

Some Theses on Higher Education vs. State: Transition and Post-Transition Countries

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1. Saying that the issue of university autonomy is an *eternal question* are not mere words. The history of debates on this issue – not yet written in a comprehensive form – would enable deep and detailed insights into a complex higher education agenda and could contribute a lot to today's discussions as well. However, any expectation that these insights could support the idea of progressive, linear logic of history is false. Logic of this issue is rather controversial, oscillating, dialectic.

1.1 In this paper it is only possible to reconsider briefly the latest, most contemporary stage of debates on *university autonomy*, particularly in a special *context of the so-called transition and post-transition countries*. Yet this context can't be geographically limited and focused only to developments in a narrow circle of European countries. Despite various borders and walls which divided Europe throughout the 20th century (and even before) there has always been 'a common dimension' in European higher education. For sure, a debate on institutional autonomy belongs to it. Developments within the 'countries in transition' should be observed with in relation to developments in other countries – and vice versa.

1.2 Even if the political turnover in Central, East and South-east Europe didn't occur at the end of the 1980s, universities and other higher education institutions in this regions would have to overcome a demanding period of a 'transition'. It was not only a *political 'transition'*; the term could have a broader meaning: *cultural, even civilization 'transition'* in a European and global context. Today, not only universities in transition and post-transition countries but in all European – and not only European – countries differ very much from those institutions that speakers at this conference enrolled some decades ago. Not only political environment but 'a common dimension' has also changed profoundly. Since 1980s, *knowledge* as the traditional central category within academic institutions has been challenged in a particular way: the concept of (academic) knowledge 'for its own sake' has been confronted with challenging demands of *'the knowledge society'*.

1.3 There are two main driving forces in the fundamentals of contemporary higher education policies – the phenomenon of *mass higher education* and *internationalisation of higher education*. Since the 1960s higher education systems have been constantly expanding and internationalising at a same time. These trends – in combination with a broader economic and political agenda of the time – have raised the question of the *efficiency of higher education systems* in quantitative (resources, finance etc.) and qualitative (qualifications, academic output etc.) terms. On the other hand, these trends have also contributed to the establishment of a context in which the relationship between the state and university was re-conceptualised – particularly with regard to *quality issues*. Various developments in individual countries were accomplished only during the 1990s and established a common European 'touch'. As we focus to the relationship between the state and university, the main feature of these developments can be found in a *conceptual – and real – transition of responsibility from the state to higher education institutions*.

2. In some West European countries, *the idea of quality assurance* started to spread to higher education from the economy relatively early on, already in the 1970s, and by »1997, all countries participating in this study, except the French Community of Belgium, had introduced some form of nationally (in German at *Land* level) defined quality assessment system« (Eurydice, 2000, 177). The Eurydice study shows an obvious increase in policy and legislative activities among the reviewed countries at the end of 1980s and in the 1990s; »the major focus of legislation and policy was the management and control of higher education institutions and in particular the financing of such institutions«.

2.1 The economic and political circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s – characterised by pressures to reduce public sources as well as by an expanding tertiary education sector – dictated *questions of effectiveness in education*. Methods of quality control, quality assessment, quality assurance etc. were borrowed from the economic sector; however, the implementation of QA methods had to respect certain specific features of the academic environment. One of the most important features is linked to the principle of *academic autonomy*. Another, not less important one is linked to the principle of *governmental responsibility* for a national system of (higher) education.

2.2 With few exceptions, European higher education systems have traditionally been very influenced by the state. Since the 1980s this role has gradually started to change on West: the state has been withdrawing from direct institutional governance. The state's influence started to be restricted to setting general higher education objectives – degree structures, qualifications, general strategies – that is, to higher education *output* (graduates, their employability etc.) and not to the *process*. This is the conceptual turn – a move away from the traditional »*interventionary*« towards the new »*facilitatory* state« (Neave and Van Vught, 1991) – which is the most characteristic feature of the policy and legislative changes of the 1980s and 1990s and still retains some relevance today.

