

Abstract

European Higher Education in Search of a New Institutional Order

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The last decade higher education has become more important as a joint European policy area, implying that next to the ongoing national reform processes in higher education a growing number of European level policy documents and reform proposals are published, aimed at stimulating the integration of European higher education. Consequently a forward looking project like the one underlying this paper can be expected to reflect upon the state of our knowledge and understanding with respect to the European integration of higher education. Also the fact that we are only 1,5 year away from the magic year 2010 should allow us to take a step back and reflect upon where we are when it comes to the efforts to integrate European higher education. What do recent studies into European integration efforts of higher education tell us about the possible future developments of the 'European Higher Education Area'? What lessons do the integration efforts with respect to other policy areas provide us? What are the major concepts used in the field of European studies and how do they contribute to our understanding of the possible new directions the Bologna process might take? And on what 'evidence' are the joint European reform proposals with respect to higher education based?

Unfortunately, studies on European integration of higher education have in general suffered from 'double-isolatedness'. Many studies have treated higher education as a sector isolated from the overall European integration processes. In addition, rarely analytical frameworks from general social sciences, and especially European studies have been used for studying European integration processes in higher education. In addition, excellent studies on European integration of higher education that are available are in general neglected in European level pleas and proposals for higher education reform. Instead the latter often use inconclusive, weak and ambiguous data, for example, international university rankings or arbitrary selected and interpreted statistics, to legitimize strong conclusions concerning the need for reforms. Where does that leave us when trying to make sense of the development of the EHEA after 2010? This paper attempts to contribute to current EHEA debates by discussing the notion of order and its relevance for understanding the current change dynamics of European higher education.

The discussion of the notion of order is based on the work by Burton Clark and Johan P. Olsen. Their work shows that the dynamics of higher education systems is to a large extent determined by the need to combine system level integration and unity with institutional level autonomy and diversity. The European challenge with respect to higher education and the further development of the EHEA after 2010 consists of developing a new institutional order, i.e. an appropriate balance between system level unity and institutional level autonomy, in the first place at the national level, but also at the European level, as well as between these two levels. The paper points to the difficulties arising from the differences between the current European level and national level interpretations of the appropriate unity/diversity order in higher education.

For the post 2010 EHEA the notion of order suggests that the next steps in creating an open EHEA should include an agreement on the policy issues that clearly represent joint interests and should therefore be handled at the European level, comparable to rather clear division of policy responsibilities between the US federal and state level.