

REAL-TIME SYSTEMS

Reflections on Higher Education in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia

Jon File and Leo Goedegebuure (Eds.)

Real-time systems (*An ICT definition*)

In real-time multiprocessing there is the extra requirement that the system complete its response to any input within a certain critical time. This poses additional problems, particularly in situations where the system is heavily loaded and is subject to many simultaneous demands. Real-time systems are always dedicated. Most systems are not real-time.

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10. On Real-time Systems, Change and Challenges Comparative reflections

Jon File & Leo Goedegebuure

With special thanks to Jürgen Enders

*This lightning storm, this tidal wave,
this avalanche, I'm not afraid.
That's who you are, that's what you could
(Buck, Mills, Stipe. Imitation of Life. Athens, 2001)*

Introduction

In this volume we have attempted to provide a concise overview of four higher education systems that have experienced, each in their own right, as well as collectively, a process of rapid and profound change. What we have not tried to do in this book, nor in this comparative reflection is to engage with the notion of 'Central and Eastern European Higher Education'. Ours is in essence a tale of four countries and we share Peter Scott's point of departure:

"...the unity of Central and Eastern Europe is an artifice, contingent on half a century of communist rule. The nation states that occupy the region bounded on the West by the Elbe and the mountains of Bohemia, on the East by the plains of Russia and on the North by the Baltic Sea and which, on the South, stretch to the Adriatic and (almost) the Aegean Seas are as heterogeneous as the nation states that occupy the West of Europe, stretching from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Central and Eastern Europe is both part of a larger whole, Europe, and subdivided into many regions. Its institutions, including its universities, reflect that variety. Almost certainly, despite their common experience of communism, universities in Central and Eastern Europe have less in common with each other than, for example, universities in Latin America." (Scott, 2002: p. 137)

In the public debate on higher education policy and reform, the case of 'Central and Eastern Europe' is also often presented as either unique, or as an example of the transformation of underdeveloped higher education systems to a state of maturity. We find neither perspective convincing. As has been made eminently clear by Guy Neave in his introduction to this volume, the four systems have a rich, long and intricate higher education history, and thus substantive traditions and structures that form the foundations from which revitalised systems are emerging. And although the speed of change is such that comparable cases cannot be found that easily, we should not close our eyes to the fact that many of the pressures that are driving these changes are found in most, if not all, of our Western European systems. In this final chapter we would

like to continue the debate on the transition processes that are taking place in the four systems following Peter Scott once more:

“... the challenges facing higher education in Central and Eastern Europe appear in a different light – not as “catching up” with higher education in Western Europe, a limited (and limiting?) and finite project – but as part of a wider enterprise, to re-orientate the whole of European higher education, by reaching out beyond the elites, old and new, cultural or technical, into the diverse communities that constitute modern Europe, and by realising the potential of the new synergies between knowledge and society and the economy, identity, and culture.” (Scott, 2000: p.405).

In doing this, we start by outlining a number of major internal and external forces of change that are pressuring higher education systems to change. This is also the starting point that we chose for our dialogue with our colleagues from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia during the course of our four-year project. From thereon, we expand the argument to the common themes that run through this present volume, and discuss the major challenges that face higher education in the four countries *and* in Western Europe. In this, our aim is not to provide a normative recipe on how to deal with these challenges, but rather to sketch a road map of what still lies ahead. For despite the fact that much has been achieved in terms of change and transition, much still remains to be done to meet the challenges that flow from a fundamental re-orientation of the socio-economic fabric of European society on the eve of the knowledge society. And, to return to the overarching theme of this volume, all this needs to be done by real-time systems, responding in time to a multitude of demands simultaneously and in a co-ordinated manner.

Rooted, Re-routed and Re-formed

If we had included South Africa, Mozambique, Bolivia and Indonesia in this book (four other countries where CHEPS has worked over the past four years), the four systems would have appeared more similar than they have in our account. But the greatest similarities would have remained the broad-brush historical picture of continental European systems separated from their European cousins for a forty-year period of state-socialism – Guy Neave’s period of Babylonian exile. The focus of our dialogue has been policy and future oriented, and it is here where the real sense of four higher education systems approaching the future, and current domestic and European policy challenges, in their own distinctive ways is most clear. As is evidenced in the four country chapters, there can be little doubt that reform and change has been substantive indeed.

