

How much do new patterns of University governance can contribute to the emergence of World class universities in Europe?

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Higher education reforms have been on the agenda of Western European countries for 25 years. They have tried to deal with self-governed professional bureaucracies politically weakened by massification when an emerging common understanding enhanced their role as major actors in knowledge based economies. While university systems are deeply embedded in national settings, the ex post rationale of still on-going reforms is surprisingly uniform and “de-nationalized”. They promote the “organizational turn” of universities, to varying extent substituting collegial loosely coupled entities by integrated, goal-oriented entities deliberately choosing their own actions that can thus be held responsible for what they do. They intend to favor the diversification of stakeholders, supposedly offering solutions to problems as various as the democratization of universities, the shrinking of State budget resources and the diversification of university missions offering answers to changes in the making and in the use of science.

As a result, diversification of the universities is a major issue at the agenda. Actually, diversification aims at the development of world-class institutions, which are promoted by very selective public policies concentrating resources in a few places, both at the European level and within national frontiers. Instead of being governed by uniform state or regional rules as homogeneous providers of a public service of Higher education in the frame of Welfare states, universities as organizations are to take advantage of their strategic autonomy to adjust to the future they wish to build and they can hope for as organizations dedicated to a variety of missions including education, research and service to the community.

How far are the new rules of the game fitted to the political ambition to develop world class institutions? With what type of tensions or perverse effects? How likely are they to succeed in that respect? After reviewing the major dimensions of reforms that have been implemented in Western Europe over the last 30 years, this paper will try to give some provisional answers to these questions.