CHAPTER 16

Governance in European Universities

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present chapter is simply to suggest ideas about university governance in a time of change; it is a follow-up to that of Frank Rhodes (chapter 15) within the European context. There is no unique or ideal system of governance in higher education; it would otherwise have been discovered a long time ago. Still, one may evoke a number of guidelines which constitute the backbone of leadership in modern universities. In the first section, we state that change in a time of crisis requires management. In the second section, we list areas where it seems indispensable. In the third section, we put forward a common structure in which leadership may be efficiently exercised. Finally, we discuss some problems and challenges which such a structure might be confronted with in European universities.

UNIVERSITIES AND CHANGE

Today's European universities have little in common with those of the 1950s. While their central missions of teaching and research have undergone considerable change, they are also concerned about their social impact and their role as an agent of influence and progress. It is generally agreed that most universities have chosen Whitehead's thoughts as a vision for today's higher education. In his 1929 book entitled *The aims of education* (1929), he proposed ideas which today constitute the backbone of our university system. For Whitehead, the future of a nation lies in the narrow bond between its

progressive elements of all kinds, in such a way that education influences the public place and vice versa. Imagination is at the core of Whitehead's vision of the university. "The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence." Imagination loses its meaning when it is not accompanied by realization and thus transformation.

Some of the major transformations universities have been going through were well summarized in Frank Rhodes' paper on "The university at the millennium" (2001).

- Quite fortunately, the number of students increased considerably over the last 50 years. The level of education is definitely recognized as a key to personal development and to qualified employment. It is a major victory, but only part of the battle has been won. Investigations show, in fact, that the student population in universities does not reflect the social structure of society; sons and daughters of poorly educated people tend to reproduce the same family pattern. Innovative strategies are needed to solve such a crucial problem and to confirm the role of universities as a fantastic instrument of social mobility.
- "Universities have become the essential gateway to and foundation of every major profession" (Rhodes, 2001). Universities must be attentive to new needs of commercial, non-commercial and social enterprises, offer new programmes, promote adult education and reorientation. They should, in that respect, avoid Peter Drucker's reflection that "when a subject becomes totally obsolete, we make it a required course". In particular, universities must realize that students' expectations have also changed over the years: active learning, information technologies, multidisciplinary vision, connection with contemporary questions are today's ingredients of teaching.
- In Europe, universities are the major providers of fundamental research while modern technology and applied science rely on its discoveries. Since the mid-80s, European programmes, research contracts with companies, spin-off incubators have become efficient actors of economic recovery. Some regional applied research centres are presently financed by European programs.
- "The university and its stakeholders" has become a most appropriate expression for describing the new association between its environment and the university which opens the doors of its ivory tower and its environment. Quite a number of institutions have created new campuses in Europe over the last decades. In order to be supported by

the surrounding regions (whose citizens, after all, pay taxes to finance the university), they need to invent with them new links and to become a source of imagination for a better society. Universities are also more and more concerned with social services. Typical examples are health networks associated with university hospitals, continuing education for schoolteachers, orientation centres for secondary schools.

- Over the last five years, the challenge for European universities has gained in intensity due to its own collective momentum: the Bologna process requires a major commitment in untraditional matters. The emerging student and academic mobility, systematic evaluations, accreditation procedures will reveal their quality. While competing for the best students and the best professors, universities will need to cooperate and make difficult choices, because they cannot be good at everything. Simultaneously, research trends proper to the 6th European Framework programme require new associations.

Initiative, analysis, imagination: such are the keywords for the moving university today. How is it going to cope in the long run with such transformations? Frank Rhodes rightly observes that "in spite of these major changes in responsibility, membership and complexity, the university has shown almost no change in its organization, management and governance, and only modest change in its teaching style". The matter is complicated, because one should simultaneously remember Whitehead's (1929) warning that "the combination of imagination and learning normally requires some leisure, freedom from restraint, freedom from harassing worry, some variety of experiences, and the stimulation of other minds diverse in opinion and diverse in equipment".

