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Reflections on University Governance in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

IAU Webinar Series on the Future of Higher Education
Session: *What next? Will universities need a new business model for the future?*
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What Kind of University for what Kind of Society?

Institutional foundation of the University:
- Combining institutional defense against invasion of alien norms with adapting effectively to environmental changes and new societal expectations/demands

Starting-point:
Global Pressures on Universities to Transform

- Wide-ranging internal and external demands and expectations require universities around the world to adapt their governance structure and practices.

- Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

- In this situation, universities face the existential challenge of finding an appropriate balance between:
  - being responsible *and* responsive institutions
  - being economically *and* academically oriented

"Changing conditions for institutional governance: Wide-ranging internal and external demands"

1. Dramatic global growth and expansion of two traditional university missions:

- Education: massive expansion of student enrolment and course profiles
- Research: massive growth of research activities and types of knowledge production. Traditional distinctions (esp. basic-applied) no longer functional.

2. Key developments in society to which universities are expected to respond:

- Knowledge society: accelerated technological, economic and social change (Innovation)
- Grand societal challenges ('wicked problems'): traditional responses suffice no more
  - Climate change
  - Inequality (incl. vaccine inequality)
  - Security
  - Global health care/pandemic(s)
- Intensifying global competition
- Growing need for life-long learning

"Pressure for transformation, but:"

"University reform documents give little attention to the possible role of universities in developing a humanistic culture, social cohesion and solidarity, and a vivid public sphere." (Maassen & Olsen, 2007: 9)

What do we know about impact of higher education governance reforms?

- Early 1990s: research data suggests a converging trend resulting from HE governance reforms promoting an executive model

- Assumption: gradually all HE systems will become more and more similar in their governance modes and practices (nationally and institutionally)

Three university governance levels

1. Relations between national and institutional governance actors & bodies

2. Interactions and relations among central institutional governance actors & bodies

3. Relations between central institutional governance actors & bodies and academic staff, students and academic production processes (education & research)

How do reform initiatives *intend* to impact the relationships among governance levels?

1. **Formal governance relations between national and institutional governance actors & bodies**

   - Towards a more executive governance mode

   - Increasing accountability expectations & demands

   - Growing density of involved governance bodies and actors

2. **Organisation of and interactions among governance and administrative actors & bodies at central institutional level**

   - Formalisation, standardisation, specialisation and centralisation as key features of professionalised institutional administration (accountability)

3. **Governance interactions between central institutional governance actors & bodies and academic 'production processes'**

   - Formalisation, standardisation, specialisation and centralisation in the administrative support of increasingly diverse academic activities

How to interpret realized impact of institutional governance reforms?

Reality check in 2010s:

- Not one homogeneous set of global reform impacts with time lags in implementation, but rather a continuous diversity in institutional governance modes and practices (path dependency & "filters")
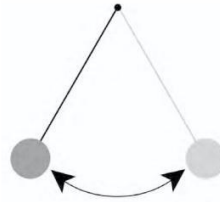
  - *Institutional leadership*: Comparable to private sector executive leadership or firmly embedded in the public domain and academic traditions (university leaders as "primus inter pares")?

  - *Institutional administration*: An internally oriented support function, or an externally oriented accountability/reporting function?

  - *Institutional autonomy*: Real room to manoeuvre or conditional autonomy?

  - *Institutional funding*: Large, basic public block grants or competition for external public and private funding sources?

How to interpret diversity in university governance practices?
Four visions on university governance and its main aspects

Source: De Boer & Maassen 2020 (inspired by Gornitzka, 2020; Olsen, 2007, 30)

Vision on university governance / University governance aspects	Norm-steered academic community ("Republic of Science")	Instrument for national authorities	Representative democracy (negotiation based)	Service company in a competitive market setting
Role governance actors and bodies	Minimal governance	Link between state authorities and university	Arena for internal and external interests	Assure economically defendable management; strategic decisions about profile and niche
Leadership role	Elected primus inter pares	Rules / procedures manager	Politician / negotiator	CEO / unit manager
Authority through	Academic competence and status	Formal positional authority	Resources / networks	Professional leadership authority
Role of the state	Patron and protector of institutional sphere	"Principal" & regulator; control over university governance bodies and actors	Negotiation partner	Facilitator of well-functioning market
Rationale for university autonomy	The university as a value embedded institution	The university as a link in a hierarchical delegation chain	Mixed – Co-determination and interest representation	The university has to be 'set free' for being able to operate in a market setting

Way forward:
Examples of issues to address in adapting university governance models to the post-COVID-19 world

- Lessons from COVID-19 experiences and innovations
  - What worked and did not work in the unforeseen, intensive use of digital technologies in education, research, and leadership/management/administration
  - Evaluate university mission & profile, and adapt them to the new realities (address "elite accusations")
  - Contribute to new global narratives about the place of the university in society and the importance of the public funding of universities

- Communication/relationship with society
  - From PR and marketing to communicating university profile and achievements
  - From service provision through knowledge *transfer* to equal, mutually beneficial partnerships with society (public and private partners) through *sharing* knowledge
  - Strengthen the collective voice of universities in public debates

Way forward (cont.):

- Internationalisation
  - Assess the extent to which the emphasis in internationalization can be shifted from physical exchange & mobility to virtual exchange and digital collaboration
  - Wherever appropriate: reduce reliance on tuition fee income from international students
  - Wherever appropriate: create together with partner HEIs digital mobility corridors for doctoral (and possibly Master) students

- University "business model" / governance mode
  - Develop an appropriate balance between executive dimensions and co-determination in university governance and decision-making
  - Develop an appropriate balance between the internal support function (of academic activities) and external reporting orientation of the university administration
  - Adapt the university "business model" to the growing involvement of individual universities in university alliances (e.g. the European University Initiative)

Thank you very much for your attention!

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Research Group:
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