HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE
REFORMS ACROSS EUROPE

EXECUTIVE REPORT
MODERN CONFERENCE
BRUSSELS, 8-9 JUNE 2009
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction .......................... P 6
II. EU Policy Framework for Higher Education ....................... P 7
III. Summary of the MODERN Thematic Report on Governance .............. P 10
IV. Key Conference Themes ................................. P 14
   1. Institutional autonomy ...................... P 14
   2. Academic leadership ......................... P 15
   3. Stakeholders’ involvement ................... P 15
   4. Expectations from the private sector ...... P 16
   5. Implementing new governance instruments .... P 17
V. Conference conclusions .................................. P 18
VI. References ...................................... P 19
I. Introduction

MODERN – European Platform Higher Education Modernisation – is a three-year EU-funded project (2009-2011) under the Lifelong Learning Programme (ERASMUS), which aims to respond to the Modernisation Agenda of the European Union and to the need to invest in people, support future leaders and encourage the professionalisation of higher education management at all levels. The main project activities are to create an open platform for discussion and the dissemination of good practice and mutual learning, to map the demand and the supply of higher education management training, to publish thematic reports, and to organise peer-learning activities as well as a number of conferences on key themes related to the modernisation of higher education.

The first MODERN conference on Governance took place in Brussels on 9 June 2009. It was based on a thematic report produced by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) of the University of Twente, project partner. The report provides an overview of the state of the art, changes and innovations on the conference theme - Governance reforms in higher education across Europe.

This executive report provides an insight into the key issues raised and discussed at the conference. It is organised in four parts and starts with the EU policy framework for higher education, highlighting the core messages from the presentation given by Mr. Robin van IJperen from the DG Education and Culture of the European Commission. The second part provides a summary of the MODERN thematic report produced by CHEPS and presented at the conference by Mr. Jon File, while the third part is dedicated to a number of conference themes discussed in plenary sessions and workshops, namely institutional autonomy, academic leadership, stakeholders’ involvement, expectations from the private sector and implementing new governance instruments. The executive report ends with the concluding remarks, delivered at the end of the conference by Prof. Frans van Vught, President of the European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU), project leader.
II. EU Policy Framework for Higher Education

As highlighted in the thematic report produced by CHEPS for the MODERN conference on the state of the art of governance reforms, higher education in Europe is currently undergoing more substantial changes than in any other region in the world. At the same time, the European university is “under stress” (Maassen & Olsen, 2007: 2) and it is ever more recognised as a vital institution contributing to the knowledge society and economy. This role of the university has been in particular recognised and emphasised by the European Commission and has thus served as a starting point and rationale for numerous policy initiatives. Nevertheless, universities appear to lack institutional capacity to meet these demands, and as governments have increasing difficulties to provide financial support to “quality education and excellent research” (de Boer & File, 2009: 8), they are required to find new ways to adapt to new demands coming from their environment.

The European Union’s Lisbon Strategy (2000), aiming at making Europe’s economy more competitive, while placing knowledge in the centre of this process, has become a reference for practically all European Union’s policy initiatives on higher education after 2000. The key role of the European university in this process is stressed in the Modernisation Agenda (2006), which sees the university as the institution which brings together education, research, innovation, and further emphasises its crucial role in making Europe “the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000).

Nevertheless, the European Commission (EC) has recognised several challenges for the Modernisation Agenda (van IJperen, 2009):

- European higher education is underperforming (compared to the US)
- Not enough people participate in and graduate from higher education
- Not enough focus is placed on lifelong learning
- Higher education is too fragmented, overregulated and under-funded
- Curricula are not adapted to the needs of the labour market

As indicated in the MODERN thematic report, dealing with the problems and challenges European universities face entails significant reforms in higher education governance, both internal (at the institutional level) and external (at the system-level). At the same time, the European Commission provides directions to meet the challenges universities are facing as recognised by the Modernisation Agenda, labelled as “Three Big Reforms” (van IJperen, 2009), namely, the reform of curricula (within the framework of the Bologna Process), governance reform and funding reform.

