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How does the national level mediate the European level within the Bologna process?

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Abstract

The Bologna process officially and formally started upon the signature of Bologna declaration and expresses the interest of a significant number of European states to build up the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on the principles of transparency, legibility and comparability of degrees and diplomas.

Analysing the national reports produced for the European level, it is expected that the links between both levels will somehow reflect how the national level mediates the European level. The national reports correspond to the request of the Bologna's follow-up group that within the stocktaking process is keeping the pace of the implementation of Bologna. The reports have been increasingly structured to address very specific questions related with Bologna's policy areas, such as: degree system, recognition, mobility, internationalisation and quality.

These reports could be reflecting the environment of organisations since the national organisational actors are providing their interpretation about the advancement of Bologna at national level.

Theoretically the environment of organisations is made by different institutional pillars. Thus, the analysis of the reports in connection with the concept of institutional pillars will give us a picture about the organisations' environment in different countries.

On the other hand, at different levels of analysis the opportunity of reforms is analysed under the framework of each institutional context, being clear that the decision to build up the European Higher Education Area diffuses across the European, the national and the local levels. The analysis of these mechanisms of institutional diffusion in relation to the institutional pillars will, then, give us an insight on how the institutional pillars diffuse from the national level to the European level and to the local level.

Methodologically, one will use comparative analysis to study three countries (Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal). Qualitatively and quantitatively one will use content analysis methods to address the research question. As empirical data one will use the reports prepared by national representatives.

Introduction

The principles confirmed in the Bologna declaration and in all official documents issued by Ministers of Education mainly rely on policies developed by European Union focusing on education and training. More recently, in the wake of the Lisbon strategy, there are some policy areas related to higher education that will be affected by the indicators proposed by the European Commission under the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC): "The EU has appropriated the nation-state's functional discourse of

1

education and has evolved the idea of lifelong learning as a way of building Europe" (Delanty and Rumford 2005: 114).

This paper uses *new* institutionalism with the aim of arguing that the construction of the European Higher Education Area is based on the role of institutions at developing and transmitting the norms that induce actors of a given community to switch from the logic of consequence to the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989).

The organisational actors, collective actors or semi-autonomous actors (Scott 2003) correspond somehow to the European Commission, placed at European level, to the nation-states and governments, placed at national level and to the higher education institutions, placed at local level. These actors share the executive power to implement the Bologna process and probably fit the notion of institutional structures. According to Scott (2003) the nation-state is an institutional structure as it provides (i) a distinctive configuration of organization, (ii) different arenas or *fora* within which conflicts can be brought to an end, (iii) the rules that determine the conditions of ownership. Using this concept of institutional structure our analysis will focus, then, on cultural-cognitive system impacts on organisations. The *new* institutionalism approach assumes different perspectives. The emphasis on the cultural-cognitive pillar is the distinguishing feature of new institutionalism in sociology (Scott 2003), whose basis of order are constitutive schemas built on perceptions, common beliefs and shared logics of action that are constantly evolving through institutionalisation.

The analysis focuses on how the national level mediates or filters the European level. Starting from the assumption that institutional pillars (e.g. regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive) impact the institutional environment of organisations, one will firstly focus on the rationales featuring the institutional pillars, and secondly on how the institutional pillars diffuse inducing institutional change within the implementation of the Bologna process.

The key features of institutions seen as the environment of organisations rely on the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars. According to Scott (2003) part of the environment of an organisation are institutional elements. These elements have technical and cultural features and both can influence and be influenced by organisational actors. The regulative elements view the institution as a system of rules set by the governance structures. The normative pillar sees institutions as structures providing a moral framework: rules, norms and laws are internalised by participants (professional managerial codes). The cultural-cognitive pillar is often associated with

new institutionalism in sociology and refers to individual perceptions as well as to symbolic systems and shared meanings (sense-making).

The implementation of the Bologna process lacks legal and instrumental frameworks that correspond to different levels of analysis. There are different mechanisms leading to the establishing of the European Higher Education Area. Institutional diffusion operates through mimetic, normative and coercive mechanisms, which are associated to the cultural-cognitive pillar, regulative pillar and to the normative pillar, respectively. It is difficult to define it as typically top-down process driven by coercive mechanisms allowing to "higher-level (more encompassing) structures to shape, both to constrain and empower, the structure and actions of lower-level actors" (Scott 2003: 196). One should avoid, anyhow, the simplistic way of seeing policy implementation as a linear top-down or bottom-up movement (Gornitzka et al. 2005; Neave 2005).

