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“Transformations experienced
by higher education and research institutions
in European countries”

Thursday June the 24th (1 pm to 5 pm)

11:45 to 12:30

Johanna **Witte**

(CHE, Center for Higher Education Development, Gütersloh, Germany)

“The Introduction of Two-Tiered Study Structures in The Course of the Bologna Process: A New Institutional, Comparative Analysis of Change in European Higher Education Systems”

Discussant : Séverine **Louvel**

Adaptations of study structures in the context of the Bologna process: A comparative study of change in European higher education systems - Theoretical and methodological considerations

*Paper submission to the First International Euredocs Conference “Transformations
experienced by higher education and research institutions in European countries”¹*

Sciences Po, Paris, June 24-26

Johanna Witte, CHE Center for Higher Education Development, Germany

The Bologna process is among the most ambitious and encompassing attempts at reforming European higher education (HE) systems ever, certainly in its scope and reach. In the meantime, forty countries in- and outside of the European Union have joined the process and simultaneously engage in more or less intense reforms. If the process is to succeed in its far-reaching aim of creating a “European Higher Education Area” by making study structures more comparable (Bologna declaration, 1999), mutual understanding and knowledge of the participating HE systems are of utmost importance. The empirical basis for this endeavour is however thin. Besides some overview information by Eurydice (2003) and some scattered country reports and surveys in individual countries (Dubois, 2003; Klemperer, Wende, & Witte, 2002; Schwarz-Hahn & Rehburg, 2004; Trowler, 2003), the EUA trends reports (Haug, Kirstein, & Knudsen, 1999; Haug & Tauch, 2001; Reichert & Tauch, 2003) are so far the most systematic and encompassing studies available on this topic.

This paper presents a framework and some methodological considerations for a more encompassing, systematic and theory-based international comparative study of a central aspect of the Bologna process; the adaptation of study structures to a common tiered structure based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate – often referred to as ‘Bachelor and Master’.

The proposed theoretical framework is tailored to understand and explain the specific patterns that the adapted study structures assume in the respective national higher education systems in Europe. It aims to do so against the background of different inherited institutional contexts and actors interests, combining the institutionalist and actor-centered perspectives of North (1990) and Mayntz and Scharpf (1995a; Scharpf, 1997) to a framework for analysing change in HE systems. Based on this analysis, the framework is designed to study the similarities and

¹ This is an adapted version of a paper recently submitted for publication in Higher Education Policy, forthcoming in HEP (2004) 17(4).

differences between the patterns of study structures and investigate if the observed changes contribute to the convergence of European HE systems.

This study is undertaken as a project of CHE Center for Higher Education Development in Germany and feeds into a PhD thesis supervised by Marijk van der Wende and Jeroen Huisman at the CHEPS Center for Higher Education Policy Studies in the Netherlands.

The structure of this paper is in three parts. First, the research perspective is explained and a number of initial propositions are put forward that lead to the development of the theoretical framework. Second, the theoretical framework itself is presented. Third, some methodological considerations for its application are put forward and some suggestions for further research are made.

Research perspective and initial propositions

The following observations constitute the starting point for the proposed theoretical focus:

1. In a great number of signatory countries, reforms are currently under way to adapt their study structures. These reforms cannot always be attributed exclusively to the Bologna declaration. Some of them have been initiated prior to the declaration so that the declaration can instead be seen as formalised expression of a general political will and trend in Europe (Neave, 2002). However, since the Bologna declaration, a great amount of ongoing change is focused and co-ordinated in the framework of the Bologna process, by which the aims of the declaration are implemented (Haug & Tauch, 2001). Therefore, the adaptations of study structures need to be regarded in the context of this process.
2. The Bologna declaration is a big leap forward in European HE policy in that for the first time, the aims of “greater compatibility and comparability of the systems” as well as of “constructing the European area of higher education” are envisaged in an official European policy document signed by - in the meantime - 40 European countries inside and outside the European Union. Given the history of resistance of European governments to the outright ‘harmonisation’ of HE systems through the vehicle of the European Union – as confirmed again in §126 (149) of the Maastricht (Amsterdam) treaty – this declaration constitutes a historical step (Neave, 2003). In line with previous European education policy documents, however, the Bologna declaration confirms the intention to “take full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of university autonomy” (Bologna declaration, 1999) (see De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001; Verbruggen, 2002). It is therefore

important to investigate how the resulting tension between convergence and diversity (see Meek et al., 1996; Teichler, 1988) is being played out when it comes to translating the Bologna declaration into national policies.

3. As the Bologna declaration is but a declaration of intent and not legally binding (Verbruggen, 2002), it would be inadequate to speak of its 'implementation' in the literal sense (Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2002). Also, and though the ensuing Bologna process becomes increasingly interwoven with EU processes and procedures, the declaration has been deliberately agreed upon outside of the framework of the European Union. For its translation into national policies, and finally real changes in the respective HE systems, the Bologna declaration is therefore largely dependent on what happens in the signatory countries, i.e. the national level.

4. The Bologna process as a whole as well as the adaptations of study structures at the national level are most adequately understood within a framework of multi-actor, multi-level governance. Though governance structures of European HE systems today vary with respect to the degree to which the national government can 'steer' HE in a top-down way or have to take into account the various stakeholders (Vught, 1994), in general they are most adequately characterised as multi-actor, multi-level systems (Enders, 2002; Mayntz, 1997, 1998; Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995b). National policies on changes in study structures can be expected to emerge as an outcome of the interaction of a multitude of public, semi-public as well as private actors in the respective national HE systems. To understand these policies, one needs to pay attention to the policy formulation processes regarding a reform of study structures at the national level, and to the perceptions, motives and interests of the relevant actors, i.e. the driving forces for them to support or oppose adaptations of study structures to a common European model based on two main cycles, and to shape them in a particular way.

