

University autonomy and its governance in European Higher Education: Impact on the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction

Abstract

In recent decades, much of Europe has seen a trend towards neoliberal governance of public higher education, rooted in autonomy reforms and the implementation of steering-at-a distance mechanisms. Nominally autonomous, universities are nevertheless subject to incentivisation (or penalisation) to align with macro-systemic strategy of state — whether more stringently through funding models with performance-based indicators, or more loosely through the normative pressures of steering conversations embedded within governance practices. This movement coincides with a language shift of immense proportions towards more and more English within the higher education curriculum of unrelated subjects in non-anglophone countries. Often simplistically attributed to internationalisation or neoliberalism as defined in somewhat abstract and ideologically motivated terms, here we critically engage with the findings of the UKRI-funded ELEMENTAL project at the Open University, which applied a process tracing methodology to investigate the rise of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) through the practices of neoliberal governance, interviewing key stakeholders in university and ministerial governance in European countries. While considering also other countries within the remit of the project, the presentation will focus primarily on the Netherlands, Austria, and Spain. It aims to open up discussion more widely on the role of autonomy and steering-at-a-distances practices in democratised systems of governance and any need to counterbalance perceived inequalities through language management.