This paper focuses on the nation-state as an institutional structure. Its role is analysed using as lens the national reports, dated of 2003 and 2004 and written by ministry representatives within the stocktaking exercise defined by the Bologna's follow-up group. The national reports provide on the one hand, the overview of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars used to feature the environment for organisations. On the other hand, these reports show how these pillars may diffuse inducing institutional changes.

In section 1 the investigation starts by identifying the institutional pillars putting emphasis on their rationales with the aim of understanding their main features. In section 2 the analysis will focus on how institutional pillars diffuse across the environment of organisations. The underlying assumption is that institutional pillars seen as the environment of organisations diffuse using different mechanisms. An assessment of possible implications for institutional change will conclude this paper.

The analysis of empirical data will put emphasis on the reports produced by Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal and will use comparative methodology to understand the dynamics in different countries.

1. What are the rationales of the institutional pillars?

The analysis of the rationales of the institutional pillars starts by trying to find the relationships between the institutional pillars and exogenous pressures influencing them within the Bologna process. Among these pressures one is focusing on the Lisbon

strategy with the aim of identifying the connection of the Lisbon strategy with the institutional pillars. Of course there is a time lag between both initiatives and it might be difficult to argue that Bologna that was decided before Lisbon strategy is being driven by the latter. But there are increasing steps bridging both initiatives. And the motivation of European ministers to establish the European Higher Education Area relied somehow on the need to position Europe in the world. Teichler states that when the prime ministers and head of governments in Europe went to South East Asia to participate in an European-Asian summit (somewhere in the mid 90's) and talked about science, technology, innovation and economic progress, they realised that among students from this area of economically rising countries there "is no interest to study somewhere in continental Europe, it is a land of nowhere for them" (Teichler 2004).

On the other hand, European institutional structures and organisational actors participate in both initiatives. Thus, the need for the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education systems acknowledged within the Bologna process (Bologna Declaration 1999; Prague Communiqué 2001) reinforced functional imperatives related basically to the citizen, the learner and the employee: "The European educational space becomes the centre of a project to create Europe, and this is to be achieved through combining the citizen, the learner and the employee – citizen as worker no longer: citizen as decision-taking, lifelong-learning economically mobile individual" (Delanty and Rumford 2005: 115)

Another exogenous pressure influencing the features of institutional pillars of the Bologna process is the normative imperative. The dynamics towards the convergence of higher education structures drives the implementation of the Bologna process.

The requirements to establish the European Higher Education Area postulate further integration of national higher education policies. Here integration may refer to changes in structural connectedness (March 2002) focusing then on inter-institutional relations (March 2002; Olsen 2001).

Exogenous pressures imprint the process of decision making and of implementation of the Bologna process for strengthening the cooperation among European states involved with Bologna. In such conditions our analysis is focusing on how exogenous pressures impact institutional pillars.

1.1 1 The regulative pillar

Our analysis will start by studying the regulative pillar that refers to the legal framework. It focuses on rules and laws that set the structures of the institutions.

The 2004 report from the Netherlands shows that there is a policy transformation envisaging the promotion of selectivity in incoming mobility of non-EU students, which links funding and attractiveness of policy areas, also addressed by Lisbon strategy.

> […] the budget which has been part of the block grant to institutions, especially the part which figured in the formula funding for the number of non-European students, will be transformed into a fund for scholarships mainly for selection of incoming non-EU students (The Netherlands 2005: 8).

On the other hand, within the internationalisation policy area it is possible to identify the initiatives of joint programmes and joint degrees, which are interconnected explicitly with enhancing the attractiveness capacity of the Dutch system also addressed by Lisbon strategy.

> Implementation and further development of the three cycle structure including facilitation of joint programmes and joint degrees and furthering various internationally attractive 'top' master programmes (The Netherlands 2005: 14).

In Portugal, it is also possible to observe that the introduction of the legal framework is related to the policy area of quality assurance by focusing on the establishment of the accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes, enabling to support the international credibility of the implementation of a common degree structure (Portugal 2005).

These aspects impact the regulative institutional pillar and its introduction can be linked to funding and attractiveness. These policy areas somehow stem from functional imperatives related to the utilitarian view of higher education. Anyhow, and in what concerns the implementation of accreditation systems in the Netherlands, it is possible to see that shifts on norms and values also induce changes on the legal framework, interconnected with functional features of funding policies:

> Students enrolled in accredited programmes are awarded 'learning' rights, which entitles universities to several years of government funding. During this period of learning rights students pay a tuition fee which is fixed. When students have used up their learning rights prior to graduation, institutions may ask a higher tuition fee from the students (The Netherlands 2005: 3-4).