5. The policy formulation processes at the national level do not take place in a vacuum, but against the background of the diverse inherited national HE systems. These provide the starting point for reforms as well as the national-specific context in which the political argument about adaptations of degree structures takes place. In order to understand the reformed study structures, it therefore does not suffice to look at degree titles and length alone, but one needs to take into account where the respective HE systems come from in terms of HE structures, traditions and cultural peculiarities. For example, degree titles will differ in their meaning depending on whether the system is binary or unitary, which percentage of an age group attains them, and which opportunities in the labour market they

open up. Actors' motives for supporting or opposing a reform of study structures will also be drawn from this context. A comparison of the reformed study structures in the course of the Bologna process should therefore include key structural and cultural features of the respective HE systems. Actors' perceptions, motives and interests can then be 'mapped' against this background.

6. Two major factors can thus be expected to influence the national patterns of study structures at they present themselves in summer 2004: first, the inherited study structures prior to the Bologna declaration, as they are embedded in the respective HE systems with their structural and cultural peculiarities; second, the perceptions, motives and interests of the key actors in HE policy in the respective national setting. Both are interrelated as it is through the perceptions, motives and interests of actors that the inherited HE system influences the reformed study structures. The proposed theoretical framework therefore assumes a twofold perspective: one paying attention to structural and cultural continuities (path dependence), and one looking at the interaction of actors in the policy formation process.

7. It should not be neglected that the national policy formulation processes with respect to adaptations in study structures, besides the national context, are also influenced by the international discourse and progress of the Bologna process at the European level – i.e. the emerging international institutional context. Enhancing the international competitiveness and the attractiveness of the 'European system of higher education' as well as the mobility and employability of European citizens are the stated aims of the Bologna declaration and officially shared by the signing education ministers. The proposed theoretical framework therefore also needs to account for the different ways in which this 'manifest agenda' is reflected in and interacts with the motives and interests derived from the respective national contexts of HE systems.

8. Finally, the ambition of a study at this point in time cannot be to determine the actual change that has been effected at the *grassroots* level by the reform of study structures. First, it would be too early for that (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983). Second, investigating eventual changes of study structures in thousands of HEIs spread across several European countries would be beyond the scope of any single researcher. A more relevant and realistic research focus is to ask how the country-specific designs of tiered study structures emerge from the respective *national-level* debates that take place in the policy formation phase. National-level policy formation assumes a middle position between the international dynamics of the Bologna process and the actual implementation of altered study structures "on the ground"; it

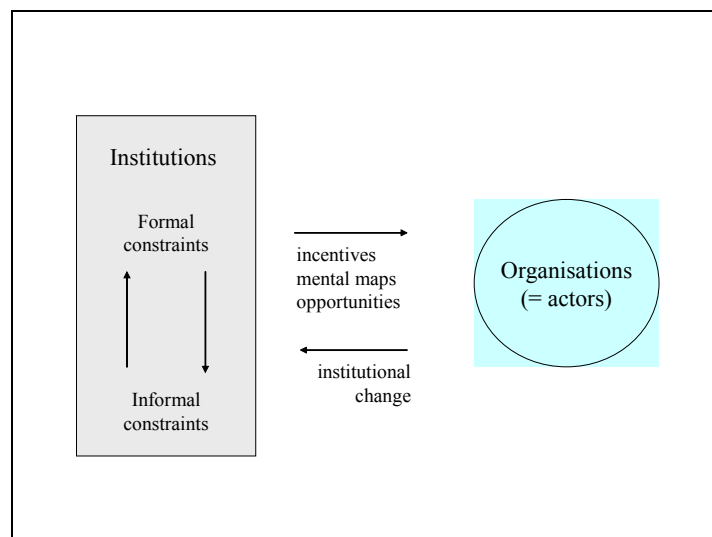
is here that an equilibrium between bottom-up and top-down approaches (Sabatier, 1986) to policy analysis can be sought.

Theoretical framework

These initial observations and propositions informed and directed the development of a new institutionalist framework drawing on North's (1990) theory of institutional change and Mayntz and Scharpf's (1995a; Scharpf, 1997) actor-centered institutionalism (ACI). While the basic causal model is based on North, aspects of Mayntz & Scharpf's ACI are made use of to provide a more detailed account of the dynamics of the policy formation phase that arise from the interaction of the various actors in HE policy.

North's original model. Essentially, North's model of institutional change – as presented in his Nobel-Prize winning book “Institutions, institutional change and economic performance” – is made up of two interdependent relationships, one between formal and informal constraints, which together provide the institutional context, and one between institutions and organisations.²

Graph 1: North's model of institutional change



Adapted from Fiori (2002:1029).

