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Small is (sometimes) beautiful: a case of Scotland and Montenegro

There is no such thing as a university. There is only the idea of the university. If your university has a marketing office, like mine does, you will know all about this concept. Here is the University of Glasgow, where among other things I am currently a PhD Student. Nice, isn't it? Oh, btw, this is also the University of Glasgow. In fact, this is the building in which I do most of my teaching.

Despite what our marketing office would like to tell you, a university is not its buildings. Here is the world famous building designed by the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh that is the home of the Glasgow School of Art. And here it is on fire on the day before the degree show in 2014. Strangely enough, here is Fakultet Likovnih Umjetnosti, or the Art Faculty of the University of Montenegro, also housed in an important historic building and also on fire on the day before the summer degree show. Luckily no one was hurt in either fire, but sometimes the things that we have in common across Europe are very strange and completely unpredictable.

What is important, aside from no one being hurt, is that both these university institutions have continued to operate, albeit in different buildings. So if not the buildings, then what? Is it the people? We management consultants like to say so, but the people change. In the last couple of years both of these art schools have appointed a new Director or Dean. Generations of students are recruited, graduate and leave. Staff members join and depart, the lucky ones take sabbaticals. It's different all the time.

Is it the law, that determines the university? Well, partly. In the UK, the right to call yourself a university is very carefully restricted and applies only to organisations that have received a Royal Charter from the Queen. Here is a university that you might not have heard of: Glasgow Kelvin. It's an impressive building, isn't it? The university's website said lots of impressive things too, mainly because the content had been largely stolen from the University of Glasgow. The overseas students who had paid their fees in advance arrived to find that this building isn't a university at all and never has been. The people responsible for the fraud of course ended up in court. In Montenegro, there is legislation to regulate universities as well. It has recently allowed for the establishment of private institutions, an innovation that might well come to the UK soon.

So. Not buildings, not people. Partly legislation, but maybe it's the organisation itself, its mission, its structures, its policies. As quality assurance people this is often the stuff that most interests us. A few years ago as part of some research to inform a new online quality assurance system, I asked some key quality people at my university to map out QA processes from the classroom to University Senate. No one could do it. That's not to say that there was any identifiable problem in

how QA operated, but just that we put a lot of faith in systems that in fact we often don't really understand.

As a higher education community, we put a great deal of faith, and indeed a great deal of resource, into planning, into strategies, into policies. As quality people, we might be particularly susceptible to the power of policy. Here, after all, is the first requirement of the revised ESG1:

1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

Have a policy, publicise it, and the rest will follow. We all know that. Don't we? Refine and revise your policy to trigger institutional change. We know that too. Well, maybe... I've worked at a number of universities in the UK and as a consultant and researcher in universities right across Europe. Sometimes I've written policy or undertaken institutional research, but mostly my job has been to translate the strategies and policies that come from outside the university or from university management into real activities undertaken by real staff and real students. I've managed large-scale quality projects that have involved multiple European partners and I've worked closely with small teams of academic staff to transform programmes or even single modules.

At the moment, I'm completing my doctorate at the Adam Smith Business School at the University of Glasgow. My topic is the relationship between policy and strategy-making in universities and *what actually happens*. This distinction is really important and I will come back to it again. What I will say now is that what actually happens, by which I mean, what people actually do, is the determinant of organisational outcome and not what is written in the strategy or in the law on higher education. That is not to say that these things are never linked, but that their relationship might be a bit less straightforward than we like to imagine.

Throughout this presentation I'm using pictures to illustrate my points, instead of text. The pictures come with references, so that you can access the materials they represent, but I've deliberately chosen to show you the materials rather than show you bullet points. This is partly because pictures are nicer to look at first thing in the morning, but it is also because I want to reinforce some ideas about the relationship between ideas, strategies and actions and about how these relationships are authentically expressed as material objects throughout our working lives. I'll be making the full text of my talk available on the EQAF website, as well as my slides, so you will have access to all of these references.