Regarding curricula, the European Commission stresses the need to make these more flexible and better adapted to the needs of the labour market, and in relation to this the EU has developed a common language via the European Qualifications Framework and learning outcomes. At the same time, the European Union is trying to develop the framework for improved university-enterprise cooperation. In parallel, the Bologna process represents an important contribution to more transparent and comparable curricula which stimulates mobility of students and researchers and is thus recognised as relevant and instrumental to the EU’s Modernisation Agenda. With the aim to stimulate mobility, the European Union has designed and implemented two mobility schemes - Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus.
With regard to the funding reform, the European Commission recommends more funding in higher education in times of financial crisis. It also suggests that the institutional funding basis should be diversified and higher education institutions should avoid relying on one major source of financing. Within the updated strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020), a new benchmark has been introduced: public – private investment in higher education should be at least 2% of GDP. Returns on education are higher in developing countries than in advanced industrial countries, and are rising in most dynamic economies. At the same time private returns exceed social returns, which represent a reflection of the public subsidisation of higher education. Here, the EC suggests tuition fees as an option, to be accompanied by grants or loans. Finally, it is suggested that increasing access to higher education should be followed by increasing income for universities.

In terms of governance reform, the European Commission encourages institutional autonomy and full accountability while at the same time raises the issue of the state involvement in the higher education sector and calls for caution with respect to overregulation and micromanagement. The European Commission recommends strategic priorities set by institutions and stakeholders involved, in particular employers and the business sector. In the end, building and rewarding good management and leadership should be a priority.

Mr. IJperen referred to several initiatives related to governance in higher education the European Union stands behind:

1. Reports and projects on the governance reforms across Europe, such as the CHEPS studies on “Impact of Higher Education Governance Reforms across Europe” or projects within the EU’s Lifelong Learning Programme, such as the MODERN European Platform for Higher Education Modernisation.

2. Initiatives to encourage the involvement of businesses which has clear positive effects on funding, governance and on curricula. For this purpose the Commission launched the University - Business Forum last year which is expected to stimulate dialogue and actions on issues such as lifelong learning, entrepreneurship, curriculum development and governance. Earlier this year a new Communication from the Commission was released “A new partnership for the modernisation of universities: the EU Forum for University – Business Dialogue” (COM, 2009). In addition to that, a Communication from the Commission - “New Skills for New Jobs, Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs” (2008) also recognises that the contribution of EU universities to the innovation-driven economy should be enhanced.

3. The European Institute for Innovation and Technology which integrates the three sides of the “knowledge triangle”: education, research and innovation. The Institute also offers master, PhD and post doctoral programmes co-designed by business partners to attract the best talents worldwide. The EIT disseminates best practices and innovation governance models across Europe. The EIT has also launched the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) programme, aiming at creating “highly integrated, creative partnerships including education, technology, research, business and entrepreneurship that will produce new innovations and new innovation models and inspire others to emulate them” (EIT, 2009).
4. Transparency Initiatives on mapping and ranking of missions and performances, such as the CHEPS studies in the field of Mapping of Missions - “Institutional Profiles - towards a typology of higher education institutions in Europe” (2005) and “Mapping diversity: Developing a European Classification of Higher Education Institutions” (2008), the European Data Collection project of the DG Research of the European Commission, the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), the pilot project to design and test a multi-dimensional global ranking, which will be run by the CHERPA network, a consortium gathering the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) of the University of Twente (the Netherlands), the Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung (CHE) (Germany), the Centre for Science and Technology Studies of the University of Leiden (The Netherlands), the Research Division INCENTIM of the University of Leuven (Belgium) and the Observatoire des Sciences et des Techniques Paris (France).

Some of the European Commission’s perspectives regarding the challenges European universities face are also confirmed in the MODERN thematic report, namely the lack of competitiveness, the tendency of uniformity and egalitarianism, the emphasis on monodisciplinarity, traditional learning and learners, as well as “failing to use their full potential to stimulate economic growth, social cohesion, and improvement in the quality and quantity of jobs” (de Boer & File, 2009:8). However, the EC believes that European universities have the potential to meet the demands, while it also prescribes certain measures, such as strengthening human resources and combining European diversity with common frameworks.
III. Summary of the MODERN Thematic Report on Governance

The conference was based on a thematic report on the state of the art of governance reforms in European higher education produced by the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente, MODERN project partner.

