

Mencinger, Jože

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Can university survive the Bologna Process?

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Universität für Bodenkultur Wien
Department für Wirtschafts- und
Sozialwissenschaften

Can university survive the Bologna Process?

Jože Mencinger

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Institut für nachhaltige Wirtschaftsentwicklung

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Can University survive the Bologna Process?

Jože Mencinger¹

1.

Let me begin by introducing University of Ljubljana and the problems my university is facing.

Despite tradition going back to 1595 and 1619, the existing University of Ljubljana was founded as a Slovenian university only in 1919 after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The university has been gradually growing to a present size and complexity. It has become a large comprehensive traditional European type and research oriented university with more than 60000 full and part-time undergraduate and graduate students, teaching and research staff of 3500, and administrative staff of 900 on 26 members schools: 22 faculties, college for health care, and three academies.

The governing bodies are the Senate (32 senators, among them there are 5 students) the Rector (elected by teachers in the first round and by Senate if the second round is needed), three Prorectors (selected by the Rector), a General Secretary, and a Managing Board (9 members, 4 teachers, 1 representative of administrative staff, 1 student and 3 representatives of the state). The teachers are elected and promoted by the senates of the faculties up to the position of associate professors after the approval of the University Habilitation Committee, while full professors are elected by the Senate of the University of Ljubljana. The promotion has been based predominantly on research performance and only marginally on teaching.

The yearly budget of the university amounts to 50 billion tolar or approximately 220 millions Euro. Educational services bring 66 percent of the budget while research and other activities the rest. The share of the government in financing is 74 percent (53 for education, 11 for research and 10 for other services, for example veterinary services) while the share of the market is 26 percent.

Financing has been changing; lump sum financing of the so called "national program" for education was finally introduced in the beginning of this year; the division of money among faculties is determined by two components: (1) A "historical" or dowry part should decrease from 80 percent to 70 percent in the period of five years, while the "flexible" part determined by the number of students and diplomas and a coefficient based on the field of the study should increase from the present 20 to 30 percent in the same period. Research is also composed of the "programs" which are financed by government in the form of 5 years research grants, and other research projects. Research groups compete for the financing of their research programs; their success

¹ Prof. Dr. Jože Mencinger, Rector, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

depends on their performance measured by published articles and citation indexes in the previous period, and relevancy of the research proposal which is decided upon by different committees. University as such is formally considered a research institution; research programs are thus collected at the university level and the money is sent through the account of the university, though the university has no direct impact on the choice of the research programs. Market activities in education and research, and collaboration with the business sector are left to the faculties and the money goes directly to their accounts.

In short, I am coming from a relatively old and very large university which cannot adapt quickly and which has experienced many reforms imposed on it in the past. If I add my age, it seems that I am entitled to be conservative and cautious regarding reforms, also those enacted on the European level implied by the Bologna process.

2.

Let me now turn to the subject. The world of reforms is divided to those who DO REFORM and those who have reforms DONE TO THEM as explained by Guy Neave². Those who DO REFORM are always certain that there is the NEED to reform, slightly less certain about the GOAL of the reform, while a likely divergence between the GOAL and the RESULT only confirms that REFORM should continue. Disagreements, doubts, or even innocent questions by those who are to BE REFORMED are clear indication that they should BE SAVED BY THE REFORM. Thus, the more questions I ask the more clear it becomes to the reformers that University of Ljubljana should be reformed.

3.

On September 1988, eleven years before the Bologna declaration the "Magna Carta Universitatis" was signed in Bologna by the rectors of the European universities who gathered to celebrate 900 anniversary of the Bologna university. Four major principles were proclaimed by them:

- First, Universities are autonomous, differently organized institutions.
- Secondly, research and teaching are inseparable.
- Thirdly, freedom in research and training is a fundamental principle.
- Fourthly, university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition.

² Neave, Guy, Counterpoint. IAU News letter, April-June 2003, Vol. 9, No 2-3

Are these four principles, on which European universities are founded, threatened? If so, by whom or by what? Are they promoted or threatened with the goals or tools of the Bologna declaration signed eleven years later in 1999 in the same place by 29 European ministers of higher education?

The major goals of the Bologna declaration are:

- to create a European Higher Education Area in order to
- to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens, and
- to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education.

According to the Bologna declaration the tools by which Europe would reach the so called knowledge based society in 2010 are: (1) the adoption of comparable degrees by the diploma supplement, (2) the introduction of two levels of study across all countries, (3) the credit system compatible with ECTS system, (4) the European dimension in quality assurance, and (5) the elimination of obstacles to free mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff.

