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THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN POSITIONING UNIVERSITIES

Practices in Central and Eastern European countries

INTRODUCTION[1]

The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a political construct which refers to all the Eastern bloc countries west of the former Soviet Union, the independent states in former Yugoslavia, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and sometimes Austria. Over the past twenty-five years, all the countries in the region except Austria underwent transition from communist rule to democracy and from state-rule economy to liberal market economy.[2] The former Yugoslav Republics became independent countries, some after a period of ethnic conflicts and war. The Baltics became independent states from the Soviet Union. Others were released from the direct influence of the Soviet Union or from autocratic dictatorships, as in the case of Albania and Romania.

As the CEE countries changed politically and economically, their higher education systems were also reformed. In the last fifteen years, these countries have experienced the most wide-reaching and frequent interventions to their higher education systems in the shortest span of time ever in history. As elsewhere in Europe, in CEE a decade or more of massification in student demand for higher education was not followed by corresponding increases in state funding. The extent and proportion of public funding for higher education vary across CEE as do knowledge policies (higher education, research and innovation) adopted by various governments. These reflect the diverse regional approaches to economic and social policies – from continuous state-regulated social welfare regimes to extensive market deregulation and liberalization. However, a common point of reference in all CEE has been the European Union and the Bologna Process concerning the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which led to policy convergence in some areas such as degree structures, quality assurance, recognition of qualifications, research and innovation and internationalisation (Dakowska and Hamsden, 2015; Vukasović, 2015). Yet some areas are more resistant to change than others, and due to the diverse historical circumstances and different dynamics of transition, the systems and institutions in CEE continue to be diverse.

The present chapter will focus upon the extent to which institutional positioning supported by institutional research plays a role in the flagship universities in the region. The analysis includes six Central European countries: Austria, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia, and draws on empirical data published in Klemenčič et al. (2015) on decision support issues in CEE; on the study of higher education reforms in the Western Balkans (Zgaga et al., 2013); and on study of higher education governance in Europe (Eurydice, 2008). We shall explore institutional research as a practice

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"of collecting, synthesizing, and analyzing institutional data to fulfill mandatory reporting requirements, assessment and to support university decision-making and planning" (Klemenčič et al., 2015, page 72) and shall link it with the capabilities of flagship universities in Central and Eastern Europe to strategically position themselves in higher education markets locally and internationally.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: IMPERATIVES AND CAPABILITIES FOR STRATEGIC POSITIONING

The term "positioning higher education institutions" implies that higher education institutions – or actually decision-makers within these institutions – have both imperatives and capabilities to strategically position themselves within the external context. These external contexts involve global higher education markets as well as the local communities within which the institutions are embedded. Fumasoli and Huisman (2013) define institutional positioning as the process through which higher education institutions locate themselves in specific niches within the higher education system and these niches (sets of relations) are expected to contribute positively to institutional functioning and performance. Institutional positioning is indeed one aspect of wider-reaching processes of strategic planning and institutional development which typically aim for a combination of goals, such as institutional efficiency, better performance and indeed improved reputational standing.

The imperatives for institutional positioning come from two well-rehearsed sets of global trends. First, an increasing market orientation in higher education implies increasing competition among higher education institutions for scarce resources, such as – most notably -- academic talent and funding. Institutions with better reputational status tend to be more successful in attracting talent. Talent attracts more talent which in turn attracts financial resources (for example by being more competitive in applying for European Union research funding or by attracting fee-paying students); it feeds social development and economic growth through knowledge exchange, and as such helps to reproduce institutional status and prestige (Klemenčič, 2015a). Furthermore, university rankings present themselves as a powerful instrument determining and reinforcing the status and prestige of universities in global positional competition (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Second, the governments and the public pose more specific and wide-ranging demands on higher education institutions to address the various societal needs. There are explicit expectations integrated in various research assessment instruments and performance measures for scholars and institutions to demonstrate societal impact from publicly funded research. From the previous assumption that higher education and research are inherently good for the society and the peer review nature of assessing scientific output we have moved in last twenty years to a new area. Governments and public research funding bodies demand that researchers and institutions should demonstrate "the societal products (outputs), societal use (societal references), and societal benefits (changes in society) of [publicly funded] research" (Bornmann, 2013).