The report was based on existing literature, current and previous work on governance issues in higher education, including a major report produced by CHEPS, CHE, ESMU and NIFU-STEP for the European Commission in 2006. This report included 32 national reports on recent changes in governance arrangements, 5 in-depth case studies (Austria, Norway, The Netherlands, Catalonia, Czech Republic) and a web-based survey among institutions (through the Socrates/Erasmus network). Moreover, the thematic report for the MODERN conference on governance also included an overview of the policy context and major themes and perspectives with respect to governance in higher education, as well as internal and external trends in governance across Europe.

The study of 32 national higher education systems showed that there has been a long wave of governance reform in European higher education, which is continuing, and that the picture is highly heterogeneous. Furthermore, the intensity, implementation and timing of reforms differ greatly across the 32 countries.

With respect to the findings of the study, three types of changes in national higher education systems have been recognised by the authors (de Boer & File, 2009):

1. Changes in national governance frameworks
2. Changes in institutional autonomy
3. Changes in internal governance and management

These were further outlined during the MODERN conference as follows:

1. With respect to national governance frameworks, five changes have been observed:
   a. The emergence of multi-level multi-actor governance
   b. Increased emphasis on competition
   c. New funding arrangements
   d. Increased attention paid to quality assurance in all countries
   e. Institutional autonomy: strengthening the strategic capacities of higher education institutions

   a) The emergence of multi-level multi-actor governance

It has been noted that many governments are “in search of new means of system oversight and performance-based steering” (de Boer & File, 2009) and not withdrawing from their responsibility for higher education, meaning that the influence of the government is changing, not declining. Areas that have traditionally been under governments’ responsibility have been transferred to higher education institutions and other actors, such as research councils and
accreditation agencies. In parallel to this, the number of stakeholders influencing higher education policies has increased, while the role of ministries of education, institutional leadership, the European Commission, industry and business, and national agencies/bodies has become more prominent.

b) Increased emphasis on competition

The growing competition for the recruitment of (high performing) academic staff, for the recruitment of (talented) students, for public funding in general and basic research funding in particular has been observed. However, there are variations across countries in this respect, in particular regarding the extent to which higher education institutions are exposed to competition and the areas which policy and practice leave open for competition.

c) New funding arrangements

The authors have stressed that there is no general reduction in the level of public funding, although the income per student has declined, albeit the methods of allocation have changed and are now more performance-based. Private contributions, such as student fees or third party funded research, have become more stressed, while (attempted) mergers in a number of systems have become a way to reduce expenditures.

d) Increased attention paid to quality assurance in all countries

Quality assurance has moved up on the agenda, which is the case both at the national and institutional levels, although the ways in which this is carried out frequently differ. Here, most emphasis has been placed on the evaluation of teaching and to a lesser extent on research.

e) Institutional autonomy: strengthening the strategic capacities of higher education institutions

Differences among countries can be grouped in two lines: freedom to determine internal structures and the degree of (internal and external) stakeholder involvement. In many countries internal governance structures are largely determined by national law. With respect to internal decision-making bodies, executive management has gained more powers, while representative bodies (e.g. senates) have a less prominent role.

2. Regarding the institutional autonomy, eight areas were identified to assess the levels of institutional autonomy:

a. Institutional mission/strategy development
b. Internal governance structures
c. Introduction of new study programmes
d. Quality of teaching and learning
e. Internal financial policies
f. Conditions of employment of staff
g. Access and admission policies
h. Development of public-private partnerships
a) Institutional mission/strategy development

With respect to institutional mission development, in many countries national authorities have a strong role in determining the broad mission of higher education institutions. Yet, the decisive role on this matter belongs to institutional leaders, with the involvement of other actors, namely, academics, students and industry and business to different degrees.