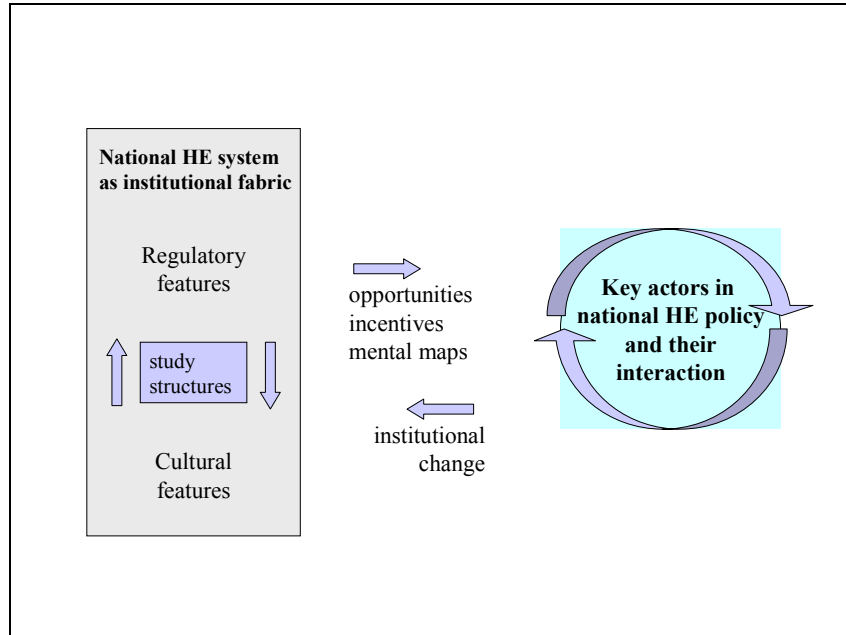
The basis of North's model is his (1990:3) concept of institutions: “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human action.” North distinguishes ‘formal constraints’ - such as laws, regulations, political

² The interpretation of North presented in this section owes a lot to the lucid analysis of Fiori (2002).

rules and individual contracts -, and ‘informal constraints’ - such as norms of behaviour, standards of conduct, cultural values and traditions that are shared by a society. Formal and informal constraints complement and influence each other and together form a dense institutional fabric. According to North, informal constraints are more difficult to change than formal constraints and thus act as a barrier to fast adaptation. The second interdependent relationship is the one between institutions and organisations. The opportunities, incentives and mental maps (= perceptions) of organisational actors (henceforth denoted as ‘actors’) are shaped by the institutional framework in which they operate, while actors in turn can alter the institutional framework. The dynamics of institutional change are thus explained as a two-way interaction between institutions and actors, with informal and formal constraints continuously adjusting to each other as well (see Graph 1).

North’s model applied to HE. Seen through the lens of North’s new institutionalism, national HE systems appear as rich institutional fabrics made up of myriads of formal and informal constraints (see Graph 2). In what follows, I will refer to these as ‘regulatory and cultural features’.

Graph 2: North’s model applied to HE systems



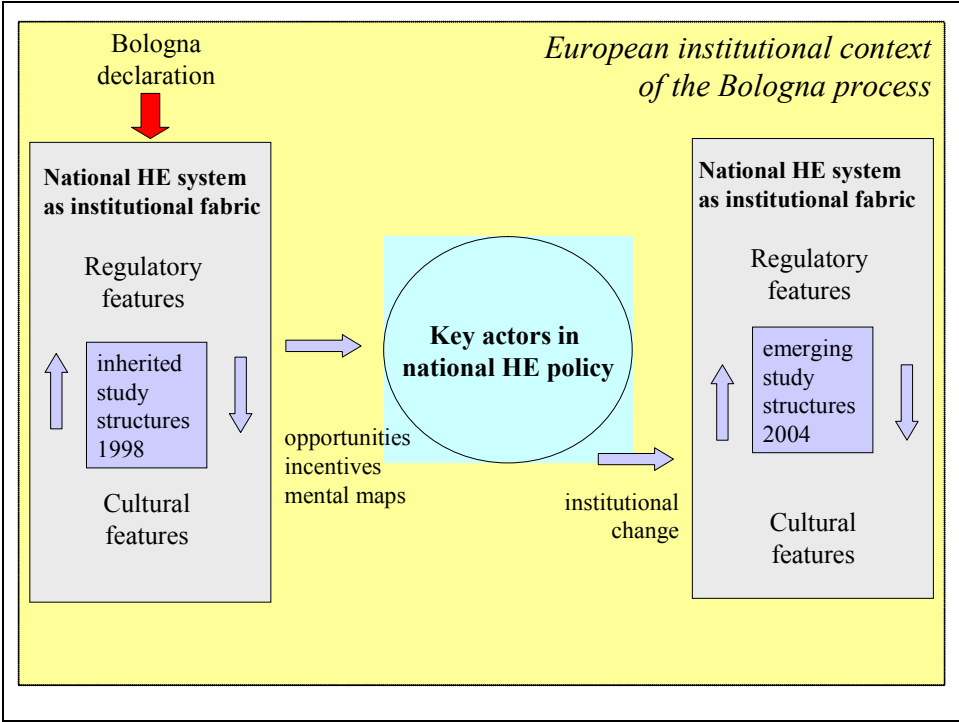
The reason for speaking of ‘features’ rather than ‘constraints’ is that besides the constraining or restricting side of institutions, I prefer to use a term that better captures the steering and enabling side as well. The reason for speaking of ‘regulatory’ rather than ‘formal’ features is simply that this captures the essence of North’s definition – “political (and judicial) rules, economic rules, and contracts” (North, 1990: 47) but at the same time is closer to common

language than the very abstract terminology of ‘formal constraints’. The use of ‘cultural’ instead of ‘informal’ constraints does not need special justification as North himself uses the terms interchangeably.

Within the network of regulatory and cultural features that constitute the institutional fabric of a national HE system, study structures themselves can be regarded as an institution that is interwoven with the other institutional features of the system. Institutional change in HE is brought about by the actors in HE policy whose opportunities, incentives and mental models are in turn shaped by the institutional context of the HE system in which they operate. The national debates over a reform of study structures can then be regarded as a political argument about intended institutional change.

