Supra-national Accreditation, Trust and Institutional Autonomy: Contrastings Developments of Accreditation in Europe and the U.S.

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Abstract

European demands for increasing autonomy of higher education institutions exist for some years now. They have been counterbalanced by demands for increasing accountability and a European quality assurance system.

In London the ministers have decided to implement a European register of accredited quality agencies, and defined the standards for registration. Being part of the register needs “substantial compliance with all standards” instead of “full-compliance”. This might take into consideration the context of the national higher education system, the role of the agency in the quality assurance system and even the national culture and traditions, allowing for different interpretations, some imprecision and diverse degrees of flexibility and compliance.

News from the US indicate an emerging desire of the federal level to play a more visible role in regulating higher education by intervention in the accreditation system for ensuring increasing institutional accountability, which may strike a parallel with the European situation.

While in the US the attempts at increased federal control have so far apparently failed, in Europe quality systems linked to higher education institutions were replaced with “independent” accrediting agencies. We analyse these changes and offer a possible interpretation for the differences on the two sides of the Atlantic.