

Autonomy and accountability move to top of European higher education agenda

European University Association Autumn conference in Poland

29th October 2007. A conference bringing together nearly 300 higher education leaders from across Europe has highlighted the extent to which the issues of university autonomy and accountability are moving to the top of the European higher education agenda. During the three-day European University Association (EUA) conference in Wroclaw, Poland, which ended this weekend, stakeholders from over 40 countries discussed how these two interrelated issues could provide the appropriate conditions for strengthening Europe's universities.

Professor Georg Winckler, EUA President told participants that the issues of university autonomy and accountability were moving up the political agenda for national governments and the European Union. The conference highlighted there is currently great diversity in national systems across Europe; while universities in some countries have very little power to manage their resources, recruit students and staff, others have a great deal of autonomy.

The EUA President stressed autonomy was not an end to itself but a vital means for universities to act quickly in a fast-changing globalised higher education environment. In particular, he said that greater autonomy was crucial for universities to respond to demographic changes, to attract international talent, and to raise necessary additional funding. Professor Winckler underlined that universities needed, within their national systems 'operational' autonomy' and not just 'theoretical' autonomy'. All universities should have the capacity to: define and pursue their mission; to adjust internal structures; to manage and recruit academic and administrative staff; and to manage budgets and to raise external funds.

All participants at the EUA conference agreed that greater autonomy meant a readiness to be accountable to key stakeholders; including students, governments, parents and business. Accountability was also important for the university itself, Professor Winckler said, underlining that accountability should lead to an increased capacity to set strategic goals. During the meeting, university leaders discussed the advantages and disadvantages of different types of external accountability used across Europe, such as the composition of governing boards, the use of full cost systems, and even the impact of rankings.

Professor Winckler also urged universities to improve their internal quality processes. It was up to leaders to demonstrate the value of internal processes to university staff, he said, and to use the results to implement future improvements rather than focusing on 'staff sanctions'. To create an effective quality culture, leaders should look to ensure ownership of the quality process by the academic community, to make sure students were involved, and to rely on younger staff to be 'quality champions', he added.

The conference highlighted the need for coherent national frameworks that balance autonomy and accountability, but avoid micromanagement by the state. Professor Winckler explained that following the conference debates, EUA would work on a project to map and assess the issues of autonomy and governance across Europe in order to identify obstacles and success factors in specific countries. "EUA has a central role to play in ensuring that reforms in these areas provide the appropriate conditions for strengthening Europe's universities and promoting a European knowledge society," he said.

To find out more about the conference, please visit: <http://www.eua.be/index.php?id=wroclaw>

Please contact Andrew Miller (contact details below) for a copy of Professor Winckler's slides:

The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

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