Convergence and Diversity

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Abstract

The article discusses the historical diversification of European higher education, and the rationale for introducing a certain amount of convergence between national systems, in order to encourage mutual understanding and trust. It argues that European higher education institutions will increasingly, as a result of the Bologna process, see themselves as part of a larger whole, while neither ceasing to compete nor to define their missions ever more precisely. While converging to create a European Higher Education Area, universities are likely to continue in their efforts to diversify.

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1. Introduction

Higher education is a confusing world. Even those who have long worked within it still find it difficult to explain how it works, how it is funded, how its institutions are governed and managed, how its students can make the best of the opportunities that a university education gives.[1] The university system of a single country, the United Kingdom, is thought to offer over 50,000 bachelor degrees and over 20,000 master degrees; no one knows how many degree courses are offered in the 45 countries of Europe which now subscribe to the Bologna process. Nor are there more than a handful of people who could reliably describe the characteristics of the higher education systems of a majority of those countries.

Almost half of all young people experience university education

Yet higher education is also an important world. Student numbers have expanded very greatly in recent years and, in many countries, close to half of all young people will soon experience a university education. Many of the universities in which they will study are themselves the largest employer in their town or city and employers as a whole know that, in the future, they need most of their workforces to have the skills and competences which graduates acquire. Those graduates are unlikely to cease their studies on securing a bachelor degree; instead, they will turn to their own or another university to help them, throughout their lives, to secure additional education, training and professional competence, perhaps through a master degree, perhaps through a PhD or, at the least, through short courses of professional up-dating. Meanwhile other forms of knowledge transfer will make industry and commerce increasingly reliant on research and innovation carried out in universities and thus by academics and researchers. Finally, universities are important foundations of civil and democratic society.

Universities and the State must work in partnership

For all these reasons, higher education is a proper concern of government. Academics and political commentators sometimes call for universities to be freed from the control of the State. In reality – even in the private universities of the United States which are sometimes called in aid of such rhetoric – almost all universities rely on governments for funds for research and for student support; the number of truly "private" universities is tiny. Moreover, even if there were more, the State would retain an interest in them because their "output" of educated and qualified students, and reliable knowledge, is vital to the functioning of every society in the world. Universities must therefore learn to live – hopefully in the form of partnership rather than con-

[1] In this chapter, the word "university" is used to describe every higher education institution engaged in teaching and research.

frontation – with States and governments and to seek a relationship which is efficient and of mutual benefit.[2]

When university systems were small, their excellence was taken on trust

As it develops, the Bologna process represents the working out of the consequences of these new relationships between the universities, civil society and governments. The relationships are new because of one central change – sometimes described by the ugly word "massification" – from a university system for the elite to a system for the many. When university systems were small, catering mainly for the upper and middle classes of society, and when there was little movement of students from one university to another – either during a course or to take a second degree – universities could rely on there being a shared body of knowledge. However eccentric and confusing the systems and practices of a particular university might be, it mattered little because everyone who had studied there could understand them and everyone else took their excellence on trust. A degree from Athens, Bologna, Cracow, Heidelberg, Oxford or Paris spoke for itself.

A "mass" system requires common practices and structures

But the old forms of trust, appropriate to an elite system, are insufficient when confronted with millions of students, hundreds of thousands of courses, thousands of universities and with the demands of millions of employers. At the very least, therefore, the Bologna process seeks to achieve sufficient common practice in degree structures, sufficient good practice in quality assurance, to ensure that a degree or diploma, granted in one European country, has meaning in another country and can be trusted as a certificate of the worth of the student who has gained it.

The Bologna process, therefore, seeks to organise the higher education systems of Europe so that they can be understood and trusted. This task is not at all easy, mainly because of the complexity of the different national systems and their different histories. But another, important reason is that an important objective of the process is to maintain, indeed to celebrate, diversity.

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[2] Issues of the growth of state regulation rather than control and of the decline in trust in professionals such as university teachers and researchers are considered in Floud 2005.

