Key Changes in Higher Education

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Abstract. In order to understand recent developments in the governance, management and organisation of European HEIs it is important to understand the overall changing context of European higher education in which those developments have been embodied. Therefore, this paper provides an overview of the key challenges faced by European higher education. It provides also a discussion of the (potential) consequences of HEIs failing to respond to the challenges they are facing in a quickly and effective manner. Paper describes also the general changes and reforms which have been introduced by HEIs to respond to the challenges. Finally, it goes into more detail and discusses how governance, management and organisation of European HEIs specifically have evolved over the past decades due to the challenges faced.

Introduction

Key Challenges Faced by European Higher Education

Background and context from the literature review—the rise of the global knowledge economy and the regionalisation of the economy

The literature review highlights that one of the key shifts influencing the current landscape of HE is beyond a doubt the rise of the global knowledge economy which trades in ideas, data, communication and creativity and is accessed substantially through the Internet. That is, the Web has effectively diminished the local and national monopoly of knowledge that universities have traditionally enjoyed. Within this context it has to be stressed that higher education, as a cornerstone of ‘smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth’ should provide students with the capability to evaluate information critically and reflectively and to collaborate and communicate in heterogeneous groups. Given that the knowledge economy requires a high level of ongoing adaptability and resourcefulness from the labour market, it has been recommended that higher education institutions pay greater attention to accommodating lifelong learning and individuals’ ‘self-realisation’. Another important factor is the gradual expansion of the HE sector, and more specifically the appearance of mass education and lifelong learning combined with the relative declining share of funding in recent decades which has resulted in intensified competition between universities; this in turn has made acquiring funding significantly more challenging than beforehand.

The increasingly popular phenomenon of the “regionalisation of the economy” (which emphasises the importance of economic growth on the regional level) combined with the emergence of theories arguing that knowledge creation and innovation are increasingly important sources of economic differentiation have led to pressure from governments, businesses, and communities for HEIs to align their core functions with the regional needs.
Findings from the Survey—Emphasis on Efficient Use of Resources and Improvement of Learning Outcomes

The survey respondents have indicated that the increasing need and pressure for efficiency and better use of resources (due to growing resource constraints) as well as improvements of the learning outcomes have been the two key external factors responsible for driving innovation. Furthermore, new technology, the necessity to respond to societal/economic needs, and regional accessibility have also been mentioned as important drivers for innovation in higher education.

Mitigating the Challenges and Risks: the Introduction of Key Changes by HEIs

The literature review suggests that higher education institutions have undertaken numerous steps and introduced various changes and reforms in order to respond to the aforementioned challenges faced in recent decades.

In more detail, to address the challenges posed by the rise of the global knowledge economy, journals and their academic editors and boards have opened up their ideas and findings through their own websites and the use of social media (e.g. by adopting the Open Science approach which relies on enhanced access to public research which is facilitated by the use of ICT tools and platforms, greater collaboration in science (also with non-scientists) and the use of alternative copyright tools to diffuse research outcomes (OECD, 2010).

Furthermore, increased competition for shrinking funding has forced some HEIs to perform their research activities on a profit-oriented basis and, at the same time, reduce their spending. That is, in pursuit of solutions HEIs have had to seek alternative sources of funding from business, industry, civil society, and non-national state actors.

Finally, in order to respond, primarily, to the increasingly sophisticated functionality and yet ever wider diffusion of information and communications technology (ICT) HE institutions have concentrated on changing the modes of higher education provision. Other reasons triggering the introduction of such modes of provisions include the need to cater for much greater crowds (due to the massification of higher education) at lesser costs (due to cuts in public funding of higher education in many countries), which push for changes in modes of provision to make teaching and learning more cost efficient and widely accessible.

Findings from the Case Studies—Greater Regional Connections, Internationalization and Collaboration with the Private Sector

Findings from all case studies point to a diverse range of strategies that mitigate challenges faced by HEIs today.

The law regulating Spanish higher education emphasises the importance of flexibility and diversity as a means of responding to the demands of a fast-evolving and progressing society (REF). The curricula of the study programmes are, therefore, linked to the acquisition of competences and knowledge which will increase employability.

Furthermore, in 2008 Spain has launched the “University Strategy 2015” initiative which, among others, promotes strategic clusters of universities and other institutions placed in campuses with the aim of creating ecosystems of knowledge that boost employment, social cohesion and territorial economic development. Recently, however, due to the crisis the financial support for the initiative has been cut down (REF).

In the UK, the Higher Education Funding for England (HEFCE) has introduced in 1999 the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) which provides funding for knowledge exchange and supports the development of a broad range of knowledge-based interactions between higher education institutions and other entities (such as businesses) which benefit the UK from the economic and social perspectives. The allocations of the funds are performance based.
Another example of an innovation related government funded programme in the UK which illustrates the focus on innovation resulting from strengthening the links with the business sector is the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP). KTP ‘offers businesses the opportunity to work in partnership with an academic institution to obtain knowledge and expertise to which they currently have no access, to address their business challenges and embed sustainable innovation’ (TSB, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships). With regards to the private sector, there are some smaller-scale initiatives promoting innovation in modes of provision.