When applying North’s model to the specificities of adaptations of study structures, it is more convenient to ‘unfold’ the cyclical interaction between actors and institutions and think of it as a phase model. This is done in graph 3, which distinguishes the state of the investigated HE system at the time of the Bologna declaration and five years later, in 2004.

Graph 3: North’s extended model applied to adaptations of study structures



The graph can be read as follows: Comparable to a change of world market prices in North’s original model that affects all countries equally but to which they respond differently (North, 1990: 101), the Bologna declaration is an external trigger for change that is received, reflected

and responded to differently in the respective signatory countries.³ The inherited institutional fabric of the respective HE system provides the opportunities, incentives and mental maps for the key actors in national HE policy to engage in the respective national policy formulation process regarding a reform of their study structures. This policy formulation process is thus directed at institutional change and shapes the adapted study structures, always seen in the context of the respective HE system. Though responses can be expected to vary, the general direction of reform efforts – and according institutional change – is influenced by the Bologna declaration and can thus be expected to lead from whatever inherited study structure to one characterised by two main cycles or tiers, with a first labour-market relevant degree after a minimum of three years.

What makes North's model interesting for the study of the Bologna process is that it allows for both gradual and non-gradual change, and it specifies the mechanisms for both. In a 'closed national system', meaning that the relevant reference points for actor interaction are taken from the respective national institutional framework, the double contingency of cultural and regulatory constraints and institutions and actors makes radical change unlikely. Path dependence in the sense of continuity, persistence and inertia can be expected to prevail; institutional change is likely to be change at the margin only. Although North focuses on this particular interpretation of his model in his initial 1990 book, in a later formulation with Denzau (Denzau & North, 1994), he discusses the possibility of a radical 'redescription' of actors' mental models that allows for more than gradual institutional change, i.e. path dependence in the sense of discontinuity and lock-in. I hold that the international dynamics of the Bologna process emerging from the simultaneous reform processes going on in a great number of European HE systems provide the conditions that render such radical redescription possible. The complex interaction of multiple national-level reforms and the international communication about these reforms creates the kind of momentum featuring positive feedback mechanisms and increasing returns that may trigger the lock-in of a new developmental path (Arthur, 1994; Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995b; Pierson, 2000).⁴

The expectation of system inertia is based on the assumption that actors' mental maps are influenced solely by their respective national institutional context. However, as regards

³ This holds even if the motives and driving forces for the education ministers to sign the Bologna declaration in the first place derive again to a large degree from the respective national contexts and reform pressures. Nevertheless, the declaration constitutes an extra trigger that unfolds an effect and dynamics of its own.

⁴ Pierson (2000:254), referring to Arthur (1994), distinguishes four sources of increasing returns, all of which are present in the Bologna process: large set-up costs, learning effects, coordination effects (positive network externalities), and adaptive expectations.

reforms of study structures in the course of the Bologna process, actors' motives and interests do not derive from the context of their own HE system exclusively, but are also influenced by the common international context created by the Bologna declaration and the ensuing Bologna process. Exposure to the European context may allow for mental models to develop that are different to those derived from the national context only. To conclude, whether the observed changes in study structures will be gradual or more substantial can be expected to depend on the weight assigned to the international context in the national debates about adaptations of study structures as well as to the degree to which the national institutional context fosters willingness to change.

Refinement of the model. To arrive at a workable model for the purpose of analysing the adaptations of study structures in European HE systems, North's model needs to be complemented in two major ways:

(i) On the actors' side, we need a more precise account of the interaction of the various actors in HE policy in the policy formulation process concerning adaptations of study structures, i.e. the circle "actors in HE policy" needs to get a life of its own. Mayntz' and Scharpf's actor-centered institutionalism shall be used to fill this gap.

(ii) On the institutional side, we need to provide a richer and more grounded account of the institutional fabric that makes up for the different national HE systems by specifying the respective cultural and regulatory features. The framework for such analysis will be provided drawing on insights from the field of higher education.

The following sections serve to tackle these two 'blanks', respectively.

A richer picture of actors' interaction. Mayntz and Scharpf's actor-centered institutionalism can be used in a couple of ways to complement and to put flesh on the bones of North's formal model. First, it provides a justification for approaching the policy formulation process on adaptations of study structures through the interaction of key actors in HE policy. Second, it can be used to highlight how policy formulation and institutional change are related. Third, it provides a complementary perspective on the three ways - opportunities, incentives and mental maps - in which institutions influence actors according to North. Finally, the concept of 'modes of interaction' draws attention to the complexity of political interaction in the policy formulation phase and the separate influence of the mode of interaction on political outcomes. Each of these points shall now be elaborated in turn.

ACI is a theoretical framework specifically developed for and grounded in policy analysis in public and semi-public sectors, such as health, telecommunications, education and research.⁵ It constitutes a theoretical response to the fact that governance in these sectors is no longer adequately conceptualised by a clear dichotomy between the steering state and the society to be steered, and that top-down planning models treating ‘the state’ as a unitary actor are no longer adequate (Mayntz, 1998; Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995b). Not only are both the steering state and the object of steering more adequately modelled as a *plurality* of actors, but the distinction between the two has become blurred altogether as state, public, semi-public as well as private actors take part in and shape the ‘governance’ of these sectors. ACI therefore replaces the dichotomy of the ‘governor’ and the ‘governed’ by an analysis of actors’ interaction in policy networks⁶ that can be characterised by multiple modes of interaction. Mayntz and Scharpf also provide a theoretical justification why organisations, though composed of a multitude of individuals, can be regarded as actors for the purpose of policy analysis (Scharpf, 1997:60-62).

