

***Building Up the European Higher Education
Area: The Struggle Between Common Problems,
'Shared' Goals and National Trajectories.***

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ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops
Lisbon 2009

Workshop on: THE POLITICS OF GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURES: INSTITUTIONS,
POWER, AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE EU LISBON STRATEGY

First Draft. Comments Welcome

1. The ‘Lisbonization’ of European Higher Education

For a long time higher education has been a marginal issue in the process of European Integration. The Treaty of Rome did not mention educational matters, which were considered for a long time a taboo topic (Neave 1984), but an article on vocational training was inserted in the Euratom Treaty (Corbett 2003). Subsequently, despite some cooperative developments during the 1980s (e.g., approval of Community programmes such as Erasmus and Delta), not much happened until the Maastricht Treaty (1992) enshrined in articles 126 and 127 the traditional image of education inherited from the past treaties: education should be a policy field based on the principle of subsidiarity, without any direct interference on the more idiosyncratic features of national systems (such as content of curricula, structure and institutional organization of education systems, cultural diversity). Europeanization (whether harmonization or simple convergence) in the (higher) educational field was clearly perceived as something to be avoided, and national legacies and traditions were considered as values to be preserved.

Today things are completely different: what was once to be avoided has become something to be pursued (Huisman and Wan der Wende 2004a; Huisman and Wan der Wende 2004b; Beerkens 2008). The unexpected suddenly materialized: the EU is engaged in a consistent process of convergence in the field of Higher Education, so that many of its most relevant dimensions (for decades considered as matters of national sovereignty) are under constant supra-national pressure. The two-tier structure of university degrees are now a fact all over the EU; quality assurance lies at the core of national and European policy-makers’ concerns; issues of Higher Education governance are at the center of the Commission’s and the national governments’ attention. Increasingly, and by now almost obsessively, national debates refer to the documents issued by European institutions and by international organizations such as the OECD. By now the role of the European associations of rectors (EUA) and students (ESIB) cannot be under-estimated nor should the role of organizations devoted to specific dimensions of higher education (i.e. the European Network for Quality Assurance, ENQA).

This process was inaugurated by the Bologna Declaration of 1999 – a typical inter-governmental initiative – and developed in a series of meetings which were held at regular intervals (Corbett 2006). The Lisbon Agenda, launched in 2000, did not directly refer to higher education, and yet in only few years higher education has been ‘lisbonized’ (Haskel 2009) and the Bologna process has been absorbed into the more general ‘tream’ of the Lisbon Agenda through a progressive convergence of documents

and declarations of different European policy-makers (the Commission¹, the Council of Education Ministers², the European Parliament³, the European University Association⁴) (Balzer and Martens 2004). From this viewpoint, 2005 can be seen as the year in which the different policy streams aiming at the harmonization of European Higher Education began to converge. In February of that year, the Commission issued the Communication “New start for the Lisbon Strategy” (CEC 2005a) and, few weeks after, in April, the Communication on the mobilization of universities for contributing to the Lisbon strategy (CEC 2005b). The first document attributes a significant role to universities in the pursuit of the Lisbon Strategy, particularly when contrasted to the rather limited role assigned to them in the original Lisbon Declaration of 2000. In the second Communication, the Commission directly proposes strategic guidelines to improve universities’ performance as a pillar of the socio-economic development of EU, and the Bologna Process is clearly taken into consideration as an essential measure for the necessary modernization of European universities (Olsen and Maassen 2006), thus “enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy”. So, it has been with the re-launch of the Lisbon Strategy that the various initiatives pursued at the European level with regard to higher education have been re-addressed towards Lisbon (van der Ploeg and Veugelers 2008). The ‘Lisbonization’ of higher education – that is, the inclusion of higher education into the Lisbon ‘stream’ – seems to be not only

¹ Among the more relevant documents issued by the Commission through which higher education has been ‘lisbonized’ it is useful to remind the following ones: the “Report from the Commission: The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems” 31.1.2001. COM(2001) n59; “European benchmarks in education and training: follow-up to the Lisbon European council, 20.11.2002. COM(2002) 629; “Investing efficiently in education and training – an imperative for Europe”, COM(2002) 779; “Education and Training 2010 – the Success of the Lisbon Strategy hinges urgent Reforms”, 11.11.2003. COM(2003) 685; “Progress towards the Common Objectives in Education and Training – Indicators and Benchmarks”, 21.1.2004. SEC(2004) 73; “The Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge” 5.2.2003. COM(2003) 58; “Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe. Draft 2006 joint progress report”, 30.11.2005, COM(2005) 549.

² See for example: EU Spring Council Conclusions: The concrete future Objectives of Education and Training Systems, Brussels, 14.2.2001. 5680/01 EDUC 18; Council Conclusions on the follow-up of COM(2001) 59 final, in: Official Journal C 204/6 (20.7.2001); Council Conclusions on the follow-up of COM(2001) 59 final in view of the preparation of a joint Council/ Commission report to be presented to the Spring 2002 European Council, in: Official Journal C 58/1 (5.3.2002); The communiqués of the meetings of minister of Education held in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), and London (2007).

³ See for example: ‘Report on education as the cornerstone of the Lisbon process’, Committee on Culture and Education, 19.07.2005, (2004/2272(INI); ‘Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education’ [Official Journal L 64/60 of 4.3.2006].

⁴ See the EUA’s political declarations: ‘The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area’ (Salamanca Convention 2001); ‘Forward from Berlin: the role of universities’ (Graz Declaration 2003); ‘Strong Universities for a Strong Europe’ (Glasgow Declaration 2005).

functional to the redesign of the initial Agenda but also to reflect the specific focus of the Commission on the strategic role of Higher Education (which clearly was lacking in ‘Lisbon 2000’).

Higher Education, then, is a strange case. Initially, because of its high level of national idiosyncrasy, it was considered as extra-integration terrain. Then, through a slow process, it became an area of cooperation among States and a field for very significant – and unexpected – inter-governmental decision-making (as the Bologna Declaration surely is). Finally, it has been included as a strategic tool/resource for what is probably the most ambitious mission of EU after the creation of the common currency. Along the way, the European Commission has progressively developed a dominant role in setting the higher education reforms discourse.

From this point of view, Higher Education can be considered as one of the most interesting areas for the analysis of some features of the Lisbon process and, above all, for the exploration of the possible impact and effectiveness of Lisbon on Higher Education policy. Put otherwise, HE is a very stimulating policy case for understanding “if” and “how” the “governance architecture” of the Lisbon agenda really works.

1. Searching for the policy effects of the ‘Lisbonization’ of Higher Education

Two are the main goals of the Europeanization of Higher Education (HE): the creation of an European Higher Education Area (generally stated by the Bologna Declaration) and the modernization of European universities as “a core condition for the success of the broader Lisbon strategy” (CEC 2006, p. 2). In this paper we want to gauge whether the pressure towards the creation of a “modernized” European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is exerting any significant effect on the member-states, by whom these pressures are being picked up domestically, and whether the changes that ensue are merely symbolic or are not rather signaling an authentic convergence process. More specifically we investigate “if” and “how” the implementation of EHEA modernization has been pursued in five countries.

The empirical focus will be on three relevant dimensions of the main general goal: 1) the adoption of the two-tier structure of academic curricula (one of the priorities of the Bologna Declaration); 2) the promotion of university institutional autonomy and accountability (this governance issue was clearly developed through the re-launch of the Lisbon strategy); and 3) the provision of quality assurance (one of the priorities of the Bologna Declaration strongly institutionalized at the European level since the year 2000 through the establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education which became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) (Saarinen 2005).

In what follows, we will produce evidence on the above mentioned elements of the ‘Lisbonization’ of Higher Education from five European countries, representing very

different historically-rooted traditions in their constitutive elements of higher education policy (mainly: systemic and institutional governance, extent of structural differentiation of post-secondary education, organization of curricula, role of the academic staff in the governance structure): England, The Netherlands, Germany, France and Italy.

From an explanatory point of view the analysis will try to assess whether and how ‘Lisbonization’ has pressured national higher education policies towards convergence, that is, whether it has caused a reduction in the variation among national educational systems (as described by our three indicators).

