Balancing Traditional Academic Values And Modernization In European Higher Education: A Case Study Of The University Of Bologna

Universities undergo currently significant changes that are often summarized under terms such as globalization (Beck, 1997), marketization of higher education and new public management (Ball, 2008). It is often argued that the competition for human and financial resources and the emphasis on economic variables within the university system endanger academic values as the shift from an ?education for democracy? towards an ?education for profit? happened (Nussbaum, 2010).

With the decline of public funding and major policy changes due to economic crises, new demands from the private sector, the massification of higher education and the Bologna process universities have to adopt new strategies to become sustainable institutions (Smerek, 2010). They are pressured to modernize themselves and successfully manage the transition of becoming a competitive organization capable of securing their position on a global market place. Furthermore, they are perceived as key organization in maintaining and advancing the economic and social prosperity of their nation state, their region and their community (Maguire, 2010).

Balancing new demands with more traditional academic values like a humanistic approach towards education, academic freedom and university autonomy is often a complex and not straightforward process. Even though, modernization is a necessity most universities are described as conservative institution that are reluctant for change (Ridder-Symoens, 2002). However, universities have to change in order to secure an adequate education of their students that makes them compatible on the job market and sustain high quality research and innovation.
Universities are not an entity but depend on the individuals working and studying in them. The academic is truly one of the main stakeholders within the university as an organization as s/he often survives different student populations. Being part of one organization over a longer period of time allows academics to reflect on changes within their own institution and environment. Becoming member of a certain kind of institution involves also the dispute with a particular set of values and norms inherent in the organization (Augoustinos et al, 2006). This set of values and norms could be also referred to as the tradition of university. The academic itself hence has to adopt to this tradition but is also able to push change by changing his/her own actions, behavior and speech. In other words, academic do poses agency within universities (Best & Patterson, 2010).

This paper tries to reflect on the struggle to transit between tradition and modernization from the perspective of academics. Academics on the one hand, have to deal with these changes and on the other hand, are able to influence and re-construct these changes. Answering the question

*How do academics perceive the process of balancing traditional academic values and modernization?*

will give an insight into the changes that universities not only in Europe face due to globalization and the introduction of neoliberal discourses in higher education.

The research question can be broken down in the following sub-questions:

1) What are the major changes in higher education from the perspective of academics at the University of Bologna?

2) How do they experience these changes?

3) Where do they see chances for modernization?

4) Where do they want to preserve traditional values?

5) How do they see the future of universities?

The objectives of this paper are to:

1) Depict changes in higher education that have a direct impact on the work of academics at the University of Bologna.

2) Evaluate how these academics resist or bring forward change.

3) Examine prospects and dangers of traditional values.

4) Examine prospects and dangers of modernization.

5) Evaluate how these academics try to balance the long tradition of their university with the demand for change.

**Method**

This study is part of my PhD thesis which is concerned with a comparative analysis of academic freedom in higher education teaching in Europe and the Asia Pacific Rim. Overall it is part of the Universities in the
Knowledge Economy (UNIKE) project (FP 7 Marie Curie Actions). The part of my research presented in this paper uses data from a case-study conducted at the University of Bologna. As one of the oldest universities in Europe the existence of tradition cannot be denied. Being an active participant in the Bologna process and emphasizing European programs like the ERASMUS and ERASMUS+ the University of Bologna strives at the same time for modernization and commitment towards building a European Higher Education Area. Consequently, modernization and tradition are present in the daily life of the university and its members. The study is based on a qualitative research design as this allows a more comprehensive account of the topic than a pure qualitative research design would allow (Punch, 2005). As the paper intends to depict the individual perspectives of academics the main method of data collection are semi-structured interviews with faculty members from different disciplines and at different career stages from the University of Bologna. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze the data as it allows to depict different emerging patterns included in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The analysis will focus on patterns related to (1) the main changes experienced by academics, (2) the role of tradition and modernization for shaping their daily work and professional experience, (3) and academic’s ways for influencing and shaping change. Significant policies, literature and other material will be taken into consideration in order to draw a connection between the individual experience of academics and the broader European and Italian developments.

Expected Outcomes

This paper will reflect on changes in higher education and the transition between tradition and modernization from the perspective of academic’s employed at the University of Bologna. It will depict the major challenges that they and their University have to face at the moment and its effects on their work. Illustrating gains and losses of modernization of higher education this paper tries to show how tradition and modernization are interrelated and how academics experience the process of balancing both. This paper also aims to make a connection between the specific case of the University of Bologna and developments all over Europe. Addressing issues like the Bologna process, internationalization, cooperation with academics outside of Italy and dealing with international students, it is obvious that the academics interviewed for this research project have a lot to offer that can be reflected on not only from an Italian but also from a European perspective. The case study intends not only to speak to an Italian audience but tries to offer an account of the struggles between tradition and modernization that academics in Europe and maybe worldwide can reflect on as they are all encountering similar transformations. This is especially true for the European Higher Education Area striving for a more coherent landscape of higher education.

References

Author Information

Sina Westa (presenting)

University of Ljubljana

Faculty of Education

Ljubljana