2. Diversity

Despite its diversity, Europe has always been interlinked

There is little point in arguing about which area of the world is the most diverse, but there can be no doubt that European languages, nations and regions have a complex and rich heritage, of which the citizens of European countries are proud. Every nation has its own heroes, sometimes mythical but more often drawn from politics, war or literature. But what is notable about any list of the great men and women of European countries is the extent to which they have been explicitly and implicitly linked, and each moulded, by their exposure to the art, literature, history and language of other European nations, from the influence of classical Greece on imperial Rome and down through history. The Renaissance of the classical tradition, the rationalism of the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, were all European phenomena, but given form and strength by their interpretation and reinterpretation in different languages and cultures and in the light of different national histories.

Diversity has been a source of strengths and divisions

Europe therefore has a long history of the maintenance of cultural diversity within an overall intellectual framework. That diversity has normally been a source of strength, permitting and indeed encouraging the exploration of the human spirit together with innovation in ideas, policies and technologies. On other occasions, of course, it has been a source of division, of bitter debate and even of violent conflict. Examples abound: the persecution of the Cathars in medieval Provence; the work of the Inquisition; the persecution of Catholics in Protestant England; the religious wars of the seventeenth century; the anti-semitism which runs like a cancer through European society, from medieval times to the Holocaust; the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. As all these examples show, diversity allied to intolerance is inherently dangerous; but understanding and tolerance of diversity can, on the other hand, breed some of the most glorious works of literature and music.

European universities have a common ancestry…

Diversity within the world of higher education has milder consequences, though academic disputes can be vitriolic. But higher education in Europe has developed by many diverse routes and has resulted in a system which now contains many different types of institutions. The typical form of the medieval European university was collegiate, still typified by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, combining residential accommodation for staff and students with learning by lectures and through library study at the feet of a master. This model was well attuned to a restricted syllabus and to the service initially of the clergy and then of a small range of other learned professions. It persisted, in that guise, until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

… but have evolved in different ways

At that time, however, a number of intellectual and political influences led to the emergence of a more diverse group of institutions. Particularly in Great Britain, institutions began to adapt themselves to the world of the industrial revolution and to the concept of "useful knowledge"; the foundation of University College London on an intellectual basis which was explicitly non-religious was an extreme example, but other Scottish and English institutions began to develop teaching in subjects such as science, outside the traditional syllabi. By the end of the nineteenth century, such institutions were being deliberately designed to meet the needs of local industry.

The Humboldtian university

A similar dissatisfaction with the traditional university model was expressed in many other European countries and led, as in Britain, to the foundation of various types of vocational and technical institutions. It was this challenge to the old universities which led to the highly influential work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, typified by the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810. As Lay (2004: 47-48) puts it: "… the function of the higher learning was radically redefined. Under these reforms, the university was reinvented as the central pillar in nothing less than an intellectual effort for national rejuvenation. The universities would become the repositories of the national spirit and a vehicle for national pride." An important aspect of the Humboldtian university was the emphasis on the link between higher education and research, in which student and teacher would engage in partnership in a search for knowledge. To facilitate this, academic freedom, for both staff and students, became a tenet of the university system.

The grande école

A further institutional development, of considerable significance, was the French institution of the *grandes ecoles*. These schools for the elite differed radically from the Humboldtian or the Anglo-Saxon universities; they were above all teaching institutions, in which research played little or no part, and their objective was to develop a cadre to staff the ruling class of France, based on the concept of a meritocracy. The development of such teaching institutions required the establishment of an alternative system of research, outside both the *grandes ecoles* and the traditional universities. In the twentieth century, many countries in east and central Europe – rejecting the Humboldtian model – based research outside teaching institutions, typically in research institutes under the control of Academies of Science. Meanwhile in many countries the technological training needs of new industrial societies were met by the foundation of Polytechnics or *Fachhochschulen*, dedicated to serving local and regional industries. In some countries research and teaching in scientific and technological subjects became the preserve of technical universities, leaving the older disciplines to the traditional universities.