In doing this, we will follow the suggestions of the co-directors of the Workshop, by focusing particularly on the ideational and organizational pressures “eventually” produced by the “governance architecture” of the Lisbon strategy on national HE policies. In particular we identify the following *ideational components*:

- a) The notion of competitiveness, which undergirds the very idea of a “knowledge-based society”, is the fundamental element of the Lisbon governance architecture. It is both “grand” and “constitutive” (Borras and Radaelli 2009, 6) in that it constitutes the original *raison d’être* of the European Community and supports a grand design of modernization of European societies and economies. In its competition with the more advanced areas of the developed world – at the time of Lisbon 2000 mainly the United States and South-East Asia – European member-states, relatively scarce in natural resources and cheap labor, realized that they clearly had to invest in the productivity their economies, the innovativeness of their science, and the qualification of their workforce. Unless productivity and innovation are constantly upgraded, European member-states realized that they are bound to slip behind their most direct competitors. Key to the promotion of both productivity and innovativeness is the qualification (and constant re-qualification) of European workers at all levels and in all trades. While the discourse on competitiveness is not particularly new – after all the Common Market was created in order to boost the domestic competitiveness of European economies – its global declension and its insistence on the knowledge-component of productivity and innovativeness are Lisbon’s real novelties.
- b) Competitiveness serves also to “discipline, organize and legitimize” (ibid. 6) whatever is done with the purpose of boosting the knowledge-base of European economies and societies. Competitiveness as “master discourse” (ibid. 7) allows then to articulate more specific sub-discourses that justify individual policy measures. It allows, for example, to ground the reform of higher education on quality assessment of teaching and research, on the competitive allocation of funds to selected institutions, and on the reform of

institutional governance (and, even more precisely, on the autonomization of individual institutions of learning and research). The reform of higher education is conceived as a giant race among national and international “champions”, where victory is assigned by a jury of customers that can freely pick their best choice once the barriers to competition are torn down. By way of caveat, we mention the danger that unrestrained market competition may not produce fair outcomes, particularly when un-eliminable barriers (e.g., native language) or counter-productive, yet responsible behavior (like resistance to academic fads) are factored in. The possibility that competition might foster the differentiation of national systems of higher education – as each might end up specializing in a niche product – must be also entertained.

As *organizational components* of the Lisbon “governance architecture” we consider:

- c) The “formal and informal organizational arrangements” (ibid. 7) through which higher education policy is decided and implemented. While we endorse the thesis of the ‘Lisbonization of Bologna’, we are also aware of the many streams of different governance formats that make up this policy field, from the purely intergovernmental (the Bologna Process) to the mixed Community method (degree recognition and exchange programmes), from the spontaneous coordination of the Bologna Process in the beginning to the Open Method of Coordination inaugurated with the Lisbonization of Bologna. The formal and informal governance arrangements, in the case of higher education, are therefore manifold and are populated by plural stakeholders such as governmental authorities at different levels (supranational, national, and sub-national) and by non-governmental actors (academic thematic groups, national and European councils, academic staff associations, student associations, etc.).
- d) The “selection of policy instruments and their procedural requirements” (ibid. 7) are clearly influenced by national cultural traditions (the role and goal of higher education in each member-state, whether it performs a purely educational or also a social function, whether it is considered as a public good or a service, whether it is available free of charge to all or it is based on a pay-per-use basis, etc.) and by historically-rooted structures of university and national higher education system governance (role of professors; institutional and systemic governance structure; mechanism of performance evaluation and control; etc.). Clearly, these national institutional and cultural traditions shape not only the organizational solutions chosen for the policy reform but also the cognitive frames of the reformers and, hence, their pliability to novel policy solutions.

We will infer that there is impact of the *ideational pressure* of Lisbon if we detect empirical evidence of decreasing variation in national *policy paradigms* regarding the three policy dimension we chose for our analysis. At the same time, we will conclude that *organizational pressures* had an impact if there is empirical evidence that the *policy instruments* suggested by the governance architecture of Lisbon strategy have been clearly used inside the national policy-making.

The comparison will focus on:

1. The national arrangements in the three considered dimensions before 1999;
2. The policy effects of ten years of Europeanization of higher education on the same dimensions;
3. How the EU HE strategy has been used by internal actors to reframe the national discourse on higher education;
4. How governments have emphasized the European policy framework to change the national policy agenda;
5. How the idiosyncratic character of national higher education and university traditions have interacted with the multilevel pressure on university systems and institutions;
6. How different governance modes adopted by EU in higher education policy (the soft inter-governmentalism of the Bologna Process, the OMC adopted for developing quality assurance, and the “exhortative mode” adopted on the governance issue) have been imported and adopted into the national systems (Gornitzka 2005, 2007).

In the conclusion we will reflect on the empirical findings by considering whether and how the possible intervening variables proposed by Borrás and Radaelli (the degree of discretion in implementation; the communication and coordination argument; the national traditions of political and administration organization; and the presence/absence of institutional opportunities) work.

2. National Cases

England

As this section will illustrate, national and international trends had already induced the English system of higher education to adapt to demographic and cultural developments by adopting many of the reforms that became later the focus of Lisbon. As a consequence, England experienced a weaker pressure to adapt than the other countries of our sample.

Facts

The pre-1999 situation regarding the three dimension considered can be summarized as follows:

1. The English system of higher education is considerably complex and segmented, characterized by different tracks that lead directly from secondary to post-secondary studies (Leišytė 2007). Post-secondary (higher education) offers would-be students a variety of degrees. After earning a three (or four) Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree,⁵ students can attend a one-year curriculum that awards a Master's of Arts (MA) or Master's of Science (MSc) degree or obtain a Master's of Philosophy degree after two years of studies as a stepping stone towards the two year Philosophy Doctor (PhD). The original English system was, therefore, a 3+1+1+2 system (that could be variously lumped as 3+2+2 or as 3+1+3 or again as 4+1+2). The distinction between one-year and two-year Master's degrees cannot be neatly attributed to their being oriented to professionalization (taught masters) or to research (research masters). The English system, from which the Bologna Declaration took inspiration when proposing convergence towards a 3+2+3 system, was on the face of it the one that needed to change the least. One of the main bones of contention was the exact identification of the number of credits (ECTS) that a degree programme should entail in order to release a degree. The English position was opposed to creating too tight of a connection between numbers of credits and degree, which went against the English approach based on a more qualitative assessment of the real student achievement and which would implicitly disqualify English Master's degrees entailing only 60, 75, or 90 ECTS. The one-year Master's degree had become an ingrained feature of the English academic landscape that everyone liked: from the HEIs who could "sell" it very well internationally thanks to the good reputation of English universities and colleges to students who would be opposed to paying two years of tuition to receive a degree that they could currently get at half the price. No direct transferability of credits existed among universities, exception made for few universities that coordinated among themselves on a regional level to that end.
2. In England, universities are self-governing bodies that can choose how to govern themselves (except for the former polytechnics whose governance arrangement are established by a law issued in 1992). As well known, since

⁵ For professionally-oriented programmes, other degrees exist such as the Bachelor of Law (LLB), the Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) and the Bachelor of Education (BEd).

the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a progressive governmental pressure on higher education institution which created an effect of consistent verticalization of internal decision-making and, as consequence, a weakening of the collegial power of the self-governing academic organs. It is necessary to fully appreciate how strongly governmental pressure constrained the historical autonomy of universities. They have been obliged to focalize their actions towards priorities sets by the central government. This process has introduced very strong competition and institutional differentiation regarding missions and functions.

3. *Quality assurance.* Quality assurance has long been a fundamental component of the English higher education system. Since 1990, quality assurance was buttressed by systematic institutional audits undertaken by the Academic Audit Unit established by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). In 1992 the “new universities” joined this system that was entrusted to the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). Quality assessment of individual subject matters and departments was, moreover, closely connected to the release of funding decided by the Quality Assessment Division (QAD) of the funding councils. In 1997, the HEQC and the QAD were merged to form the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (Witte 2006: 319). Quality assessment became the topic of a heated and complex debate during the first Blair term (1997-2001), particularly as it was widely felt that the new methods applied by QAA were too intrusive and limiting of institutional autonomy. Associations of higher education institutions and staff and students associations (HEFCE, Universities UK, SCOP, NUS) complained and obtained a revision of the methods that were directed more towards institutional audits and less at subject assessments.⁶ Furthermore it has to be underlined how evaluation of teaching and research had been deeply institutionalized since 1992 by the establishment of Higher Education Funding Council for England that is also in charge to allocate a relevant amount of public money through its periodical assessment .

