

Opening the gates or coping with the flow? Governing access to higher education in Northern and Central Europe

Rómulo Pinheiro · Dominik Antonowicz

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Abstract Access to higher education has become a key policy issue in most European countries in since the last half of the last century. We trace the historical development of the ways in which governments in two countries within the region, Norway and Poland, have attempted to steer developments. Three access waves or phases are identified and contextualized, by illuminating dominant policy logics and tensions. Our analysis suggests that “coping with the flow” reflects a continuous attempt to instrumentalize higher education and make it serve different political goals: equity, efficiency, and responsiveness. As for the institutions, these have either resisted or embraced government-led initiatives while protecting their institutional autonomy. We show empirical evidence of the fact that the two countries have undergone similar waves and policy measures, yet these have resulted in distinct institutional responses due to national peculiarities, history, local politics, and deeply rooted academic traditions.

Keywords Higher education · Policy · Equity · Access · Governance · Norway · Poland

Introduction

In Europe and beyond, pressures for the expansion of higher education (HE) enrollments have traditionally originated from a variety of sources: the labor market; rising aspirations among the youth population; the policy objectives of enhancing “equality of educational opportunity”; and of fostering social mobility across segments of the population. More recently, sustained investments in HE have also been considered a vital mechanism, for

R. Pinheiro (✉)

Department of Political Science and Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Agder,
Post Box 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway
e-mail: romulo.m.pinheiro@uia.no

D. Antonowicz

Department of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

countries and regions alike, to be able to compete in an increasingly globally connected knowledge economy (OECD 2007). In this paper, we take stock of the historical efforts, by central governments across two European countries, Norway and Poland, to steer developments regarding access to HE. Despite their unique contextual features, Norway and Poland are two interesting cases for comparison. Both countries are geographically located in the periphery of an expanding Europe. Poland has been a formal EU-member state since 2004. Norway is officially out of the union, yet, largely as a result of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), is widely considered a quasi-EU-member state. That said, both countries face similar challenges when it comes to successfully repositioning their national economies to take full advantage of the opportunities brought by globalization and the knowledge economy. Major differences (using selected indicators) between the two countries are shown in Table 1.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section two sketches the core dimensions composing the conceptual framework used for comparing developments across the two countries/systems, as well as its empirical operationalization. We then move on to present the empirical data for each of the three access waves identified, with a particular emphasis on equity, efficiency, and responsiveness. In section four, we tackle the tensions and dilemmas in the light of the notion of autonomy. The paper concludes by discussing the core findings with reference to the existing literature, and by suggesting avenues for future research.

Table 1 Norway and Poland at a glance

	Norway	Poland
Population (million, 2012)	5	38.5
GDP per capita (2012)	99,636 USD	12,710 USD
HE investments (% GDP) ^a	1.6 (OECD average)	1.5
Expenditure per student ^b	18,512 USD	8,866 USD
Attainment rates ^c	38 % (2.6 %) ^d	24 % (6.9 %) ^c
Graduation rates (upper secondary) ^c	90 %	83 % (OECD average)
Entry rates (HE) ^f	57 %	69 %
Graduation rates (HE) ^g	45 %	58 %
Enrollments rates (HE) ^h	86 % (Public) 15 % (Private) 74 % (Full time)	69 % (Public) 31 % (Private) 47 % (Full time)

^a Expenditure on tertiary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2010 figures), both public and private sources (OECD 2013: 184)

^b Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions for all services in 2010. In equivalent USD converted using PPPs for GDP, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents (OECD 2013: 174)

^c Percentage of the population (25- to 64-year olds) that has attained tertiary education, by type of programme and age-group in 2011 (OECD 2013: 37)

^d Average annual growth rate for the period 2000–2011 (OECD 2013: 39)

^e Upper secondary graduation rates in 2011 (OECD 2013: 42)

^f Entry rates into tertiary-type A education for students under 25 in 2011 (OECD 2013: 47)

^g Tertiary-type A graduation rates, including international students in 2011. OECD average is 40 % (OECD 2013: 57)

^h Students in tertiary education (type A and advanced research programmes), by percent share in type of institution or mode of enrollment in 2011 (OECD 2013: 273)

Conceptual backdrop and operationalization

Clark's (1983) seminal work on HE systems sheds light on the importance attributed to the key actors and coordinative dimensions while attempting to orchestrate system-level integration. European governments have traditionally been concerned with equity-related dimensions such as "equality of opportunity" (cf. Aamodt 2006). This, in turn, has led to increasing policy attention, since the mid-/late 1950s onwards, toward expanding access to, and widening participation in, HE, what Tapper and Palfreyman (2005: vii) term "the politics of access" (for a similar discussion, see also Clark 1983: 38). In a few countries, such as the Nordics, expansion was facilitated through decentralization in the form of the establishment of new, regionally embedded HE providers (Pinheiro 2012). Yet, access is but one of the many *values* (Clark 1983: 241–245) and *priorities* (Tapper and Palfreyman 2005) held by system-level actors, some of whom are more interested in *restricting* (elite systems) rather than *enhancing* (mass systems) access to HE as such (see Palfreyman and Tapper 2008; Trow and Burrage 2010).