In France, during the Conference of University Presidents held in 2014 (titled “Universities and Innovation, taking action for the Economy and Society”) the importance of facilitating knowledge transfer and cooperation between the academic world, businesses the government (on both the national and local level) as well as other relevant organisations and stakeholders has been emphasized (REF). The recommendations resulting from the discussions held during the conference included the development of joint public-private research units as well as the provision of more funds enhancing innovation.

In Latvia the focus has been on increasing the international competitiveness of higher education. In order to do so the Ministry of Education and Science has begun to implement several reforms. The first one focused on the improvement of the quality of studies; the second on the consolidation of the higher education and science sectors and efficient use of resources; and, finally, the third concentrated on the internationalisation of the higher education and science sectors (REF). Furthermore, a new higher education funding model, which would ensure that access to high quality higher education for all, is expected to be implemented.

Similarly to the Latvian higher education system, the Slovakian one also underwent several reforms in order to increase the international competitiveness and quality of higher education (REF). That is, the Slovak Ministry of Education offered increased support for scientific activities through the Culture and Education Grant Agency (VEGA, KEGA, APVV etc.). It has also introduced a comprehensive accreditation process and has focused on increasing the level of internationalization of higher education and the science and research sector (REF). Finally, it has promoted foreign students and university staff exchanges through various programs such as the Erasmus exchange programme.

Findings from the Survey—Change as a Constant Feature of European HEI

The survey results highlighted the fact that since 2008 change has been a constant feature of European higher education and of the samples HEIs in particular.

In more detail, there is evidence of varying degrees of participation and cooperation between institutions, with 7 out of 27 respondents reporting their institutions having merged with others, and almost all respondents (26 out of 27) describing the establishment of “partnership(s) with other institution(s)” since 2008. However, the success or effectiveness of these moves was questioned by some participants. Other measures such as a focus on research-based study, work-placements, and real-life experiences have also been reported by respondents as a way of innovating. Further measures including increases in “progressive internationalisation” and improvements related to “learning outcomes and graduation rates” have also been mentioned respectively by 31 out of 32 respondents and by all 32 respondents.

With regards to the impact of relevant, external stakeholders, both the media and the general public are unilaterally shown rather insignificant in driving changes in the higher education system, with least responsibility attributed to regional/local external administrative bodies. The varying significance of government and local authorities in terms of institutional autonomy was observed by survey respondents ranging from 16 to 25 responses out of 31, which may reflect different socio-political structures and traditions in different parts of Europe.
Recent Developments in the Governance and Management and Organization of HEI

As a result of the aforementioned external pressures, the literature review suggests that HE institutions have also devoted considerable attention to adjusting their institutional structures. That is, traditional universities, characterised by a strong core with independent faculties, geographical boundaries, and in Europe a priori governmental steering are challenging their borders, organisational layouts and relationships to the Government.

The changes incurred in HEIs as identified by the literature review can be categorised as follows:

- Changes in governance of HEIs: Changes in ‘the framework in which an institution pursues its goals, objectives and policies in a coherent and co-ordinated manner’ (Eurydice, 2008).
- Changes in HEI management: Changes in the ‘implementation of a set of objectives pursued by a higher education institution on the basis of established rules’ (Eurydice, 2008).
- Changes in HEI organisational structure: Changes related to the creation of new units or individual positions and/or the restructuration of old units and re-defining individual positions.

The literature review suggests that the reforms in the first decade of the 21st century have primarily focused on increasing institutional autonomy. The rationale behind those changes had been based on the assumption that autonomy enables institutions to focus their strategies on their particular strengths which in turn allows them to adapt to the changing regional, national and international environments they operate in (Castro, 2012).

Alongside the development of institutional autonomy came the increased emphasis on accountability to ensure that institutions respond to societal needs. The accountability mechanisms put in place have had innovative (rather than traditional) character and have involved various assessments and checks as well as performance contracts and multi-year agreements between states and institutions (Castro, 2012).

As a result of those developments the position of executive heads of institutions has been strengthened and new institutional bodies have been set-up in many HEIs, such as advisory and supervisory boards which often include external stakeholders (Castro, 2012). In more detail, individuals with experience in the industry or in commerce are often invited to be part of institutional governance bodies with the aim of helping to link HEIs with the economy and improving internal efficiency. Furthermore, representatives of the civil society also participate in HEI governance with the goal of promoting regional and cultural interests and to facilitate the institution’s contribution to the local economy and to social development (Eurydice, 2008).

The rise of involvement of external stakeholders has been particularly prominent in the Nordic countries (i.e. Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Finland). To illustrate, the University Act in Denmark introduced in 2003, has introduced governing boards in HEIs with a majority of external members while commissions with student and staff representatives retained barely an advisory role. In Norway, as of 2003, governmental regulations made a board with four external members (out of a total of 11) a standard solution; the policy aimed at achieving a balance between the external and internal stakeholders so that neither could claim an effective majority (Musial, 2010).

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References