Mass Higher Education Provision

One of the most striking features of the concise descriptions of the four systems is a decade of sustained expansion in higher education participation. While this reflects pent-up demand released from the constraints of state manpower planning, and may be ‘just’ the four systems experiencing the second wave of growth a decade or two later

than in Western Europe, it meant that the four systems went through the transition from elite to mass higher education very rapidly indeed.

The real insight of Trow's (1973) seminal work on mass higher education was not the numerical indicators used to define different stages in the growth of higher education (elite systems enrolling 15 – 20% of an age cohort, mass systems from this level up to 50%, and universal systems even larger numbers) but the recognition that elite features persist in mass systems, and that different elements of a system change at different rates. The approaches to this transition from elite to mass higher education have been different in the four countries. Most obviously, in Poland expansion has taken place mainly through a spectacular growth of private higher education, whereas the other systems have accommodated strong growth primarily within the public sector. But in all four systems there has been a complex process of developing 'diverse forms of mass higher education' alongside the traditional forms of elite provision. Notably, in a number of cases these forms have been developed within the same institution.

New forms include institutions of a non-university type and tertiary professional schools in the Czech Republic; the further elaboration of the Hungarian college-university binary system by the provision of short-cycle AHVT programmes, together with a dramatic increase in part-time and correspondence enrolments; the development of higher vocational schools and part-time programmes in the Polish public sector; and a sophisticated and pragmatic relationship between programme level, institutional type and the public/private distinction in Slovenia. The different routes to mass higher education provision can be clearly seen but so can plenty of evidence for Trow's differential rate of change observation. In general, formal entrance requirements, aspects of quality assurance, and student funding mechanisms have still to 'catch up' with these rapid changes. As is the case for an established and transparent system of articulation and transfer between the different sectors of the systems and the different types of programmes. And clearly, the transition processes in each of the four systems have not been without difficulty. As has been discussed in the third part of this volume, issues of funding, cost sharing, quality, and governance and management have proven to be tough nuts to crack. Yet, at the same time, it is without doubt that all four systems are continuing their processes of transition.

The Times they are a Changing

There are many in our field that argue that the period we are living in today is one of unprecedented change. These claims come from a variety of different vantage points, ranging from politicians to institutional policymakers to higher education policy researchers. The following statements illustrate this conclusion well. At the 1998 UNESCO World Conference, the meeting of the world's education ministers, it was concluded that:

- On the eve of a new century, there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for socio-cultural and economic development;
- Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions of access, improved staff development,

enhancement and preservation of quality, relevance of programs, employability of graduates, and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation;

- At the same time, higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge can be produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled. Equitable access to these technologies should be ensured; and
- The second half of (the last) century will go down in the history of higher education as the period of its most spectacular expansion: an over six-fold increase in student enrolments worldwide, from 13 million in 1960 to 82 million in 1995. But it is also the period that has seen the gap between industrially developed countries, the developing countries and in particular the least developed countries with regard to access and resources for higher learning and research, already enormous, becoming even wider.

At a 2001 conference on the future challenges facing higher education, which brought together an international forum of policymakers and researchers, the same emphasis was placed on change, though with a somewhat different focus. Not so much the changes themselves were the object of discussion, but rather their consequences for the role and position of higher education institutions. Taking as the point of departure that the new economy has placed a premium on the acquisition of knowledge, which increasingly is viewed as a resource by businesses, governments, and individuals, as well as an area of potential profit by higher education, three core set of questions were addressed (The Futures Project, CHEPS and CHERI, 2001):

- What is the role of higher education in the new economy? As a result of the new economy, higher education institutions are facing multiple and competing pressures from stakeholders;
- Are core values under threat? In this evolving context, it has been argued that the core values that have traditionally underpinned higher education are now under threat; and
- Who is in charge? With increased institutional diversification and an increase in the power of market forces, are we experiencing a change in the status and role of the key stakeholders in higher education?