Both trends inevitably link higher education institutions more closely with the society in which they are embedded and strengthen their engagement with local communities, which is referred in the literature as strengthening the "third mission" of higher education institutions, next to teaching and research. In a special issue on third mission in higher education, published in the *European Journal of Higher Education* and guest edited by Romulo Pinhero, Attila Pausits and Patricio Langa (2015), the argument is put forward that many of the major tensions surrounding the third mission still remain unresolved. One such tension revolves around the question of how to balance public expectations with HEI autonomy and the academic freedom of constituencies – staff and students. This question brings us directly to the discussion of capabilities for institutional positioning.

Capabilities for institutional positioning are real opportunities and positive freedoms of institutions -- i.e. their decision-makers -- to critically shape institutions' responsiveness to higher education environment for the purposes of institutional sustainability and improved functioning (adapted from Sen, 1999). Institutional capabilities, thus, highlight what the institutions are able to do and to be within the higher education systems and markets; and what it is that the institutional leaders, students and staff can do in the name of the institution to contribute to the institutional goals whatever these may be. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom of internal constituencies lie at the core of capabilities for institutional positioning and institutional development more broadly.

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Whereas academic freedom is an individual right or at least a condition pertaining to institutional leaders, individual staff members and students (Berdahl, 1990), institutional autonomy refers to positive freedoms of institutional leaders to take strategic and operational decisions on behalf on the institutions (Pritchard, 1998). It also refers to higher education institutions operating and being governed in the absence of interference by external parties in decisions (King, 2015), which comprises organizational, policy, financial and human resources, as well as strategic priorities and actions.

The principle of institutional autonomy implies granting institutions the right to decide by themselves on their internal organisation and operational conduct, while remaining accountable to their main stakeholders (Klemenčič, 2013). In view of the quest for universities to be more responsive to the socio-economic demands, this approach favours participation of external stakeholders – especially from industry and government – to increase accountability and cultivate links with the broader environment (Teichler, 2006; Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007). These are typically included in the external university boards, as part of general tendency towards the creation of managerial infrastructures parallel to academic ones, leading to a shift in decision-making from the collegiate governing bodies to managerial bodies (de Boer et al., 2007; Amaral et al., 2003; Maassen, 2003). The underlying expectation is for universities to act more as corporate institutions (Shattock, 2009). By incorporating management practices from the private sector to public services, the aim is to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions by giving them more autonomy while demanding more accountability (Klemenčič, 2013).

The governments have begun to look for new ways to govern the higher education sector, trying to come up with instruments of regulation and control which are accepted by the sector as legitimate and are effective in steering the system. There has been a rise in external and internal evaluation and accountability mechanisms to this effect (Stensaker and Harvey, 2011). Accountability means that HE institutions have to use public funds responsibly and pursue their operations in line with the governmental and general public expectations (Klemenčič, 2012). The institutions need to demonstrate this through various performance evaluations and other control mechanisms. While the relationship between the state and institutions has shifted from state control to state supervision (van Vught, 1989), the state remains interventionist in an evaluative sense (Neave and van Vught, 1991; Klemenčič, 2012). The evaluative state has developed more procedural policies (Musselin, 2009), and delegated evaluative competencies to independent agencies, such as quality assurance and accreditation agencies, research funding agencies and education councils (de Boer et al. 2007; Klemenčič, 2012).

