Political Priorities and Political Campaigns in Higher Education

Interview with Professor Teichler

The editors of the *Voprosy obrazovaniya* have interviewed **Ulrich Teichler**, professor at the International Center for Higher Education Research Kassel, participant in the Conference of Higher Education Researchers held in October 2014 in Moscow. The interview discussed the influence that top priority topics examined by the educational community had on the state of things in other areas of the higher education system; the problem of stated and concealed aims of education initiatives; the prospects of university ranking as the most debated aspect of higher education politics today.
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Professor Teichler, at the Conference you were talking about the 'side effects' that inevitably follow when just one topic come into the limelight. What could be the consequences of focusing on the topic of ratings?

My impression is that at every historical moment we have an inclination to look at higher education with certain priorities in mind. At certain times we just talk about funding, at certain times we are preoccupied with rankings, and at certain times we are primarily interested in student participation. This means that there are at any time a few themes, which are in the limelight of higher education policy, and others, which are in the background. But while there are merely three or four in the limelight at any given time, the system is functioning only, if about twenty different things are not ignored.

The problem is that strategic decisions tend to be made and major changes tend to take place primarily in those areas which are in the limelight. But there might be a need for changes in other areas, which is likely to be ignored. And the changes in the areas, which are in the limelight, might have intended or unintended consequences for other areas. For example, improved funding for the former areas might be based on financial cuts for the latter. Altogether, developments and policies often are interrelated across many areas, but the

actors and experts might merely pay attention to the causes and the effects in a few areas.

A single policy measure might have an impact on a broad range of areas. For example, measures were undertaken in Germany over the years to increase funds for research projects undertaken at universities (distributed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and to provide additional money for a few top universities. In both cases, the prime aim was to enhance high quality research, and in the latter case, the aim was as well to concentrate high quality research more strongly than in the past within a limited number of top universities and thereby strengthen their international visibility. One cannot understand the effects of such policies, if attention is only paid to the extent to which the declared aims are eventually realized. One has to examine as well, whether increased attention to vertical diversity of higher education undermines the willingness in the system to take care of horizontal diversity. The strong emphasis on the enhancement of research might reduce the linkages between research and teaching. The increasing competition in the promotion of research might be fine for the winners, but also might demotivate many other scholars. Or some universities might be so eager to collaborate with universities in other countries, which look similar in quality according to global rankings, that they ignore the possible value of collaboration with a broad range of universities which might be value for their own breadth of functions. In sum, often measures for improvement in higher education turn out to be successful to some extent according to the objectives pursued and counterproductive in other respects.

Certainly, evaluations are valuable which concentrate on the degree of success or failures of policies according their objectives, because such success is not an automatism. If in a certain country at a certain moment in time more money is made available for the funding of international offices within higher education institutions, we can take for granted, that these offices will become bigger. We can expect that the staff of these offices will be better professionally than in the past. It is already less certain, however, whether this has an effect on the quantities of student and staff mobility. And it tends to be overlooked, whether universities paying more attention to mobile students reduce their services for the non-mobile students. The politically induced evaluations might focus on the former issues. Our task as higher education researches is to make others aware of usual super-complexity of the situation and to analyze the consequences beyond the intended changes.

How likely is it that the topic of ratings and rankings will remain pressing in the coming years?

I have had the opportunity of observing developments of higher education and related policies over a period of various decades. I dare to

say that certain issues tend to be in the limelight only for five years or somewhat longer. Thereafter, the issues are overshadowed by others or even ignored. I have not seen thrusts that remained vital in the higher education policy scene for ten years or even for twenty years. For example, there might be a decade, in which hope is widespread that participation of students and junior staff in decision-making leads to wiser decisions within higher education institution. There might follow another decade, where hope prevails that a strong power of university presidents is essential. There might be some years, where the importance of external stakeholders having an influence in university boards is underscored. As a rule, these do lasting for a long time, and a new wave of hope and reforms will follow. But it is interesting to note that the advocates of the reforms, which are currently in the limelight, tend to believe that these reforms have long-lasting effects in the desired direction. For example, the advocates of university ranking claim that the importance of rankings will stay forever. I would argue that higher education systems might be so slow in real change that rankings systems will persist for a long time, but that their current status as a priority policy area is likely to be over soon.

Judging from your own experience, how is it possible to avoid negative consequences of only one topic or a very small number of topics being in the limelight?