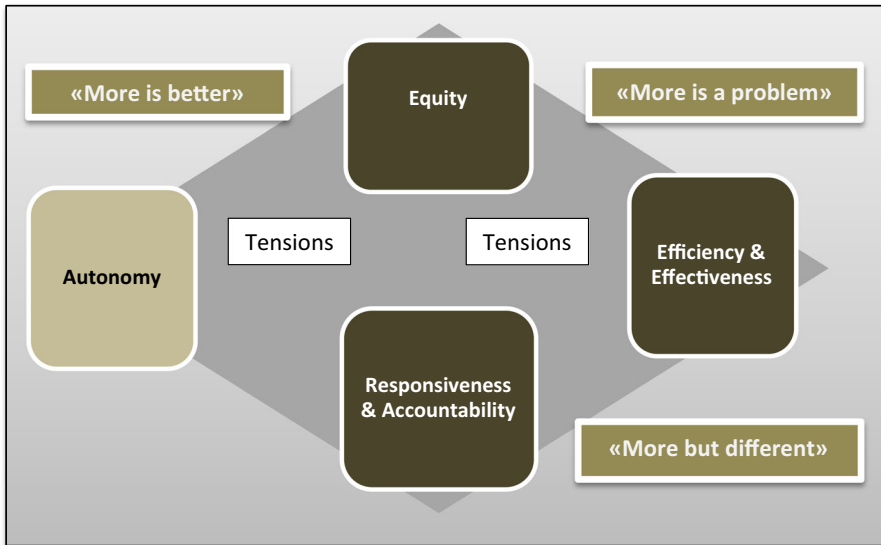
Higher education institutions (HEIs), the "academic oligarchy" (Clark 1983), and their core internal constituencies, academics and administrators, praise first and foremost *autonomy* (institutional and scientific) as a basic foundation for the inner or "autonomous life" of academe (Trow 1970) and the professional identities of academic groups (Kehm and Teichler 2013). Autonomy is a double-hedge sword since it encompasses both internal and external dimensions (Schmidtlein and Berdahl 2005; see also Olsen 2007). That said, in this paper, we primarily focus on internal notions of autonomy since externally related aspects are taken into account as part of more instrumental accounts (see below). As for the *market* (Marginson 2004), which may also encompass the State (cf. Bisson et al. 2010), it is particularly concerned with issues pertaining to the *efficiency* and *effectiveness* of HE activities (Gornitzka et al. 2004), and the ways in which these affect the overall competitive standing of individual providers and national systems alike. Finally, the rise of the stakeholder society (Neave 2002) and the growing prevalence of external interests in the "inner life" of academe (Trow 1970) have, *inter alia*, meant that *responsiveness* and *accountability* to the general public have come to the forefront of contemporary debates within European HE (Stensaker and Harvey 2011).

A preliminary comparison of findings across cases has identified three phases or *policy-waves* against which concerted efforts by government can be assessed and interpreted. The first wave of massification, termed here "more is better," took place when governments in Norway (mid-1950s until the mid-1980s) and Poland (between 1990 and 2000) undertook a number of key policy measures as a means of increasing the flow of students entering HE; thus, the dominant logic (driving force) here was that of *equity*. This wave was followed by concerns with respect to the quality of outcomes and *efficiency/effectiveness* of operations, resulting from an exponential increase in student enrollments and HE providers, corresponding to the "more is a problem" wave. This second wave lasted between the late 1980s up to the mid-1990s in Norway and between 2001 and 2010 in Poland. Finally, the third wave termed here "more but different" started in the mid-1990s in Norway and in 2010 in Poland. It attempts to steer access toward particular study fields considered to be strategic to the well-being of the country, hence being directly related to external calls for increasing *responsiveness* and, to an extent, *accountability* as well (Table 2).

Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of the conceptual model, based on Clark's triangle of coordination, adopted in this study. The analysis of the role played by key actors and their respective agendas or strategic priorities is set against the historical backdrop of the three access waves identified earlier. Particular attention is paid to the dominant

Table 2 The three “access waves”

	Norway	Poland	Dominant logic
“More is better”	Mid-1950s to mid-1980s	1990–2000	Equity
“More is a problem”	Late 1980s to mid-1990s	2001–2010	Efficiency
“More but different”	Mid-1990s to ongoing	2011–ongoing	Responsiveness

**Fig. 1** The study’s conceptual framework. *Source:* Authors

“policy logic” (Maassen and Stensaker 2011) or *rationale* for each of the three phases identified. Yet, it is worth stressing the fact that our model is a simple heuristic device and that the boundaries between the *four* elements of our quadrant are not rigid. There are a number of situations where dimensions and stakeholders’ interests do overlap, e.g., HEIs’ concerns about equity-related issues (Clark 1983) and/or the state’s willingness to promote efficiency and effectiveness by resorting to the market (Gornitzka et al. 2004). Thus, it is also worthwhile paying attention to the tensions arising from the coexistence of different/competing logics (cf. Greenwood et al. 2010) and the ways in which HEIs have strategically responded.

Regarding the operationalization of the aforementioned dimensions (Fig. 1) and following Olsen (2007), we distinguish between *instrumental* and *institutional* dimensions. Equity, efficiency/effectiveness, and responsiveness/accountability are intrinsically associated with governmental agendas and external imperatives and demands (cf. Gornitzka et al. 2004; Stensaker and Harvey 2011), whereas *autonomy* stands out as a distinctive endogenous feature (and deeply cherished value) of HEIs (Clark 1983) and the academic profession at large (Kehm and Teichler 2013). Thus, in our analysis, special attention is paid to the criticality of instrumental aspects (per the dominant government agendas and policy

rationales) within each of the (3) access waves, with autonomy pertaining to the ways in which HE providers have reacted (embraced or resisted) to such externally driven agendas.

The three access waves

Following the adopted conceptual model, this section presents the key findings across the two countries/HE systems for each of the three main phases or access waves identified earlier, against the backdrop of the dominant policy logic and their respective tensions.

“More is better”: equity as the driving force

Norway

The first expansionary wave in Norwegian HE can be divided into two distinct periods. The first (up to 1970) catapulted universities to the forefront of developments, whereas the non-university sector played a critical role between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, when university enrollments stagnated. Starting in the late 1950s, a clear governmental policy of expansion was adopted, articulated via the research councils. In the period 1950–1966, transfer rates into HE (as a percentage of secondary school graduates) grew from 35 to 47 %, resulting in a fourfold rise in enrollments, from less than 8,000 students in 1955 to close to 29,000 in 1966 (OECD 1971). By the mid-1960s, the proportion of all 20- to 24-year olds enrolled in HE reached 11.2 %, up from an estimated 3.6 % a decade earlier (ibid.). The key drivers behind the exponential increase in enrollments were the combination of the shortage of skills—an *economic rationale*—and a strong policy emphasis attributed to “equality of educational opportunity” (Aamodt and Kyvik 2005)—a *sociopolitical rationale*. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, access to HE was expanded via a gradual increase in the capacity of the university and non-university sectors, resulting in an exponential growth in enrollments, most specifically regarding female students, students from low-income groups and those located in more peripheral localities. Furthermore, in the late 1960s, a regional college system comprising a set of shorter, vocationally oriented institutions focusing on cross-/multi-disciplinary education was established and gradually expanded (Kyvik 1981). A major policy rationale with this measure was to enhance equality of opportunity to students located in remote regions, and originating from families with relatively lower educational attainments (i.e., first-generation HE students) with a preference for more vocational subjects and shorter (up to three years) educational programs.

In the mid-1970s, fears regarding the over-supply of graduates combined with a climate of economic uncertainty (effects of the global oil shocks) impacted on governmental plans for further expansion. HEIs were forced to respond to external calls for efficiency and flexibility (Aamodt and Kyvik 2005). Shorter and more vocationally oriented education, usually provided at the college level, rose in popularity, resulting in the gradual decline of the number of university applicants. The strong belief in universities as *engines* for economic development (Castells 1993), prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, was replaced by a new policy logic demanding socially relevant HE (Bleiklie et al. 2000: 95). This, in turn, led to the emergence (late 1970s/early 1980s) of a “policy of vocationalism” exercised around a technocratic attempt by government to manage HE outputs in the light of domestic economic needs (ibid.: 96). The figures are indicative of such an imbalance between sub-sectors. Between 1975 and 1985, enrollments across the non-university,

vocational college sector grew by 136 %, whereas university enrollments stagnated (Vabø and Aamodt 2005: 17).