The situation after the ten years since the Bologna Declaration is the following:

1. In terms of degree length and system, the situation in 2009 is still pretty much the same as in 1999. English universities, though pressured into compliance by their government on other policy dimensions, are still fully entitled to designing their own degree programmes as they best see fit, leaving it to the quality assessment and funding policy to discipline – reward and punish – inadequate

⁶ Associations such as HEFCE, Universities UK, SCOP and NUS injected also some attention for the Bologna Process into the English policy-making process thanks to their connections with similar associations in other member-states and their European umbrella associations.

behaviour. In order to understand English universities' reluctance in converging towards a European system that, after all, took inspiration from the types of degrees that they had been awarding all along, one must fully understand their pride in an educational system that attracts students from all over the world and that already responds in many ways to the Lisbon criteria. Moreover, "Behind these statements [of the HLPF] was British skepticism towards the purely length- and workload-based approach of ECTS which ran contrary to British approaches in developing and using credit frameworks and potentially discredited its one-year Master's programmes" (Witte 2006: 348). Rather, Diploma supplements fitted rather well the English system, strongly based on the capacity of students to independently assess their own progress towards an educational goal. Therefore, Diploma supplements were easily introduced as they dovetailed with the existing English tradition and cultural experience.

2. In the last decade, governance, both at institutional and systemic level, has continued the long term process of substantial change, by reinforcing the NPM mode of governance. Nowadays higher education in England higher education is strongly managed and market driven (Ferlie and Andresani 2009).
3. Quality assessment, as we saw was also a characteristic trait of the English higher education system, and indeed a rather developed and sophisticated one. Because of the strong tradition of institutional autonomy, though, English universities were reluctant in endorsing a European system of quality assurance that would necessarily have to adopt highly formalistic criteria that could limit their institutional autonomy – and the British government had no particular vested interest in it either. After all, England was perceived by most European partners as the model from which Europe-wide reforms had directly or indirectly taken inspiration. Moreover, the English educational system had already undergone an autonomous reform process whose main steps are represented by the Higher Education Acts of 1988 and 1992; the Dearing Report of 1997, issued just two months after the Blair Labour government took office; the Teaching and Higher Education Act of 1998, which followed from it; the White Paper on "The Future of Higher Education" (2003); and the Higher Education Act of 2004, which followed from it. In particular, while originally quality assurance was based on an informal peer-review system performed by the CVCP, with the increase in the numbers and diversity of HEIs, these assessments were increasingly standardized. This system was changed again, though, as it revealed itself to be too bureaucratic and intrusive, and even ultimately skewed. Hence, the reluctance of all institutional actors in further tinkering with a system that finally appeared to be working.

Dynamics

The response of England to the ‘Lisbonization’ process is twofold. On the one hand, English reforms can be characterized as superficial, belated, and ultimately defensive. UK authorities took late notice of the Bologna process even though they were among the original signatories of both the Sorbonne and the Bologna Declarations. As it happened in other policy areas, the UK (England) believed itself to be at the vanguard in the field of higher education and therefore anticipated that very little adaptation would be necessary. When it realized how intrusive adherence to the principle of growing convergence might be, it assumed a defensive position and strenuously fought to retain autonomy of its HEIs (not just financially, but also in terms of designing degree curricula and awarding degrees), to preserve its one-year Master’s degrees, to shun the imposition of Europe-wide quality assurance methods, and to avoid the strict implementation of a European credit system (ECTS). The only Bologna measure that England implemented with enthusiasm has been the introduction of the Diploma Supplement, that just happened to fit nicely into the type of reforms that had been autonomously decided. While the British authorities were articulating this strict inter-governmental position at EU level, higher education policy actors (associations representing HEIs, teaching staff and students) were rather active in connecting with their European counterparts and in relaying the EU debates back at home (through HLPF and the UK HE Europe Unit) (Bache and Olson 2001). So, we cannot claim that English reforms or policy outcomes are completely devoid of any Bologna or Lisbon influence. Nevertheless, the general approach of English actors to Bologna has been cautious and unenthusiastic. On the other hand, it has to be underlined that the other priorities of Lisbonization regarding higher education (more attention to the relationships with labour-market, competition, excellence, managerial modernization of universities, and so on) perfectly fitted with the national strategies developed since 1981, starting with the conservative revolution of Margaret Thatcher and continued also under the Blair governments.

Germany

What had represented a romantic and humanistic educational ideal – the Humboldtian system – was increasingly displaying clear limitations in a faster, more fluid and interconnected world (Weiler 2005). The German case tells us that the need for reform in HE was mainly due to the obsolescence of the original system and its incapacity to: 1) respond to the national demographic changes occurred during the sixties, when the surge in student population was met by simply opening up access to HE to larger numbers of students; 2) cater to the needs of part-time students and adults who wished to go back to school to update or complement their education; 3) stem the

high drop-off rates of German students and the substantial lengthening of their studies well beyond the official terms.

Facts

The pre- 1999 situation regarding the three dimension considered can be summarized as follows:

1. The German degree structure was organized, prior to 1998, into two fundamental types: 1) German *universities* awarded three degrees (*Diplom*, *Magister* and *Staatsexamen – Kirchliches Examen* for theology) equivalent to a current Master's degree; 2) *Fachhochschulen* awarded only the *Diplom (FH)* that could be ranked somewhere in between the current Bachelor and Master's degrees. All of these took between 8-10 semesters to complete, with the *Staatsexamen* (at different levels) taking up additional semesters of preparation time. These differences point to the prior difference between HEI types: *Universitäten* were supposed to be more teaching and research oriented and to allow for a strong disciplinary specialization; *Fachhochschulen* were instead more practical and trade oriented and to lead to a more direct access to various trades. German HEIs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy particularly in terms of curriculum design and method of teaching limited by several factors: a) authorization of programmes on the part of Länder ministries "based on a control of input measures such as teaching capacity, contact hours, rooms and the like" (Witte 2006: 157); b) a system of national subject specific curriculum frameworks (*Rahmenprüfungordnungen*, ROPs); c) academic unions and individual academics. One aspect which the German HEIs did not have to worry about was funding, as funding was directly transferred by Länder ministries on the basis of objective criteria. Funding was severely scarce, but there was very little that HEIs could do about it given that they could not raise money among private investors nor could they charge tuition fees.
2. *Governance and institutional autonomy*. German University system historically belongs to the Continental type (together with Italy and France) which means that institutional autonomy and responsiveness were very low and power was exerted by academic guilds and governments of Länder (which are in charge of higher education).
3. Quality assurance was not an issue in Germany, simply because the *Rahmenprüfungordnungen* (ROPs) took care of securing a certain homogeneity among different programmes. What also functioned as a sort of quality assurance system was the close connection that was established between certain degree programmes (particularly the *Diplom*, since the *Magister* degree was prevalent in the humanities and the social sciences) and employment. "The

Diplom degree directly conveyed the right to practice” (Witte 2006: 161). One indirect, yet very significant marker of quality was the direct employability of University graduates to be hired into the higher ranks (*höherer Dienst*) of the public administration, while *Fachhochschulen* graduates could aspire to access only the middle ranks of the public service (*gehobener Dienst*). The state (both at the national and at the regional level), therefore, was the real quality assurer.

The situation after the ten years since the Bologna Declaration is the following:

1. First of all, The Fourth Amendment (1998) introduced a two-tier (Bachelor and Master’s) degree system *on a trial basis* next to the conventional *Diplom/Magister/Staatsexamen* roughly equivalent to a Master’s degree. This caution was due to the fact that similar innovations had been tried before (by introducing “foreign degrees” into the German system) but without much success. Moreover, since the ultimate authorities in educational matters were the *Länder*, the central government could only suggest and recommend, but not impose a reform of degree structure. The suggested formats were 3+2 or 4+1, for a total of 5 years of post-secondary studies (also more complex options were possible, but eventually were weeded out). This reform appeared, on the one hand, to respond to the fact that students were taking more than the conventional 8-9 semesters to complete their *Diplom/Magister*, and, on the other, to look for a job after only three years of study. To this end, it was clarified that a Bachelor degree was a “‘real’ degree, conveying a proper professional qualification” (Witte 2006: 167). Moreover, since both *Universitäten* and *Fachhochschulen* could issue both degrees, the distinction between the two was implicitly erased. After the 1998 reform, ROPs were abolished and it was decided that each programme should receive individual accreditation through a system set up by the *Länder*. The new system was decided rather consensually by the German Rectors’ Conference (*Hochschulrektorconferenz, HRK*) and the Standing Conference of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* (*Kulturministerkonferenz, KMK*) and involved the creation of a Central Accreditation Council (*Akkreditierungsrat, AR*) and several decentralized accreditation agencies. The AR would be affiliated to the KMK, have a “corporatist” set-up with representatives from academia, employers, students, institutional management and the *Länder*. The HEIs would pay for the accreditation themselves and it was implied that the new Bachelor and Master’s programmes would require accreditation. This new system was meant to inject a certain degree of flexibility into a rather static system and to encourage individual HEIs to experiment with new curricula and programmes.