And so to Montenegro and Scotland, two countries not only geographically at opposite ends of Europe, but also, I think, at opposite ends of our current European quality journey. Montenegro is not currently part of the EU and, alas, Scotland might not be either very soon, but European influences have permeated the quality systems and cultures of both countries and it is our relationship with European structures that might also determine the directions of our respective higher education systems.

Scotland and Montenegro are both small countries, and this matters when we talk about quality in our higher education systems. Although Scotland is still part of the UK, it has always maintained a completely separate education system. Although some of Scotland's universities are among the very oldest in Europe (my own institution of Glasgow was founded in 1450) they remain part of a small group of 19 autonomous higher education institutions. This diverse range of HEIs includes 14 campus based universities, one distance-learning university, an educational partnership institution based in the Highlands and Islands, one art school, a conservatoire and an agricultural college. All are funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which is responsible for distributing funding to individual institutions for teaching, research and associated activities. There are no private degree-awarding HEIs in Scotland. Overall, there is an average of just under 300,000 students enrolled in Scottish universities in each academic year, of which 22% (according to the last figures available) are from overseas. The University of Glasgow is the highest overseas recruiter with nearly 7,500 international students recruited in 2014/15.

Montenegro is much smaller than even Scotland, and it arranges its higher education in a slightly different way. Firstly, since 2005, the government has passed legislation that allows private institutions. Secondly, there is a tendency common across the region for faculties to assert their independence from their accrediting institution and for some new HEIs to describe themselves as faculties rather than universities because of the specialised and limited scope of their academic programming. So it rather depends on how you count, but a recent and incredibly valuable report by Andree Sursock and Tomas Jurgenson for the EUA-IEP programme evaluated 10 HEIs, some being independent faculties with total student enrollments below 200, compared to the state funded University of Montenegro with around 25,000 students.

Scotland has a well-established, and I think we believe, a pretty sophisticated approach to quality that has existed in its current form since 2003. We call this approach the Quality Enhancement Framework and it includes a number of related activities that include institutional review, which is conducted very much from the perspective that solid quality assurance systems are already in place at our institutions and therefore the focus of external reviews should be the activities that universities undertake in order to improve the quality of their provision. The scope of these reviews has broadened over a number of cycles and currently includes six broad themes:

- Institutional context and strategic framework
- Enhancing the student learning experience
- Enhancement in learning and teaching
- Academic standards
- Self-evaluation and management of information
- Collaborative activity

ELIR reviews are carried out by a team of six reviewers: one student reviewer, one international reviewer, three senior UK-based academic reviewers and one coordinating reviewer. The institution undergoing ELIR submits a self-

evaluation document called a Reflective Analysis (RA). The ELIR team uses this document and initial meetings with staff and students to identify topics of particular interest to explore during the review visits. At the end of the review, the ELIR team produces an Outcome report (covering the overarching judgment, the areas of positive practice and the areas for development) and a more detailed Technical report. Reports from all institutions are also collated and thematic publications describing good practice and general areas for sector improvement are circulated across the HE community.

Universities are not expected to develop all of their activities alone and in fact a large component of the Quality Enhancement Framework is based on collaborative working. As a community, university-based teams and individuals receive modest financial support to attend collaborative meetings and workshops; to undertake research in particular areas of need or interest; to visit universities internationally to find out about good practice elsewhere and to create guides, reports and other materials to help colleagues across the sector. Cross-sectoral themes have included:

- Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (2011-14)
- Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes (2008-11)
- Research-Teaching Linkages: enhancing graduate attributes (2006-08)
- The First Year: Engagement and Empowerment (2005-08)
- Integrative Assessment (2005-06)
- Flexible Delivery (2004-06)
- Employability (2004-06)
- Responding to Student Needs (2003-04)
- Assessment (2003-04)

Currently, the whole sector is looking at Student Transitions. So far, so great! It all sounds wonderful. So how was it achieved? How did Scotland develop this coherent approach to quality with a positive focus on enhancement?

