



An Innocent Abroad: Comments on the Bologna Reforms from an American Perspective¹

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Introduction

I am honored to be invited to participate in this meeting as a representative of my country. While I have been asked to provide an American perspective on the Bologna developments and future, my comments will more clearly reflect my recent international experience and comparative research.² I will of course make reference to the higher education system of the United States and I'm sure, as my European colleagues never tire of pointing out, that my remarks will inevitably reflect American values if not biases.

Several years ago the late distinguished scholar Martin Trow wrote an article sub-titled *The American Advantage* (2000) in which he outlined the distinctive characteristics of the US higher education system that are now being widely adopted around the world. These characteristics include:

- a vertically integrated degree framework (i.e., BA/MA/PHD)
- modular courses and continuous assessment
- institutional autonomy marked by strong administrative leadership and multiple sources of financial support (including tuition fees)
- separate graduate schools within universities to assure the quality of PhD degrees
- employment conditions promoting the mobility of academic staff
- diversity of institutional missions (e.g., in institutional emphases on teaching, research, and public service)
- competitive allocation of national research funds

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² For supporting research and related papers addressing many of the points in this essay see the website of the Research Program for Public Policy on Academic Quality (PPAQ): www.unc.edu/ppaq

As Trow noted the unique political conditions of the US led to a laissez faire orientation of the national government toward the development of public and private higher education. In this context the American higher education system evolved as a competitive market featuring independent public and private institutions each seeking students, faculty members, financial resources, and ultimately academic prestige. As Trow argued, these conditions anticipated those now confronting universities in countries around the globe. As a consequence American higher education as a system was better adapted, normatively and structurally, to the new requirements of a “post industrial” age, which places a great premium on the creation and wide distribution of knowledge and skill. The current adoption of similar forms and structures by other countries is consequently best understood as a necessary response to the common demands of a globally competitive environment now confronting all nations.

At the same time most nations, including the US, are now struggling with the design of the appropriate framework conditions to assure the efficiency and effectiveness of their emerging mass systems of higher education in this new global environment and in addressing these issues the American advantage is much less clear. Let me therefore provide a brief comparative assessment of three critical policy issues associated with the Bologna reforms: autonomy and regulation, information and student choice, and quality assurance.

Autonomy and Regulation

In an era of heightened global competitiveness, universities must act nimbly. However, the “nimbleness” of a university is strongly influenced by the national regulatory framework for higher education. For this reason US private universities, some state-supported US universities, as well as universities in Australia, Canada, and the UK possess potential competitive advantages in the international competition with other universities. Many of these institutions have the autonomy to create without external evaluation new, interdisciplinary research doctoral programs, control student admissions, design the employment and work conditions of their academic staff, and possess the managerial flexibility to adopt new forms of research organization and management. As a consequence there is an ongoing debate in many countries as to the degree of autonomy and/or deregulation necessary for universities to operate effectively in the new international environment.

Let me suggest a number of characteristics that universities will require if they are to be vital players in the emerging international competition:

- Lump-sum funding
- Authority to develop a personnel and wage system appropriate to competing for international academic and research staff
- Autonomy in purchasing and contracting
- Ownership of facilities
- Self-accrediting status
- Authority to set and retain tuition and fees

A number of these characteristics, particularly those regarding flexible funding and authority over contracting and facilities, are relatively uncontroversial and consistent with the general trend of universities becoming “state-supported” rather than state financed in many developed countries. In this new context universities require the managerial authority to manage efficiently revenues from different sources.

However in almost all developed countries regulations regarding academic personnel, academic programs, and tuition fees are much more contentious. First, with regard personnel, in a number of EU countries civil service regulations and state-determined salary schedules govern the employment and work conditions of academic and research staff as well as research doctoral students. These national personnel regulations often were not designed originally for university personnel and may therefore be too inflexible for universities engaged in fast-moving frontier research. Rigid personnel regulations also make it difficult for universities to effectively compete in the international market for the best academic and research staff as well as research doctoral students.

Second, many of the world’s leading universities -- private US institutions such as Harvard and Stanford, but also publicly supported universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of Michigan, are essentially “self-accrediting institutions,” which provides them the comparative advantage to introduce quickly and easily new and innovative academic programs. It is clear that the academic integrity of these universities’ can be assured by external quality assurance procedures as well as by their ambitions to maintain a high academic reputation. But the universities’ ability to be leaders in innovative academic programming is not slowed by external bureaucratic processes.

