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ARTICLE

Higher Education Governance Reform in Practice. Matching Institutional Implementation Practices and Policies

Endika Bengoetxea Castro

(1) endika@ehu.es
(2) endika.bengoetxea@ec.europa.eu

(1) Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea / University of the Basque Country
(2) Seconded to the European Commission, DG Education and Culture

Abstract

Governance is one of the most important higher education policy reform areas in the European Commission. The experience of many years in this field shows that in Europe the diversity of both higher education systems and higher education institution typologies is an important aspect to consider when assessing which governance model to apply in each case. Due to this diversity, there is no ideal governance model for each institution and/or higher education system, and the most ap-

propriate strategy to follow varies depending on the mission and typology of each higher education institution. The increasing tendency towards the globalization of higher education and the economic crisis are impacting directly on universities, forcing them to position themselves in this context. Implementing an appropriate governance model according to the corporate strategy of choice is essential, although good practice models in one case might not be directly applicable to another.

The European Commission works in parallel with two types of governance instruments: firstly, policy instruments to promote the exchange of good practice and mutual learning between and among governments, countries and institutions. In recent years, the need for transparency regarding how different higher education institutions perform in the various fields where they operate is of increasing interest. Moreover, financial instruments available through programmes such as Erasmus facilitate the development of pilot projects and studies presented at the initiative of transnational consortia. This article reviews the latest trends in higher education governance in Europe, with special emphasis on the need to preserve the diversity of higher education systems and institutions through transparency tools, showing relevant examples of cooperation projects for improving governance practices.

Keywords

La reforma de la gobernanza de la educación superior en la práctica. Puesta en práctica de los objetivos políticos en la gestión universitaria

Resumen

La mejora de la gobernanza es uno de los temas más importantes de la agenda política de la educación superior en la Comisión Europea. Tras muchos años trabajando en este campo, la experiencia demuestra que en el caso de Europa es importante considerar la diversidad de sistemas educativos y de tipologías de instituciones de educación superior a la hora de analizar los modelos de gobernanza que han de aplicarse en cada caso. Esto conlleva que no exista un modelo de gobernanza ideal para cada institución y/o sistema de educación superior, y que la estrategia varíe según los objetivos y el tipo de cada institución de educación superior. La creciente globalización de la educación superior y la crisis económica están afectando directamente a las instituciones, obligándolas a posicionarse en este contexto. Implantar un modelo de gobernanza adecuado a la estrategia institucional elegida es esencial, si bien los modelos de buenas prácticas que pueden usarse en un caso no son directamente aplicables a otro.

La Comisión Europea trabaja con dos tipos de instrumentos en el área de gobernanza: por un lado, los instrumentos políticos fomentan el intercambio de buenas prácticas, el aprendizaje mutuo entre gobiernos, países e instituciones, y la creación de herramientas para la rendición de cuentas. Por otro lado, los instrumentos financieros a través de programas como Erasmus facilitan la elaboración de proyectos piloto y estudios que se presentan a iniciativa de consorcios transnacionales. Recientemente está cobrando importancia la necesidad de proporcionar mayor transparencia en cuanto a la actividad y la eficiencia con la que trabajan las instituciones de educación superior. Este artículo revisa las últimas tendencias de la gobernanza en Europa, con especial énfasis en la necesidad de preservar la diversidad de sistemas y tipos de instituciones a través de las herramientas de transparencia para líderes institucionales, dando ejemplos de los proyectos de cooperación más relevantes en materia de gobernanza.

1. Introduction

Governance is one of the main policy reform areas on higher education modernisation agendas. Higher education governance involves not just aspects of internal university governance, but also the roles of the state and external stakeholders. This is a complex reform area covering many aspects of higher education systems and their day-to-day operation, such as human resource management, funding, quality assurance, course planning, access and internationalisation.