Poland

Between 1945 and 1989, enrollments in Polish HE were kept low by the communist authorities. According to Sadlak (1991: 402), HE was made an integral part of the political system by subjecting essential decisions to the party's ideological and political objectives. Fueled by a spirit of political and economic revolution, enrollment expansion was initiated in the 1990s, when only around 13 % of the age-group entered the sector (Szulc 2004:12). The first policy step aimed at *de-regulation*, the HE Act of 1990, lifted the existing bureaucratic barriers to increasing enrollments, created the conditions for the appearance of a private sector, and introduced fee-paying part-time education across the public sector. During this period, the prevalent policy logic was to rapidly expand the capacity of the domestic system to address rising popular demand resulting from skills shortages. Between 1991 and 2001, enrollments in fee-based educational programs (public and private sectors) increased tenfold, from 92,000 to 994,000. This contrasted with more moderate growth (from 310,000 to 590,000 students) of those attending tuition-free, full-time education at the public universities (GUS 2013). The exponential rise in enrollments meant that, for the first time, students originating from socially and economically underprivileged families gained access to HE. Yet, ironically, this was mostly accomplished through their participation in non-subsidized, fee-based education in the private sector, which raised serious doubts about real access. However, private HEIs were forced to look for students outside the big academic cities (Warsaw, Poznań, Gdańsk), and in the second part of the 1990s, a number of them were also found in peripheral towns such as Suwałki or Nowy Sącz, hence creating educational opportunities for those students originating from less affluent, less educated families who were unlikely to undertake risk (social and financial) to join big universities far away from home. Even if private HEIs have been income-driven, they have helped to overcome critical cultural and mental barriers for families with low cultural capital. What is more, for students from underprivileged (socioeconomic) backgrounds, paying tuition fees while staying at home was the most affordable option.

After 1990, and as part of its transition to a post-industrial service-oriented economy, Poland entered a period of substantial transformation, which basically meant that there was a sudden demand for qualified labor. This was addressed in the form of the establishment of new, mostly part-time vocational programs across the public and private sectors. The focus on *quantity* meant that little attention was paid to *quality*. However, this changed in the late 1990s, when the first serious concerns regarding the quality of educational provision across the entire sector were publicly raised. This was partly due to high unemployment rates among graduates, which tripled between 1997 and 2001. Considerable political attention was then paid to the *quality* and *relevancy* of the curricula, considered by many to be outdated, rigid, and decoupled from the real needs of a post-industrial economy. This led to the passing of a new law (in 1997), which created the conditions for the establishment of a publicly run and funded HE vocational sector. The latter aimed to provide shorter (i.e., more efficient in terms of the use of public resources) and more vocationally oriented programs targeting all those who wished to continue their education after secondary school but did not have academic aspirations.

The turbulences associated with economic transformation forced the government to implement strong austerity plans aimed at enhancing *efficiency* (i.e., reducing costs) across the public sector. System expansion was aided by the introduction of new legislation (the

1990 HE Act) that not only allowed public HEIs to charge tuition fees for part-time programs, but also created the framework conditions for the rise of an unregulated private sector. The growth of tuition-based education across the public and private sectors was remarkable. By 2001, a total of 450,000 students (approximately 30 % of total) undertook some type of paid education (Antonowicz and Gorlewski 2011: 49–51). This, in turn, helped address a number of policy goals. Firstly, it allowed expansion to occur at a relatively low cost to the public purse. Secondly, it provided a considerable amount of private funding to the heavily underfunded public HEIs, in particular the universities (tuition fees accounted 15 % of total revenues across the public sector, 20 % at the public-run universities). The dynamic expansion also brought a series of negative side effects or unintended consequences, namely, a gradual loss of social-, political- and (most importantly) economic *legitimacy*.

