

On The Disciplinary Structure and The Number of Belgian Universities: a Historical Perspective.

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Introduction

The optimal number of universities and the distribution of tasks over universities are two issues that recently have been heavily debated in Belgium, both among academics and in the popular press¹. Those discussions, however, have not been restricted to Belgium. Similar questions trouble, or have recently troubled, other countries ranging from Austria and Holland to Massachusetts and Quebec².

Moreover, it is not the first time that these issues have been discussed. At the beginning of this century, for example, Thorstein Veblen (1918) already argued that professional degrees should not be taught at universities. And also in Belgium, the number and the disciplinary organization of universities has been debated several times.

In what follows, we will show how the number and the disciplinary structure of Belgian universities evolved over time. At the same time, we will illustrate what kind of factors were taken into account by the decision makers of those days and link these factors with some present-day research about the optimal organization of the ‘higher education industry’³. One will be surprised by the modern outlook of those early discussions...

In the beginning...

Historians generally consider Bologna and Paris as being the prototypes for the two kinds of organizational structures that characterized the medieval universities (Rüegg (1992)). While the first consisted of a law faculty, an ‘arts and medicine’ faculty and, on the fringe, a faculty of theology, the second had a lower faculty (arts) and three higher faculties (theology, law, medicine). However, most universities did not start as ‘full’ universities. They rather started with one or two faculties or had only one faculty that covered all the disciplines.

¹ De Standaard (23/07/98), Knack(29/10/97), Trends(09/10/97), Le Vif Express(13/11/98-4/12/98), Tendances(26/11/98) e.a.

² <http://www.bmwf.gv.at>, <http://www.cup.qc.ca/>, <http://www.ruu.nl/~ps0/hoop96.htm> and (Barrow, 1996)

The statutes of the University of Leuven, founded in 1426 and the first ‘Belgian’ university, were copied from those of Cologne, a daughter of the university of Paris (Gieysztor (1992)). In 1797, however, the French government closed this university and replaced it by the ‘Imperial University’. This university consisted of academies, one for each ‘Court of Appeal’. Each academy had five faculties: letters, theology, law, medicine, mathematical sciences and physics. Although the territory of present day Belgium then had two ‘Courts of Appeal’, only one academy was installed: the Brussels Academy. A faculty of letters (3 professors) and a faculty of sciences (4 professors) were created and the already existing school of law was transformed into a faculty of law. No faculty of medicine was installed (Nothomb, 1844).

When in 1814 the Belgian territory fell into the hands of the Dutch Empire, the higher education sector thus consisted out of one faculty of law, one of sciences, one of letters and some schools of medicine.

The Dutch period

The Dutch government had already created 3 universities in the Southern-Netherlands (Leiden, Utrecht and Groningen), all taking the structure with five faculties. And plans were made to establish universities in the Northern-Netherlands too:

‘Local authorities immediately started lobbying. Brussels, already heaving three faculties, asked to keep these and tried to prove that the institution of higher education could not be anywhere else than in the capital. Leuven also wanted a unique university in one city and argued that Leuven should be that city because of its academic reputation. Ghent and other cities claimed that competition among different institutions in different cities was necessary⁴ (Nothomb, 1844, p 12).’

³ The structure and the organizational principles of the higher education industry receive more and more attention in the economics literature (for a first introduction, see the symposium-articles on higher education in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (winter, 1999)).

⁴ Quotes have been translated from French and Dutch. For the original versions see Coupé (2001).

Jaffe (1989), Florax and Folmer (1992), Anselin and Varga (1997) all find that universities have a positive impact on the regional economy. The above mentioned lobbying clearly indicates that, even at that time, cities understood the importance of a university for the local economy.

In the end, three universities were created: Leuven, Gent and Liège. The Dutch Empire thus had 6 universities for 6 million people. Some claimed that this was excessive. Others reacted: ‘ Have we forgotten the disadvantages of bringing together too big a group of students? Are we not aware that a lack of competition ends rivalry and that having only one group of faculty is detrimental to the advancement of the sciences? (Nothomb, 1844, p 59).’