Different institutional models

During the nineteenth century, these different institutional models developed in diverse ways, both within Europe and in the wider world influenced – and sometimes ruled – by European nations. Universities came to differ in the lengths of their courses – from the English bachelor degree of three years through the Scottish master degree of four years to the master or diploma degrees of six years or more in some continental European countries. Even more extreme differences arose in the duration and nature of doctor degrees, sometimes seen as exclusively designed to train future academics, sometimes intended to lead to professional careers outside academe. Some systems were selective, with a restricted number of students admitted on the basis of a competitive entrance test; others were open to all who had successfully completed high-school education, with no control by the university on the overall numbers or on their distribution across the courses that were offered. Systems of examination were equally varied, from three hour written examinations to ten minute oral examinations. In some systems, the vast majority of students who entered were expected to graduate; in others, the majority of students was excluded after intermediate examinations or they themselves withdrew after shorter or often longer periods.

Evolving models

None of the models of universities were set in stone. In England, for example, universities which had been established – often as "university colleges" of the University of London – to serve the needs of a major city, developed over time into "civic universities" with a much wider mission for research and teaching. Successive waves of reform and growth saw the foundation in the 1960s of "plateglass universities" on green-field sites away from major population centres, seeking to imitate in new ways the collegiate residential experience of Oxford and Cambridge. In the late 1980s the Polytechnics, which had hitherto been the responsibility of local government, were funded by a national body and took on many of the characteristics of autonomous universities, a fact recognised when they changed their names to become the "new universities" of 1993. Finally, in 2005, a further set of new universities were created, distinguished from their predecessors only by the fact that they did not offer doctor degrees.[3]

Diversity is a result and a cause of innovation, enterprise and achievement

As with the cultural development of Europe as a whole, the diversity of university systems and structures has been both a result and a cause of innovation, enterprise and intellectual and cultural achievement. Even though the language of mission statements is relatively recent, universities have for years pursued different objectives, if only because of their different locations and the different capacities and interests of their staff and students. This was despite the fact that, in many

[3] It is important to note that, although these institutions are sometimes called "teaching universities", many of their staff engage in research despite not awarding doctorates.

countries, universities were controlled – to a greater or lesser degree – by national or regional governments, who sought to impose a degree of uniformity or conformity to a common pattern and to maintain distinctions, for example between universities and polytechnics, which were always subverted in practice.

Differences have led to hierarchies

Perhaps inevitably, difference led to hierarchy, with some universities being seen as superior to others. This was perhaps because those universities were able to offer better terms and conditions to their staff, so that in the ferociously competitive world of academe they attracted the most productive and prestigious teachers and researchers; success then begets success, as people strive to join those universities and measure their own success against that objective.

There is nothing wrong with such hierarchy and the competition which it engenders; it occurs in all walks of life and stimulates achievement and innovation. It is unfortunate, however, that in the university world – both in Europe and worldwide – prestige has come to be associated almost exclusively with success in research and academic publication, much less with good teaching or knowledge transfer. At the extreme, which can already be seen in some of the great research universities of the United States and the United Kingdom, this leads to a neglect of bachelor-level teaching by some leading scholars. Research hierarchy is also taken to extremes, with success measured in many disciplines by publication in a short list of leading academic journals.

The diversity is bewildering

There is, to sum up, enormous diversity in and among European universities, in terms of structures, courses, syllabi, staff and student interests, and relationships to the locality, region, nation or world. No-one knows how many different courses are offered in Europe's universities, but the number and diversity is certainly bewildering. Even specialists in a particular subject find it difficult to answer the question: which university offers the best course in that subject? "League tables" in newspapers seek to answer another question: what is the best university? Such rankings are highly subjective and based on a particular model of a university. Nevertheless, they do reflect a search for information and for a means of structuring a diverse and complex world.

