



Norwegian Ministry
of Education and Research

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BFUG MEETING

San Lawrenz, Gozo (Malta), 24-25 May 2017

Reports from the parallel sessions on Innovative Learning Methodologies

Parallel Session 1 – Mr Godfrey Vella and Ms Audrey Abela

During this workshop the following issues were discussed:

Digitalisation

The advantages associated with digitisation include accessibility and reach; disadvantages include quality assurance.

Online Content

Institutions are under pressure to put their content online but once it is passed on to entities such as Coursera, the institutions lose control over their intellectual property rights. Counter argument – stringent agreements with these entities.

Online Degrees

Attaining a degree is not merely collecting ECTSs. Students may require guidance on how to choose courses and ECTSs to put together a meaningful degree. They might also need assistance identifying which programmes are worth investing and enrolling in.

Lifelong Learning

Digitisation may facilitate lifelong learning. We have to distinguish between people following online courses to increase their opportunities to find employment, and those who are already in employment but are trying to seek additional certification.

Quality Assurance

It is more difficult to ensure QA when dealing with online courses. QA is inherent in most traditional programmes and there usually is a highly qualified person responsible for it.

Traditional Methods of Teaching

With the increase of online programmes, we cannot forgo traditional methods of teaching.

Parallel Session 2 – Dr. VanDyck Silveira and Ms Christine Scholz

The parallel session discussed four organisational themes, namely Institutional Strategic Leadership Organisational Model, Culture, Performance and Stakeholders, and the pervasive orthodoxies related to these.

Institutional Strategic Leadership Organisational Model, Culture

With regard to this organisational theme two conflicting orthodoxies were identified by the participants.

On the one hand, a number of participants held that higher education institutions are monolithic, conservative and risk averse 'ivory towers'. From their perspective this orthodoxy was reflected in the tendency of stakeholders within higher education institutions to be quiet and conforming, institutions resisting change and external influence and not taking into account enough the interests of society. In fact, it was held that societal structures itself, which were felt to be geared towards the reproduction of elites, were contributing to this orthodoxy. As a solution it was proposed to provide incentives to institutions to take more strongly into account external input. Moreover, the importance of the leadership of higher education institutions and their personal leadership style were stressed.

On the other hand, some participants challenged this orthodoxy and argued instead that there is a trend towards copying a business model of running higher education institutions and that this was not working in this context. The key driver for this orthodoxy was seen in the pervasive economic discourse in society and it was proposed to reverse this trend given that it was not suitable for the context of higher education, since economic success could not be equated with academic quality.

Culture

With regard to the organisational theme of the culture of higher education conflicting orthodoxies were again voiced.

On the one hand, some participants felt that the student body is changing. The driver for this orthodoxy was seen in the changing labour market and world economic development, which influenced skills needs and demand for skilled labour. The changing make up of the student body meant that common approaches to teaching and learning would not work and would need to be adapted to suit different needs of students. It was proposed that 'traditional' teaching may be suitable for the 'traditional' student. However, more diverse modes of teaching and teaching styles would be required to accommodate the needs of non-traditional learners.

On the other hand, some participants felt that higher education had in fact not changed considerably so far and that data suggests that it has remained a privilege of the few as evidenced by persisting obstacles to access to higher education for underrepresented groups, which is resulting in a reproduction of elites. As a solution to this orthodoxy it was suggested that systems of education would need to be reformed at all levels - from primary to tertiary education - in order to ensure that barriers to progression throughout the education system are removed and inclusion of non-traditional learners is facilitated. The proposal of achieving this through privatisation of higher education as a stimulus was discussed, but not considered as suitable.

Performance

In terms of performance as an organisational theme for the internal environment of higher education institutions the main orthodoxy identified was that employability is not the only or main outcome of education. Reasons supporting this orthodoxy included the unpredictable nature of the future, the changing labour market and the changing skills needs and labour demand in the economy. In view of these aspects participants felt that higher education cannot focus solely or mainly on employability, which may allow for limited adaptability to future demands. As a solution it was proposed that higher education in general and higher education programmes in particular should be as open and flexible as possible to allow for changing needs of the labour market. The focus of programmes should be both on fundamental knowledge and transversal skills and higher education systems should provide incentives and framework conditions for the development of innovative content and programme design.

Stakeholders

With regard to the organisational theme of stakeholder involvement conflicting orthodoxies were again identified.

On the one hand, a number of participants felt that the debate on stakeholder involvement in higher education is changing from internal self-governance by the key stakeholders in higher education, namely staff and students as well as governments as main funders of higher education to the involvement of external stakeholders. It was felt that this change in stakeholder involvement might impinge on institutional autonomy and may result in a further exclusion in the governance of higher education of vulnerable and underrepresented groups in higher education.

On the other hand participants felt that stakeholder involvement in higher education institutions could contribute to policies and governance being fully inclusive and responsive the needs of society at large.