As could be expected given the nature of the participants and the complex topics of both conferences, no absolute answers to the questions posed were found. Yet, overall the case for higher education being in an era of unprecedented change is a compelling one. It remains difficult, however, to actually pin down causal relationships between the drivers, objects and outcomes of change. In a way this is not surprising given that so many aspects of higher education appear to be subject to simultaneous and interconnected change. A not all-encompassing listing would read something like this: the economy, technology, control, diversity, resources, students, programmes, inequity, growth, knowledge, and values. Whether together these constitute 'the times that are a changing' is perhaps a question better left to our successors, but the issues emphasise the need for an analytical approach to the drivers of change in order to be better able to understand their impact and outcomes.

The Differential Impact of Global Warming

In our dialogue with our colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe when dealing with the complex issue of change in higher education driven by both external and internal forces, we have found it helpful to use the metaphor of global warming. Overall there is fairly substantive evidence, though not completely uncontested, that the earth is warming up. If this is indeed happening there is no doubt that it will lead to a rise in sea levels. Yet the impact of this is not uniform. For a country like the Netherlands, the impact will be vast given that at least half of the country is beneath sea level. Without a serious investment in dams and dikes, Zandvoort-by-the-sea will be replaced by Amersfoort-by-the-sea.¹ Thus, the Dutch will experience a major and very direct impact of rising sea levels as a consequence of global warming. In the Slovenian Alps, on the other hand, such an impact will be much less direct or major. Obviously, climate changes will have their impact here as well, but flooding appears somewhat less likely than in the Netherlands, and the measures that need to be taken to react to climate changes will be different.

Transferring this metaphor to our present discussion, our argument is that for higher education there are external environmental changes taking place that have a parallel to global warming in the sense that they are taking place, and that they cannot be avoided. Internationally these changes include (i) economic globalisation, (ii) the rise of knowledge-based economies, and (iii) the spectacular developments in information and communication technologies. For Europe, a fourth change can be added, namely the emergence of a European higher education and research area. All four changes are taking place, individual countries cannot prevent them, nor can they ignore them on the assumption that these changes will not have an impact on their systems. Put succinctly, they are larger than life. Yet their impact will not and need not be the same in all systems, but will and can vary according to a number of variables. Examples of these are: the structure of the economy, the availability of (financial) resources, priorities in national policies, socio-cultural traditions, and so on. Inevitable, however, is the fact that systems will need to respond to these changes in their macro-environment, and to the effects they will have closer to home.

Next to these four major environmental changes there are a number of other changes that are typically more directly mediated at a national level or that are specific to particular systems. Examples of these are the speed and methods with which to approach mass higher education provision (as discussed above); whether and how to aim for greater levels of diversity in a system; the changing nature of government co-ordination; increased levels of competition within national systems; the extent to which the costs of higher education should be shared and how to do this, etc. It is these types of changes that have featured in particular in the previous chapters of this volume. And given the fact that they are nationally mediated this also helps explain why we can observe so much diversity across the four systems.

¹ For those slightly less familiar with Dutch geography, Zandvoort is a seaside resort town, while Amersfoort is a city some 100 kilometers inland. The Dutch problems, however, are nothing compared with those of the Maldives that will sink below the Indian Ocean in its entirety.

Convergence and Diversity: The push and pull factors in higher education

The question of ‘convergence or diversity’ is one that has bedevilled both policy makers and researchers for a long time. And despite the fact that progress has been made over the years to understand what forces drive systems and/or institutions to respond in a similar or different vein (e.g. Huisman, 1998; Meek *et al.* 1996), we are still far away from a full-blown theory of systemic and institutional diversity. What is gaining acceptance, however, is the notion that the more diverse a particular policy environment is, the more chance there is for diversity amongst the systems and/or institutions located in that particular environment. Relatively crude as this notion still is, it can help us understand better why we can witness both similar and different developments in the four systems that are central to this volume. And it can help us in improving our understanding of what lies ahead.

