Governance Regime Changes in Higher Education from a comparative perspective: national policy dynamics

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The research project will focus on the meso and micro level of analysis (see below, points 2 and 3) of the PRIN2015 project “Governance Regime Changes in Higher Education from a comparative perspective: systemic performances, national policy dynamics and institutional responses”. This project aims explain the main differences in performance across Higher Education Systems in Europe, considering a multidimensional system of performance indicators with a particular focus on teaching and the “third mission” from a diachronic perspective. The focus of the analysis in on the changes that have taken place in systemic governance regimes (i.e. the set of adopted policy tools, interests alignments, and prevailing shared ideas), national policy dynamics (the process by which governance regimes are designed and modified over time), and institutional responses (the reaction of institutions to inputs from the existing governance regime). Thus, the main aim is to pursue a systematic comparative analysis of the set of factors which influences – at different levels (systemic, national, institutional) – the “performance” of higher education systems.

Thus, for each level of analysis, the project will develop a specific research approach and will operationalize specific research questions, and consequently will adopt appropriate methodologies, consisting in a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

1. Macro Analysis: comparing governance changes effects on systemic performance in EU countries

The system-level analysis will focus on the relationships between governance regimes and systemic performance in at least 15 pre-enlargement EU countries (with the addition of other, post-enlargement countries where data are available) seen from a diachronic perspective.

The main research question here is: how are governance regimes and institutional features correlated with HE systems’ performance? How have the diachronic changes in these characteristics led to change in systemic performance?

In this analysis, governance regimes are operationalized, at the systemic level, in terms of adopted policy instruments, and thus as specific sets of techniques or means by which governments try to affect the behaviour of policy actors in order to direct them towards the desired results (Linder and Peters, 1990). Policies are (not) successful when they affect the actors’ capabilities and beliefs to the extent that their behaviour results in the good (bad) performance of the HES. Explanations therefore lie with the “carrots”, “sticks” and “sermons” (Vedung 1998) that are established and rendered effective within a system - that is, with the policy instruments employed in a certain context. These instruments, following Doern and Wilson (1974), Phidd and Doern (1983), Woodside (1983), Howlett (2000, 2010) and Salamon (2002), may belong to two main families: substantial tools and procedural tools. Substantial tools are those that directly affect the actors’ behaviour, while procedural tools are those through which decisional responsibility is assigned and accountability rules are established. In higher education, according to the mainstream literature on governance change (Huisman 2009; Paradeise et al. 2009), governments have redesigned governance systems to make HE institutions more accountable, by intervening above all in regard to procedural tools, and thus with the introduction of rules governing the allocation of public funding, tuition fees, the recruitment of academics, and the evaluation and accreditation of institutions. Flourishing studies of higher education economics has begun to analyse the performance of universities and
university systems from a cross-country perspective (among others: Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Agasisti & Perez Esparrels, 2010; Daraio et al., 2010; Agasisti & Haelermans, 2015). However, there is a need for more empirically-based studies and for a deeper theoretical understanding of those system-level determinants of HEIs’ performance that are affected by policies, governance regimes and the reforms thereof.

The project will assess these changes over time by means of a double-sided comparative analysis. On the one hand, the analysis will adopt quantitative techniques (more specifically, parametric and non-parametric estimations of country-level spending efficiency, as well as econometric analyses of HES’ performance), and the net effect of each adopted policy instrument will be gauged. Thanks to this research strategy, the project will assess which instruments alone seem capable of producing a stronger effect on systemic performance.

On the other hand, a configurative qualitative research strategy will be pursued through QCA, in order to identify those specific combinations of policy instruments capable of exercising a greater degree of influence over systemic performance. This dual research approach is justified by the theoretical attempt to measure the pros and cons of the two methodological approaches in view of the object of analysis, and to see whether their results are intrinsically diverging or not both in theoretical and prescriptive terms. Furthermore, the comparison of results from the variable-oriented and the configurative-oriented analyses will provide a better understanding of national similarities and differences. From this point of view, it will be quite interesting to assess the explanatory capacity of the two methods in regard to the mechanisms that are triggered by governance regimes (i.e. competition, normative-mimetic-coercive isomorphism, positive feedback, accountability).

Furthermore, the results of the two comparative strategies will be assessed in order to choose those national cases on which to develop research at the meso and micro level. It should be pointed out that the same systemic data (including the period 1995-2014) will be gathered for both research strategies, although they will be obviously coded in different, more appropriate ways.

Regarding “performance” - the dependent variable - the project will start from the main indicators used in the literature, namely: the accessibility of the system (% of school-leavers entering HE); teaching efficiency (the % of the population awarded a tertiary degree; the % of students getting their degree within the allotted time); teaching effectiveness (private returns of HE; graduates’ skills; employment rates; matching of occupation to teaching). Particular importance will be given to third mission indicators, including: the number of patents, spin-offs, grants obtained for applied research (contract services), and so on. Although it does not specifically focus on the research dimension – where comparability issues across countries are more complicated – the analysis will also test certain important indicators within this area, such as the number of PhD students, and/or the competitive grants obtained – indeed, these indicators lie at the crossroads of research and HEIs’ other institutional missions. However, one of the project’s main undertakings is to design and validate new performance indicators and indexes that are more capable of accounting for the systemic performance of HEIs, and thus of providing a less fragmented representation of such performance.

