Introduction

Why did the ministers in charge of higher education in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom\(^1\) decided to adopt a common degree structure by signing the Sorbonne declaration in May 1998? How did they decide and negotiate the objectives stated in this declaration?

On the 25\(^{th}\) of May 1998, at the occasion of the 800\(^{th}\) anniversary of the Sorbonne, the Ministers in charge of higher education in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom signed a common declaration untitled “Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system”, in which they recognised the necessity to build a Europe of universities and to favour mobility and international recognition; more precisely to do it around the two cycle structure. They engaged to promote this common frame of reference in their countries, and called on all other European countries to join them to build the European Higher Education Area. They were heard: next year in Bologna, the ministers of 29 countries were present to sign the famous Bologna declaration on “The European Higher Education Area”. The Sorbonne can thus be considered as the founding event of the

\(^1\) Respectively Claude Allègre, Jürgen Ruettgers, Luigi Berlinguer and Tessa Blackstone
Bologna process, and the questioning of the motivations of the four ministers first engaged is certainly not secondary for the understanding of the process.

Nevertheless, among the existing studies on the Bologna process, there is not much about this question of the motivations of the initiators. In fact, the Sorbonne declaration -and the other declarations and communiqués of the Bologna process- have been the matter for interesting discourse analysis (Kolokitha 2004; Nokkala 2004); different studies also focus on the continuity between the European Community higher education initiatives and the Bologna process (Hackl 2001; Tzortzis 2004), and on implementation at national and institutional level (Duclaud Williams 2004; Barraud, Mignot-Gérard 2005, Witte 2004), or on the articulation between the Bologna process and the dynamics of internationalisation of higher education (Van der Wende 2001). But little has been done so far to analyse the motives of the actors who initiated the Bologna process and to reconstruct its internal dynamics. Convinced that the actors’ part of the puzzle cannot be eluded to grasp the specific nature and power of Bologna, this is the perspective we would like to propose here by analysing the Sorbonne meeting and declaration.

If little research is done on this point, it is actually often assumed that it was because the four ministers participating to the Sorbonne meeting shared the same vision that they decided to write it down into a declaration, and to call on the other European countries to join. But what we are going to show in this paper is that there was no clear common vision pre-existing the Sorbonne. The shared vision was not the cause of the Sorbonne meeting and declaration, it should rather be considered as its outcome. In other words, the shared vision did not pre-exist the Sorbonne meeting, but the Sorbonne is the starting point of the construction of this common vision. Therefore, it is a good case to explore something that is most often let aside in the study of European policies: the very moment of the formulation of European objectives and norms.

Of course, we do not pretend to explain the whole Bologna process nature, meanings, and impact by doing so; the focus of this paper² is narrow in both time and space. In time, because only the Sorbonne meeting and declaration will be treated; and in space, because the part of the story we chose to tell is limited to four countries. Nevertheless, we would like to argue that it is relevant to question what is generally considered as obvious seven years after it was decided. As the moment studied is the genesis of a major process of policy change, we believe it is important for the knowledge of this specific process to recompose it in details.

It should be precised here that the method used for this research was quite inductive. It did not consist in deducing hypotheses from a theoretical model and testing them on the

² The focus of the doctoral research behind this paper is broader, as it goes from the genesis of the Bologna process to its institutionalisation.
specific case of the genesis of the Bologna process. It rather consisted in recomposing the story of the Sorbonne starting with the simplest question (Who? When? Why? How?…), and in accepting to be driven and eventually re-oriented by the information collected, and only afterwards in analysing them and questioning the literature. This paper therefore relies on consistent empirical data: 40 semi-directive interviews were conducted on the Sorbonne meeting and declaration (at the national level, interviews of the ministers, their closest staff involved in the Sorbonne and Bologna meetings, of actors from the national rectors’ conferences, and other relevant higher education actors, at the European level, interviews of the Commission actors working on higher education, of experts, of actors from the European rectors’ conference –EUA-, and from the European students’ organisation), institutional archives and personal archives given by the interviewees (personal notes, correspondence) were also consulted.

This paper is composed of three parts. We will first show that there was no pre-existing shared vision before the Sorbonne meeting and declaration. We will then recompose and analyse the actual motives for the ministers to sign this document calling for the harmonisation of the architecture of degree structures. But if there was no pre-existing shared vision, a common vision is nevertheless identifiable in the Sorbonne text, we will therefore analyse how it was formulated in our third part, which will allow us to discuss literature on the role of ideas and on Europeanisation.

1. The preparation of the Sorbonne meeting: rush and formal basis, but no pre-existing shared vision

Relying on the empirical material collected, we are here going to introduce the story of the preparation Sorbonne around three driving lines. First, the fact that the event had to be prepared and the declaration completed in a very short time appears as a key for understanding; second, the most surprising result is certainly that the Sorbonne was organised with a very peculiar method as the form preceded the content; and third, the assumption that there is some shared vision pre-existing the Sorbonne can be disqualified quite easily.

The rush as a key for understanding

The idea of a meeting and a declaration originally came out from the mind of the French Minister Claude Allègre. He was the one who invited the three other ministers to attend the ceremony to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the University of Paris, and who
asked his special adviser\(^3\) for higher education to write the draft of a European declaration. As we are going to explain it all along this first part, once the idea had popped in his mind, he decided to settle a date and launch the project immediately, on the basis that “once he [had] the “spirit”, the details [would] naturally come on the way”\(^4\), which also means that at the different steps of the preparation things had to be done in a rush.

Therefore, for the understanding of the genesis of the Bologna process, it is first essential to keep in mind that the Sorbonne meeting was really organised in an emergency: there were less than six months between the Minister’s first vague idea to organise a “Colloque de l’Université Européenne”\(^5\) and the date of the meeting, and about two months and a half between the beginning of the organisation and the conference. These delays are extremely short on the scale of political events of this kind. This is why this time pressure is certainly a key element to understand some features such as the very limited number of persons involved in the organisation of the event, or the way the European partners were chosen.

In fact, the Sorbonne was organised by a limited number of persons: the administrative staff of the Direction for higher education of the Ministry was not involved before the autumn 1998 –that is to say after the Sorbonne meeting-, and within the team of the political cabinet, only 4 or 5 persons were closely working on the project: one mainly on the draft of the declaration, and the others on the practical organisation of the event. They started to meet regularly with the communication agency contracted by the Ministry and some actors from the CPU (French rectors’ conference)\(^6\). In the narratives they can make of this period, the dominant record is that it was really hectic. They took the mission to organise this event in a so short time as a real challenge, and this certainly contributed to make this group more united and proud once the conference took place:

“I remember it as a very exciting period, there was something a bit crazy in the organisation of the Sorbonne, doing all these things: choosing a communication agency, organising the technical part of the event, the editing, the invitations, finding the chairs for the round tables... There was finally so little time between the idea and the execution that we had to make it with pieces and bits. But we did it! And it was great success if you consider the little time we had” (an adviser of the French Minister)\(^7\).

---

\(^3\) He actually had a very important role: there was no secretary of state in charge of higher education, but this adviser was playing this role in the shade.

\(^4\) These words come from an interview with one of Claude Allègre’s cabinet advisers, describing the way the Minister was used to work, not only for the case of the Sorbonne, but in general. My translation.

\(^5\) This is how the Sorbonne meeting was initially referred to.

\(^6\) If the CPU was not involved at all in the political part of the project (drafting of the declaration, and negotiations), the bureau of the organisation had decided to support the project for its logistical part.

\(^7\) Interview done on the 25\(^{th}\) of September 2003. My translation.
But if retrospectively, the Sorbonne meeting appears as the founding event of a major process, at that time, it could also be considered by actors outside this small team as no more than a coup organised in a rush.