External evaluations of institutional performance have contributed to strengthening of institutional leadership and management (Välimaa, 2011), and paved a way for strategic planning and strategic positioning also in institutions where these functions were previously non-existent or underdeveloped. In fact, in many European countries, the state mandates the institutions to prepare multi-year strategic plans. These contain not only the goals and objectives, but also specify resources and activities needed for implementation, timeline and units or individuals responsible for implementation. These strategic plans are frequently directly linked to performance-based funding formulas.

While the financing formulas continue to be debated across Europe, the overall trend is towards shifting the burden of financing public HE from the governments to the institutions and linking funding to performance (Klemenčič, 2013). Institutions bearing a rising burden of self-financing are trying to compensate by strengthening links to business and industry, and especially by increasingly passing the cost burden on to students. These circumstances call for more strategic planning and institutional positioning if the universities are to ensure financial sustainability.

For most institutions, relations with various funding bodies and with global league tables are one of the key aspects of the positioning game. Both funding bodies and ranking agencies tend to outline very specific performance indicators which inevitably become targets for higher education institutions (Cowburn, 2005), and which guide data collection to supply evidence of achievement. Such exogenously driven institutional research does not necessarily aid strategic planning. As Cowburn (2005, p. 105) suggests: “[t]his approach tends to force institutions away from a pro-active strategic approach towards reactivity – demands coming in thick and fast, tight timescales pushing institutions into making decisions and taking up opportunities that may not be in their best interests – thus impeding clear strategic thinking.” At the same time, the need for monitoring performance increases the role of institutional research within the institutional governance.

Strategic planning implies a deliberate well-thought-out process whereby actions are chosen on the basis of carefully considered goals followed by rigorous analysis of strategy options – as emerging from available resources and opportunities and their probable consequences. Yet the everyday reality of decision-making within higher education institutions (or indeed any social organisation) is hardly such a conscious and intentional process. Furthermore, intelligence for informed decision-making is rarely readily available. Institutional leaders need to take decisions in the fast-changing and complex higher education environment. Information – if available at all -- is imperfect and incomplete within structures which are multi-layered, heterogeneous and embedded in internal politics. To put it simply, the world in which higher education leaders take strategic decisions is messy and fairly unpredictable.

To discourage the institutions from reactive (rather than pro-active) decision making, governments have imposed on public institutions the task of preparing multi-year strategic plans. A similar task is imposed by legal owners and boards of trustees in private institutions. As Taylor and Machado (2006, pp. 146-147) suggest, strategic planning has been advocated "as the key to superior institutional and system performance", yet strategic planning has also often failed. The reasons for failure lie in vague – platitudinous – language applied in strategic plans without clearly spelled-out objectives, timelines, available resources, responsible units and individuals to coordinate and monitor the implementation. What we often find in universities' strategies is a "mission-overload" whereby institutions seek to excel in too many functions and are unable to select some where they truly hold competitive advantage enabling them to profile themselves. This mission overload translates into excessively broad, unrealistic aims and objectives in strategic plans, which serve more as an exercise in external relations and marketing than as a management tool. Strategic plans also fail when there is high resistance from internal constituencies, poor management to oversee implementation, unsuitable people involved in planning, and if strategic planning has proved to be "a bureaucratic, rigid and cumbersome data-intensive process" (Taylor and Machado, 2006, p. 148). This later proposition is particularly relevant to the role of institutional research in strategic positioning of higher education institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN UNIVERSITIES: PURPOSES, STRUCTURES AND PERSONNEL

The classical definition by Saupe (1990, p. 5) conceives institutional research as "research conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information which supports institutional planning, policy formation and decision making". Saupe further specifies the three key functions of institutional research as supporting institutional governance, institutional evaluation and general data management. The question arises how these various functions are balanced within individual institutions and, especially, whether and to what extent institutional research is applied to inform ingenious strategic planning such as decisions on institutional positioning. The proposition put forward is that for purposes of deliberate strategic positioning institutional research is indispensable and especially institutional research towards developing contextual intelligence. Contextual intelligence focuses in particular on the changing political and economic environment, constellations of possible strategic partners and of competitors, availability of and competition for various academic resources, and so on, all of which are indispensable for decisions on institutional positioning (Terenzini, 2013).