One cannot initiate reforms in higher education and then wait for many years in order to evaluate the implementation, the system change and eventually the impact, and only thereafter start seeking for new measures to optimize the reforms and counteract negative side effects. Rather, one has to try to anticipate the variety of effects already in the period of initiation of the reforms. I like to tell you a story. In Germany, some years ago, ten universities were supposed to be elected as winners of the core element of the Excellence Initiative. The institutions were awarded up to 100 million € each over a period of five years in the sub-programme called “future concepts”, whereby the funds should help to pursue a policy of enhancement in the area of research, which were likely to move them up in the global rankings of “world class universities” In the morning of the day, when the winners were supposed to be announced, a journalist of the German Press Agency called me very early and asked me to formulate a comment which he could publish in connection with the announcement of the winners. I asked him, whether he assumed that I already knew the winning universities, before the decision was announced. He said that he did not expect me to know the winners in advance, yet would be in the position of providing an interesting comment in advanced. I was very pleased with this answer noting that he expected something differently from me. I responded that the reputation of research at universities and research institutes in Germany is quite high. In contrast, comparative studies

of Erasmus students suggest that the quality of teaching and of the teaching and learning environment at German institutions is not higher than middle level. Additionally, I said that the Excellence Initiative concentrates on the quality at the top, whereas universities have more difficulties of offering an appropriate quality of research of a somewhat lower caliber, which might be relevant for economy and society, and of providing study programmes which are meaningful even for students which will not end up in highly paid positions.

I was pleased to read newspapers on the following day. The major papers had long highly visible reports on the winners in the Excellence Initiative. In each newspaper, I note a small additional article underneath: The higher education researcher Professor Ulrich Teichler suggests that the next reform campaign should aim at contributing to the quality of teaching; moreover, the necessary diversity of the system should not be overlooked. Soon afterwards, a German foundation raising funds from employers in order to fund higher education reform projects initiated two new programmes: Support for most successful small and medium size universities and prizes for high-quality teaching. Concurrently, various other foundations, government agencies and individual institutions established prizes for excellent teaching and excellent curricular reforms. When I made at a meeting a somewhat ironic remark about the new inflation of incentive programmes, the general secretary of the above named foundation said: Mr. Teichler, everybody might make jokes about these initiatives, but not you, because our decision of establish such programmes were influenced by your comment on the Excellence Initiative.

I believe that higher education researchers can most easily pay attention to the complexity of the higher education system. When a political campaign starts with a targeted but somewhat narrow focus, we researchers certainly have not yet any evidence of the major effects and side effects, but from the outset we can present hypotheses of likely effects. In discussing this with the policy makers and practitioners, we might convince them to opt early on for more complex strategies.

Can you name any examples when the results of the large campaigns actually were not meeting with the declared expectations?

An interesting example for this is the Bologna Process. The introduction of a convergent system of bachelor and master programmes all over Europe was advocated primarily with the aim of facilitating international student mobility. First, we see as a result that the proportion of students from other parts of the world opting for study in European countries, in fact, increased substantially; in contrast, intra-European student mobility has not increased substantially as the consequence of the Bologna Reform. I had already argued at the beginning of that reform process, that the character of the Bologna Reform was

not really suitable for increasing intra-European mobility, while master study in Europe certainly would become more attractive for students outside Europe.

Second, I argued that that one would not undertake such a substantial reform of study programmes just for increasing the mobility of student—a small minority in the past and yet a minority, if the aims of the reforms were realized. This—from my point of view—was only named the highest goal for the Bologna Reform, because everybody loved mobility. In reality, however, the Bologna Reform cannot be understood without taking into consideration the possible effects of expansion of higher education on graduate employment and work. The graduation rate was already higher than 20% on average of the European countries around the year 2000, but we could expect a doubling within the next two decades or so. Experts did not expect that the number of typical graduate jobs would increase as much as the number of graduates. According to the prevailing higher education policies, a further increase of enrollment was accepted rather in order to upgrade the competences in the middle of the occupational hierarchy. For the latter purpose, however, study for a period of about five years was not considered necessary and curricular changes were viewed as preferable. So, study up to only a bachelor degree on the part of a large proportion of students was viewed as desirable.

As a consequence, research on the Bologna Process should look at a much broader spectrum of declared or hidden objectives than just those objectives, which are in the limelight of public debate. In this framework it should look at objectives and impacts, which are there, even if they are not the most popular ones. Higher education has to serve those students more strongly in the future who will end up in positions with below-average pay. It is often said that evaluation research concentrates on the extent of success according to the pursued goals. But higher education research has to take into account that there might be “goals”, which are not stated clearly, and that the range of effects might be much broader than those anticipated by the advocates of reforms. A vision of a mix of declared and intentions and of a breadth of possibly intended and unintended consequences must guide analyses in order to be really relevant for improvement in higher education.