The simple answer is that we had no choice. As far back as 1963 UK Robbins Report on Higher Education established the principle that university education should be available to all who were suitably qualified to benefit from it and created the conditions for massification of the UK higher education sector and for enhanced central steering of university activity. It made a case for "a higher education *system*" where previously universities were much more independent of national planning. Overall, the participation rate in higher education in the UK is now around 47%, and 52% in Scotland when prior to 1963 it was between 5-8%.

Elite higher education for the few is concerned primarily with shaping the mind and character of the ruling class, as it prepares students for roles in government and the learned professions. In mass higher education institutions are still preparing elites, but a much broader range of elites that includes the leading strata of all the technical and economic organisations of society. In universal access contexts, there is concern with the preparation of large numbers for life in

an advanced industrial society and to maximise adaptability to rapid social and technological change and the ascendency of 'soft' knowledge as a source of national competitiveness. With this vision of the purpose of higher education has come an increasingly unassailable understanding that universities are integrated into a broader national economy and that public support for education should be predicated on measurable indicators of economic contribution. The introduction of individual undergraduate fees in England and Wales has similarly focused attention on the economic transaction of university study: offsetting the cost of fees against the expectation of enhanced future earnings, and it is likely that similar fees will be introduced in Scotland.

In the UK funding per student dropped very significantly (by around two thirds to three quarters) between 1979 and 2004 as student numbers rose and funding is now zero for subjects outside the national target subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths. Institutions are faced with contradictory forces that require them to cut unit costs (teaching more students with fewer staff and diminishing resources) whilst simultaneously improving performance in all areas of operation including teaching, research and the commercialisation of research outputs, known as knowledge transfer. Successive governments have adopted a populist, market-led view of quality (or threshold performance standards) that that can be broadly categorised as 'value for money' and increasingly insisted on accountability measures including performance indicators, 'customer' surveys and league tables in an attempt to "operationalise and legitimise" a competitive, marketised education sector. Universities, like other public sector organisations, have unwillingly inherited a generalised perception that anyone in receipt of public and private funds is fair game for state scrutiny and state intervention. Chomsky in fact argues that Universities and their employees, like other public service workers, are 'parasitic' in that they are dependent on the largesse of society, and they are often treated with all the suspicion, contempt and harassment that other welfare recipients suffer.

The tool most often leveraged in this power struggle is called strategy. Universities are expected to be cognisant of, and to respond to, a cascading hierarchy of strategies that mostly owe their genesis to government imperative. The prevailing national rhetoric has been, and remains, one of 'we have no choice'. Change is inescapable, driven by technology advances and globalisation, and higher education feeds directly into the national economy. Universities are therefore under enormous pressure to deliver a significant contribution to national survival strategies, despite in fact the weak evidence of a link between higher education and any form of defence against economic collapse.

Having said all that, the Scottish model has up until now proved extraordinarily successful. The reason I think it has been successful is that it models and reinforces the kinds of things that academic staff do, and want to do, naturally. My colleague Ewa Chmielecka at the Warsaw School of Economics argues persuasively for the core values and ethos of academics as teachers, researchers and managers of education and her research findings echo almost exactly the findings of some of my own research in Scottish universities. Management researchers like me tend to get excited about organisational cultures and ethos,

but in fact the cross-Europe findings of studies like the IBAR project suggest that normative academic cultures remain in place despite everything.

The Enhancement Framework in Scotland has been successful because academics like to collaborate, they like to research and to debate. They are good at generating thoughtful, rigorous and meaningful work. In the main, they are committed to the quality of the education they they provide to their students and they are willing to listen and to adopt innovations that help them to maintain that quality even when conditions are sub-optimal. They understand and accept the value of collecting evidence and defending their practice. In fact, the rhetoric and management of the ELIR process of institutional review sometimes feels a little like an institution-wide doctoral viva. They produce, fundamentally, a material environment of discussions, scholarly papers and classroom innovations that intersect seamlessly with the material culture of academia in a way that quality assurance forms and performance targets do not.