2. Länder have started to give more financial and organizational (also in the recruitment of professors) autonomy to universities. In almost all the Länder new boards of governors (composed by prominent representatives of external stakeholders) have been established by law. At the same time Länder have started to introduce market-driven strategies and competition (Orr and Jaeger 2009). However these reforms do not seem to have been capable to substantially change the traditional consensual inherited values of self-academic governance (Schimank and Lange 2009).
3. The reform of the accreditation system stirred quite a bit of conflict between governmental levels. “An important forum for cooperation was the German National Bologna Follow-Up Groups, which began work in March 2000” (Witte 1006: 178). The German-BFUG was composed of the Chair of the HE Committee of the KMK, three individual *Länder* representatives, and one representative each from the federal Ministry and the HRK, and later it was further complemented by representatives from the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, DAAD*), the AR, and the students’ association. Paradoxically, this international forum helped national concertation by allowing each stake-holder to fully realize the importance of fostering convergence among European HE systems. The reports therein produced chart the cautious implementation of the Bologna Process in Germany. The Research Council (*Wissenschaftsrat, WR*) produced documents encouraging the whole-hearted adoption of the new system on the part of German HEIs and the gradual abandonment of the old system. To this end, the AR suggested several ways in which the transition could be accomplished. It also developed a further distinction between those Master’s programmes that provided a deepening of the subject matter studied during the Bachelor (“genuine” Master’s) and those that allowed for a more multidisciplinary reorientation (“hybrid” Master’s). “The latter were not supposed to qualify for access to doctoral studies. In many ways, these regulations reflected traditional paradigms: mono-disciplinary, academically-driven degree programmes were established as the norm; trans-disciplinary and applied degrees as the exception” (Witte 2006: 181). This implied a debasement of the multi-disciplinary Master’s to a second-class rung, thus thwarting the original intention of the reform which was to inject innovativeness and experimentation into the system.

Dynamics

Among the driving forces behind German HE reform, the perception that the existing (in 1998) system was ill-suited to withstand the competitive pressures deriving from globalization and internationalization was certainly paramount. This perception

was mostly harbored at the federal ministerial level, but it was buttressed by the feeling that “public opinion favoured a substantial increase of HEI autonomy, a more competitive character of the HE system, and the possibility to introduce Bachelor and Master’s programmes in particular” (Witte 2006: 164). Quite clearly, echoes from the Bologna Process were filtering in Germany more audibly than they did in the UK. In particular, direct comparisons between German and British degrees and the suspicion that German students may have a hard time be accepted in British universities fanned the fear that German HE had become inadequate.

This led German authorities to push through two important amendments to the federal Framework legislation, in particular the Fourth Amendment (1998) and the Sixth Amendment (2002). These Amendments intertwined more directly with the Bologna Process than in the English case, even though it is difficult to find a direct causal link between the two. The German HE reform was powerfully shaped by the following intervening variables that could be lumped into two groups. First, a group of “policy legacy” variables linked to the way in which the HE system and the individual HEIs were governed, and to whether there existed a neat separation between different types of post-secondary education and access to various types of employment. Second, a group of “institutional and political” variables having to do with the federal structure of the German state, the structure of interest participation and intermediation, and sheer political contingencies linked to the coalition in power at any given moment.

The federal system is particularly relevant for explaining the patchy and uneven adoption of Bologna reform items and the tug-of-war that ensued between the center and the Länder. While Länder governments started to change the institutional governance of its universities, the national government is using the “power of the purse” to try and induce the desired behaviour. For example, the federal government now releases substantial extra funding only to the ten best universities or to the best research groups (Schimank 2005; Kehm and Lansendorf 2006). What is happening is simply that also in Germany governments discovered that the mode of governance needed to be changed at both at the single university and at the systemic level. The need to develop competition changed also the traditional way to govern the whole system: in 2005, a new excellence initiative was launched jointly by federal and state governments to promote quality and excellence in research. The total amount of extra-funding allocate is about € 2 billions for the 2006-2011 period. This is a clear indicator of the fact that German political authorities decided to use financial incentive to change the way of steering higher education policy.

The German implementation of the Bologna Process, then, is also tentative and incremental, but for reasons completely different from those of the English case or from those of the French and Italian ones. Germany, although clearly proud of its HE system, was nevertheless aware of the need to rejuvenate it and to make it more internationally competitive. Considerations linked to its costs and to the segmentation that it produced

in the student population also played a role. What stalled the process and made it so excruciatingly slow, however, was mostly the federal and corporatist format of its policy-making – an institutional setting completely different from the English one.

France

Facts

As is well known, the French HE system stands out for its very differentiated and articulated structural configuration which encompasses universities, *Institut universitaire de technologie* (IUT), *Grandes Écoles*, and other smaller vocational types of institutions. The pre- 1999 situation regarding the three dimension considered can be summarized as follows:

1. The system of awarded degrees was very complex and articulated (Kaiser 2007). The structure was 2+1+1+1+3. The first cycle was designed for basic education and led to a *Diplôme d'études universitaires générales* (DEUG). After this, the second cycle was characterized by two possible choices. The first, more academic-oriented, was a one year programme leading to a *Licence* (DEUG+1) and to one additional year leading to a *Maîtrise* (Licence+1). Both degrees were considered to be final qualifications, with which the holder may enter the labour market. The second choice focused on professional specialization and comprised a two years programme leading to a *Maîtrise*. After the first two cycles the third cycle offered also the choice between an academic and professional programme. The academic programme was based on the one year *Diplôme d'études approfondies* (DEA) and the 3-year Doctorate programme. The professional option involved a one-year programme leading to highly specialized diplomas in engineering and information and technology. The content of all programmes had to follow strict ministerial guidelines regarding their curricular content (to ensure the substantial homogeneity of degrees all around the country's universities).
2. Evaluation of teaching and research started in the middle of the 1980s (Chevaillier 2004). In 1984 a National Committee for the assessment of public institutions for scientific, cultural and vocational education was established, and in 1989 the National Committee for Research Assessment was built up. The evaluation activity, however, was vaguely defined and had only a feeble impact on the institutional behavior of universities. For example, the students' evaluation of teaching was made compulsory by a law of 1997, but it is often not implemented. Drop-out data are made public only in aggregate form without the possibility to know the single institutional performance (Cour des Comptes 2005). Also the evaluation of the outcome of the four-years contracts

(inaugurated in 1988), through which the single universities establish with the ministry their specific goals, were perceived to be very feeble and superficial (Musselin 2004).

3. The French governance structure was characterized by a strong power of central political authority and weak institutional autonomy. As is well known, until 1968 French universities were simply a confederation of faculties. This institutional fragmentation continued to persist also after the reforms of 1968 and 1984. After the introduction of evaluation and contractualisation during the 1980s, the institutional autonomy of French universities has been progressively strengthened. The formal structure of university governance is based on the existence of collegial deliberative bodies (composed by elected representatives of teachers, students, non academic staff, as well as stakeholders from outside the university) which have the legal power to decide on the most relevant issues. At the top there is the president, elected by the members of these three collegial bodies. Until the end of the 1980s, before the strong governmental pressure to make universities more effective and accountable began to be applied, the governance system reproduced the traditional self-governing pattern prevalent in Continental Europe (that is: decisions based on structural compromises among the different internal interests; distributive policy style, and so on). This trend started to change (Musselin and Mignot Gerard 2002) only when the external pressure asked for more effective decision thus making the role and the action of presidents more managerial and weakened the role of the collegial bodies (Boffo and Dubois 2006).

The situation after the ten years since the Bologna Declaration is the following:

1. In 2002 the law providing for the “Bolognasation” of the degrees structure has been approved and the new system started to be implemented since the 2006-07 academic year. At the university level, the first cycle is now called *Licence*, and lasts 3 years; the second level leads to two possible two-year programmes: the *Master recherche* and the *Master professionnel*. The third tier is obviously represented by the three-year Doctorate. So, apparently, the 3+2+3 structure has been adopted, but reality is more problematic. In fact, the old intermediate degrees are still alive (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 2007). So the old DEUG and the one-year *Maitrise* are still awarded. This accommodation makes the French implementation of the Bologna two-tier system very opaque and is a strong indicator of persistence of the old *repertoire* and paradigm on the curricular structure. Regarding the other two tools – the ECTS system and the diploma supplement – considered very significant for reaching the comparability and readability of degrees asked by the Bologna declaration, it has to be noted

that the Diploma Supplement has become compulsory only in 2008 and the ECTS system is still under implementation.