I do not want to claim that the principles of Magna Carta are threatened by the goals or by the tools of the Bologna declaration, but I question whether the two documents are compatible, the former stressing autonomy and diversity, inseparability of research and teaching, freedom of research, and humanist tradition, while the latter stressing competitiveness and mobility.

First, the idea behind the Bologna declaration is that everything can be solved by demand and supply, and that universities should be organized on the same principles and should compete as companies do. In fact, most universities perform a mixture of non-profit and profit services. What is the appropriate mixture of both cannot be said without considering the historical heritage and mission of a university in question. There are universities who have to provide education for which there would be no demand by the market such as philosophy, history and many other subjects which however preserve the humanist tradition which is requested by Magna Carta. Furthermore, it seems that the Bologna process emerged from a faulty assumption that United States has been outpacing Europe because of the differences in educational systems, and that Bologna process would help Europe to reach the goal declared in Lisbon on March 2000 by European science ministers. According to it, EU should be by 2010 “the world’s most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy”. Let me only say that I do not think that the goal is either reachable or that it is reasonable.

John Stuart Mill, one of the most passionate promoter of the “laissez-faire” was however convinced that education is a public good which cannot be left to demand and supply, because knowledge is a condition for independence and assistance to be made able to function without assistance. Academic capitalism is but trying to put universities on the market, so that universities should constantly adapt its supply to demand and produce what is called “human capital”. Unfortunately, human capital has become more and more similar to raw materials entering university and leaving it as a finished product for corporations. This implies that university should close down less profitable departments where costs per student are high. Accordingly, teachers would lose their decisive role in the university matters and should become “just in time workers” hired and fired by those who run a university as any other business with the only goal - maximization of profits and shareholders’ value.

The mobility can also be a noble principle, but as defined by Bologna, mobility does not seem to be the mobility of human beings but rather the mobility of future labour force; looking for job far away from your home or country is not a virtue by itself, it is an emergency.

Secondly, I question the links between the goals and the tools. How would the two cycle system enhance knowledge and contribute to the quality of teaching and research, which only reappeared as an issue in the Berlin conference? Will the curriculum of those who continue be the same as curriculum of those who exit after the first cycle? Who knows whether there will be jobs for them? Is diploma supplement really in the interest of students or only something which should serve potential employers to choose the best pieces of “human capital”? Is the mobility of students which might be useful for generating European identity really helped by the credit points; is it not far more hindered by social considerations than by anything else? Is accreditation which reminds me of ISO standards, not only an invention to pump money out of naive, poor, and helpless, or another field for bureaucratic activity?

These are the questions I have and for which I do not get answers. It is also true that my scepticism has been enforced by experiences of reforms in my country which indicate that most of the inventions have been only reinvented. More than forty years ago, in 1960, when I entered law school, a two cycle system was introduced, dividing the curricula into two parts, one to be taught in the first cycle and one to be taught in the second cycle. We were told that the reform is urgently needed. After two years we all, except a colleague who died, continued in the second cycle. After some years the two cycle system was abolished. Twenty years ago, in 1981, the Law on Career Oriented Education was passed as a strategic project which should again ensure “usefulness of the education” or in today’s jargon “employability” of the graduates. The

proverbial slowness of the university helped to avoid the harm and the concept affected only the organization of the university. University of Ljubljana was changed into a loose association of independent members: faculties, academies, high schools, and institutes each being a legal entity. Only in 1994, university was reestablished as a legal entity, while the property used by the university was given back only in 2001. The reformers however never rest; while adapting the law on higher education to meet the requests of the Bologna process they would also like to REFORM the functioning of the university again despite the fact that the existing structure of governance based on integration with decentralization of many decisions has proved to be a proper solution for a large university. It enhances sense of belonging to the university and ensures that the faculties are active in looking for additional resources.

What will happen I do not know. However I am certain that University of Ljubljana is an institution which can because of its size and position in the country defend its autonomy against domestic politicians if it firmly stands for the principles. I am however less certain whether universities can resist academic capitalism and preserve principles of Magna Carta which are to give people the knowledge and the courage to think by themselves and to solve problems with an open mind. The goal of the university is simple - an autonomous human being.

To be fair, we should admit that the Graz and Berlin declarations corrected Bologna by introducing social dimension, cultural richness, the link between education and research, and participation of students in the governance of the universities.

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Bestelladresse:

Universität für Bodenkultur Wien
Department für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften
Institut für nachhaltige Wirtschaftsentwicklung
Feistmantelstrasse 4, 1180 Wien
Tel: +43/1/47 654 – 3660
Fax: +43/1/47 654 – 3692
e-mail: Iris.Fichtberger@boku.ac.at
Internetadresse:
<http://www.boku.ac.at/wpr/>