

Alex Usher (AU): Enora, hello. Thanks for being with us.

Enora Bennetot Pruvot (EBP): Thank you. Good to be here.

AU: Tell us how this project got started originally. What was the benefit to the European University Association to start a project, which in some ways compares and maybe implicitly critiques some governments. What was the idea behind it?

EBP: Well, we started that a while ago. It's actually over a decade ago that we started looking into university autonomy. At the beginning of the two thousands, you had a lot of discussion around governance reforms and autonomy, but also a lot of controversy about what autonomy actually covered. So, the discussions weren't going anywhere, and there was a perceived need that we would actually uncover a little bit what autonomy meant and give it a bit of a structure. So that's what the exploratory study aimed at back in 2008-2009. On that basis, we developed for our members the Autonomy Scorecard. As you know, at the time, rankings were all the hype. This scorecard had a very interesting asset, which was to bring attention to the topic in a productive way. So while the aim was never to say, "the higher you are, the better you are as a system," it did bring a lot of attention to the topic and it got public authorities' ears and interest. So that was really the rationale behind the Autonomy Scorecard. It went well. We published now the third edition this year.

AU: One of the things I really like about the scorecard is that it treats autonomy as a multidimensional phenomenon. So you've actually got four separate definitions of autonomy: organizational, financial, staffing, and academic. Could you tell us briefly what each of those four terms mean?

EBP: We're trying to indeed split the concept so that we can actually get a bit more concrete in each of the dimensions. With the organizational dimension, what we're looking at is a selection, of course, because we can't look at everything. But we do consider terms around the executive leadership. So, how the executive leader of the university is selected, who gets to decide on the criteria, what kind of regulation there is around a term of office, or a dismissal. We also look at governance bodies, not to make any statement around what governance model is adequate, but we do look at who gets a say in the selection of its members. Then we'll look at legal structures and academic structures. So, how the university can decide on opening up faculties and departments, for instance, and also if they can found legal entities. So that's the organizational part. With regard to financial autonomy, we look at essentially two blocks. 1) internal financial management capacity, that includes also real estate, ownership of indeed of buildings and campuses, and capacity to sell, but also borrowing and banks, et cetera. And 2) tuition fees for the different student populations. That's the question of who gets a say on fixing those fees. With staffing autonomy, we consider recruitment, salary setting, and career dismissals and promotions. With academy autonomy, not to be confused with academic freedom, we look at student enrollment and selection, the capacity to decide on the academic offer, as well as external quality assurance mechanisms. We had other aspects that were discussed at the beginning, like research, but it was deemed to be autonomous enough not to focus the indicators on it.

AU: Maybe just for a North American audience, because that staffing autonomy is the one that sounds a little strange over here. In Europe there would be a number of countries where the system of promotion in tenure is actually inscribed in law. Is that correct?

EBP: It tends to be heavily regulated. We have about half of our samples, our sample is 35 higher education systems. Europe is incredibly diverse, as you can imagine and as you know. About half of our sample actually has a civil servant status type of model for their senior staff. We focus on senior admin and academic staff. So, as soon as you are in civil servant status mode, obviously you have higher levels of regulation regarding the recruitment process, salary setting, as well as extra protections around dismissals, but also high rigidity with regard to promotions. So it tends to be totally out of the hands of universities to promote staff, for instance, in those in those models. We also see that civil servant status has actually been phased out in a couple of countries. The Netherlands would be one of the most recent cases where it's been a long-term process over two decades, but it's now officially phased out. Austria is still in the process. Luxembourg has done so as well. Germany in some parts has done it as well. So you really have almost a west/east type of divide because Central and Eastern Europe tend to have much more staffing autonomy there and no civil certain status.

AU: You rate each country on a number of different indicators, and I think if I counted correctly, you've got 30 indicators in total across the four different types of autonomy. Some of those indicators seem like they might be quite controversial politically because in effect, you set up each indicator in such a way as to have a top score and a bottom score. So, for instance, being free to set tuition freeze gives an institution more points, seemingly more autonomous. Being free to ignore the local language and choosing the language of instruction, that gives you more points and I know that's been quite controversial in a number of countries recently, notably Denmark. What kind of pushback do you get on these design choices?

