Reconsidering Higher Education Governance

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(1) Governance: a term with roots

At first sight 'governance' seems to be simple and clear: it is an exercise of *authority*, *control* or *direction*.

Latin '*gubernare*' sounds quite familiar in various modern languages.

Its Greek background can produce a surprisingly modern linguistic association: '*kybernaein*' – cybernetics?

Actually, it is much closer to *navigation* – the old art of ascertaining the position and directing the course at sea.

When *human conduct* was under discussion with Greek philosophers, *navigation* – or 'governance' as 'directing the course at sea' – was a frequently used *metaphor*.

Let's see a case.

(2)   … the agents themselves must consider …

But this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; *matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity**, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for* *they do not fall under any art or precept* *but* *the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion,* *as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation.*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

(3) People and cultural contexts

In understanding *human affaires* Aristotle rejects 'precepts', ready made recipes.

The stress is not on »*precepts*«; the stress is on »*the agents themselves*«.

Two messages result from these considerations:

(A) a reasonable captain would always take a decision after very carefully considering *who* he has on board; governance calls for 'ownership' and can be achieved only in partnership;

(B) general precepts or ready made recipes do not help at all when we find ourselves in complex conditions of 'real life'; concrete circumstances and cultural and historical contexts should be always taken into account.

(4)   A new concept with an increasing frequency

How do we use this term in the context of higher education?

It seems to be relatively *a new concept*; several important recent documents didn't used it at all: the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988) the *Lisbon Convention* (1997), the *Sorbonne* and *Bologna Declarations* (1998, 1999) etc.

Search the Web: "higher education governance"

> *Trends 1* (1999): 0 hits
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> *Trends 2* (2001): 2 hits
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> *Trends 3* (2003): 4 hits
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> *Trends 4* (2005): 8 hits

And in what context did the term appear?

(A) governance of a higher education *system*

(B) governance of a higher education *institution*

(5) Three levels of higher education governance

Despite its rather scarce use in documents, higher education governance is an *underlying theme* for all aspects of the *Bologna Declaration* (particularly the social dimension and higher education institutions and students).

We can roughly distinguish between the *three levels* or *structural dimensions of higher education governance*.

(a) *internal* or *institutional*: governance of higher education institution(s);

(b) *external* or *systemic*: governance of higher education system(s); and

(c) *international* or *global*: governance of higher education systems within an international (global) perspective, e.g. the Bologna process.

(6)   Conceptual shift of the 1980s

Today's concept in certain points radically differs from previous traditions: the conceptual shift is linked to the societal context characterised by the *transformation from elite to mass higher education.*

The phenomenon of mass higher education put the need for *systemic reforms* onto national and institutional agendas.

The Eurydice study on twenty years of reforms in European 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*«.

This conceptual shift was remarkably described as a move away from the traditional »*interventionary*« towards the new »*facilitatory* state« (Neave and Van Vught, 1991).

(7)   Autonomy vs. accountability

Expanding higher education systems of the 1980s: effective governance in higher education requires much more *decision-making freedom* at the *institutional level*.

The concept of the *autonomy of universities* moved to the centre of discussions: autonomy was enlarged in terms of 'financial dimension' – institutions search for alternative resources.

Between the 1960s and 1980s universities underwent huge changes; they had to reconsider their mission.

Bologna 1988: »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« (*Magna ChartaUniversitatum*).

Higher education and national State

The issue of *autonomy* is »at the heart« of higher education governance for centuries. Yet it has been a substantially different issue since the *birth of modern national State.*

The *industrial society* of the 19th century marks a sharp turn in the development of higher education: the traditional mission of the '*pursuit of truth*' was confronted for the first time very directly to the '*needs of economy*'.

National state put the protection and acceleration of economic development as the most important issues on its political agenda. As a sub-chapter to the protection of domestic markets, protective measures emerged in the field of higher education (e.g. system, qualifications, etc.).

