

Managing University Autonomy in terms of Research

Bologna conference, 15/16 September 2003

As a preamble

In the series of conferences dedicated by the *Magna Charta Observatory* to the universities' capacity for autonomous decision-making (as it reflects in their institutional responsibilities), each yearly meeting is exploring aspects of management, curricula development, staff renewal, collective decision-making or, in 2003, research, basic or applied. The topic was referred to by Claude Allègre, the former French Minister of Education, when he addressed the launch event of the Magna Charta in September 2001, and referred to his experience at MIT:

"Publication in the American system does not pre-empt patenting but this has unwanted consequences as ideas for patenting become "precious" all along the research development line. Therefore, in some departments, the students are forbidden to give any seminar linked to their research. As a result, students are completely blocked, marginalised in the academic community; indeed, should they give a seminar, they could pass on information to competitors, often colleagues of their own lab, if not of a neighbouring institute. Worse still, some time in the same laboratory, you have one student working for one firm, a pharmaceutical company, for instance, and another student working for another: they are not allowed to discuss their work, even if (especially if) their research has important areas of commonality. How can the university survive such a forced fragmentation of knowledge ?"

The Bologna conference should offer some clues to answer that question.

General observation

While there is abundant literature analysing, discussing and evaluating the impact of the new boundary conditions for universities – in particular those legal reforms leading to increased autonomy – on the governance structures, human resource management and teaching issues, the topic of research in connection to university autonomy remains quite underrepresented. The debates on research issues and the future development of research are numerous but are not related to the university as such when they address the changing conditions for research in general, the mechanisms for its financing, the relation between private and public funding structures, the role of evaluation, etc. Thus, to try and connect these discussions and analysis with the question of university autonomy and research, in other words with the role of universities as institutions of research and teaching is somewhat of a challenge.

Areas of key interest

From the literature and the interviews made so far, a number of central issues can be distilled. The order in which they are presented is not a hierarchy of importance, but rather – at least for the time being – an enumeration of observations.

1. Defining the influence of multiple negotiated partnerships

The question of research autonomy needs to be considered at different levels in order to understand what shapes the universities' space for freedom of action. In the attached first sketch, a number of forces are identified, which influence and determine what the autonomy of the university looks like, as far as research and innovation are concerned. Autonomy is more and more the result of a web of negotiations involving various partners of different weights, people and organs from very different contexts, both within the university and society at large, such as representatives of the interface between the institution and its environment.

2. The teaching basis for research

Universities are increasingly financed on the basis of negotiated global contracts for a given period of time. In many cases, considering the traditional link between research and teaching, such funding is strongly coupled with the number of students taking courses at the university rather than with past research performances. Balancing the allocation of financial means within the university between research and/or teaching thus becomes a central management – and identity - issue. Practically, there are discussions about research groups that risk being suppressed – or regrouped with similar units in other locations – should student numbers get too low.

3. The paymasters' role

Most finances for research generally flow from outside the university. Thus, the research-funding environment in which a university is embedded comes to play a key role in the search for resources. Questions of regional financing vs. national or even European funding are to be addressed in this context. Similar reflections can apply to the resources needed for bottom-up research (curiosity driven mainly) or to those for more programme-oriented approaches (usually problem-based). Furthermore as the project character of scientific knowledge production becomes ever more important, the university as an institution is challenged to restructure in function of niches of excellence, where innovative rather than main-stream research can take place. To develop such a profile, an internal science policy will have to be set up.

4. The blurring frontiers

Universities are confronted with what we could be called a **de-differentiation** process among institutions of research and teaching. In the 19th and first half of the 20th century, the usual organisation pattern was “research-sharing” - some institutions doing basic research, others being more application oriented, while others still focussed on technological development. Over the last decades, these accepted boundaries have tended to disappear or, at least, to lose evidence. Thus, at present, the universities have to position themselves simultaneously at various levels, getting ready, in the research

domain, to compete with a varied group of other institutions. As a result of institutional *de-differentiation*, differentiation has grown among people instead, enlarging the gap between different categories of researchers. This *de-differentiation* has for a consequence that the institution, as such, will need to rethink and re-arrange the types of research carried out within its walls, should the university avoid the risk of fragmentation.

5. *The quality criteria*

The evaluation of research within universities points to the ambivalence between the ideal of devotion to basic research and the reality of market forces that also shape the institution. Depending on the emphasis chosen, the understanding of quality will change. How have procedures and criteria of quality definition evolve over recent years? How have the acquisition of financial resources, intellectual property rights, industry collaborations, or the participation in increasingly big European research networks contributed to transform the internal quality criteria prevailing in academic institutions? Who are the gatekeepers defining such criteria for quality (and are not external partners playing an increasing role in this context)? In other words, what freedom has the university to set specific standards and are those accepted by outside policy makers?

6. *The costs of flexibility*

A growing policy focus will be on how institutions handle the tension between the individual research freedom and the flexibility allowing the institution to act as a collective, i.e. an autonomous partner in a growing competition on the "research market". Can the universities combine the two? In many countries under investigation, for instance, the working contracts for junior researchers have been shortened to the limits of precariousness, compelling them to integrate into existing structures, at the risk of downplaying their creativity and the originality of their own ideas. Some countries have tried to counter-act such unfortunate developments (Germany created a new position of "Junior professor", for instance), but it remains to be seen if this can bring the expected consequences.

7. *The patenting of knowledge*

The question of intellectual property has now become a central issue for university autonomy. Who holds the intellectual property rights? Who takes care of the fact that the knowledge produced is also linked to potential users? What does it mean in terms of social responsibility, not to speak of legal liability (for the researcher, for the institution)? What status does the ownership of patents give to the individual researcher and/or to the institution? These are but a few of the questions to be addressed to define institutional autonomy and its management. A matter made more complex by the fact that the university also needs to use patents originating from other researchers and other institutions in order to progress with its own work.

These key areas of interest will be addressed in much greater detail in the study that the Institute for the Sociology of Science, University of Vienna, has been commissioned to prepare for the 2003 conference of the Magna Charta – as it did last year. Prof. Ulrike Felt, however, considers that these 7 items are central to the understanding of university research and institutional autonomy as represented in the survey and interviews conducted by the Institute over the last few months.

That is why all partners in the conference of 15/16 September are invited to keep these points in mind as they prepare for the meeting, this study allowing for the expected convergence of the discussions.

Ulrike Felt / Andris Barblan, end of June 2003