All this is possible because the national agency for quality, QAA Scotland, has increasingly operated on a 'light touch' assumption about the ways in which institutions manage their quality assurance processes and so therefore are able to focus on more creative discussions about quality enhancement. They know that institutions have a great deal to lose in terms of reputation, and therefore in their ability to attract and retain students and what we might call bedrock QA processes are well-understood and managed in a coherent way across the whole sector. The aim has been support, nurture and normalise good governance of QA whilst focussing attention on the practices and activities that lead to real innovation and real improvement.

So what about Montenegro? There is certainly no shortage of quality assurance strategies in the institutions in Montenegro, and I should know because I wrote at least two of them myself as part of EU projects I was involved in. As a external panel member for two institutional accreditations, I certainly saw no shortage of documentation. What is more problematic are the ways in which academic identity and ethos have to be performed in a country that is just too small to replicate the useful practices we have nurtured in Scotland. Inevitably there are considerable political pressures in Montenegro that play out in the higher education sector in particularly idiosyncratic ways. But the issue of scale has a number of negative impacts on the student experience. For example:

- There are not enough academic staff to provide a comprehensive curriculum, so universities rely on part-time teachers visiting at weekends from Belgrade and other universities.
- Public investment is very low, teachers wages are very low, and this leads to nepotistic and sometimes corrupt practices.
- Research opportunities are very limited because domestic investment in equipment, facilities, travel and publishing is negligible.
- Universities are financially reliant on student fees and recruitment may be increasingly volatile should Montenegro join the EU.
- There are almost no opportunities for staff to access or to create materials to support a thriving teaching quality culture.

A lot of Montenegro's problems are political and economic and these problems are replicated in the higher education sector. Without full-time staff, without space for discussion and scholarly exchange, without investment in research capacity academic cultures are inevitably weakened because the sector is weakened. This is not to say that I didn't witness some areas of impressive teaching practice during my time there, but this is maybe despite rather than because of the environment in which higher education must operate.

So, should we try to replicate the Scottish model in Montenegro, using its geographic partners to build a bigger community of practice? I certainly found a receptive audience when we discussed these kinds of activities, but I am anxious about exporting a model that in Scotland looks likely to be superseded in the very near future. I'm also anxious about the appetite for neo-liberal views of education prevalent in the political rhetoric in Montenegro, not least because on one of my last visits I sat in a Rector's office under a very prominent picture of Margaret Thatcher, who in the UK at least is widely perceived as the architect of many of the attacks on academic culture we have suffered in the last few decades. I don't have a picture of that particular encounter, so instead here's a picture of Druže Tito, that was hanging on the wall of my apartment in Podgorica.

And so back to my PhD research. As I said earlier, what I'm interested in is what actually happens, and not what is written in the law of higher education, or in the quality assurance policies of the universities I work in or visit. To collect my data, I'm using a research technique that was first developed by the Marxist trade unions in the car factories in Turin and Milan in Italy in the 1950s. The aim of this methodology is to support worker to worker communication, and to bypass the "official" story that is codified in our quality assurance documents and our institutional mission statements. My research interviews have only one question: If I had to take over your job tomorrow, what would I need to know? This question almost always solicits a soliloquy that can last for a couple of hours. And it uncovers the authentic practices of my academic colleagues, and not what is written in the law or in the policy. It also uncovers the authentic quality and concern for the student experience that is lived every day by real people in real organisations, and also the problems and barriers that they need to overcome.

