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Promising Practices in Higher Education Provision

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Abstract: Research project of 9 European universities focuses on organizational, managerial, administrative, and technological circumstances, in which the innovative potential of major universities across Europe is being developed and sustained. As the funding system in many countries is based on „per capita“ and scientific research criteria, innovative universities perform in good economic condition and can afford investments in infrastructure, qualified faculty members and further innovations.

Key words: *Relevant Changes In Educational Provision, The Governance And Management Of Higher Education, Institutional Commitment, Concept Of Leadership, Financial Incentives, National Regulations, Academic Autonomy, Evaluation Procedures, Coherent Teaching and Learning Approach*

INTRODUCTION

The approach adopted by the project aimed to engage the consortium in mutual learning activities with each other, as well as with various HEIs across Europe. Before describing the approach, it is worth highlighting that we have kept the number of contributing institutions to a size which allowed us to engage in an exchange of knowledge with institutional delegates at the same time as we gathered the data. While every effort was made to ensure that the sample was representative, it is worth bearing in mind that these main findings represent trends observed in the sample of selected institutions, and we are therefore cautious about extending them more broadly – hence we use the term ‘promising practices’ to describe the approaches to innovation identified in the project.

The project included:

A literature review, conducted by three of the consortium partners. This aimed to provide some background on and an initial explanation of some elements of the project and a basis for further discussion material.

A survey of 47 higher education institution leaders or their representatives across 25 higher education institutions in 9 countries (Austria, France, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain). This aimed to gather the perceptions of a set of elite respondents regarding relevant changes in educational provision, as well as the governance and management of higher education.

Case study research, involving 61 interviewees and 7 focus groups across 10 HEIs in 5 EU countries. This aimed to explore a broader set of higher education managers, administrators, faculty members and students regarding the innovations, practices, processes and relevant drivers and barriers.

Identification of promising practices. This was based on a list of practices from all case study reports prepared by the case study research team and grounded on agreed-upon criteria for selection of promising practices.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PROMISING MODES OF EDUCATION PROVISION ACROSS EUROPE?

The findings from the literature review and survey undertaken as part of this project identify the following as ‘promising practices’.

The practices were identified by the consortium as promising when they were potentially transferable, have been considered in at least some contexts to add

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value and to be sustainable (and so might also add value and be sustainable elsewhere), and have the property of being institution-wide.

In terms of curriculum delivery, recent trends typically include:

•Competency-based degrees (as an alternative to time-determined qualifications)
•Work-based or employment-based learning, which involve time 'on the job' as part of the curriculum
•Outcome-based education, which concentrates on learning outcomes
•Interdisciplinary courses, which mix disciplines
•Inquiry-based learning, which relies on students solving problems and structuring their learning around asking questions
•Student-based learning, where students can lead their own learning activities

In terms of programme organisation, recent trends cover blended learning (which includes a learning at least partly delivered through online and social media), year-round teaching, engagement with other institutions and the broader community, flexible delivery and assessment options [1].

In terms of information technology/information communication technology (IT/ICT) practices, recent trends have included flexible access to teaching material, for example, through virtual campuses, massive open online courses (MOOCs) or 'flipped classrooms'. 'The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed. Short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while in-class time is devoted to exercises, projects, or discussions' [2].

The growing body of literature on innovation in education has a strong focus on the intersection between pedagogy and new technology [3-6].

Despite this wide use of IT, a majority of respondents saw the 'new' IT trends through a more critical eye. A majority of respondents identified the much talked about massive open online courses as a fad rather than a substantial contribution to the world of higher education. When asked about perceptions of change in higher education, 56.3% of respondents disagreed with the following statement: 'MOOCs are worth the hype – they make higher education better' [7, p. 41].

Respondents' scepticism about the value of ICT-based innovation mirrors calls for caution within the literature on the implementation of ICT-related innovations [4-6]. This literature suggests that new technologies add more value to higher education when they are included in a teaching and learning approach (rather than simply used as a way to substitute tasks). Incorporating new technologies in teaching and learning approaches involves a redefinition of the teaching approach and curriculum, and takes into account the 'networked' model, based on multidirectional flows of information, which is constantly adapted. In addition, there is a need to address the pedagogic usage of technology, instead of implementing technology without a priori thinking on how to fit it in a particular pedagogy [8-12].

The project, after deliberation and based on agreed-upon criteria, selected five promising practices in higher education provision.