“Everything was done in emergency, and there were tensions. […] the idea that was floating at that moment was that it would not work rather than that it would set a process in motion” (an adviser of the French Minister).

The time pressure is also one of the key elements to understand which European partners were invited to the meeting and proposed to sign the joint declaration. When Claude Allègre decided in early 1998 that there would be a ceremony for the birthday of the Sorbonne and that there would be some European guests attending, he chose the date, and contacted the European homologues he knew the best and liked to meet with. The German and Italian ministers were invited earlier to the anniversary (in March). This was not the case for the British minister Tessa Blackstone as we are going to explain it.

It is hard to give the exact date and conditions in which the Italian and the German ministers were first informed about the Sorbonne project. In fact, the contacts were first very informal; there was no official letter or meeting specifically on this topic. Claude Allègre, Luigi Berlinguer and Jürgen Ruettgers say that the most important thing that brought them to engage together in the European project is that they knew each other very well and liked each other very much. In fact, the three of them were in charge of both higher education and research, which doubled the occasions they could have to meet. Beside Councils at the EU level, and bilateral relations, an occasion they had to see each other as research ministers, is the Carnegie Group, or “G8 of research”, where they had the opportunity to meet, to know each other, and discuss about higher education and research. The three ministers evoke the meetings of the Carnegie Group in July 1997 and January 1998 as crucial moments to build some personal links that were more than official discussions between ministers.

So they knew each other from the meetings of the Carnegie Group, and when Claude Allègre wanted to invite European guests, he naturally turned towards Luigi Berlinguer and Jürgen Ruettgers. Trying to tell more concretely what their first exchanges about the Sorbonne were, we rapidly slip on the register of the anecdote. Let us take the example of the contacts with the Italian. The Italian secretary of state for Higher education already had meetings planned at the French ministry about the reform they were preparing in Italy, and it

---

8 Interview done on the 6th of May 2003. My translation.

9 Sometimes called the “G8 of research”, or the “secret G8 of research”, the Carnegie Group was created in 1991 by the American Carnegie Commission on Science technology and Government. The meetings of this group are not official, they are supposed to be completely informal meetings where ministers in charge of research in the G8 countries have the opportunity to meet twice a year for a whole week end. These meetings take place in convivial and isolated places (castels in the country for instance), each minister comes only accompanied by one person. The subjects to be discussed are not pre-defined, but totally open and there should not be any note taken from the discussions.
seems that the Sorbonne project was evoked in those meetings. The Italian were actually thinking of introducing an intermediary qualification at 2 years (the *laurea* was at least 4 years) and the French international relations adviser who they met told them “*Wait before you introduce the two year qualification! We are precisely thinking about passing to three with a European reform*”\(^{10}\). Different actors also report that one day in early 1998 Claude Allègre and Luigi Berlinguer met in a bilateral meeting or visit, and that they exchanged some jokes about which one of Bologna and Paris universities was the oldest in the world, and this was the occasion for the French Minister to invite the Italian one, as told by an adviser present at this meeting:

> “Claude Allègre said to Luigi Berlinguer ‘I want to invite you as a special guest for the 800\(^{th}\) anniversary of the Sorbonne. It will be the occasion to launch an idea that is dear to my heart: the Europe of universities’. To tell you the truth, that day, I learned at the same time than the Italian that there was going to be an anniversary of the Sorbonne and that a European project would be initiated on that day”\(^{11}\).

Whatever the details of the way they were contacted, by March 1998, the German and the Italian ministers told they were very enthusiastic, and designated some adviser in their staff to follow the project and the writing of the declaration on the basis that the text would be drafted by the French.

But things were quite different with the British. It was only in very late April or beginning of May 1998 that the British Minister was first contacted and invited, and the invitation was not made at the occasion of a meeting about something else, there was what could be qualified a “commando visit” to London by the French minister and one adviser. The mission of the visit was explicitly to go and see the British Minister of Education, David Blanket\(^{12}\), and then the junior minister in charge of higher education, Tessa Blackstone, to convince the British to come to the meeting and sign the declaration. She had had only very few links with the other ministers before, especially because as a junior minister only in charge of higher education –and not research as well- she did not participate in the Carnegie Group week ends. But she could not be let aside because the other three thought that if they wanted to make something powerful, they could not do it without the United Kingdom.

The rush is also a point that could explain that no other countries were invited and that the European Commission was not involved, if not challenged.

The choice not to invite other European countries than Germany, Italy and the UK, and not to involve the European Commission can first be interpreted in ideological terms. In fact,

\(^{10}\) Interview done on the 23\(^{rd}\) of September 2003. My translation.

\(^{11}\) Interview done on the 10\(^{th}\) of September 2003. My translation.

\(^{12}\) After having done his agreement and support to the project, David Blanket would not intervene any more, and the British interlocutor would be only Tessa Blackstone.
the four ministers strongly believed in the power of the projects launched by a little bunch of
determined political leaders within Europe, and then if their project was good, it would spread
to other countries naturally (they qualify it as the “tâche d’huile” —oil stain— effect). In the same
way, it was decided since the very beginning that the project would be done independently
from the European Commission, and it can be easily argued that it was because of their will
to show that it was possible to build Europe in another way, more political and more flexible.

But the pressure of time again seems important to understand: the necessity to work in
a rush because of the delay imposed by the French Minister—and because of each one’s own
interest—strongly activated the beliefs they could have for a long time about the best way to
build the Europe of University. To organise the meeting involving all the members States of
the EU, and with the support of the European Commission would effectively have taken
much more time than to organise more informally a purely intergovernmental project limited
to four ministers. And contrary to officials from the European Commission, national Ministers’
relation to time is conditioned by the political calendar: the ministers’ view is necessarily short
term, as their horizon is the next election and they want to make reform before the end of
their mandate.

A peculiar method: the form before the content

Until now we have introduced the formal part of the Sorbonne story, putting the emphasis
on the practical organisation, and contacts between the French, the Italian, the German and
then British. We showed that the rush was a structuring feature modelling the interactions at
that moment of the story. One might be surprised that stronger elements about the policy
objectives of the ministers or their vision of higher education have not been evoked yet. But
these aspects had not been forgotten by chance. This actually mirrors one of the most
amazing results from our investigation: in the organisation of the Sorbonne meeting, the form
really preceded the content. Quite unexpectedly, the policy prescriptions were grafted on the
event, and not the contrary.

The explicative power of chronology is sometimes dismissed for not being a very
sophisticated analytical tool. But in our case, it shaded light on a sequencing of facts we
found very meaningful. What is really striking when reconstituting day by day the chronology
of the beginning of the year 1998 is actually that the different ingredients of what would finally
make the Sorbonne meeting and declaration appeared in a very strange (dis)order. The

13 In order to recompose the coupling between the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne and the
joint declaration for a European higher education area, we worked a lot from the personal notes taken in the
strategic meetings of the cabinet from three advisers of the French minister, and not only from interviews in
which there is necessarily some a posteriori reconstruction and re-ordering of events.
idea of celebrating the 800\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Sorbonne and to give the \textit{doctor honoris causa} honours of the university to some European ministers invited came \textit{before} the idea to associate this event to a joint declaration about a common European architecture of degrees. As matter of fact, in the notes of Claude Allègre’s advisers dated from mid-January 1998, one can find references to the anniversary of the Sorbonne and to a “colloque de l’université européenne” with European guests, but the first articulation between this anniversary and a common European project based on the two cycle degree structure is mentioned for the very first time only one month later (on the 10\textsuperscript{th} of February exactly).

