

The Bologna Process
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***INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY
AND GOVERNANCE***





It is our great pleasure to address this very important conference and we thank the organizers for this kind invitation.

It is perhaps safe to argue that the problems we are going to discuss are universal in the sense that practically every higher education institution faces some tension between itself and public authorities, at least in relation to the best regulation of public money invested into public institutions. One could further argue that there is an inherent controversy between universities and public authorities. On one hand, the history of learning and discovery shows fairly convincingly that it is best to set teachers and thinkers free to make discoveries and to effectively teach knowledge, skills, and culture. The issue of university autonomy was introduced in the Bologna Declaration with a reference to the 1988 *Magna Charta Universitatum*, which stated that

- *The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of the societies differently organized because of geography and cultural heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and mentally independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.*





On the other hand, every HEI is practically dependent on public authorities and on the society at large in terms of at least two things: funding and legislation. Even private universities with little or no financial support from the Government or local authorities obviously are not free in terms of regulations set by the law. From this perspective, all the pronouncements of absolute freedom are but popular lore.

The organizers address four questions to our workshop. The first of them reads:

- ***How should public responsibility and institutional autonomy be balanced in the Bologna Process?***





How should public responsibility and institutional autonomy be balanced in the Bologna Process?

The shortest answer is “it should be balanced”. Yet we are perhaps expected to be a bit more specific and to respond to the question “**how** it should be balanced”. To do that, we have to say a few words about the key notions of the question posed: *public responsibility* and, again, *institutional autonomy*.

Universities **are** responsible to society and to the public for what they are doing and, therefore, are *accountable* towards society. In other words, universities should be “independent of all political authority”, as underscored by *Magna Charta*, but they cannot and should not be independent of society. From this point of view, universities couldn’t be fully independent of public authorities either – inasmuch as the authorities pursue the goals consonant with the goals of the society (which is not always the case, though).





Nowadays, universities' responsibility is greater than ever before. The reason is the *massification* of higher education we are facing now. The first university-like institutions created in the West in the 13th century were grounded on a very restrictive model of learning which was accessible to a very small and elite proportion of the population. This meant that the *impact* of university education on society was appreciably less as compared to the impact typical of universities nowadays. Obviously, the more the impact, the higher the responsibility. We are obliged to agree to the view that, considering the great role played by HEIs of our time, they should be controlled by society. A possible analogy doesn't seem to be too straightforward: as military matters shouldn't be entirely left to the military, academic matters shouldn't be entirely left to academics.

A simple example can be given to make it clear what we really mean. If a university educates its students in the spirit of, let's say, neo-nazism or other unacceptable ideology, a Board of Trustees or any other governance body wouldn't look at such a hypothetical situation helplessly under the pretext of respecting the institutional autonomy but, most likely, will intervene to put an end to the situation.





We make it a point that the reference is made here to a Board of Trustees or a similar body rather than to the Ministry of Education or some other *political, governmental* structure. It is one of the Open Society principles that civic, self-organized, rather than political, bodies regulate problems of this kind.

More generally speaking, lay people sitting on the boards are very important. Among other things, they bring a broadly understood market-oriented perspective. When a university has to make a strategic choice, it is very useful to look at the lay people's reaction as something mirroring public interests and, besides, as a reaction from those who typically are more sensitive to market demands and challenges than academics are.

The notion of public responsibility may have one more facet. Universities are responsible towards the public, but the society as a whole is equally responsible towards universities, since without effective public support universities cannot develop or even survive, while society is highly interested in universities' sustainability.





It seems appropriate to mention at this point of our reasoning that alongside institutional autonomy there also exists *personal* autonomy of professors and students. Humboldt is known as the autonomy champion. But Humboldt's main objective was to protect the individual autonomy of professors rather than of the university. His point was to focus on the duty of the university to generate new knowledge, which means that the professors are expected first of all to do research, which cannot be regulated from outside. Humboldt doesn't seem to admit that academic freedom can be abused. Is our feeling exactly the same in the age of the mass education? This is an open question.

We are not discussing here what could be dubbed '**structural constituent's autonomy**' – that of the **faculty/department/institute/chair** (depending on the structure adopted). Do they have their own budget? To what extent are the structural constituents free in their decision-making? Are they entitled to have their own academic senates, their own boards of trustees? The existing practices differ very much; it would be very interesting to analyze the experience of different educational systems, to find out excellent practices (perhaps not *best* practices – for the simple reason that what suits perfectly one system may cause troubles if applied too directly to some other settings).