North’s model is about institutional change, whereas the focus of ACI is on the process of policy formation (Mayntz, 1997; Scharpf, 2000). The two are closely related and consistently linked as it is *through* the negotiation over and the decision upon new policies that institutional change is brought about. Not all policies are directed at institutional change, but study structures being an institution, the reform of study structures is an example of such a policy.

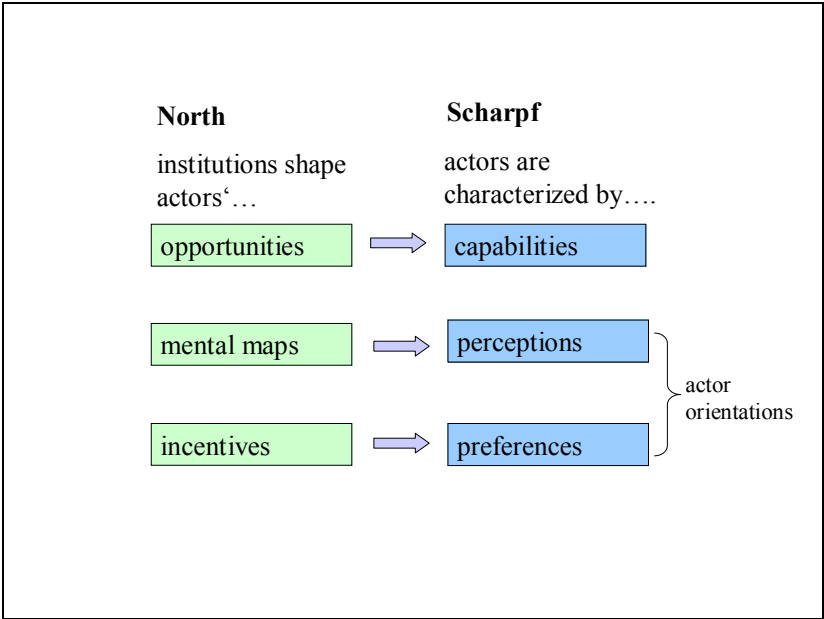
Like North, ACI acknowledges the importance of institutions and actors in explaining political outcomes; the line of vision, however, is reversed. In North’s thinking, institutions influence actors, and they do so through opportunities, incentives and mental maps. According to Scharpf (2000:3), “actors and their interacting choices, rather than institutions, are the proximate causes of policy responses whereas institutional conditions, to the extent that they are able to influence actor choices, are conceptualised as remote causes.” Accordingly, ACI’s perspective is how actors are influenced by institutions, rather than how institutions influence actors. In Scharpf’s (1997:43) terms, “actors are characterised by specific capabilities, specific perceptions, and specific preferences”. There is a nearly one-to-one correspondence between the two sets of categories: opportunities shape capabilities,

⁵ In the introduction of (Benz, Scharpf, & Zintl, 1992), the authors explain how they developed their concepts on multi-level governance through inductive construction from case study material.

⁶ It shares this approach with other frameworks for network analysis, such as Knoke (1990) or Laumann & Knoke (1987) and the advocacy-coalitions framework of Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1993; 1999).

mental maps guide perceptions, and incentives trigger preferences (see Graph 4). To analyse actors' interaction in the policy formulation process regarding the introduction of TSS, it can be useful to reverse perspectives in order to see how the opportunities, incentives and mental models provided by the institutional framework are reflected in actors' capabilities, preferences and perceptions.

Graph 4: Actor characteristics in North and Scharpf



ACI provides two further concepts that are useful for the analysis of actors' interaction in the policy process: 'actor constellations' and 'modes of interaction'. Both actor constellations and modes of interaction are shaped by the institutional rules and are thus implicit in North's model, especially in the category of 'opportunities'. However, North does not develop these implications as far as ACI does. *Actor constellations* are the full picture that emerges if the perceptions, preferences and capabilities of the individual actors are taken together. They "are meant to represent what we know of a set of actors that are actually involved in particular policy interactions – their capabilities (...), their perceptions and evaluations of the outcomes available (...), and the degree to which their payoff aspirations are compatible or incompatible with one another. The constellation thus describes the level of potential conflict" (Scharpf, 1997:72) with respect to a certain issue. While the 'actor constellation' depicts the static picture of actors' relations regarding a proposed policy, the *mode of interaction* specifies how "that conflict is going to be resolved – through unilateral action, negotiation, voting, or hierarchical determination" (Scharpf 1998: 72), i.e. it is concerned with the dynamics of actors' interaction. By distinguishing four modes of interaction, Scharpf draws

attention to the fact that most governance systems today allow for several ways of conflict resolution besides hierarchical decision-making. Of course, the four modes are but stylised types; in reality, there are many shades of grey in between.⁷ For example, HE policy is frequently characterised by ‘negotiation in the shadow of hierarchy’ (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995b:28), i.e. though government has the formal authority to impose a certain policy on the HE sector, it chooses to negotiate a consensus. Actors’ knowledge that hierarchical determination is the ultimate fall-back option increases the likelihood that a consensus is found. Teasing out the entire spectrum of interaction modes in the policy formulation process on TSS for each HE system included in the empirical analysis could quickly exceed the means of an individual researcher, and it might be necessary to confine analysis to a rough sketch of the predominant modes of interaction in the respective system. In any case, it is useful to be aware of these distinctions as they draw attention to the fact that the patterns of adapted study structures do not only depend on actors’ perceptions, preferences and the power constellations between them, but also on the way they are ‘played out’ in the ensuing political game.⁸

A richer picture of the institutional framework of HE. In comparative HE research, there is a tradition of comparing HE systems across certain dimensions. I distinguish six institutional dimensions of HE systems that are closely intertwined with the institution of study structures, i.e. the types and length of degrees (see Graph 5). Each of these dimensions includes both regulatory and cultural features:

(1) ***Governance***, i.e. the way HE policy formation is determined by the distribution of roles among actors in HE policy through laws, statutes and inherited relationships, with particular reference to *curricular governance* and quality assurance issues, i.e. the way responsibility and control of curricula and degrees is distributed in the system and the degree of curricular diversity that is deemed appropriate;

(2) ***Institutional diversity***, i.e. the number of types of HEIs and the dispersion of HEIs across these types, their nature, tasks and relationship, including status and funding issues, and the way the functions of education versus training and of elite versus mass education are distributed;

⁷ The different sub-types and facets are presented in chapters five to eight of Scharpf (1997).