In 1828, an evaluation is made about the organization of the universities. A commission formulated following questions, questions that even today are still frequently raised:

1° ‘Do the courses that are taught at the university correspond to the needs of the society? Isn’t there a lack of courses that form good public employees or of courses that increase the knowledge of business, agriculture and industry? If so, shouldn’t we assign to each university those courses that are most linked to her environment and localization rather than having all courses taught everywhere (Nothomb, 1844, p 84)’?

2° ‘Wouldn’t it be better to transform some of the existing universities into institutions that specialize in courses on business, agriculture and industry? Wouldn’t that be the cheapest way to stimulate the education of the industrial class (Nothomb, 1844, p 85)’?

3° ‘Shouldn’t we consider the idea to bring together those faculties that nowadays are taught at all universities, at least for those faculties that need huge subsidies. (Nothomb, 1844, p 579)’?

However, these questions would never be answered because of the Belgian revolution of 1830.

Note that it has often been assumed that comprehensive universities are cheaper. The ‘educational-cost-functions’ literature (see Lewis and Dundar (1998)), however, has mainly concentrated on economies of scale and devoted only little attention to this issue. A study for Australia (Lloyd et al, 1993) did find evidence of economies of scope, a study for the UK (Johnes, 1996) however only showed mixed evidence. Of course, comprehensive universities could be a way to keep departments relatively small while still attaining a large overall size (and hence possibly exploit economies of scale). Comprehensiveness can thus allow to reduce the costs of an ‘easy access through regional implementation’-policy. This can be illustrated with the Dutch situation: while the number of new first year law students in 1998 was almost equal at the number of ‘applied sciences’ students, the latter was only offered at three ‘uni-subject’-universities, while the former was offered by 9 ‘multi-discipline’-universities (Nature 6, Health 8)⁵.

As far as scale economies is concerned, Lewis and Dundar (1998, p. 88) conclude their review of studies for the UK and the US as follows: ‘both the earlier single-output and the more recent multiproduct cost function studies reveal that prospective economies of scale do exist at both institutional and departmental levels for an average size institution or department... Nevertheless, the single most pervasive limitation of all these studies is their inability to control adequately for the quality of undergraduate instruction as size increase’.

The Belgian period

One of the first decisions of the new governments is to abolish the faculties of sciences and of letters of the University of Ghent, the law faculty and the sciences faculty of Leuven and the letters faculty of Liège. However, the cities do protest and in 1831, Leuven gets the permission to retain its law faculty, while the others start with private faculties.

⁵ Based on CBS-statistics.

Once more, proposals are issued about the future of the higher education sector: the ‘general administrator of education’ suggest to create one university but with the four faculties divided over four cities (‘ a proof of impartiality, not because we think it would be better for the education (Nothomb, p 115)’. A commission created to think about this question, however, favors a comprehensive university in one city.

In 1833, a new commission, composed of professors and inhabitants of Gent and Liège, proposes to have two comprehensive universities, one in Gent and one in Liège⁶...

The commission admitted that a unique university would be better and cheaper (‘these reasons can be summarized as following: obtaining more results with less costs, doing more and better with less’ (Nothomb, p 880)) but its impossible to choose between the cities and regions. In addition, these universities had to be comprehensive: ‘we need two comprehensive universities or one unique university’ (Nothomb, p 881-882).

The parliament follows the commission but in the mean time, two private universities were created, one in Brussels and one in Mechelen (that will move to Leuven one year later)⁷.

The government was also aware of the differential impact of different disciplines on welfare and thus tries to influence the choice of students: studentships are distributed between faculties in order to promote those studies that are most beneficial to society. Differentiated exam-fees had similar goals. Note that at the end of the eighties, the UK government considered introducing a differential fee structure to influence the subject mix of graduates (see Taylor (1990)).

The issue of the number of universities and faculties will, from time to time, be heard of again but only pro forma: for example, the triennial report of 1849-1852 mentions that

⁶ Leuven lobbied for one unique university at a place in the center of the country (as Leuven is) (Nothomb, 1844, p.128) because it would increase competition (among professors and students) and it would be cheaper. Moreover, by stimulating contacts between students of different provinces it would help to create one nation. Note that the same idea lies behind the European Erasmus/Socrates programs!

⁷ The principle of ‘liberty of education’ was inserted in the constitution of 1831. Note that ‘the degrees that would be granted by the private universities will only have the value that the general publics attaches to it’.

one member of the parliament asks to check whether it would not be cheaper to have just two faculties in Gent and Liège but no vote is held on the subject.