Looking at the national policy environments that characterise the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, a number of substantive differences come to the fore that are described in more detail in chapters 2-5, and have also been touched upon in Chapter 9. We have already referred to the different institutional landscapes of the four higher education systems. The existence or otherwise of different institutional types has a major impact on the competitive environment in which individual institutions operate, as does the severity of the regulative system for the entry of private providers into the system. National regulations determining which sort of institution may offer which sort of degree programmes, and the criteria and procedures for the approval of new programmes also have a major impact on how institutions determine and fill their niches in the landscape. The criteria governments use to fund public (and in two of our four cases, private) higher education programmes, research activities and contract work for government agencies all create a complex web of opportunities and incentives. The general governmental attitude towards, and provisions made to regulate, entrepreneurial activities within higher education can further expand or limit this web. Without attempting to summarise the findings of the previous eight chapters the four systems already exhibit many of the characteristics of diverse policy environments, and the ‘current policy issues’ identified in each system suggest that this diversity is likely to expand.

At the same time, at the supra-national level, we can witness the emergence of a more homogeneous policy environment for the four systems as a result of at least two parallel developments. The first is the Bologna process, the second their forthcoming entry into the European Union. Although these two developments are quite different in nature and origin, they do exert pressures that may lead to convergence of policy developments in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia – as they do for the wider European Union and the countries in Europe in its broadest definition. As regards the Bologna process, it is clear that in our four countries this has resulted in substantive, although more or less fundamental, restructuring of the academic programmes offered by higher education institutions (see Chapters 2-5). A restructuring that marks a significant break with past traditions, as the four systems show the definite imprint of the continental European tradition: long to very long first degree programmes, with a relatively weak relationship with the socio-economic needs of the respective societies. Given this strong tradition, it is not surprising that the

introduction of a Bachelor-Master system is not welcomed with open arms and open curriculum development manuals by everybody in academia. Similar reactions and emotions are apparent in quite a number of Western European systems, and certainly in their traditional university sectors. What is remarkable in the national policy approaches of the four systems is the extreme seriousness accorded to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration. In much of the policy debate in many parts of Western Europe one is often left with the impression that 'Bologna' is something 'out there'. Ministers have signed a treaty, the deadline is 2010, that's a long way away, and actually we may want to think about this ... But in many of the policy debates that we have participated in during our project, 'Bologna' is perceived much more as a binding and urgent reality. As such, it constitutes an important external force that pushes the four systems towards a more similar programme structure. While once again this varies across the four countries (Slovenia is clearly at the forefront in terms of the priority it has given to internationalisation), this also expresses a fairly strong belief in cross-national student mobility beyond the threat of brain drain, and in the opportunity to enrol students from neighbouring countries – both to the West, and to the East and South-East.

A second trend towards convergence can be seen in the developments discussed by Marijk van der Wende & Don Westerheijden in Chapter 8 on the European debates on quality assurance and degree recognition. Even though assessing these policy developments is still to an extent like 'reading the signs on the wall', there is a general consensus that one way or another they will result in more commonality in degrees, approaches, methodologies, curricula, standards and even outcomes. And thus, here again, is a driving force towards more convergence at the European level.

The third trend is one that takes place outside of the direct sphere of higher education policy. But it is clear that entry into the European Union will have a major converging impact on the four systems. On the eve of entrance, an inordinate amount of time is spent by many civil servants to actually assess the changes necessary in national procedures, rules and legislation to meet EU requirements. This was described to us once as having to translate 80 000 pages of Brussels' policies, guidelines and rules into one's home language and then to ensure that one isn't inadvertently in conflict with them! (The potential impact of EU policies should not be underestimated, as has been demonstrated with the case of Mme Gravier.²) The effect of European policies also will become more tangible when the European higher education and research areas become more of a reality. Though whether this will be all good news remains to be seen given the emphasis on matching funding, which may prove to be a serious constraint for the four systems. But that all of this will impact on both the structure and the nature of education and research is beyond doubt. The extent of this impact, however, is dependent on both national and institutional policies and this remains a much-contested dimension.

² Mme Gravier was a French national who enrolled in a higher education program in Belgium. Unlike Belgian nationals, she was charged a registration fee. The case was taken to the European Court of Justice, which in 1985 on the basis of this developed the principle of equal access to higher education for students in all European member countries.

