

Pursuing Things that Work in European Higher Education Governance

Marta A. Shaw^{a,*}

^a*University of Minnesota, USA*

In the past two years, scholars in international and comparative higher education have paid increasing attention to the shifting landscape of university governance in Europe. Guided by theories of isomorphism and policy convergence, researchers have hypothesized that governance models in the European Higher Education Area are converging towards a common model that represents a radical departure from earlier traditions (Musselin 2005). Until recently, scholarship on governance in Europe warranted Burton Clark's (2007, p. 319) charge of "talking the talk far removed from local operating complexities." Yet emerging scholarship in the field is opening up possibilities to diminish the existing gap between research and practice by analyzing changes in governance and mapping out policy options in empirically consistent ways (Dobbins 2011; Dobbins et al. 2011). Efforts to develop coherent indicators to compare higher education systems in Europe open up the possibility for researchers and practitioners alike to "escape nationalistic tunnel vision" (Clark 2007, p. 321). This article argues that to realize the potential of its new tools, the field of international higher education must go beyond a synchronic and passive analysis of higher education systems. For the field to have real impact, it must heed the call of its founding father to "pursue the things that work" (Clark 2007, p. 319). With this aim in mind, the present article briefly traces the landscape of governance change in European higher education and critically assesses emerging pathways of future research.

In the past four decades, universities in Europe have been expected to advance social and economic activity that goes far beyond their traditional mission of creating and disseminating knowledge (Temple 2011). Changes

in European governance since the 1980s reflect a search for a common response to the complicated position of universities in the region. European universities are traditional institutions with deep roots in history, but since the emergence of the global "knowledge society", their role has been undergoing a dramatic transformation that leaves many academics uneasy (Gornitzka et al. 2007; Locke et al. 2012). The growing economic role of European higher education went hand in hand with an explosion of demand, decreasing state funding, and significant changes in the funding mechanisms used by governments. The pace of change in governance practices was accelerated by the establishment of the European Higher Education Area and a tightened relationship between the Bologna Process and the Lisbon strategy of the European Union (Capano and Piattoni 2011). A redefinition of the economic role of the university has contributed to an unprecedented shift of power in Western European higher education towards market forces (Maassen 2009; Regini 2011). Universities in Western Europe are no longer mere "cultural institutions"—they have become corporate organizations, "opened up to stakeholders, and in integration with an evaluative and regulative state" (Musselin 2005). Governance has since become a significant focus of scholarship on globalization in higher education (Paradeise et al. 2009; Dobbins 2011).

Comparing Directions of Governance Change

Comparisons of changing governance systems have commonly utilized Clark's (1983) classic concept of the higher education system as a triangle of state authority, the market, and the academic oligarchy. Historically, the balance of power in European universities was slanted towards the state and the academic community. The majority of institutions in continental Europe derive

*Corresponding author: Email: martashaw@umn.edu,
Address: Jandris Center for Innovative Higher Education,
150 Wulling Hall, 86 Pleasant Street SE, University of
Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA

their governance frameworks from one of two predominant models: the Humboldtian ideal, common in Germany and Northern Europe, envisions the university as a “republic of scholars” steered by the state; while Napoleonic and Soviet traditions view the university as a direct arm of the nation state (Dobbins 2011). Unlike their much younger counterparts in North America, European universities developed in close proximity to the nation-state, which is currently being profoundly redefined by the processes of globalization.

In recent decades, the power relations in European higher education have shifted towards an Anglo-Saxon model of a market-accountable university. Higher education systems in Western Europe have been undergoing a gradual shift towards more managerial and competitive approaches that emphasize the responsiveness of higher education to the local and global socio-economic environment (Paradeise et al. 2009). The role of higher education has been redefined as much as the role of the state itself, with significant implications for the relationship between the two, and for the daily functioning of universities (Maassen 2009). Yet despite the proliferation of studies on policy borrowing and convergence, few researchers in Europe have focused on the complex realities of successful practice at universities in the midst of these tectonic changes in higher education. The result is a persistent disconnect between practitioners and researchers that impoverishes not only their respective communities, but also their institutions and higher education systems.

Recent Developments

So far, empirical study of governance policy in Europe has been hampered by a lack of attention to governance practices effective in specific national contexts, and by a lack of consistency in the variables employed in cross-national comparisons of policy formulation (Heinze and Knill 2008). Researchers at the University of Konstanz have sought to fill this gap by developing a promising set of empirical indicators in different models of governance (Dobbins et al. 2011). The indicators are yet to be tested, but they represent the first systematic directory of available policy variations.