Belgium thus had two public and two private universities. And apparently, this distinction mattered for the disciplinary expansion (Mallinson (1963,p82)): ‘The two State universities of Gent and Liège made no spectacular changes and remained, indeed, rather hidebound ... Neither Leuven nor Brussels had been as inactive as the two state universities, and they showed themselves much more attuned to the needs of the times.

From the 20th century on, the number of students is rising fast, thus placing the expansion of the university-sector on the agenda. As a first step, some other institutions of higher education are given equal treatment with the academic faculties. Next, in 1965, the government creates some new university ‘centers’.

The fact that these were incomplete lead to some remarks. For example, the ‘national council for scientific policy’ wrote (in 1961): ‘The council also has observed that a real university climate can only be developed within a comprehensive university where there are contacts between all fields of knowledge (p81) ⁸. Moreover, they argued against the existence of specialized faculties by pointing out that their scale would remain too small. But this dislike against ‘incomplete’ universities was countered by the fact that this incompleteness was said to be only a first step and hence, that horizontal expansion would be possible later.

During the seventies, 3 universities are ‘dedoubled’ according to language and, a university center is established in Limburg (LUC). This center could organize courses in Sciences and Medicine but against expectations, the local school of commerce didn’t get university status (although they were on the same campus). An amendment to add this school as a faculty of Economics was refused because⁹

⁸ But it also favoured ‘a certain degree of specialization ... for the post graduate level (p87).’ The same idea is repeated 35 years later at both sides of the linguistic frontier (see Dillemans(1997) and Bodson and Berleur(1998)).

⁹ Parlementaire documenten (Senaat) 25.05.71 (p1742). Document Kamer 907 nrs1-4).

- ‘the chances on jobs for students of management were considered to be limited’
- ‘ the creation of new forms of education would disturb the existing balance’

In 1991 though, the school has been incorporated into the university center as an economics faculty.

Today...

Recently, the Flemish government and the government of the French community asked three former rectors to write down their vision on the organization of the higher education sector.

Both the Dillemans-report (1997) as the Bodson-Berleur-report (1998) stick to the ‘comprehensive university’-prototype.

‘We should try to achieve horizontal diversity within possibly more comprehensive fields of science and in any case to an offer of courses that includes more than just one subject, in order to have an enriching multi- and interdisciplinarity (Dillemans (1997,p.10))’

‘More fundamental, some institutions, given their size and historical development, do not offer the range of courses one expects these days to be offered by a university. Pluridisciplinarity is what makes the richness of a university. The need for it has nothing but grown over time (Bodson and Berleur (1998, p.126))’.

If universities should be complete, should the number of universities then be reduced?

Both are aware of the limitations of their powers:

‘I have gotten the advice to leave behind any revolutionary plans with tabula rasa-sweeping measures. We could dream about those thirty years ago and some (including me) do so still today. However, they can not be realized anymore (Dillemans (1997, p10))’.

‘Even if had been proven that it was most rational, that it would give the best ratio of price on quality, it would never be accepted... We should start from the idea that in the middle run no institution of any importance will disappear: university, faculty, institute, etc. (Bodson and Berleur (1998, p125))’

Of course, not everybody agrees with their point of view. Some argue that there is no evidence of scale economies: ‘...no serious study has shown that the performance, however defined (in economic, pedagogic or cultural terms), of an institution is related to its size’ (Cref (1999)). And hence do not agree that there are too many institutions of higher education in Belgium¹⁰. Others stress the importance of competition and pluralism (Witte,1999).

It is important to note here that in many other European countries, the government takes the final decision about which university offers what discipline. In the United States, however most public universities seem to have a large autonomy in deciding about their scope: only 20% of the US states’ authorities have at least some control over the ability of universities to add undergraduate programs (Volkwein and Malik (1997)).

Conclusions

As one can see from this little historical review, the problems about how to organize or manage the higher education sector are not new. Issues like the ideal size of a university and the optimal number of universities are a regular point of discussion in the Parliament, in the universities and even in the popular press. Moreover, the arguments that were used in those early discussions are very much like the ones one can often here nowadays.

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¹⁰ See also de Grauwe (1999).

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