

*Per Nyborg\**

## **Bologna Process and higher education institutional reforms. Do they relate?**

Institutional reforms were implicit in the Bologna Declaration:

European higher education institutions, for their part, have accepted the challenge and taken up a main role in constructing the European area of higher education, also in the wake of the fundamental principles laid down in the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988. This is of the highest importance, given that universities' independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society's demands and advances in scientific knowledge.

Institutional autonomy is the key to continuous change. The responsibility for change will be with the institution itself. Institutional governance must be adapted to this responsibility.

As the Bologna Process has developed, Ministers have made it clear that higher education is a public responsibility. The public responsibility for higher education must be exercised with due regard for the need of higher education institutions to act freely and efficiently in the pursuit of their mission. Public authorities therefore have a responsibility to promote autonomy for higher education institutions as well as academic freedom for individual members of the academic community. This implies that institutional autonomy and academic freedom should be defined by legislation. Within the framework set up by legislation, the institution decides.

With a proper balance between public responsibility and institutional autonomy, an effective law on higher education may only regulate what is essential to regulate and which cannot effectively be regulated in any other way.

An autonomous institution should have the right to decide its organisational and administrative structure, decide its priorities, manage its budget, hire its personnel and admit its students, decide the content and forms of its education and research – or at least a number of these rights. Increasing institutional autonomy may have consequences for institutional governance, possibly implying a stronger and more centralised institutional leadership.

Until fairly recently, universities in most European countries were elements in a system of state institutions, following general laws and regulations for such institutions. Special laws on higher education would usually define a university as a state institution with a right to self-government and as a place where academic freedom would be respected. An elected Rector and an academic Senate would lead the institution. Freedom was, however, mainly related to academic matters, not to economic and organisational matters.

Over the last one or two decades, this has changed. In many countries, higher education institutions may now have great economic freedom; they may be organised as public companies or foundations for more flexibility. However, these institutions are often led by an Executive Board, which will hire a Rector, often from outside. The academic community no

---

\* Former Chair, Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, Council of Europe

longer governs the institution all by itself. Institutional autonomy is not the same as academic autonomy.

The greater freedom for the institution means a higher focus on responsibility and accountability and also external participation in institutional governance. The individual academic member may ask if such extended autonomy is worth its price. The way I see it, public responsibility and institutional autonomy should be balanced for optimal cooperation and division of labour between public authorities and autonomous institutions.

As the university is assumed to have the responsibility for all its activities, it follows that it should also have responsibility for its faculties. Faculties must of course be delegated authority over their activities. The university should give the faculties autonomy within a framework set down in the university statutes. Faculties must be accountable to the university, just as the university is accountable to external public authorities.

On this basis, how should universities be governed and managed? This has been discussed intensively, also before Bologna. Modernising university governance and management has in some countries meant to copy management principles from the business world. But professors don't produce goods or services, university students are neither products nor customers. I do not believe that the Rector should be substituted by a managing director.

On the other hand: The old-fashioned democracy with the Rector as a *primus inter pares* with no decision power can not meet the challenges of academic and administrative change. For better or worse, reforms have been needed.

I don't think there is a unique best solution for university governance and management. Institutions have different size, different histories and traditions, different missions. They operate within different national HE systems and different legislation. It is not an easy decision to decide on a new administrative framework for higher education institutions.

The Norwegian legislation, as an example, opens up for some flexibility. The 2005 Act relating to universities and university colleges define the Executive Board as the highest governing body of an institution. All decisions taken at the institution by persons or bodies other than the Board are taken with authority delegated by the Board and at the responsibility of the Board. The Board shall itself decide the internal organization of activities at all levels. Such organization must ensure that the views of the students and staff are heard.

Normally, an *elected* Rector is the *chairman* of the Board. On behalf of the Board, the Rector has overall responsibility for and manages and supervises the institution's activities. However, the Board may decide that the Rector shall be *employed* for a fixed term of years. An employed Rector shall be responsible for day-to-day management of the institution's academic and administrative activities and serve as *secretary* to the Board. An employed Rector is responsible for implementing the academic and administrative resolutions adopted by the Board, and for the utilization of resources.

Heads of faculty and heads of department may be either elected or employed. The decision lies with the Board. Heads of faculty are appointed by the Board but the Board may decide that heads of faculty shall appoint heads of department.

Some Norwegian institutions have made the change from an elected to an appointed Rector, thus changing to a more business-like management. The traditional universities still hold elections. Time will show whether or not they will change. It is their own decision.

My conclusion is that institutional reforms have been needed in the Bologna Process. More reforms will be needed, especially in countries in Southeast Europe, with institutional reforms at the heart of the process. This also implies that reforms should be carried out in a dialogue between the lawmakers and the university system. You may look to other countries for ideas and inspiration, but each country must find its own solution. There are no international blueprints that fit all.