2. The quality assurance system has been rationalized in 2007 through the creation of a new agency (*Agence d'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur, AERES*) which has replaced the previously existing evaluation organizations. AERES is called to evaluate and assess all the activities of higher education institutions (both in research and teaching), the content of degree programmes, and the procedures of staff recruitment. It has to be underlined that the agency has no power in allocating funds: it is simply a technical agency preparing evaluative reports for the government.
3. Governance structure is undergoing change. After the 2003 attempt of the Minister Ferry failed due to the strong student opposition, in 2007 a new law to reform universities was approved. The reform is committed to reinforce the autonomy and the financial responsibility of universities (through the reduction in the size of the *Conseil d'administration*, the strengthening of the role of the president, and the attribution of more substantial autonomy to universities in matters such as budget, staff recruitment, and remuneration). The reform has encountered strong opposition both before and after its enactment.

Dynamics

French higher education changed, at least from the formal point of view. Obviously the effectiveness of these changes is disputable. Regarding the harmonization of the degree structure, it is clear that the old system is continuing under the new dress of the Bologna two-tier system. The process of evaluation and quality assurance has been reformed but it still seems to be ineffective. The governance reform is under implementation, but also from a technical point of view the content of the law approved in 2007 seems to be more an adjustment of the old paradigm than a radical departure from it. Substantially, French higher education has been moderately 'lisbonized'. Formal compliance is prevailing and incremental accommodation is the fundamental feature of the implementation.

Regarding the dynamics of the process of 'Lisbonization' some features clearly emerge:

1. Higher education reform is clearly considered a relevant problem by French governments. It is not by chance that one of the four promoters of the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, the direct antecedent of the Bologna process, was the French Minister of Education, Claude Allègre. This same minister appointed, in July 1997, Jacques Attali chair of a committee to elaborate a proposal to reform French higher education and to « répondre victorieusement aux défis auxquels la

France est confrontée : l'intégration européenne croissante, la mondialisation des échanges, les progrès scientifiques et techniques en constante accélération ». One of the “national” goals of this governmental commitment was to attempt to reduce the divide between universities and *Grandes Écoles*

2. If French governments have been, and are, very conscious of the need to change higher education policy content and strategy, they also know that this is a highly politicized issue in their country. It is not by chance that the strengthening of university institutional and financial autonomy has failed twice in the last twenty years (in 1986 by the minister Devaquet, a socialist; and in 2003 by the minister Luc Ferry, a gaullist) because the strong opposition and protest of students and teachers. Also the reform finally approved in 2007 is still strongly opposed (so its effective implementation is to be doubted). Moreover, the opposition has taken a clear stand against some of the priorities of the HE Lisbon Agenda (institutional competition and differentiation).
3. The national use of the European argumentation seems to be very instrumental at the top level of policy-making: while the reform of higher education has been a top “national priority” for a long time, the Bologna and the Lisbon processes are considered simply as “containers” from which to pick solutions. From this point of view, the reformers use the Lisbon agenda as a rhetorical device in their effort to reframe the national discourse on higher education against the persistent and highly institutionalized egalitarian and national values (Duclaud and Williams 2004).
4. At the institutional level the national reform policy is not perceived, by professors and administrators inside universities, as being connected to Europeanization (Mignot-Gérard and Barraud de Lagerie 2005)
5. The idiosyncratic character of the national higher education and university tradition strongly influenced the reform strategy. The external pressures of internationalization and ‘Lisbonization’ as well as the reform commitment of French governments have been strongly countered by the some historically-rooted features of the university system and of its perception by society. For example, while acceptance of the 3+2 system has been relatively easy thanks to the existence of a quite similar system composed of a variety of degrees (Orivel 2005), opposition to the governmental strategy to make universities more autonomous and financially responsible was rather grounded in the egalitarian culture which historically characterized both students and professors (who do not want to accept the risk connected with institutional differentiation that can be the substantive effect of giving more autonomy to universities).
6. It does not seem that the soft-governance modes adopted by EU in higher education policy had any specific impact at the national level, whereas the traditional modes of governance seem to persist.

The Netherlands

Facts

Dutch higher education is a binary system in which the university sector is separated from the vocational higher education sector (HBO). Regarding the three dimension we focus on for comparison in this paper, the Dutch situation pre 1999 was the following one:

1. The degree system was the typical Continental one. A long lasting degree (four years for most subjects; five or six year for some subjects like medicine, dentistry, engineering, some sciences) leading to a Master-equivalent title. An intermediate qualification existed until 1982. Universities had large autonomy in determining the content of their own curricula.
2. The Netherlands has been the first European country to develop quality assurance in research and teaching. This is due to the fact that the autonomistic policy (strictly linked with changes in the allocation of public funding) has been inaugurated at the beginning of 1980s. In 1985, the quality assurance policy was launched through a ministerial policy paper (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen 1985) and it has been institutionalized as a self-regulating system of peer-reviewed assessment of research and teaching. The overall coordination activities are managed by the national association of rectors (Westerheijden 1997)
3. Until 1997, institutional governance was characterized by the traditional corporative-democratic system. In that year, after two years public debate, the internal governance system was changed by law. The philosophy of the reform was that of strengthening the executive position and weakening the role of councils, following a logic of verticalization of responsibility in the decision-making. For Dutch governments, this reform was a consequence of the result of fifteen years of autonomistic policy. What had emerged, in practice, was that the impact of institutional autonomy had been lower than expected because the traditional style of university internal policy-making, based on consensual and distributive politics, was still prevalent (De Boer and Huisman 1999).

It is clear here that the situation of the Netherlands before the starting of the Bologna/Lisbon process is very peculiar. In at least two of the three analyzed dimensions, this country had started since 1980s to develop a strategy based on some of the Lisbon Agenda priorities - above all quality assurance, competition, institutional autonomy, and better governance – (Litjens 2005). From this point of view it is clear

that the Dutch higher education system was strongly prepared to fit the Lisbon agenda goals. The current situation is as follows (de Weert and Boezeroy 2007):

1. The new Bologna system was approved by law in 2002. All Dutch universities have implemented the Ba/Ma system: the first degree takes three years to accomplish in universities, but it still four-year long in HBO; the second degree can last either one or two years. This means, basically, that the total length of the previous degree programmes remained unchanged. The previous degrees lasting four years now are designed through a 3+1 duration; as the previous degree lasting five years are now declined through a 3+2 years of duration. Together with the new degree system the compulsory implementation of ECTS has been introduced. As regards as the Diploma supplement, it is compulsory since 2005.
2. Because the governance system was changed before 1999, what is interesting here to underline is that after twenty years of change and reform, Dutch universities, while retaining some traditional features in internal policy-making, have been successful in strengthening their behavior as corporate actors, thus becoming more capable of acting in a competitive and accountable way (de Boer, Enders and Leisyte 2007).
3. The system of quality assurance has been improved by the establishment of an independent agency (NVAO) in charge for the accreditation of the degree programmes. This organization was created in 2002 and since 2003 it evaluates also the Dutch-speaking universities in Belgium. This agency coordinates mandatory accreditation processes for universities that want to offer Bachelor and Master's degrees.

Dynamics

What clearly emerges from the above is that the modernization of Dutch Higher Education has been a relevant governmental and political issues since the beginning of 1980s. The Netherland has been the first Continental European country to deal with the ineffectiveness of the traditional Continental model of higher education, which implied, according to the famous Clark's typology (1983), strong State and academic guilds and weak institutional autonomy and responsiveness. Due to the evident dissatisfaction with higher education which arose in the Dutch public opinion since the mid of 1970s (van Vught 1991; Daalder 1982), higher education became a very salient policy issue.

