

Autonomy and Governance in European Universities

Parallel to the changes in expectations on the contribution of Higher Education Institutions to society and a knowledge-based economy, the relationship between the state and universities has been significantly redefined. Many recent reforms in Higher Education addressed institutional autonomy in one of its various forms. However, the changing regulatory practices do not necessarily indicate a retreat of the state from steering higher education and increased autonomy raised in turn corresponding accountability expectations. While the need for more autonomy has been recognised at European and increasingly on national level, there is little specific information on the comparative state of different national systems in Europe and what this means in practice for universities.

Given that the extent and understanding of autonomy will have a major impact on the capacity to develop stronger relationships in the European Higher Education Area, this gap needs to be addressed and this permanent, fast changing process monitored.

As stated in the EUA Lisbon Declaration (2007), the principles of university autonomy must accommodate diverse institutional missions and include:

- **academic autonomy** (deciding on degree supply, curriculum and methods of **teaching**; deciding on areas, scope, aims, and methods of **research**.)
- **financial autonomy** (acquiring and allocating funding, deciding on tuition fees, accumulating surplus: see the financial autonomy index set up by EUA)
- **organisational autonomy** (setting the university structures and statutes, making contracts, electing decision-making bodies and persons)
- **staffing autonomy** (responsibility for recruitment, salaries and promotion).

EUA's approach to analysis of university autonomy

This diversity of understandings of what autonomy is in practice and the diversity of national contexts makes it necessary to resort to a multidimensional approach in order to gain useful insight on the topic of autonomy. EUA has thus designed a multi-stage, interactive process aimed at studying in depth this crucial issue for European universities. The first "building block" of this analysis consists in a Europe-wide **Autonomy Survey**, which objective is to provide a broad overview of national and institutional trends regarding autonomy and governance.

The Survey is conducted through a questionnaire which was addressed to the National Rectors' Conferences and is now updated through a series of subsequent interviews. It aims at establishing the necessary knowledge basis for further benchmarking of university autonomy and governance issues in the future. The Survey specifically looked at the ability of universities to decide on institutional strategy and structures, on academic programmes, student-related aspects, finances, real estate, and human resources.

It is a timely project, in line with the follow-up of the EUA Lisbon Declaration of April 2007 and the subsequent EUA conferences in Wroclaw in 2007 and in Barcelona in 2008 to define more accurately the different dimensions of autonomy. The survey's findings will be fed into EUA's 2009 Prague Convention discussions in order to promote a truly interactive process with EUA's membership.

The survey is complemented by the research conducted in the framework of EUA's **Full Costing project**, which analysed, amongst others, certain aspects of financial autonomy in more detail through a pilot sample of universities. The study established an **autonomy index** to provide indications about the real degree of financial autonomy.

Within the framework of the EUDIS project which starts in November 2008 EUA will look more closely at the link between the diversification of income streams and the university's autonomy and thus provide another "building block" for the bigger picture on autonomy.

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