Finally the capacity to independently set and retain tuition and fees is a critical institutional prerogative, with significant potential influence for strengthening individual universities. Distinguished private universities in the US have long enjoyed this comparative advantage. However tuition autonomy has also proven crucial for publicly supported universities in the US as well. For example, both the University of California System and the Pennsylvania State University in the US have been able to weather substantial state reductions in per student financial support primarily because these universities possessed the independent authority to set and retain tuition fees. Utilizing this authority they have been able to offset state cuts in appropriations and to sustain their research reputations over time. Publicly supported universities in the US as well as those throughout the EU that lack this independent authority to raise fees, have been forced to absorb increasing numbers of students without a commensurate financial support. As a consequence these universities have experienced difficulties in maintaining their international research reputation.

While important arguments exist regarding the relationship between university access and tuition fees, universities possessing an international research reputation attract students from around the globe in part because these institutions provide substantial private benefits to their students. Permitting such universities to charge those students who can afford to pay market appropriate tuition and fees

is a rational means of sustaining national research universities in a competitive international market.

In sum those universities actively engaged in the international rivalry for research reputation are essentially competing in a different “industry” than other national universities. As I have noted the regulatory scheme for these types of universities is still too restrictive in many instances. What is needed in my view is a regulatory framework recognizing these differences in market context, in which the institutional autonomy necessary for competing internationally is awarded not by institutional category or university title, as is now the case in many countries, but rather by university performance. For example, only those universities that have already developed a capacity for productive research with international impact, for high quality research doctoral education, and for attracting significant numbers of competitive research grants might be accorded this special level of autonomy. As in international soccer leagues, access to this regulatory framework would be permeable, based upon current performance. New institutions may develop the capacity over time to become eligible for this additional autonomy.

But a different regulatory regime might be applied to state-supported universities not demonstratively engaged in this international competition. The failure to design regulations appropriate to the performance of different universities has created a visible “academic arms race” in which too many universities now pursue highly expensive and self-destructive strategies designed to achieve an unobtainable world-class status. Therefore an alternative regulatory framework is needed that might include regulations designed to lower competition among institutions, with limitations on fees, more systematic oversight of academic programs, and other appropriate incentives and rules designed to foster differentiation in institutional missions.

Information and Student Choice

As higher education has become more competitive nationally and internationally indicators of academic quality have increasingly been published by government, academic, nonprofit, and commercial entities to better inform student choice of an educational program. Indeed, many policymakers believe that informed student choice can be the primary means of external quality assurance.

However, the highly popular league tables produced by commercial publications are often seriously flawed as guides to student choice, relying as they do upon information and measures which have questionable validity as predictors of effective student learning (Dill and Soo, 2005). More valid and useful academic quality information and rankings have been produced by not for profit entities such as the rankings produced by the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE) in Germany, as well as the well regarded National Survey of Student Engagement and the Assessment of Research Doctoral Programs in the US. A critical determinant of the legitimacy of academic quality information in both the commercial and non-profit sectors is government policy, which may subsidize the development and provision of more valid quality information as is the case of the Research Doctoral surveys in the US as well as the influential graduate surveys now being produced in Australia and the UK. Government can also mandate or strongly encourage publicly supported universities’ participation

in more valid surveys and rankings as in the case of the NSSE in the US and CHE rankings in Germany.

While public subsidies for the provision of more valid information on academic quality can certainly be justified, the influence of this information on the assurance of academic standards is less clear. International research on university choice among first degree level students suggests that quality rankings and ratings influence the educational decisions of a relatively small segment of the student population, primarily those of high ambition and achievement (Dill and Soo, 2005). The educational choices of many students are influenced by a wide variety of educational, social, and personal factors, including geographical location, the appeal of university social life, and in the US the rankings of university athletic teams. This research suggests that the individual decisions of even well informed first degree applicants are unlikely to be a strong influence on the assurance of academic standards within academic institutions. The more significant role of quality information therefore is likely to be its development and use by academic staff as part of institutional efforts to assure and improve academic standards.

In contrast to the limited impact of information on the quality of first degree level programs on academic standards is the successful experience in the US with information on research doctoral programs. The National Research Council rankings of research doctoral programs are subsidized by federal agencies and the assessments are designed and carried out by some of the leading social scientists in the US. Several research studies suggest that the Council's rankings have prompted significant reforms by leading US universities to improve the quality of their research doctoral programs. Why have US universities been so responsive to these particular rankings? First the market for research-doctoral students is a more perfectly competitive market than that for first level degrees. US universities aggressively compete with high paying fellowships for the very best international doctoral students. Doctoral applicants are an older, more educationally experienced set of consumers who are pursuing a degree primarily for vocational reasons. They are therefore less likely to be influenced by consumption benefits and academic prestige indicators and more likely to seek information on concrete measures of academic quality. In addition faculty members are much more psychologically invested in the quality of their doctoral programs than in first level academic programs. Doctoral graduates are more visible products of the individual mentor and department – particularly to academic colleagues at other universities -- than are largely invisible first degree recipients.