3. Convergence, harmonisation or further diversity; the Bologna process

Small cohorts of mostly male students

Despite the dynamism and diversity of university structures, the systems developed in Europe before the last quarter of the twentieth century shared one common and crucial characteristic. They were the preserve of a small proportion of the population, typically less than 20 % of a cohort of young people or rather, of young men. What has distinguished the most recent period – still not much more than thirty years – from the centuries of earlier development is the growth in student numbers and in the proportions of young people attending university and, closely allied to that, the growth in the number of women among the student body. Now, throughout Europe, it is typical for around 40 % of a cohort of young people to attend university and the majority of them are women. Although progress has been slower in integrating some ethnic minorities and people from unskilled and disadvantaged backgrounds into the university system, it is as a whole now undoubtedly a mass rather than an elite system

Large cohorts with a majority of women students

It is this change which, above all, has made it necessary to seek for common features within, or at least a map of, the amazingly diverse and complex European university system. When universities were the preserve of elites – as they were until very recently – and most of their students were drawn from similar socio-economic backgrounds, there was within those elites a substantial amount of shared – if sometimes unspoken – knowledge.[4] Students and their families knew – or at least thought they knew – which were the "best" universities, the universities which would offer a gateway to the most prestigious careers. Now that there are hundreds of universities in many countries, catering to millions of students, this shared knowledge is no longer available, particularly when – as increasingly happens – students wish to study in countries other than their own. Meanwhile, national bureaucracies, faced with the increasing cost of higher education, naturally also demand to know what they are getting for their money and are not satisfied, as they might have been in the past, with the answer that academics know what they are doing and can be trusted to do it well.

There could have been – and indeed there could still be – a demand for radical simplification. At the extreme, this could take the form of requiring a common European syllabus for each academic subject, taught and assessed in the same way in every country and therefore with common outcomes available to every student and every employer. There could be requirements – in the interests of equity between academic subjects – that every bachelor degree should be the

[4] A marvellous fictional depiction of the transmission of such knowledge can be found in a play by Alan Bennett, "The History Boys", soon to be a film.

product of a specified number of hours of tuition. It could be required that successful completion of a bachelor degree in one university or one country would give an automatic right of entry to a master course in another university or another country. Universities might be required to specify exactly their focus and mission and to maintain that focus without deviation over time.

Bologna avoids radical simplification

The Bologna process is none of these. It seeks, perhaps as an alternative to demands for such radical simplification, to encourage all the countries of Europe to move towards a set of minimum common methods of organising university study, which will together facilitate the public understanding of the university system and of the students who have benefited from it. The different national systems – as they existed in 1999 at the start of the process – were so diverse that Bologna has undoubtedly encouraged a degree of convergence, but its minimum requirements are actually few in number.

Bologna requires adherence to a set of common methods

What does adherence to the Bologna process actually require? At a minimum, all signatories have agreed to adopt the "three cycle" model of bachelor, master and doctor degrees.[5] They have agreed to describe those degrees in documents known as "diploma supplements" and by means of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which together give information about the course that has been studied. They have agreed to develop frameworks of qualifications which show the relationship of one qualification to another. They have agreed to develop and implement a set of common standards for the quality assurance agencies which, in each country and in relation to the national characteristics of each system, give assurance of the quality of education to students, employers and governments. These changes and requirements have to be in place by 2010[6] and *Trends IV: European Universities implementing Bologna* (EUA 2005) suggested that good progress is being made towards that objective.

A common model does not mean homogenisation

This is very far from the imposition of a common system, although it clearly encourages or requires some convergence towards a common model, some harmonisation. But it obviously does not amount to homogenisation – there remains enormous scope for countries, or individual universities to maintain or adapt their systems to fit these minimum requirements. To take the most obvious example, bachelor degrees vary from three to four years in length, master degrees vary from one to two years and there is no agreement as yet on the length or organisation of doctor degrees.

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[5] The initial agreement was to a "two-cycle" bachelor and master degree; doctor degrees were formally added at the Berlin ministerial conference in 2003.

[6] Diploma supplements are required by 2005, but this requirement has not been fulfilled in a number of countries.