The importance of this reform area is underlined in the European Commission's 2011 communication on the modernisation agenda for higher education, which signals higher education governance (together with funding) as one of the key areas for action. The focus on governance reform in the 2000/2010 period was characterised by widespread reform efforts in EU member states, where the main trend was to increase institutional autonomy. Higher education institutions are legally autonomous in all EU states, although the degree of autonomy varies from country to country. Supported by the assumption that institutions with greater autonomy are more capable of focusing their institutional strategies on their particular strengths and of adapting to a changing environment at regional and international levels (European Commission 2006, 2011), all European countries have framed institutional autonomy national accountability systems (involving assessment and checks) to ensure that institutions respond to societal needs. At the same time, institutional autonomy has been combined with appropriate accountability mechanisms such as performance contracts and multi-year agreements between states and institutions. As a reaction to this, the position of executive heads of institutions has been strengthened and new institutional governance bodies such as advisory or supervisory boards have been introduced in a number of institutions, usually including external stakeholders. However, it remains essential for higher education institutions not to be constrained by over-regulation that would otherwise prevent them from achieving the aspirations that society expects from them.

In parallel, institutions nowadays have to justify their performance to a greater extent than in the past, notably as a result of introducing external quality assurance systems. This is placing new demands on senior management within higher education institutions, which calls for a professionalisation of such management, including through training. This need for further leadership and management is also reflected as a priority topic in EU programmes.

At systemic level, the challenge posed by the diversity of typologies and missions of higher education institutions is a very important related aspect, which raises challenges for governance and quality assurance in higher education. In Europe, this diversity is regarded as a positive characteristic since diverse higher education systems are more responsive to rapidly changing social and economic needs. For instance, it is considered positive to respond to challenges such as those that seek to better serve the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous population of learners. Furthermore, reforms such as those promoted within the framework of the Bologna Process have resulted in the creation of even more diverse typologies of higher education institutions with different missions, and the economic crisis will probably reinforce this tendency towards diversity by forcing institutions to better place themselves by analysing their strengths and weaknesses within their context and by defining strategic action plans accordingly.

Increasing diversity calls for transparency as a key element in the EU strategy for the modernisation of higher education systems. Clearer information on the performance of institutions can inform the choices of students, employers and policy makers. University managers are also direct beneficiaries of transparency since many institutions are unaware of the areas in which they excel (apart from specific cases mainly within the research mission). Higher education institution leaders and managers could increase the effectiveness of their decisions, in particular to strengthen the relevance and quality of teaching and research, labour market outcomes, and innovation and entrepreneurship. Institutions benefit from transparency since it allows them to better position themselves and improve their development strategies, quality and performance.

This article reviews the contribution of the European Commission to issues of governance and transparency in relation to the challenge of modernising European higher education. To that end, the EU has a number of policy and funding instruments. Furthermore, policy priorities within EU funding programmes are aligned with such objectives. The review examines the main actions in this area, with a focus on specific examples of tools and actions directly related to the improvement of institutional governance. Section 2 presents the impact of diversity in higher education governance reforms, and section 3 briefly describes the main EU policy instruments in this area. Section 4 presents examples of projects addressing the improvement of institutional governance funded by the EU.

2. Higher education governance in a diverse landscape

The importance of diversity as regards governance reform is underlined in the main European documents on higher education, both at national and EU levels, stressing the need to take account of the variety of higher education system types (with national characteristics) and institutions (which vary in size, missions and profiles). Institutional diversity is considered one of the key strengths of higher education in Europe.

Some of the reasons for increased diversity in Europe are connected with Bologna Process reforms, which have a direct impact on the quest for new governance models: one of the effects is the creation of new types of institutions in some countries, which demand non-traditional governance models for their success; another is the increasing tendency of higher education institutions to merge into bigger organisations to foster cooperation and efficiency, which has led to discussion about the most appropriate governance models for managing such institutions.

The importance of the link between governance and diversity gave rise to a meeting of Director Generals for Higher Education of EU Member States on this topic under the Hungarian Presidency of the EU in Budapest in April 2010. The need to address diversity was not only reviewed at systemic level, but in particular at institutional and programme levels. At the meeting, there was general agreement on the need to encourage institutions to profile themselves in all missions, identifying their main strengths and resources; it was also felt that institutions could excel in many important dimensions other than research, such as teaching quality, knowledge transfer and innovation, or even internationalisation.

