The question of whether, and if so, how quickly, higher education in Europe might be converging has been a matter of interest for both policy-makers and scholars for some time. As long ago as 1999, colleagues of mine at the Institute of Education in London published a study of the changes observable then (Green, Wolf, & Leney, 1999), and more recent research in which I and other colleagues have taken part have indicated that change, arguably of a convergent kind, is continuing across Europe (CHEPS, 2009). The European Commission has taken a particular interest in this topic, and a series of communications following from the 2000 “Lisbon Strategy” have urged member states to “modernise” their education systems (most recently, European Commission, 2011). By “modernise,” the commission means, amongst other things, allowing individual universities more managerial independence, especially financial independence, so that they can become more “entrepreneurial” in the sense that Clark (1998) proposed and thus, it is hoped, more effective contributors to the knowledge economy.

However, we need to ask what exactly we mean by “convergence” in higher education, and this book performs a valuable service in identifying the wide range of structures and processes which we might expect to see changing as part of a convergence process. There is, though, a danger in policy assumptions that there is one, and only one, correct way to manage both system and institutional levels in higher education, but there is not – even within fairly standardised national systems one may find wide diversity between institutions, being successful in different ways. The United Kingdom may be a good example of this: what may seem to an outside observer to be a uniform system is, on closer inspection, diverse in terms of funding sources, research intensity, and institutional governance, as well as academic standards. Most national policy-makers will claim that they wish to see diversity of mission among the institutions in their national system – but there is a risk that seeking convergence in terms of governance, funding, and so on will lead, in fact, to a kind of convergence to the mean, as all institutions respond in similar ways to external signals.

Making changes to national policies towards higher education is one thing (albeit an essential one); achieving change at institutional level is another and perhaps more difficult one. Long-held attitudes need to change—with individuals accepting greater personal responsibility, for example—and new skills will be needed. Yet, without these institutional level changes, changes in national policies will often be ineffective. It is, I think, significant that master’s-level management qualifications aimed at university staffs have emerged in the last ten or so years, right across Europe (we think our MBA programme in higher
education management in London was one of the first, dating from 2002). A key aspect in achieving convergence is the connections between national and institutional policies in improving effectiveness. I hope that this book will stimulate further thought and debate about the process of, and the benefits that may arise from, convergence in higher education in Europe.

Paul Temple
University of London, UK
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Paul Temple is Reader Emeritus in Higher Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He has worked extensively as a consultant on higher education planning and management issues, internationally and in the UK. He was previously head of the federal University of London’s Planning Division, after working on polytechnic and college planning and finance issues in London. He has written on university organisational and management issues; his particular interests are how the university functions as a knowledge producer and how the physical form of the university affects its work. With Michael Shattock and Gareth Williams, he worked on a framework project on “the entrepreneurial university” in Europe, and the resulting book, Entrepreneurialism in Universities and the Knowledge Economy, appeared in 2009. He has recently completed work on two other European-funded projects, one on university/enterprise relations, and one on the changing pattern of higher education management and finance across Europe. He is currently involved in research on how Chinese universities interact with enterprises. He has edited Universities in the Knowledge Economy: Higher Education Organisation and Global Change (2012), and The Physical University: Countours of Space and Place in Higher Education (2014). His most recent book is The Hallmark University: Distinctiveness in Higher Education Management, which will appear in late 2014. He was until recently editor of the London Review of Education.