This represents the link that is possible to establish between different policy areas (e.g. accreditation and funding and how accreditation impacts funding). This link goes beyond functional imperatives and influences convergence of higher education

structures, such as the establishment of the accreditation system seen as a condition for credibility of university programmes. That is to say that accreditation guarantees the expectation of students in what concerns their rights and endorses the accreditation as an indicator of official recognition and social obligation.

Describing the interconnectedness between the regulative pillar and exogenous pressures, it is possible to note that in spite of the legal framework establishing a two-tier structure, its implementation at national level requires further efforts to guarantee the preservation of the binary system. It is clear that in the case of the Netherlands

> Dutch society, including employers, asked a clear distinction between graduates from research universities and graduates from universities of professional education. Therefore a distinction in names of degrees has been decided in such a way that research universities award the degrees of Bachelor and Masters of Arts or of Science, and the universities of Professional education award the degrees of Bachelor or Master followed by the name of the subject (The Netherlands 2005: 6).

Therefore, the principles associated to normative imperatives are something that will be worthwhile to follow in other countries where there is a binary system. Hence it is interesting to observe whether the preservation of the binary systems requires the revision of the legal framework established within the Bologna process.

1.1.2 The normative pillar

The normative pillar sees institutions as structures providing appropriate behaviour. The normative system fulfils "the obligations of a role in a situation, and so of trying to determine the imperatives of holding a position" (March and Olsen 1989: 161; March and Olsen 2004). But the system that provides norms and values for appropriate behaviour also establishes rules for justificatory action (*ibid*.) This process invokes rationalised ideas that may operate like diffusing processes "when such ideas or recipes are adopted by an organisation, they will in the first place leave their mark on the members' talk, appearing in new discursive categories such as concepts, metaphors and arguments" (Christensen and Røvik 1999: 176). Then, it could be argued together with March and Olsen (1989) that reasons in decision-making processes are used to justify or legitimise a choice, rather than to make it.

The normative pillar is morally governed and binds expectations (Scott 2003). This framework stems from values (conception of desirable behaviour together with the construction of standards to which it can be compared) and norms (specify how things

should be done) (Scott 2003). The analysis will focus, then, on how exogenous pressures impact values and norms.

The case of Italy (Italy 2005) demonstrates that the reform of university systems is normatively based on recognition instruments, such as credits, certificate recognitions and diploma supplements. Financial incentives are allocated to actions that promote the international competitiveness of Italian universities using these instruments. The idea of emergence of new strategies under the framework of diversity policies can also be related to the normative pillar.

The Netherlands assumes as priority the development of institutions and programmes with different profiles as "an important determinant of Dutch's international attractiveness and competitiveness" (The Netherlands 2005: 14). On the other hand, the national level believes that the BA-MA structure will offer new opportunities for the development of "high quality internationally acknowledged master programmes with a selective admission" (*ibid.*) In these cases, the attractiveness of Italy and the Netherlands is based on the development of recognition mechanisms and on the improvement of strategies of diversity policies.

In the case of the Netherlands it is also interesting to note that the learning rights already mentioned, can be seen under the normative pillar as the new university funding system is based on the rights to learn, giving the impression that the basis of legitimacy of the system is morally governed. However, the report makes clear that the economic rationale is present as "The new university funding system based on 'rights to learn', is expected to transfer the system in the direction of a demand driven system (from a supply driven system)" (The Netherlands 2005: 10-11). Therefore, it also contributes to seeing the normative pillar of these countries driven by functional imperatives.

Analysing the normative imperatives (dynamics leading the convergence of higher education structures) impacting the normative pillar it is possible to observe a strong interconnection between the convergence of higher education systems and the reinforcement or emergence of different policy areas in the national contexts. For example, the Italian report stresses the enhancement of quality and international competitiveness of the Italian university system that would be achieved by granting full autonomy to universities; the Dutch report assumes quality as the key element of the reform followed by the preservation of the binary system, and the Portuguese report states that the international credibility of the new degree structure depends on the

accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes. Interestingly the approaches are different. In Italy the report comprehensively refers to the role of national entities (e.g. National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System; National University Council; Italian University Rectors' Conference; National Council of University Students; National Committee for the Assessment of the University System; University Internal Assessment Units) in defining the normative criteria for action. In the case of the Netherlands the links to international consortia are clear since:

> The national accreditation organisation NAO is transformed into the supranational Dutch/Flemish organisation NVAO. Together with other accrediting agencies in Europe the NVAO formed the European Consortium for Accreditation, ECA. ECA aims at mutual recognition of accreditation (The Netherlands 2005: 12).

