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Interplay between Politics and Institution in Higher Education Reform

Saber Khelifi*

University of Manouba, TUNISIA

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Abstract: The advent of the new economy brought university reforms to the limelight, and higher education research concentrated on the study of interactions of multi-level, multi-actor policy reforms, to the detriment of studying policy implementation. The ebbing of implementation analysis in the mid-1980s has probably put researchers off following up policies to the point of delivery, resulting in what critics dubbed a 'missing link'. Policymakers more pronounced need to evaluate the impact of the policies they adopt, inter alia, has led to a renewed interest in bottom-up implementation in other public policy fields, but not as much in higher education research. The article builds on a Network Governance-informed approach for studying policy reform in higher education and adapts it to study of policy implementation with a focus on transition systems. Witte's actor-centered new institutional framework is taken as a springboard, and some of its underlying assumptions are reviewed for that purpose, adding insights from public administration literature (NPM) and Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy (SLBy). Ultimately, it proposes a politics-institutions framework to account for the institutional change entailed to the reforms.

Keywords: *Politics, higher education, reform.*

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Introduction

The implementation approach is based on a number of theoretical assumptions among which top-down governance model is probably the most central. Ironically, however, it was also the very cause for the ebbing of its heyday in the decade of 1975-1985 (Gornitzka, Kyvik & Stensaker, 2005, 2005; Sabatier, 2005) in favor of 'flatter' approaches assuming multi-actor governance models such as the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), actor-centered institutionalism (Scharpf, 1997) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991). In the late 2000s, this phase in higher education research, too, started to show signs of letup as policy process theories seemed themselves so much taken up with policy interactions, documents and initiatives that critics began to refer to a "missing link" whereby empirical research that "follows policies through the implementation process" remained, by and large, wanting (Gornitzka et al., 2005, p. 36). Teichler (2011, p. 12) echoed the same concern when he complained about the "deficient information base" that came out of a decade of Bologna reforms in Europe, perceiving the rather technical stocktaking reports as "much politicized" despite their a-political veneer.

The validity of reviving implementation analysis in higher education research is promised on more than the theoretical concern about the missing link. The new economy highlighted the economic worth of the traditional missions of higher education and changed them in the process. Applied research turned into a driver of the "triple helix" of innovation systems (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2009), and teaching was redirected to a focus on employability relevance. This entailed the need to follow up policies at the shop floor so that taxpayers could ascertain 'return on their investment' (Gornitzka et al., 2005), thereby leading to the entrenchment of a new awareness where public policy "is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators [but as] actually made in the crowded offices in the daily encounters of street-level workers" (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). Theoretically, the renewed appeal that Lipsky's work on street-level bureaucracy (SLBy) has had among policy researchers in other fields (Hoyle, 2014; Brodtkin, 2012; Zedekia, 2017) has not had a matching echo in higher education research.¹ Re-thinking the implementation approach in higher education has thus begun to rise. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) first refocused interest in the local plane with their "glonocal agency heuristics" and Veiga (2012) offered a more straightforward 'vindication' of the implementation approach's much-criticized "stages heuristics" in her study of the implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

*Correspondence:

Saber Khelifi, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Manouba, Tunisia. ✉ saberkhelifi11@gmail.com



The current article revisits another aspect of implementation analysis, namely, the top-down governance, by tackling reform in transition polities. There the culture of top-down governance is so established that some of its aspects will likely "outlive" the formal political reforms. The main questions addressed are: How do top-level actors (politics) interact with the informal institutions/culture at the frontline level² to produce institutional change in transition polities? How far can political actors carry through reform at a time of changing culture at the shop floor? Will the transition status augur smooth and intact translation of policies by the frontline actors who are, after all, technical agencies? Or, will frontline actors, intentionally or unintentionally, circumvent the translation of policies adopted at the top? If so, what tools are on offer for such actors to affect such policies?

To do so, we must go beyond policy change (politics) as suggested, for instance, by Witte (2006), and grapple instead with institutional change (politics and culture), based on the typical implementation assumption that focus on top-level policy change can be cursory. In Neave's (1988) terms, we go beyond the *pays politique* of policy-level change to investigate the actual implementation at the *pays reel* (Faber & Westerheijden, 2011, p. 11). Since "policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts" (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992, p. 22), the work of individual actors on the frontline becomes "intricately political" as they shape the final outcome of change (Zedekia, 2017). Two intricately intertwined features pertaining to frontline actors are likely to impede reform policies from trickling down 'intact' and will be addressed in this article: the nature of the academic profession and the use of discretion.

