

## **Linkages between university autonomy and success of European university systems**

This paper analyses existing indicators of successful higher education systems and university autonomy to see whether the oft-repeated policy claim on the significance of university autonomy to competitiveness of higher education systems can be substantiated.

In the European policy context university autonomy is continuously argued to be intimately to the performance of individual institutions. (Maassen and Olsen 2007, Aghion et al 2008, de Boer et al 2010, Jongbloed et al 2010, Anonymous 1 2012). Flexibility and agility are increasingly important when operating in the competitive and rapidly changing environments of universities. Changes within and outside universities have led in a number of countries to governance and funding reforms in which autonomy has been a major focus (Bladh 2007, De Boer & Goedegebuure 2007, Salmi 2007). The overall ability of the higher education institutions to decide on their strategic goals, programme offer and the allocation and composition of their funding is significant for the overall adaptiveness and competitiveness, of the institutions (Sporn 2002).

The Bologna Process discourse frames university autonomy as a precondition of competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. However, empirical analysis shows that the link is tenuous at best (Nokkala 2012). In this study we will examine connections between the degrees of autonomy and patterns in attractiveness and performance of universities by comparing university autonomy in European countries. Measuring the degree of autonomy enjoyed, doesn't yet indicate how this autonomy is utilized.

### **Conceptual framework**

Autonomy in the context of higher education institutions has been studied, for example, by measuring the flexibility to exercise autonomy (Fisher 1988, Volkwein and Malik 1997), by specifying the limiting and/or contributing factors within the autonomy (Askling et al 1999, Bladh 2007, Berdahl 1990, Anonymous 2, Ordorika 2003, Estermann and Nokkala 2009; Estermann et al 2011) and by addressing what ought to be included into the HEI autonomy (Dill 2001, Sizer and Mackie 1995). Autonomy has also been addressed in relation to academic freedom (Karran 2009; Romo de la Rosa 2007; Anonymous 3 2012) and accountability (Salmi 2007). Various social, political, legal, historical, economic and cultural contexts shape the autonomy and our notions (Felt and Glanz 2002; Huisman 2007; Ordorika 2003).

Few studies indicate linkages between autonomy and attractiveness and performance of higher education institutions. De Boer et al (2010) and Jongbloed et al (2010) find there

to be some correlation between certain elements of university autonomy and recent governance and funding frameworks and the performance of the higher education systems.

The European Union policy indicates the desired outcomes in higher education, and the aspired benefits for society. Universities need to embrace the business world, educate graduates with knowledge and skills geared to the labour market, and concentrate on excellence. European higher education should also be attractive on a global scale (EC 2011, 2012). Indicators for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training, include e.g. Higher education graduates, Cross-national mobility of students in higher education, Investment in education and training and; Returns to education and training (EC 2007).

#### Method and data

The indicators on competitiveness of the higher education system are compared with the indicators university autonomy rating across 26 European countries, including both EU-member states and countries outside EU.

The autonomy data is based the recent publication of the European University Association (Estermann et al 2011), which rates and ranks university autonomy along four dimensions: organizational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy. In this paper, those dimensions are used as indicators of the different autonomy elements (Estermann et al 2011).

The competitiveness data is based on the European science, technology and innovation indicators (Eurostat 2012), the latest education statistics published by OECD (2011) and Eurydice (2012) (Eurydice 2012) on the 2010 graduate completion rates, graduate employment rates and stages of external quality assurance systems. Finally, data is derived on a study on higher education funding reforms (Jongbloed et al 2010) and World Bank publication on impact of investment in tertiary education (Millot 2012). Nine indicators are used as proxies of competitiveness of European higher education systems.

- the share of foreign students out of all students in tertiary type A programmes (proxy for attractiveness)
- the share of foreign students out of all students in advanced research programmes (proxy for attractiveness)
- completion rate tertiary type 5A (university) programmes (proxy for output quality of higher education)
- Share of employed 25-64 year-olds out of the 25-64 population amongst Tertiary A and advanced research programmes graduates. (proxy for employability/ output quality of higher education)

- Index of relative earnings from tertiary education amongst 25-64 population (proxy for impact of higher education)
- share of R&D personnel in higher education, as % of total labour force (proxy for impact of higher education)
- share of third party funding out of university revenue (proxy for sustainability of funding)
- stage of development of external quality assurance (proxy for process quality of higher education)
- Number of top 500 universities in Academic Ranking of World Universities per Million tertiary age populations (proxy for reputation/output quality of higher education)

### Findings and discussion

The tentative analysis shows that while high or low financial autonomy did not make a difference to any of the success indicators; high or low autonomy in academic, staffing and organizational issues does make a difference on some success indicators.

Whilst often repeated in policy discourse, our analysis shows that the significance of university autonomy to the success of higher education systems may not be clear cut. Instead, the success of higher education systems may be attributed to a complex set of circumstances in which available funding, stability of the surrounding society, reputation and innovativeness of the system as well as the individual institutions play a role alongside the governance framework and autonomy (Altbach and Salmi 2011, Anonymous 2 2009, 4 2012). As such, the policy discourse can be critically scrutinized. Further research is needed to determine the significance of each individual factor. It is also likely that no magic potion of success can be determined, but that instead specific economic, cultural and political circumstances come to play in different national contexts.

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