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CHANGING GOVERNANCE IN UNIVERSITIES

ITALIAN HIGHER
EDUCATION IN
COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVE

GILIBERTO CAPANO,
MARINO REGINI,
& MATTEO TURRI



Palgrave Studies in Global Higher
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Changing Governance in Universities

Italian Higher Education
in Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

All of the higher education (HE) system reforms implemented in western countries over the last three decades have had one fundamentally important aim, namely that of changing the existing institutional and system governance arrangements (Lazzaletti and Tavoletti 2006; Cheps 2006; Maassen and Olsen 2007; Trakman 2008; Paradeise et al. 2009; Huisman 2009; Capano 2011; Shattock 2014; Dobbins and Knill 2014). The logic underlying such measures has remained substantially the same in each case, although the instruments adopted to achieve the aforesaid aim have differed, depending on the characteristics of the various systems and the nature of their historical heritage.

As far as system governance is concerned, generally speaking, there has been a significant difference between the English-speaking world and continental Europe.

In fact, universities in the former countries enjoy considerable operational freedom and independence as far as their internal institutional and organizational arrangements are concerned. Their governments have aimed to implement national policies which, through strong regulatory measures and a substantially interventional approach, have significantly conditioned the behaviour of universities which until then had enjoyed ample room for manoeuvre. In the UK, Australia and New Zealand, for example, governments have dramatically reorganized the system governance through the creation of agencies entrusted with the task of evaluating

teaching and research, and through the adoption of a strong stance pursuant to which universities are called upon to constantly meet the requirements of the socio-economic system. America's public universities have been required to compete for financial funding (Geiger 2004) and to further verticalize their institutional governance arrangements (McLendon 2003a, 2003b; Leslie and Novak 2003; El-Khawas 2005; Schulze-Cleven 2015). In other words, in the English-speaking world, universities' traditional autonomy has been restricted through the implementation of policies designed to increase competition among the universities for both public and private funding.

In continental Europe, there has also been significant government intervention, although this has come about through the adoption of somewhat different strategies to those witnessed in the English-speaking world. In fact, the governments of Continental Europe have attempted to gradually abandon the centralized model, based on State control of all aspects of the universities' lives, and have chosen to grant greater autonomy to the universities. This approach has been accompanied by national strategies based on the concept of 'steering at a distance' (Neave and Van Vught 1991), and thus no longer centred on invasive micro-regulations, but on light regulation, target and benchmark setting, contracts and continuous assessment.

From the point of view of the system governance, in other words, what has been witnessed is the 'hybridization' of various different historical models. In the English-speaking countries, governments have tried to coordinate universities so as to achieve systemic targets; in Continental Europe, on the other hand, governments have loosened the centralist grip on their respective universities and have developed policies granting the universities varying degrees of autonomy. The one thing that both groups of countries share is that governments have played, and continue to play, an active part in the coordination of the university system, converging towards the steering at a distance approach, albeit from diametrically opposed positions.

This reorganization of the system governance has been accompanied by the reform of institutional governance through gradual changes to the distribution of power and to roles within the universities. The competition/assessment mix and the demand for institutional accountability which have characterized all national policies imply that the universities are capable of providing a rapid, homogeneous response guided by strategic rationality. In other words, the universities have been systemically pressured into

transforming themselves into corporate actors. This requirement has led to a process of institutional centralization characterized by the strengthening of the monocratic posts (deans, department heads and rectors) and of the Boards of Governors (BoG) within universities; by the weakening of collegial bodies and of the power of academic groups; by the introduction of instruments of governance of a managerial type; and by the gradual strengthening of the role played by external stakeholders.

In the English-speaking countries, where universities are basically free to establish their own internal governance system, this transformation of institutional governance has been the result of external pressure and of governmental policies regarding new systemic regulation; in Continental Europe, on the other hand, where universities are governed by national law, the reform of institutional governance has been designed through legislation. The legislative reform of institutional governance in such countries began in the Netherlands and Sweden in 1997, which were followed by Austria (2002), Denmark (2003), Germany (2003–2006), France (2007), Portugal (2007), Finland (2010) and Italy (2010). The features that these reforms share, in fact, consist in the attempt to strengthen the institutional leadership of the universities, together with the verticalization of all decision-making processes. In some cases (the Netherlands and Denmark), the reforms have been genuinely radical, with the introduction of the appointment system for all monocratic posts. In other cases (Germany and France), there has been a mix of strategies (rectors appointed by the BoG or the Senate, while all other monocratic posts are assigned following an election).