Before further advancing this proposition, it should be noted that institutional research as defined above has already been practised in the United States since 1950, while in Europe the practice of institutional research is much more recent, highly varied across countries and institutions, and in purpose different from the American practice (Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013). Both American and European institutional research refers to the practices of collecting, synthesizing, and analyzing institutional data. However, whereas American institutional research primarily informs institutional decision-making and planning, European institutional research also (and sometimes primarily) feeds into fulfilling mandatory reporting requirements to the state and into external quality evaluations and accreditation (Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013). Another difference lies in how institutional research is 'institutionalized' within governance structures. Whereas American universities tend to have a fairly centralized institutional research unit, in European institutions the delivery of institutional research is typically scattered across different administrative offices rather than joined in one unit (Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013). However, also in Europe the trend is to try to connect institutional research and quality assurance units and link both to strategic planning. As suggested by Klemenčič and Brennan (ibid., page 269): "[O]ne major commonality across Europe is that the expansion and professionalisation of institutional research is related to and increasingly integrated into the systematization of quality assurance at institutions. This effectively means that new units are erected within institutional governance structures which tend to combine several functions that are associated with institutional research. In other words, data management, internal and external reporting and advising for institutional governance have been blended into the management of quality assurance."

The demand for contextual intelligence also raises demand for more varied competences amongst institutional researchers. Herein lies another difference between US and Europe. Whereas in the US, institutional researchers enjoy an established professional identity and ample academic programmes to acquire professional degrees and or pursue professional development, in Europe career paths of institutional researchers are highly ambiguous, academic programs are only emerging (and predominantly focusing on general higher education management or -- at best – quality 'assurance); and the 'hybrid professionals" conducting institutional research neither have a notable job market nor institutional identity (Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013). Work remains to be done by associations such as EAIR to affirm the practice of institutional research and sustain the professional identity and professional community of institutional researchers.

In the everyday decision-making within higher education institutions many decisions regarding strategic positioning will be taken incrementally. Historic legacies, existing relationships, established cooperative practices and habits of the mind are the ones that shape institutional responses to achieving sustainability and improved functioning (cf. Krücken, 2003). And then there are external prompts, such as the yearly publications of ranking tables or research assessment exercises or performance funding negotiations that create a bit of steer and reflection upon grand transformations, which indeed are difficult to achieve, if they are at all possible or even desirable. For deliberate strategic positioning on however small a scale, institutional research is, however, indispensable. Without proper intelligence developed in-house, directed to the specific questions of institutional leaders and geared toward specific institutional purposes, the institutions all too easily become subject to the influence of league tables, comparing themselves with the world-class universities even if their profile, resources and location disqualify them from playing in the world-class league (Klemenčič, 2016). In other words, in absence of any other contextual intelligence, the institutions may lose sight of what excellence means in their particular case, what is relevant and how they can achieve it. The crude measurements of excellence imposed by rankings may distort the authentic purposes and mission of the institutions in questions, and distort the sense of their strategic niches and the relations they should cultivate to achieve these.

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The predominant governance model in Central Europe is Humboldtian: most of the countries subscribe or had returned to that model after the social transformation (Scott, 2007; Pritchard, 1990; 2015). Before the 1990s, in Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia, the model of the socialist self-managed society and economy was applied to the governance of higher education systems and higher education institutions (Zgaga et al., 2013). The basic legal entities were faculties, art academies and colleges – not the university which was only an umbrella institution without many managerial and academic powers (ibid., 39). Fragmentation of university organisation is a consequence of that model. Romania had a Napoleonic tradition of state serving elite institutions and was subject to full control of the state when it came to decisions on university operations. The organizational characteristic of the Humboldtian model is academic self-governance with collegial decision making, and weak university managerial structures. Yet, governance of universities as public sector organisations has been changing due to changes in government steering and developments in higher education markets for students, academics and financial resources (Enders et al. 2008).

