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Paradoxes and Tradeoffs in European Higher Education and Research Policy

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On paradoxes and policy

Paradoxes are logical contradictions and normally exist on a conceptual rather than on an empirical level

The notion that European R&D investment is greater than innovation output is therefore not a paradox

It is even less so when one considers that the relation between R&D investment and innovation is not well known enough to make any reliable statements



Relation between research and policy

- Policy aims at order or change, research at description, understanding, prediction and in some instances using this knowledge to make interventions
- Policy success is not directly dependent on the truth value of the assumptions about the world used to motivate the policy but it is very rare that good research can be the outcome of such a process.
- If policy follows research too closely, it may miss opportunities for experimentation and risk taking or it may abandon its own incremental problem solving dynamic which can produce innovation



Relevance versus Diversity

- Evidence based policy presents both an opportunity and a threat for research and policy.
- If research follows policy too closely, there is a risk that the only problems that attract resources are those that can be foreseen by the policymaker or in which the researcher can interest the policymaker.
- Steering through relevance must therefore be balanced with enough resources to maintain a research presence in areas not near to what is currently defined as relevant



Expansion versus concentration and improvement

- Expansion of number of places and institutions at the tertiary level in many member states has taken place at the expense of reforms and quality improvements at the primary and secondary levels
- This has been to some extent facilitated by the politics of targets used by the Commission to 'persuade' member states to create more ordered realities for the Commission's policies



Excellence, consolidation, elitism

- One policy position is that excellence is a mechanism to promote consolidation and critical mass.
- Some HER actors claim that excellence driven HER policy involves a shakeout at the bottom to make room for a few world class actors whose preeminence in the market was established decades if not centuries ago
- Elitism triumphs over variety and traditional welfare goals of HER policy such as social mobility and even distribution of competence



Standardisation vs national salience

- The OMC, Bologna and similar arrangements help to create standardised routines and practices within EHER
- This standardisation increases predictability, reliability and enables mobility. We are now approaching a European market for students and academic labour
- Given the national and cultural embeddness of HER, standardisation and increased coordination involves sacrifices for all countries but the tradeoffs are not uniformly distributed across the community