Concerning the content, what happened at that date is that there was a conjunction of different elements towards the choice of the two cycle structure as the back bone of the process -which once again was absolutely not obvious when the meeting was first planned-. According to us, these elements are –at least- in the number of three\textsuperscript{14}.

First element: in July 1997, the minister had asked Jacques Attali\textsuperscript{15} to gather a commission and then write a report in order to propose some solutions to resolve the problem of the dualism between universities and \textit{grandes écoles}. The commission worked at the autumn 1997 and winter 1998, and Jacques Attali and the three chairmen started to write the report around the end of February. One of the most outstanding conclusions that were outlined in the report was the proposition of the introduction of a two cycle structure\textsuperscript{16} as a solution towards the convergence of universities and \textit{grandes écoles}. (Because with this system, \textit{grandes écoles} would be able to give the same type of 5 year qualifications than universities). We should precise here that contrary to what its title –\textit{Pour un modèle européen d’enseignement supérieur}- might suggest, and contrary to the record of many actors years later, this report is not about Europe, but about \textit{French} higher education problems \textit{in a context} of European integration and globalisation, which is slightly different. And the two cycle structure is not either in this report a proposition for a common framework for all European countries but a solution to a French problem. The role of Attali’s report is often overestimated, or at least misunderstood: it was an important step for the Sorbonne, not for being what inspired the Sorbonne declaration as it is often stated, but for being a real momentum in a phase of muddling in the formulation of the principles of the declaration.

\textsuperscript{14} In this first part, we are just looking at the way the two cycle structure was adopted by the French preparing the Sorbonne meeting and drafting the declaration, we will analyse the reasons for the other three to accept this principle later in the study.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Conseiller d’Etat}, famous for having been personal political adviser of François Mitterrand for more than ten years.

\textsuperscript{16} In France, at that time, actors would rather talk about the “3-5-8” structure, the numbers for the years of studies after the baccalaureate.
The second element is a policy note that Adrien Schmitt, a former university president, who was at that time the CPU delegate in Brussels\textsuperscript{17}, addressed to the Minister by the intermediary of a former colleague, working in the political cabinet of the Minister. This document was not about the convergence of French universities and \textit{grandes écoles} like Attali’s report, but about the need for French higher education institutions to adopt a degree structure compatible with international standards if they wanted to compete internationally. This idea is so common in the French context now that it might not appear innovating to say such a thing, but Adrien Schmitt’s note was really one of the first times that the two cycle degree structure as a solution to improve the competitiveness of French institutions was stated so clearly.

So with those two first elements, the two cycle structure appeared as a solution both for to the French specific problem of dualism between universities and \textit{grandes écoles}, and to French concerns about the competitiveness of French institutions because of the lack of legibility of French degrees. Nevertheless, Claude Allègre had until then been in favour of a “4-6” structure\textsuperscript{18}, rather than of a “3-5”, and the later elements were not sufficient to convert him totally to the two cycle structure. According to the information collected in interviews with both ministers, and with Claude Allègre’s advisers, who really succeeded in convincing him was the German Minister, Jürgen Ruettgers. As we will explain it more precisely later, the German were actually about to introduce an experimental Bachelor Master structure, and the German Minister explained how the “3-5” was able to compete with the American degrees (because the secondary school studies were longer in Europe than in the United States).

The combination of those three elements explains how the French minister and his closer staff opted for the two cycle structure and how it became the back bone of the draft of the declaration Claude Allègre’s special adviser for higher education drafted and submitted to the other ministers. The question is then how and why the three others not only agreed to engage in a European project, but also why they did choose or accept this precise policy objective. As we will analyse it more in detail in the next part on the motives for the ministers to sign, this choice was easier for the UK and the German Ministers, but it was much more risky for the Italian one.

We have shown here that the occasion to make the joint declaration public was invented before the political content of the declaration itself. This is even more surprising when one learns that the date of the birthday is partly false\textsuperscript{19}, which many actors like to tell.

\textsuperscript{17} Adrien Schmitt is very often the forgotten character of the story, but we think he played quite an important role : he wrote this policy note addressed to the Minister, and he was among the very few (with the four or five advisers delegated by the ministers) to be sent the draft of the declaration and asked for his opinion.

\textsuperscript{18} Specially because it was the structure he estimated the closer to the American system.

\textsuperscript{19} There is actually no exact date of foundation and therefore birthday of the Sorbonne known by historians.
What we find extremely interesting is that the choice to celebrate this anniversary, even if invented, actually came before the Minister and his staff knew what they would exactly write in the declaration. They wanted visibility to make public something that was still work in progress. This is not anarchy, but this is not either the strategic rationality one would expect from political leaders. This chronological presentation of the organisation of the Sorbonne gives us some hints about the heterogeneity of the elements that compose political work, and their unexpected assemblage, far from a shared vision naturally leading to a common project.

**Upstream the Sorbonne: no pre-existing shared vision**

The third driving line we would like to emphasize here is that in our empirical results, there is no evidence of a strong and clear shared vision before the Sorbonne meeting and declaration. There can be two distinguished levels of arguments explaining the existence of a common vision, one is shared vision “naturally” resulting from the convergence of problems and solutions, and the other is shared vision as the formulation of same beliefs and policy objectives, no matter if the actual situations do not converge. We are going to see that none of these arguments can work here when looking upstream the Sorbonne meeting, which disqualifies the explanation of the launching of the Bologna process by a pre-existing shared vision.

A first level of explanation of the existence of a shared vision is that it emerges from the noticing of convergent problems and the formulation of convergent solutions. In the case of the Sorbonne, it corresponds to the assumption often made that the ministers were experiencing similar problems in the four countries, which favoured exchanges on convergent solutions. But if we draw a picture of the situations and policy priorities of the ministers in the domain of higher education at the end of the 1990’s, we do not observe a clear convergence.\(^{20}\)

Let us draw a very quick picture of the situations of national higher education and national objectives of the respective ministers in the four countries at the end of the 1990’s.\(^{21}\)

In France, the priorities of the Minister were to do something about the problem of the dualism between universities and grandes écoles; to bring research and teaching more together; to foster autonomy and internationalisation of French institutions, and to create an

\(^{20}\) We do not rely only on interviews here. In fact it was not rare for the ministers and the officials interviewed to recompose the story giving an important role to their political rationality. This is why we confronted the data collected in the interviews with diverse documents dating from the late 1990’s (Eurydice 2000, diverse national archives…)

\(^{21}\) These pictures can of course only be bad caricatures in the space we have here.
independent evaluation agency. In Germany the big concerns were the quite important drop out rate, the too long average length of the studies (it was not rare that it took 7 or 8 years for students to complete their degree), the unemployment rate of graduates especially in social sciences and humanities, and the lack of attractiveness of German institutions to international students. The situation of Italian higher education at the end of the 1990’s was certainly one of the most disastrous of the OECD. Drop out was reaching enormous peaks\textsuperscript{22}, for those who effectively passed their degree, the average time to complete was much too long; the university system and the job market were very disconnected and only very few graduates would get a job in their area of studies, if they got any job at all. In the UK, it is a bit abrupt, but certainly not wrong, to say that the main concern for higher education at the end of the 1990’s was money. There was a big crisis of the funding; this is why the bipartisan commanded Dearing report from 1997 recommended the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees, which would be the big debate in the following years. The other big objective of the labour was to widen the access to higher education. (this is the “target 50” objective: reaching the rate of 50%\textsuperscript{23} of young under 30 getting university education within 10 years).