In order to achieve a greater diversity of profiles, efforts are required to give higher visibility and rewards to dimensions other than research, and in particular to teaching quality. These dimensions/profiles should be reflected more clearly in career paths and instruments, such as quality assurance and funding mechanisms, particularly ensuring that academic staff that demonstrate excellence in teaching quality are recognised adequately. As a reaction to this aim, countries such as Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands are now working on the development of funding that is more multi-dimensional, awarded according to missions, performance targets and/or quality assessments. In some countries, this can represent up to 30% of total funding, while it is considered expedient to keep a strong funding basis related to student numbers and graduates. Unfortunately, an optimal model with a full set of performance and assessment indicators for the non-research dimensions does not yet exist. European initiatives such as U-map and U-multirank, described later, aim to bring more transparency to these other important missions of higher education systems and institutions, and to improve existing tools along those lines.

As positive as diversity may be, it also has the consequence of making it impossible to propose an ideal governance model for all higher education institutions and systems, thus rendering the debate on the subject more complex. Diversity in demographic changes, national enrolment targets and expected further expansion affects the appropriateness of governance models, of the best typology of institutions or of the nature of study programmes.

Furthermore, increasing diversity puts strain on existing quality assurance and evaluation systems. There is a need for flexibility in quality assurance applied to more innovative and required activities. Efforts need to be made, for example, on the evaluation of institutional capacities for self-evaluation and internal quality assurance, on the assessment of lifelong learning activities, and on the strengthening of the role of various feedback mechanisms (such as surveys of graduate labour market success). In parallel, funding mechanisms and appropriate incentives for academic staff should be adapted to the conditions of increased diversity to recognise their involvement. Moreover, the involvement of academic staff is considered essential to ensure the quality of actions such as the international mobility of students and excellence in teaching, and in some countries the lack of recognition of such activities on the same level as research activities is considered to be demotivating even. Quality assurance systems must also address this diversity for a fair evaluation of the work of each institution according to its profile, recognising excellence in its various dimensions.

At programme level, tailor-made programmes for non-traditional learners and flexible learning paths are increasingly required, especially nowadays due to the impact of the economic crisis. There is consensus on the need to reduce the existing gap between societal needs and the institutional perception of such needs. This and some of the aforementioned challenges call for a better involvement of relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes, including those outside the higher education sector (e.g., employers or civil society representatives). Such involvement of external stakeholders can be articulated by representation on the governance bodies of institutions, by specific project-based cooperation agreements, by staff and student mobility actions, and by other means.

3. Main European Union policy initiatives on governance

This section reviews the main lines of action within the European Commission's policy instruments on the governance reform area, notably those related to diversity, transparency and cooperation with relevant higher education stakeholders. These can be divided into three categories as follows:

3.1 Reports on the impact of governance reforms across Europe

At the time of writing this article, the latest state-of-the-art research on governance reform at European level was an independent study providing an in-depth overview of policy changes and reforms in the governance domain of European higher education over a period of 10 years. This study entitled "Impact of Higher Education Governance Reforms across Europe (2006-2010)" was conducted together with independent studies on curricular and funding reform areas in higher education.

The study highlights the diversity of the European Higher Education Area: the different governance aspects of higher education modernisation agendas have been addressed to varying degrees in different countries, although further reforms are deemed necessary, especially to allow universities more institutional freedom. The report concludes that under the right conditions, with sufficient funding and smart financial incentives, institutional autonomy has a direct positive effect in terms of performance in the primary processes of universities. As the study underlines, there appears to be a link between the output of the primary processes (numbers of graduates and articles published) and the level of institutional autonomy.

The study provides recommendations on the need to revisit the balance between autonomy and accountability, mentioning that what seems to be gained in terms of autonomy might too easily be lost on excessive accountability requirements. Traditional means of state regulation and state micro-management tend to be replaced by new methods of accountability and reporting to other authorities, calling for the need to assess the means and ends of accountability in European higher education.

Finally, the report underlines the need for increased investment in higher education and research across Europe, without which it is unlikely that universities will be able to completely fulfil the growing expectations of their role within the European knowledge society and their overall contribution to European competitiveness. Governance reforms in combination with sufficient levels of funding are likely to contribute to enhanced system performance. This requires the balance of public and private investment in higher education and research to be revisited.

3.2 Strengthening university-business cooperation

Business involvement in higher education is a horizontal topic with clear positive effects on funding and governance reforms, as well as on ensuring that curricula are up to date and meet the needs of employers and society. With the aim of supporting closer cooperation between the worlds of

academia and work in Europe, the European Commission annually organises the University-Business Forum, a platform to foster dialogue and actions on issues like lifelong learning, mobility, entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer, curriculum development and delivery, and governance.