And Portugal is undergoing a process of international evaluation carried out by OECD (to evaluate the education system), by ENQA (to evaluate the national quality assessment system) and by EUA (to evaluate the institutions on a voluntary basis). These exercises could be used to enforce the logic of appropriateness inside institutions, as well as to give international credibility to the reform.

1.1.3 The cultural-cognitive pillar

The cultural-cognitive pillar focuses on constitutive schemas. In other words, shared logics of action can be reviewed by new perceptions about reality. These perceptions could somehow be associated with deinstitutionalisation processes resulting in the weakening, transformation or even disappearance of institutional structures and processes (Scott 2003) because new perceptions induce changes or adaptations. According to Dimaggio and Powell (1983), the nation-states and the professions are the main shapers of institutional forms. The mechanisms used by state actors focus on coercion and the establishment of formal organisational networks, while the mechanisms used by professions "rely on normative and/or mimetic influences and to attempt to create cultural forms consistent with their own aims and beliefs" (Scott 1987: 509).

According to the available data, functional imperatives have been active in shaping the cultural cognitive pillar. Functional imperatives associated to internationalisation have been identified in the Italian report (2005):

> Further efforts should be undertaken to achieve two main goals: greater internationalisation of all Higher Education Institutions (non-University sector included) and a significant increase in the percentage of foreign students in Italy (Italy 2005: 14).

The Dutch report (The Netherlands 2003) recognises that international attractiveness and competitiveness dictate the development of institutions and programmes. And in 2005, the report states: "Some obvious adjustments to current international practice have been made already. Recently an international (European) committee is installed to advise the parties concerned on the situation and possible future steps" (The Netherlands 2005: 6).

In Portugal the report perceives quality assurance as a crucial issue for "national development, due to the remarkable expansion of the higher education sector, which led to an heterogeneous universe of institutions, programmes and degrees" (Portugal 2005: 3)

This relationship between the cultural-cognitive pillar and functional imperatives draws attention towards the analysis of processes that may lead to deinstitutionalisation. In the countries analysed it is possible to identify different pressures that are changing the perceptions about reality. The literature identifies three sources of deinstitutionalisation: (1) the perception that there are problems in performance (functional); (2) the shifts in interest in supporting institutional arrangements (political); (3) the existence of divergent beliefs and practices (social) (Oliver 1992, as cited by Scott 2003).

Using the introduction of recognition mechanisms, such as the credit system which is highly relevant for Portugal, it is interesting to note that there is reference to the credit system already existing in Portugal for a long period and that should co-exist in a transition period with the European compatible credit system (Portugal 2003). This is something that links to the perception that the *old* credit system does not correspond to the performance of the *new* credit system, being clear, however, that in the Portuguese context the *old* credit system was never fully implemented. The point is that the initiative to replace a system by another could not be due to lack of performance because the earlier system was never fully implemented.

Another reference that appears in the Italian report (Italy 2005) and in the Dutch report (The Netherlands 2005) is the introduction of joint degree programmes as a concept and action that will reinforce international attractiveness and competitiveness, wishfully providing a way for overcoming some of the present lower performance degree programmes.

There are shifts in supporting existing institutional arrangements and there are divergent beliefs and practices, mainly because there are changes on the principles

guiding the convergence of higher education systems. Therefore, political and social pressures can be associated with normative imperatives. In the Netherlands it is interesting to note that national stakeholders (e.g. VSNU for research universities; HBO-Raad for universities of professional education; employers' organisations) play a role in debates on preparation of policies, legislative materials and funding reforms (The Netherlands 2005). Therefore it would be expected that shifts in interests or in the underlying power distribution among these institutions would be important in guiding the reform.

In Portugal there is reference to the process of professional accreditation that could somehow impact the reform of the two-degree structure (Portugal 2005) heating the debate about the requisites to exercise a profession and to have a job. Hence, it would be interesting to learn to what extent the *professionalisation* argument will be strong enough to support the proposals of 5 year degree programmes (integrated masters).

In Italy it is interesting to note that due to political and social pressures, a clear objective of the reform is to grant full autonomy to the universities (Italy 2005). And the role of University Internal Assessment Units has been re-defined by law and their tasks now include advice on new PhD courses to be created or to be confirmed. These Units should also report and collect information based on the indicators set by the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System. Hence, apparently the revised role of these Units may be seen as aiming at allowing the government to redistribute the balance power to support institutional arrangements and grant autonomy to the universities.