Of course, it would be excessive to say that the four situations were completely different, and had nothing in common. The four Ministers might have been experiencing the same problems two by two: for example, for both Germany and Italy, the issue of the length of studies was a real concern, but it was not so much for the UK, which was doing quite well on that point. Another example: for both Germany and France, to make higher education institutions more attractive to international students was really a priority, whereas for Italy, the expansion on the international market was really not the point, given the severe problems they had to deal with nationally. So there were some problems matching between two countries, but there was no sufficient clear convergence between the four to argue that the similarity of problems experienced naturally led to the same vision. And still, if we had observed some stronger convergence, the relation between convergence and constitution of a shared vision would have had to be demonstrated.

At a second possible level of explanation, there is no need of a convergence of problems for a shared vision to be formulated, but what is more important are strong common beliefs. In the case of the Sorbonne, it would mean: the ministers were not exactly experiencing the same problems at home, but they had strong beliefs about the new challenges that higher education had to face, this is the reason why they gathered to engage in a European project. This interpretation is in appearance more sensible than the previous

\textsuperscript{22} The Italian language even uses the expression of “university mortality” to describe this massive phenomenon: between the mid 1960’s and 1990’s, among the 10 millions students who passed by the universities, 7 millions went out without any higher education qualification at all.

\textsuperscript{23} When the labour government arrived, this rate was only 32%.
one, but if we pose a definition of “shared vision”, we can see that it does not work either to assess that there was a real shared vision pre-existing the Sorbonne.

It should be precise first that what we call here “shared vision” cannot consist in a mere and loose expression of the situation with the same words in the air. If a shared vision is supposed to explain the beginning of a process of policy change—as it is often said to explain the launching of the Bologna process—, then it has to be something structured and composed of different elements making a system. The scholars studying the role of visions in policy change develop very refined models of the constituents of a vision, like the deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs in Paul Sabatier’s and Hank Jenkins-Smith’s advocacy coalition model (1993), or the values, norms, algorithms and images in Pierre Muller’s referential model (1995), for example. Whatever the model and its particular characteristics, the principle is quite the same: studying a vision is not only looking at general and vague ideas expressed in the same words, it is rather analysing how general beliefs, policy objectives, and more precise policy prescriptions are organised in a system, how they re-allocate power between policy actors, and how they impact public policy outcomes.

On this basis, we want to argue here that the common perception the ministers had before the Sorbonne was only quite vague (“We had the same vision of the role of higher education and research in a globalised economy and society” (adviser of the Italian Minister))

We have seen that there was no consistent shared vision of higher education pre-existing the Sorbonne because there was no sufficient convergence between the problems met in the four countries to suppose it led to develop a common vision, and because the vague expression of a common perception cannot be considered a vision in the sense of a system. But if the ministers did not engage in this project because they were already sharing a

---

common vision, the question which was our starting point –the one of the motivation for the ministers to sign- is therefore still to be answered: if this was not a strong shared vision, what was it then that led the ministers to respond positively to the French Minister's invitation and to sign the declaration?

2. **Different motives to sign a joint declaration**

The analysis of the data collected actually reveals that each one of the four ministers had its own motives for engaging in the European project and accepting the two cycle degree structure as the backbone of the document. From a methodological point of view, in recomposing the motives of some actors at a precise moment that was many years ago, there were some traps to avoid. Trying to stick as much as possible to our inductive method principles, we have been very careful not to infer the rationality of the actors from the literature, nor from what they themselves say now their motives were.

**France: to sign to get some leverage, but leverage to do what?**

The French case is specific in the sense that, as we have just seen, the French Minister Claude Allègre was really the one at the origin of the Sorbonne meeting and declaration. Concerning the French signature, the question is therefore not really “why did the minister accept to sign the declaration?”, but rather “what did he have in mind when he decided to invite his European colleagues to sign the declaration?”.

Given that it was the idea of the French minister to organise the meeting and make a declaration, one could have expected that there was some clear strategy of leverage with determined objectives from his part. There is actually a consensus on that point from different French actors from the inside (the political cabinet and the administration), or from observers knowing the French context well. In interviews, they all expressed it quite in the same terms.

“This principle of international lever, this is very typical of Claude Allègre. He knew he would use international dynamics to make the national dossiers go ahead in spite of the blockages”  

(an adviser of the Minister).

“This is what I call the ‘theory of detour’: to set some general European principles in order to move the routines and conservatisms in the national countries”  

(an official from the Direction for Higher Education).

“Allègre needed to make this declaration with some other European countries because he wanted to have the excuse of Europe to pass some reforms in France”  

(French European civil servant working at the direction higher education of the European Commission in 1998 ).

---

26 Interview done on the 23rd of July 2003. My Translation
When one wants a lever, it can be assumed that he knows what he exactly wants to lever with it... Nevertheless, looking at it more closely, the clear objective of this strategy in terms of policy outcome is not so obvious. To get some policy leverage with a European declaration was indeed a strong motivation. But leverage to do what? This is what remains unclear.

In the months and weeks before the Sorbonne meeting, there is no mention of precise plans for policy measures related to the Sorbonne. As explained above, the staff is mobilized to organise the meeting in a rush, and not to make proposals for concrete and specific reform objectives. In the same way we observed that quite unexpectedly the content was grafted on the form concerning the organisation of the Sorbonne, we have here some reasons to suppose that the Sorbonne was planned, and then organised and held without the Minister exactly knowing what it would do of it in France. What can be observed at the summer 1998, that is to say just after the Sorbonne meeting was held, confirms that idea: the Minister asked on the one hand a university president to write a policy note on the possible consequences and translations of the Sorbonne objectives in France, and on the other hand the staff from the direction for Higher Education of the Ministry to start to think about a solution to give the two cycle structure a legal existence without putting the whole French degree structure upside down. In other words, even if the idea of the Sorbonne came from the French Minister, the imperatives of the Sorbonne finally appeared quite external and blurred once it was time to implement them in France\textsuperscript{28}.

Of course this is not to say that the French Minister had no ideas or objectives at all. He had a diagnostic of what were the problems in the French higher system, as well as strong general objectives of reforms to implement. We rather want to outline the intuitive but chaotic way the strategy of the French minister was constituted. First came the formal idea of the anniversary as an occasion to do something European with some European guests, and then came the way: a declaration calling for the harmonisation of degrees around the pivotal two cycle structure; all along this process, Claude Allègre was convinced it would give him some leverage to make some reforms, but which exact reforms, he would see.

Germany: the Sorbonne as an activator and a tribune

The German signature to the Sorbonne was in a certain way the most linear of the four countries. For Jürgen Ruettgers, there was no dilemma or big risk taken in signing: the Sorbonne principles only went a bit further in the direction he had already taken in the German reform that was about to be adopted.

\textsuperscript{27} Interview done on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of October 2003. My translation.
\textsuperscript{28} On that point, see the very interesting study led by Pauline Barraud and Stéphanie Mignet-Gérard. (Barraud, Mignot-Gerard, 2005).
In Germany, a reform of the framework law on higher education was in preparation for more than two years, since 1996 –that is to say much before the Sorbonne-. The main points of the reform were deregulation (in volume the framework law would be reduced of more than 50%), internationalisation, and quality assurance. The point we are interested in here is internationalisation. As explained above, the lack of attractiveness of German higher education institutions was one of the major concerns of the sector since the mid 1990’s. One specific measure to improve German institutions’ attractiveness was the introduction of Bachelor Master programs that would be more recognisable at the international level, and that could be taught in English. This was only an experimental measure, for the voluntary institutions, which would get some support from the federal ministry if they created the pilot programs.

So we can see that the principle to introduce Bachelor Master program in order to improve international recognition of national degrees and attractiveness of national institutions is very close from what would be written in the Sorbonne declaration. In fact, even if the declaration was written by the French, the influence of the German is not to be neglected. A first very direct influence was the one of the German minister over the French minister to convince him that the two cycle structure was a good solution (see above). Another second more indirect influence was the way the German developments inspired Adrien Schmitt’s policy note on the “3-5-8” as an international standard to be more competitive. Adrien Schmitt had both a very good knowledge of the German system and close links with German rectors, by whom he was kept informed of the projects of reform going on in Germany.