“More is a problem”: efficiency and effectiveness come to the fore

Norway

During the late 1980s, a government Commission (*Hernes*) drew attention to the worrying decline in university enrollments and the lack of new/future entrants in the fields of the humanities and across long-term, research-based programs (Aamodt 1995: 65–66). In contrast to the first expansionary period (above), this second wave (late 1980s to mid-1990s) was neither planned by the authorities nor resulted from ongoing policy initiatives. The two main drivers for expansion were considerably high levels of unemployment combined with higher educational aspirations among the youth. Instinctively, the government attempted to match supply and demand by redirecting public resources dedicated to cover unemployment subsidies, into HE. Public pressures to provide open access for all qualified seekers intensified (Aamodt 1995). In 1994, and as a means of facilitating access to HE by students possessing low academic backgrounds, the government removed a series of structural barriers across upper secondary education. The number of registered students between 1994 and 1995 increased by 32 %, with the university sector playing a prominent role (NSD-DBH 2013). That said, the absolute number of graduates (a measure of internal efficiency) remained relatively stable until the late 1990s (*ibid.*)

The second period of expansion and reform involved both the universities and the colleges. After years of neglect, the universities welcomed the renewed policy attention. The reform proposals by the *Hernes* Commission (1988) were, by and large, “received with general acclaim by leading academics and administrators.” (Bleiklie et al. 2000: 98–99) As for the college sector, the mergers (1994), which were a top-down exercise, with the Ministry and Regional Boards setting the agenda, were, by most accounts, undertaken in an effective manner (Kyvik 2002: 69). However, it must be stated that the speed with which the new reforms were implemented was enhanced by the fact that the chairman and main architect of the proposals, Gudmund *Hernes*, later became the Minister of Education (1990–1995). In other words, an alignment between the objectives of the governmental policies and the constellation of various political forces, actors, and values seems to have been successfully accomplished (Bleiklie et al. 2000: 75–76).

Poland

The first symptoms of the “more is a problem” phase were reported in the late 1990s, but this phenomenon only became a serious issue in the early 2000s. Economic

slowdown and a rapidly rising number of unemployed graduates resulted in the adoption of new policy measures and a shift in the policy logic. The HE diploma lost its “magic power” to protect young people from unemployment, and the prevailing myth of “more is better” collapsed. As a starting point, it needs to be acknowledged that university autonomy, granted shortly after the collapse of the communism, was significant (Popłonkowski 1996). In the post-communist countries, university autonomy was anything but a political issue.

“In Poland we used to define university autonomy in political terms only as a relation between the university and the central administration. This relation determines the scope of liberties of universities with regards to teaching and research. University autonomy has been defined as an absolute value and people tend to believe that the more autonomy there is the better. However, such understanding of university autonomy was shaped and legitimized during communism.” (Białecki 1997:34; own translation)

Hence, the government had limited power to act as a policy maker also with regard to student access, largely due to the fact that the academic community was oversensitive about any type of direct or indirect interference. By the mid-2000s, there was a general feeling that expansion had slipped out of political and professional control. The rapid growth in the number of students was mainly driven by fee-based programs. There was little the government could do about restraining growth in the private sector, but it tried to limit the number of part-time students at public HEIs in two ways. First and foremost, it stopped subsidizing part-time studies and set stricter institutional requirements for part-time programs to limit the number of new students. The intention or policy logic here was to leave further expansion in the hands of the market since continuous financial support for expansion across the public sector was both economically dubious and politically risky. The private sector was already large enough to provide room for candidates who failed to gain access to full-time programs at public HEIs.

Overall, the government was weak in pursuing its own policy goals, although some scholars (e.g., Kwiek 2009; Antonowicz 2012) have doubts about whether these goals have even been explicitly declared. One of the major concerns was—strongly related to system expansion—academic multi-employment, pertaining to the professional engagement of academics employed in public HEIs in teaching in the private sub-sector as well. Both the central government and the rectors of public universities wanted to stop it and effectively use the human resources at their discretion to produce high-level quality research and teaching. Despite the government’s intentions, the 2005 law on higher education failed to include a ban on additional employment due to strong opposition from academics and rectors at private HEIs. Estimates suggest that more than a third of all academics based at public HEIs had at least one additional job outside their own university, which raised serious doubts as to their performance, not least in the research realm. Earlier studies suggest that, as a phenomenon, multi-employment had far more reaching consequences for public universities as it resulted in the de-institutionalization of the research mission (Kwiek 2012).

Finally, in 1999, the government was one of the first signatories of the Bologna Declaration, which was part of wider agenda of “Europeanization of Polish higher education” (Kwiek 2014). In the 2005 law of HE, the government forced HEIs to introduce 3 + 2-year programs, thus replacing the rigid 5-year degree programs. This, in turn, provided students with greater flexibility to switch programs between bachelors and masters levels. More importantly, the new structure enabled students to exit the system after 3 years.