2. *How do institutional pillars impact the implementation of Bologna?*

This section will focus on how institutional pillars diffuse across the environment of organisations and may impact the implementation of Bologna. The implementation of policy processes is seen as "mutual adaptation and a learning process, and implementation as negotiation and interaction" (Gornitzka et al. 2005: 45). This idea stresses changes in structural connectedness putting emphasis on network development through experiential learning (March 2002). Using this perspective, the implementation of the Bologna process can be seen as integration and product of "diffusion trough networks" (*ibid*: 140) in two senses. Firstly, learning results from "diffusion, imitation, and appropriation from others that knowledge, practices, ideas, preferences, identities,

and rules spread within a population and create a basis for integration". Secondly, the network structures are evolving through experience and "learning from themselves" (March 2002: 140). The network structures [e.g. institutional structures and organisational actors] evolve by filling gaps in the structure or eliminating inconsistencies (*ibid.*), building comparable indicators or gathering information under the framework of the stocktaking process within the Bologna process

The implementation of the Bologna process may be seen as product of the institutional diffusion occurring though networks that are impacted by the features institutional pillars. The diffusion of institutional pillars occurs through imitation, organisational learning and interpretation.

Imitation can be associated to mimetic mechanisms of diffusion. The cultural-cognitive pillar uses mimetic mechanisms to diffuse, while the regulative pillar uses coercive mechanisms and the normative pillar uses norms. And isomorphism can be seen as "one possible indicator of institutional forces at work" (Scott 2003: 209) being clear that exogenous pressures determine this movement to reduce uncertainty and instability.

Organisational learning puts emphasis on the network structures. Interpretation sees variation introduced as people negotiate meaning trough interaction (Aldrich 1999). The interpretation and sense-making processes occur at European level, at national level and at local level. The opportunity of reforms is analysed at national and local levels. At different levels of analysis each institutional structure and organisational actor diffuses, translates and interprets the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. Interpretation is embedded in values, beliefs and frames of reference that differ among different organisational actors, assuming the role of policy makers and policy implementers. This course of action affects politics and the crystallization of meanings within the European Higher Education Area.

These mechanisms can lead to deregulation. The concept refers to the process of removing established rules and controls while replacing them by other forms of regulation. Deregulation, then, may comprise (1) translation that builds clearly on the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability), (2) impact of supranational guidelines in drafting national legislation and (3) application of laws creating conditions for increasing competition (Andersen 2001: 110). The national institutional structures and organisational actors are responsible for the translation of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability). Deregulation

comprising the concepts of translation, incorporation of EU directives and application of laws creating conditions for increasing competition may be embedded in processes of interpretation, organisational learning and imitation. Table 1 shows in detail the connections between diffusion mechanisms and institutional pillars based on the national reports' content analysis. The numbers refer to the reports that hold ideas related to the institutional pillars and to the diffusion mechanisms.

Table 1: Relationships between institutional pillars and diffusion mechanisms

	Imitation	Organisational learning	Interpretation
Regulative pillar	1	3	2
Normative pillar	2	4	6
Cultural-cognitive pillar	1	2	6

2.1. The regulative pillar

The diffusion of the regulative pillar can be associated with "coercive and regulative power" (Scott 2003: 115). Thus, regulative systems are instrumental and the mechanisms of pressure are coercive. The regulative pillar has been diffusing through (i) organisational learning, which results from interchanges between different institutions (ii) interpretation, which refers to variations introduced as a result of negotiated meaning and interaction and (iii) imitation, which associates isomorphic processes originated from exogenous pressures.

Illustrations of organisational learning interacting with the regulative pillar can be found in the Italian case and the Dutch case. In the Italian case one can use the example of the university autonomy as something that results from the interaction of inter-institutional relationships. That is to say that the progressive autonomy of universities is conferred based on different stages of development and interaction between universities and governments. In the Netherlands one chooses the case of the establishment of the accreditation system to show that "a treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders made the accreditation organisation into a transnational body. Since 2004 it is called the NVAO and it works for the Netherlands and the Flemish community of Belgium. Thus, the inter-institutional relationships between these two bodies reached the establishment of the transnational organisation that will take guarantee the accreditation system" (The Netherlands 2005: 12).

Examples of interpretation can be found in Italy and in the Netherlands. In Italy, interpretation was made, for instance, while drafting the legislation on the degree system, introducing innovations in academic recognition "based on the concept of comparability rather than equivalence" (Italy 2003: 2). In the Netherlands, with the aim of preserving the binary system, the two-cycle degree structure comprises two differentiated types of degree programmes, "research oriented education (wetenschappelijk onderwijs, WO), traditionally offered by research universities, and professional higher education (hoger beroepsonderwijs, HBO), traditionally offered by hogescholen, or universities of professional education" (The Netherlands 2005: 3).