In order to sign the Sorbonne declaration, the fact of being about to adopt this reform of the framework law was facilitating in two ways for the Minister. First, there was no mismatch between the spirit of the law and the Sorbonne, they were going in the same direction, and the signature would not be interpreted as a shift or a reversal. Second, the clashes about the choice of the two cycle structure had already happened, or at least were already happening (not to say that they were resolved, but they had not impeached the minister to prepare the law).

But of course the big difference between the German project of reform and the Sorbonne declaration was that in the first case the Bachelor Master program was introduced as an experiment, on the basis that only voluntary institutions would participate, whereas in the second case, the engagement to pass to the two cycle structure concerned the whole system. This is why some Lander ministers reacted saying that by signing such a declaration engaging the whole German higher education system, Jürgen Ruettgers was going beyond

---

29 Fourth amendment to the framework law, 1998.
his competence (in Germany, higher education is actually a competence of the Länder, the attribution of the federal level is limited to giving the great policy orientations). But the declaration was non binding, and with the experimental Bachelor Master program, the minister was expecting the set a dynamics in motion\textsuperscript{30}, and the Sorbonne was therefore some extra to activate the dynamics.

Another element that has to do with the political German context is that the Minister had a personal interest in going to the Sorbonne, in receiving the \textit{doctor honoris causa} honours, and in being seen as one of the initiators of a European project. In fact, if the other ministers were half way or beginning of their mandate\textsuperscript{31}, the political calendar was different in Germany, the end of the legislature was approaching, and the German minister welcomed positively the benefits he could get from an exposure in an international event. As he would soon be campaigning, the Sorbonne was the occasion to end with a flourish.

The reform of the German higher education framework law would have been passed, with or without the Sorbonne, so the European declaration was for the Minister an extra, an occasion to insist, as well as to show up in a status-enhancing context before an election. But it was not turning upside down the plans of the German Minister; Jürgen Ruettgers was actually the one who had run before the wind. In fact, to make a comparison, if the French launched the project without concrete plans of reform to respond to it, the German intervened less in the preparation of the Sorbonne, but had their national response ready in advance in the reform they were preparing for two years.

\textbf{Italy: signing gambling}

The case of the Italian signature is very interesting because the Italian Minister was undoubtedly the one who took the greater risk by signing such the declaration. Italy was among the four countries the one that had the greatest gap between its national system and the Sorbonne objectives. Moreover, not only the existing system was different, but, contrary to the German case, the propositions that were being done in Italy to reform the system also differed from the Sorbonne principles.

As explained above, when Luigi Berlinguer arrived at the ministry of education in 1996, the situation of higher education was really disastrous. He had particularly set his heart on making an important reform to help resolving this situation for two reasons. First, he had

\textsuperscript{30} It is hard to precise here if this was the actual strategy of the Minister at that time or if it is \emph{a posteriori} reconstruction, as it is actually what happened: for the 2002 German reform which generalised the introduction of Bachelor Master, Bologna was an important legitimating myth. On this point, see the study of Georg Krüchen (Krücken et al., 2005).

\textsuperscript{31} At that date, Luigi Berlinguer could not know that there would be a government reshuffle, and that he would have to keep only education, and let higher education to someone else, and Claude Allègre could not know either that he would have to resign in 2000.
always been very interested in university policy and governance (he was the former rector of
the university of Sienna, and had been responsible for education in his party for a very long
time). Second, and in the Italian context it was quite important, he was the first from a
communist party (the reformed Italian communist party) to accede to a minister’s seat, and
for this reason “he had the strong feeling that he had to accomplish something, that it was
truly his duty” (Adviser to the Italian Minister). This is why he had opened the biggest debate
on higher education ever held in the country. In June 1996 a working group was constituted
to think about some propositions for the reform of higher education; it was chaired by a
famous Italian sociologist, Guido Martinotti\(^\text{32}\). In December 1997, the Minister officially
presented it to the academic community during a big event in order to open a discussion
between all the actors of the sector (rectors, unions, political parties…), while the secretary of
state for higher education started to work on the project of a law with the Italian rectors’
conference. It is not here the place to develop the conclusions of the Martinotti report, but the
one thing that should be remembered here is that there was no mention of a two cycle
structure, but the proposition of the introduction of an intermediate certificate at two years
(the CUB) before the \textit{laurea} at four years.

When Luigi Berlinguer was invited to the Sorbonne meeting and started to be informed
of the content of the declaration, especially the two cycle structure, there was a reversal. He
was soon convinced that it was the solution to conduct the Italian reform, both because a
structure in two consecutive cycles could resolve many Italian problems, and because to be
engaged in a European project would be a tremendous lever. But the problem was that only
a few weeks before he was informed of the Sorbonne project, the Italian Minister had
positioned in support of Martinotti’s proposition, and of the two year certificate, even if at this
stage it was nothing else than a proposition. The debate was already going on on the basis
of the report, and the Minister could not suddenly intervene and say they were going to do it
another way. This is why he only told very few persons he was going to sign the Sorbonne
declaration.

To him, his secretary of state for higher education, and the chairman of the report, the
two cycle structure was not incompatible with the general spirit of the report, it was rather its
continuation, and thus there was not that much contradiction in signing the Sorbonne.

“The Minister came back from the Sorbonne and told me: ‘with Martinotti’s report, we had it on the
tip of the tongue, but we could not say it, but I saw in Paris that it is the road to follow, the choice
we must make’. In a way, before the Sorbonne, it was unconscious, we had made the work to
achieve it, but we had not achieved yet, in Paris the Minister understood that it corresponded to the
main ideas of Martinotti’s report”\(^\text{33}\) (an official from the Italian Ministry).

\(^{32}\) This is why this group is generally referred to as Martinotti’s commission, and the report as Martinotti’s report.

\(^{33}\) Interview done on the 11\(^{\text{th}}\) of November 2004. My translation.
But it was not perceived that way by many Italian actors, because Martinotti’s proposition could appear more acceptable (it was more in the respect of the Italian university tradition, and it did not make the existing system collapse) and also because some of them had the feeling of having been betrayed because the Minister had changed his mind without telling. Every one now knows that in 1999, the Italian were very active in the Bologna process by hosting the Bologna conference, and they also passed their national decree of implementation of the two cycle structure. But if the story tends to prove Luigi Berlinguer was right, when back from the Sorbonne in May 1998, the controversy was big and he was actually accused in a big newspaper of being a traitor.

The Italian Minister signed the Sorbonne declaration because he found in the two cycle structure an unexpected policy solution for the big reform he wanted to make in Italy. In that sense, this story can be read as a case of opportunity window (Kingdon, 1984): what happened in 1997 is the conjunction of the problem stream with the disastrous situation of Italian higher education and the political stream with the accession of the Prodi government and Luigi Berlinguer as a minister of education who “wanted to accomplish something” (adviser to the Italian minister). Then in 1998, in the policy stream began the search for policy solutions, first Martinotti’s one, and finally the Sorbonne one. By picking up the solution of the two cycle structure, and therefore by signing the Sorbonne, Luigi Berlinguer was putting himself in danger, but he thought it was worth it. This is why the Italian signature can be called a gamble from the Minister Berlinguer who “decided to take the chance”.

UK: to sign for prevention

It is certainly the UK minister’s motives that require the more explanation. Why is there that this country, which higher education system was not really turned towards Europe, was among the builders of the first important European process in the sector?