The Forum contributes to a structured dialogue between the two spheres, demonstrating both parties' interest in working in partnership. In order to support implementation, a pilot action called "knowledge alliances" was launched in April 2011 (with a view to continue being implemented annually) to ensure greater societal and economic relevance and outreach of higher education by strengthening the employability, creativity and innovative potential of graduates and lecturers, and the role of higher education institutions as drivers of innovation.

3.3 Transparency initiatives on mapping and ranking missions and performance

The European Union's higher education modernisation agenda underlines the importance of transparency and diversification based on the strengths of the different higher education institutions. In order to identify these strengths, institutions need tools that allow them to benchmark themselves against other higher education institutions at national and international levels.

The European Commission supports several initiatives to develop tools and policies to improve transparency. One of the most relevant is the EU sponsored U-map project. U-map developed a classification model to categorise the rich diversity of higher education institutions, taking inspiration from the well-established Carnegie Classification in the United States. This methodology categorises higher education institutions according to different missions: teaching and learning, research, innovation and knowledge transfer, regional engagement and internationalisation.

The relatively recent existence of higher education rankings had a considerable influence over governance decisions in many institutions. Unfortunately, in many cases this reaction was unexpected and has a dubious positive impact, especially as regards diversity: the vast majority of existing rankings focus narrowly on the research dimension, ignoring performance in areas such as teaching, internationalisation, innovation and community outreach. In doing so, they do not cover the diversity of higher education and, in practice, they are known to include no more than around 3% of higher education institutions worldwide.

In order to improve this situation, and since it is commonly accepted that despite the drawbacks of exiting rankings they are here to stay, the European Commission launched in 2009 the feasibility study entitled "Design and testing the feasibility of a Multidimensional Global University Ranking", also known as U-multirank, which designed and tested a personalised multi-dimensional ranking concept, covering performance in five dimensions: research, teaching and learning, innovation and knowledge transfer, regional engagement and internationalisation. The main aim of the approach is to serve as a useful tool for decision making for any end user, not resulting in a single overall listing of universities (the end result would not lead to a league table). Its main characteristic is to offer users the possibility to make a personalised ranking tuned to their own personal preferences and objectives in the different areas of interest (dimensions). The study proved the feasibility of this multidimensional ranking concept, underlining that further work was still required to develop some

indicators. Furthermore, it also identified several challenges, among which the most critical is the need to further improve data in terms of availability, robustness and comparability, as well as the need to implement a strategy for periodic data collection. Some 159 higher education institutions of diverse profiles took part in the initiative, proving that institutional managers could be provided with valuable information to enable them to define governance measures and strategic plans.

As a follow-up of this study, the European Commission has recently launched (March 2012) a new call to implement a first version of this ranking towards the end of 2013, with the aim of it being published annually. This subsequent phase will build on the findings of the U-multirank study and will create a web tool enabling users to choose the type of institutions of interest (e.g., e-learning institutions, those from just a small number of countries, etc.) and then select the performance indicators of any of the five dimensions that are relevant to their search. This transparency tool is intended to provide users, such as institutional leaders, students and policy makers with more accurate performance information than the that offered by existing rankings on which to base their decision making, although as explicitly mentioned in the call, this ranking is regarded by the European Commission as complementary (and not a substitute) to other relevant higher education tools, such as quality assurance.

4. European projects on higher education governance

As one of several funding instruments of the European Commission, and as a complement to the policy initiatives presented earlier, the Erasmus programme (mainly known for student and staff mobility actions) offers the possibility to fund cooperation projects to support the objectives of the higher education modernisation agenda.

Taking the form of a call for proposals (usually with two to three year-long projects with a minimum of three partners from three European countries), the topic of higher education governance has been a priority area since 2009, and several projects have focused on pilot studies in relation to improving governance at systemic or institutional levels.