Analysing imitation as a diffusion mechanism that can be associated to variations introduced from external origins, the quality assessment system of the Portuguese higher education degree programmes builds on the Dutch system (The Netherlands 2005) and its legal framework is embedded in the Dutch system.

Organisational learning, interpretation and imitation are apparently contributing to the deregulation of the regulative pillar. In the Italian case, the law on the degree structure gets inspiration from the concept of comparability, providing its translation in the Italian context. For the Italian organisational actors comparability relies on "a clear description of the didactic offer, based on educational goals determined and defined with the contribution of the stakeholders; the adoption of a system of credits based on ECTS, (…) the implementation of the Diploma Supplement as compulsory" (Italy 2003: 1). On the other hand, the EU guidelines are present in drafting the legislation and "all the EC Directives have been transposed into the Italian legislation; moreover, by unilateral decision, since 1999 Italy has also been applying all EC general systems to non-EU professional qualifications held by non-EU citizens" (Italy 2005: 5) demonstrating that supranational directives impacted the deregulation of the recognition tools enlarging its application within the Bologna process.

In the Netherlands the legal framework conforms to the elements of the Bologna declaration: two main cycles degree structure, ECTS-credits and accreditation of quality assurance of programmes. The higher education system in the Netherlands is since 2002 based on a three-cycle degree system, consisting of Bachelor, Master and PhD (The Netherlands 2003).

And in Portugal, the law which regulates the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement establishes the regulatory principles of the instruments for the creation of the European

Higher Education Area. This law translates the supranational guidelines on the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement.

2.2 The normative pillar

The normative pillar often diffuses through network ties (Scott 2003). Our findings show strong correlation between this pillar and interpretation and organisational learning.

The normative pillar uses interpretation to diffuse. In the Italian (Italy 2003) and in the Dutch (Netherlands 2005) reports it seems that the interpretation of the European dimension includes implementation of joint degree programmes leading to joint degrees. In the Dutch report (The Netherlands 2005) it is clear that the implementation of such programmes impacts diversity policies linked to the teaching of languages. Although bi-lateral cooperation between the Netherlands and Germany is being developed, the conditions of openness of the degrees implies teaching in English, justifying the decision "Because of access of foreign students to programmes, and master programmes in particular, are offered in a widely spoken European language, mostly in English, instead of in Dutch" (The Netherlands 2005: 13).

Organisational learning can also be observed in the normative pillar of all the countries analysed. The Italian report states that the accreditation system for recognition purposes builds on inter-institutional relations among the institutions involved with accreditation and assessment activities:

> A system of accreditation for recognition purposes is in operation and is being improved. The system has been implemented by MIUR at the advice of the Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario (CNVSU). CampusOne programmes are certified by the Conference of Italian Rectors (CRUI). Programmes that decided to implement an ISO system are certified by Bodies accredited at SINCERT (Sistema Nazionale per l'Accreditamento degli Organismi di Certificazione e Ispezione) (Italy 2005: 4).

On the other hand, in the Dutch report (The Netherlands 2003) it is possible to observe that the development of descriptors for BA-MA degrees, used as reference points for quality assurance, are the outcomes of inter-institutional relations between the Netherlands and the Flemish community of Belgium. The Portuguese report (Portugal 2005) acknowledges, under the scope of the establishment of the accreditation system for academic purposes, the work in this field developed by professional associations of some of the regulated professions.

These processes act somehow as indicators of appropriateness. And in the case of the Portuguese report is seems clear that the role of professional associations is guiding the discussions on what is 'appropriate learning' for the labour market and 'appropriate learning' to exercise a profession.

The introduction of variations according to exogenous pressures is more difficult to distinguish. In the Dutch report (The Netherlands 2005) the reference made to codes of good practice for accreditation agreed among ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education)[1] members can be seen as a source of imitation for other all the countries' members. In Portugal there is strong influence of accreditation systems that focus on professional competences. For instance, "the [Association] of Engineers is currently engaged in the European project EUR-ACE that aims at defining common European structures for professional accreditation" (Portugal 2005: 3). The accreditation system implemented by the engineers' organisation is being imitated by other professional organisations.

As observed in the regulative pillar, the diffusion of the normative pillar also entails deregulation (translation, supranational guidelines and application of laws creating conditions for increasing competition).