Starting in 1983, when the first performance-based criteria for funding allocation were introduced, governments started to reform higher education through a policy process characterized, as is common for that country, not only by a consensual style but also by a bi-partisan agreement. In 1985, a policy paper was issue by the ministry of Education (HOAK 1985) in which the guidelines of reform strategy were designed. This

is a watershed in the evolution of higher education, not only in the Netherlands but also in Continental Europe. This document is the first governmental declaration that the traditional strategy of command and control – which had characterized higher education in the last century – had to be abandoned in favour of a “steering at the distance strategy”. Autonomy and quality assessment were the ideas/policy tools launched by that document. This new strategy was formalized by law in 1993: the transition from a system based on setting ex-ante standards and rules to a system centered on post-hoc evaluation was impressive. The government decided to make universities free to program and decide but, at the same time, it equipped itself with strong correction and sanction powers. Higher education is under constant review and public discussion in the Netherlands, and further changes are still being introduced particularly to increase the autonomy of individual institutions.

What about ‘Lisbonization’ of this process, then? It is very difficult to say because clearly the Netherlands is a case of evident “fit” with (indeed, anticipation of) the Lisbon Agenda. Analysis of official documents reveals that *competitiveness* – Lisbon’s leitmotiv – starts to be used since 2004 (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschappen 2004) in a ministerial report asking for greater internationalization of Dutch higher education. Here the Lisbon language is used particularly as it regards the discourse about deepening the link between university and labour-market and on the social and economic value of education. On the other hand, the rhetorical use of Lisbon is very low. For example, the words ‘Lisbon’ or ‘Bologna’ are never quoted in the last Strategic agenda for higher education (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschappen 2007), where there is only a generic reference to the participation of the Netherlands to the construction of the European Higher Education Area.

From this point of view it has to be underlined that the an Oecd review of the Dutch higher education system (asked by the government itself) has underlined how the Lisbon target has been given ‘lip service’ more than a concrete long-term commitment and that in such a way the steering at the distance strategy seems to be on ‘auto-pilot’ (Oecd 2007).

Furthermore, regarding the new modes of policy governance, the fit between the Lisbon architecture and the Dutch way to do higher education is very high. Benchmarking, mainstreaming, soft but constant consultation among the policy actor is are the characteristics of higher education policy since the mid of 1980s (De Witte 2006) but this seems more due to the traditional consensual policy style historically-rooted in the Dutch political system than a direct impact of ‘Lisbonization’.

Italy

Facts

Italian higher education system is made up by only one type of institution: universities. The pre-1999 situation is as follows (Capano 1999):

1. Regarding the degree system, Italy was characterized by an a single university degree, the *laurea* (lasting usually 4 years, but 5 or 6 years in fields such as medicine, engineering, architecture, veterinary), bestowing the title of "doctor" after the graduation.⁷ Admission to any university field was free (no particular degree was required), except for medicine, architecture, dentistry, psychology, and computer science. Post-graduate education was rather differentiated including the following programmes: Research Doctorates (lasting 3 or 4 years); specialisation courses (lasting at least 2 years for the medical and legal professions); a plethora of courses lasting 1 year (many of them named “Master’s”). Like in France, in Italy too universities had little autonomy in determining the curricular content of their degree programmes, which had to conform to national fixed requirements (Capano 2002).
2. Quality assurance started to be developed in 1994 with the creation of Internal Evaluation Units and, in 1996, with the establishment of the National Evaluation Committee for Universities (CNVSU). Initially both the types of organizations were thought as advisory bodies, respectively of the individual universities and of the Ministry (Capano 2008a).
3. Governance was a very undeveloped issue. In fact, although in 1989 a state law recognized for the first time the principle of institutional autonomy and in 1994 the mechanism of public funding was radically changed (lump-sum budget), the historically-rooted features of systemic and institutional governance – a mix of central bureaucratic and academics-driven politics – strongly persisted both at the systemic and at the institutional level (Capano 2008b). In practice, Ministerial guidelines concerning programme design and strong academic lobbies controlling hiring and promotion effectively shrunk most space for autonomous decision-making for individual universities.

At present the situation is a little bit changed:

1. Regarding the implementation of the Bologna process, Italy has been, unexpectedly, a “leader”. Since the Autumn of 1999 the formal rules for

⁷ In 1991 it had been introduced short-circle programmes lasting 2 or 3 years supposed to have a vocational nature. This new kind of diploma (called "short laurea") did not succeed as attested by the fact that only the 6% of the student enrolled at universities in the academic year 2000-2001 were attending these courses.

adopting the two-tier systems were ready and their implementation began with the 2001-02 academic year. At the end of 2004, a new overall redesign of the entire system was approved and its implementation started in 2008-09. The pillar of the new degree system is the replacement (except for medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, law, and veterinary) of the old one-tier Laurea with a two-tier structure consisting of the new 3-year Laurea (L) and the 5-year Laurea Magistrale (LM). In the beginning, in 1999, the two-level structure was designed in such a way as to tightly link the first level with the second: it was not a 3+2 system but a 3-5 system. In fact, the graduate degree was conceived to be a 5-year degree. In 2004, this mechanism was modified by the “reform of the reform” approved that year: at last, there are two independent degrees, a three-year long “*laurea di base*” and a two-year long “*laurea magistrale*”. In addition, one-year degree programmes – lasting one year and leading to a “*Master di primo livello*” (if earned after a *laurea di base*) and a “*Master di secondo livello*” (if earned after a *laurea magistrale*) – have been introduced. These latter are a legacy of the more recent past, and are supposed to be more vocational-oriented. However they are not recognized to have “legal value” (i.e., they have the same value regardless of the institution awarding it) as the *laurea di base* and *laurea magistrale* do. Significant autonomy has been given to universities in establishing the substantial content of the degree programmes, within limits set by procedural and formal constraints. ECTS have been applied since the first implementation of the new degree structure, and the Diploma supplement is now effective (after some years of troubles).

2. The Quality assurance system has been developed and partially improved during the last few years. More powers have been assigned to the Internal Evaluation Units, which are now sorts of governmental watch-dogs of institutional behaviour. The National Committee of Evaluation of Universities is now in charge of the accreditation of degree programmes. Furthermore, a new steering committee for the evaluation of research – the *Comitato di Indirizzo per la Valutazione della Ricerca* (CIVR) – consisting of seven government-appointed members, was set up by law in 1998 and concretely established in 1999. This Committee developed the first national university research assessment framework, based on the scientific production during the period 2001-2003. The results were presented at the beginning of 2006 and have been moderately used by government in allocating public funds (Minelli, Rebora and Turri 2008). The second round of research evaluation should be launched in 2009. Finally, a new national agency was instituted by law in 2007, but it has not been established yet. This new organization should take on all the functions assigned to the two national existing committees (the CNVSU and CIVR), so it should evaluate research and teaching simultaneously and act as the accreditation agency of all university degrees. Furthermore, following the example of the unified French

agency, it should also evaluate periodically the scientific work of individual scholars and the administrative performance of universities.

3. Governance issue is the real structural and persistent trouble-spot of Italian higher education. Even if also the Italian governments have tried to increase the autonomy of individual institutions, results are still rather unsatisfying. On the one hand, governments have been unable to coherently steer the system at a distance. Very often they have not stuck to their own commitments and they have not punished universities for performing poorly, as it had been announced in national plans and regulations. On the other hand, the internal governance system of universities, based on the traditional democratic-corporative mechanism, is intrinsically ill-suited to produce responsible decisions and to overcome the simple aggregation of internal interests and preferences (Capano 2008b; 2008c). Against the evidence of the problem, no changes and reforms happened in the last decade, even if public debate has been intense and is still going on⁸.

Dynamics

The dynamics of Italian higher education policy seen from a “Lisbon” perspective show some salient characteristics. First of all it emerges without any doubts that the role of Italian government in the Sorbonne and Bologna declaration is based prominently on an internally perceived need to reform higher education. The perception that the old degree system was performing badly and should be changed was quite clear since the middle of the 1990s, and just few weeks before the Sorbonne declaration a ministerial committee had presented a report in which an intermediate degree was proposed. The then Minister for Higher Education, Giovanni Berlinguer, strongly supported a change of the degree system and capitalized on the Sorbonne event to capture a very important symbolic resource against the highly predictable academic resistance to any curricular reform (Capano 2003). Thus, for Italy the Bologna process is clearly an instrument for pushing forward national reform. The strong reformist will of the centre-left coalition to reform higher education explains why the implementation process has been so rapid. Furthermore, it has to be underlined how all national public discourse has been replete with references to Bologna and Lisbon words and ideas. Comparability, readability, competition, employability, evaluation, quality assurance institutional accountability and so on are hugely present in ministerial documents and reports, in parliamentary debates, and in newspaper comments (Capano 2005). From this point of view it seems that, at least at the communicative level Italian, higher education policy is sufficiently ‘lisbonized’.