Comparative research using these indicators will inevitably follow. As it takes its departure from earlier work on higher education governance, it faces a real danger of pursuing purely academic discussions at the risk of irrelevance to policymakers. With the tools now at its disposal, the field of comparative and international higher education must not only map out the directions of change in European universities, but also heed the call of one of its founding fathers, Burton Clark, to “pursue things that work” in real university contexts (Clark 2007, p. 319).

Responses and Controversies

In scholarship and policy debates, changes in higher education systems have often been analyzed with the implicit assumption of their inevitability (Nybom 2007). Yet recent governance transformations in Europe have been far from uncontroversial, and the effects of borrowing policies from diverse traditions far from clear (Locke et al. 2012).

Both the field of comparative higher education and the academic community have recognized that what is at stake is the soul of the European university. A shift towards managerial governance is often seen as a symptom of Americanization in European higher education, and a departure from historical ideals at its heart (Michelsen 2010). While change is inevitable, the kind of institutionally legitimated change that erodes the ethical core of European higher education will inevitably become its eventual stumbling block. Yet it is only in a few cases that postulates to correct the course of governance change produced convincing university-generated counter-narratives, neither by higher education scholars nor by academics. In the absence of powerful counter-ideas, governments tend to gain power over universities and adopt solutions legitimated in the international arena (Kwiek 2012), often without weighing contextual constraints. Indeed, it has been argued that European higher education in the last 50 years has been a passive object rather than active agent of change (Nybom 2007).

Until the present, a large proportion of scholarship on higher education in Europe has been complicit in

furthering the inevitability of externally driven change and deepening perceptions of the field's practical irrelevance. The excessive popularity of neo-institutional and policy borrowing theories has disposed researchers to explore the macro-level changes in university governance without paying sufficient attention to the needs and potential solutions perceived by university stakeholders. Empirical studies comparing the perceived realities of policymakers and implementers of eventual reforms in Europe have been scarce if not non-existent. At the current crossroad, comparative and international higher education faces the choice to either continue on its earlier pathway of highly conceptual, synchronic research, or to take Clark's path and use the new tools to explore what works in specific higher education contexts. The second path will inevitably lead researchers into the uncomfortable realm of rigorous qualitative research that captures meanings and value systems. It will likewise take them into the even less comfortable terrain of public scholarship that does not shy away from policy recommendation. In few places is the need for such a path more critical than in my home region of Central Europe.

The Case of Central Europe

In post-communist Central Europe, universities have struggled to redefine their identity, and they provide ample illustrations of the possibilities and pitfalls of resistance to global university narratives. For five decades after the Second World War, the higher education systems of most Central and Eastern European nations functioned in relative isolation from the economic and political dynamics faced by Western neighbors. In the aftermath of the political transition, academics in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic regained levels of autonomy that often exceeded those of their Western counterparts, and secured a strong position in both policymaking and local governance (Estermann et al. 2011). Yet despite a strong political voice and social prestige, academics did not produce a convincing narrative of the academic institution (Kwiek 2012).

In Poland and Czech Republic, universities have used their existing advantages to resist changes proposed by the national governments, but without powerful founding ideas, they been vulnerable to externally imposed change. Most recently, the government of the Czech Republic moved forward with a comprehensive reform of higher education despite massive protests from the academic community (Myklebust 2012). The new bill reflects the internationally legitimated model of governance: it limits academic control of universities, strengthens the executive steering core, and involves external stakeholders in governance. Without compelling and socially convincing ideas to challenge the government, Czech universities have not been able to co-author their own identity.

Poland provides another instructive case study where the resistance of academics does halt the direction of change desired by the government, but to an effect recognized as unsatisfactory by all sides (Papuzińska 2011; Nowotnik 2011). The Polish government proposed a set of reforms largely the same as in the Czech Republic in a 2008-2010 amendment to the higher education law. The academic community successfully fought against the mandates and ensured that their adoption would be voluntary. The final result, however, yielded a model of governance that both the government and academics see as corrupt and wasteful of Poland's intellectual potential. The government and the academic community agree that change is needed, but disagree on how to accomplish it, which prevents reform even in areas recognized as pressing by both sides. The potential consequences are sobering—failure to reform higher education has been forecast to set Poland's social and economic development back by an additional 12-15 years, making it difficult for the country to compete with Western neighbors (Poland 2010).

Conclusion

In Central Europe and elsewhere, there is a critical need for higher education research that is both theoretically sound and practically relevant. The complexity of global dynamics in higher education systems must not detract emerging scholars in the field from paying close

attention to the lived realities of all participants in higher education systems under consideration. For administrators, faculty, university staff, and students, institutional governance is not an absorbing theoretical model, but the scaffolding of their daily activities and interactions. Our job as higher education scholars is not only to examine and compare the features of different scaffoldings, but also to discover how to secure and fortify them so that they allow people and their academic institutions to thrive.

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