EBP: So, the actual main feedback we get is a highly positive one. A large majority of our members, and by that I also mean the national university associations, they find it useful for constructive discussions at home because they do have all these indicators and they're then able to have quite concrete benchmarking exercise. That helps dispel some myths that some public authorities will bring forward and "say, yes, but we're doing it like Germany, or we're doing it like Finland" and so on. Now of course, since we use this ranking feature, which I explained before why, we do give the impression that we have a little bit of a normative angle to the whole question of autonomy. But the idea is really more one of structuring the debate and provide a comparative perspective. Now, as you say, things like tuition fees and the capacity to decide on that, or actually as well civil servant status, which I just mentioned, they're connected to wider societal choices. So here the issue is not to say, "you know, you have to get rid of that, or you have to introduce that to be more autonomous. But our message is down the line is here is the data. Not everything will matter the same way, depending on your country, your system, your perspective and clearly the original design is not bulletproof. It's the result of a very large scale consultation and it would be counterproductive to say this is the only way to measure autonomy.

AU: One of the nice things about the multidimensional approach that you take is that countries can look very good in some areas but not so good in others. And I think Wallonia is a good example. It scores extremely high on organizational autonomy, but really low on academic autonomy, and Iceland is the reverse. So, you can see those strengths and weaknesses as you say, but still there

are a few countries which up persistently at the top of your four lists. The four that struck me: England, Scotland, Estonia, Finland and you also get quite a few that end up persistently at the bottom of the autonomy list in each area: Greece and Cypress in particular, but also some other Balkan countries, France as well. I know you avoid presenting this as a league table, but implicitly aren't you kind of setting up a northern European model, not Anglo-Saxon maybe, but you know, Anglo-Baltic-Nordic as an ideal and saying that's the one that people should follow. How does that go over with the rest of your members in the other parts of Europe?

EBP: Well, it turns out to be very, very helpful for our universities because then they can actually say very concretely what it is that they're lacking in terms of capacity compared to their neighbors. The whole benchmarking aspect was always a very important one within Europe, because we are such a diverse area of the world, but now it's becoming more and more relevant because we also have an incredible push towards transnational collaboration, which always was there to some extent but it has really been boosted over the last couple of years. So, it becomes very concrete for universities in their collaboration with others, what they can do and what others can't. So it has a very concrete aspect to that. I'd say generally the scorecard helps distinguish the specific features at country level and it helps the stakeholders to discuss whether these are structural weaknesses that they need to be addressed, that they consider a problem and a priority, or whether that's considered legitimate and fine and sustainable within the system.

AU: I understand how institutions can use this to start discussions with government, but how do governments react to these kinds of comparisons? In a sense their scores are kind of a commentary on their styles of management. If I were Cyprus, I would not be happy about this report, I don't think. How do national education ministries react to this kind of data? Are they defensive about it or do they view it as a positive discussion tool as well?

EBP: Actually, we have quite some significant feedback from ministries who express interest in the work that we've done, in the methodology, and in the outcomes and they're highly interested by the benchmarking aspect of things. So we are currently presenting and discussing the scorecard with various governments, various ministries. They particularly find it useful for their own preparation when they revise legislation, which is always happening somewhere in Europe at the moment and in the last couple of years. I think that's the best use that can be made of the scorecard is when it's helping to feed input into a discussion to decide on the scope and the priorities of the upcoming reform. So again, the scorecard is not saying that we have the solution and here is the model that you should aim for, but rather providing food for thought on what can be of relevance for the discussion with the stakeholders.

AU: Enora, I know the methodology and the participating countries have changed a bit over time, but since you started scoring countries, but which countries have seen the greatest improvement in autonomy and what have been the political factors in those countries which have driven improvement?

EBP: Indeed, the scope of this study has evolved in terms of geography, and we've had countries coming in, countries coming out and returning. So the point of comparisons change a little bit. What we see this time around is that we have several countries or systems that have experienced changes both upward and downwards in various dimensions. The only one though

that has systematic increases compared to 2015-16, which was the second edition, is Poland. That has to do with the reform that they carried out around 2018-19, which was heavily geared towards governance. They changed our governance model but they also revised the funding model and gave greater capacity for universities to manage funds internally. So, that is one of the most sort of straightforward examples. But you do have systems that have experienced both increases and decreases at the same time, which points to either sometimes rather technical adjustments, or simply the lack of holistic view on autonomy and reforms. Ireland is also another positive example. Ireland suffered tremendously in terms of university autonomy from the impact of the economic crisis that we've experienced 2008-2009, and that has generated long-term effects on what universities were allowed to do or not. That we finally see being more open again so that, for instance, the moratorium and promotions of staff has been lifted. This shows that the financial impact has been a very long one when we had the crisis in 2008-2009, and finally this has now improved with the latest revision of the Irish governing framework. So these are two positive examples.

