



## Barriers and drivers of innovation in higher education: Case study-based evidence across ten European universities



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Innovation  
Higher education  
Management  
Barriers  
Drivers  
GAIHE

### ABSTRACT

The paper advances current knowledge on factors affecting higher education institutions in their quest for innovation in education. Based on an analysis of ten institutional cases from five European countries, a comprehensive description and classification of barriers and drivers of innovation are provided. Results indicate certain “disengagement” in relation of higher education institutions and education policy makers, business, and students as well as between higher education institutions’ managers and their subordinates. Based on the findings, major innovation-related challenges in the higher education are discussed and related practical recommendations are presented.

### 1. Introduction

With societal changes rooted in internationalisation and information technology progress, higher education faces several new challenges, one of which is to upkeep the role of constant innovation leader. Therefore researchers’ attention is quite naturally captured by those aspects that would either positively or negatively impact innovation delivery both in and through higher education. This study delineates prerequisites for a successful story in the context of the Innovation Union (EC, 2010) and presents research results on innovation-related barriers and drivers, as these were perceived by members of the main decisional bodies, which include management and governance boards, administration structures and student authorities at ten diverse European universities. The purpose of this study is to unveil particular challenges tied to management of higher education institutions (HEIs) that are associated with excellence in education.

This study advances current knowledge on factors that affect HEIs in their quest for innovation in education and its provision. The focus is specifically on *management of HEIs*. In general, HEIs are vulnerable as changes in government regulations, social and technological conditions strongly affect their operations (Sporn, 1996). Some of these factors are not under the control of HEIs. However, this study is concerned with those aspects that can be directly influenced by these institutions. The authors concentrate on managerial and governance structures and processes that might impede or support innovations in higher education. Paraphrasing Winslett’s call (2014, p. 174), instead of adding to the noise of innovation talk that focuses on asking, how do we innovate

in teaching and learning, in this study the question is rather *which factors of the internal environment at HEIs add value to innovative teaching and learning?* Thus, the study provides a *description and classification* of these factors based on an analysis of ten institutional case studies from five European countries.

The sample entailed the ESSEC Business School and University of Strasbourg (France), University of Latvia and Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (Latvia), University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava and Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia), University of Salamanca and University of Alicante (Spain), and Anglia Ruskin University and Queen Mary University of London (UK). Case studies have been grounded on uniform scenarios for data collection and conducted by a consortium of partner universities under the project titled Governance and adaptation to innovative modes of higher education provision (GAIHE).

The GAIHE project was built on the premise that an innovation has an increased benefit for all relevant stakeholders. It delineated the innovation as an “implemented change with an increased added value that replaces an existing product or production method” (McGrath et al., 2016). The GAIHE project has focused on innovations related primarily to the modes of higher education provision, and how the governance and management structures at HEIs support (or hinder) these innovations (for exemplars of innovation found at the researched HEIs see McGrath et al., 2016).

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## 2. Innovation challenges at HEIs

Clearly, education is not detached from the other spheres of society. The *motors of societal growth* like cooperation, dialog, empowerment, participatory governance, professionalization, and leaders' role modelling for morality and excellence are the very same as the *drivers of educational innovation*. On the other hand, lack of transparency, corruption, nepotism, economic instability, rigid control, distrust and lack of collaboration all act as barriers to both societal development and innovation in education.

Higher education system is affected by innovations that take place in economies globally. It is believed that higher education systems should comply with these patterns and innovate themselves (Barber et al., 2013). Under these circumstances, HEIs should rethink their model of functioning; providing the graduates with the skills and knowledge suitable for the labour market and create knowledge that can be commercialised in new products and services.

Research has already identified some of the issues that HEIs have to cope with in order to raise the potential for innovation delivery. Lately HEIs have rapidly expanded, which has radically changed the nature of higher education. The number of international students had increased and the research collaboration expanded, thus HEIs have become increasingly competitive (Barber et al., 2013; Shields, 2013). This has prompted the need to raise the quality of services offered through innovative practices. The main challenges of innovation practice are twofold – strengthening the European higher educational area and ensuring the quality of higher education through internal and external quality assurance mechanisms (Haug, 2016). For instance, in 2009 the European Commission was stressing the importance of increasing the higher education quality through the modernisation of curricula, more effective funding and improved governance of higher education (EC, 2009). Furthermore, the European Commission states that the increase of the quality and competitiveness of HEIs could be achieved through new modes of delivery, such as blended degrees or massive open online courses (MOOCs), and the shift to student-centred learning (EC, 2014). In this process, HEIs are referred to as the main responsible actors for ensuring the quality of education delivered (EC, 2009).