The National – Institutional Policy Nexus

One of the main challenge for the coming years for the four countries – but certainly not for them alone – will be how to co-ordinate national and institutional policies in an increasingly volatile and international environment. The complexity of this task cannot be underestimated. We have outlined some of the push factors that are likely to drive higher education systems towards more convergence. And we have outlined a number of forces that play a crucial role in national policymaking and that constitute a drive towards diversity. This ‘clash of forces’ becomes an interesting phenomenon if we take into account the concept of the ‘loss of steering power’ identified by Harry de Boer & Leo Goedegebuure in Chapter 9. What happens when national systems find themselves caught between supra-national policies with a European rationality and local policies that quite legitimately relate to different claims and priorities? How is this balanced in systems where much of the policy debate is in fact a complex dialogue between parties that have very different priorities? The difficulty becomes even more pronounced when political balances are intricate.

What we thus see is first the complex issue of national policies dealing with ‘global warming’ types of external forces. Second, institutional policy makers trying to mediate between national and supra-national policy priorities and claims by their internal and – increasingly – external constituents. Third, all of these actors coming together in a national policy arena to attempt to reach consensus on the most appropriate ways forward. And finally, all of this occurs in a situation where institutional representatives are challenged to muster a sufficient degree of internal support for the outcomes of these processes.

We believe this leads to a particular version of the demand-overload problem that has been identified as one of the serious problems facing modern higher education policy (Clark, 1998). What is often considered an appropriate reaction is a loosening of central controls, or a decentralisation or devolution of power. Clearly, this to varying degrees has already been the case in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Which brings us to our final point: the role and nature of institutional management.

Tackling a 700 Year Old Problem

The problem of institutional management is not a recent phenomenon, even though many of us like to think it is. As Cobban (1975) argues:

“Whatever the differences in scale and technology, there is a hard core of perennial problems which have taxed the minds and ingenuity of university legislators from the thirteenth century to the present day. Matters of organisational form and democratic procedures ... are just some of the issues which reveal the strands of continuity linking the medieval studium generale and the universities of the modern world.”

Chapter 9 has identified the major areas of contention in this respect for the four countries. Yet it is one thing to analyse a particular situation, but another thing altogether to suggest solutions. We do not claim to have the ultimate solution to the

problem of institutional management in times of vast and rapid transition. But we strongly feel that a further professionalisation of the institutional management function is an important *and* necessary condition to deal with the issue. This is not because of misplaced trust in the wisdom of professionals or a rock solid faith in the principles of modern management. On the contrary, it is the logical conclusion to the arguments presented above. In the knowledge society, higher education is asked to take an increasingly prominent place and is expected to pro-actively engage in relationships with *all* of its stakeholders, including its internal constituents. It is asked to do so in the context of higher education institutions being difficult institutions to manage because of their principle characteristics (Clark, 1983; Van Vught, 1989): goal ambiguity, high professionalism, fragmentation, and devolved decision-making. Therefore, given that institutional management has more responsibility now than ever before, the drive towards professionalisation would seem inescapable. The consequence is that we need to break away from the assumption that a good and respected academic by definition is a good manager. This tradition is still paramount in all four of the countries we have observed. Furthermore, this is as much true for the central institutional level as it is for the decentral levels. Given the overload of demands placed on higher education institutions, it cannot be assumed that a Rectorate can effectively deal with, let alone solve, all of the issues facing an institution. In the same way that at the systems level a case can be made for devolution of power and authority, this case can be made at the institutional level. And this directly affects the primary institutional processes of teaching and research. For effective institutional management is not only about overall strategic planning and resource allocation, about balancing income sources and understanding cost drivers, it is as much about human resource development, about motivating staff and using their individual qualities to the maximum benefit of the institution. Which requires effective co-ordination of the teaching and research function within institutions.

At a recent seminar with colleagues from a higher education centre at the University of Pennsylvania we came to the following conclusion:

“Competitiveness in today’s higher education marketplace depends on academic strengths, the management acumen of the rector or president, and just as much on the knowledge, experience, and foresight of the team supporting that person.”