AU: Let me ask you the same question with the reverse. Which countries seen the biggest slide in autonomy over the last 10 or 12 years? And I note that Hungary participated in the first two rounds, but not in this one.

EBP: There are different cases out there. You have very few systems that registered downward developments in more than one dimension, and these are Denmark and Estonia, but these are more linked to technical changes with regard to governance as well with language, the provision of programs in languages other than the national language. So, I wouldn't call those very worse. However, there's more general worrying picture of greater involvement of public authorities in various domains which might appear technical. The clearest case though would be Turkey, which did not participate in last time, but we can compare with the 2010 data but Turkey's obviously a bit of an outlier with regards to European benchmarking. The reason I'm underlining their case is with regards to the selection of executive leadership. It's the one case in Europe where the rector's selection is in the hands of external authorities and not in the hands of universities. What you see is that often universities select their leader, and then there's a confirmation by the ministry government, even the president of the Republic in some cases. But Turkey actually puts that decision in the hands of the president of the Republic. So that's a clear outlier. With regard to Hungary that did participate in the analysis. This time we decided to take them out of the European comparative analysis and produce a separate analysis for them because of the singularity of the reform that has been engineered in Hungary, which points at greater autonomy on paper but actually poses several problems that we outline in our specific analysis.

AU: This is the foundation initiative that was put forward I think about two years ago now, right?

EBP: Absolutely. Most of the sector in Hungary has now been transferred into public trust funds and that have acquired extensive competencies including some of the competencies that were before with the academic Senate. That generates an issue because the board of trustees of these foundations are actually nominated fully by public authorities and for life.

AU: For life. Well, that's a way to insulate from changes in government, that's for sure. So let me just end on this. This report takes for granted autonomy is a good thing. That it's for institutions. It

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.9: Autonomy Scorecard

Guest: Enora Bennetot Pruvot, Deputy Director Governance, Funding, & Public Policy Development

occurred to me though, that if you go through European history and you look at the higher education system, which had the greatest global admiration, that was the one that existed in Germany in the late 19th century. And while that system was famous for notions of Lernfreiheit and Lernfreiheit. Those are autonomy in some ways, I'm pretty sure that the Prussian system of education would come close to dead last in this scorecard. I mean, there's a lot of ministerial control there. One could probably say the same thing about the Chinese system today, which has demonstrated its ability to compete scientifically with any other system in the world. So, how valuable is autonomy really in comparison to say, funding? How much should we pay attention to this rather than other indicators of institutional health?

EBP: Well, as you know, Alex, obviously, we do not only push for autonomy, we also push for sustainable funding and more sound accountability frameworks. And it's how we should see autonomy. It's an ingredient in a recipe. So that I think there are essential differences to what we've seen in the 19th century. We have a much greater complexity of what the universities are supposed to achieve, the mission portfolio has expanded enormously, their ecosystem is much more complex. What I think becomes critical is the capacity to behave strategically. I think we've passed past the notion that the central level knows better. We have to engineer this transition from steering model or control mode to a more guiding or supporting role. That is a very long-term transition for public authorities. So yes, we need accountability, we need funding, we need autonomy and if you don't have the three, you can have chaos, you can have issues. Of course, if you have great funding, then autonomy might not be your first question. You know, Luxembourg, from the time when they developed their first university, autonomy was not the most important topic for instance. But now that university has arrived at maturity, it has become something interesting, important, and that has justified the reform that they have implemented now a few years back. So we think autonomy is necessary for responsive and sustainable higher education systems. We see very concrete illustrations of that. I mentioned the, the European context in terms of international collaboration or collaboration within Europe at least. It's become a very strong point of attention how to enable that collaboration to go deeper and that has very much to do with overcoming some very regulatory framework obstacles.

AU: Thank you so much for being with us today.

EBP: Thank you very much.