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Changing Patterns of the Higher Education System and the Perennial Search of the Second Sector for Stability and Identity

The Emergence of the Second Sector of Higher Education

Different types of higher education institutions existed ever since we talk about higher education in terms of an aggregate, i.e. „sector“ or (sub-)“system“. Before the World War II, multidisciplinary universities were viewed in most European countries as the apex of the system, whereas mono-disciplinary institutions initially were not considered as being on equal terms. During the first two or three decades after World War II, however, this distinction gradually eroded: medical colleges, technical colleges and many other colleges were accepted at equals, and many – not all – changed their name to technical universities, etc.

Since the 1960s, a new sector of higher education emerged in Europe, though at a different point in time in the various European countries. The early models – the British „polytechnics“, the French „Instituts Universitaires de Technologie“ (IUT) and the German „Fachhochschulen“ – differed from each other in various respects, but they reflected jointly two common trends:

- a pressure towards increasing systematic knowledge in the „middle-level occupations“ or „semi-professions“ and a pressure towards a corresponding „upgrading“ both of the respective occupations and educational institutions,
- a pressure for diversification of the existing system of higher education due to the growth of the enrolment rates, because the students became more heterogeneous in terms of motivations, competences and career prospects and because the state was not willing to pay for an expansion of a research-oriented higher education system in tune with the rising students' demand for higher education.

The pressures and needs felt seemed to be similar, but the institutional responses remained varied.

The Search for a Name of the Sector

Various efforts were made for naming this second sector of higher education emerging in Europe since the 1960s. Various terms were chosen:

- „Short-cycle“ higher education,
- „Non-university“ higher education,
- „The alternative sector“ of higher education,
- „Vocational“ higher education,
- „Professional“ higher education“,
- „New“ higher education institutions or programmes,
- the „college sector“ o
- a list of names of national types, e.g. the „polytechnics“, „Fachhochschule“, etc. sector.

However, a consensus never emerged about a most suitable term. Even an association such as EURASHE which wants to represent and to promote the sector, never succeeded in propagating a single term as the most desirable one. This lack of consensus as regards the suitable term does not come as a surprise. Because most terms define this sector explicitly or implicitly in relationship to the „big brother“, i.e. the university, but the second higher education sector wants to find an identity outside the shadow of the university. Related to that, no common denominator is visible of the

substantive character of these institutions: „applied“, „vocational“, etc. sounds derogative, while „professional“ is not sufficiently distinct to the professional fields of universities (medicine, etc.); moreover, not all short programmes have a professional emphasis.

Major Distinctions between the Second Sector and the Universities

Analyses of patterns of the higher education tend to address different dimensions. We observe the following phenomena:

- different types of higher education institutions,
- different types of programmes (e.g. academic vs. professional),
- various levels of programmes and degrees (e.g. sub-degrees, bachelor, master, etc.),
- differences of programmes according to duration (years of study, credits, etc.),
- variations in reputation and prestige within formally equal institutions and programmes.

The composition of a higher education system in a country according to types of institutions and programmes, levels, etc. might be called

- „Unitary“ system,
- „Binary“ system“,
- „Dual“ or „multi-type“ system,
- „Stage“ or „level“ system,
- „Comprehensive system“,
- Etc.

In the search for a more analytical typology, we note the following distinctions:

- (a) Higher education institutions or programmes might be grouped into „types“, or sectors, or they might be viewed as a point on a spectrum. As an example of the latter, the Czech system of higher education was often described as pursuing a „spectral approach“.
- (b) We can describe the variety of higher education programmes according to the vertical, i.e. the status dimension (quality, reputation, career success of graduates, etc.), or according to the horizontal, i.e. substantive dimensions (i.e. different conceptual and curricular profiles).
- (c) A higher education system might aim at providing inter-institutional diversification (e.g. differences in the reputation or profile of individual institutions or different types of higher education institutions) or intra-institutional differentiation (e.g. the „comprehensive university model“ in Europe).