The translation of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability) occurs in the Italian case when it is possible to observe that the principle of comparability allows references to (1) harmonisation, (2) academic recognition, (3) qualifications framework, (4) quality, and (5) international competitiveness (Italy 2003; Italy 2005).

The Dutch report (The Netherlands 2005) establishes a relationship between funding and joint degrees and the mobility of students. Somehow this initiative binds resources to the expectation of establishing joint degrees. In the case of Portugal, there is the perception that the implementation of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability) may be incompatible with maintaining the present binary system. However it is not foreseeable if there will attempts at protecting the binary system following a strategy similar to that used in the Netherlands. A law that was recently passed foresees different criteria for degree accreditation in universities and

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[1] The consortium is a project organisation established in Cordoba in November 2003. The ultimate aim of the consortium is the achievement of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among the participants before the end of 2007. The consortium involves 10 European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Flandres (Belgium) Norway, Poland, Spain and Switzerland).

polytechnics. This fact suggests that the establishment of the quality assessment system of higher education institutions is evolving towards an accreditation system. In Portugal there is a clear link between the reinforcement of quality assurance through the establishment of an accreditation system and the idea of promoting the international credibility of the reforms.

Apparently the translation of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability) in these countries entails paradigm shifts. Normative mechanisms have been activated to enforce the logic of appropriateness. That is to say that the national level fosters these shifts as changes of values embedded in institutional elements, while providing different meaning codes for cooperation, competition, teaching or learning.

The guiding principles of the EU or emanated from other supranational institutions are present in the normative pillar. The appropriate behaviour matches with the Lisbon Convention or with the ECTS philosophy. This is reported from Italy (Italy 2003), where academic recognition is embedded in the Lisbon Convention, being compulsory to present the applications for academic recognition with explicit reference to this document that Italy has ratified. "On the one side, individual applications for academic recognition have to clearly refer to the Lisbon Convention, and to include a complete documentation; on the other, Universities and higher Education Institutions have to express their evaluation within 90 (ninety) days running from the date on which the applications concerned were received" (Italy 2003: 1). In the case of ECTS it is recognised by the national level that university credits are "an essential element of the curricula" (Italy 2003: 2).

In the Netherlands the reports (The Netherlands 2003; The Netherlands 2005) show awareness about the wide scope of an accreditation system. In spite of clear recognition of this system's European dimension, the institutional agreements try to safeguard expectations related to student mobility and the recognition of qualifications. Hence, supranational guidelines are clearly shaping the normative pillar in the evolution of the accreditation system. In the Portuguese report the perceptions about the impact of supranational guidelines in the normative pillar are present not in the documents analysed, but rather on the proposal of the Ministry to evaluate the system of higher education and its quality assessment system based on the guidelines of OECD and ENQA. This initiative clearly demonstrates the awareness of the importance of the reform's international credibility (Portugal 2005).

In Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal it is possible to observe that translation of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability) and supranational guidelines prevails over the application of laws creating conditions for increasing competition. One possible explanation is the relationship that it is possible to establish between the application of laws promoting competition and the openness conditions. This connection tends to be critical as it may imply loss of independence from the national level's perspective. For instance, in the case of academic recognition, the Italian law anticipates situations where the responsibility remains "entrusted with State Administrations that have to operate taking into due account the current provisions on recognition to professional ends and for access to the civil service" (Italy 2003: 2).

On the contrary, in the Dutch case the coordination of funding and mobility policies shows that the government is prepared to allocate to non-EU students a scholarship on a competitive basis as "the budget which has been part of the block grant to institutions, especially the part which figured in the formula funding for the number of non-European students, will be transformed into a fund for scholarships mainly for selection of incoming non-EU students" (The Netherlands 2005: 8).

The Portuguese report makes references in connection to the lifelong learning policy area, based upon the idea that opening higher education to new publics will be a determining factor of competitiveness of the European economy.

2.3 The cultural-cognitive pillar

The cultural-cognitive pillar focusing on common beliefs and shared logics of action has been diffusing by interpretation more clearly than by organisational learning or even by imitation. The Italian report and the Dutch report state that the introduction of the credit system and its implementation at local level will be influenced by the negotiated meaning between national organisational actors and local organisational actors. The perception about different ways of describing educational programmes, including traditional lectures and practical training, together with the certification of other skills and experience of professional nature may vary among institutions but its usefulness largely depends on a system recognisable and comprehensible by all institutions and actors involved. Thus, the process of interpretation or the outcome of negotiated meaning will be crucial for the credit system as instrument for academic recognition.