⁸ The use of the term ‘game’ does not imply that a formal game-theoretic analysis as aimed at in Scharpf (1997) is suggested. The policy formulation processes on a reform of study structures seem too complex to allow for the degree of reduction necessary for such formal analysis.

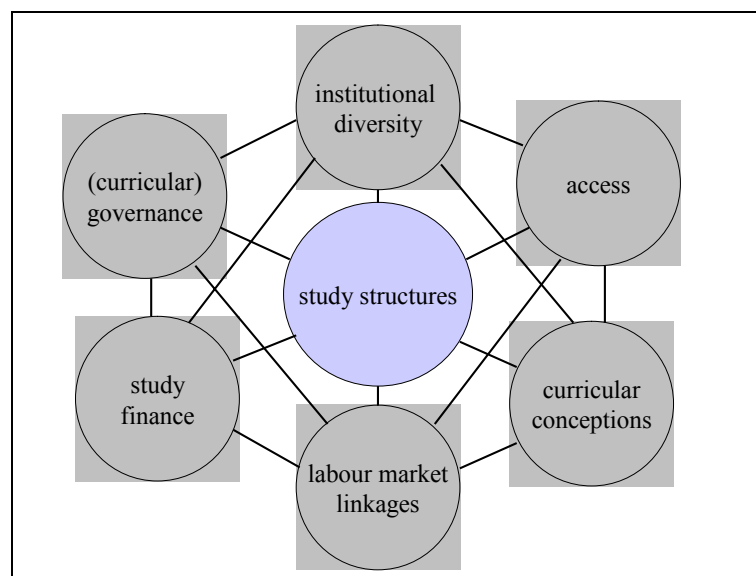
(3) *Access*, i.e. the percentage of school leavers qualifying for and admitted to HE, and the way the transition from school to the HE from undergraduate to graduate education is organised and regulated, again with reference to the nexus of elite versus mass education;

(4) *Conceptions of curriculum*, i.e. predominant educational goals and perceptions of what constitutes academic quality, and according ways of organising HE curricula, such as the balancing of breadth and depth, facts and methodology, student freedom and guidance, research- and labour-market orientation, the length of studies and the enforcement of time limits;

(5) *Labour market linkages*, i.e. the relationship between HE and the employment system, including conceptions of employability, professional entry regulations and recruitment practices, and the mobility between the two systems;

(6) Finally, *study finance*, i.e. the way HE (not research!) is funded, including the allocation of funds across institutional and programme types, with particular reference to the context of austerity, i.e. budget strain, the willingness of society to fund HE and the resulting efficiency-increasing and cost-cutting efforts in HE.

Graph 5: Relevant institutional dimensions of HE systems

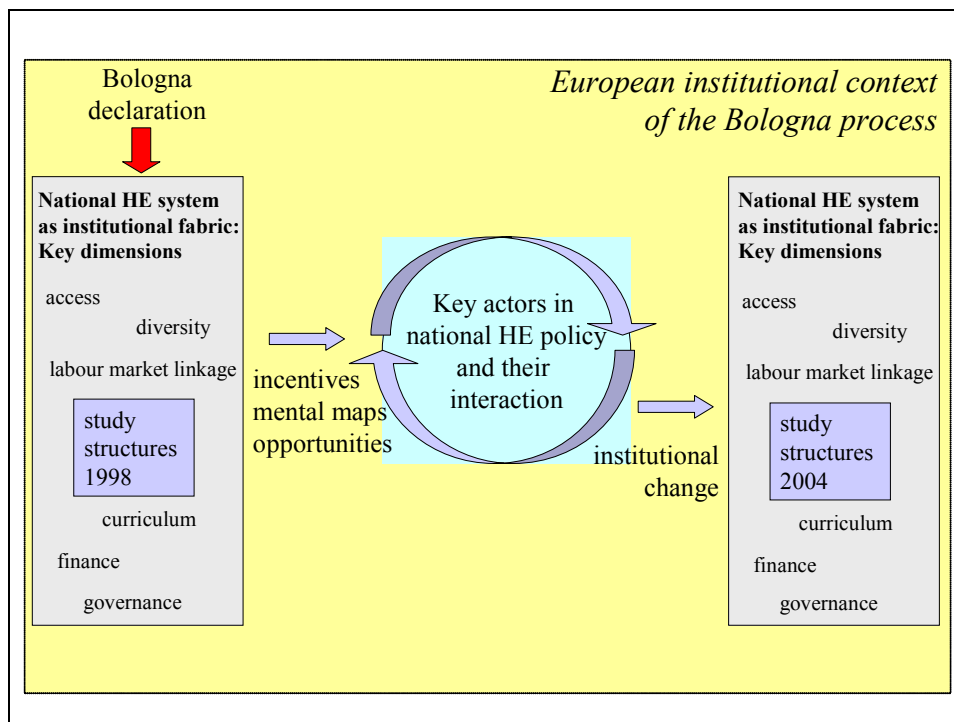


Though these dimensions coincide with common categories and concepts in HE research,⁹ the major criterion for the selection made is their relevance with respect to a reform of study structures in the course of the Bologna process.

