

Influence of rankings and other transparency tools on HEI autonomy

University autonomy and accountability : where is the balance ?

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About autonomy

- In a large majority of European national systems, HEI are not autonomous,
- Very different levels of legal institutional autonomy, and large variety from one type of HEI to another,
- Large formal dependence of most of HEI from national systems of funding, rules for HR recruitments, ...
- Even regarding QA, evaluations, accreditation, most of HEI are not autonomous (cf strictly normalized processes of accreditation),
- In some cases, HEI can choose their evaluation agency or programme ...

About autonomy

Autonomy ...

- Mainly asked for by HEI leaders,
- Supported by external stakeholders,
- Suspiciously considered by academics,
- Divergently analysed by students,
- Still a problem for most of the HE national authorities,
... still to be built.

About Transparency

- Modernization of HEI implied evaluation, development strategies, new management policies, ... Datas,
- New views about the use of HEI data :
- How to share what information with whom ?
- How to deal collectively with the individual datas of each HEI ?
- Why for ? - benchmark ? - ranking ?
- to build strategy ? - conceive policy ?
- Opposition between traditional lack of information / transparency,

About Transparency

Of course, HEI need

- to deliver pertinent information to different precise target groups,
- to produce useful indicators supporting the conception of institutional strategy,
- both at institutional and national (European ?) levels.

Such a process needs to identify, produce and share the pertinent information, inside and outside.

“Transparency” : to accumulate information or to select the more pertinent and/or discriminant one ?

About QA context

- New context of international networks and Bologna process increased the need of sharing information about HEI,
- Mostly based on :
 - Guarantee about quality of teaching (and learning ?)
 - attraction of students,
 - High quality of research - innovation and prestige,
- What else ? ...

What about others components of the HEI quality ?

About QA context

- The Bologna process , intergovernmental, re implied national authorities in the debate about QA,
- re introducing governmental power through the use of the evaluations results
 - accreditation,
 - funding,
 - promotions,
- Usually asking for good level, but also easy-to-use evaluations issues.

About accountability

HEI : difficult life ...

- building a still-to-be-built autonomy
- benchmarking and networking,
- still having to negotiate with legal authorities.

... One common point :

- Need to be reliable, accountable, externally and internally,
- in order to be able to assume their autonomy,
- and to manage this autonomy with all kind of their recently diversified stakeholders.

About accountability

National system life ? also difficult one :

- How to include into a national strategy the different orientations of autonomous institutions ?
- Problem to be faced by most of the national HE systems in the new next years,
- in the context of European HEA building process,
- and of increasing internationalization of HE benchmarks.

For both : a new culture of accountability.

About rankings

- In this context, different kind of “transparency tools” have been sharpened to strengthen the accountability needed to manage an efficient autonomy.
- How to explain the success of rankings ?
- Rankings are :
 - relatively easy to conceive and manage,
 - relatively easy to explain,
 - their results are easy to read
- At least easier than a comparative institutional analysis.
- including more HEI than qualitative methods,
Appear as “objective”...

About rankings

... But,

- How far is a ranking a tool for transparency ?
- What is learnt about the HEI included ?

Have been conceived to compare.

- How far is the ranking useful for each of the concerned HEI ? How to use the ranking results in the HEI ?

But yes : they generate immediate reactions.

About “collateral damages”

- Often said than transparency tools have generated hostile reactions
 - from traditional sectors,
 - from some actors of HE activities.
 - Academic colleagues common reaction ?
 - Takes a lot of time,
 - non useful work,
 - if not by peers, driven by incompetent guys,
 - without any consequence about their daily work.
- A boring process, faced as an unpleasant routine.
 - In that perspective, the considered as non useful processes are counter-productive,
- And generating reactions of self-proclamation.

About uniformity / diversity

- One of the most negative impact :
- HEI adaptation to the ranking criteria induces an increasing conformity to these criteria,
- Consequently, a reduction of the HEI profiles.
- Risk higher from rankings than from any other evaluation tool, due to limited number of easy to numerate data.
- Not stimulating institutional innovation, sine they don't change their criteria,
- If such, loose comparability.

More conformity, less diversity.

Remarks

- No balance between autonomy and accountability : the 2nd is a condition for an efficient autonomy,
- The useful tools for HEI autonomy ?
 - Able o strengthen the HEI,
 - increasing its strategic ability,
 - and improving the quality of its activities.
- No easy tool, but demanding processes of objectivation,
- helping the diffusion of a culture of QA in the institution
- and a culture of shared institutional projects,
- stimulating innovation and initiatives.