CHANGE, PROGRESS AND MANAGEMENT

Quite clearly, the university is a world of increasing complexity; this perception is confirmed by a number of qualified staff who have been serving the university for several decades. Year after year a faster rate is imposed in order to meet new requirements. The Bologna process is not going to make things any easier: deans and department heads are at present elaborating future programmes, promoting mobility, preparing joint degrees. Enterprises under such pressure would undoubtedly request the help of business consultants, but everyone knows the distance between their culture and that of the university, which faces a number of challenges proper to higher education. Still, it is worthwhile to itemize a number of topics which should undoubtedly require special attention from large research university managers.

- *Human resources.* Most European universities expanded rapidly in the late 60s and early 70s. Thirty tears later, they suffer a major personnel rotation with its advantages (lower age range, new ideas, new disciplines) and the associated disadvantages (discontinuity, loss of expertise). Universities compete for the best academics, with the new and welcome dimension of European mobility. Recruitment within the present decade undoubtedly constitutes the major factor that will determine the future of the university. Young candidates are eager to know about career and promotion policies, salary scales, quality evaluation and incentives of various sorts. Simultaneously, information technologies have deeply modified the structure of administrative staff; in particular, its expected managerial ability increases year after year.

- *Change.* The last 50 years have been marked by major scientific discoveries, interdisciplinary approaches, new competence. The university needs to adapt its response to these demands: new degrees, continuing education, creation and deletion of departments. The management of change is difficult in universities where quality and scholarship are often associated with secular traditions. Traditional departments are not keen to depart from established structures or to accept personnel and funding reallocations for emerging disciplines or for new degrees. Change is unproductive unless it is accepted by all; its implementation is difficult and requires the highest care from university managers.

- *Strategic vision.* Change should not be the fruit of impulse. On the contrary, it should result from a strategic vision which has become indispensable over recent decades. While the promotion of such a vision belongs to the university leaders, it should be conceived by an appropriate reflection group; it should also be shared by the entire community. Today, the context is changing so fast that the university needs permanent study groups to evaluate the environment, to perceive developments in other countries, to be sensitive to social needs, to measure evolving employment structures and requirements. A good example is pedagogy: for centuries many European universities have relied on passive learning, which does not meet contemporary educational needs; lifelong education requires students to learn how to learn while they attend the university. The transformation of pedagogy in the university system precisely requires a shared strategic vision of its future. Another example concerns research: multidisciplinary work, work in large teams, international cooperation are relatively recent trends which need to be firmly implemented in the university system. Within the new context of the Bologna process,

institutions must adopt new strategies if they wish to remain research universities.

- *Long-term budgeting and fund-raising.* It is true, however, that financial constraints make it very difficult for universities to implement their strategic vision which should lean on available resources. Long-term financial predictions are difficult to elaborate; in most European (public) universities, revenue depends upon government allocation which varies with time, with the economy and with the political situation. University managers need to constantly evaluate financial perspectives in order to frame their projects within an accessible perimeter. Additionally, as in the United States, universities will not be able to go past basic government expectations and show a difference unless they can count on the support of private and industrial sponsors. Such support is impossible to raise unless university management adopts a fund-raising policy and establishes a relationship with potential donors.

- *Communication.* Large universities are communities of several thousand people who should ideally share the vision adopted by the management. It is a considerable challenge: the percentage of executives is higher than in any commercial enterprise (academics versus total), while most of them have their own ideas regarding the future of the university. It is recognized that faculty adhesion to our objectives is indispensable, but, according to James Duderstadt (2001), "faculty loyalties are generally first to their scholarly discipline, then to their academic unit, and only last to their institution". He correctly observes that "while faculty members are – and should always remain – the cornerstone of the university's academic activities, they rarely have deep understanding or will accept the accountability necessary for the many other missions of the university in modern society". University management needs to organize communication with the various components of the university: professors, researchers, staff, unions and students. Inappropriate communication may be the cause of failure of a well-designed strategy while "victory will be given to the one whose troops are gathered around a common objective" (Sun Tzu, 1972).