⁹ See, for example, van Vught (1989) Maassen & van Vught (1994), Huisman et al. (2001) and Campbell & van der Wende (Campbell & Wende, 2000) for a discussion of (curricular) governance, Birnbaum (1983), Huisman (1997; 1995) and Meek

The dimensions are meant to serve as analytical tools for three major purposes: (1) to depict central features of the inherited HE systems that constitute the divergent starting points of the countries; (2) to map the opportunities, incentives and mental maps that guide various actors in the policy formulation process (see last section); (3) to identify change of HE systems concurrent with the adaptations of study structures and to judge possible convergence.

Graph 6: Full theoretical framework



Methodological considerations

Basically, this framework could be applied to any country participating in the Bologna process. For the present study, I have chosen Germany, the Netherlands, France and England. The research design is thus an international comparative multiple-case study.

The sample is composed to yield wide variation in all relevant explanatory dimensions, such as cultural and regulatory traditions, study structures, governance, institutional diversity, access, concepts of curricula, labour market linkages and study finance. The HE systems also vary with respect to predominant modes of interaction in HE policy and the role played by the “European argument” in national policy formation. This variation promises interesting connections between explanatory factors and the explanandum; adaptations of study

et al. (1996) for a discussion of diversity, Trow (1974; 1979) for access, Teichler (1996; 2000) for labour market linkages, and OECD (1974) for finance.

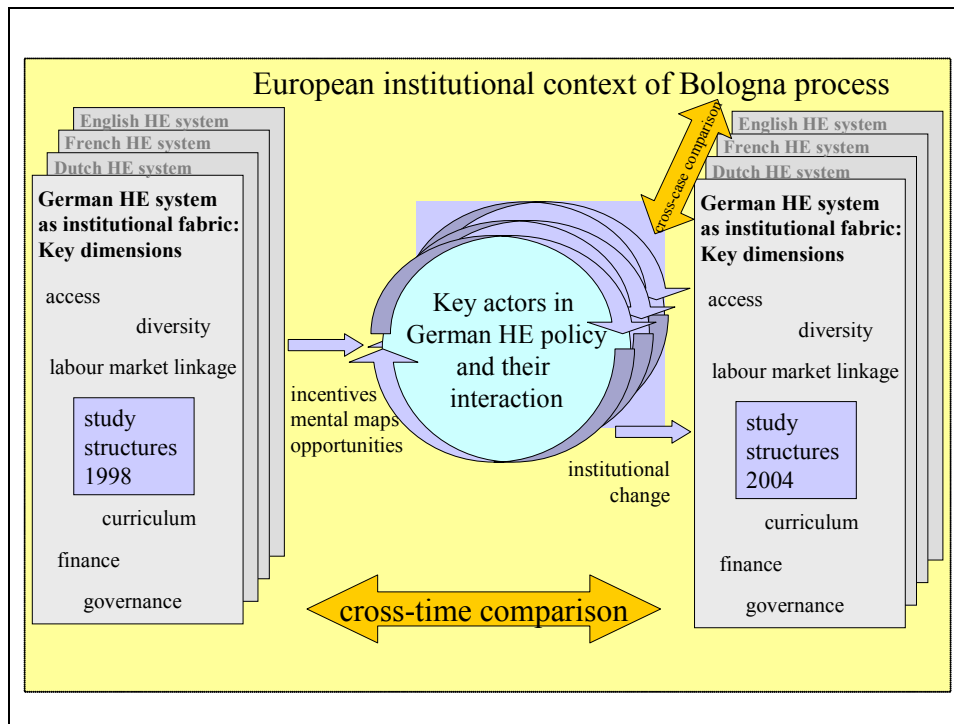
structures. With respect to cultural and regulatory traditions, the sample includes the three most influential European academic traditions – Humboldtian, Napoleonic, and Oxbridge, as well as an interesting intermediate case. With respect to study structures, it includes two HE systems, Germany and the Netherlands, that currently undergo quite profound changes as the first university degree was traditionally located at the Master level. Also, both systems are characterised by a strong binary tradition that is translated in different ways into the new structure. France is an example of a HE system that had tiered study structures already before the Bologna declaration but nevertheless undertakes significant reforms to adjust these structures to a perceived “European standard”. Finally, England is an interesting case as, though it was perceived by some Bologna signatory countries as an implicit role model for the introduction of a ‘Bachelor-Master-system’ and did respond little to the declaration, HE policy actors in England recently started questioning if the English degree structure is consistent with the “proposed Bologna framework” (Williams & Coate, 2004). The sample thus includes HE systems that enter the Bologna process from very different starting points and display a considerable degree of variance in the degree and scope of change.

It should be stressed, however, that the aim of this study is not causal inference in the statistical sense, nor an approximation of statistical inference by a case selection based on most similar or most different case designs (see Peters, 1998 for a lucid critique of these approaches). Rather, the aim of the study is to construct individual causal explanations for the adapted study structures in each of the HE systems included in the sample (Mayntz, 2002). The theoretical framework developed in the last section thus serves as a bridge between the case study logic and the logic of comparative research (see Yin, 1984): It provides a common frame of reference for comparison while being flexible enough to allow for individual differences.