Imitation is more clearly seen as an implementation mechanism in defining the BA-MA structure. There are references in the Dutch and the Portuguese reports. The reasons for their absence from the Italian report may result from its position as front-runner country. In the Dutch report the justification for mimetic processes relies on the need to assure international comparability. It was recognised necessary that an "international (European) committee is installed to advise the parties concerned on the situation and possible future steps" (The Netherlands 2005: 6). The rationale behind this initiative is to prevent "injustice to students where similar programmes in other countries are awarded with degrees that are of higher esteem" (The Netherlands 2005: 6). The same concern appears in the Portuguese report in what relates "to ensure that the environment of the home and the visiting institutions must be of comparable nature, or that adequate measures have been taken through institutional agreements to meet the needs of students in adapting to the new environment" (Portugal 2003: 3).

The impact of organisational learning in the cultural-cognitive pillar lies on the progressive autonomy of Italian Universities (Italy 2005) and on the relationship that it is possible to establish between professional accreditation and academic accreditation in the Portuguese situation (Portugal 2005). These facts could be the basis to develop culturally supported concepts and actions contributing to develop a framework of accepted beliefs among different institutions placed at national level.

Analysing the impact of deregulation mechanisms within the cultural-cognitive pillar, translations of the Bologna principles (e.g. transparency, legibility and comparability) are evident in designing the national qualifications framework and the setting of up of joint programmes and joint degrees. The Dutch report (The Netherlands 2005) refers to the latter element, being possible to find in the future its impacts on the regulative pillar. On the other hand, the concept of professional recognition is embedded in all the EC Directives that have been "transposed into the Italian legislation; moreover, by unilateral decision, since 1999 Italy has also been applying all EC general systems to non-EU professional qualifications held by non-EU citizens" (Italy 2005: 5), being likely that these guidelines will impact the preferences of a wide range of actors at national level. Moreover, it is also possible to note that the functional discourse on accreditation and quality assurance relies on the need to foster the European dimension of these processes. Therefore, the institutional arrangements in the Netherlands to establish a supranational body, or the external evaluation process implemented in Portugal, show clearly that some supranational orientation is present. The application of laws creating

conditions for increasing competition may have some impact on the establishment of inter-institutional relations in setting up the offer of joint programmes and joint degrees. This is something that so far is not evident.

Concluding comments

There are functional and normative imperatives that can be seen as a hallmark for institutional pillars. What has been presented here as features of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars show that functional imperatives are linked to some Lisbon strategy policy areas, such as attractiveness and funding, and that normative imperatives associated to the convergence of higher education structures are apparently more connected to quality and accreditation and also linked to Lisbon strategy in a more subtle way. From the perspective of European institutional structures probably the Bologna stocktaking process is, then, contributing to bridge Bologna and the Lisbon strategy.

Additionally, the relationships between normative imperatives and the normative pillar somehow show how political institutions "not only respond to their environments but create those environments at the same time" (March and Olsen 1989: 162) putting emphasis on policy preferences formation. Apparently, the empirical data corroborates the idea that "political preferences are molded though political experiences, or political institutions" (*ibid*.). The policy areas emerging within the Bologna process focusing on quality, autonomy and internationalisation originate from the other policy areas usually connected to the Lisbon strategy.

The answer to the question on how does the national level mediate or filter the European level within the Bologna process finds explanation on deinstitutionalisation and deregulation processes.

Our findings show that there are regulative, normative and mimetic pressures leading to the institutionalisation of European Higher Education Area with strong correlations with the deinstitutionalisation of the institutional pillars. That is to say that institutional pillars are evolving towards deinstitutionalisation. This process of institutional change is stemming from the increasing importance of normative elements and cultural-cognitive elements of institutional systems, rather than from regulative elements. This assumption underlines the role of institutions seen as the environment of organisations at developing and transmitting the norms that may induce shift towards the logic of appropriateness.

On the other hand, the institutional pillars have been diffusing through deregulation. This process originates from organisational learning, interpretation and imitation. Deregulation operated by the national level highlights the difficulty that institutional structures and organisational actors at European level have in exerting coercive and regulatory control over the national level in the field of education.

Deinstitutionalisation and deregulation will, then, influence organisations. These processes of institutional change can be seen as feedback loop processes that are affecting the implementation of the Bologna process. The impact it has for the European level is something that will be worthwhile to follow, together with the effects it may have for the local level, since the role of the national level is not producing stability, uniformity and order, but it is rather contributing to the co-evolution of the environment of organisations.

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