b) Internal governance structures

Regarding internal governance and management structures, these are, to a varying extent, determined by national legislation in most countries studied. The variety of practice concerns the level of detail, meaning that institutional leadership is highly involved, the involvement of academics and students varies strongly, while external stakeholders are not much involved.

c) Introduction of new study programmes

Study programmes are in most countries designed by institutions themselves and here institutional management, academics and students are the most important players. Yet, institutional autonomy is somewhat restricted by programme accreditation procedures and criteria.

d) Quality of teaching and learning

Quality assurance is a matter where higher education institutions have an increasing responsibility, and here institutional leaders, academics and to a lesser extent students are influential. There seems to be a substantial amount of institutional autonomy in terms of designing internal quality assurance procedures, which has resulted in both more internal bureaucracy and more professionalisation of the quality assurance function.

e) Internal financial policies

As for resource allocation and finances, institutional management and to a lesser extent government decide how budgets are distributed internally, which indicates significant institutional autonomy. On the other hand, in many countries higher education institutions follow the same internal allocation methodology applied by the government in allocating lump sums to institutions. It has also been noted that the institutional autonomy in determining (the level of) tuition fees exists only in a few countries.

f) Conditions of employment of staff

Human resources are to a great extent managed by institutions. In concrete terms, institutional management has much influence in determining conditions of employment, while governments set some/many of the framework conditions.

g) Access and admission policies

Practices of student selection vary across countries. Namely, in many countries there are centralized national procedures and regulations on student access and selection, while in other countries student selection is the responsibility of institutional management and academics. However, in this area as well, there is a trend towards more institutional autonomy.
h) Development of public-private partnerships

Finally, the development of public-private partnerships is the least regulated issue. Even though higher education institutions have the freedom to establish such kind of relationships, experiences are limited.

3. Internal governance and management

Although practices differ greatly, governance arrangements do follow certain trends. With regard to internal governance and management, the following trends have been observed:

- Greater levels of institutional autonomy
- Higher levels of public accountability, followed by more centralisation of this responsibility internally
- Strengthening of higher education institutions as organisations – strengthening of institutional leadership, more leaders are now “selected”
- Strengthening of middle management, particularly “executive Deans”
- Reduction of the powers of (collegial) representative bodies of academic staff and/or students and administrative staff
- Boards of Trustees/Supervisory Boards with (majority) external stakeholder representation

The MODERN thematic report on governance represents an overview of the situation with respect to governance in higher education which was a reality in 2006, when the study for the European Commission was conducted. Today, only three years after that, the situation has evolved in many countries, which requires ongoing monitoring and mapping of the higher education governance dynamics across Europe.
IV. Key Conference Themes

Within the scope of the MODERN conference various themes regarding higher education in Europe were discussed. Although governance in higher education was the main theme, the discussions often reached beyond its scope.

Five thematic areas with respect to the purposes of the MODERN platform on higher education modernisation and on the governance theme in particular were:

1. Institutional autonomy
2. Academic leadership
3. Stakeholders’ involvement
4. Expectations from the private sector
5. Implementation of new governance instruments

1. Institutional autonomy

Regarding institutional autonomy there is a consensus that the practices across Europe are diverse, although a trend towards greater autonomy of higher education institutions has been recognised. Institutional autonomy was a theme of one of the conference workshops. Six aspects of institutional autonomy were the starting point in approaching the subject, i.e. governance, staff, students, finance, education and research and the level of diversity of practices in these areas across Europe.

Enhanced institutional autonomy through deregulation is seen as an “overarching governance trend in European higher education over the last two decades” (de Boer & File, 2009: 12). During the conference the notion of autonomy was linked to the notion of quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions, leading to a conclusion that the higher level of institutional autonomy more often then not leads to higher quality and more effectiveness. At the same time, a change has been noticed with respect to the relationship between teaching and research, where teaching seems to be losing its importance to research activities. This, again, is seen as a result of the growing level of institutional autonomy. Furthermore, the trend of increasing autonomy has brought higher education institutions to the challenge of building institutional profiles and, in relation to it, the dilemma of reconciling quality and diversity under the umbrella of a single higher education institution.

