

DOSSIER

Innovation and Good Practices in University Government and Management

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Abstract

This brief introductory article takes a look at the main topics of this Dossier (innovation, good practices, government and management) in order to put them in context, to guide their scope and to open them up to experts with an interest in them.

Keywords

university; innovation; good practices; government; governance; management

Innovación y buenas prácticas en el gobierno y la gestión de las universidades

Resumen

Se presenta un breve artículo introductorio sobre los principales ejes de este monográfico (innovación, buenas prácticas, gobierno y gestión), con ánimo de situarlo en contexto, orientar acerca de su alcance y abrir perspectivas a los expertos interesados en estos temas.

Palabras clave

universidad, innovación, cambio, buenas prácticas, gobierno, gobernanza, gestión

The Dossier of this monographic number of *RUSC-Universities and Knowledge Society Journal* focuses on a theme that is high on the agenda of many university managers and stakeholders in countries where the socioeconomic situation is similar to that of Spain. The reason for this choice of theme was not the situation that Spain is currently experiencing, though it does make it all the more relevant.

The title contains four key concepts: innovation, good practices, government and management. It may sound overblown, but the aim is to draw attention to a problem¹ that affects interuniversity teams' teaching and/or research (and even the RD&I system). Given that such teams make important and vital contributions to every facet of life outside the sphere of higher education, it goes without saying that the impact of the problem can also be discussed from the perspective of the UOC (Open University of Catalonia). This introductory article therefore intends to provide a general overview, without being exclusive or excluding.

The concepts referred to in the title are issues that have a major impact on many national university systems, and public systems in particular. In principle at least, the government and the management of institutions in private university systems are autonomous and more flexible, and they can more readily implement changes than those in public systems. This is, of course, assuming that they have leaders with vision and values.

Innovation and good practices are considered or interpreted differently in the various national systems:² European, North American, Latin American, Australian, North African, South African, Asian or Far Eastern. That is why anyone interested in these issues should have a global overview while focusing on the systems that are either closest to them or more relevant to their vision and interests.

1. Innovation and change

The word 'innovation' has been fashionable for several decades. It may have different meanings and content for different people. It is connected with the introduction of changes, with new ways of seeing or doing things. The most intensively or extensively cited definition is perhaps the one by the Austrian economist J. Schumpeter, with the updated view of M. Porter. In reality, that point of view, which is very popular in the world of business, implies that innovation is the creation or modification of a product in order to introduce it in the market. Many variants of that concept have developed over the years, possibly around its core, which is 'creating, modifying or changing', with the addition—as an essential complement—of the answer to the question: Why?

In our case, it is a matter of innovating or changing: Why? And also how? This is an important matter to which attention is not always paid. Change may be sought without really knowing which direction to take or what the destination is. In this case, any innovation or change in any direction might be right and proper.

1. A problem to which, *a priori*, there is neither a solution nor a perceived solution.

2. And even within them.

It would seem logical to think that a change in the form (and also the content?) would be sought, since this is where various aspects of the functions of universities at the service of society have been implemented.

2. A network society

We live in a society that has changed and is changing a lot. This may sound redundant, since society has always changed, and a lot, and that is the feeling its members no doubt had at a given time. Recently, however, that change is also being modulated by the persistent and very deep structural crisis of the current economic system of the so-called 'developed world'.

Current change is fast, deep and global, in a network world and on the World Wide Web. Changes have always existed, and most of them were probably considered equally as 'deep' for the generations living through them at a given time. But 'fast' and 'global' are the distinguishing traits of the current model; we are experiencing a fast global change. And, playing a major role in that process are information and communication technologies (ICTs), which are not just a technological support for the current network society. Although the term was not coined by the sociologist M. Castells, he has used it widely and endowed it with content.

As alluded to earlier, in order to change or innovate, it is essential to know which direction to take and why.³ This is perhaps the point where the reason for and the direction of the change begin to diverge. This is a matter of content, which began to be discussed and guided at the World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, Paris, 1998). Many years have gone by since then, but it is considered to be the last effort that was made on a global scale. It is a document that scholars and change managers really ought to revisit.

However, content issues that have such enormous scope were not intended to be dealt with in this monographic number, and that is why the concept of 'good practices' accompanies the word 'innovation': this is much more modest and, needless to say, practical.

