

Higher Education Governance and Institutional Autonomy

Balancing academic, economic, organisational, socio-cultural and political objectives and realities

By: Peter Maassen

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Abstract

Throughout the last decades, a large number of higher education reforms have been initiated by European governments with the aim to change the basic legal and economic framework conditions under which their national higher education institutions operate. The reforms have resulted in changes in the intra-institutional governance structures and allocation models, as well as in leadership and management functions and mandates, personnel policies, and institutional strategies. A key issue in the reform initiatives is the level of institutional autonomy, that is, the room to manoeuvre individual universities and colleges have in determining their own affairs. An important assumption underlying the reform initiatives is that institutional autonomy should be enhanced in order for the higher education institutions to be able to deliver the expected outcomes of the reforms. In addition to national governments, also the European Commission has produced a number of reform agendas for higher education, all showing a strong belief in the relationship between enhanced institutional autonomy and the academic performance as well as the socio-economic relevance of higher education. In this presentation I will discuss first and foremost the developments in institutional autonomy in European higher education. In this, a distinction will be made between two perspectives on institutional autonomy in higher education. The first perspective concerns developments in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and higher education institutions. This perspective is central in the academic literature, as well as in the efforts of the higher education institutions and their interest organisations, such as the European University Association (EUA), to monitor and map the developments in institutional autonomy. The second perspective concerns developments inside higher education institutions that are the result of changes in formal institutional autonomy. A relevant question from this perspective is: How is formal institutional autonomy interpreted and used inside higher education institutions? In addition, three governmental reform ideologies or visions are identified that will be used for interpreting the general differences among the institutional autonomy developments in European higher education systems.