In this respect, synergy stemming from cooperation of various groups within the HEIs' internal environment would be one of prerequisites for a "winning" formula in the context of innovation delivery. However, despite this well-known power of combined efforts, sometimes the internal culture at HEIs does not give support for that. As Urbanovič and Tauginiene (2013) note, individual academic and institutional interests might from time to time be incompatible, with this eventually resulting in a poor culture of responsibility at HEIs. Another example of contrasting and differing motivations in the academic environment was pointed out by Whitworth (2012). He exemplified it in the case of a project that aimed at building a university innovative technology-rich teaching space, which provided for flexible teaching, collaborative work environment, presentations and exhibitions. While the project was popular with students, it was perceived as troubling by teachers. The reasons for divergence in their understandings were manifold, being rooted mainly in work overload, inertia of academic staff and the lack of senior management support despite the appropriate financial funding for the project. This case showed that in order to reach a real cultural shift at HEIs, consistent support from people in power structures is immensely important.

Considering the power structures, it is undisputable that the tone from the top, this being either politicians forming the regulatory frameworks or HEIs' managers, sets the direction in which the higher education sector will move. In this respect, financial limitations and rigid regulatory mechanisms act as innovation barriers in higher education (Keogh and Fox, 2008). In most European countries, the national budget restrictions allocated to higher education act as a barrier that prevents the development of innovative teaching and learning (EC, 2013, 2014). Furthermore, there is also scepticism among higher

education leaders that for instance "MOOCs can have a real impact on reducing the high costs in higher education" (What's AHEAD, 2014, p. 1). Technologies are perceived as driving factors for university development, for instance by putting more emphasis on distance education (Thomas, 2009). At the same time, introduction of new technologies can affect the management of higher education. Leaders of institutions that offer MOOCs tend to be more positive about innovations' potential benefits by improving access to higher education than leaders at institutions that do not offer MOOCs (What's AHEAD, 2014). Nevertheless, although many information and communication technologies are available, for example the virtual learning environment being even more accessible currently, their impact on higher education is still minimal (Shields, 2013).

Thus, it seems that several external "push" factors, like new information and communication technologies, do not work sufficiently in this respect. Hence, internal "pull" factors need to be addressed at HEIs, too, in order to enhance the desired effect for modernisation of education. For instance, Smith (2012) promotes the idea that especially in relation to senior management support, further changes in institutional ICT infrastructure, supportive networks and leaving time for employees to develop essential skills, needs to be considered. Additionally, Zacher et al. (2014) suggested that leaders' behaviour particularly serves as a role model to influence employee innovative performance at work. Moreover, it is assumed that besides management of human capital through purposeful innovation-oriented leadership, other specialised management tools like utilisation of the organisational identity concept at HEIs could be helpful. Stensaker (2015) maintains that organisational identity is a promising concept for the incorporation of ideas of both continuity and change at universities. This intangible asset could potentially strengthen staff involvement in innovation efforts on a systematic and longitudinal basis. However, in order to do so, some complementary requirements of the internal environment at HEIs have to be satisfied. For instance, Clark (1997) reasons that in general, the higher education sector is inclined to be organised as a self-guiding society, which is committed to inquiry, learning, self-assessment and self-correction. The call for autonomy, especially in the relationships between HEIs and the state, are voiced in many spheres of education sector's operations, for example, in the quest for decisional freedom in budget allocations (Aghion, 2008), or for reduction of tight control (Findlow, 2008). Indeed, the accountability fundamentalism might result in a seemingly endless bureaucracy, in a state of administration-for-the-sake-of-administration at HEIs, which burdens the staff and complicates any innovation plans.

Another aspect of fostering innovation in education relates to the need to create a collaborative work environment at HEIs. According to Garcia and Roblin (2008), this is probably one of the biggest challenges we have to face. As these authors note, it is important to facilitate cooperation among colleagues, to stay open to new ideas, to share power, and dedicate time for teamwork (Garcia and Roblin, 2008). Furthermore, as Garrison and Kanuka (2004) found out in their study on successful adoption of a new blended learning approach, the creation of clear institutional policies for innovation, establishment of supportive organisational structures at HEIs, such as contact points or specialised units, and a managerial strategic approach to innovation selection and evaluation, are essential.

Some authors note that in addition to the managerial top-down "political" support for innovation initiatives, there must be a certain level of buy-in also from academic staff for the innovation strategic orientation at HEIs. For instance, as Keogh and Fox (2008) indicate, negative attitudes of academic staff toward innovations, low level of acceptance of new modes of education provision, and even their lack of awareness of the potential and quality of these innovations, emerged as barriers in their analysis of a case of the e-learning embedment into a traditional university. Moreover, students' engagement also seems to play an important role in strengthening the bottom-up innovation strategies. As Carey (2013) showed in a case of students' experience of

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