The reason the most often cited to explain the British signature to the Sorbonne declaration is actually that the statements of the declaration were absolutely inoffensive for the British higher education system (“it was not doing any harm”). In fact the compliance to the Sorbonne declaration did not require any change for the UK system, because the British degree structure was already organised in two graduate and postgraduate cycles. It is interesting to note here that to British actors the inoffensive nature of the Sorbonne declaration does not result from its non binding status—as in the vision of many countries that joined the process later in 1999- but from the proximity between the Sorbonne objectives and the UK model. This narrative of a neutral signature to an inoffensive declaration is very

---

34 Interview done on the 9th of November 2004. My translation.
35 Interview done on the 12th of November. My translation.
common among British higher education actors, maybe because it can also explain the stillness or resistances to any change related to Bologna in the following years, according to this circular logic: the declaration was not calling for any change, it is therefore normal that nothing is changing, and it retrospectively proves that there was no danger for the UK to sign this declaration.

Our empirical research shows that the British signature to the Sorbonne is more to be understood in terms of prevention than in terms of neutrality. It is true that it was not very costly, or even free, for the UK to sign the declaration, as it was not implying any direct substantial change. It is important to keep in mind that it is only very late that the British were contacted and invited to the Sorbonne meeting. They did not ignore that they were invited almost at the last minute, and that the Sorbonne meeting would be held, with them or without them. And it happened that the project proposed was compatible with the British structure ("that [was] the good thing, they want[ed] something very close to what we ha[d] in the UK"\textsuperscript{36} (Tessa Blackstone)). So the immediate cost of signing the declaration was very low, but not signing could have revealed to be costly in the longer term, because it would have meant to go without the possibility to keep an influence, or a minimal control over the possible developments of the Sorbonne meeting and declaration.

This arbitrage is clearly expressed in the words of an official from the Direction for higher education of the British Department, who advised the minister to sign the declaration and represented the UK in the negotiation of the text:

\begin{quote}
"So the choice was either to join with the other three, and get something that was pretty close from what our universities developed, either to let the other do it on their own, in which case we could have been on the side, and have produced qualifications that were disadvantage to us. […] there was a strong belief that there was more to gain than to loose by joining this, and that secondly, if we did not join, we might actually be at disadvantage as this took effect\textsuperscript{37}.

Therefore, the British signature can be qualified as preventive: there was not enough concrete danger for the British system in 1998 to call it defensive, but to sign appeared a cheap mean of prevention against some future potential developments of the Sorbonne.

We have seen that the four ministers not only did not share a clear vision, but had different motives to sign the declaration. The French minister at the origin of the Sorbonne meeting and declaration wanted to get some leverage, even if the precise measures he wanted to make were not specified yet; the German minister saw in the Sorbonne some principles that were going only a bit further than the ones of the reform he was about to pass; the Italian took the chance to sign because the two cycle structure appeared as a solution for the reform he wanted to make, even if it was quite risky for him; and the British minister, who
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Interview done on the 12\textsuperscript{th} of November 2004.
\textsuperscript{37} Interview done on the 17\textsuperscript{th} of December 2004.
was invited very late, signed as a mean of prevention –if something was to be initiated, it was better to be in than out-.

Once analysed separately, we should now try to see how the national strategies combined at the moment of the negotiation of the text. Our empirical research shows that there was very little discussion of the document drafted by the French.

**The informal and consensual negotiation of the Sorbonne text**

We have not evoked the very moment of the negotiation of the Sorbonne text yet, it is in fact more understandable once the perspective of each minister has been introduced. When analysing the drafting of the text and its discussion, what is striking is that it was actually not a moment of conflict, or a moment of tough negotiation, but rather a moment of consensus, except maybe for the remarks of the British concerned with reactions some touchy words could provoke in the UK.

The drafting and negotiation of the text was done late (in May, in the weeks before the meeting); it was done in a very informal way: no more than a whole of about ten people were involved. As stated above, the declaration was drafted -in English- by an adviser of the French minister. This draft was first discussed by e-mails between the four advisers of the ministers and at a meeting between them that took place in London in mid May 1998 in order to set the final version to submit to the Ministers.

The analysis of the correspondence and of the records on the London meeting reveals that the draft first proposed was finally (and surprisingly?) quite consensual. Concerning the form of the draft, there was almost no comment from the advisers who seemed quite satisfied with the tone of the French’s draft. In the emails, we only observed that the Italian adviser made some style recommendations that were taken into account in the final version of the document in order to give it a “stronger political feel”, or “make it more lyrical”. Concerning the content, the main remarks came from the British who stressed the vocabulary aspects that could be problematic when received in the British context, as in this quote about curricula:

---

38 We rely on two types of data: the first is the e-mail correspondence the advisers of the ministers exchanged twice in May 1998, the second is the interviews of the different advisers present at the meeting when they settled the final version of the text.

39 It is interesting to note here the variety in the profiles of the persons the ministers had delegated to discuss the draft of the declaration. The French one was “higher education special adviser”, the German one was “political personal adviser”, the Italian one the “diplomatic adviser” of the Minister –and therefore an expert in international negotiation, but not in higher education matters-, and the British one was not a member of political staff, but the director for higher education at the department for skills and education, that is to say an official.

40 Initially this meeting was not to take place in London, but the place was changed in order so that the late invited British could be present.

41 Email from the Italian adviser to the French adviser, May the 5th of 1998.

42 Interview done on the 9th of November 2004. My translation.
“We could not agree to ‘harmonise our curricula’ […] as in Britain, there are no common curricula, we have a policy which favours diversification of higher education courses.”

At the meeting, there was again some touchy point for the British on the use of the word harmonisation, but the British had to give in:

“The first thing that was pointed was that they talked about harmonisation. Here [in the UK] any reference to the word harmonisation in any European text is an immediately disregarded by the British parliament, this is the way Britain is. So harmonisation was a word we would never have allowed including. But I do recall that the other, the French, the German and the Italian, said: “but this is actually harmonisation, and we must have this word” and I think it did appear in the declaration. And that was something that caused some troubles afterwards.”

The fact that the negotiation of the text was so smooth is actually very interesting, and it is a result different from what we could have expected given that the four countries did not engage for the same reasons. Why was it so consensual? We do not have sure explanation for this fact, but we can make some hypotheses. Maybe because each one had anticipated some benefits and was therefore well disposed towards this declaration. Maybe because the draft was done already when the discussion started and the time was limited so the ministers had to accept it anyway. Maybe because the text was merely a political declaration without any formal status, and the ministers knew it had no irreversible dimension, and were more concerned about stating some intentions. Or maybe because the way of proceeding was finally quite unusual for an international negotiation (advisers of very different status, limited number of persons involved, informal nature of the exchanges) and surprised them in a way that they were enthusiastic and more inclined to cooperate than to mistrust. Maybe all of that together.

What led the ministers in charge of higher education in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom to sign the Sorbonne declaration was not a pre-existing shared vision. The signature is better understood by analysing the motives separately, and then looking at the negotiation of the text as we have done above.

But once we have said that we must face a contradiction. To play with words, the shared vision was not pre-existing, but it undoubtedly start to exist in the Sorbonne declaration. That is to say that the Sorbonne is the starting point of the construction of the shared vision. We are now going to use the elements previously presented to explain how a vision can coagulate. And this sounds to us a good case to explore something that is often let aside in the literature on the role of ideas and on Europeanisation: the formulation of European vision and norms.

