

Engaging in the Modernisation Agenda for European Higher Education

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The MODERN project

The new communication from the European Commission “Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems” stresses the vital role of European higher education in developing human capital and driving research and innovation in the knowledge economy. The Commission emphasises once again the need to enhance the performance and international attractiveness of Europe’s higher education institutions.

European higher education institutions need to modernise their governance and prepare their leaders to operate in increasingly complex sets of interactions at the institutional, regional, national and European level. European policies call for universities to play a strong role to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda and in making Europe a strong knowledge-based economy. Although the need to prepare university leaders, for increasingly complex positions is so obvious, the supply of management support to higher education institutions, their leaders and managers is highly fragmented in Europe. [Download Engaging in the Modernisation Agenda for European Higher Education, MODERN Conference, Brussels, 30 January 2012.](#)

Introduction

In September 2011 the European Commission issued a communication (EC, 2011a) entitled “Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems”. The point of departure of this communication is that “...education, and in particular higher education and its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and the articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth and prosperity. Higher education institutions are thus crucial partners in delivering the European Union’s strategy to drive forward and maintain growth.” (2011a; 2)

This new communication on the modernisation of European higher education echoes and builds upon themes developed in a series of earlier Commission communications and Council of the European Union resolutions stressing education, research and innovation as pillars of the Lisbon Strategy:

- Investing efficiently in education and training: An imperative for Europe (2003a);
- The role of universities in a Europe of knowledge (2003b);
- Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling European universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy (2005b);
- Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: Education, Research, and Innovation (2006);
- Modernising universities for Europe’s competitiveness in a global economy (2007)

The Commission’s latest communication stresses that “The main responsibility for delivering reforms in higher education rests with Member States and education institutions themselves. However, the Bologna Process, the EU Agenda for the modernisation of universities and the creation of the European Research Area show that the challenges and policy responses

transcend national borders. In order to maximise the contribution of Europe's higher education systems to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, reforms are needed in key areas: to increase the quantity of higher education graduates at all levels; to enhance the quality and relevance of human capital development in higher education; to create effective governance and funding mechanisms in support of excellence; and to strengthen the knowledge triangle between education, research and business. Moreover, the international mobility of students, researchers and staff, as well as the growing internationalisation of higher education, have a strong impact on quality and affect each of these key areas.” (2011a;3)

The MODERN project, the European Platform Higher Education Modernisation, aims to create an open platform as a key instrument for innovation, state-of-the-art knowledge, dissemination of good practice and joint action on university leadership, governance and management for the professionalisation of the sector. MODERN aims to contribute to raising awareness in European higher education institutions on the strong need to invest in people, to support potential leaders, and to encourage management training at all levels (junior and senior, academic and administrative staff) to ensure their competitiveness to respond to external challenges – such as those posed by the Modernisation Agenda itself. (For further information see: www.highereducationmanagement.eu)

This report is the last in a series of six reports to be published by the MODERN project on key issues related to current priorities in higher education management: governance, regional innovation, quality assurance and internationalisation, funding, and knowledge transfer. These five thematic reports, all written by staff members of the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) of the University of Twente, the Netherlands (and all available on the MODERN web-site) are:

- Higher Education Governance Reforms across Europe: Harry de Boer and Jon File (2009)
- Funding Higher Education: A view across Europe: Ben Jongbloed (2010)
- Internationalisation and its quality assurance: Don Westerheijden (2010)
- University Engagement and Regional Innovation: Paul Benneworth (2010)
- Towards a Strategic Management Agenda for University Knowledge Exchange: Paul Benneworth (2011)

In selecting these five themes the MODERN steering committee focused on key policy areas identified in the Modernisation Agenda of 2007. The extracts from the September 2011 communication quoted above demonstrate that these themes remain highly relevant today. Our reports cover governance reform, funding reform, internationalisation and quality, and two central aspects of the knowledge triangle: knowledge exchange and regional innovation. So, while by no means providing an exhaustive coverage of all of the areas of the current modernisation agenda, our reports focus on many of its key components.

All five reports were written with a particular purpose in mind: as background resource materials for thematic MODERN conferences which would bring together university leaders and managers as well as providers and potential providers of higher education leadership and management development workshops and programmes to discuss the challenges that trends, policies and developments around the theme in question might create for university leaders and management. The outcomes of such discussions would form a valuable input into the development of new or improved management development activities.

This sixth and final report was envisaged to be an extended executive summary of the first five reports to provide an easily accessible and relatively concise overview of trends and developments across the five selected thematic areas. The publication of the September communication has however also provided an opportunity to explore the relevance of our analyses to the latest Modernisation Agenda. Our report will once again serve as background resource material for a (final) MODERN conference: “Engaging in the Modernisation Agenda

for European Higher Education” to be held in Brussels on 30 January 2012.

The structure of this report is therefore straightforward: Part One is an attempt on our part to start a process of engagement with, and conference discussion about, the new modernisation agenda primarily from a MODERN perspective: from the angle of the five MODERN thematic areas and grounded in an interest in effective university leadership and management. Part Two contains the extended executive summaries of the five MODERN thematic reports (some needed to be more extended than others).[.....](#)

Principles for effective regional innovation

Regional innovation is one way in which universities can demonstrate their fulfilment of the societal compact. But to understand how regional engagement and innovation can contribute to modernising Europe’s universities the following issues and challenges emerge:

1. How to balance regional innovation with the universities’ core missions, particularly when there are such strong pressures for universities to focus on a particular mission (‘profiling’). Is regional engagement a task for a sub-set of HEIs or potentially appropriate for all HEIs?
2. There is a strategic management challenge for universities in the sense of optimising the ‘base load’ of regional innovation activity on the one hand and, on the other, thinking strategically about the opportunities which the regions offer for on-going institutional development.
3. How to capitalise on existing activities and partners and to improve based on what is already done with regional partners?

In terms of the first challenge, the framing of regional engagement and innovation as part of the third mission is not very helpful. The notion of a ‘third mission’ suggests something peripheral to universities’ core activities, hinting at an industrial liaison office or an engagement and placements centre. However, effective regional innovation involves exploiting emerging opportunities for societal engagement and networking to improve the salience, relevance and quality of the core tasks undertaken by universities. What this review makes clear is that there are no practical or conceptual reasons why excellent research cannot also be societally useful. In terms of the second challenge, the strategic management of regional innovation activities by universities, there are two types of activities to assess. First, the engagement activities already underway within universities.

Here the issue is how to optimise these activities to maximise the benefits they bring to the university consummate with the efforts and risks involved. Second, undertaking new, flagship, developmental regional innovation activities. These will bring the management challenge of attempting to change the way that things are done and to handle the relationships between regional actors. The latter type of activity implies a great deal more risk and uncertainty. The complex dynamics of the relationships require careful management and risk sharing if both universities and regions are to obtain the greatest benefit from their collaborations.

The final challenge relates to universities managing their regional engagement activities to maximise the benefits and opportunities, and minimise costs and risk. This involves writing a strategy, publishing policies and guidelines (covering things like intellectual property, building hire, staff and student volunteering, and participation in public life), allocating resources to encourage, stimulate and reward engagement, establishing performance indicators and targets, then monitoring progress towards the strategic goals. This will need to be discussed with the internal and regional stakeholders of the university to ensure that the potential benefits of regional engagement are legitimate.

Once these challenges have been addressed and digested, European HEIs will be better equipped to reinvent themselves as institutions central to securing long-term economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental sustainability for Europe as a whole.

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