Unfortunately, this search for authenticity is unfashionable in the current higher education climate. In the UK, in the last decade certainly, the primary strategic drivers for UK higher education have been government-mandated performance indicators that in turn feed a variety of highly publicised league tables. Of these, two have tended to dominate local strategy production: the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[1], and the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS)[2]. We now have a new UK-wide framework, the TEF, which early indications suggest might wash away the quality enhancement agenda in a tsunami of numerical performance indicators.

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[1] See: http://www.ref.ac.uk
[2] http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php

These unassailable national drivers have had a marked normative effect on strategy production in higher education during the past decade: national and international university rankings have made material the global battle for educational excellence and as our EUA colleague Ellen Hazelkorn rightly points out "no one wants to be at the bottom." Typical institutional responses have included restructuring of academic courses to make them more marketable and competitive; increased emphasis on measureable research outputs and research income; links with industry and knowledge transfer; and rationalisation of institutional structures (particularly closing departments less likely to achieve against targets and merging administrative services).

At a systems level, universities are no longer perceived as substantially equal and instead encouraged towards competition and hierarchy. Badges of excellence in the UK such as inclusion in the Russell Group of research- intensive institutions have become increasingly important. Reputations and rankings are everything because these are the mechanisms that attract the most students, the best students, and (crucially) the students that will pay the most to attend our universities.

You will notice that nowhere do I mention the normative influence of Europe or the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG1&2). I undertook extensive institutional research in 2012-13 as part of the EU-LLP IBAR project and found that almost nobody in UK universities had read the ESG and quite a lot of people hadn't heard of it. The ESG is not a working document on the desks of UK university managers. Instead, the broad assumption is that the national quality agencies requirements are in line with the ESG and so institutions do not need to treat the European standards as a guiding document.

The impact on institutional culture has been a generalised transformation from the collegiality and academic culture-driven activities of the Enhancement Framework, so something which is much less focussed on process and much more focussed, if not obsessed, with outcome metrics. At the same time, austerity cuts to higher education, particularly in non-STEM subjects, are creating significant financial difficulties. Some of the effects include:

- There are fewer academic staff to provide a comprehensive curriculum, and universities are increasingly relying on part-time teachers, GTAs and adjunct staff on casual contracts.
- Public investment in non-STEM subjects has been substantially cut, teachers wages are getting lower in real terms, and this is leading to widespread disillusion and departures from the profession.
- Universities are increasingly dependent on overseas student recruitment, which is an increasingly volatile market, particularly since BREXIT

And students notice. Because what students value is academic culture as well. We can say without opposition that students are surveyed and included in our

quality mechanisms, but we ask them the wrong questions. And our increasing obsession with performance indicators and rankings is making this worse.

Here are students protesting in Glasgow a fortnight ago. The institution they attend is widely perceived as one of the best in the world. There are a huge number of applicants for every place on offer. And yet these students feel that they are not getting what they need. Interestingly my subsequent discussions with this group suggests that they are not entirely sure what the problem is, and the placards they are holding tend toward a neoliberal reading of the situation: in other words "as customers we feel that we are not getting value for money". The reality, in fact, is that what these students are really seeing is the erosion of academic practice as a result of austerity policies, coupled with a national measurement regime that does not value academic culture. Their concerns and frustrations were replicated by staff at a rather less public debate later the same week. What I want for Montenegro is the same thing I want for all of us across Europe, and across the world, which is a higher education sector that helps us all to live in a better way in an increasingly complex and challenging world and which maximises the opportunities open to every citizen. I believe that we can only do this by asking what do academics really do, and how can we support that?

I hope that this deliberately provocative talk has generated some questions, but I also have some unanswered questions of my own to end on this morning:

- As a European higher education community, what values, ethos, culture and practices do we want our measurement and evaluation tools to reflect?
- What practices and models should we be supporting each other to develop?
- What practices, tools and materials represent our culture and values in an authentic way?
- Do our quality processes reflect and support our academic identities?
- Whose needs should universities exist primarily to serve? Do our evaluation practices and tools reflect those needs?