⁸ The current Minister of Education, Universities and Research, Maria Stella Gelmini, announced that the reform of governance is one of the priorities of her policy plan.

However, if one pays more attention to the details of the day-by-day policy process, both at the systemic and at institutional level, things appear more complex and ambiguous. Two examples will suffice. First, the implementation of the new degree system could be characterized as filling new bottles with old wine. The content of old four-year degree programmes were distributed over the new 3+2 programmes; no organized and planned re-visitation of the ways and tools of teaching was developed. As in other cases, the old system has been adapted to the new formal requirements. In Italy the impression is that of a “reform by decree” without any planned activity aimed at diffusing the rationale of the reform at the “grass roots”, among the real players and interpreters of the implementation game: the academics.

Furthermore it has to be underlined that the actions of government have been very incoherent relative to their announced goals and plans. In fact, the new “steering at a distance” governmental strategy seems unable to purge itself completely from the conventional ex-ante evaluation or the continuous adoption of procedural constraints on the behaviour of universities in the teaching function. National research assessments have not been institutionalized yet; benchmarking and mainstreaming are used in a spotty manner and very often without a strong real commitment. In the Italian case, the Lisbon agenda seems really a “primeval soup” (reference) from which to fish out something on the basis of contingent needs.

3. Policy effects in comparative perspective: convergence vs. national persistence.

In the five cases that we compared, higher education has undergone quite a bit of change during the last ten years, at least as far as our chosen three dimensions are concerned. So far so good: after all, change is an intrinsic feature of policy dynamics. But from our perspective, two questions are particularly relevant. The first regards the degree of change with respect to the pre-1999 situation and, therefore, the specific goals introduced by ‘Lisbonization’ that we focused on (the two-level structure of degrees, the improvement of quality assurance, and the modernization/verticalisation of governance – the “how”); the second concerns whether these changes have been really affected by the strategy of Europeanization (the “if”).

Regarding the amount of change, we present in Table 1 our findings on the three analyzed dimensions, grading (in a qualitative, ‘subjective’ manner) their current state with respect to the pre-1999 situation by giving 0 for no or minimal change, 1 for moderate change, and 2 for relevant change. By “change” we mean the content of the policy output (any evaluation about the policy outcome would need a significant extension of the analysis that is not matter for this paper).

Table 1. Changes (policy outputs) in comparative perspective 1999-2008

	Bologna degree-system	score	Quality assessment	score	Governance/institutional autonomy	score	Total score
England	3+1+1+2 <i>Troubles with ECTS and DS</i>	0	First agency for quality assurance in 1992, replaced by another one in 1998. In 1992 the agency for evaluation of teaching and research has been established	0	At the institutional level reinforcement of monocratic positions since 1980s. Changes in systemic governance since 1980s.	0	0
Germany	For trial since 1998. Full implementation within 2010. Ects since 2004; DS since 2005	1.5	National Agency founded in 2005. Research and teaching evaluation implemented by Landers.	1.5	Changes in some Landers of institutional governance. Excellence initiative in 2005 to promote top-level research	1	4
France	Full implementation by 2010 even if designed respecting policy legacy (formal 3+2 but with the persistence of intermediate certificates) Ects still to implement. Ds compulsory since 2008	1.5	Agency for assessment and evaluation built up in 2007	1.5	Reform of institutional governance approved in 2007 (modest change respect to the previous situation)	1	4
Netherlands	Defined by law in 2002. Full implemented ECTS compulsory since 199; DS since 2005	2	Accreditation agency established in 2002. Since 1990s teaching and research is evaluated through peer review	0,5	Institutional governance radically reformed in 1997. Systemic governance based on the steering at the distance strategy since 1980s	0	2.5
Italy	Approved in 1999. Fully implemented since 2002. ECTS since 2002; DS since 2994	2	Committees for accreditation and evaluation of research build up in 1990s. In 2007 formally approved a unitary Agency still not working	1	No formal changes even if under discussion since the beginning of the decade.	0	3

What emerges is that only *England* had no relevant changes, while in the other four countries change occurred albeit nowhere to a maximum degree. The English case is clearly the more deviant case, but the explanation for this outcome is very simple: English higher education policy fitted the ‘Lisbonization’ objectives.⁹ The BA/Ma system, which was the benchmark of the Bologna declaration, belongs to the English tradition; quality assurance and evaluation as instruments of governing the HE system started in earnest early in 1980s, hence prior to most countries; and institutional autonomy and responsible institutional governance are founding principles of English universities and have been stimulated by the steering at the distance strategy adopted by British governments since more than twenty years ago.

The Netherlands is a mixed case. In fact, independently from European pressures, it developed institutional autonomy and implemented a radical reform of governance (in the Lisbon sense) before 1999, as the reform of degrees structures is clearly a consequence of Bologna declaration.

The other three countries (*Germany, France, and Italy*), typical examples of the Continental model of university and higher education policy, evidently changed their higher education policies after 1999. All three countries were affected by the Bologna Process, as the Netherlands, but they scored better on quality assurance and evaluation: on this dimension it is clear that they did more than the other two (but only because England and the Netherland had started fifteen years earlier to apply this policy strategy and therefore, by the time of Bologna, did not need to change much). Regarding the governance dimension, France and Germany performed a little better than Italy (where no formal change has been decided) even if in a timid way.

Significant policy outputs can be registered, except for England, but with different intensity in the different dimensions. What emerges from the four continental cases is that national governments are indeed trying to pursue the “steering at a distance” strategy (Amaral, Jones and Karseth 2002). This general policy strategy became widespread in Western countries since the end of the 1980s (van Vught 1989). So, it is nothing of new or original: it is the policy paradigm that was shared at least at the discursive level, among many experts and policy-makers for at least two decades. From this point of view, our analysis shows that the policy changes that we have ascertained belong to a long-lasting wave of reforms which involved Western countries

⁹ This is true at least as far as our three dimensions are concerned. When one looks at other “disciplining mechanisms” that would also be implied by the Lisbonization process – such as the liberalization of access to higher education degrees for students coming from different secondary education tracks and the decoupling of degrees from privileged access to professional occupations, also included in the “competitiveness” agenda and jointly constitutive of a general “democratization” of higher education in view of unleashing the productive potential of European HE systems – conclusions would be rather different.

progressively. Differences in intensity of policy outputs are strictly connected with timing: the countries which started early are farther ahead.

From this perspective, it is evident that the ‘Lisbonization’ process adopts an already hegemonic policy paradigm on higher education and proposes it as a template for the design of the European Higher Education Area. Lisbon presses European countries to speed up convergence towards this model.

Convergence is another relevant parameter to be considered here. Do the changes that occurred in at least four of the five countries signal a convergence process? As Heichel, Pape, and Sommerer (2005) pointed out, there could be two types of convergences: sigma and delta convergence. *Sigma convergence* indicates the diachronic decrease in variations among national policies. *Delta convergence* means the decreasing over time of national policies with respect to an exemplary/shared model. From our empirical analysis, it would seem that there is a moderate movement of four among the five analyzed countries towards decreasing variation of their own policies with respect to some basic pillars of higher education (institutional autonomy, quality assurance, evaluation, systemic governance). At the same time it seems that all the countries are moving towards a shared, common, hegemonic policy model (the “steering at the distance” one). But this double moving towards convergence seems to retain some national differences in interpretation, translation, implementation, and timing which still preserves the imprint of national styles and traditions (cf. Heinze and Knill 2008).

4. ‘Lisbonization’ of Higher education: the evocative effectiveness

Summarizing, in the case of Higher Education, ‘Lisbonization’ has meant first of all the institutionalization at the EU level of a specific policy paradigm that was first developed in the 1980s. The UK (England) and the Netherlands started to sketch out the fundamental elements of this new way of making policy in higher education. The essential principles of this new paradigm (generally labeled “the steering at a distance” model) involved greater institutional autonomy and accountability, competition, evaluation, quality assurance, excellence in research, stronger linkage between university and the labour-market. Through the Lisbon Agenda the process of international diffusion of this new paradigm reached the significant result of being integrated and thus strongly legitimized as the EU policy model for higher education (for a skeptical view, see Bache 2006). It has become the official EU discourse, helping national governments in their long-lasting (and very often impervious) efforts to reform their higher education systems.