43 Email from the British to the French, 11th of May 1998.
44 Interview done on the 17th of December 2004.
3. The Sorbonne as the starting point of the construction of a shared vision

The Sorbonne shared vision: not pre-existing and yet existing

What we have done until now might have been interpreted as a try to deconstruct absolutely the importance and the political meaning of the Sorbonne. It was not, and we are now going to explain that if there was no pre-existing shared vision before the Sorbonne, there was one clearly identifiable in the Sorbonne text, and if the Sorbonne meeting was not organised in purely rational way, it was a very crucial moment because it was the moment when what would be the core for the next steps of the Bologna process coagulated.

The Sorbonne meeting was held on the 24th and 25th of May 1998. As we have seen it was prepared in a rush, with “pieces and bits” and the objectives for the declaration were formulated on the way. According to all, the event went on really well, for some it was even a great success and a moving ceremony. Of course this appreciation results from some reconstruction: the Sorbonne is now seen as the founding event of a major policy process, so the memory one has of it has to be the one of an historical moment. But still, it cannot be denied that efforts had been made to emphasize the symbolic dimension of the event and impress the guests: the rectors invited were in robe, the participants were given bronze medals specially made for the occasion as a souvenir, the dinner took place in the great golden reception room of the French foreign office in the presence of the French Prime Minister… The only words out of tune that were pronounced were from the Director of Higher Education from the European Commission. There was indeed some reasons for the Commission official to feel challenged, even more that he was not initially invited to the meeting. The tone of his speech was a bit acrimonious, he accused the ministers of not recognising all the work done by the Commission for 20 years, and warned them to be careful not to build a two speed Europe of higher education. But as a whole the meeting was considered a success.

The meeting was closed by the reading and signing of the joint declaration. Until now we applied ourselves to demonstrating that there was no shared vision pre-existing the Sorbonne, but we now want to emphasize that the declaration that was made public on that day does contain a quite coherent vision. This vision is now very well known: by signing the declaration, the ministers noticed the transformations of the sector and the progresses of European integration and they engaged in the construction of a European higher education area. Their stated objectives were to promote mobility and improve the international recognition of European diplomas, and we can consider that the objective of producing more
employable graduates in more efficient systems is implicit, but present. The policy instrument to reach these different objectives and to be the pivot of the EHEA is the two cycle degree structure, divided in two consecutive graduate and postgraduate cycles, and completed by the credits transfer system.

This is no more the vague common perceptions we showed the ministers were sharing a few months before, it is now enough structured and making a system between general beliefs, policy objectives and specification of policy instruments for it to be considered a vision. We will call it “the Sorbonne vision”. A vision cannot be punctual, it is not a view one has one day on a specific situation, and then forgets on the next day. It is something that has an existence over time, produces some outcomes, models and is modelled by the interactions between actors. Retrospectively, we are able to say that the Sorbonne vision was not punctual, on the contrary it would become the skeleton completed in the Bologna declaration, driving the dynamics of the Bologna process, and framing the debates on higher education all over the continent.

How can we mobilize the results of our empirical research to propose an interpretation of what happened along a sequence which started with no pre-existing vision and ends with the starting point of the construction a common vision?

An interpretation of the Sorbonne as the coagulation of a vision around a policy instrument

After the profusion of details of the narrative we made, the real question is: What is the meaning of this story? To us the story of the Sorbonne is the story of a process of coagulation of a shared vision. And to us what makes the coagulation possible at some moment is the complex choice of a specific policy instrument, and its public expression in a political declaration. This story can be better understood in the perspective of Paul Pierson’s definition of path dependence and increasing returns in the study of politics (2000).

To summarise all we have said the story of the Sorbonne is the following. A French minister one day of January 1998 decided to have a ceremony for the 800 years of the University of Paris, and that it would be the occasion to make a “colloque de l’université européenne” and think about a Europe of the university with some European guests he knew, the German and the Italian Ministers. He fixed a date and launched the organisation of the event, on the basis that the details on the political content of this meeting would be defined on the way. At that moment of the story, there is no real pre-existing vision and objective shared by the ministers.
On the way, there was about one month later a conjunction of elements that made the policy instrument of the two cycle degree structure emerge on the agenda of the minister. The two cycle structure was first a proposition from a report on the dualism between universities and grandes écoles in France; second, it was proposed as a way to make French degrees more compatible with international standards; third it was supported by the German minister.

The conjunction of elements in favour of the two cycle structure allowed this policy instrument to come and fill in the gap of the political content of the European “colloque”. The coupling between the European event and the two cycle structure was favoured by the German minister. When he was told about, the Italian minister saw in the two cycle degree structure a solution for the Italian reform he was preparing. The design of the Sorbonne vision was getting more precise: it would be a project of a Europe of higher education based on common architecture of degree structure.

The European project would be made public in a declaration that would be signed at the conference. The French Minister asked his adviser for higher education to write the draft of the declaration. As the date of the conference was approaching, the three ministers realise they could not go without the UK and the French minister invited them. The last minute invited British and the three other then exchanged and met to discuss the draft of the declaration, but as it was consensual, there was not much change.

The conference was successfully held and the declaration signed. Even if a few months before the four ministers were not sharing a common and structured vision, a coherent vision did show in the declaration. This vision was strongly articulated around the two cycle structure, and it became core of the Bologna declaration which 29 countries signed, and then the thread of the Bologna process dynamics.

The story told this way, we can see how the coupling between a vague European project and the policy instrument of the two cycle degree structure was the turning point, and the beginning of the coagulation of a vision. With the emergence of the two cycle structure as a policy alternative, the beliefs on the necessity to build a Europe of the university and on the role of higher education in society, the objectives of internationalisation, efficiency and mobility -that were until then disconnected- assembled making a system. The specification of the policy instrument was not a secondary choice motivated by strong objectives and vision; it was on the contrary the binder thanks to which the coagulation of the vision could begin. Once the vision coagulated around the policy instrument at the Sorbonne, the rallying to the project at Bologna means the adhesion to the vision and to the instrument, adjustments and complements are still possible, but reversal becomes more and more difficult.
This interpretation of the Sorbonne story as a process of coagulation around a policy instrument can be enlightened by the points of Paul Pierson on his study on path dependence and the study of politics (Pierson, 2000). In this study, he develops the arguments that the notions of path dependence and increasing returns coming from economics are applicable to politics, and open new perspectives for political science. The basic idea of path dependence is that once engaged on a path, the costs of exit become more and more expensive going down the path, because of increasing returns. These notions are often used in new institutionalist studies to account for the stickiness of existing institutional settings. But we want to use some of Pierson’s conclusions in a different direction.

We can first come back to the economics origin of path dependence in the study of technology. Referring to Paul David’s famous piece on the QWERTY keyboard (1985) (which remained no matter if it was not the most performing technology, because once an initial advantage had been gained and processes of learning set in motion, there was a lock in and the competitors were excluded because of the cost of exit), if we accept to switch from a technology to a policy instrument, we could argue that the Sorbonne story with the coagulation of a vision around the two cycle degree structure is the story of the emergence of the QWERTY of the Bologna process.

For a better understanding of increasing return processes in the political world, Paul Pierson poses different conditions; two of them seem to us particularly relevant to understand the Sorbonne story. First, according to him, among the four features of path dependence at work in political life, one is contingency, which means that “relatively small events, if they occur at the right moment, can have large and enduring consequences” (Pierson, 2000 : 263). Not only existing institutional settings can have path dependence effects, but small events, which happened by accident, or by chance, but at the right time can be very important. This is precisely what we showed with the Sorbonne story and the very small and micro event of the choice of the two cycle structure.

