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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: FROM CASE STUDY TO STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT

Abstract. This chapter traces the origins of Institutional Research from its beginnings in the US. Subsequently, it follows the development of the field in the UK and Sweden during the mid to late 1960s and, examining a rather different situation in France and Spain a quarter of a century later, analyses the factors and policies at the macro level that shaped the fortunes of Institutional Research. It provides some explanations for the apparent delay in the emergence of IR in the latter two countries. It concludes that competition, regionalisation and the managerial revolution are powerful influences in determining the spreading fortunes of our field.

INTRODUCTION

For a quarter of a century, the European Association for Institutional Research has brought together scholars and analysts, researchers and administrators. And, despite our title, from the very first, our community has never been confined simply to Europe. Quite on the contrary, it is a matter of record that we are part of a far wider constituency and, moreover one that, to judge by the numbers drawn in by recent conferences, is growing by leaps and bounds. Still, it is not out of place to admit that the origins of our particular Republic are not wholly of our own making. They reflect rather the projection into a European setting of a particular operational perspective on research into higher education the roots of which developed first on the Western side of the Atlantic.

What I want to do in this short excursion is to reflect a little on the origins of institutional research and the developmental trajectory that it has followed in Western Europe.

In many respects, a very good case can be made for arguing that institutional research is amongst the earliest modes to be employed in telling the story of higher learning. Certainly, it would not have passed under this rubric at the time when the earliest histories of individual universities - usually ancient - and within them the individual colleges - usually distinguished - were first penned. But if none would then have seen the saga in terms of being 'an institutional saga', it cannot be denied that their focus was most explicitly on what today's jargon would call the 'institutional level'.

Agreed, the present-day scope of institutional research has evolved far beyond the institutional history of higher education. Our field obeys the inexorable process of fragmentation, splitting off and re-coalescence, that process which Walter Metzger termed 'subject partition' (Metzger 1987) and which remains a fundamental characteristic of knowledge in a dynamic state. Today, this dynamic has brought us to a condition, however, where a mort of difference exists between research at the institutional level and institutional research. To my way of looking at matters, the essential difference is less in methodology, technique and disciplinary related perspectives so much as the ultimate purpose on which they are brought to bear. What distinguishes institutional research *stricto sensu* is its application to the individual

establishment of higher education. It is in essence the institution interrogating itself to provide intelligence to its leadership on current performance the better to enable the latter to shape the policy, posture and institutional development for the future. Ham-fisted though this definition may appear, it makes certain presumptions about the role of the individual university very particularly in the domain of planning and budgeting, just as it also makes certain assumptions about the type of relationship which binds universities generally to society or to the community. And, furthermore, though the connection is more remote, certain assumptions are made about how the student estate is construed.

It is important to explore these dimensions a little further if only for the fact that they provide a powerful explanation for the rise of our community and, no less significant, they provide an explanation behind the initiatives which led up to our creation twenty five years ago.

ROOTS

It is very far from coincidental that the roots of institutional research lie not in Europe so much as in the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. In other words, institutional research is in part the product of a very particular relationship between universities and government on the one hand, and on the other the arrival of the higher education system to which it applies, at a specific stage in its development, namely massification. What set higher education in the United States from its European counterparts was not simply that it reached massification some three decades earlier.¹ It was also a series of systems in which functions that in Europe were located at central government level and under ministerial oversight, initiative and responsibility were embedded in the individual institution.² Amongst them, the setting of admissions standards, the determination of university fees, the conditions of hiring, revenue generation, the decision to launch new programmes or to terminate non-viable ones, internal budgetary allocation and above all that task which weighs upon the shoulders of American university Presidents – to wit, the raising of funds, the quest for donations and the hunt for endowments. (Fisher & Quehl 1989: 4) The development of an ‘internal intelligence gathering capacity’ – which is essentially what institutional research is about – becomes singularly important when student fees and thus the attraction of students form a substantial part not simply of the university budget³ but also reflects the standing and repute of the establishment in the community. Institutional research becomes central both for shaping future institutional development and policy, for ascertaining and evaluating how far current policy is ‘on track’. Institutional research was not confined, however, to what today would be termed ‘internal audit’. But precisely because ties between university and local community in the United States were particularly strong and expressed in the various forms of Boards of Trustees – or in the public sector, Regents – institutional research played and, for that matter still plays – an essential part in shaping the terms and conditions under which the university negotiated and re-negotiated its place in that community (Trow 2003).

...AND ORIGINS IN EUROPE

The question this raises is, of course, when and how did institutional research begin to assume importance in Europe? Here, for very obvious reasons, both the circumstances and the general context were very different, and though it is safe to say that the drive to mass higher education certainly played its part, it did so through a very different angle d'approche. Put simply, whilst in the United States research into higher education at systems level evolved out of institutional research, in Britain and Europe the converse was the case: institutional research emerged in the wake of systems level investigation. More particularly, it finds its earliest origins in the various commissions of enquiry that were set up from 1958 onwards in Sweden and from 1961 onwards in Britain which governments had brought together to consider how best to deal with 'expanding social demand' for higher learning. (Neave 1989: 211–222.)

There are good reasons for these differences, not least of which the fundamental construct of the university as a service of state. This was a powerful interpretation and that on two counts. First, it had been fully assimilated into, and reinforced by the notion of, higher learning as part of the 'welfare state' – a policy that took shape in the period of post war reconstruction. (Neave 1992) Second, higher learning, construed in this light, built upon a far earlier notion that had accompanied the emergence of the modern university in Europe from the first two decades of the 19th century. This particular functional interpretation formed the bedrock of both the Napoleonic and the Humboldtian model of university. Both stood as a state service, supported by government monies and subject to a high degree of operational oversight by central national administration. Such oversight extended entre autres to appointments, conditions of employment and student admission, which were largely set out in a framework, of national application and grounded in administrative or constitutional law. The fact that universities in Europe were construed in this light largely accounts for the relative tardiness – relative, that is to the United States – in the emergence of institutional research.

ACCOUNTING FOR TARDINESS

This tardiness can be explained with reference to a number of factors, the first of which was that as a state service, universities in Europe could count on public finance for their development. And whilst they had most certainly to render accounts for the use of that money, such accountability was limited in scope, and is sometimes alluded to as a 'closed cycle' concept of accountability. It involved, essentially, a relationship of financial probity with the appropriate Ministry and the verification that expenditure had been undertaken in keeping with current legislative stipulation. This is not to say competition was absent between institutions. But if it took a public form, that public competition was equally limited and confined largely to the area of the 'glittering prizes' of research and research funding. Nor in Europe did competition involve universities locked in strife for students. Effectively, the drive towards massification in Europe stood as the polar opposite of the situation in the United States. For if in the latter instance, institutions competed for students and no less for the fees that came with them, in the former, it was students who competed for places. Indeed, in certain systems, competition for places was itself tied not to admission to university so much as to the results obtained in the Upper Secondary school leaving certificate. (Teichler