Universities encountered the challenge to become *national* universities; *national higher education systems* were born.

(9)   National systems, incompatibility, obstacles

The 20th century was a period of growing legal regulation of national systems of education; the importance of systemic governance was continuously increasing.

The practices of national regulations overlapped but were also separating. A serious problem was encountered when all these *different* and in various respects *incompatible national systems started to emerge as a significant obstacles* to the new political agenda: *mobility*.

Within this broader historical context we should reconsider developments in higher education after new challenges appeared in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Today, all three structural dimensions of governance – *institutional, systemic and international* – construct a triangle: *an interdependent totality*.

(10)   **Academic aspirations and market forces**

Higher education governance is a *multidimensional* concept.

Apart from its three structural dimensions another triangle could be drawn and delineated by *academic aspirations, market forces* and *democratic culture.*

Within this triangle, the interplay between academic aspirations and market forces attracts much attention. It is often accompanied with certain uneasiness…

Yet, neither the influence of markets nor the legislative burdens on higher education can be seen only as a *threat* to academic aspirations; they can be also *supportive:* 'external' factors which make these aspirations feasible.

This is particularly important when considering the relationship between internal and external governance.

(11) Budget cuts and commercialisation

Is it true that academia avoids contacts to 'external world'?

In modern academic practice *disinterested research* is being ever more 'challenged' by *research that yields interest*

The biggest challenge of the 'external world' to contemporary higher education institutions is *commercialisation.*

Did *governmental budget cuts* push universities to search for *alternative funds on markets* or did universities' success in finding alternative funds influence these cuts?

Since the 1980s it has become clear that the extraordinary expansion of the higher education sector for structural reasons *cannot expect a proportional expansion in terms of national budgets* (just take the pressure from sectors like health care and social security into account).

(12) Confusion over means rather than ends

Derek Bok, formerly President of Harvard University:

> *»If there is an intellectual confusion in the academy that encourages commercialization, it is a confusion over means rather than ends To keep profit-seeking within reasonable bounds, a university must have a clear sense of the values needed to pursue its goals with a high degree of quality and integrity. When the values become blurred and begin to lose their hold, the urge to make money quickly spreads throughout the institution.«*

> *»Left to itself, the contemporary research university does not contain sufficient incentives to elicit all of the behaviours that society has a right to expect«*

(2003)

(13)   Clear academic guidelines needed

Efficiency : institutional as well as systemic governance should be improved to bring better results – this claim seems to be undisputed.

However, the university cannot be governed as an enterprise; it has had always to search for *uneasy balance between service to society and contemplative scholarship*.

Today, searching for a balance requires a deliberate analysis of the *costs and benefits of commercialisation*; yet it puts modern universities into a Ulysses-like position between the *prospects of bringing in substantial new revenues* and the *risks to genuine academic values*. What to do?

Bok calls for *clear academic guidelines*. »Setting clear guidelines is essential to protect academic values from excessive commercialization«.

(14) Scholarly integrity vs. democratic culture

Derek Bok concludes:

»*The university's reputation for scholarly integrity could well be the most costly casualty of all. A democratic society needs information about important questions that people can rely upon as reasonable objective and impartial. Universities have long been one of the principal sources of expert knowledge and informed opinion on a wide array of subjects. Once the public begins to lose confidence in the objectivity of professors, the consequences extend far beyond the academic community«. Any damage to the reputation of universities »weakens not only the academy but the functioning of our democratic, self-governing society.«*

(15)   An unfinished, open concept

There are several types of higher education institutions and several clusters of higher education systems; all of them are legitimate in so far as they all rest on pronounced philosophies and cultures.

It is similar with *governance*: it is not a 'neutral technical matter' but is founded on types of institutions and/or systems, that is, on *conceptual and cultural backgrounds*

Therefore, the concept of *higher education governance* is not *uniform*, *finished, unproblematic nor indisputable*. It is connected with several open questions, problems and dilemmas.

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.