Lessons from European Integration for US Higher Education

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Introduction

For more than a decade, higher education in the United States has faced mounting criticism. The reasons are similar to those faced by higher education systems throughout the world. High on the list are escalating demands for responsiveness to students and external constituents, declining public resources, and a sense that colleges and universities are ill-prepared to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

Globalisation of higher education (e.g. mobility of students and scholars and expansion of distance learning, all fuelled by the technological revolution) is seriously challenging traditional governmental roles and policies. Questions are being raised about whether the states are the appropriate level of government or have the capacity to address policy issues arising in a global, technology-intensive higher education market. State and federal policies designed for an earlier time can be barriers to efforts to respond to changing needs. Public scepticism about the role of government in general is leading new thinking about the role of non-governmental mechanisms to accomplish public purposes.

The major industrialised countries of the world increasingly face similar higher education issues (Goedegebuure et al. 1993; Neave and van Vught 1991; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 1997). In particular, Europe and the US share the challenge of creating a policy environment appropriate for a global market, at a time that strong fragmenting forces are at work. Both face pressures to devolve governmental authority and responsibility to state, regional and local governments. Intensified nationalism and parochialism create serious barriers to multi-state, supra-national or federal solutions to public-interest concerns such as quality assurance and transferability, and comparability of credentials.

Europe has been engaged in a more than quarter-century journey through the process of greater economic and political integration, accelerating in the past 12 years with the Treaty of Rome in 1985 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This experience places in sharp relief the contours of issues that arise as nation-states and higher education systems seek new ways to solve problems that could not be solved through existing policy frameworks (Neave 1991, 1994, 1996). The European experience also underscores the issues that face the US about the limitations of both state and federal policies. Are the states realistic and practical means to address issues that cannot be confined to single political jurisdictions? Is even the US an appropriate definition of 'higher education space' – a term used in Europe and the Russian Federation to define the new, broader arena for problem-solving? What combination of governmental and non-governmental policies is appropriate and feasible in the new policy environment?

The intent of this paper is to suggest a framework for comparison and sharing of lessons.
between the US and Europe. Unfortunately, the US looks inwardly for solutions to higher education issues and often fails to learn from others (Dill et al. 1996). If the issues concern elementary and secondary education and vocational training, leaders use examples from elsewhere in the world to underscore that the US is falling behind its competitors in the world economy. In higher education, the situation is just the opposite. Confident in the comparative strength of American colleges and universities, US leaders rarely cite examples from other countries but devote considerable energy to encouraging others to adopt US practices. By failing to learn from others, the US will lose valuable time in adapting its policies to enable its institutions and students to compete in the new environment.

Two Laws in Motion

Clark Kerr (1990) characterises the issue as the interaction — and often conflict — between, ‘… “two laws of motion” propelling institutions of higher learning around the world’ (p.5). These are: ‘(1) the further internationalisation of learning, and (2) the intensification of the interest of independent nation-states in the conscious use of these institutions for their own selected purposes’. Kerr emphasises that these forces are not new, but their intensity — and, therefore, the conflict between the two — is greater than ever. Political leaders recognise the critical role that higher education plays in developing the human resources and research and technology necessary for states and nations to compete in the global economy. At the same time, the world-wide knowledge economy, communications networks, and mobility of students and scholars require that universities set their sights beyond the comparatively narrow interests of local political jurisdiction (Kerr 1990).

Kerr’s references are primarily to nation-states, but he notes that the same tensions arise in the relationships between states in the US and their higher education institutions. Much as the states function within the framework of federal policy, the nation-states of Europe function within the developing framework of the European Union (EU). Kerr notes that even these broader federal or supra-national frameworks, formed to address issues that single states could not address, can in themselves become enclaves or devices for protectionism that run counter to the free worldwide knowledge network and the flow of information, students and faculty (Kerr 1990).

The US and Europe as Units of Comparison

Because of the diversity of cultures and policies among states in the US and nation-states in Europe, international comparisons have recently focused on the state, not the US as a whole, as the unit of comparison with nation-states. The OECD undertook a review of California in 1990 (OECD 1990). In 1996, it included Virginia in its review of tertiary education (OECD 1997). Nevertheless, the US and Europe are useful units of comparison when one is considering issues that require attention on a supra-state or supranation-state basis. One of the most common issues concerns quality assurance for students who attend universities in more than one country or access programmes from several out-of-state providers through distance learning. Other common concerns relate to the need to balance local priorities for applied research and economic development, on the one hand, and the long-term priority for basic research of importance to the US as a whole or to Europe, on the other. The US and Europe can be considered to be roughly analogous ‘spaces’ or ‘communities of solution’ for certain higher education issues. In even broader terms, the ‘space’ for policy in a global economy transcends the strict political boundaries of the US and the EU (Neave 1994).

Important Differences

Any effort to compare the US and Europe must acknowledge certain differences between the two (Mc-Daniel 1991; Trow 1991). To emphasise a few of the most obvious differences:

- The US federal system is more developed than what is likely to emerge in Europe in the foreseeable future. The authority of the European Commission (EU) related to individual member states and their higher education systems is unlikely to be expanded to the extent of the US federal government. In