



TRUE: Dissecting the University

TRUE (Transforming Universities in Europe) is a European project that places universities under a magnifying lens: no longer in their research-promoting role, but cast as objects of critical inspection. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the project aims to gain a thorough understanding of the systems of higher education, their evolution, and the policies devised to manage European universities.



«If Stanford and Hamburger University are equally entitled to bear the name of university, then I wonder what specific features set a ‘university’ apart from any other organisation.»

Benedetto Lepori, PhD (Faculty of Economics, USI)

Centre for Organisational Research CORE – USI

CORE is a research centre of the Faculty of Economics-USI. Headed by Professor Alessandro Lomi, the Centre operates right at the heart of an international collaborative network. On these premises, COR-e is steadily emerging as the European landmark for the study of organisation theories and insights into economic organisations. One offshoot of the Centre is a research group led by Dr Lepori, which focuses on the management and performance assessment of research and of universities of applied science.

web:

www.core.eco.usi.ch/education.htm

“As organisations playing a central role in our society, universities produce knowledge, and knowledge is increasingly seen as one of the mechanisms of economic growth and social welfare.” This is how Benedetto Lepori, a researcher with CORE and USI coordinator for TRUE, explains what sparked the ongoing research programme on the world of higher education. “At times, government strategies on how universities should change – Lepori continues – are based on ideological assumptions which totally disregard what is distinctive about the academic system and its function. I have been working on this project with two USI researchers, Marco Seeber and Martina Montauti. We have applied the tools of social and economic research to study universities and their organizational transformations.” Public bureaucracies, private enterprises, or professional organisations run by academics? What is the ideal management model for a university? To what extent is the organisational structure of universities being modified by government policies? And how much can such changes influence the production of knowledge, teaching, and ultimately the quality of a university? These are the main questions confronting the project’s researchers. The research is included under the Higher education and social change programme of the European Science Foundation. Programme participants include research centres in Italy, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Portugal, the UK, and Norway, where Bergen University acts as project leader. Switzerland’s contribution to the project is backed by the SNF.

Universities under the lens: a delicate balance between statistics and qualitative research

Does it make any sense to turn universities into organisations increasingly reminiscent of private enterprises – into ‘establishments’ that are becoming progressively less academic? Weighing, or quantifying, the scientific production of academics: does it tell us anything useful about the quality of a university? Adjusting tuition fees: does it produce more efficiency for an academic organisation? Every time a choice is made, the university is pushed in a new direction; unless we analyse things carefully, we could easily end up on the wrong track. We should, earnestly and effectively, pursue the objective of universities as places where knowledge is generated. There is an ongoing debate on what ‘system of government’ universities should adopt. On the one hand, historically, European universities could be described as amorphous and decentralised organisations, based on an academic style of management. “On the other hand – Lepori explains – a new trend has emerged in recent decades, in which universities have been gradually transformed into strategic corporate actors, by introducing proper management systems and centralising power.”

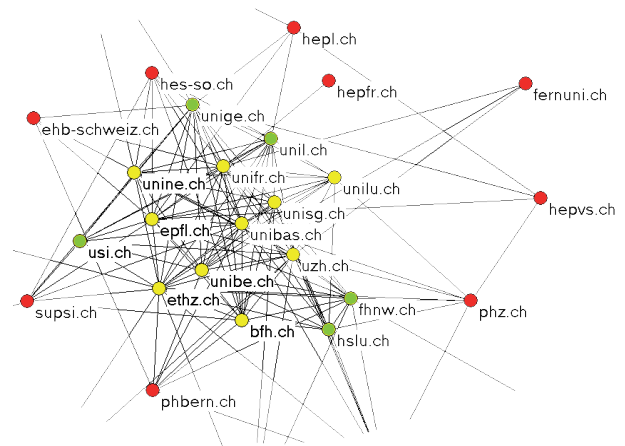


Benedetto Lepori, PhD

«To run an organisation as complex and intriguing as a university is no mean task.»

In this connection, we need to explore to what degree public policies, history, and the teaching curricula can impact the organizational structure of a university, and how these differ within Europe. These are major questions running through the TRUE study; and they will be tackled with a methodology that is on the whole quite innovative. As Lepori points out: “We thought long and hard what analytical tools to apply. Universities have traditionally been surveyed on the basis of qualitative criteria, borrowed from sociology. And sociology tends to use more or less structured interviews conducted in the field. When we set off, we questioned whether that was indeed the most suitable methodology to apply to a sample of 26 universities spread across eight countries; finally we opted for developing an on-line questionnaire, made up of ‘closed’ questions, to be handed out to the governance actors of the various universities involved: ranging from members of the University Council to the Academic Senate, from the Rectors to the heads of administration to the Faculty deans.” It was a demanding job, but the researchers were rewarded, as no less than 700 questionnaires were completed, for a response rate close to 50%: a hefty harvest of data. Thus, for the first time, we are going to be able to analyse and collate such data qualitatively, but also quantitatively, by applying statistical methods. Statistical techniques are indispensable, says Lepori, given the great variety of objects in our enquiry. Another novelty of our project concerns the approach we adopted: “Generally, when one talks about

management and university – Lepori stresses – one assumes a model which the academic organisation is expected to follow; and then one monitors each organisation’s progress in implementing that model; in our own approach, however, we place far more emphasis on complexity, on the fact that managing a university is anything but a child’s play— it isn’t a problem with one single solution but a gamut of different models of organizational coordination and control. In other words, besides the formal, hierarchical dimension, we need to take into account the informal dimension, i.e. the network of relations, how these components intersect and interact. We need to assess, for example, the ability of a rector or of a professor to connect different spheres and contexts, the academic and the political ones, their ability to create consensus, indispensable for the acquisition of resources and well-managed relations with the environment.”



Graphic representation of the relational structure of the Swiss university system, through website links.

In truth, the modern university encompasses at least three ‘identities’: one is the community of scholars, which governs itself; the second is an organisation run according to principles proper to private enterprise; and a third one is a public institution animated by social targets. All of these aspects are important for the good health of the organisation; so that public policy should really be alert and sensitive in striking a happy balance between all the components. Undeniably, the resulting picture is far more complex, but this is a view in which university actors feel increasingly ‘at home’ in a world where knowledge, the economy, and society itself are engaged in a fruitful dialogue. It is a complex situation, rich in nuances, which can be unravelled only by combining different analytical tools, quantitative methods and analysis, and the use of new information sources. “A recent example – Lepori explains – is provided by a study we published in the prestigious Journal of Informetrics. In that paper we demonstrated quantitatively that the density of relations between two universities depends on how far apart they are and on their being located in the same country; however, other factors matter, namely reputation, research intensity, and size. That project covered a sample of over 1,000 universities in Europe. We were helped by the findings of the first census of European universities of applied science (carried out by a EU programme in which we took part) and by data collected from the websites of the universities surveyed. If it is true that relations and partnerships are a structural element of the academic world, then these analytical techniques applied to networks could potentially revolutionise our understanding of the factors which generate new knowledge and innovation. Finally, all this could have radical implications for higher-education policy.”