The practices selected are broadly representative of the range of curriculum delivery, programme organisation and ICT-enriched learning approaches identified by survey respondents and as such reflect broader trends in higher education delivery and might possibly be transferable to other institutions and settings.

LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT AND EXISTANCE OF AN INSTITUTION-WIDE STRATEGY

The first dimension identified in the case studies we cover includes the level of institutional commitment and existence of an institution-wide strategy. This includes whether there is a senior-level commitment to innovation, which is transmitted through a clearly articulated vision (through mission statements or a university strategy, for example) and is communicated across the institution.

The support of the heads of institutions was perceived by some case study interviewees as well as participants to the peer learning and training course activity6 as being instrumental to ensure the sustainability and success of an innovation. This is also mentioned in the available literature (see Gosling et al. [13]).

The survey report found that 93.8% of respondents to the survey (30 out of 32 respondents) are of the opinion that the rector and senior leadership team are

responsible for leading innovation [7; p. 27]. This support role includes identifying and publicising relevant innovations. It also reflects the idea of the strong presidential core identified as part of the entrepreneurial university model.

The act of supporting and motivating individuals and teams defines the concept of leadership (as opposed to management, which is about providing directives topdown). Leadership can also be shared across different levels of the institution, termed 'distributed leadership' or participatory governance [14].

Whatever the model of leadership, the available literature on this issue argues that, to be effective in fostering innovation, HEI leaders need to provide a clear sense of direction/strategic vision, ideally articulated in a university strategy [13]. Davies [15] and Daumard [16] argue that the dominant controlling and motivating parameter in entrepreneurial organisations revolves around trust and shared mission, values and culture. A university strategy helps to communicate such trust and shared mission, value and culture. This is the case for many, but not all of the institutions we have researched as part of our case study analysis, as Table 1 shows. Of the 10 researched for this project, 7 had a strategic plan and 1 institution, the University of Salamanca, had a plan to increase its virtual presence.

The case studies provide examples of where specific innovations were directly referred to in the strategic plans of the HEI in question. For example, the move to a 'virtual campus' at the University of Alicante was anchored in the university strategic plan, called UA40,7 for the period 2014–2019. In another example, Anglia Ruskin University states an ambition to become a world leader in work-based degrees in its corporate plan. This ambition promotes the promising practice of work-based degrees.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR INNOVATION, AND THE IMPACT OF INNOVATION ON INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

A second dimension of management and governance identified as important to fostering innovation is 'institutional support', which includes whether and how the university invests in staff initiatives and training and supports the building of synergies.

Responses to the survey indicated that academic staff support and managerial support are considered to be the third and fourth most important factors to support innovation (after new technology and 'new process and procedures'): 27 out of 32 and 23 out of 30 survey respondents (respectively) thought that these two factors facilitated innovation. These factors are also identified as facilitators in the broader literature [7, 17].

The second main inhibitor to the introduction of innovation was considered to be the insufficiency of skilled personnel (24 out of 33 survey respondents as well as interviewees at Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Ss. Cyrill and Methodius and the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga), a finding supported by some of the literature [7, 14, 18]. This suggests that, in order to innovate, institutions need to invest in training their staff.

For example, the work-based programme of Anglia Ruskin University requires a proficient level of digital literacy among faculty members.

The case studies suggest that designated support units could also incentivise staff to innovate. An example of a support unit is the Centre for Academic and Professional Development, previously known as the Learning Institute, and its elearning subunit at Queen Mary, University of London. This centre supports innovations in teaching and learning at Queen Mary by providing staff development activities, developing practices and policies, advising academics and other professionals, benchmarking practices, expanding commercialised continuous professional development, and raising the profile of development activities across Queen Mary, University of London.8 Another example is the University of Strasbourg, which set up the Institute for the Development of Pedagogic Innovation as part of its IdEx initiative. These units also have the advantage of promoting practices across faculties and institution-wide learning.

Institutional support also involves supporting staff members to build stronger relationship with stakeholders outside the university. For example, ESSEC had business representatives in the steering committees of the innovative chairs.

THE IMPACT OF INNOVATION ON ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

A fourth factor which could both support and be influenced by innovation is organisational change.

The most commonly reported forms of changes in organisational structure within participating HEIS which resulted from innovations in educational provision involve diversification of the HEI organisation. This involved establishing partnerships with other institutions (26 out of 27 respondents), new research unit/research institutes (20 out of 27 respondents), or the introduction of new positions in administration (19 out of 27 respondents). Learning from the case studies suggests that positions or units with a clear mandate allocated to innovation could help to share information institution-wide to promote cross-departmental fertilisation and communication, as well as consistent practices across departments. Cross-departmental communication, or lack thereof, was reported as a contributing factor in limiting some innovations in the case of the University of Strasbourg.

