

Differentiation Requires Definition: The Need for Classification in Complex Academic Systems

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A central characteristic of mass higher education systems worldwide is differentiation. Academic systems have become collections of varied types of academic institutions serving specialized clienteles, with different purposes, funded in a variety of ways, and with quite diverse levels of quality and accomplishment. Academic systems are increasingly large, with hundreds or even thousands of institutions serving a varied student population. Differentiation and massification are perhaps the main hallmarks of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Most countries are coping with the challenges of understanding and controlling this complex new academic reality. However, few have been able to make sense of the often disorderly array of academic institutions—ranging from the most distinguished research universities to modest vocational schools serving a local clientele.

Classification Systems

Classifying academic institutions and systems is within the realm of the possible, although few countries have comprehensively done it. Classification is not the same thing as ranking. The purpose is to categorize institutions by function and role so that it will be easier to understand the differentiations that exist. In fact, the country that built a mass higher education system first, the United States, has had a reasonably effective classification for several decades, although it is in the process of being changed and perhaps dismantled. The well-known Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, started in 1970, has been revised several times, most thoroughly in 1994, when it listed 3,595 institutions of postsecondary education in 10 major categories. In 2000, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published an interim revision of the classification in which the categories were reduced in number with the aim of emphasizing the teaching function in higher education.

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The Carnegie Classification is not intended as a ranking of institutions, but rather as a way of categorizing them by function. However, some have seen the classification as an

informal ranking, with the Research University I category as the most prestigious. Colleges and universities have often aspired to advance to the “next highest” category, for example, going from Baccalaureate College II to Baccalaureate College I, feeling that a ranking is implied in the categories. The Carnegie Foundation has long argued against using the classification as a ranking.

Few, if any, other countries have attempted to categorize their academic institutions by role and function. While the process is not easy, and the Carnegie Foundation has revised its categories on several occasions, it is not an impossible task. The American task is made easier by the accrediting system. The Carnegie Classification lists only accredited degree-granting institutions that are in the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

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In Britain, stimulated by the amalgamation of the former polytechnic institutions into the university system, by the expansion of the last decades of the 20th century, and by the desire of the government to create a differentiated academic system, the government mandated quality assessments of research and teaching in all of Britain’s academic institutions. While the assessment effort was criticized in the academic community, it was carried out, and “league tables” were created. These tables ranked all universities and many other postsecondary institutions by a common measuring scheme. Widely attacked for its sometimes imprecise measurement techniques, the system did help to define a differentiated academic system, and in a general way classified academic institutions.

Carnegie’s Abdication of Responsibility

In 2000, the Carnegie Foundation began to abdicate its key role in defining America’s differentiated academic system by reducing the precision of its classification. Carnegie is now considering a different approach to classification, focusing on what it perceives to be the main functions of higher education—especially emphasizing teaching and trying to capture the service function of academic institu-

tions. This direction reflects Carnegie's new ideological commitments, and it will inevitably mean that the most useful classification of academic institutions will be much less valuable for understanding the complexity of the American academic system. Where institutions and others could informally "benchmark" themselves against specific categories of colleges and universities, this will no longer be possible.

What Is To Be Done?

Large, complex, and differentiated academic systems need measurements of institutional characteristics and roles. Such measures will, in a sense, be de facto rankings. But the original goal of the Carnegie Classification, to define the entire U.S. academic system by role and function was a valuable

exercise and succeeded, despite criticisms, in generally being accepted as reasonably objective. Similarly, Britain's quality assessment efforts that resulted in informal "league tables" were useful.

More precise definitions of the various functions of academic institutions are needed, to be followed by an objective categorization of academic institutions within countries and perhaps regions. Thoughtful classification of academic institutions can help prospective students choose the most appropriate institution, provide institutional categories to guide institutional planning as well as funding, and introduce some rationality into analyzing the increasingly complex array of academic institutions that characterize many national systems. ■

Italy: A Hard Implementation of a Comprehensive Reform

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There have been many attempts to introduce reforms in the Italian higher education system, especially after the 1960s, when social demand exploded in Italy as it did everywhere else in Europe. At that time, a strong egalitarian philosophy prevented the introduction of diversification at the postsecondary level and resulted in the implementation of a complete open-door recruiting policy. Thereafter, the university operated according to the principles of a centralized administrative system (the French model), with academic power channeled through chair holders (the German model), in pursuit of the traditional task of the reproduction of elites. Over the years, the lack of any institutional relationship with the labor market and with society, together with the system's poor level of productivity (high dropout rates and graduation rates barely reaching 40 percent of those enrolled) made clear the need for reform. Some attempts at reform came from the world of politics (the political leaders becoming more and more worried by the "peculiarity" of the higher education system), but these were counteracted by the academic powers that be. Only in the 1990s did some measures undertaken by the government become effective. Basically, these affected the universities' budgets—for the first time giving individual institutions a lump sum every year to be administered independently and linking a small (but growing) percentage of it to the institutional performance (number of on-time graduates per number of students enrolled and so on). Since then, the principle of autonomy for each individual university grew progressively, together with the concept of evaluation of academic performances.

The New Reform Project

In 1996, the then minister of education, Luigi Berlinguer, created two special commissions for the study of a comprehensive reform of the entire education system. The one devoted to tertiary education proposed a project that introduced several innovations intended to increase the productivity of the system, reduce the average length of studies (normally well above the established standards), and differentiate postsecondary tracks in relation to the labor market and the new professions. The first and most relevant change included the creation of a binary system with a university track made up of a three-level structure of courses and degrees: first level, *laurea*, after a three-year curriculum; a second level, *laurea specialistica*, after a two-year curriculum; and a third level, *dottorato di ricerca* (Ph.D.), after another three years of studies—together with a parallel postsecondary professional track to be organized outside the university at the regional level. In addition, the curriculum of each field was divided into a core group of disciplines to be found at all universities and a second group to be structured independently by each university to enhance its autonomy as an institution. A second step was the introduction of a credit system and the European Transfer Credit System to make individual curricula more flexible and to ease the creation of continuing education programs.

Third, the development of a real national system of evaluation was established, with evaluation offices at each university coordinated by a National Committee of Evaluation. The members of this body were nominated by the ministry but given the task of independently carrying out evalu-