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A Long Road to Differentiation: The Case of Slovenia

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The nondifferentiation of higher education institutions is being viewed as one of the key weaknesses of European higher education. Institutional diversification within national higher education systems is believed necessary to achieve two main goals: increased equity in terms of access to a wider variety of students and greater excellence through institutional specialization. The argument asserts that a single European country, even a large one, cannot sustain several world-class universities similar in function and scope. Furthermore, every country requires a variety of higher education institutions that meet the needs of not only an expanding but also an increasingly diversified body of students. Thus, differences in institutional provision of higher education should address programs, modes of delivery, public service, and other factors. While the diversity of higher education institutions is in principle almost unanimously viewed as a favorable condition, the mechanisms to achieve it are the source for

much contention. Governments that call for changes toward differentiation have to back up the rhetoric by a "carrots and sticks" strategy through public-funding mechanisms. Positive financial incentives ("carrots") are proving to be more politically palatable and hence easier to implement than negative financial measures ("sticks"). The case of Slovenia, described in this article, is a case in point.

LACK OF DIFFERENTIATION

A country that became independent from Yugoslavia in 1991 with two million people and covering an area of 20,273 km (equal to the size of Wales or New Jersey) is a home to 3 universities established by the state: University of Ljubljana in central Slovenia, University of Maribor in the northeast, and University of Primorska in the southwest; 2 other universities—University of Nova Gorica and Euro-Mediterranean University—which are a consortium of universities with a seat in Slovenia; and 30 other higher education institutions.

Some obvious differences exist between the three state universities; Ljubljana is significantly older with an enrollment double in size than the other two and is the only university with arts academy. However, regardless of the differences in size and age, the functional differentiation between the three is negligible. They all strive toward offering a complete program of a research university, and in recruitment they target the same group of students—albeit with some regional focus. The objective of each is to be a comprehensive, world-class research university. Nonuniversity higher education institutions—self-standing faculties (a peculiar type of institution found in the former Yugoslav region), higher education colleges, and higher professional schools also—seek

upgrades in status ultimately, in order to become universities. Furthermore, higher education institutions within the same disciplines usually offer similar or the same study programs with the same modes of delivery and target the whole student body without addressing specific student groups or requirements. Finally, Slovenia also lacks a binary higher education system. Both universities and self-standing faculties offer academic and professional programs at the undergraduate level, and they tend to do so also through establishing several regional branches.

Thus, the differentiation of Slovenian higher education so far has been primarily in direction of the emergence of new institutions—including some not established by the state—and new branches of existing institutions both as a response to a booming demand for higher education services. In other words, differentiation so far has been predominantly expansionist and not reductionist.

DIFFERENTIATION AS A POLITICAL PRIORITY

The newly released (but not yet adopted) draft of the Higher Education Strategy 2011–2020 by the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology puts a clear emphasis on institutional diversification next to internationalization, quality, and social dimension—considered the main pillars of the national system's development. In the area of differentiation it makes two key proposals. First, it proposes to consolidate institutional binarity with a clear "division of labor" between research-oriented universities and professional higher education institutions. Thus, new polytechnics will be established and/or existing professional schools will be prompted to merge.

Second, it calls for institutional profiling—essentially study programs offered by different institutions to become significantly varied by their content and orientation. To achieve this, the strategy proposes a revised system of funding that would allow the institutions to negotiate with the government for substantial additional funding for diversification. On the top of the basic lump sum, the institutions should be able to apply for funding for development and competitiveness, foreseen as 20 percent of the basic funding. The strategy stipulates that these funds will be distributed, based on quality assessments, qualitative measures, and international peer review, as well as via negotiation between universities and government. The exact criteria for distribution of the development funds are still unclear, as they need to be developed in the forthcoming regulation. From the overall strategy it is assumed, however, that the criteria will be based on the four main development pillars (i.e., diversification, internationalization, quality, and social dimensions). The expectation is that institutions will define their strengths and weaknesses and accordingly sharpen their focus toward developing distinct institutional priorities and thus a specific profile of education. An important role is foreseen for the newly established Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency, which serves as the accreditation body for all higher education institutions and study programs. During cyclical reaccreditation the agency will be able, among other issues, to monitor also the institutions following its diversification strategy.

Finally, the proposal includes granting more freedom to higher education institutions in admissions procedures, to achieve a better overlap between the orientation of the study programs and the candidates enrolling in these programs. Currently, admissions to the undergraduate programs are based on

the national testing. Institutions did not and could not develop their own entry requirements. The strategy highlights that new selection procedures must enable fair access and at the same time offer more freedom to higher education institutions to select the most suitable and motivated students for the profile of study programs they offer.

WILL IT WORK?

The "carrots" strategy taken by some other European governments to fight egalitarianism among higher education institutions, most notably Germany's Excellence Initiative (see article by Daniel Fallon in *IHE*, no. 52, summer 2008), is showing some positive signals toward differentiation. The similar mechanism of competition could also work in Slovenia. However, taking into consideration the smallness of the country and the combination of the aims of the strategy, the funding mechanisms are likely to favor equally the logic of expansionism—such as, awarding excellence, the logic of reductionism, and profiling through cutting down weaker functions.