Institutions got *more autonomy* but they became *more accountable*: they are bound to the more efficient use of public funds and encouraged to seek alternative sources and to be more open to the economy and society.¹ A preliminary result of national developments in this area was the *extreme variety of QA provisions* at the beginning of the 1990s (it seems this variety was even larger than in the case of degree structures); later, this variety contributed importantly to the idea of 'concerting' European higher education.²

¹ »The granting of greater autonomy to institutions, particularly in institutional governance, budget spending and course planning was intended to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit and thus promote efficiency, cost-effectiveness, flexibility and quality in educational provision. At the same time, institutions were encouraged to seek additional funding through bids for governmental contracts and the sale of their research and teaching services« (Eurydice, 2000, 177).

² Interestingly, the issue of quality assurance was not an item on the agenda of an important EU document as it was the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the EC* (Commission, 1991). An early EU document stressing *quality assessment in higher education* was only adopted in late 1991: »Improving the quality of teaching in higher education is a concern shared by each Member State and by every institution of higher education within the European Communities. The increasing importance of the European dimension in general and more particularly the introduction of a single market will widen the range of interested parties concerned with quality in higher education in each Member State.«

3. European universities responded to the complex challenges of the late 1980s in a special way: they met in Bologna in 1988 and signed *Magna Charta Universitatum*. Aware of the *spirit of the time*, the convention exceeded usual frames of an international academic meeting. It took place »four years before the definite abolition of boundaries between the countries of the European Community« and, we should add this from today's point of view, two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The document adopted at the meeting stressed the importance of being »aware of the part that universities will be called upon to play in a changing and increasingly international society«. Its most remarkable message is that »the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies [...]. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority [...] and economic power« (*Magna Charta*, 1991, 59).

We shouldn't forget: universities from both sides of the 'iron wall' (true: at that time already decomposing) met in Bologna in 1988 symbolically announcing *a new era of institutional co-operation* across Europe as a whole. Was it also the first symbolic announcement of a change of the relationship between the state and the university?

4. Political turnovers in Central, East and South-east European countries of the late 1980s and early 1990s mark a period of a radical change at their universities and national higher education systems in general. Almost elsewhere, students and academics massively engaged in political events; their engagement seemed to give a firm basis for *ambitious expectations* about new developments in higher education. This was a case, in particular, with regards to the idea of university autonomy and academic freedom, more or less neglected in previous times. During the period of political turnover, this particular experience from previous times caused a radical oscillation as one could expect: the principle of university *autonomy* was granted at the highest political level (Constitution, legislation)³ while the (public) *accountability* of universities was not mentioned at all.

4.1 As it is normal that people celebrate important landmarks in their life and national history it is also normal to confront the 'cruel reality' the day after 'the happy night'. This applies also to the issue of autonomy and the relationship between state and university. The idea of autonomy as regarded from the viewpoint of 'countries of transition' was, actually, a two-fold idea: a negative and a positive one. The *negative idea of autonomy* refers to the experience of the state as the ultimate and supreme, even totalitarian power. However, if the state is supposed to be democratised and if the newly adopted legislative framework guarantees a relative independence to various social subsystems than a *positive idea of autonomy* should be established that refers to a *responsibility* of the state

³ In my country, like in some other countries, this principle entered the *Constitution* of 1990: »State universities and other institutions of higher education shall be autonomous. The funding of these institutions shall be regulated by statute« (Art. 59). Later, the new higher education legislation of 1993 was extensively disputed and led to the Constitutional Court which finally decided that a »fully autonomous social subsystem is an intrinsically contradictory notion: if it is fully autonomous, then it is no longer social nor a subsystem.« The Court also ruled that the Act »was unconstitutional insofar it provided for the autonomy of university member institutions« (Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 18, 1998 and No. 35, 1998).