Anyway, speaking of different-level autonomy, and of different approaches to autonomy, we face a situation typical of those handled by game theory. We face a *conflict of interests* held by different players, by different stakeholders. It hardly can be denied that, for instance, a professor may show interest in expanding his or her course, even at the expense of other disciplines, for it is natural for a specialist to think of his or her discipline as the most important. In the same vein, a university as a whole may show interest in getting more money from the Ministry than any other one. Stakeholders outside the university may want to invest less and to gain more in terms of a higher quality of education, etc. The point is that in a cooperative, democratic society such conflicts should be resolved by way of *negotiating*. In other words, autonomy is a *negotiable principle*.





Coming back to Bologna, we can say that yes, there are certain special aspects brought about by the Bologna Process to the issue of institutional autonomy. The Bologna Process was initiated as an essentially political project and, in this sense, as a top-down one. At the same time, the goals set by the Bologna Process cannot be achieved without grass-roots support – without a situation where each professor and administrative officer alike understand the crux of the matter and are willing to contribute to the success of reforms. Of course, students, too, have their part to play and their voice may be decisive, at least in some respects. From this perspective, it is a bottom-up process. It is extremely important to have a balanced interaction between the “semi-autonomous” parties involved.

In the report presented by the International conference on “New generations of policy documents and laws for higher education: Their thrust in the context of the Bologna Process” (Warsaw, November, 2004), we find a sort of typology of the legislative systems for higher education and of the ways how to reform such systems, viz.: ***no reform at all*** (the case of the UK, where the state tends to minimize its involvement in higher education regulation); ***detailed laws*** to regulate every aspect (in some of the CEE countries); or simply a ***general framework*** (for instance in France). It seems to these writers that, ultimately, it is the third option that has more chances to prevail.





In a little more detailed way, we would describe the desired situation as follows. Public authorities (parliaments, governments, ministries, etc.) are expected, first of all, to provide for two things: first, to offer (by way of adopting laws and other documents) a general framework for the system of higher education (e.g. defining what is and what is not a HEI; who is and who is not entitled to found a HEI; what kind of procedures of accreditation and recognition should be followed, etc.). Second, to fix (most likely by the parliament), which percentage of state budget should be allocated to the higher education system. It is essential that funding of higher education be placed at the top of the priorities list. There must be a widely (universally) held belief or recognition that there is no part of our economic, political or cultural life which cannot be improved by or which will not benefit from the application of knowledge and ideas.

- ***Higher education as the central mechanism of generating knowledge and ideas adds value to everything.***

And it is *taxing* to keep such a mechanism running.

All the rest (study programme contents, methods of teaching, personnel/staff problems, intra-university management and budget) should be left to the academia, **but** in a fully transparent manner **and** in a close cooperation with all kinds of stakeholders, like student associations, professional associations, employers, etc.





The second question having been practically covered by the exposition above (***Are there elements of institutional autonomy that are essential to the Bologna Process?***), let us proceed to the 3rd question offered by the organizers, which is

- ***Does increasing institutional autonomy imply a stronger and more centralized institutional leadership? (Such as the appointment of a University President by the Executive Board instead of the Academic Senate electing a Rector?).***

To be honest, we find the question as it is worded a bit difficult to answer. The posts of President and Rector do not seem to be self-evident. As we know, in some universities there are *both* a President *and* a Rector (or a Rector and a Chancellor). It is a matter of specific *functions* assigned to each of them. Yet one thing deserves our attention. Institutional autonomy does give rise to new functions; for instance, if personnel management was a prerogative of the Ministry and now this function is relegated to the University, this means that a new function for the University management is added. One more problem is concerned with innovation processes. If a university is involved in technology transfer and kindred issues, the university administration is expected to do real business, which is not so traditional for many universities and their Rectors. The same holds true with respect to fund-raising activities.

This being the case, one may think that it would be reasonable to split the many functions performed by Rectors into two classes: one would be concerned with managerial and business activities, while the other would be described in terms of leadership, mission and vision development, branding, and even the icon of the institution.





Since so different gifts and inclinations are only rarely found combined in just *one* person, it may be reasonable to have *two* persons at the head of the university – roughly speaking, a recognized leader and a higher administrative officer, however we dub their posts.

One more problem which gives rise to a need for diversifying management functions in universities is their growing financial self-sufficiency. Nowadays the state is withdrawing and tightening its belt with respect to the funding of education. This tendency is universal and is not likely to show any reverse development. It is a kind of outsourcing where what had been a natural function of the state is given out to some other agents, the state actually being downsized.