We take Witte's (2006) multi-actor framework of policy change – designed to study policy change in established European democracies – as a springboard. After (1) presenting the framework, (2) it is put into a critical review, and (3) the actor-institution duality is adapted into a politics-institutions framework based on insights from NPM and SLBy literature. (4) Ultimately possible empirical applications of the new framework are presented.

Witte's Model of Policy Change

Witte's (2006) adaptation of North's (1990) model of institutional change to study higher education policy change – in England, France, Germany and the Netherlands – typifies modern analytical frameworks in the field as it takes on major developments in new institutional research. Its stress on the dual aspect of institutions (formal/legal and informal/cultural) is championed by historical institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990; Christensen, 2011; Kauko, 2013). It also takes cognizance of the new governance theories and their emphasis on the multi-actor, multi-level governance model (Scharpf, 1997; Mayntz, 1993) as characterizing higher education policy making instead of the classical and supposedly obsolete top-down, command-and-control model premised by implementation analysis (Eggins, 2014). It is, therefore, an interesting point of departure.

In keeping with mainstream new institutionalist perspectives, Witte's framework forks into an institutional side and an actor's side. It assumes institutional change to result from a two-way interaction: one within institutions (formal and informal) and the other between institutions and actors (Witte, 2006). On the one hand, formal rules, regulations and laws are a "crystallization" (Witte 2006, p. 53) of the cultural norms, routines and traditions of a given higher education system. They structure the behavior of individuals, one generation after the other, thereby reinforcing a certain informal institutional set-up (*i.e.* higher education culture). As to the (non-)state actors, they both reinforce and change informal institutions through law making which can either maintain or, otherwise, subvert the continuity of the established culture. In turn, actors are themselves affected by institutions (formal and informal) which constrain/enable their "capabilities", though shaping their leeway of action, their "perceptions/mental maps" and also drawing the repertoire of their policy "preferences" (Witte 2006).

While essentially inspired by North's (1990) economic model of institutional change, Witte's framework (2006) added a number of key assumptions on either side of actors/structure and institutions/culture to call it into the service of higher education policy research. They pertain to the *type* of change (gradual/radical); *the characteristics* of the actors involved in the policy making (state and non-state), as well as, an original operationalization of the vague concept of *institutions*. As regards the type of institutional change, and unlike North's (1990) core assumption about institutional change being mainly gradual³, Witte assumes the possibility of radical institutional change if a new and sturdy institutional set-up is made available. She perceives Bologna process reforms to be one⁴ as they can serve to shatter the existing informal institutions. Political actors dissatisfied (in their mental models, perceptions) with the anomalies of the current institutional set-up may find the new model that Bologna provides an attractive alternative to espouse, a process referred to as representational re-description (Denzau & North, 1994). In practice, this will be done through updating existing formal institutions to crystallize the new beliefs into a formal and regulatory shape.

The core assumption underlying the actors' side of the framework champions the network governance⁵ (NG) model (Witte, 2006, pp. 28-29). This contradicts with the classical Weberian top-down one, which underlay the implementation approach in the 1980s before its ebbing away later. In NG narrative state agencies' monopoly of policy making has been questioned by the involvement of non-state actors (faculty/students unions, professionals' organizations, etc.) which now assume key roles in the formulation and implementation of the policies. In the NG framework, the political potency of non-state actors plays out in the non-state actors negotiating at almost equal footing with the state actor (as depicted by the circular interaction in the middle of the framework below, Figure 1). This assumption translates methodologically into identifying main (non-)state actors and spelling out their

characteristics (mental maps, capabilities and preferences), since they are key to drawing the full picture of actors' attitudes and arguments in the policy deliberation and the potential conflict of interests/arguments entailed (Witte, 2006).

As regards the institutional side, the framework breaks down the intrinsically elusive and rather "vague" concept of institution or "institutional fabric" (p. 52) into a more specific and traceable dimensions (such as curricular governance, institutional type, funding, access, etc.) each of which will reflect the formal (law) and informal (cultural) reform. Figure 1 visualizes Witte's framework.