to set a proper framework for higher education governance as well as to a *responsibility* of an academic institution to its social environment and to itself.⁴

4.2 If the *democratisation process* is taken seriously than the *academia* should change its approach to the state – as well as to itself. This conclusion could be (mis)understood as an apology or as an adoration of political power.⁵ However, such a (mis)understanding forgets the substantial change of the environment and makes its wrong conclusions on wrong presumptions. E.g., the abolition of injustice does not allow for a *revanche*; a *revanche* would re-establish injustice. A remembrance of 'the ancient regime' can provoke fierce feelings; yet, democratic alternatives can't be built based on these feelings. This was a lesson learnt in a period after political turnover. An *active and independent position* is demanded from universities in democracy; passive responses to 'demands from above' would recall the past while as a 'splendid *autarchy*' academia would loose contacts to its material grounds and risk its 'mundane' mission: not only to maintain and develop an advanced knowledge base but also to transmit it to local and global social, cultural and economic environment. On the other side, this lesson is also about internal democracy; *democratic governance* of higher education institutions.

This was not only one lesson; a series of lessons was learnt during the 'transition' period⁶ – and fifteen years later the situation is very much different from those of the early 1990s.

4.3 New higher education legislation has been set up in all European countries during last decade or two; in most cases, it has been also renewed several times. Particularly since 1999, these changes have been importantly initiated through European 'concerting' of higher education and national legal systems are today closer than ever; yet, analysts should be aware of national and regional differences – the old as well as the new ones.

From this aspect, 'transition' and 'post-transition' countries have developed some special features.⁷ The relationship between the state and universities is elsewhere (within the Bologna process) legally regulated and autonomy is guaranteed; yet many details remain open and certain questions are highly disputable (see e.g. *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3/2003), e.g.:

- Is there a conceptual difference between '*state*' universities vs. '*public*' universities?
- How to treat *public grants* to universities: either as a 'good will' of the state or as a responsibility for national higher education and accountability of national institutions?

⁴ These issues have been recently an object of serious reconsideration; see e.g. Weber and Bergan, 2005.

⁵ Certainly: if the democratisation process is taken seriously than the *state* should change its approach to the academia as well.

⁶ As one of them, it is worth to remind a colloquium organised in Erfurt in March 1996: »*Between autonomy and external control – a university in search of the golden mean*«. Participants from 8 CEE countries and the former DDR met with colleagues from WE countries and discussed issues of university autonomy and the relationship to the state in the context of 'transition' period. Participants adopted a declaration on university autonomy *Towards the Responsible University of the Twenty-first Century* (The Erfurt Declaration) which deserves to be read now – in the 21st Century – again (see Wolf, 1997).

⁷ Yet, they can't be observed as a monolith since obvious differences have appeared among countries which belonged to a certain 'common higher education area' two decades ago. This issue hasn't been yet seriously addressed within the Bologna process or within some other multilateral context.

- A principle of autonomy – does it apply to autonomy of '*integrated university* or to university '*member institutions*' ('independent faculties')?⁸ How could different interpretations influence financing issues at institutions? How could different disciplines and study areas – e.g. humanities vs. management – compete to new challenges?
- What is *the role of private higher education institutions*: do they substitute the public sector (usually severely under-funded)? Do they compete with public sector? For what funds (public grants, student fees, research funds, etc.)? Do they represent the 'entrepreneurial part' of public higher education institutions? Do they supplement the public sector?
- What kinds of '*buffer institutions*' have been developed so far? What is their partner composition? What expertise are they based upon? In case of *Quality Agencies*: do they exist and what is their relation to the state as well as to individual higher education institutions? Last but not least: what are their chances within the 'small' higher education systems (where »everyone knows each other«)?
- Last but not least, challenged by increasing internationalisation and by strong demands for quality: how to preserve, promote and develop *institutional autonomy* as well as how to preserve and promote '*sovereignty*' of national higher education systems in new circumstances?