2. Meso Analysis: comparing national policies in a selected number of countries

The meso analysis will focus on a limited number of countries, selected by assessing the results of the macro-comparison (by choosing the “champions” and the main “outliers” of the clusters emerging from it). Here the focus of research will be on two specific goals: 1. Understanding why and how the selected countries have developed their chosen HES governance regimes; 2. Quantitatively analysing how the performance of universities in these countries has been affected by the reforms introduced.
The importance of the first analytical goal derives from the assumption that policy-makers in each country have to deal with five factors (namely: political-institutional arrangements; dynamics of partisan politics; socio-economic national and international context; policy legacy; the influence of Europeanization – both in institutional and ideational terms), the interaction of which influences policy makers’ range of choices when deciding what policy instruments are to be adopted in HE, and thus the actual governance regime. The aim of this aspect of the project is thus to reconstruct the diachronic developments of choice regarding governance regimes in HE, to understand under which contextual conditions certain tools or specific sets of tools can be adopted or not. From the methodological point of view, this analysis will be mainly of a qualitative type. The reconstruction of the diachronic evolution of choice will involve gathering data from: existing literature; official documents produced by the major stakeholders; and semi-structured interviews (with at least 15 policy makers for each country) at the national level. Then, through a process of tracing analysis (Mahoney 2012; Bennett and Checkel 2014), each single national policy dynamics will be reconstructed, and the causal mechanisms explained in relation to outcomes (the chosen governance regimes over the last twenty years). We would expect the actual development of events, and the five factors considered in the analysis, by evolving and interacting with each other, to trigger specific causal mechanisms such as learning, policy diffusion, policy entrepreneurship and brokerage, framing and ideas, power reproduction, i.e. the most relevant in terms of influencing policy dynamics in HE. Furthermore, the reconstruction of policy dynamics could enable the type of intervention in existing governance regimes to be assessed, and thus the type of changes introduced over the course of time to be evaluated (Capano 2009; Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

With regard to the second analytical goal, we shall analyse the performance of universities within the selected countries by using the panel nature of the data. More specifically, we will study how the performance indicators varied over a long timespan (between 1995 and 2014), and compare them at different periods of time when specific reforms were made. The study of how system-level institutional features affect universities’ performance is important from the policy perspective, and previous attempts have been made to understand how different characteristics of HE systems impact the dynamics of institutions’ inputs and output (see, for example: Agasisti, 2009; Donina et al., 2015). One specific objective of the meso-analysis will be the definition of appropriate indicators for measuring the institutional features that characterize HE governance at the system level, and an attempt will be made to operationalize and measure them, and to conduct a descriptive, quantitative analysis of how these features have been modified during the period under scrutiny. When moving the empirical, quantitative analysis of performance at a within-country level, the focus will be twofold. On the one hand, we shall investigate the baseline research question: is the improvement in universities’ performance correlated with reforms that have been implemented at country level (i.e. are there certain common patterns/changes)? On the other hand, we shall study whether a cluster of universities can be identified, according to the patterns of performance evolution over time, also by combining such modifications with the system-level reforms made during the period in question.

3. Micro analysis: institutional response

Changes in HE governance regimes have been pursued by government so as to increase systemic performance through the continuous redesigning of the rules of the game for the institutions, and thus by assuming that the effects of the new governance regimes are characterized by expected institutional behaviour (and consequently characterized by a kind of coercive isomorphism). However, the reality is more complex and we are perfectly aware that also under strict regulations, HE institutions have sufficient room for manoeuvre (Gornitzka, Kogan, Amaral 2005). Thus, the micro perspective of our analysis will focus on the institutional response to the pressure from the renewed governance regimes. From this point of view, we assume that we shall get a better understanding of the interaction between external pressures stemming from governance reforms, and internal institutional features. In fact, national reforms are interpreted, elaborated and implemented
by the universities’ internal actors – with their power resources, culture, learning abilities – who act as “filters” vis-à-vis the planned reforms.

These internal actors face organizational dilemmas (Simon 1997; Drucker 2009) that do not meet a “one-size-fits-all” solution in national reforms. We have identified four basic dilemmas encountered when establishing the internal organization and functioning of universities: the functional vs. hierarchical integration of organizational units; the large and encompassing vs. the small and homogeneous nature of such units; a strong decisional role vs. a traditional brokerage role for middle management; the centralization vs. the decentralization of internal policy-making. The institutional answer to these dilemmas can be considered the institutional response, in organizational terms, to governmental pressures, as well as the driver of the institutional response in terms of expected performance. Moreover, such organizational theories could provide a useful framework for this analysis due to their focus on the connection between change and the overcoming of organizational inertia (also) through the role played by reforming agents and leaders, and by the activation of energies in terms of organizational learning, resource development and power management (Rebora and Minelli, 2012).

On this analytical basis, the project will involve a micro analysis of institutional performance and response. This analysis will employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods to create new knowledge, to develop instruments for assessment purposes, and to furnish material supporting debate and learning. First, we shall perform a comparative quantitative analysis of the institutional performance in each of the countries chosen for the meso-analysis (see also the previous paragraph). Thanks to the results of this assessment, together with any eventual findings resulting from the reconstruction of national policy dynamics, five universities will be chosen for each country, and a profound qualitative analysis will be conducted for each university by gathering data through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and official institutional documents. Thanks to this in-depth research strategy, it will be possible to understand which specific institutional factors favour/hinder “local” implementation of reforms, and favour or hinder the mechanism that the changes in governance regimes aims to achieve (i.e. competition, differentiation, institutional profiling, accountability).

Plan of activities

The ideal candidate should have a PhD in political science and a good training in quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore the candidate should demonstrate enough experience on the topic of the research.

During the 12 months of the contract the selected scholar should work in close contact with the supervisor in order to:

a) prepare national reports on 6 of the 15 analyzed countries;

b) proceed to an empirical analysis of the quantitative dataset on institutions to assess the changes in institutional performance;

c) to collaborate with the other research teams of the PRIN2015 project in interviewing policy-makers in at least two of the selected countries.