Prof. Dr. Peter Gaehtgens (2009), former President of the Freie Universität Berlin, and former President of the German Rectors' Conference, argued that today there is an increasing number of universities undergoing transformation from a “Humboldtian” type, driven by intrinsic, individual and academic interests of scientists, to an “entrepreneurial” type, driven by “institutional” and more collective interests which enables it to be more responsive to the demands of the environment.

Enhanced institutional autonomy is normally seen as instrumental in the described process of transformation (de Boer & File, 2009), consequently in making universities more responsible and accountable and finally more efficient in fulfilling their “third mission”.

Executive Report MODERN Conference on Governance, Brussels, 8-9 June 2009 • 14
2. Academic leadership

The role of academic leaders varies significantly across Europe, both in terms of practices and different models.

As indicated in the MODERN thematic report, a general tendency towards strengthening the executive positions in the institutions, accompanied by a more important governance role for external stakeholders exists. In that respect, one of the most common dilemmas is whether academic leaders should be appointed or elected. The situation is rather diverse across European countries, while the current trend is that the number of universities having their leaders appointed rather than elected is increasing, and this happens “at the expense of academics and students and their representative bodies” (de Boer & File, 2009: 14). Simultaneously, some countries, in particular the post-communist ones of Central and Eastern Europe, are more in favour of electing their leadership, and having in mind the past relationship between the regime and higher education institutions often found in these countries, this preference is expected (Scott, 2003: 305). In relation to this, the question of the effect external members of governing bodies might have on the powers of internal academic leaders is frequently raised nowadays. During the MODERN conference, this question was accompanied by the concern of possible intra-institutional conflicts, which lead to an assumption that elected leaders bring less possibility of conflict, while those who are appointed are less supportive of academic affairs.

Today, academic leaders are encouraged to lead their institutions towards greater responsiveness to the needs of society. Academic leaders are expected to develop and pursue institutional priorities addressing specific needs in the environment, and thus be more capable of pursuing them (Soboll, 2009). Nevertheless, these well defined institutional priorities are seen as conflicting with academic freedom, which is also something higher education institutions are expected to nurture and secure (Gaetgens, 2009). Prof. Gaetgens referred to this paradox as “rectangular circles”, since academic freedom rests with individual researchers, while institutional priorities represent a collective interest. At the same time, the stronger the external influence on the institution, the more academic freedom is in conflict with institutional priorities.

In conclusion, academic leaders and managers are under pressure, both internally and externally, as their capacity, knowledge and skills to run their institutions are being challenged by growing demands arising in the environment. Their management skills are expected to be accompanied by academic competences without which they are unable to operate fully in academic environments.

3. Stakeholders’ involvement

In broad terms, stakeholders are any “groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984). However, not all the stakeholders from Freeman’s definition are of the same relevance for higher education institutions. Therefore, the concept of stakeholder salience (File, 2009) narrows the range of stakeholders to “only’ those actors that are very important for the organization”, and is defined as “the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims”. Salience increases when decision makers ascribe more attributes to a stakeholder and the combination of attributes leads to three groups from being perceived as less to more salient: latent (one
attribute), expectant (two attributes) and definitive (all three attributes). Attributes can be demanding, dominant, dependent etc.

Stakeholders in the higher education arena are numerous. Government, higher education institution administration, employees, partners, customers are only some of them and their relevance for a higher education institution varies. In broad terms, stakeholders can be divided in two groups, internal and external, depending whether they reside inside or outside the institution. While the general trend is that internal stakeholders are losing out to external stakeholders, this varies across countries. It is commonly accepted that the relationship of the institutional management and various stakeholders has become more intense, which has had its consequences for internal governance arrangements of higher education institutions. At the same time, demands coming from stakeholders are proliferating, and as their relevance for institutions grows, leaders and managers need to be more responsive to them, making their task extremely difficult.

The issue of stakeholders is often raised when the “third mission” of the university is discussed. The link between this is seen as linear: the more universities interact with the environment in which they operate, the more diverse the priority allocated to different stakeholders by institutional managers becomes. Therefore, stakeholder management becomes more complex, while stakeholders themselves are as well seen as diverse in terms of their knowledge on the internal dynamics of higher education institutions.