Outlined below are just some of the projects focusing on the most significant challenges relating to governance at institutional level, all of which have the highest potential to improve existing governance models both at systemic and institutional levels. They have been signalled by independent experts of the European Commission as the most innovative and/or for being examples of good practice:

- **Autonomy Scorecard:** The main outcome of this project is a report comparing university autonomy across 26 European countries. In addition to an in-depth analysis of the current state of institutional autonomy in Europe, the study includes four scorecards which rank and rate higher education systems in four autonomy areas: organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy.
- **European University Quality Management Tools for Lifelong Learning:** This project created a model and tools for quality management in lifelong learning (LLL) organisations and

continuing education. Its motivation is to respond to the lack of systematic tools to analyse university processes and outcomes focusing on lifelong learning. The model and tools are based on applying the EFQM model to the LLL field.

- **Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies:** Also focusing on the area of management of LLL actions, this project provides different profiles and interests in LLL, which are at different stages of LLL implementation, and an opportunity to develop and enhance their strategic LLL approaches.

- **European Higher Education Management and Development:** This project contributes to the professionalisation of institutional senior management and to improving areas such as business-university cooperation governance. It focuses on improving relevant competencies of higher education institutional leaders. It proposes a master programme to provide these professionals with the necessary qualifications for top-level higher education management competence.

- **Strategic University Management: Unfolding Practices:** This project aims to identify good practices and to exchange university strategic management practices. A platform will be created for best practice knowledge transfer. One of its main activities is desk-research into the current state-of-the-art of strategic university management projects, tools and techniques to facilitate the continuous improvement of strategic management of higher education institutions.

- **European Benchmarking Initiative on Higher Education:** Building on previous benchmarking initiatives in higher education, this project proposes a modern management tool to support progress on institutional reforms, increased operational efficiency and the capacity for innovative changes in order to adapt to new challenges in their context. Target groups are university leaders and decision makers, staff at various levels from all over Europe and other relevant stakeholders. The project focuses on four key areas: governance, university-enterprise cooperation, curriculum reforms and LLL.

- **Indicators for Mapping and Profiling Internationalisation:** This project attempts to measure the internationalisation of higher education, proposing a methodology to improve transparency and accountability in internationalisation. It is expected to provide a set of relevant indicators, a choice of individual internationalisation profiles and a potential comparison with other Europe-wide institutions.

- **Innovative OER in European Higher Education:** Beyond a strong conceptual basis for open educational resources (OER) in Europe, this project examines the innovation cycle in awareness raising, strategy building (institutional frameworks), pedagogical models, business cooperation and pilot experiments. It conducts pilot studies into areas where OER functionalities can be achieved, such as OER multi-campus (stakeholder engagement sessions) and OER internationalisation (manuals). Best practices in institutional OER development plans (with scenarios for multi-campus approaches) and institutional and multi-campus pilot experiments are analysed, and a report will be created with multi-campus best practices.

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About the Author

Endika Bengoetxea Castro
(1) endika@ehu.es
(2) endika.bengoetxea@ec.europa.eu

(1) Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea / University of the Basque Country
(2) Seconded to the European Commission, DG Education and Culture

Endika Bengoetxea worked in DG Education and Culture at the European Commission since March 2009 after more than 13 years as a lecturer at the University of the Basque Country in Spain. Since his arrival at the Commission as a seconded national expert, he worked in Unit C1 both as a higher education policy officer and as an Erasmus programme manager. He was responsible for the coordination of Erasmus centralised actions and the EACEA, the Erasmus University Charter and, as regards higher education policy, notably for third cycle aspects, quality assurance and transparency tools.

He holds a bachelor's degree in Computer Science (Universities of the Basque Country [Spain] and Brighton [England]), a master's degree in Medical Imaging (University of Aberdeen [Scotland]), and a doctorate in Image and Signal Processing (Télécom Paris [France]).

He previously worked as lecturer at the Computer Engineering Faculty in San Sebastian (University of the Basque Country) from 1996 to 2009. Being a former Erasmus student in 1993/94 in the United Kingdom, Dr Bengoetxea held several international relations management positions at the University of the Basque Country. From 2001 to 2009, he was also an academic expert on DG EAC and DG INFSO programmes such as Leonardo, Erasmus, Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, FP6 and FP7.

(1)
Informatika Fakultatea
Pº Manuel Lardizabal 1
20018 Donostia-San Sebastián
Spain

(2)
European Commission
DG Education and Culture
Unit C1 – Higher Education; Erasmus
Madou Plaza 1, 11/83
1200 Brussels
Belgium