- *Administration.* The administrative staff is the keystone of university management. Amateurish administrative practices are incompatible with the development of modern universities that manage the careers of several thousand people and deal with considerable amounts of money. A primary task of management is to organize the administration, to recruit the best staff and to control quality. A university is

indeed a very intricate mechanism which cannot possibly function without smooth and accountable procedures.

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

We have just evoked a number of items which require special care at a time of change. While the natural trend in large human enterprises is to reproduce traditional patterns, including quality, a lack of consideration for these items means a lack of response to new demands in a changing environment. The only response is leadership; it must however be practised with care and adapted to the specific world of higher education: the exercise of authority without a shared vision is indeed generally disastrous. The wealth of a university is measured in terms of values and not capital; any progress contributing to values is equivalent to capital gains in a commercial enterprise. Leadership requires a simple and efficient system of governance. While a variety of systems exist, depending upon the country as well as the university, it is worth mentioning a few simple and maybe idealized trends proper to European universities which may lead to efficient leadership.

- *The Administrative Board (Board of Directors, Board)* is the supreme body of the university; it holds the final responsibility with respect to the State and other stakeholders. The Board appoints and dismisses the upper executives of the university, possibly at the suggestion of the Rector (or President), the Executive Board or the Academic Senate. The Board is primarily concerned with the strategic vision of the university which it defines with the help of the Rector and its Executive Board. It accepts investments and annual budgets based on long-term budgeting capabilities. In particular, the Board exercises control over the execution of the budget and its allocation to various items. The Board is in charge of salary policies although, in many European countries, they are defined by the State. It is responsible for quality control and is kept informed about its results. The number of Directors should not be too large. In addition to a limited number of top executives of the university, the Board should be made of representatives of stakeholders: region and State, social organizations, companies (future employers) and also some experts in educational development. Students are members of the Administrative Board in a number of countries; we will discuss that matter in the next section.
- *The Rector (President, Vice-chancellor)* is the upper executive of the university. He or she reports to the Board for the execution of its strategic vision and its decisions. By analogy with commercial enter-

prises, some consider the Rector as the Chief Executive Officer of the university who assumes the link between the university as a whole and the Administrative Board. It is preferable however to view him as the prime minister who enjoys a large independence and an ample delegation for the execution of his tasks. He chairs the Executive Board and chooses his collaborators. He is responsible for the interface between the university and the State and other institutions of higher education. Among his many duties, the Rector keeps permanently informed about the evolution of higher education and proposes strategic visions to the Administrative Board. He promotes innovation in the university, generates new ideas and evaluates the possibility of their materialization. He keeps up a permanent contact with Faculty Deans and Department Chairmen regarding the implementation of the strategic vision and university policies.

- *The Executive Board (Rectorate, Presidency)* supports the Rector, who is its chairman, and helps him to achieve his task. It is composed of a number of close collaborators (vice-rectors, vice-presidents ...) with special assignments: budget, finances and staff; student affairs; academic affairs; research and other matters that deserve delegation and special care, such as communication or pedagogy. The Executive Board, which should not be too large, has an essential role and needs to show full solidarity with the Rector. Most (if not all) of its members should be selected by the Rector who, in a way, makes up his government. The Executive Board prepares new policies while staying in touch with Faculties and Departments.

- *The Academic Senate (Academic Council)* is the legislative body of the university for academic and student affairs. Depending upon the institution, it is composed of professors, students, representatives of personnel and possibly deans or representatives of the Executive Board. The role of the Academic Senate is essential as its approval is needed for the implementation of university policies. Once again, no step forward is possible without a shared vision of the future. To that effect, links need to be maintained between the Administrative Board and the Senate, either through the Rector or the Chairman of the Board.

- *Faculties and Departments* constitute the core of the university. Being responsible for the primary missions of the university, i.e. teaching and research, they need to act with a large degree of autonomy. It is not easy to propose limits between centralization and decentralization, which vary from country to country. The best approach seems to implement the principle of subsidiarity (see e.g. Weber, 2001): upper bodies should not intervene as long as Faculties and Depart-

ments can perform their mission and be loyal to the vision proposed by the Administrative Board and the Rector. Decisions which engage the future, such as the designation of new professors, the enlargement of staff or the opening of new study programmes must remain in the hands of the Rector or of the Administrative Board.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

In principle at least, such a simple system of governance should allow universities to evolve and to be responsive to change in society. However university administrators know that nothing is simple in higher education: any change creates difficulties, problems to solve or, more positively, challenges to overcome. Let us briefly consider a few of these challenges, each of which would require a deeper analysis.