It might be justified to consider the Japanese higher education system as strongly hierarchical, because we observe substantial quality differences between institutions of higher education and many of the less prestigious institutions try to copy the approaches of the more successful ones. The U.S. higher education system is also characterized by a larger vertical range than the higher education systems in Europe; however, there is a remarkable variety of distinct substantive profiles as well. Individual institutions are often proud of their substantive peculiarities even if a second look shows us that they are less distinct than they like to pretend. U.S. higher education is like the religious system in an U.S. town: people go to various similarly looking churches, but they feel certain that God is in their church.

In many European countries, less emphasis is placed on the characteristics of the individual higher education institution and programme. Rather, an institutional typology should serve to stabilize different substantive profiles group-wise (such as the more or less peaceful coexistence of two major religions in Europe since the Peace of Westphalia in the mid-17th century).

The Dominant Emphasis on the Vertical Dimension

It is not merely an analytical issue whether to describe the diversity of higher education institutions primarily in „vertical“ or in „horizontal“ terms. Rather, this is a salient political issue. In a somewhat simplified pattern, we could make the following generalisations as far as the attitudes of the various actors are on the national level:

- Universities tend to adhere to vertical concepts. There is a single God, and a single Nobel Prize, paradigmatic homogeneity tends to be viewed as a strength of a „mature“ discipline, while paradigmatic heterogeneity raises doubts about the academic quality of a discipline.
- Institutions of higher education of the second sector sometimes yield to the vertical pressure, for example by making unrealistic claims of the career success of their graduates in comparison to that of university graduates. But they tend to be more favourable to a horizontal approach than universities and praise their own curricular approach as clearly distinct from that of universities.
- Both, employers and governments, tend to be in favour of both horizontally and vertically different types of higher education and programmes. They see the need of different levels combined with different profiles. Moreover, they even go so far to over-stressing the curricular value of the second sector of higher education in order to counterbalance the status advantage of the universities.

Given these patterns of attitudes, it might come as a surprise to note that supra-national governmental agencies tend to underscore the vertical dimension of higher education. For example:

- The Council of the EC agreed in 1988 to consider three years of study at a recognized institution of higher education – i.e. irrespective of type or programme – as the typical entry qualification to the high-level professions.
- The OECD groups the educational programmes and awards primarily according to the level. In the 1998 version of „Education at a Glance“, five types/levels of awards are chosen:
 - „Non-university certification“ (less than three-year programmes at institutions of higher education or also three-year programmes at other post-secondary education institutions),
 - „Short first university degree“ (Bachelor or similarly),
 - „Long first university degree“ („Laurea“, „Magister“, etc.),
 - „Second university degree“ (Master, etc. in countries where a bachelor exists),
 - „Ph.D.“
- The „Sorbonne“ and the „Bologna“ declarations also talk about levels according to years of study or ECTS, but not of types.

Two explanations are often given for addressing solely the vertical dimension. The first is more of a technical nature: there are no common criteria according to which national higher education systems are horizontally diverse, therefore the horizontal diversity cannot be taken into account adequately in international comparisons. The second claim is that the other types of programmes and institutions than the university sector would be most highly recognized, if study is compared and possibly recognized according to the required length. But, the well-intended policy might have the reverse effect: If all attention is devoted to the length of study, horizontal diversity tends to be viewed as irrelevant and the specific curricular thrusts of many other types of institutions and programmes are marginalized.

Developments

The second sector of higher education seems to be transitional as far as the institutions belonging to it are concerned. Institutions not viewed as higher education are upgraded towards institutions of higher education. One, two or three decades later many of them are recognized as universities. In the meantime, the second sector of higher education is filled up again by new institutions recognized as „higher education“.

The dynamics observed might be characterized differently: Two terms were often used to describe and explain those dynamics:

- The term „academic drift“ is employed to underscore the inclination of „non-university“ higher education institutions to raise their status by becoming more similar to universities, e.g. through striving for a research role, dissociating themselves from an applied emphasis, recruiting staff qualified for university careers, etc.
- In reverse, „professional drift“ depicts tendencies of some universities to become more applied in order to secure better funding or improvement of their graduates' career prospects, thus becoming more similar to the non-university sector of higher education.