Traditionally, a major problem was that the majority of degree programs at public HEIs were academically driven and left no option but to undertake a 5-year study period regardless of student needs, talents, and intellectual abilities. The Bologna structure therefore provided a basic framework to award students who wished to complete shorter degrees while providing access to higher (masters)-level programs to others. That said, despite government hopes, based on the experience of other European countries where Bologna has enhanced efficiency by reducing the time to graduation, it turned out that approximately 75 % of bachelor graduates continue their education at the master's level (GUS 2013).

“More but different”: focus on responsiveness

Norway

By the mid-1990s, the shift toward the knowledge society/economy paradigm raised domestic concerns regarding: future labor market needs; the retraining of individuals (move toward skills and competencies); and the (still) unfulfilled socioeconomic and cultural needs of society. The HE sector was, once again, seen as critical for leveraging the country's capacity to compete, both regionally (Europe) and internationally. The 2003 quality reform resulted in a series of changes in the funding formula (based on input and outputs) of Norwegian HEIs, both as a means of enhancing their efficiency/effectiveness as well as overall responsiveness to external imperatives and demands (KD 2005). New contractual arrangements between the Ministry and the HEIs were forged (Gornitzka et al. 2004), with collaborations with external actors such as industry being emphasized. This meant, among other aspects, that societal outreach or engagement (*formidling*) became a formal mission at all HEIs.

Norwegian universities, old and new, are more willing than in the past to collaborate with various external actors across the public and private sectors. Yet, challenges, both structural and cultural, remain (Pinheiro 2013). There are concerns regarding the shortage of graduates across certain key, knowledge-intensive areas of the economy such as engineering, education, and health and welfare. A recent ministerial commission (*Stjernø*) has suggested enhancing institutional collaboration (mergers and alliances) and institutional differentiation (profiling) as a means of better addressing local and national labor market needs (NOU 2008) and of making Norway a robust and competitive knowledge economy. A 2012/3 White paper to Parliament stressed the need to develop a long-term plan for HE and research to ensure more predictability and transparency with regard to national investments and highlighted that there “is a demand in all parts of the country for good access to higher education and specialist knowledge environments.” (KD 2012: 11).

Beyond responsiveness, the establishment (2004) of a National Quality Agency (NO-KUT) has, on the whole, enhanced transparency and accountability across the system. As far as equity goes, in 1999, the government devised a structural reform (*Competence Reform*) with the objective of easing access into HE by non-traditional students (adults). In 2003, a plan aimed at increasing the percentage of minority language students, particularly first-generation immigrants, in HE was adopted. As for gender-related issues, national policies focused on three aspects: reduce the gender segregation across study fields; increase female participation/completion at the graduate (masters and PhD) levels; and enlarge the share of female professors (KD 2005). All HEIs are now required to develop a strategy and formulate an action plan with respect to gender equality.

Poland

The “more but different” period came as a result of the dramatic demographic decline, namely 30 % expected reduction in the number of students entering HE in the next decade. For the first time, the number of vacancies at HEIs across the country surpassed that of the number of qualified school leavers, resulting in fierce competition among providers. This, in turn, changed the nature of the domestic HE market, from supply- to demand- driven. Concurrently, access to HE across the public and private sectors was largely enhanced, particularly in relation to the former since not only is tuition free, but is also considered to be of higher quality, hence enjoying a better market reputation. In response, the private sector began searching for students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the consequences of the over-supply has been the gradual diminishing of issues pertaining to access to HE from the political agenda. Notwithstanding, sections of the private sector advocating for greater student choice have, to no avail, lobbied the government to provide them with direct subsidies.

The implementation (2011) of the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF)¹ has led to enhanced freedom in curricula development, enabling public HEIs to become more responsive to market demands and expectations. For example, the best research-performing departments have been allowed new freedoms to (re-)design curricula structures. Nevertheless, the government has had to handle contradictory expectations. There is a serious possibility that, due to demographic decline, a number of HE providers will cease to exist. In this context, the government is being pressurized to centralize planning and quality control. On the other hand, it has recently decided to deregulate a number of professions to allow graduates to enter the labor market without the need for additional certification. However, quality concerns have led influential groups such as lawyers and medical doctors, to enact additional entry barriers into the profession, as a means of protecting the latter’s legitimacy.

Moving beyond responsiveness and accountability, in 2011, the government imposed a 2 % cap on enrollment in existing, full-time tax-based programs at public HEIs, as a means of controlling rising operational costs. The government has increasingly been more proactive in steering access patterns by promoting certain degree programs in areas seen as strategic to the national economy (e.g., chemistry, STEM areas), in the form of additional funds/subsidies in order to stimulate supply and demand. In so doing, the state is taking active steps to directly affect market dynamics (see Bisson et al. 2010).