This overall and generally homogeneous, in comparative terms, reinforcement of the universities' institutional governance has been accompanied by a thorough reorganization process within the universities. The English-speaking countries have moved towards strengthening those intermediate units (Faculties/Schools/Colleges) that are considered to be genuine governing structures of the universities themselves, and an executive arm of the universities' governing bodies that is entrusted with the routine management of power within each university. In Continental European countries, this tendency has been less marked, with the historical role of intermediate structures – the Faculties – being preserved (with the exception of Italy after 2010), as they continue to coordinate the interests of the various academic subjects and of the basic organizational units. In these cases, however, the persistence of the traditional internal organization has been counterbalanced, under law, by the strengthening

of the rector's and of the BoG's roles with regard to the process of recruiting and promoting academic staff (Capano and Regini 2014).

Thus the reform of institutional governance has been, and is, a global phenomenon that governments have consciously pursued, in the knowledge that the steering at a distance approach, with all its methods of evaluation and assessment, cannot work if the universities are not institutionally equipped to respond in a coherent manner. For universities to be responsible, that is capable of reacting positively to external challenges and to the demands of society, they have needed, and still need, to relinquish the self-referential conception of academic self-government (which translates into institutional policies of a distributional type). In order to compete, universities need to be able to make decisions in a selective manner, and in order to do this they have to change the way they are governed. The choices made in the western HE systems have all been based on this consideration. The reforms of institutional governance have been accompanied by national policies whereby universities have had to start making clear choices in order to create their own space; that is, in order to access public funding, and in some cases private funding, provided for certain specific purposes (improvements to teaching, better quality research and an attention to the socio-economic effects of their actions).

Within this general framework, Italy is a latecomer to a scenario where attempts at university reform have been characterized by considerable difficulties and have been blighted by the poor quality of policy design which has compromised their ability to achieve the desired results. Italy may be considered a latecomer since, until very recently, the Italian HE system had represented the classic case of a traditional Continental European model characterized by a centralized decision-making process controlled by the Ministry, by the limited autonomy of the country's universities, by the significant power of academic oligarchies and by the limited power of the institutional authorities (rectors and principals) whose role was mainly that of mediating between different academic subject areas. Some of these features were modified by the reform of the system governance adopted between the late 1980s and early 1990s, and also by a process of progressive autonomy witnessed since then. However, this autonomy was not accompanied by any reform of the governance arrangements within the universities themselves, or by other features of the European models of system governance (that is competition and, above all, assessment and accountability). This led to a situation defined in the public debate as 'autonomy without responsibility', which gave rise

to several distortions that the media were quick to pick up on during the early 2000s, thus feeding governments' diffidence towards the academic world. This formed the backdrop to the attempts made to reform institutional governance during that initial decade of the new millennium, which were to culminate, in 2010, in a reform that embodied the lack of trust in the academic world, and transformed this mistrust into a whole series of restrictions on the universities' autonomy.

Following approval of this reform, debates about, and studies of, university governance from a comparative perspective have flourished in Italy as well (Barone et al. 2010; Capano 2011; Turri 2011; Cassone and Sacconi 2013; Regini 2015a; Capano and Regini 2015). However, the political attention of decision-makers and the analytical attention of scholars have focused almost exclusively on the design of national reform strategies, that is, on national regulations or on university statutes. Very few studies, on the other hand, have tried to investigate the changes made to universities' actual governance modes and arrangements, that is, the ways in which governance and decision-making processes work in practice. This is because both policy-makers and several scholars tend to assume that a general policy strategy, or a national law reforming universities' institutional governance, directly determine the outcomes. But national reforms are interpreted, elaborated and implemented by the universities' internal actors – with their power resources, culture, learning abilities – which act as 'filters' vis-à-vis the planned reforms. It is only when the universities actually implement the reforms that any assessment may be made of the degree to which the objectives have been achieved, and the manner in which this has been possible, and of the variability of those solutions actually adopted.

For this reason, in 2013, we decided to conduct a survey of the ways in which Italian universities had implemented the 2010 law reforming institutional governance. In order to analyse the implementation of this reform and to understand how the new governance arrangements work in practice, we opted for an online questionnaire sent to all 66 Italian state universities, followed by in-depth case studies of 12 such universities.¹

In order to understand to what degree these actual workings of the new institutional governance arrangements, and the problems accompanying them, are specific to the Italian case, or are similar to those of other European HE systems, we have decided to conduct the same type of detailed case study in 15 universities in the other major Western European countries.² These cases are quite obviously a non-representative sample of the different HE systems. However, we conceived our study as an exploratory

one only, and as such it does not aim to systematically test relations between an independent variable (the national governance reforms) and a dependent variable (the specific ways in which the universities' governance actually works). All we wanted to understand is how some universities in each country have internally reorganized, that is, to what extent and in which ways the national reforms have forced them to question the established ways of dealing with governance issues.³

These exploratory, non-systematic case studies have provided us with a wealth of information and data which will be used to illustrate our arguments here. However, in order to go beyond this mere descriptive framework, we realized that two things are needed to be done, representing the actual point of departure of and the common thread running through the present volume.