Besides these two conflicting views, participants felt that another important orthodoxy with regard to stakeholder involvement in higher education was the improvement of international cooperation in higher education as evidenced by the increased transparency and comparability of higher education systems achieved through the Bologna Process. It was suggested that this development should be further supported by ensuring and strengthening the proper implementation of the Bologna Process action lines in all countries forming part of the European Higher Education Area.

Parallel Session 3 – Dr. Stefan Sant and Ms Lorraine Vassallo

Competition in the World Scale

With reference to the orthodoxy of *competition in the world scale*, delegates identified the biggest challenges as being traditional teaching methodologies. The delegates noted that there is not much difference between traditional teaching methods and teaching methods on MOOCs in the ways with which MOOCs are being used at present. In both cases, students have to learn topics by heart in order to sit for and pass their exams. Possible solutions would be to teach learners how to reason rather than to learn information by heart and to introduce innovation in teaching methods. It is also necessary that the education system teaches students to develop their personalities in order to be more competitive in the world scale.

Technology

The main point that was raised by the delegates was that big universities (Ivy-Leagues) make use of MOOCs however, as pointed out during the discussion related to the previous orthodoxy, they stated that there is no real difference between traditional and blended learning, or even between teaching methods in secondary schools and Higher Education institutions and Universities. Suggested solutions were as follows:

- Educators should learn how to effectively integrate MOOCs in pedagogy;
- It is important to take into consideration micro – campuses in different countries in the use of technology;
- Delegates could further discuss how to bring technology into the classroom; and
- Ensuring that teachers have the competences to use technologies.

Market/Fitness with industry needs

Market and Fitness with industry needs were discussed jointly. The delegates reflected upon whether market needs drive technologies or vice-versa and one delegate stated that research drives innovation not the market. Consequently, it is necessary to learn how to find information collaboratively.

Another point which was raised during the discussion was that Higher Education institutions are possibly not inscribing the need for teaching staff to be educated in technology.

The issue of low-employment rates amongst graduates was also raised during the discussion. Delegates questioned whether students get qualifications to enrich themselves or to be granted access to the labour market.

The below were the potential solutions identified by the delegates:

- Jobs are changing so education should allow people to have the flexibility to change between jobs;
- Universities are to explain better what skills and competences students learn as this is not always clear to employers. This is mostly true in the humanities, which is perceived by employers as not providing any work-related skills to students; and
- Universities should teach students for 'unemployment' and for self-enrichment.

Parallel Session 4 – Ms Edel Cassar and Ms Angelique Grech

Competition in the world scale

On competition in the world scale the participants outlined the importance that Universities do not see it from a competition perspective but, universities are more interested in attention students. In fact, this is not a competitive issue but it is more a question of attracting students at a national, regional and then at an international / global level. The participants were all adamant that the word competition should not be used when referring to higher education but the focus should be on attraction. One of the questions which was raised during these discussion was: 'Are we not providing student-centered learning yet?' In fact, participants underlined the importance that universities are attracting student on the basis of their reputation and the areas of studies they are offering. Subsequently, on the notion that non-universities providers may be offering more courses which are of interest to the students, it was underlined that this is not disrupting the higher education sector, on the contrary this is stimulating universities to widen their methodologies and some of these educational institution see this as an opportunity. There are cases where non-university providers are having cooperation agreements with universities having awarding powers in order to start offering degrees.

Technology

On Technology participants underlined the importance of having a blended approach to this whereby traditional modes of teaching are accompanied by technological platforms. However, the participants also acknowledged that technology is assisting with providing more education for all. In fact, educational platforms are important to provide opportunities to students who are not able to attend on-campus higher education and therefore on-line platforms could provide opportunities for these students to further their education.

Markets

On markets the participants underlined the importance that Universities are not driven by the demands of the labour market. In fact participants stated that 'Universities are not markets'. It was also noted that that in order to ensure that programmes are designed in a manner which will help student to gain access to the labour market, these should be accompanied by interaction between research and training. Participants said that specialized research on the need of future skills should be accompanied and be in relation with the provision of training offered to the students.

Fit with the industry

On fit with the industry, participants commented that higher education should, hopefully, satisfy industry in order students to get a job. This, however, is not the sole purpose of higher education. Higher education should prepare students for 'life'. In fact, the participants commented that study programmes should be designed in a manner to enable students to gain basic competence / generic skills. Courses' learning outcomes should be balanced in terms of having outcomes related to the specific areas of study but it should also give student skills and competence which will enable them to be self-directed learners. Furthermore, Universities should be able to research on what the future needs of the labour market would be in order to ensure that the learning outcomes of a course are designed in a manner to cater for these future skills. Participants also underlined that universities should respect more the non-learning arena of courses, thus it is important that universities start validating learning outcomes / skills and competence, which are obtained through the non-traditional modes of teaching.