Alberto Amaral report on changes in institutional governance in Portuguese higher education and provide empirical insight into the changes in values and norms regarding institutional governance and management of higher education's stakeholders. Ted Tapper and Ourania Filippakou address — from a historical-political perspective — the developments in UK quality assurance, providing potential lessons for other higher education systems.

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