

Chapter 14

Global Challenges and Trends of University Governance Structures

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tries to identify the different trends in university governance and their underlying causes. Although it focuses on university trends in Europe, it makes reference to global trends and causes, such as digitalization, inter-connectivity of our societies, and growing international competition. In sum, the chapter argues that the digital evolution has led both to a changed approach to teaching as well as to growing global competition in the race to obtain the best talent. This, in combination with a generation that has a growing access to higher education and that thrives on “instant knowledge-satisfaction,” has led to university governance changes that better fit current needs. Government-led austerity programs have further accelerated these changes, as universities seek to optimize their financing whilst, at the same time, striving to move up the international rankings. University governance trends include a professionalization of management, the creation of international excellence networks, and the establishment of interdisciplinary but specialized schools.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are often referred to as one of the oldest structures in the world, with it being commonly recognized that the first universities (as we know them today) were established around the 11th Century¹. It would, however, be ill sighted to suppose that university structures had not changed at all over the past millennium. Already at the outset, the structure and mission of medieval universities differed: whereas the universities in Germany, France, and England were self-regulated (through “an independent corporation of scholars”) (Scott, 2006), universities in Spain and Italy were created by royalty or government

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to serve the needs of the state (Pryds & Darleen, 2000). It would also be unwise to compare a society with merely 27 universities worldwide to today's reality with more than 26,000 universities². Even if we only go back one hundred years, scholars in the UK, the US, and in continental Europe agree that, by and large, three particular stages can be identified in the development of universities and university structures in the past century, with a fourth one emerging³. A first stage is the pre-war stage of 'old school' universities that are in most cases self-regulated and self-financed; a second stage is the post-war period that was marked by a democratization of higher education and a proliferation of government-subsidized universities alongside private initiatives; and a third stage started in the 1980s following financial crises and austerity programs on the part of governments, urging universities to rethink their funding (and their spending) and subsequently their (management) structure. We argue that a fourth stage has begun to emerge since the beginning of the new millennium, induced by digitalization and globalization. Contrary to the first three stages, which were largely triggered by government policy, restructuring in this fourth stage is mainly the result of global and technical (r)evolutions.

Therefore, to state that "Universities are old, long term institutions that have persisted through many different regimes, contexts and situations before", as Oxford professor Chris Rowley declared in the Financial Times on 3 January 2017⁴, is ignoring the different changes that have occurred over the past centuries. These changes have even accelerated in the past few decades. Rowley also stated that "Brexit should [in this context] be taken as just another example. Indeed, research obviously occurred pre-EU membership."

Critics of current trends in university governance indeed tend to look back to a utopian traditional model that 'always existed', but the evidence suggests that the internal balances were always to a considerable extent contingent on external conditions and fluctuated accordingly (Shattock, 2017).

BACKGROUND

The Higher Education Landscape in the World

It is a truism to say that we are living in exciting times. The world is changing dramatically and rapidly. Not only do geopolitical changes transform the world order, there are also technological revolutions that strengthen globalization and challenge many old business models. As a result of this, universities are now true international players that have become more competitive – and this amidst austerity programs around the world that envisage university's public financing. There are also the global problems that need a deep understanding of what is going on and what can be done. All of these trends force universities around the world to reinvent themselves – not only content-wise but also structurally.

Technological Evolutions

Without a doubt, widespread digitalization and global access to information through the internet and social media have contributed to a true globalization of universities. The *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* has never been as 'universal' as today. Spurred by governmental and supra-national initiatives with regard to student and staff exchange (e.g. the Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus+ programs of the EU, and the very idea behind the Bologna reforms, but also the widespread Study Abroad programs in the US and the growing initiatives of the Chinese Scholarship Council in mainland China), universi-

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