Tensions and dilemmas: revisiting autonomy

Given the shift in policy logics across the three access waves, how can the (re-) actions of HEIs during the aforementioned periods be characterized in the light of internal concerns with respect to institutional autonomy?

In Norway, the first expansionary wave was characterized by a certain reluctance by the university sector to accommodate new reform measures. Given the universities’ considerable autonomy as regards *numerous clauses*, the government was left with no option but to use the non-university sector as an instrument for enhancing enrollment expansion. In Poland, the 1990 HE Act not only restored but further enhanced the institutional autonomy enjoyed by

¹ In Norway, work has started (in 2011) in order to integrate the national qualifications framework (for lifelong learning) with EQF (consult NOKUT 2011). New regulations are expected during the first half of 2014.

public universities when it came to student enrollments. Ideologically imposed *numerus clausus* were lifted by the democratic government, but public spending on HE dropped dramatically in the 1990s. The “more the better” meant stretching public HEIs to their limits, with the solution being to redirect the growing inflow of students to the private sector.

As for the second expansionary wave, many Norwegian universities initially refused to adopt a policy of limited admission, yet another indication of their degree of autonomy. That said, the dramatic rise of university enrollments between 1989 and 1990 (from 16 000 to 46 000) led to the introduction, in 1990, of stricter admission policies for university education. Yet, such measures had little practical effects on enrollments at the university level, which continued to climb throughout the 1990s. In Poland, public universities reacted negatively toward any form of government attempts to steer access, and the government found it difficult to pursue such policy goals. Therefore, it was forced to use indirect instruments, such as cutting public funding for part-time programs at public universities, to slow down enrollment expansion. Moreover, the Polish government failed to address the issue of multi-employment, which was the foundation for the massive expansion across the private sector. For many academics, “moonlighting” became part and parcel of their exercised academic freedom.

Finally, in the third (ongoing) expansionary wave, and starting with the 2003/4 Quality Reform and the adoption of the Bologna standards, Norwegian HEIs have been allowed increasing autonomy as a means of enhancing their ability to respond to emerging market demands, e.g., from students and employers. Fiercer competition—for students, funds and prestige—has, however, meant that different degrees of responses have been given across the sector. Despite the fact that, on the whole, most HEIs welcome as many new applicants as is financially feasible (governmentally funded positions), some institutions have used their enhanced autonomy to become more selective in order to attract the best students, raise quality standards, and enhance efficiency (time to graduation). In contrast, others, particularly the struggling university colleges located in relatively remote regions, have adopted a rather open student admission policy as a means of overcoming their lack of competitiveness in the realm of research. What is more, growing patterns of “vocational drift” by universities in tandem with increasing “academisation” has meant decreasing institutional diversity (*homogenisation*) at the system level, an aspect that may turn out to have negative implications as far as equity is concerned. As for the role of the state, section 3.7 of the 2005 Act for universities and colleges refers to the following: the issuing of regulations (including restrictions) on the national coordination of admissions, when/if necessary; a separate admission process in the case of higher degree courses; and granted institutional autonomy regarding the placement of foreign students (NOU 2005: 10; consult NOU 2006 for regulations regarding academic freedom). Finally, in Poland, the government restored its political steering by putting a stop to the rise in the number of students in full-time programs at public HEIs. In addition, and for the first time, it begun to steer access to HE in accordance to the needs of the economy. Such a shift in government policy brought about strong opposition by public universities, but political pressure on universities to build stronger links with society (and respond to external demands) had mounted for some time, thus leaving them no option but to adjust their programs to exogenous circumstances and stakeholder demands.

Discussion and conclusion

The historical account presented here suggests that governments in Norway and Poland have often been taken by surprise and, as a result, have had to undertake a number of key

