

Who 'owns' the higher education?

Some adverse effects of bystander state from a national perspective: Case of Slovenia

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Setting the stage (1)

- Is higher education a matter of national concern (ownership)?
- Should national government place much more faith in collective ability for self-regulation of higher education institutions?

Setting the stage (2)

- Many challenges in higher education
 - Higher education enrolment among highest in Europe (cca 70 % of a cohort), but very high dropout rate; enrolment of student benefit seekers is very high
 - Highly unbalanced structure of graduates ; too many social science and humanities graduates, far to few science and technical graduates; absence of interdisciplinarity
 - Completely flawed system of financing higher education
 - Bologna process actually increased average duration of studies
 - **KEY PROBLEM IN A NUTSHELL:** Higher education is not an integral element of national system of innovation.

- We are introducing small and rather isolated mechanisms to deal with specific topics, contributing to a non-efficient patchwork, but missing the big picture.
- Thesis:
 - Modernization of higher education on a national level is not only a technocratic problem and cannot be approached as such. It is strongly related with national political process.
 - The state has so far only been a bystander, attempting to (1) inefficiently integrate international processes and commitments and (2) please internal rent-seeking and pressure groups.

Obstacle 1: High external centralisation and internal fragmentation of HE system

- HE in Slovenia is dominated in size and scope by two public universities; over 80 % of public resources on HE and science
 - => relatively independent and self-sufficient in terms of finances (too big to fail)
- Internal fragmentation of both universities and among independent schools
 - => Impossibility of university management and strategy coordination; any attempts met with resistance
- Very deterministic perception of university autonomy
 - Confirmed by the constitutional court
 - => Contextual shaping as the only possible approach

Obstacle 2: Very poor linkages with employers

- Majority of study programmes do not require any involvement with business community or other employers
- Poor feedback from the labour market
- Study programmes catering needs of professors, not students of employers
- Is HE losing contact with the real world?

Obstacle 3: University politics and management

- Political mobilisation of the public universities: the most influential non-political institution
 - Ministerial positions traditionally staffed from university ranks; most public opinion makers and journalists educated at a single university; rectors former active members of political parties
 - Directly influencing policy making, including strategic documents and regulatory framework; *the state as a bystander*
- => Sub-optimal responses to challenges
- e.g. most by optimising internal processes and diversifying sources of revenue; two largest universities by *direct political, legal and medial confrontations* with the government

Obstacle 4: Low internationalisation of Slovenian HE

- Only a fraction of staff are foreigners; mostly junior staff
 - Very small proportion of international students
 - Language barriers, with Slovenian as almost exclusive language of tuition
 - Internal official and unofficial mechanisms for preventing employment of international academic staff
- ⇒ Relatively limited experience of HE institutions with good practices in other countries
- ⇒ Many key people engaged in HE stakeholder have fairly limited personal experience with higher education systems in countries with consistently rank higher both in competitiveness or quality of their higher education

Obstacle 5: Unionisation and radicalisation of student organisations

- Highly developed and well-regulated student representation, but which is assuming the features of trade unions of unqualified labour force
 - Development of *secondary labour market* for student work
 - Developing *culture of selective dependency* (some welfare benefits; student benefits; family networks); but failing to implement innovative ones.
 - Dismissing the quest for efficiency and marketable knowledge in HE as neo-liberalism and attempted privatisation

Some tentative implications

- Introducing technocratic solutions and best practices in Slovenian HE is not going to be an easy process.
- If introduced, good practices tend to be accepted arbitrarily and selectively
 - only those that confirm the existing arrangements
 - while the rest are dismissed as inappropriate for the Slovenian specific situation, or relativized.
- The solutions for adverse developments in HE is going to be a very difficult political process...
- Ultimately, to substantially increase HE will depend on its depolitization – reducing their political impact will, paradoxically, make them stronger and better in the long run.
- The state will have to regain the ownership not of HE, but of HE policy process; from bystander to moderator