On the one hand, in order to understand how universities' governance arrangements work in different countries, some historical context is required. The manner in which the various different HE systems have developed, the timescale and characteristics of the reforms affecting those systems, the problems that had been resolved, or not, by previous reforms, all emerge as vitally important explanatory factors. As far as Italy's HE system is concerned, therefore, Part II of this volume offers a historical reconstruction of its development, with a focus on certain critical junctures thereof. The aim is thus not only to highlight the major problems characterizing each phase but above all to establish when and how the issues of governance, in the broad sense of the term, emerged and were dealt with; such issues as funding, autonomy, assessment, institutional governance and the universities' internal organization.

On the other hand, in order to interpret our empirical findings concerning the outcomes of university governance reforms both in Italy and in other European countries, we thought it is necessary to develop a more theoretical analysis capable of accounting for what are often deemed the successes or failures of the reforms themselves while the reasons for one or the other remain unclear. To do so, Part I of the volume examines the potential of the concept of 'unintended consequences' in analysing the unforeseen and partly unforeseeable – insofar as they are the consequences of cognitive errors or value-driven choices of the actors concerned – effects of the reforms of university governance in Europe. We then illustrate a policy design typology which will enable us to understand the substantial failure of university reforms in Italy in terms of the limited political and technical capacity of this country's public policy-making system.

Finally, Part III will be examining the evolution of the governance of Italy's HE system in greater detail, with the aid of the aforementioned theoretical instruments and the historical reconstruction of events.

NOTES

1. These universities have been chosen on the basis of location and size. In Northern Italy, we studied the Universities of Turin, Milan Bicocca, Insubria and Venice Cà Foscari; in Central Italy, the University of Florence, Rome III University, Marche Polytechnic and Pisa's Scuola Normale Superiore; in Southern Italy, the Universities of Catania, Chieti, Salento and Naples (Napoli Orientale).
2. In the UK: University College London (UCL), the University of Manchester, the University of Leicester; in Germany: the Universities of Heidelberg, Freiburg and Lüneburg (Leuphana); in France: the Universities of Paris-Sud, Strasbourg and Tours (uncompleted study); in Spain: the Universities of Barcelona (UB), Valencia and Zaragoza; in the Netherlands: the Universities of Amsterdam (UvA), Leiden and Maastricht.
3. The empirical studies, in Italy as well as in the other European countries, have been conducted by two UNIRES (Italian Centre for Research on Universities and HE Systems) research teams, whose members we wish to thank. UNIRES is an inter-university research centre established by the universities of Milano, Bologna, Firenze and Pavia, together with the Fondazione CRUI (Conference of Italian University Rectors). Recently, the universities of Torino and LIUC (Università Carlo Cattaneo), as well as the Scuola Normale Superiore, have joined it. Members of the scientific council are Giliberto Capano (director), Marino Regini (president), Gabriele Ballarino, Alessandro Cavalli, Giancarlo Gasperoni, Roberto Moscati, Francesco Ramella, Gianfranco Rebora, Michele Rostan, Emanuela Stefani, Carlo Trigilia and Matteo Turri.

The UNIRES research team dealing with the Italian case, coordinated by Giliberto Capano and Marino Regini, included Matteo Turri, Michele Rostan, Emanuela Stefani, Monia Anzivino, Nicole Casanova, Giorgio Mosconi and Elena Breno. As to the case studies of the 15 universities in the UK, Germany, France, Spain and the Netherlands, they were carried out by Matteo Turri, Emanuela Stefani, Maria Antonietta Ciclista, Sabrina Colombo, Valentina Goglio, Mattia Cattaneo, Davide Donina, Ilaria Genuessi, Michele Meoli and Flavio Porta, under the supervision of Giliberto Capano and Marino Regini. Both studies have been generously funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research. The results have been published in Italian (Regini [2015a](#); Capano and Regini [2015](#)).

The Theoretical Framework

The Italian higher education (HE) system is of particular interest not only in empirical terms but also from a theoretical viewpoint, due to two specific characteristics it displays.

On the one hand, it is paradigmatic of the problems encountered in reforming university governance throughout Europe. A careful, detailed examination of the changes that have affected the Italian system over the last 70 years, and in particular in the last 30 years, thus also throws light on the reforms implemented in other European countries and on their respective outcomes. In other words, it helps us understand the expected effects, and the unintended consequences, of such reforms.