- *The university and the State*. Most European universities are financed by the State; even those that enjoy "private" status are often subsidized. The State of course does not limit its intervention to finances: it determines the educational structures, the range of degrees and sometimes the contents of the programmes. In some universities, the State appoints the members of the Administrative Board and even the professors (proposed by the Board or the Rector). Major reforms such as the implementation of the Bologna process require fundamental legal modifications which may not leave to universities the degree of independence they need to meet new demands. In a recent article, the French newspaper *Le Monde* (2003) quotes a university president claiming that "our autonomy only exists on paper. In fact, we live within a complicated system of guardianship by the government", while another says that "the State should have a regulating role, which means that it should not manage decisions of every university." Quite clearly, "the lack of flexibility in the management of budgetary resources, legal constraints or else the absence of human resource management limit the room for manœuvre of universities." The implementation of new ideas in large universities is incompatible with intrusive legal systems which seriously limit their degree of autonomy. Still, the government pays the bill. It will be essential in the future to define the type of freedom and independence which governments should leave to universities as long as they comply with global perspectives and accept financial and quality control.
- *Students and management*. Students are the major stakeholders of the university; as such, they have been members for many years of a

number of committees which are directly concerned with student life: course evaluation, transformation and creation of study programmes, social subsidies, organization of academic life. A more recent trend, which is a legal requirement in several countries, is to include student representatives in organs at all levels of the university, such as the Administrative Board. It is *a priori* difficult to accept that young and often inexperienced students will, within the Administrative Board, appoint higher executives or new professors, or else decide on the budget of the various faculties. However, once they respect the necessary discretion on personal, financial or strategic matters, it is positive for the university to display to students the clarity of its decisional process and to explain the meaning of its decisions. Students need to be trained to exercise management: a good practice would be to introduce new student-partners of the Board to the workings of the university and its challenges. A potential danger is for the Board to deviate from its core business and to be involved in political confrontations which are proper to the student movement. Student participation seems to be very efficient in a number of countries (in Scandinavia, in particular); they should inspire universities which are new to such policies.

- *Election vs. appointment.* It is generally recognized that modern universities need to adopt forms of governance that allow its executives to assume true leadership. Prevailing theories of management do not favour, however, the election of executives at essentially all levels of the university, from basic research units up to the Rector. Still, the election system, which was adopted in universities when they were born, is alive and well. It is doubtful that those who favour appointment against election will soon prevail, although they have a point: in hard times affected by change, how can one possibly govern along a strong political line assumed by the Administrative Board or other upper levels, while being indebted to the electoral basis and meeting them daily? Proponents of the election system claim however that being elected is an essential guarantee of credibility within the university system. It is obvious that change is not for tomorrow, but that clarity would help. An elaborate list of duties, responsibilities and power in the hands of the elected person, together with a description of the stakes would undoubtedly lead voters to choose the right person for an appropriate leadership at times of crisis.

- *Clash of visions.* Universities have gained the conviction that they should open up to their stakeholders, with particular attention to the world of companies and potential employers of its students. The presence of their representatives on the Administrative Board is

extremely useful, bringing together a new approach to management and the wish of well defined objectives which may sometimes be lacking in higher education. However, while enterprises have their own approach to management, universities cultivate secular and well respected views on teaching and research which may not be in line with the former. Once again, the only way to join forces that have ignored each other for so long seems to be to explain the university, its vision and its values.

CONCLUSION

There is no unique way to govern a large research university. It obviously needs professional management with the help of rather simple structures, if it wishes to meet new demands and future challenges. However management is not incompatible with the values of humanism and education for all, a concept which higher education has cultivated for so many centuries. On the contrary, it should be considered as an efficient instrument of leadership and progress.

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