

COUNTRY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Divergence and Convergence in the Governance of European Higher Education

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The Lisbon Declaration established the concept of European universities being at the heart of the knowledge economy and encouraged a modernization of European systems. The Bologna Process and the Horizon Europe program represent important outcomes. Less attention has been given to the modernization of higher education systems and the alignment of the granting of university titles. European systems are largely diverging rather than converging, undermining the benefits of convergence in teaching arrangements and research and conflicting with the concept of a European Higher Education Area.

In the year 2000, when the European Union's Lisbon Declaration boldly proclaimed its aim to be the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world and stated that its universities were the key to the knowledge economy, European national higher education systems needed to be focused on "common concerns and priorities." In the following years, the European Commission issued a string of communications intended to encourage the updating of governance and decision-making machinery in higher education. In parallel, the Bologna Process was established to encourage the convergence of academic teaching structures to facilitate cross-border system coordination and a common structure of bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. This has been a considerable success, owing much to the commitment of the academic community. The same can be said of the Horizon Europe program, which has become the major source of research funding in Europe.

Divergence in European Systems

Similar progress has not been made, however, in the governance of higher education either within national systems or at the institutional level. While New Public Management and "modernization" ideas persuaded governments to move from direct management to steering institutions from a distance, there remains great diversity in operationalizing the principles involved. In our study *The Governance of European Higher Education: Convergence or Divergence* (Michael Shattock, Aniko Horvath, and Jurgen Enders, Bloomsbury, 2023), we found that national systems were not converging but, on the contrary, following divergent paths. In Hungary, for example, the government has played a controversial role in transferring institutions to "foundation" status to encourage less reliance on public funding and has imposed five-person governing bodies with membership drawn from the governing political party. In Germany, on the other hand, governance has devolved to

regions where intensive inter-Länder (interregional) consultation encourages convergence toward a common model. In Norway, governance of the university system is, in effect, shared between the central Ministry of Education and Research and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, which has wide powers in respect to institutions and awards university status. In the United Kingdom (except in Scotland), a recurrent public funding system has been replaced by another system that is run as a market, based on funding from tuition fees backed by a student loan scheme and supervised by a regulator—the Office for Students. It has also transferred the governance of research to the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, thus separating policies on education from policies on research and innovation, an implicit rejection of the Humboldtian philosophy espoused by Germany and many other European systems.

Ambiguity in Institutional Status

These diverse governance arrangements can have critical consequences for national policy making. One example is in the expansion of university systems to respond to regional demands. Historically, higher education in many European systems was concentrated in large, often coastal, cities: Hungary (Budapest), Norway (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim), and Portugal (Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra) offer good examples. Regional pressures and a belief in the need to equalize opportunities within the countries (especially strong in Norway) demanded the founding of new institutions in "hinterland" locations. Norway was first in the field in the late 1960s, founding a university in Tromsø in the far North of the country with the aim of discouraging depopulation to the South and as a contribution to the local and regional economy. Similar considerations led Norway to the decision in the 2000s to embark on a program of merging regional colleges to provide a new generation of regional universities. Portugal has followed a similar path with a more mixed pattern of

regional universities and polytechnics. Hungary has employed a parallel rhetoric to support “hinterland” development, but, in practice, 85 percent of its student body continues to be based in Budapest.

The creation of new regional institutions raises sensitive issues in regard to status vis-à-vis long-established universities. Most countries claim that research is intrinsic to the concept of a university but tacitly accept the distinction between the two institutional models by describing regional universities as “universities of applied sciences.” In England, the unofficial description of some post-1992 institutions and all post-post-1992 institutions has been “teaching-only universities,” to be replaced later by the less disparaging “teaching-intensive universities.”. The evidence provided by the Research Excellence Framework, which measures research outcomes every five or six years, emphasizes the extreme institutional differentiation within the UK higher education system. A particular contrast is provided by Germany where the efficacy of its long-standing regional higher education system is sustained by a constitutional commitment to the preservation of “homogeneous living conditions” across the nation. Here the monopoly of university status is under challenge from the *Fachhochschulen*, higher education institutions denied the right (though there are increasing exceptions) to award doctorates. The arbitrary addition of over 200 *Fachhochschulen*, which now enroll nearly 40 percent of the student body in the country, to the list of 93 research-oriented universities would significantly alter the external perception of the German university system, but dispensation has been given to these institutions to claim

“universities of applied sciences” status when marketing themselves outside the country. Conversely, their neighbors in France have incorporated the *instituts universitaire de technologie*, established with very similar missions as the *Fachhochschulen*, into existing universities.

Greater Fragmentation

These variations in governance structures and policy drivers are replicated, at least in scale, in the governing structures of universities themselves. They spring from history, geography, inherited political, financial, and academic cultures, and from the consequential differences in national perspectives. One might have expected that “modernization” would have drawn systems together, but this is not evident. On the contrary, it has encouraged, and is encouraging, greater diversity. It is significant that major common trends include reinforcement of state direction and weakening institutional autonomy. The European Higher Education Area covers a smörgåsbord of national systems and university profiles which inevitably prompt divergent policy objectives. The Bologna Process and Horizon Europe draw academic communities together, but political and financial pressures at the level of state decision-making point toward greater fragmentation. At a time when external pressures appear to be driving European nations closer together, perhaps there is an opportunity to establish a more coherent, and recognizably European, university system more representative of the Lisbon consensus, which envisioned a collaborative university research environment and closer system alignment.

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