Convergence and/or diversity? The argument for transparency

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Convergence

• Convergence in higher education systems worldwide
• Drivers:
  – Integrated global system of scientific research
  – Increasing mobility of students, researchers, teaching staff and institutional leaders
  • Emerging market of academics and researchers
  – Technology-driven expansion of new delivery modes in teaching and learning
  – International labour market of graduates
  • Globalising organisation of professions

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Convergence

• Strong impact of regional integration
  – E.g. Bologna Process in Europe
  – Other examples: ASEAN, NAFTA, Commonwealth, Africa
• Bologna Process:
  – Remarkable achievements in convergence
    • Transparency: degree and credit systems, transparent quality assurance systems
    • Increasing mobility, interaction and communication

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Convergence

• Inclusive and mobilising process of development
• Interest from outside world
  – But not all objectives of (optimistic) agenda of 1999 have been realised
• Risk of loss of momentum
  – What about post-2010 agenda (Bologna 2.0)?:
  • Leuven 2009 ministerial meeting organised by BENELUX

• Misunderstandings about convergence in Bologna Process 1.0
  – Every programme should try to achieve the same learning outcomes: standardisation of curricula is dangerous
  – Every bachelor should be able to enter whatever master’s programme in Europe (in the same field of disciplines)
  – Quality assurance at threshold level (accreditation) is a sufficient generator of trust
  – Governments often try to protect national coherence
  => by confusing convergence with harmonisation the Bologna Process has not (yet) well addressed the real demands for transparency, i.e. transparency of diversity

• Alternative concepts and models of convergence better equipped to address diversity:
  – Content-oriented systems of convergence: Tuning project, qualification systems
  – National regulatory systems based on performance indicators
  – European policy developments: Lisbon Strategy, ERA, EQF, initiatives of French presidency, etc.
  – AHELO feasibility study (OECD)
  – Global rankings
Diversity and transparency

- Increasing agreement on crucial importance and richness of diversity
  - of institutions, programmes, profiles, missions, delivery modes, teaching & learning arrangements, etc.
  - We need more, not less diversity to address demands
- Convergence
  - Is a condition for the "readability" and recognition of diversity
  - Is in fact a favourable condition for further diversification

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Diversity and transparency

- Convergence
  - Also increases need for reputation management; risk of proclaimed and not-evidence-based status differences (academic drift, vocational drift, etc.); risk of inclusion/exclusion games on the basis of power
  - Asks for complementary measures to limit the possibilities of claiming status on the basis of undocumented identities
- => convergence (and, thus, recognition and mobility) can only work with sufficient evidence-based transparency

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Diversity and transparency

- Risks of diversity without transparency
  - Quasi-markets of higher education, based on reputation, not on merit ("higher education arena organised as a bazaar of undemonstrated reputations")
  - Disclosed diversity, not capable of meeting the needs for diversity of students, employers and society at large (problem of asymmetric information)

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Diversity and transparency

- Loss of system dynamics and decreasing system innovation: newcomers will have it very difficult to gain status because they will not be able to demonstrate their real (in contrast to reputed) identity
- Mission overload and lack of focus: institutions trying to do everything at the same time
• => in order to avoid ‘wild’ competition we need a trustworthy system of evidence-based transparency

Autonomy and transparency

• Risks for autonomy without transparency
  - Diversity without evidence-based transparency will inevitably lead to unrestrained competition and, hence, market failure
  - In Europe, national governments and the EHEA will not be in the position of tolerating unrestrained competition which endangers national coherence

• => if we want to develop institutional autonomy, we need a trustworthy system of evidence-based transparency
Autonomy and transparency

• Governments and institutions need to address needs for diversity and transparency together, or markets will do anyway
  – To address more diversified student demand
  – To answer diversified needs of labour markets and society
• Integration of HE systems didn’t solve problems of academic and vocational drift, nor those of artificial ‘binarism’

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Evidence-based transparency

• ‘mapping higher education’ on the basis of robust, trustworthy and scientifically generated knowledge
  – Producers of science and knowledge should be capable of defining and measuring trustworthy measures of their own performance

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Evidence-based transparency

- Conceptual and methodological challenges are enormous
  - What is the real added value of universities in teaching and learning processes? (but: if universities are trivial and learning environments are contingent, what’s the point of having them?)
  - Definitions of categories, levels, thresholds, cutting-off points, etc seldom are value-free and tend to organise inequity

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Evidence-based transparency

- Political problems are substantial, both within and outside HE
  - Resistance to change = resistance to know
  - Myths of equality (whereas equality is: treating differently what is substantially different)
  - Legitimate fears of abuse (but: do we refrain to know what can be abused?)
    - Fear of hierarchies
    - Need for sophisticated models of valuing different profiles

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Bologna Process v2.0

- ‘Rankings will not go away’: true, but too weak an argument
  - In fact ranking is nothing more than a very common and relatively simple cognitive procedure to handle complex information
The Bologna Process v2.0

- The real argument is that higher education as a whole will benefit from well-developed systems of transparency
- Convergence, diversity and transparency should be the cornerstones of the next decade of the Bologna Process
  – => And, therefore, should be clearly stated in the Leuven Communiqué (2009)