As far as these unintended consequences are concerned, they may be subdivided into three categories: unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences resulting from the fact that those who designed the reforms had obvious cognitive limitations; unforeseen consequences due to an ‘ideological’ subscription to the prevailing model (in the case in hand, the ‘New Public Management’ model), namely to a value-driven approach rather than a rational one; and finally, the unforeseen, but largely foreseeable, consequences of poor policy design (such as mistakes deriving from the nature of the policy process, or decisions resulting from a political compromise), or of flaws in policy implementation.

As we shall see in [Chap. 2](#), the first two categories are commonly to be found in all processes of HE reform conducted in the various European nations. However, an analysis of the Italian case will enable us to get a better picture, and conduct an in-depth analysis, of the mechanisms resulting in these unintended consequences. The third category, on the other hand, is

particularly common in Italy, and thus it is from this point of view that the Italian case can contribute most to the debate about those conditions determining the success or failure of HE reforms.

In fact, while on the one hand the Italian HE system is paradigmatic of HE governance reform, on the other hand it represents an extreme, anomalous case of persistent difficulty in finding suitable solutions to the unsatisfactory workings of governance. The outcomes of the reforms do not appear to have met expectations, either during the phases in which Italy dealt with the question as a timorous and rather reticent latecomer, guided exclusively by an isomorphic logic or during those (few) periods in which it dealt with the question in an independent, apparently informed manner, or indeed found itself as a forerunner of reform in Europe. As we shall see in [Chap. 3](#), this anomaly is the result of the specific policy-making and policy implementation modes of this country.

Why, in fact, have reforms of HE achieved such differing degrees of success in different countries? The answers to this question obviously depend on the definition of success and failure, and thus on the dimensions of policy that can be said to have failed or succeeded. According to McConnell ([2010a](#), [2010b](#)), in fact, policies have three dimensions of importance for evaluation purposes: the processual, political and programmatic dimensions. The processual dimension refers to the dynamics of governments' dealing with challenges such as the pursuit of their own goals and the preservation of their favoured policy instruments, the maintenance of policy legitimacy, the building of a sustainable coalition and the capacity to be innovative. The political dimension refers to the problem of enhancing the electoral prospects and reputation of political leaders, and of easily controlling the policy agenda and governmental activities. The programmatic dimension refers directly to the capacity to achieve the expected objectives, and thus to produce the desired outcomes.

From this perspective, therefore, the assessment of policy success/failure should focus on specific dimensions which are not necessarily in keeping with one another. Process success (governmental capacity to control policy making) is not necessarily a bearer of programmatic success (governmental capacity to effectively implement planned policy and thus to produce the expected outcome), since the adopted policy instruments may be the wrong choice for the problems in question; political success (governmental capacity to be electorally rewarded) is not directly linked to process/programmatic success, since it may depend on other factors.

And there is no direct link between bad/failing policy implementation and punishment of political rulers, since this depends not only on the specific political contingency but also on the public relevance attributed to the policy at stake: for example, generally speaking, public opinion is more sensitive to fiscal or labour policy than to HE policy.

At the same time, the political, processual and programmatic dimensions of policy are to a degree interconnected at all stages of the policy-making process. This is because governments continuously try to redesign policies so that they better fit their own goals. Thus the three types of policy success can be considered mutually dependent and influencing one another, when the policy process is seen from a governmental point of view.

From our perspective, however, the programmatic dimension is the most important of the three: over the last 30 years, governments have continuously attempted to change the governance modes and ways of working of their HE systems. Therefore, the question of their effectiveness in achieving the declared goals and desired outcomes should be taken into the highest consideration when assessing the real effects that attempts at policy change have had.

In [Chaps. 2](#) and [3](#), we develop a theoretically based analysis to account for what are often deemed the successes or failures of the reforms. Firstly ([Chap. 2](#)), we deal with the problems encountered during implementation of HE governance reforms throughout Europe, which we interpret in the light of the concept of unintended consequences, rather than, as is normal practice, as a result of the resistance to reform. Secondly ([Chap. 3](#)), we shall be examining governments' lack of political and technical capacity, which in the Italian case makes it particularly difficult to identify effective solutions.

The Unintended Consequences of University Governance Reforms

1 FROM THE ‘DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION’ TO THE ‘CORPORATE ENTERPRISE MODEL’: THE ORIGINS OF UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE REFORMS IN EUROPE

In Continental Europe, university governance has traditionally been of the oligarchic variety. Within the legislative framework established by the State, academic communities negotiated the material and symbolic resources available, in universities which up until the 1960s were entrusted with the task of forming a country’s intellectual and professional elites.