3. Aspects of innovation

Innovation or change⁴ can occur in any of the functions of universities at the service of society:⁵ 1) teaching; 2) research; 3) management. It should be noted that this is the order in which they are usually expressed. Though the logical order would be 2-1-3 (research, teaching, management), since the creation and application of knowledge should come first. However, the order that

3. By the way, it is quite hard to reach any agreement on either in the socioeconomic context.

4. Change, why and how? Without wishing to shock anyone, here it would be worth thinking about what their target audience is (to enable them to be considered as innovations). In other words, who benefits from them, who needs them and who wants them?

5. In this article, the assumption is that they are the traditional ones, so as not to introduce greater complexity.

society appears to demand is 1-3-2 (teaching, management, research). Something appears to be amiss.

From the internal viewpoint of universities, it would be worth considering the following as current functions:

- A) Learning, for both students and lecturers (instead of simply teaching in the case of the latter). In other words, transferring, sharing and disseminating knowledge. Here, the meaning of the term 'knowledge society' comes into play, with the help of the network society; thus, the shared creation and application of knowledge can also be included.
- B) Promoting and being a distinctive, important and renowned hub of the global RD&I system. In other words, creating, applying and questioning knowledge.
- C) Managing the system that supports the two previous functions, thereby adding value to it. Here, various innovations occurring in general management and talent management can be considered. This implies deep-seated changes in mindsets and actions in relation to the views generally held on this function, which is even considered to be residual.
- D) Governing, considered as running the university community and guiding it towards achieving its goals (in terms of its *raison d'être* and values), based on the formulation, implementation and evaluation of a strategy. And doing so in a context where the 'Ivory Tower' notion of universities is dwindling and interaction with university system stakeholders is increasing.

In theory, interaction can occur in every single one of the aforementioned functions. Depending on the function, change is easier or harder, has a greater or lesser impact, and requires more or less funding. In the case of Spain, these issues are well addressed in the Report of the Committee of International Experts EU2015.

First of all, the biggest and best innovations have occurred in the RD&I system, as a result of both the power of the human mind and accumulated knowledge; in the current era, development and technological innovation have revolved around ICTs. Such innovation, the least regulated and most dependent on the capacities of teams, is nuanced and modulated by the funding system, as has always been the case.

Secondly, innovations are occurring in aspects of teaching (learning, for both students and lecturers). Such aspects might be:

- a) Content: What to learn?
- b) Methodology: How to learn?
- c) Time: When to learn?
- d) Place: Where to learn?

These changes are probably the ones with which university teach staff are most familiar, as are the most experienced students. In principle, they are not actually hard to implement, because universities have quite a lot of autonomy in this respect. They are often driven by the sheer determination and

hard work of isolated lecturers or groups, who either give up or disband because they do not receive the appropriate backing.

Changes in management and, above all, in government are rare and complex, and not necessarily because they require greater funding, which is not the case. In recent years, the term 'governance' has been introduced as a conceptual innovation of the term 'government'. The change⁶ is interesting, especially when taking account of the definition of the term contained in the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (the body in charge of regulating the Spanish language): Art or way of governing, the objective of which is to achieve lasting economic, social and institutional development by fostering a healthy balance among the State, civil society and the market economy.

The Dossier of this monographic number of *RUSC-Universities and Knowledge Society Journal* comprises a selection of six articles that either present specific cases of good practices or reflect on important issues for innovation and change, as described in this introductory article.

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6. Which is not simply semantic.

About the Author

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He has undertaken his academic work (research, innovation, teaching and university management) at a number of universities: Complutense University of Madrid, University of Zaragoza, University of La Laguna (Tenerife), Polytechnic University of the Canary Islands, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, UOC (Open University of Catalonia) and UNED (Spanish National University of Distance Education).

He held the post of senior visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada) and at the University of Guadalajara (Mexico).

The university managerial posts that he has held include vice-rector of the UOC, vice-rector of the University of La Laguna (Tenerife), rector of the Polytechnic University of the Canary Islands, rector-founder of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and director of the UNED Regional Network Centre for Catalonia. Other notable positions that he has held include general manager of the Strategic Plan for Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, member of the team that drafted the University Strategic Plan and creator-promoter of three UNESCO Chairs at two different universities.

His current lines of work and interest are: managing change and complexity at universities; governance, leadership, strategy and human capital; talent management and open innovation; knowledge workers' skills; development of personal and interpersonal competencies.

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