At the beginning of and during the 1990s, legislators in transition countries focused on the new general framework for higher education which had been profoundly challenged everywhere by the overturn of the political system and by the economic conditions. Creating legal provisions which would ensure academic freedom and institutional autonomy has been crucial in this regard. Only in Serbia, where in 1998 Milošević government imposed a legal amendment which very strongly interfered with the traditional autonomy of universities; this process was delayed until the beginning of the 2000s when a new democratic government by Zoran Đinđić came to power (Zgaga et al., 2013). Consequently, the governments were looking for more legitimate instruments to steer the system: they redefined and upgraded external quality assurance mechanisms, promoted competitive research funding and gradually began inserting performance conditionality into funding arrangements. The more market-oriented conception of higher education was promoted in the transition countries also by various external agencies, such as the World Bank and OECD, and later through the modernisation agenda for higher education in Europe by the European Commission (ibid.).

Austria was among the first of the six countries to introduce funding agreements in 2004 (Klemenčič et al., 2015). These are basically contracts between the federal government and the universities under which progress in the fulfilment of performance targets is monitored through annual 'Intellectual Capital Reports' (File et al., 2013). Poland too, was among the first countries in Europe where output-based criteria played an important role in funding (Jongbloed et al., 2010). In Romania, the new Law on Education in 2011 also introduced differentiated funding based on performance (Klemenčič et al., 2015). Next to core funding, which is incremental, there are also supplementary, complementary and institutional development components which are allocated to universities, based on the quality criteria and standards. Slovenia is combining a formula-based system, which includes output-based elements with contracts that specify targets and goals for universities (Klemenčič, 2012; File et al., 2013). In Croatia, no output criteria were used in funding arrangements until the academic year 2012-2013, but the latest reform of the institutional funding system is introducing contract-based funding, using both input-based and output/performance-based criteria (Šćukanec, 2013; File et al., 2013). In Serbia, the 2005 Law on Higher Education introduced a negotiated funding model; however, in practice "the new model has not been implemented; instead, higher education institutions have been funded through the system of direct financing [based on previous years' allocations]" (Vujačić et al., 2013, p.16). Funds, which are earmarked for specific use by the government, are sent directly to the academic units based on the relevant funding category according to number of students, staff, academic programmes, etc. (ibid.). But even in Serbia, as well as in other former Yugoslav countries, the reform of funding towards a more output-oriented model is in sight (Klemenčič, 2013).

Changes were underway also in university governance arrangements. Some of the most common changes have been introduction of university boards to institutional governance with participation of external stakeholders (from industry, business and government), although the actual competences of these boards vary across countries (see Table 1). Only in Austria is the University Council, which consists of external stakeholders, also a decision-making body "responsible for long-term and strategic planning and for determining the institutional orientation" (Eurydice, 2008, p. 33). The Senate must approve the development and organisation plans; however, most decision-making responsibilities fall under the competence of the University Council (ibid.). In other countries such bodies perform supervisory functions (Poland, Serbia and Slovenia). There is no external board in Romanian universities.

Table 1: Internal governance of universities (adapted from Eurydice, 2008 and own research)

	Austria	Croatia	Poland	Romania	Serbia	Slovenia
Academic body	Senate	Senate, at least 60% are academic staff, at least 10% students	Senate	Senate (25% students)	Senate, at least 20% students	Senate, at least 20% students
Decision-making body	University Council	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate	Senate
Advisory/ supervisory body	University Council (external stakeholders only)	Advisory Council (mixed internal and external stakeholders) Council (rectors, vice rectors, deans, heads of departments)	Council (optional; possible only external stakeholders)	None	Council (2/3 academic and admin staff, 1/3 students and founder	Governing Board/ Council of Trustees (internal and external stakeholders)
Executive head	Rector elected	Rector elected internally	Rector elected internally	Rector elected internally	Rector elected internally	Rector elected internally (student vote 20%)

