

The ingredients of trust in European higher education

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Summary

In a world increasingly characterised by interpersonal and inter-organisational relations across national borders, trust is a key issue. It is plausible to assume that trust between people and institutions is more easily developed and invested within the nation state than across them. Hence, processes of globalisation, internationalisation and Europeanisation also entail shifts in trust in higher education at several levels and a challenge as to how actors can manage to move from a state of distrust to a trusting relationship.

In principle there are only two basic distinctions in how the issue of trust is perceived and in how to achieve trust:

- The rationalist-instrumental perspective on trust where the basic assumption is that individuals pursue its self-interest and maximise his or her own utility. Social order and predictability can be achieved through making sure that that *un-wanted* behaviour can be controlled so that public good is achieved. It can be argued that this currently is the dominating perspective in achieving trust.
- The normative/cognitive perspective on trust where trust is established by the existence of strong norms and expectations as to what is appropriate behaviour of various parties involved in a relationship. Such strong norms are a result of socialisation, a common history, social interaction and a sense of belonging. While this in a historic perspective was the dominating perspective on trust, it seems to have lost momentum in current policy-making.

With respect to possible development concerning trust in the period until 2020, it is most likely that current trends will continue. Hence, the establishment of standards, indicators and agencies will most likely be further strengthened as witnessed within the quality assurance area. However, due to difficulties in finding adequate measures and indicators, one could argue that recent policy initiatives such as a European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies and a European Qualification Framework are not the final initiatives taken in this area. Furthermore, creating trust should not be seen as an area for public policy-making exclusively. The recent interest in creating a new stratification among higher education providers through various rankings is an example of the possibility that also private initiatives could play a role in the trust-creating game. In sum, the process of creating trust will most likely involve more actors, operating at different levels, and with a variety of motives.

Because of this, there is no *one-size-fits-all* solution to the trust problem. Trust will most likely operate within certain strata of the European Higher Education Area defined geographically, economically or academically. Although this is a development which is difficult to influence, one could argue that future policy initiatives should pay more attention to more *normative/cognitive* ways of creating trust. The argument for this is not least related to the rising economic and social costs associated with trying to achieve trust by adding more control and bureaucracy. Possible solutions include the creation of new arenas for dialogue and debate where policy-makers and those responsible for policy implementation at the *shop floor* can meet to discuss pressing issues, but also where they learn to know, and even perhaps, trust each other.