A more detailed analysis might explore whether quality differences between sectors of the higher education systems increase or decrease and a functional segmentation between the sectors is on the way or whether there is a trend of functional blurring. Such an analysis can also show whether the individual institutions of higher education tend to follow the main stream of a sector or whether they strive for the sharpening of an individual profile.

Various theories have come afore in higher education research about these dynamics as far as the pattern of the higher education system is concerned:

- (a) The 'expansion and diversification' theory had the strongest impact on the public debate. Accordingly, the expansion of higher education creates a pressure for diversification because the needs of the learners and other potential users of the services of higher education become more varied and because, as many actors involved believe, these varied needs might be more readily met through a certain 'division of labour' among institutions. Trow's model of 'elite', 'mass' and 'universal' higher education became the best known terminology for explaining such an 'expansion and diversification' approach.
- (b) A second type of theory, 'drift' theories, also became very popular. Types of higher education institutions are not necessarily very faithful in pursuing the goals, they were expected to pursue when they were initially established. According to these theories, different types of higher education institutions are eager to pursue their initial mission at most for a short period after they had been newly founded or upgraded. After some period, they begin to consider themselves as competitors to the other types of higher education institutions.
- (c) A third type of approach might be called 'flexibilization' theories. They share the view that expansion of higher education calls for diversification, but in contrast to the first theory, they point at weaknesses in segmented institutional types serving clearly distinct needs. The establishment of certain types of higher education institutions seems to be an early response to changing needs. Over time, soft models and broad ranges of solutions might be superior to distinct types. Accordingly, late selection in pre-career education, permeability of educational careers, compensatory measures for the disadvantaged, soft diversified structures of higher education, and the establishment of a life-long-education system contribute a soft system in three respects: no decision in the educational career would be considered as definite, the model could satisfy both the advocates and critics of educational expansion, and it would finally facilitate rapid adaptations, if major problems occurred.
- (d) Finally, we note 'cyclical' theories of the structural development of higher education. According to these theories, certain structural patterns and policies come and go in cycles. For example, opening up of educational avenues and a reduction of the differences between varied types of institutions and course programmes might be on the agenda at times when a shortage of graduates is felt, whereas segmentation and hierarchization of higher education is favoured or just taking place, when fears of over-supply or 'over-education' dominate the scene.

Problems and Opportunities of Strengthening the Profile of the Sector

If higher education is presented in the public by a strong voice of the university and by a weak voice of the other sector of higher education, because the latter sector has no common profile and because the individual institutions of this sector consider themselves as being merely in a transitory stage on the way toward becoming a university, the self-representation of the higher education sector becomes lopsided. For example, one could argue that a representation of higher education only by universities in the „Sorbonne“, „Bologna“ and Prague discussions is likely to be destructive for the diversity of the higher education system.

But it is difficult for the second sector to become a major voice, because the criteria of distinction are not uniform and because many individual institutions hope to raise their status by playing down or even reducing those differences. Therefore, one cannot be surprised to note that the organisations representing this sector tend to be relatively weak if compared to the organisations representing the universities.

The current moves toward an introduction of bachelor-level programmes and degrees in most European universities pose a major challenge to the second sector of higher education. Unless it succeeds in sharpening the profile, it will be weakened because its institutions and programmes will be viewed as just a minor variation of a short university programme. Thus, sharpening the profile is on the agenda for EURASHE or a loss of identity.

I assume that sharpening the profile by addressing the shortness of the programmes or their applied nature is underscoring too much the character of a minor version of the university to be useful for reinforcing one's identity. A search might be needed for a more convincing particular curricular thrust. I could imagine that a „pro-active professional education“ could be the solution: Students do not learn theories and cope with professional tasks due to the transfer quality of their theoretical knowledge (the dominant university approach), but they are confronted with the tension between academic and practical problem solving approaches from the beginning of their studies thus enjoying a process of anticipatory professional socialisation which draws both from the critical rationality of the university and from the early confrontation with practice in „applied“ learning settings. There is room for an identity of the second sector of higher education between the academic and the applied approach.

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