Some Bologna actions remain loosely defined

Discussions of the Bologna process have recently widened, with the introduction of a greater emphasis on the “external dimension” and on the “social dimension” of the European Higher Education Area. Neither term has been satisfactorily defined. But the “external dimension” appears to imply the translation of the main features of the EHEA – three-cycles, ECTS and quality assurance – into higher education systems in other parts of the world. This would, in principle, facilitate greater cooperation with those systems and easier mobility for students between them. The “social dimension” is variously defined; it is sometimes taken to mean that countries should agree to “portability” of grants and loans, so that students can use their national system of financial support while they study in another country. More broadly, the term seems to mean that governments and universities should make sure that the Bologna reforms do not inhibit efforts to widen access to higher education from disadvantaged groups. Neither the “external” nor the “social” dimension of Bologna seems likely to lead to a convergence of national systems.

There are, however, two current trends in European higher education which may, in the long run, affect the diversity or homogeneity of the system; neither are strictly the product of the Bologna reforms, but they are sometimes blamed on Bologna and they certainly deserve attention.

Rethinking course curricula within the Bologna process

The first trend is concerned with the nature of the curricula of courses. In many European countries, the Bologna process required that the existing single-cycle course, leading to a master or diploma degree, should be replaced by a bachelor and master qualification within the two-cycle model. The process by which this change should take place was not specified in the Bologna agreements, nor normally in the legislative processes which followed in many countries. Practice naturally varied; in some cases, an existing five year course was simply divided up into a bachelor course of three years, a master of two years, with little or no change to the curriculum; this was sometimes based on the assumption that almost every serious student would wish to progress from bachelor to master and therefore the division between them did not need to be rethought. Even worse, there were a few examples where attempts were made to force the entire content of a five-year programme into a three-year bachelor course.

Moving to a student-centred approach

In many cases, however, the requirement to design the new bachelor and master programmes has been seized as an opportunity to reconsider the nature and objectives of the curriculum. In addition, although the requirement for shorter bachelor courses initially focussed attention on the time to be taken to secure such a degree, attention soon turned to the learning outcomes to be expected from a student, the skills, competences and knowledge that he or she should have obtained by undertaking the course. This was a radical departure for some university systems, where courses had been described by the

number of hours spent in lectures or classes, rather than by what was learnt. It has sometimes been described as a movement from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach.

Such a change did not imply anything about the content of the curriculum.

Exploring common curricular components

Curriculum content was, however, the subject of a trans-European project, officially separate from Bologna, though holding many implications for it, called *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* (generally known as the *Tuning* project).[7] Experts in a range of academic disciplines were brought together to explore whether the syllabus in those disciplines could be described through a set of learning outcomes which would be common across Europe. Naturally the exact content of the syllabus, in a subject such as history, would continue to reflect national experiences, but the skills and competences might – it was argued – have much greater commonality across the continent. Much to the surprise of many academics, this proved to be the case and the *Tuning* project has been a valuable input into curriculum redesign in a number of countries. It holds out the prospect of the gradual development of common European curricula, through the decision of academics and their professional groupings, rather than by any central fiat.

Much more contentious, because of the wide-ranging implications for the whole university and the whole system, has been the discussion of convergence or increased diversity in the mission and activities of universities. This discussion, which has occurred or is occurring in every European country, is difficult to describe or characterise because it has so many different strands.

Diversity of mission and activities?

As was argued in the first section of this chapter, the European higher education system has evolved in innumerable ways, with the result that the system – if it can even be called that – is very diverse. This situation, and the increased attention to it which the Bologna process has brought, provokes – at the extreme – one of two reactions. The first reaction is to argue that the diversity of types and missions reflects a sad and undesirable departure from what might be called the Platonic ideal of a university. This ideal, which borrows elements both from the collegiate universities of medieval times and from the Humboldtian restatement of the early nineteenth century, incorporates ideas of a partnership between student and teacher, academic freedom for both and the union of teaching and research. It is based also on a notion of university autonomy in which the university commands its own resources and can deploy them as it wishes. Proponents of this view

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[7] For full information on *Tuning*, please visit http://www.relint.deusto.es /TuningProject/index.htm

accept that there will be institutions – such as polytechnics – which are engaged in higher education but which cannot be described in these ideal terms; they are valuable and excellent in their way but they are not universities.

Common purposes but different profiles?