Second, a strong implication of this interest in increasing returns in politics is the “need to focus on branching points and the specific factors that reinforce the path established” (Pierson, 2000 : 263). If the factors reinforcing the path established are still to be analysed in another study on the sequence between the Sorbonne in 1998 and Bologna in 1999, we applied ourselves here to understand a branching point, where a path started or at least took a new direction –because path dependence notion implies that an outcome is always linked to the past-. On this point, we think very important not to assume that the two cycle structure was the obvious pivot for the Sorbonne declaration, and then the Bologna one, but rather to describe the mechanisms by which it became the pivot without making functionalist
assumptions: “rather than assume relative efficiency [of an outcome] as an explanation, we have to go back and look’ (Pierson, 2000 : 264).

So, it will need further analysis of the lock in after the Sorbonne, but we have argued here is that the Sorbonne story can be interpreted as the opening of a track, and the beginning of a path dependence process. The question is now in which way this focus on the concrete interactions and mechanisms at the opening of a path is related to literature on policy ideas and Europeanisation.

**The Sorbonne: a case for studying the missing link of literature on the role of ideas and on Europeanisation**

The analysis of the concrete mechanisms of the formulation of policy visions is the common research agenda of the studies on the role of ideas on policy change and of the studies on Europeanisation, because it is in a certain way the missing link in this two fields of research.

Let us first look at the literature on ideas. To summarise, the common assessment of the different scholars (we take here Hall, 1993, Sabatier 1993, and Muller, 1995) in this field is that ideas and cognitive schemes matter. As we said it already these studies develop very refined models of the constituents of a vision and how they make a system, or about the way the introduction and diffusion of a new vision is closely in interaction with the power games between actors.

But if these studies are very convincing on showing that ideas matter, that they impact policy outcomes and that they interact with actors’ games, they have in common a relative weakness on the concrete processes of formulation of ideas. In other words, ideas matter indeed, but where do they come from? The assumption that one has to accept when applying those models to a specific case is that the policy visions in a sector are embedded in a general vision (the paradigm of Peter Hall, the global referential of Pierre Muller, or the deep core beliefs of Paul Sabatier). We do not mean here that general beliefs about society and individuals do not have structuring effects on policy visions in specific sectors at all, but we mean that to consider the relation between the general belief and the policy sector vision mainly in terms of declination prevents from looking at very interesting socio-political mechanisms. The mechanisms of formulation of a policy vision should be first precisely recomposed on inductive principles, looking at actors “at work” in the policy arena (Musselin, 2000 : 28). Eventually, it should be possible afterwards to question the link between policy vision and general beliefs rather than to postulate before the empirical research that the policy vision is —only— the declination of a general or global vision.
With the Sorbonne story we told in details in this paper, we showed how a vision emerge from intuitive, chaotic, and partly material socio-political processes. The processes of the formulation of a vision in fact do not have to be purely logical and composed of only ideational elements. In the case of the Sorbonne, the fact that the form preceded the content, that the meeting was organised in a rush, that the puzzle assembled around the emergence of the two cycle structure policy instrument, that the vision had to be expressed in terms adequate for a political declaration are all very important features of the formulation of the Sorbonne vision. On this basis, and with a development of the analysis to Bologna, it should then be possible to discuss the statements about the Bologna process as a shift to a globalised market model in the sector of higher education, or as the continuation of the Commission previous initiatives with an intergovernmental process.

A parallel observation can be done on the analysis of policy formulation as a missing link in the study of Europeanisation processes as well. We are going to let aside the studies on Europeanisation which limit the notion to the impact of Europe on national policies (for instance: Caporaso et alii., 2001; Knill, Lehmkuhl, 1999, Schmidt, 2000). In fact these studies develop interesting and sophisticated schemes to identify and qualify this impact, its nature, and its degree, but they do not question the upstream formulation of European formal and informal norms.

We are focusing here on the branch of Europeanisation studies which defines Europeanisation as a process from the formulation of European norms to their institutionalisation in the national contexts. Claudio Radaelli’s definition is in fact a very comprehensive and precise definition of Europeanisation:

« Europeanization refers to : Processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies» (Radaelli, 2001:110).

We can see that in this definition, the formulation of the vision is fully integrated as it is the first phase of the process of Europeanisation. Nevertheless, when looking at the empirical framework given by Radaelli to analyse processes of Europeanisation, we do observe that the phase of the formulation is forgotten (Radaelli, 2001: 126, 133). There is actually a mismatch: the definition he proposes is very interesting and comprehensive, but the related empirical framework he adds is finally not so different –even if a bit refined- from the scholars who define Europeanisation only as the impact of Europe on national contexts. Therefore enquiring on Europeanisation would again consist in analysing the national effects of European policies.
We do think Radaelli’s definition of Europeanisation is the most interesting that was given, even if we make a slight correction on the point that in his definition only EU policy and politics are treated; we consider that all European policies are not EU policies—the Bologna process for instance-. Yet, if we take Radaelli’s definition, we oppose his empirical prescriptions. If an object is thought in terms of a process, each phase has to be analysed, and the succession of the phases is essential to understand the object. Thus, if Europeanisation is a process, the analysis of the phase of formulation of the European norm can not be eluded. We argue that the Bologna process can be understood as a process of Europeanisation, and that the Sorbonne therefore corresponds to the phase of the formulation (or construction in Radaelli’s words) of the vision or the norm. This phase of Europeanisation is not studied at all in the branch of Europeanisation studies focused on the domestic impact, but it is not really studied either in the branch taking Europeanisation as a process.

In the two previous parts, we had shown that no pre-existing vision could explain that four ministers signed the Sorbonne declaration calling for a harmonisation of the architecture of degree structure in two cycles. Nevertheless we saw in this third part that a vision does appear in the declaration, and that the story we told is finally a story of coagulation of a vision around a policy instrument. This opened different theoretical perspectives. First, the path dependence and increasing returns notions seem promising tools to account for this particular story, but we need to go further in the study of the process to Bologna to describe better the lock in effects. Second, we suggested that this type of study is also a way of discussing pieces of literature on policy ideas and Europeanisation on a specific point that remains a missing link in the two fields: what do we learn when looking at how a policy vision is coagulated and formulated?

**Conclusion**

We wish that this study on the Sorbonne could contribute quite modestly to the debate on the transformations of higher education and the Bologna process, and very modestly to the policy analysis debate on the formulation of policy visions.

The study we presented here is only the very first chapter of a long story, but with Paul Pierson we would like to suggest that small events, when they happen at the right time can have big consequences. Thus we hope that what we said is small but meaningful, and that to look at the first chapter of the story also says something about the continuation of the story. To see that the Sorbonne is the starting point of the construction of a common vision could actually be helpful to understand the next steps of the Bologna process. First, to see
how the form preceded the content and how the vision was constructed around the two cycle structure might help understand the loose and polysemic nature of the principles of the Bologna process. Second and consequently it might also give some elements to think about the ambivalent status of the process: at the same powerful and quickly institutionalised on the one hand, and fragile and submitted to the risk of dilution on the other hand.

Beyond its interest in terms of knowledge of a specific policy in a specific sector, this story is the story of the process of coagulation of a vision; and we hope we will be able to develop our intuitions and strengthen our arguments that such a story has something to say in order to fill in the missing links of theories on the role of ideas, and Europeanisation of public policy.

**Bibliographical references**


Caporaso, James, Cowles Maria Green and Risse Tomas (Eds), Transforming Europe, Europeanization and Domestic Change, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.


Hall, Peter, “Policy paradigms, social learning, and the State: the case of economic policy making in Britain, Comparative Politics, April 1993, pp. 275-296.


Nokkala, Terhi, “Discursive construction of the role of universities as national and international institutions in the European Higher Education Area”, contribution to Euredocs 2004 Conference.


Tzortzis Konstantinos, “The institutional framework of the EU in higher education with specific focus on the Bologna process”, contribution to Euredocs 2004 Conference.