The situation is fairly controversial. On the one hand, as just indicated, the state reduces its involvement in covering overall costs of education, HEIs acquiring, as a result, more financial autonomy. On the other hand, the model of state funding has been changed as well. It becomes more targeted, more specific-programme oriented instead of the simple block-grant funding that leaves universities the autonomy to decide how to spend funding. In other words, stripping itself of the obligations to fully support the overall costs of the universities, the state still controls, at least partly, the type and scope of the universities' research and teaching. Hence a lesser autonomy for the universities.





What could be a solution?

We will not say much about it. In fact, it is quite familiar to a developed democracy. Since democracy presupposes a balance of interests, here, again, we need negotiations and lobbying. Our professional associations should, among other things, become a go-between in our “bargaining” with the authorities, promoting our business in the parliament and the bureaucracy. Both legislative and executive authorities should be under constant pressure. We shouldn’t shy away from defending our case wherever we find it just and fair.

The last two words – “just and fair” – also are of importance. Nobody, either an individual or a group, can claim to be infallible. Alongside human rights there are human wrongs. Here we end up with the same as before: each individual case is subject to negotiation.

Earlier in our exposition we mentioned Rectors, Chancellors, Board of Trustees and a possible distribution of functions (and power) between them. In some countries, one finds a more sophisticated system, such as that in Canada. According to Canadian legislation, so-called bicameral system is practiced. One chamber of governance is the Board of Governors, authorized under state legislation, which has a majority appointed by the Government. Boards of Governors have authority over the university’s budget, especially over money coming from the Government. The other chamber is the University Senate elected by the academics who control academic activity. The Rector, also elected by the university, is a bridge between the Board and the Senate to make the whole machine run smoothly. This way of keeping a balance between autonomy and governance deserves attention.





A slightly different situation is found in some US universities, e.g. in the University of North Carolina, where each public institution has its own Board of Trustees, while all of them are under the state Board of Governors made up of students, faculty, administrators, and citizens of the state. The Board is accountable to citizens of the state as well as to the university community as a whole. Its function (worded a bit loosely) is to provide the best education for citizens with the money available.

It could be added, rather parenthetically, that both Government and society at large are keenly interested in reasonably independent and efficient universities not only because of the universities' indispensable role in building a knowledge-based society. Even looked at from a narrow perspective – as business organizations, universities are very good at earning money. Universities are not black holes to pour money into. Far from that. According to some estimates, when properly managed, universities are orders of magnitude more efficient than institutions in any other public sector.





Now, let us discuss the last question of our agenda, *Question 4*, which reads:

- ***Does an increasing institutional autonomy imply a stronger influence from external decision-makers (Ministry of Education) on the composition of the institutional leadership?***

We strongly suspect that this question has originated from the ministerial quarters rather than from academia. But, speaking seriously, we would tend to interpret the question as follows: Given the fact that HEIs are developing towards more and more autonomy, the decision-making process becomes more or less unrestrained. Given two more facts, one concerning a growing complexity of the HEIs, and the other concerning a more profound impact that the HEIs have on present-day society, the risks of an inappropriate decision in the context of unrestrained autonomy may be too great. It may be the Ministry of Education's duty to exert more influence on the role and the composition of the university leadership to minimize risks.

Understood this way, the issue seems fairly reasonable. One could say that the Ministry of Education, as already mentioned above, is supposed to lay down guiding principles for the HEIs to follow. If, for instance, a Ministry offers a principle according to which each HEI should coordinate its decisions with a board of trustees (or any other body of that kind) and this principle is approved by the legislature, it is up to the Ministry to see to it that the principle be implemented.





Should the theme be brought forward for further discussion in the Bologna process after Bergen?

So, we tried to answer the questions offered by the organizers with some additions and expansions. We didn't try to incorporate into the discussion the Russian experience where the situation is grossly aggravated by the size of the system (the figures seem to speak for themselves: about 6 million students, about three thousand HEIs and so on).

To sum up the discussion, the organizers pose an additional question: ***Should the theme be brought forward for further discussion in the Bologna process after Bergen?*** To this question we answer definitely in the affirmative. In the Bologna Declaration the problem is just touched upon. Its complexity is obvious. There is an intricate blend (a maze, I'd say) of different-level autonomy (beginning from individual to institutional autonomy), of feedback mechanisms, of restrictions and counterbalances, etc.

The complexity is paralleled by the importance of the problem. It is really vital to our system. It hardly is an exaggeration if we admit: unless this problem finds its solution (or, rather, its solutions depending on the regional, economic, and political context), the educational system cannot be successful. We do not have the right to put this problem aside. Otherwise we should be prepared to receive last rites. Which will never happen, I believe.

Thank you very much.

