

The Bologna process towards 2020: Institutional diversification or convergence?

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The topic of diversity receives much attention in policy debates. Generally, governments and other stakeholders perceive diversity as an inherent good: it better caters for the wide variety of students; it better matches the need of a highly diversified labour market; and in a diverse higher education system both mass and elite institutions can co-exist. Diversity comes in different shapes (e.g. student and staff diversity within institutions; diversity between institutions based on reputations/status). In this chapter the focus is on institutional diversity in general: the variety of institutions within a particular country and within Europe.

One may argue that institutional diversity is to some extent threatened by the Bologna process, for the aim of the process is to make the systems of higher education more compatible/comparable. This seems to imply that systems and institutions have to adapt structures and processes and, importantly, they have to move in the same direction. Studies on the Bologna process reveal that indeed . at the macro-structural level . there are patterns of convergence: each system will have adopted the three-cycle structure, have implemented ECTS and the Diploma Supplement and have introduced quality assurance regimes. However, when looking closer at the actual manifestations at the level of institutions and departments, there is considerable diversity (e.g. length of degrees, access to the cycles, quality control regimes versus quality enhancement regimes).

Explanations for the current state of the art . macro-level convergence, but meso- and micro-level diversity . can be found in policy theories, organisational sociology and political theory. In the main, policy theories point out that reforms quite often have different (sometimes unintended) outcomes from those expected. Organisational sociology points at the phenomenon of the translation of ideas, which implies that reform ideas are moulded and adjusted to fit local circumstances. Strands of political theory stress historical legacies and path dependencies, differentially influencing the adoption of reform.

For sure, diversity is not only influenced by the Bologna process. The literature points at the role of globalisation (supporting convergence, but at the same time allowing for local variations), governments/markets (both can act as enablers of and/or barriers to diversity) and rankings/league tables. The latter are currently underdeveloped, meaning that they focus on the measurable and are biased towards the model of the research-intensive university. They currently are more likely to harm institutional diversity.

Our current understanding of what drives diversity leads us to expect that, generally speaking, the more concrete and directive European policies are,

the more convergence will take place; if governments strike a balance between governmental steering and market mechanisms, diversity will thrive. And, if rankings continue to be underdeveloped, the level of institutional diversity is threatened.