As common for multiple-case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989), this study follows a sequence of within-case analysis, followed by cross-case analysis. In the case at hand, this also includes a two-fold comparison: Cross-time and cross-national (see Graph 7).

Cross-time, the study compares study structures in their respective institutional context before the changes made in relation to the Bologna process with those in summer 2004. The cross-time comparison thus spans a period of six years. Across cases, the study compares the study structures in summer 2004, using the cross-time comparison *within* cases, i.e. the reference to inherited institutional patterns, to explain differences *between* cases.

Graph 7: Within-case and cross-case comparison



Within-case analysis. Within-case analysis basically means identifying the key regulatory and cultural features of the respective HE systems that constitute the divergent starting points for the Bologna process and mapping them onto the perceptions and preferences of the major actors in national HE policy in order to explain the particular policy outcomes in terms of altered study structures.

The key actors in national HE policy to be included in the analysis vary from country to country depending on the respective system of HE governance. However, in all systems under investigation, the selection includes the central government, representative bodies of HEIs, and the relevant buffer and expert organisations. The degree to which regional government, employer associations, student bodies and others need to be taken into account is contingent on the respective system. In any case, I limit the analysis to a handful of crucial actors that play an important role at the national level through position papers, recommendations, regulations, and laws.

Once the key actors in national HE policy are identified for the HE system at hand, the institutional key dimensions of the respective HE system can be used to map the specific actor constellation regarding adaptations of study structures in the country in question. For example, if the relationship of university and non-university HE is an issue of debate in the respective country, a change of study structures might be used by non-university HEIs to lobby for an upgrading of their status vis-à-vis universities through the right of granting the

same degrees (institutional diversity). Or, if the reforms take place in a context of austerity, a change of study structures might be used by the state to decrease costs per student by shortening the completion time of the first degree (study finance). Similarly, if the inherited degrees are perceived to lack labour market relevance, adaptations of study structures might be used to remedy this problem (labour market linkages). The country-specific pattern of tiered study structures as well as the amount of change in the wider context of the HE system brought about by a change of study structures will thus be influenced by the perceptions, preferences and capabilities of the key actors in HE policy drawn from the country-specific institutional context, i.e. the problems they perceive, their motivation for bringing about change, and their ability to do so. As has been pointed out above, the degree and direction of change will - besides the national-level institutional context - also depend on the way in which the international discourse of the Bologna process is perceived and interpreted by national actors in HE policy.

Cross-case comparison. Once the analysis of national-level policy formation has been conducted, the country-specific patterns of – more or less reformed - study structures in summer 2004 can be compared between the countries included in the sample. To judge the degree of similarity, not only degree titles and length of degrees need to be compared, but also the way these degrees are embedded in the respective HE systems as depicted in the six dimensions. Which percentage of an age group receives higher education? Can university and non-university institutions grant the same degrees? How much permeability is there between different types of institutions? How generalist or specialised are the first degree curricula? Do most graduates enter the labour market or is it common to go for a Master-level degree right after completion of the first degree? How selective is entry to the Master level? The answers to these and similar questions determine the degree of “real similarity” behind the surface of formally similar degree structures (see Neave, 2002). The observed similarities and differences between the adapted study structures can then be attributed to differences in the inherited country-specific pattern of study structures on the one hand and to differences in actors’ interaction in the policy formulation phase on the other hand (see Graph 6). Consequently, the question of convergence can be answered by analysing whether the observed adaptations of study structures have contributed to making the HE systems more similar with respect to degree type and length, but also regarding the other six dimensions, as compared to the starting point in 1998.

Data collection. The empirical work of this study will not be based on an independent survey, but draw data from a range of existing sources, such as national and international policy documents, the national media, national and international surveys (the EUA Trends Reports) and statistics (OECD Education at a Glance, Eurydice, CHEPS country monitor...), information available on the internet, as well as HE literature on the respective HE systems. This will be complemented by informal expert interviews and a set of formal in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives from the key actors in HE policy in the countries included in the sample (about ten per country). The study can also build on previous collaborative research of CHEPS and CHE on the implementation of Bachelor and Master programmes in Germany and the Netherlands (Klemperer, Wende, & Witte, 2002; Lub, Wende, & Witte, 2003).

Suggestions for further research

Besides the purposes of this study described above, the multiple case study that I am currently undertaking is also being used to check and further develop the adequacy of the theoretical framework, following a replication logic (Eisenhardt, 1989). Due to time constraints, in my current research I can apply the framework to four European HE systems only. Also, the choice of countries has been influenced by my ‘cultural competence’ as a researcher, as analysing the policy formation process on adaptations of study structures is strongly eased by at least passive language skills of the respective language. In principal however, the framework should be a suitable instrument for the study of any country participating in the Bologna process, and I would like to encourage other HE researchers to apply it to other cases. Such applications would amount to a ‘test’ of the framework, and demonstrate whether the six suggested institutional dimensions indeed capture the main national driving forces in other HE systems as well. It would be particularly interesting to check this for institutional contexts which notably differ from the Western European ones, i.e. HE systems of Eastern, Northern and Southern European countries inside and outside of the European Union. This way, more stones could successively be added to a mosaic of study structures and national HE systems in Europe, helping to build an information base that would enable the in-depth mutual understanding needed for the creation of a European Higher Education Area.

This paper reflects work-in-progress and draws on a study to be completed by the end of 2004. Comments and critique are very welcome. I can be contacted at: Johanna Witte, CHE, Post box 105, D-33311 Guetersloh, Germany. Telephone: +49 (0)5241-9761-54, Fax: +49 (0)5241-9761-40, E-mail: johanna.witte@che.de, www.che.de.

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