(Lazerson, Toma, Neave: CHEPS/Penn Seminar on Higher Education Management Development, Enschede, 2003)

This is a challenge then that is not unique to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Slovenia. It is a challenge facing all of higher education in Europe, and beyond. The Bologna process, in combination with the major external forces discussed before, drives us to reconsider our undergraduate and graduate programmes with a keen eye to societal needs. And this requires professional programme management. The emergence of a European Research Area is likely to have the same effect on the research function of universities. Though curiosity driven research will always remain a cornerstone of academia, we cannot escape the fact that thematic priorities also are set increasingly outside of an institution, as is evidenced by the EU Framework Programmes. Within institutions, and even across institutions, this requires effective co-ordination of

research activities, implying that this can no longer be the sole prerogative of individual professors. Dealing with these challenges in a context of professionalism and individual autonomy is no easy task. Yet, the extent to which we succeed in accomplishing just this, will determine to a very large extent the success of the modern university in Europe.

None of this is to suggest that changes to institutional leadership and management are not fraught with risks. In all of these discussions about changing patterns of university management and decision-making there is a need to remember that the core activities of higher education are teaching and research programmes guided and lead by specialised and professional academic staff. In an environment of rapid change and burgeoning opportunity one of the major challenges facing university leadership is attracting and retaining talented staff, and ensuring high levels of motivation and morale. Rising levels of entrepreneurial activities and ‘creeping managerialism’ within the academy are not uncomplicated in this regard. In a gentle parody on the business school genre of ‘the four Bs of human resource management’ our colleague Harry de Boer suggests 14 potential consequences in C many of which pose real risks to the academic enterprise:

Cost awareness, Clients & competing interests, Consumer power, Change is normal (constant change), Competing stakeholder interests, Curriculum distortion, Core business downgraded, Curiosity displaced, Curtailment of freedom, Commercialisation, Contractualisation, Continuity is lost, Competition, and Collegiality under pressure.

Our argument is that these risks are best avoided, and an appropriate balance best found between the internally and externally generated demands on the modern university, in a context of strong and effective institutional management and leadership. Major environmental changes are driving these potential consequences in C, and ineffective non-transparent decision-making structures will not make them disappear. In contrast, particularly in systems where academic salaries are a real challenge, the changes will be responded to in an uncoordinated manner at the level of departments and individual academics and many of the negative Cs will develop ‘off-shore’ in the private arrangements individual academics forge in their own micro-environments.

The Dangers of Context-crossing Best Practice

In this book we have seen substantial evidence of a decade of fundamental system-wide reform and innovation in all four higher education systems. In this context we suggest that one of the remaining great challenges revolves around creating effective leadership and management capacity at the institutional level to enable informed responses to the turbulent environmental conditions we have identified. What we are not arguing, however, is that there is out there somewhere a ‘best practice’ solution to this challenge. Higher education internationally has suffered from management fads (Birnbaum, 2000) that jump from their contexts of development to very different contexts of application. In some cases this entails the jump from the military or business sectors to higher education, and in others the jump from higher education

systems with particular traditions and underlying socio-economic conditions to systems operating in very different contexts. In a rare and fascinating account of 'importing organizational reform', in this case importing to Hungary the US idea of intermediate boards of external stakeholders at the system and institutional level, the consultants came to the following conclusion:

"As economic and academic globalisation marches on, innovative structural configurations like intermediate boards are encountering cultural traditions and long-held distributions of power. Other characteristic structural features of the region, such as relatively weak, elected rectors and very powerful senates with broad management powers, clash with what might be regarded as "global" management models that call for a stronger executive function including expanded powers of the rector and separation of administrative from faculty expertise. It will be interesting to watch the strength and pervasiveness of these dominant, increasingly perceived as global, management norms and models as they encounter regional and national cultures...these are sufficiently strong, particularly in countries with large, well-established university sectors and with a culture of strong government bureaucracies, to question the value of these "global" management norms. At the very least, we believe that these global management norms will be substantially adapted by these strong regional and national cultures."

(Morgan and Bergerson, 2000. p. 447)

On the one hand, we are unconvinced about the existence of really workable 'global' management models, but, on the other hand, we are convinced that effective and modern higher education leadership and management approaches will be developed out of regional and national traditions and experiences. As we indicated in the preface to this volume, one of the aims of our dialogue over the past four years has been to make a modest comparative higher education policy contribution to the search of our colleagues in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia for their own distinct solutions to this and other policy challenges. We hope that this book will add to this contribution.

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