It is widely acknowledged that in the more economically advanced countries, these traditional, elitist universities began to be transformed, in the 1960s and 1970s, into ‘mass universities’ (Trow 1974). In Europe, this process was supported by an egalitarian ideology of access to higher education (HE) for everyone. In the European countries north of the Alps, this impulse was mainly perceived as a demand for broader access to the upper sections of the job market: thus the HE system’s response was above all to create a vocational channel that prepared students for the technical occupations, alongside the traditional academic channel for those social classes that could afford to opt for higher-status professions. In the UK, this role was entrusted to the country’s Polytechnics which developed during the 1960s in particular. In France, it was played by the *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie* (IUTs), which were established

within the country's university system in 1966. In various other Continental European countries on the other hand, an official 'binary' HE system was favoured: in the 1970s, Germany established its *Fachhochschulen* or 'universities of applied science', which have their equivalents in the *Hogescholen* in Holland and Belgium, and which were subsequently introduced in Austria and Switzerland as well (Teichler 1988; Scott 1995; Kyvik 2009; Regini 2011). In Italy, however (as in other Southern European countries), where HE has always been perceived more as a status symbol than as an effective means of formation of human capital to be deployed in the labour market, just one channel of access to HE was preserved at the price of lowering overall standards.

At individual university level, rather than at the systemic level, the response was closer to that seen in Northern European countries. Throughout Europe, the previous, oligarchic governance of the universities was substantially 'democratized', with access to decision-making bodies now offered to representatives of academic staff of all levels, to technical-administrative staff and to students (De Boer and Stensaker 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s, in the face of further expansion of HE systems, and of the dominance of neo-liberal ideology that saw them as part of a costly welfare state that needed to be reduced in size and rendered functional to economic development, the first strong criticisms began to emerge of that kind of governance, both of the system as a whole and of the individual universities. At the systemic level, there was a call for greater efficiency, accountability, competition and openness to the needs of the economy. As regards the individual universities, there were calls for an end to the self-government of the academic community, which was considered to be excessively self-referential, collusive and incapable of reacting promptly to external challenges, and for a more managerial form of administration. This thus led to a process, subsequently backed strongly by the European Commission (2006), often described as the gradual establishment of a 'corporate model' of university governance (Stensaker and Vabo 2013).

Such demands were initially greeted more favourably by the governments and the political elites of the UK, and then of the Netherlands, than those of other European countries. In the UK's case, one reason for this was that they were part of the new neo-liberal, anti-corporatist vision dominating that country. In the public sector in particular, the prevailing precepts were those of 'New Public Management' (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011): these considered the universities to be corporate actors called upon to operate in quasi-markets in accordance with the principles of efficiency,

competition and accountability. A series of guideline documents (from the 1985 Jarratt Report to the 2003 Lambert Report) gradually resulted in the imposition of this vision.

In the Netherlands, such demands were listened to because they became part of the political reaction to the economic deadlock – attributed to the excessive ‘consociativism’ held responsible for the lack of innovation – that the country found itself embroiled in during the 1980s, and because the vocational HE channel with its governance system based on the corporate model was very popular and highly esteemed. As in other Continental European countries, and unlike in the UK, the reform of university governance in the Netherlands required, however, an organic, detailed law applicable to all universities. Following lengthy debate (Maassen 2000), this law was promulgated in 1997, and the Dutch case became so paradigmatic of the change in direction that it was later to have repercussions – albeit to a lesser, often contradictory degree – on university systems throughout Continental Europe. As with the flexi-curity reforms implemented in the labour market field (Visser and Hemerjick 1997), in the field of HE the Dutch 1997 law preceded a series of other reforms of the governance of Europe’s universities and became a benchmark against which the other national reforms are compared, despite its remaining the most radical of them all.

In the following sections, we are going to briefly discuss the objectives of the reforms of institutional governance in the principal European countries, before focusing on the emergence of unintended consequences and offering an analysis of their nature and causes.

2 FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE CORPORATE ENTERPRISE MODEL: THE OBJECTIVES OF INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE REFORMS IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

The so-called marketization of higher education has often been identified as an important driver of change in university governance over the last 30 years (Etzkowitz et al. 2000; Kerr 2001; Geiger 2004; Teixeira et al. 2004). Although the term ‘marketization’ may be based on an inadequate understanding of what markets are and how they can operate in the public sector (Regini 2011; Musselin 2010; Schulze-Cleven 2015), this trend has to some extent contributed towards replacing the notion of the university as a representative democracy with the idea of more corporate governing