4.4 These questions can provoke as reactions of suspicion as a need to trust. It seems that the main problem is if universities are able (ready) to play a *proactive role in these new circumstances*. In any case: complaints that they are »not taken seriously from 'outside'« are not serious. Universities themselves should provide for alternatives; this is a part of their historical mission.

Two decade ago, there was a debate on West whether governmental decreases of public funds pushed higher education institutions to markets or institutions' success on markets provoked decreases of public funds. There was a dose of cynism in this debate; yet there is an overdose when it is applied to transition and post-transition countries. Sometimes really severe general conditions push social subsystems as culture, (higher) education, (fundamental) science, etc. into extreme neo-liberal conceptualisations. What is the future of universities from this angle? As the role of universities in society and economy is obvious and should receive full attention it would be a fatal mistake if forgetting the idea of *higher education as public good*. University is not simply an enterprise and its products are not simply merchandise. Similarly, quality in higher education is not only a consumption category linked to ISO standards etc.; it is also about cultural diversity, scientific paradigms, last but not least, about the historical mission of university.⁹

5. The issue of quality in higher education seems to be the decisive point in today's debates. It was a long way to *Berlin* where Ministers confirmed that »the primary

⁸ See again note 3, last sentence.

⁹ In this sense Derek Bok's (formerly President of Harvard University) warnings could be very instructive also within Europe of today: »If there is an intellectual confusion in the academy that encourages commercialization, it is a confusion over means rather than ends. To keep profit-seeking within reasonable bounds, a university must have a clear sense of the values needed to pursue its goals with a high degree of quality and integrity. When the values become blurred and begin to lose their hold, the urge to make money quickly spreads throughout the institution« (Bok, 2005, 6).

responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework« (*Berlin Communiqué*, 2003), and then to *Bergen* where Ministers adopted »the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA« and where they committed »to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria« (*Bergen Communiqué*, 2005). Decision taken in Bergen could have important effect for further developments – not only in QA matters but also in relation to the relationship between the state and higher education institutions.

6. The transition from the 'interventionary' to the 'facilitatory' state was characterised by *strengthening the role of institutions*: 'autonomy for accountability' could often be heard in those times. Yet, not to forget the price: autonomous institutions had to start competing for additional funds at markets. Now, the role of institutions has again come to the fore within recent discussions on quality enhancement in higher education: it has become clear that the *primary responsibility for quality should be with higher education institutions*.¹⁰ Thus, *Trends IV* as the latest report on developments in higher education turns its focus away from the fact that »the differences among individual European countries are enormous« to »a clear trend toward more institutional approaches to exploit synergies, economies of scale and spread models of good practice at institutions which do not suffer from low degrees of autonomy« (Reichert, Tauch, 2005, 32).¹¹

6.1 Recent trends towards the 'Europeanisation' of higher education show that *institutions could play a new energetic role* in future – relatively 'emancipated' from their modern existence as 'national universities' during the last century or more. Is it possible that pan-European *institutional co-operation* can help where the *subsidiarity principle* sets limits on national states? Does it bring new challenges to the issue of institutional autonomy as well? Does it offer a new perspective to universities in 'transition' and 'post-transition' countries as well?

¹⁰ »[...] consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework« (*Berlin communiqué*, 2003). The EUA in Graz (2003) as well as in the Glasgow (2005) Convention contributed importantly to this direction: »Universities stress the link between a systemic quality culture, the scope of autonomy and funding levels, and call on governments to acknowledge that greater autonomy and adequate funding levels are essential to raising the overall quality of Europe's universities« (*Glasgow Declaration*, 2005, point 27).

¹¹ »The essential aim of the Bologna reforms, namely to create a European Higher Education Area which is predicated on quality and therefore attractive to its members as well as the outside world, can only be achieved if the concern for quality is not reduced to the establishment or optimisation of external quality assurance processes alone, but considers all processes of institutional development« (Reichert, Tauch, 2005, 33).

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