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Europe - supranational policy level following Bologna and the Lisbon strategy.

From a recommendation that agencies should cooperate to develop comparable criteria and methodologies to a European system and a European register of accredited agencies.

The rule of independence of accredited agencies would probably exclude US regional accrediting agencies.

In the US attempts to increase the role of the federal level in the accrediting system failed despite accusations of not promoting institutional quality and accountability.

We compare the two cases to understand how far EU and US are or not converging and why they present a different behaviour.

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Late development of the “Evaluative State in Europe” - late 1980s.

Causes: massification; development of a private labour market; market as instrument of public policy.

Similar procedural rules: self-evaluation reports, external review panel, public reporting.

Different political discourses from the university as public service (France and Sweden) to a market-based economic discourse (UK and the Netherlands).

Large trust between government and institutions allowed these to control the system: the Netherlands, Portugal and Flanders.

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The European case – loss of trust

IMHE 2008

Progressive loss of trust in institutions and in professionals.

New public management.  
Attacks on public services.  
Massification and heterogeneity.

There has been an overwhelming movement from state approval to accreditation; all new QA systems are based on accreditation

The three systems “owned” by institutions – the Netherlands, Portugal and Flanders were replaced with independent accreditation agencies under accusations of vagueness of external reports, obscure reporting, lack of clear conclusions, leading to ineffective behaviour.

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The European case – supranational developments

IMHE 2008

The initiative of the 1991 EU Dutch presidency; comparative analysis; pilot projects to increase European cooperation.

1998: the Council recommends Member States establish transparent QA systems and promotes cooperation of agencies - ENQA.

The Bologna declaration has been an important driver for change with regard to quality in steering mechanisms.

In 2004 the Commission recommends institutions develop rigorous internal quality management mechanisms and an accreditation strategy, multiple accreditation agencies and an European register.

Universities should be allowed to choose the accreditation agency thus leading to a stratified European HE Area.

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The European case – supranational developments

IMHE 2008

The efforts of the Commission may be interpreted as aiming at making visible a stratified system of HEIs with different missions and quality, emphasising efficiency and mimicking the American higher education model.

The EU ministers adopted in 2005 the Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA and established the register in 2007.

The register was set up on 4 March 2008 as the first legal entity to emerge from the Bologna process.

The problem of the “independence” from HEIs.

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In the US there has been a long tradition of accreditation by private, non-profit organisations, the first agency, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, having been established in 1885.

These organisations are voluntary, non-governmental membership associations of higher education institutions.

States were responsible for establishing requirements for and granting institutional licensure. Accreditation agencies were responsible for making judgments about institutional quality. And the federal government was responsible for allocating and ensuring that federal funds for student aid were used for their intended purpose.

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This system of self-governance and self-regulation by institutions and accrediting organisations, with quality being assured without government intervention, was regulated in the 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA).

The HEA Act goes through a reauthorisation process every five years. This has created the opportunity for strong criticism of the accreditation system, which was seen as not responding to demands for increasing accountability.

Several authors have questioned the effectiveness of the system and its independence.

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The accreditation system has been under strong fire at the time of the 1992 reauthorisation of the Higher Education Act, following reports of fraud and abuse in federal student aid programmes and a large number of institutions with high default rates.

With accrediting agencies seen as having failed in their gate-keeping role, the 1992 reauthorization established stronger federal control over the accreditation process.

The 1992 reauthorisation was an almost complete fiasco due to strong opposition to the new legislation. McGee recognises the institutions and the accrediting guilds they support yield massive political clout, and will be able to fend threats such as this almost effortlessly.

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The recent (2007) reauthorization process reopened the debate on accreditation.

Margaret Spellings, US Secretary of Education established a Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The Commission's final report is very critical of the accreditation system considered to have significant shortcomings.

However, the lobbying capacity of higher education institutions and accrediting agencies seems apparently to have once more won the fight. In the reauthorization process the Congress introduced amendments that limit the powers of the federal administration.

The White House criticised the decision because it would restrict the Department of Education's authority to regulate on accreditation.

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The State Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, was more acid in her comments claiming that Congress had dug a moat around the Ivory tower.

Glen McGhee (2006) recognises federal agencies often find numerous ways to get around congressional mandates if they want to. The propensity for 'agency capture' by powerful special interest groups is the main reason behind congressional oversight committees as well as a growing judicial presence in negotiated regulatory schemes. It is possible there will be an ongoing fight in the future, as the federal government will continue to place greater emphasis on evidence of student learning and institutional performance, improved information for the public, comparability among institutions, and learning standards (Eaton 2007).

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In the US there is a long tradition of distinct and mutually exclusive roles of the federal government, the states and the accrediting associations that are private membership associations of higher education institutions.

Presented as an independent system of self-evaluation and peer review without government intervention.

This system has been under fire as there are increasing demands for public accountability and a shift from quality improvement to accountability.

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The US System has been criticised for:

- Behaviour like institutional (medieval) guilds
- Protects privileged market positions of its members
- Irrelevant for improvement of HE quality
- Failure for improving inadequacy of collegial QA mechanisms
- Mutual back-scratching society
- Inadequate transparency and accountability impeding innovation

Attempts made to change this situation by shifting the balance of power of the Triad in favour of the federal level so far have failed, although it is difficult to clearly ascertain its causes due to the extreme complexity of the network of interests, influences and cultures.

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Possible causes of the US status quo:

- Agency capture by powerful special interest groups.
- States dislike federal control over their traditional roles of coordinating planning and policy.
- A federal movement to take on the accrediting role would not survive institutional, state and constitutional challenges.

Differences in Europe

- The EU is far from a federation of states.
- The nation-states still keep strong power despite the creeping competence of the Commission.
- Very different funding levels EU/US.
- The democratic deficiency of Eurolandia

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Despite the opposition of many university leaders, the EU steamroller advanced towards a system where accrediting agencies similar to those in the US would not be recognised as bona fide institutions.

The quality agencies that had some relation with universities (cases of Flanders, Portugal and the Netherlands) did not resist the shift in the emphasis of quality assurance from improvement to accountability and were dismissed under public accusations of lack of efficiency and irrelevance.

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Not being a seer makes impossible to guess what will be the future.

In the US the Education Encyclopaedia suggests the federal government will continue to use the associations as part of the triad but will continue to try to intervene in the accreditation process to ensure that federal interests are protected.

In Europe the emphasis has shifted from the social and cultural towards the economic function of the university. The new knowledge society might offer a new opportunity to universities, by assuming knowledge and innovation as an indispensable ingredient for economic competitiveness and social progress.

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The recent rhetoric of the Commission favouring an increased autonomy of European universities should be met with caution.

The 2008 OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education recommends strengthening the ability of institutions to align with the national tertiary education strategy and reconciling academic freedom with institutions' contribution to society.

Unfortunately, despite the new rhetoric of increased autonomy these recommendations remind us of the words of Mahony: The 'new' autonomy is then a paradox: it is the autonomy to be free to conform.

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