Despite the introduction of external boards, with the exception of Austria, these have not adopted decision-making functions which include strategic planning. Strategic planning has remained in the hands of Rectors to be confirmed by the academic Senates. These, coming from the ranks of academics, are rarely well prepared to take on managerial responsibilities. The habits of mind and routines of institutional management in all countries except Austria carry the legacies of the past system where the state administration micromanaged universities and institutional leaders had neither real decision-powers nor responsibilities to strategically managing universities.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Looking at the institutional research practices in Central and Eastern Europe and strategic positioning, several observations can be made. Like elsewhere in Europe, universities in Central and Eastern Europe are caught between enforced data reporting (deriving from accountability to government) and institutional research for strategic development (because universities want to do better).

Reforms of quality assurance have important implications for institutional research. The Standards and Guidelines (Bologna Process, 2009, pp. 18-19) mention explicitly that "[i]nstitutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programs of study and other activities" and that "[i]nstitutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programs and awards they are offering". Furthermore, the recommendations provide the following guidelines as to achieve this ‘standard’: “Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or what the results of innovatory practices are. The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but they are at least expected to cover: student progression and success rates; employability of graduates; students’ satisfaction with their programs; effectiveness of teachers; profile of the student population; learning resources available and their costs; the institution’s own key performance indicators” (Bologna Process, 2009, p.19). The implementation of European Standards and Guidelines both at the system and at the institutional level has been extremely diligent (Loukolla & Zhang, 2010). In all of the examined countries we observe strengthening of the external quality assurance bodies and processes at the system level, as well as further development of internal quality assurance structures and procedures; both resulting in more developed practices of data collection, analyses and reporting on university operations (Klemenčič et al., 2015).

The changes in public funding mechanisms have also affected institutional research practices. The systems for allocating state funds to higher education institutions have been changing from the exclusively input-based models to funding schemes that include performance indicators (ibid.). There are fundamental differences in the type of data and reports requested from universities by the governments in the incremental funding scheme where allocations are based on previous years’ allocations; formula funding where allocations are calculated using standard criteria for all institutions; negotiated funding where allocations are based on negotiations over a budget proposed by the institutions; and contract funding where allocations are based on meeting the targets agreed in a performance contract (Jongbloed et al., 2010, p. 47). Since public funding continues to be the predominant source of university financing, the shifts in funding models construct a whole new array of reporting requirements and fundamentally change the nature of mandatory reporting, data collection and university financial management (Klemenčič et al., 2015).

The reporting requirements for universities are thus changing due to the changes in quality assurance and funding arrangements set by the governments. Consequently, these are pushing for institutional changes in structures and processes of institutional research. However, in all of the case countries, with exception of Austria and Romania, the changes in regulatory mechanisms, and thus reporting requirements, have not yet been such as to push for a dramatic turn towards performance-based management practices at universities.

There are several reasons why this is the case. First of all, the mandatory reporting requirements are substantial. The practice of institutional research to support institutional decision-making and strategic planning tends to be overshadowed by the task of fulfilling the mandatory reporting requirements. Apart from the national funding bodies, statistical offices, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, universities report also to the various ranking agencies, such as U-Multirank, QS, ARWU, THE, and Green Metric Ranking.

Second, the institutional research function at most universities is still rather underdeveloped. In universities with the most advanced systems, such as in Austria and newly in Romania, the university provides senior management across the university with regular reports on the performance indicators. Elsewhere, university information systems are centralized, however non-integrated, which means that there are multiple data warehouses managed by different departments or people at the university level.