These insights into the relative role of information in the first degree and research doctoral degree markets suggest that public subsidies for the development of valid quality rankings for research-doctoral programs could be an especially influential means of strengthening third cycle education.

Quality Assurance

The global changes that have accompanied the implementation of mass higher education make it more difficult to assure academic standards by the means traditionally employed. By academic standards I mean the specific levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students achieve as a consequence of their

engagement in a particular academic, professional, or vocational program. For example, modular courses require the adoption of continuous assessment, which diminishes the effectiveness of traditional means of assuring academic quality such as subject exams and external examiners. A vertically integrated degree framework may introduce incentives for grade inflation in first degree programs as students now strive to attain higher level degrees. This temptation to dilute standards may be further increased by the adoption in a number of countries of performance-based funding policies tied to graduation rates. The world-wide emphasis on league tables, which are all heavily dependent upon measures of research productivity, the implementation of merit pay systems for academic staff, and the adoption of competitive funding for research have all dramatically increased the importance of research reputation both for individual professors and for institutions. In this new environment financial resources and faculty time invested in teaching, and perhaps equally important, faculty time invested in assuring academic standards within institutions, inevitably decline.

These new circumstances motivate the need to develop more useful methods of external quality assurance to assure the public interest in maintaining and improving academic standards, but all nations have discovered that designing effective and efficient procedures in this field is not a simple task. The US was the first country to develop a system of academic accreditation, but the ineffectiveness of this regime was underscored first by the felt need of the many states to adopt regulations on educational accountability for already accredited colleges and universities, second by evidence of the declining performance of US colleges and university graduates, and more recently by the controversial and assertive recommendations by the US Secretary of Education.

This US experience emphasizes that a first critical issue in the design of any external quality assurance regime is the appropriate balance between the state and the academic institutions. The EU Ministers have wisely adopted the standard that an academic quality assurance agency must be independent of both the government and the institutions of higher education. True independence from government is of course never completely possible, especially for state supported universities. As Mark Twain once said, "No man's life, liberty, or property are safe while the legislature is in session." But it is worth emphasizing that one reason the US has made less progress than some countries in the EU in developing a more effective framework for academic quality assurance is that the current accreditation system in the US is not sufficiently independent from either the government or the institutions.

The US accreditation experience also reveals the central importance of the focus of external quality assurance. Several US accrediting agencies, notably the American Board of Engineering and Training (ABET) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) have developed exemplary subject accreditation processes with an emphasis on student learning outcomes. But the comprehensive processes of the US institutional accrediting agencies bear little resemblance to the evidence-based focus on the effectiveness of core academic processes characteristic of the ABET and TEAC approach. US institutional accreditation addresses issues of administration, governance, personnel, finance, and student life, which have little influence on academic standards, while avoiding a close

inspection of the core academic processes of curriculum and course design, student assessment, and academic program quality assurance practices. This lack of a laser-like focus on the academic core is a common failing of the institutional evaluation processes implemented in a number of other countries as well.

In this sense the focus and rigor of the subject accreditations now being implemented in several EU countries, correctly emphasize the importance of core academic processes within subject fields. The research evidence is clear that it is at the subject level where efforts to assure and improve academic standards are likely to have an impact. Given the fundamental changes in degree frameworks accompanying the Bologna process the initial emphasis in some countries on subject level accreditation as a means of legitimizing these new degrees is therefore quite understandable. Nonetheless it is becoming obvious that a comprehensive system of accrediting at the subject level is not humanly sustainable and the diminishing marginal improvements over time of such a process cannot justify its substantial costs. Equally important, the exclusive focus on subject fields does little to increase incentives for the corporate university to take full responsibility, as it properly should, for the assurance and improvement of academic standards in all its subject fields and degrees. Over time, therefore serious consideration will need to be given as previously suggested for some type of institutional-level external quality assurance process that can validate the collective university processes for assuring the academic standards of all programs and lessen the need for continual subject level accreditations in all fields. The Degree Awarding Process review in the UK and the Academic Audit process initially developed in the UK and further refined by a number of other countries offer a possible approach to this problem (Dill, 2000), although I believe further work is still needed to develop institutional-level quality reviews that have sufficient validity and reliability. However, by creating a category in which some institutions can achieve independence from continual subject review, and setting the bar for entry to this category quite high, as indeed it should be, the state can create a new and powerful incentive, at relatively little cost to the public, for all institutions to improve their quality assurance processes.

Conclusion

Let me close with a quote from a Communiqué published by the European Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in 2003 which noted:

... consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.

Some may feel that this is simply a political statement without significant meaning. But my own life experience as a faculty member and as a researcher in this field convinces me that this statement addresses the very heart of the matter.

As I have tried to suggest the public interest in the quality of higher education will best be achieved if we can design an institutional framework that encourages the development of strong, effective, collegial mechanisms of academic quality assurance within all institutions of higher education.

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