4. Expectations from the private sector

There is a common agreement that the university is a key institution in the “knowledge triangle”. It is also a unique institution, in the sense that it draws together education, research and innovation and as such it can contribute greatly to economic growth. However, this perception of the university is not equally shared among universities themselves, in particular by academics, which creates a diverse landscape of the degree of cooperation between the university and the business sector across Europe.

The private sector asks for higher education institutions to train people, with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences for a smooth transition to the labour market upon graduation. According to Dr. Horst Soboll (2009), Advisor to the European Commission and former Director of Research Policy and Communications of Daimler AG, the private sector sees universities as institutions which are to train people in research and management and enable them to work in interdisciplinary teams. Universities are also expected to generate knowledge through research which lies beyond the limits of mono-disciplinarity and which should serve as a basis for new products, services and processes. In this respect, universities must sharpen their profiles and define niches in order to be able to generate excellence. They are also asked to be more flexible and more open to competition, to react to incentives, and to adapt to new demands. Finally, with respect to addressing the needs of the society, Dr. Soboll stressed the importance of universities in their regions, forging strong links with the business sector, embedded in joint strategies. Yet, universities, as research organisations, should also be active at the European and international levels stimulating mobility of researchers and joining forces and resources in order to achieve a critical mass to meet global challenges and problems (e.g. environment, energy, health, transport).
With respect to innovation, patents are seen as a valuable tool linking universities and the business sector (Soboll, 2009). While for businesses patents are seen as a mechanism to protect own research and development investments, rather less as an additional income, for academia, patents are seen as a source of licence income. Yet again, the value of patents depends on the discipline, the latter being a relevant factor in establishing links between higher education and the business sector which should facilitate joint research ventures. Therefore, as Dr. Soboll underlined, each higher education institution should create a strong institutional profile based on its specific research niche and area of excellence.

5. Implementing new governance instruments

University reforms are driven by demands from society and numerous stakeholder interests, asking for employability and mobility of graduates, contribution to innovation and regional development, as well as development of partnerships with business and industry. At the same time, universities are asked to be competitive and this requires “autonomy, profile diversity and institutional strategy”, which is in contrast with some basic principles under which universities function, such as academic freedom (Gaehtgens, 2009).

Furthermore, governance reforms require instruments which will facilitate the integration of academic and administrative processes, identification and pursuit of institutional interests and profile, professionalisation of leadership and, last but not least, respect for academic freedom. The main challenges recognised in the reform process are numerous and they require certain measures, such as balancing institutional interests and academic freedom and increasing institutional autonomy and personal accountability at all levels (ibid.).

Although the higher education institutions across Europe often face similar challenges, the ways of meeting these challenges are numerous, which can be explained by the variety in regulatory frameworks, system and institutional dynamics, other types of local arrangements, cultures and traditions, which further contributes to the already diverse higher education landscape in Europe.
V. Conference conclusions

In closing the conference, Prof. van Vught (2009) concluded that there is a wide range and degree of higher education governance trends in Europe which have been discussed extensively in the MODERN thematic report and conference. These are set in a context of many new challenges which higher education institutions and their leaders and managers face nowadays. These challenges are at the core of the EU Modernisation Agenda, which has resulted in numerous initiatives coming from the European Commission itself, from the business sector, from policy makers, from higher education institutions and their leaders, etc. Yet, realities across Europe are diverse and there is no one single model of good governance arrangements that fits all.

There are many solutions and many good practices in higher education governance in Europe. These should be clearly identified and disseminated widely in Europe to contribute further to governance reforms. As the focus on governance issues is increasing, policy makers and institutional leaders are increasing their knowledge on and understanding of higher education governance. Still a more common vocabulary needs to be developed, which will help foster more transparency on higher education governance issues.

At the same time, leaders and managers of higher education institutions need more practical instruments, in the form of organisational support for institutional development and leadership development programmes, in order to successfully perform their tasks. This is one of the purposes of the MODERN platform.

30 June 2009
VI. References


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