The development of institutional research within central university administration is particularly challenging in the countries from former Yugoslavia due to a particular model of university governance. In these countries, the legacy of socialist self-management structures was translated into 'fragmented' universities in which faculties, art academies and colleges had (and most of them still have) legal identity, thus making university merely an umbrella institution without significant decision-making powers (Zgaga et al., 2013, p.39). In a fragmented university, the position of deans is extremely strong: they are in direct contact with the Ministry regarding financing (with the exception of Slovenia). Different governmental agencies tend to obtain data directly from the academic units rather than from central administration. There have been attempts to replace this model with governments' regulative intervention, but the changes in practice are slow. In most cases only a 'functional integration' has been achieved which effectively means a working cooperation between the faculties, yet still relatively weak central administration and underdeveloped central administrative services, including institutional research (Zgaga et al., 2013). In such an arrangement the capacity to take operational decisions is low.

Third, institutions have few "pure" institutional researchers who could deliver the type of intelligence needed for rigorous strategic planning, which indeed also includes contextual intelligence. Institutional researchers are either based within quality assurance units or are scattered in various administrative units where they often perform several other functions. Institutional research is still an "add-on" function, with limited capacity in terms of people and technological resources.

CONCLUSION

In Central Europe with exception of Austria, the practice of institutional research to support institutional decision-making and planning tends to be over shadowed by the tasks of fulfilling the mandatory reporting requirements. Furthermore, there is limited institutional capacity to undertake institutional research functions for purposes of strategic planning and institutional positioning, such as analyses of trends and changes in the environment ("external changes"), benchmarking and comparisons to other universities. The development of institutional research for data-driven management of universities in this region apparently still depends on government steering also in terms of competition it creates among higher education institutions within the national higher education systems, and whether it encourages the ambitions of the universities to compete within global higher education market. Only in higher education systems where the state has set clear performance-based regulations for funding and quality assurance (such as in Austria and attempting in Romania), do we see systematic development of institutional research to support performance-based management across the universities in that system.

As higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe move towards more strategic positioning processes – either because they wish to improve their functioning and status or because they are steered to do so by their governments – they will inevitably need to upgrade their institutional research function. As they do so, they ought to remember that for purposes of supporting strategic positioning, institutional research ought also to develop contextual intelligence, as discussed above. Institutional research has to extend from being mostly descriptive-analytical in its character – and thus concerned with validity and reliability of acquired data – to become transformational – and thus concerned with relevance, legitimacy and accountability of proposed solutions (Wiek et al., 2012; Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013). To achieve this, the institutions ought to strive towards bringing together the various "communities of practice" within their institutions, especially students and staff, to engage in defining what questions should be posed for institutional research, what data should be collected and how data get interpreted for institutional leaders. The involvement of various epistemic communities is fruitful for self-reflection on the underlying values and socio-normative motives of institutional research and for ensuring relevance and legitimacy (Klemenčič and Brennan, 2013).

The task for institutional leaders is to develop a culture of institutional research that will nurture involvement of students and staff with institutional research and university quality improvement. This can be achieved through advisory stakeholder committees comprising staff representatives, students and external stakeholders or through a different platform for collaboration between institutional decision-makers, students and staff, and external stakeholders so as to lead to institutional improvement around the set of shared values to enhance the collective well-being and quality experience of the university. To elicit a genuine, conscientious contribution of students and staff – individually and collectively – to strategic decisions of universities and to a practice of institutional research that can support these, more is needed than merely a positive freedom to do so. They need to feel a certain degree of 'loyalty', i.e. a strong feeling of allegiance and attachment or belonging to one's university and indeed to a collectivity or group of people within that university (Klemenčič, 2015b).

NOTES

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[2] For all CEE countries, the European Union has served as an important point of reference. The Baltics, the Visegrád Four and Slovenia joined the European Union in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. With

accession, these countries are no longer considered “transition” countries, a term that is now reserved for the Western Balkan states. Austria has been a member since 1995, and has sometimes played a role of regional interlocutor between CEE and the European Union. In the remaining “transition countries”, the European Union neighbourhood policy continues to play a role in higher education reforms, as does the presence of international actors, such as World Bank, Council of Europe and donor agencies.

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