Various case studies reported the creation of units or positions which aim to foster innovation – although it is important to note that the case studies do not provide evidence about whether or not such units are effective in generating innovation.

For example, the University of Alicante created the office of the Vice-Rector for Technology and Innovation (currently Vice-Rector for Information Technologies), while Comenius University in Bratislava created the position of Associate Dean for Development, of Vice-Rector for Development and of university coordinator for elearning and other new forms of education.

The available literature suggests that the ability of a HEI to adapt its organisational structure can reduce the waiting time for administrative responses and make the hierarchical structure more flexible, two elements which were mentioned in case studies on the Universities of Strasbourg and Salamanca as impinging on innovation.

Organisational change is not necessarily limited to individual positions and units. It can take the broader form of a new university set-up. Indeed innovations in education provision can force institutions to restructure themselves entirely. For example, institutions can be encouraged to adopt new structures to reach more students abroad, as the branch of the Stockholm School of Economics based in Riga, Latvia – which acts as a branch campus – does.

Finally, downsizing was not common among surveyed institutions. Institutional mergers were reported by only 7 out of 27 respondents, and only one example was identified in the case studies, namely, a merger of three existing universities to create the University of Strasbourg. (Please see figure.)

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL REGULATIONS AND FRAMEWORKS IN FACILITATING INNOVATION

The relationships between universities and governments vary among different European member states. For example, HEIs in certain systems evolve with a relatively large amount of autonomy. Universities in such countries as the UK – or more accurately England, given its devolved system – France, or Latvia, are free to set their academic structures, create legal entities, design the content of their courses, and have some discretion over their financial management, being able to borrow money, keep some surplus and sell buildings. Others, such as Sweden or Slovakia, are more restricted, with guidelines issued for academic structures, legal entities and financial management.

These differences impact on what universities can do, and how they manage and run themselves. However, we have found that national regulations were part of a complex dynamic. On the one hand, there was an overwhelming feeling among consortium members, participants to the project and respondents that national regulations and the consequent lack of autonomy for HEIs made it difficult for their institutions to innovate. On the other hand, the adoption of national frameworks which include innovation, as was the case in France and Spain, coincided with innovation initiatives in these countries (see the case studies of ESSEC's 3i strategy, the University of Strasbourg's IdEx initiative, the University of Alicante's UA40 and the University of Salamanca's plan for 'virtualisation').

HEIs remain public institutions across most of Europe, and as such are publicly regulated. In this respect, despite a growing trend of the late 20th century to increase institutional autonomy [19], HEIs have also been steered by certain national frameworks

and have actively sought to encourage and invest in innovation (including, as mentioned earlier, the plan for innovation and the Spanish University Strategy 2015, which promoted the creation of university business clusters).

Some case studies indicate the value that more autonomy from government might bring to some institutions in some countries. While too much regulation may lead to a lengthening of administrative decisions because of the multiplication of hierarchical layers, national governments have shown that they play a role in incentivising innovation. And national incentives for innovation can stimulate innovation. For example, some national governments have adopted national strategies to stimulate innovation, as was the case of France with the National Plan for Innovation. This plan occurred in parallel with the adoption of relevant strategies, namely, IdEx at the University of Strasbourg and 3i at ESSEC business school – both of which include measures to increase innovation.

Another type of autonomy touched upon and defended by case study authors is academic autonomy. Academic autonomy refers to the freedom of academics within an institution. Some of the most innovative methods, such as the use of gaming at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, were set up with a fairly high level of autonomy, i.e. the entrepreneurship game course in fact has its own budget, including the salary of the teacher. Such a level of autonomy, accompanied by appropriate incentives, was found to encourage innovation in that case.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Which recommendations can be issued regarding university management in innovative provision?
Based on these findings, our report wishes to issue the following recommendations that were agreed upon by the consortium, based on the promising practices identified as part of this project, as well as our survey of HEI leaders. Given the limitations to this study, these recommendations are intended as activities and ideas that HEIs may consider adapting to their context and to further test to understand their impacts on innovation.

Innovation relies on institution-wide leadership and strategy, which bind the institution around a sense of purpose, the implementation of which needs to be regularly evaluated. Leaders include senior representatives supporting innovation. Staff and students also have a role to play in generating ideas. We recommend that each HEI include innovation objectives, defined in measurable performance targets, in its strategy.