measures with respect to either easing or limiting access to HE. In the first phase (“more is better”), expansion was fueled by the establishment of new educational providers, regional colleges in Norway (1970s), and private HEIs (1990) in Poland. In the former case, the measures were motivated by the resistance of the established players to attempts at reforming degree structures and at opening up the (public) sector to a mass student population. In Poland, the rationale was an economic one, with the state attempting to achieve massification while controlling public expenditure in a climate of financial austerity and acute economic modernization. That said, the main driving force or policy logic across both countries was that of fostering access to HE; hence, *equity* played a critically important role in the first expansionary wave. In the second phase (“more is a problem”), governments in both countries attempted to cope with the unexpected rise in the number of entrants into the system, either due to high youth unemployment (Norway) or as a result of declining quality and widespread dissatisfaction regarding learning outcomes (Poland). More often than not, *efficiency/effectiveness* concerns drove the political agenda, with governmental agencies taking bold steps to curtail public subsidization (Poland) and/or enhance system-wide integration (Norway), e.g., via forced mergers. Finally, in the last and most recent phase (“more but different”), governments in both countries have pursued a series of strategic measures aimed at enhancing student flexibility (credit transfer) and accountability (quality screening) as per the Bologna goals. In addition, governmental agencies have attempted to redirect student demand toward a selected number of key areas seen as vital for the national economy in the near future and against the backdrop of an increasingly connected and competitive knowledge-based society/economy. In other words, increasing *responsiveness* to external dynamics and imperatives has been the primary policy driver behind this third (albeit more modest) expansionary phase.

The cross-country analysis reveals that, despite unique historical and contextual differences, government attempts at striking an adequate balance between *equity* (access) and *efficiency/effectiveness* (see Clark 1983) are rather prevalent issues across both HE systems. In Poland, a core policy priority has been to balance private sector interests alongside traditional universities and the newly established public-funded vocational providers, as well as the growing need for greater diversity (*institutional autonomy*) with the desire to regulate the market (*equity/accountability*). In Norway, tensions arising from the “blurring of boundaries” (Pinheiro and Kyvik 2009) between the university and non-university sub-sectors and their consequent effects on (institutional) *diversity* and (student) *choice* (see Van Vught 2009) have been at the forefront of the policy agenda.

Our analysis also reveals that HE expansion (and its system-level regulation) is far from being a planned (i.e., straightforward and predictable) process, hence suggesting that, in European HE, policy processes in general and implementation mechanisms in particular are characterized by increasing ambiguity, dynamism, bi-directionality, and unpredictability; aspects that are often neglected among policy circles (cf. Gornitzka et al. 2005). The transition from governance to *steering* at a distance (Kickert 1995) has, *inter alia*, meant that ongoing dynamics across the organizational field of HE (see Kyvik 2009) and within the institutions themselves (Pinheiro 2013) are increasingly characterized by the confluence of a set of key dimensions, namely: the needs and expectations of internal and external constituencies; conflicting policy logics; strategic agendas, driven by either internal or external actors; and academic and institutional aspirations (Pinheiro and Stensaker 2013).

While attempting to compare developments in Norway and Poland, it is worth bearing in mind the different timing of reform processes that, in turn, are intrinsically associated with the different access waves. Poland initiated its first expansionary wave about half a

decade after Norway, moving (rather rapidly) from an extremely centralized steering model into a more decentralized market model (Gornitzka 1999). As for Norway, the analysis reveals that “the market” has, implicitly or explicitly, always played an important role in the governance of HE affairs, including matters pertaining to educational expansion (Bleiklie et al. 2000: 144), yet its prominence across the whole of the public sector has increased since the early 1980s. As alluded to earlier, the massification of HE across Western Europe started in the 1960s and 1970s (Trow and Burrage 2010). This makes it tempting to assume that Norway and the bulk of the Nordic region have acted as “leaders,” while Poland and other Central Eastern European (CEE) countries could, for various reasons, be associated with “laggards” (cf. Mirvis 1997). This, in our view, has more to do with a question of *timing* than the willingness to adopt certain (novel) policy mechanisms and (innovative) institutional strategies, as illustrated by the traditional resistance by the Norwegian state/society toward “the market” (e.g., private sector, tuition fees) and that of the established public universities in accommodating a growing societal demand for HE. Conversely, the strategy of allowing Polish public universities to charge tuition fees to reduce the burden in the public purse and thus promote massification could be (tentatively) interpreted as akin to an early adopter (i.e., leader type) strategic posture rather than a laggard per se.

Going forward, we contend that there is much to gain from a comparative historical analysis (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003) of European HE systems with distinct starting points or path dependencies and endogenous characteristics, yet experiencing similar dynamics, converging policy priorities, and unresolved policy-related tensions and dilemmas surrounding the further expansion of HE enrollments. More specifically, future studies comparing developments across Europe, within and/or beyond the Nordic and CEE regions, could cast critical light on the ways in which governments and HEIs alike are coping with shifting waves in enrollments, including but not limited to: the effects of the recent financial crisis; the ongoing restructuring of the domestic and European HE landscapes; and the negative demographic trends throughout Europe.

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