At the other extreme is the view that all higher education institutions are engaged in a common purpose, encompassing teaching, research and knowledge transfer, but that each specialises according to its own history, inheritance and current situation. The distinctiveness of institutions can be reflected in their names – polytechnic, college, technical university, classical university – but otherwise such collective names have little utility and every institution should be classified as a university or as a higher education institution, whichever generic name is chosen for the whole system. Institutions can also be grouped, as in the Carnegie Classification which is used in the United States, but those groupings are for information; they (in theory) carry no normative significance nor do they embody a hierarchy.

These issues may seem to be arcane, a matter only for those few academics who are concerned with the administration of higher education rather than with a traditional academic discipline. But in fact they have serious political implications, which have grown stronger as the systems have become larger, and those political implications are reflected in funding decisions and in the quality of education which can be provided.

Diversification leading to hierarchy

In recent years, politicians across Europe have increasingly advocated a greater diversification of the system on the grounds that each university cannot do everything, that the public purse is not limitless and that it is inevitable and indeed desirable that funds should be concentrated where they will bring the greatest return. In practice, this has meant the concentration of funds for research on fewer and fewer institutions. The most extreme results have been seen in the United Kingdom, where funding decisions based on successive Research Assessment Exercises have led to the situation that 75 % of research funding (from the Higher Education Funding Council for England) is given to 25 (out of 120) universities, while some other universities receive little or nothing. It is argued that teaching-led universities, as they are sometimes called, should concentrate their efforts on teaching and knowledge transfer, but the funds for such purposes are normally more constrained and lower than those for research. To add insult to injury, concentration somehow still allows the research-led universities to secure larger funds, sometimes for teaching but also for knowledge transfer. Diversification does not, therefore, lead to total differentiation but to hierarchy. Other countries are showing signs of following, for example in Germany where it is intended to create a number of "world-class" research universities following a competition among existing universities.

Meanwhile, in a number of countries the polytechnics or *fachhochschulen* are arguing, to the dismay of the classical universities, that now that both types of institution are providing bachelor and master degrees, funding should be at least equalised and, going further, the polytechnics should be eligible for research funding.

There is no sign, in other words, that a situation of stability – so desired by many academics - will soon exist in European higher education. Convergence will proceed, well short of harmonisation or homogenisation, but it will be accompanied by increasing diversity within a larger and larger university system.

4. Conclusion

Bologna as a response

It is clear that the Bologna process, for all the attention that has been lavished on it since 1999, does not by any means encompass the full range of issues and changes at the moment affecting European higher education. Indeed, many changes which are loosely attributed – often by aggrieved university teachers – to Bologna have only tangential or even looser relationships to it. In particular, the diversity of European higher education institutions and the systems in which they operate has been affected only marginally by Bologna. Far more important, in many ways, have been the growth in student numbers, the failure in most countries to fund those numbers at earlier levels and the transition from an elite to a mass system. Bologna can be seen more as a response to these changes than a cause of them.

At the same time, Bologna was inspired by some noble aims, to improve the public understanding and attractiveness of European higher education, to enhance mobility of students among the European nations and to fit Europe's students to take their place effectively as citizens and employees in the world of the twenty-first century. To all except the most convinced Euro-sceptics, those are desirable ends. To those with a sense of history, they recall the origins of the university system in medieval Europe, the age of the "wandering scholars", one of the greatest of whom, Erasmus, has given his name to the student mobility programme of the European Union.

Increased convergence with increased diversity

Prediction is a dangerous art. There have been far more wrong than right predictions. But it seems likely that European higher education institutions – called universities or not – will increasingly, and as a result of the Bologna process, see themselves as part of a larger whole. They will not cease to compete, nor to define their missions ever more precisely, so that diversity will continue and will even be increasingly systematised. But at the same time they will converge to create a European Higher Education Area – based on academic freedom and

autonomy, on student-centred learning and on the link between teaching and research, which will continue the development of institutions which have been changing for 800 years.

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Resources

[1] European University Association (www.eua.be)

[2] Bologna Process website (www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna)

Biography:

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