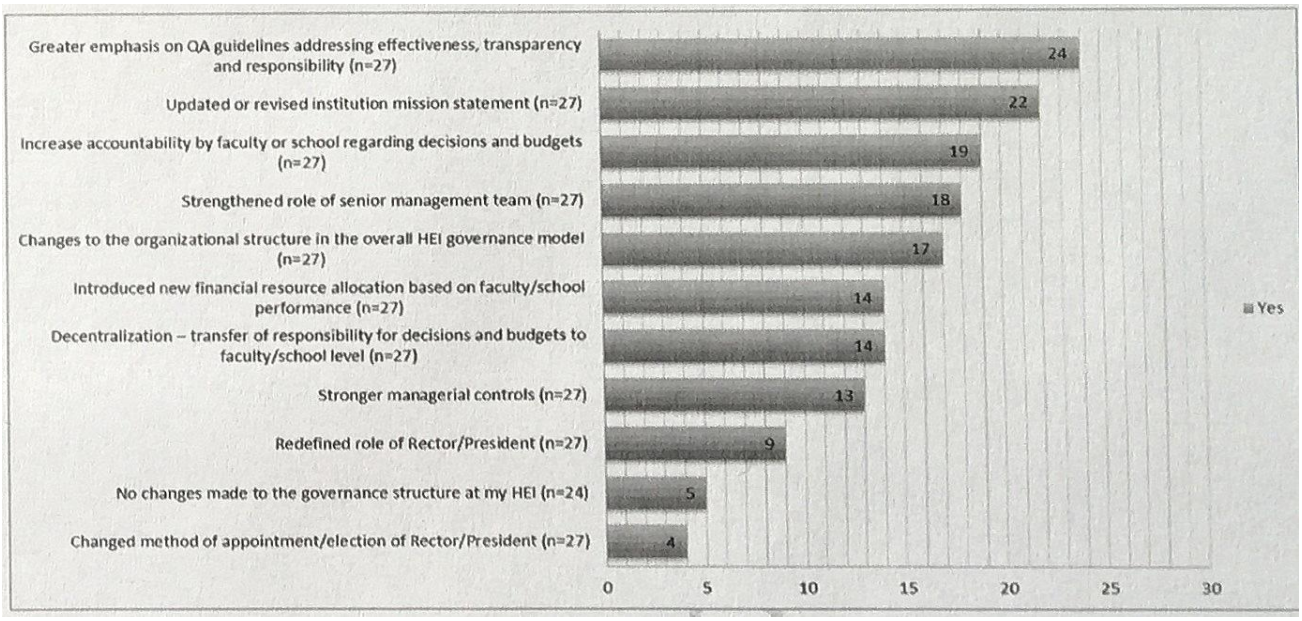
In addition, HEIs need to provide the right institutional support; organisational flexibility; financial incentives; and evaluation, impact and quality assurance framework to support innovation.
We recommend that each HEI consider how the type of institutional support, organisational layout, financial incentives and evaluation procedures enhance the institution's innovation potential.
Innovation needs to be understood broadly. It does not only include new technologies (although digital innovation was understandably popular). Our case study and survey results suggest that student-centred, skillsbased methods of teaching are also gaining ground in Europe, for example. In addition, new technologies are not an end product and need to be included in a coherent pedagogical approach.
We recommend that HEIs consider not just investing in technology, but prioritising training staff and developing support structures to facilitate the inclusion of innovation in a coherent teaching and learning approach.
We welcome and encourage the further exchange of practices across institutions of higher education in Europe as well as other stakeholders, in order to facilitate the transmission of ideas. This further exchange could be articulated around the dimensions to support innovation, using relevant tools, such as the self-assessment tool used in this project.

CONCLUSION

Innovations include various aspects of education provision, including but not limited to digital innovations. These innovations include changes in teaching methods, curricula and programmes that allow for reaching a different student demographic – for example, through partnerships outside of the university. Our project has highlighted several examples of promising practices in education provision and governance and management. These

promising practices cover examples which add value to the institution and have the proven or expected potential to be transferrable and sustainable. University governance and management structures and approaches can support innovation in a number of ways. These approaches include expressing a highlevel institutional commitment and establishing an institution-wide strategy to support innovation; providing institutional, organisational and financial support to innovation; and conducting regular evaluations of the initiatives. Given that most HEIs are public in the European Union, supporting innovation also relies on an appropriate regulatory environment set by national governments and a stable and wide funding base.

Figure: Impacts of innovation on evaluation, accountability and quality control



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