Before 1999, all the countries here analyzed had similar problems with higher education efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and responsiveness. All five countries started, even if different ways and with disconnected timing, to re-frame the

essential elements of their national higher education systems and policies. And in all of them (above all in France, Germany and Italy) governments were faced with strong and effective opposition. Thus, viewed from this perspective, the Bologna Declaration represents the concrete beginning of a process that, through ‘Lisbonization’, allowed governments to create a supra-national policy arena from which they could draw *ideational and organizational legitimization* for reinforcing their reformist strategy. So, from this point of view, ‘Lisbonization’ has been a very rational tool for national governments to create external legitimate pressure for their own national policy arenas.

Obviously the rational choice of governments had unintentional consequences as well: that is, it created an independent process from which many other actors can also draw incentives for political and policy action. It is not by chance that ‘Lisbonization’ has become the magic word with which universities and students elicit, both at the national and at European level, specific behavior from governments (more funding, more quality, more excellence, more rights, etc.). So ‘Lisbonization’ of higher education has gained a life of its own, independently from the instrumental goals of national governments. It clearly influences in a specific way the national reform efforts by proposing a common general model to which refer to.

So, generally speaking, ‘Lisbonization’ designs the boundaries of the policy space in which national systems can move. Now the real problem is: how much does ‘Lisbonization’ concretely influence the content of policy output? As we know, the domestic impact of European integration policies is mediated by a set of intervenient variables. Drawing from our analysis, the four countries with a significant degree of misfit vis-à-vis the three dimensions that we considered performed differently on each dimension. Why have the Netherland, Germany, Italy and France transformed their degree structures, but simply accommodated their quality assurance systems? And why have France, Italy and Germany been not very effective in changing the institutional governance of universities? The answer cannot be simply that the two-level degree system objective was more binding than the other two goals (quality assurance and institutional governance) because the ‘monitored coordination’ developed in the last years as pointed out, for example, by Ravinet (2008).

Obviously a more convincing answer can be found by focusing on those intervening variables that strongly influence the possible domestic impact of ‘Lisbonization’ on higher education

Here we think that the framework proposed by Borrás and Radaelli (2009) might be useful to this purpose. So, we follow their sketched framework in trying to explain similarities and differences regarding our three dimensions of higher education policy we empirically investigated above.

1. *The degree of discretion in the implementation of Lisbon goals.* Here the hypothesis (H1) is that “the more open the Lisbon strategy goals are, the greater the possibility to accommodate and make compatible the pre-existing national goals with EU-

goals, inducing domestic change gradually” (ibid. 17). Apparently the hypothesis seems to be confirmed, even if some specifications are necessary. In fact, it is true that generally speaking, none of the goals of the Lisbon Agenda and of the Bologna Declaration are binding. But the problem here is about the difference in timing and intensity of policy adoption, which clearly seem to depend on other intervening variables rather than on the openness of the process. In other words, this hypothesis seems to be too feeble. A counter-intuitive argument might be made that, also without ‘Lisbonization’, quite similar policy dynamics and changes would have been detectable if the wave of higher education reforms were observed in a diachronic perspective. Another point is that the large openness, flexibility and malleability of the Lisbon strategy goals permit a significant variety in the interpretation of the basic policy principles and thus allow to translate the old historically-rooted policy principles into the new language without loss of their original meaning. If this is true, then, the apparent convergence in *policy output* could be coupled with still significant variation in *policy outcome* (as many observers underline especially for France, Italy, and Germany)¹⁰.

2. *The communication and coordination of the discourse by national policy entrepreneur(s) and reform coalitions.* Surely the legitimization of the new policy paradigm at the EU level has empowered those domestic policy actors that, particularly in the member-states least fitting with the Lisbon policy model, were pursuing reforms. And surely, in all the analyzed countries, magic words such as evaluation, accountability, excellence, competition etc., although combined in different ways because of their malleability, have been pillars of a coordinative discourse which has facilitated the adoption of some policy output (H2). At the same time, however, it has to be underlined how the hegemonic actors in higher education and the real policy entrepreneurs are governments. Higher education reform is a bi-partisan problem. So the discursive dimension of ‘Lisbonization’, at the national level, has to be considered as a rhetorical/symbolical device in the hands of governments. From this point of view, then, the governmental side of the possible coordination/communication dimension emerges as a point on which more research and reflection should be done. Furthermore, as sketched above, the discursive dimension of ‘Lisbonization’ can represent a relevant opportunity also for other actors at the national levels. Especially in the slower reformist countries (France, Germany and Italy) the new policy ideas and principles can be brandished by those universities which could gain more money if competition were significantly and correctly applied. With Schmidt (2006) we could say that what slowed down Bologna in Germany, France and Italy (as is to be expected in compound democracies) was the lack of a *coordinative discourse* that could iron out

¹⁰ For Italy see: Moscati (2009); for Germany: Schimank and Lange (2009); for France: Musselin (2009).

domestic opposition, while what slowed it down in England (as is to be expected in simple democracies) is the lack of a *communicative discourse*.

3. *The national traditions of political and administration organization.* The national institutional tradition variable is represented, in higher education, both by the historically-rooted internal university arrangements and by the functioning of national higher education systems (role of professors; institutional and systemic governance; mechanism of performance evaluation and control). Here the hypothesis is that of structural similarity: the greater the structural similarity of the current system to the Lisbon principles the more probable domestic change (H3). Our findings here run against this hypothesis or are internally contradictory. In effect, the two-level degree system proposed by the Bologna Declaration was very different, with respect to the pre-existing situation, in four out of five countries. In this case, path dependence was radically uprooted (even if through an accommodative process). The same is happening, regarding the institutional issue, in some German Länder, where institutional governance is undergoing significant change. On the governance dimension, then, it has to be underlined how, generally speaking, the hypothesis seems to work even if only time will definitely tell (in Italy, a radical reform of institutional governance is under discussion, and in France more time is needed in order to understand the real impact of the Sarkozy's reform approved in 2007). At the same time, the hypothesis holds with regard to third dimension, quality assurance, with only the two countries that had already been treading a quite similar policy path, being able to stay the course .
4. *The presence or absence of institutional opportunities for issue coupling and entrepreneurship.* H4 states that “the institutional position of the individual or reform coalition determines the amounts of change” (p. 19). In our case, because higher education reforms were willed by governmental actors, the institutional position of the reformers was certainly very strong. In order to give a sense for the variation among the five cases, then, the intervening variable should be reformulated in terms of “governments capabilities”. This, obviously, requires us to focus on those institutional mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of governments in policy-making (institutional political arrangements, veto-points, etc.) and on the social perception of the policy issue (very significant for higher education as all the educational issues). From this perspective, the hyper-economic emphasis put on the concept of “knowledge-based society and economy” is very far from the more “cultural” conception of education and higher education historically prevailing in the three large continental countries. In these countries, even in the presence of institutional opportunities for decoupling reform goals from established cultural traditions – which meant the strong legitimation of government do decide on higher education reforms – policy output was deeply influenced by the prevailing values

regarding the role of universities in society against the ‘commodification’ of higher education imposed by the Lisbon agenda.

These considerations show how difficult it is to evaluate the real impact of ‘Lisbonization’ at the national level. It is surely evident that Lisbon exerted *ideational influence*, as the new policy model clearly represents the benchmark for national strategy and the Lisbon repertoire is the framework around which national strategies are constructed and reframed. It is partially evident that there is *organizational influence*, because the new governance modes adopted by Lisbon have ambiguous implementation effects inside the national policy arenas. On the one hand, it is evident that the supranational policy arena intensified the interactions among national governments (through the increasing role of the Commission in redesigning the content of the university modernization agenda; the relevance attributed to the action of the European Universities Association; the two-year Bologna Councils and the ongoing activities of the BFUGs; and so on) which, in turn, increased the pressure on domestic policy arenas. But on the other hand, both the intensification of supranational activity and the adoption of some procedures and policy instruments seem very often strongly influenced by national policy legacies and always adapted to the specific national context and prevailing interests.

From this point of view, then, the governance architecture of Lisbon could really resemble or a patchwork (Heritier 1996) either a Pandora’s box (Bruno, Jacquot, and Mandin 2006). But, and this is the real big problem for the analysts, without this blend of, often contradictory, principles, ideas, and magic words, national government and reformers could lose significant resources for their efforts. Without this sometimes confused and rhetorical supranational strategy, all reformers would feel more isolated and more weak. So probably the governance architecture of Lisbon is effective more for what it evokes than for what it practically asks for.

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