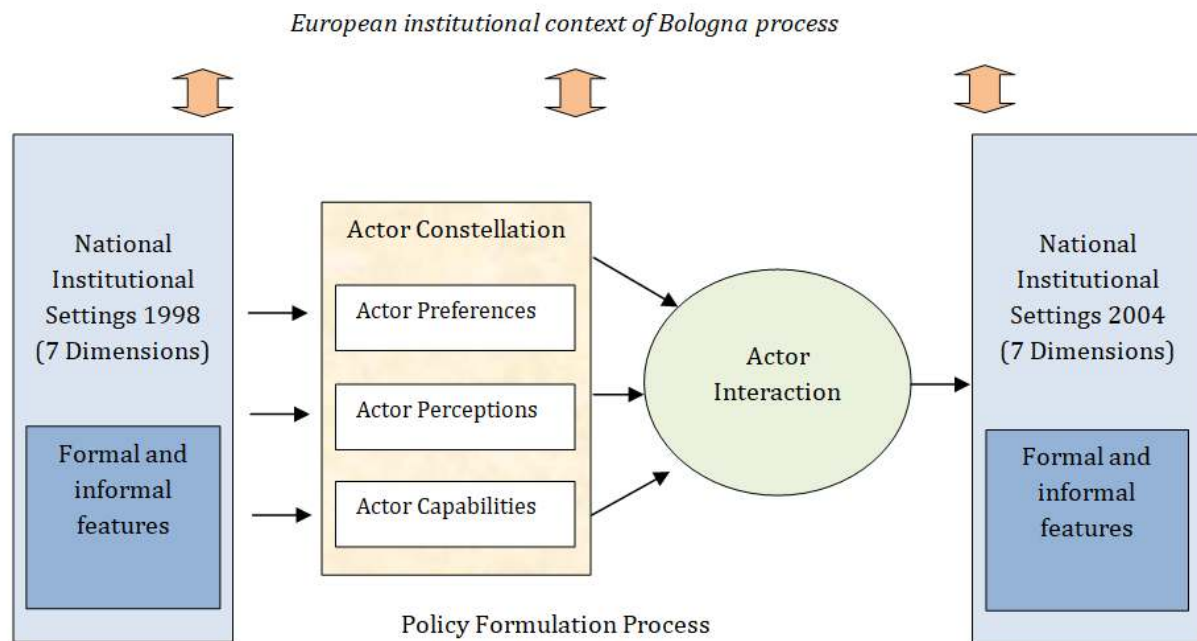


Figure 1: Witte's Theoretical Framework (Witte, 2006, p. 93)

Witte's Framework: A Critical Review

To adapt Witte's model (mainly focused on politics) to the study of institutional change (politics and institutions) in transition systems, two underlying assumptions must be revisited: The political potential of non-state organizational actors and the professional/discretionary potential of individual actors at the shop floor.

The Political Potential of Non-state Actors Revisited: A Public Administration Perspective

Mainstream public administration research provides a different narrative on non-state actors' participation in the formulation of public policies than the network governance narrative. There, recent developments in governance are perceived as mainly ornamental rather than structural. They are seen as a form of new public management (NPM), or "soft governance" (Schafer, 2006, p. 71), in which the state runs the public sector through the use of private-sector accountability tools such as reporting, auditing, score-cards and other forms of performance measurement to ensure apt implementation of its policies (Veiga & Amaral, 2009). These tools enable states to gain tighter controls based on devolution, selective freedoms that increase the entrepreneurship of agents along pre-determined lines, combined with the *specification of output* and the use of *accountability* and *audit systems* to sustain external control (Marginson, 2009, p. 4 emphasis added). Hence, NPM marks a shift from classical command-and-control styles of governance to "steering from a distance" whereby the state "holds the ring ... opens it to new players and defines the content of the relationships and responsibilities among these new players" (Paradeise, Reale, Goastellec, & Bleiklie, 2009, p. 237). In other words, the network of non-state actors invited to the realm of policy formulation is seen as a state-controlled retooling of traditional ways of governance designed to recast the roles of the players in the public arena, rather than a sign of revitalized democracy or a "hollowed out" state (Ferlie, Musselin & Andresani, 2009, p. 9).

The NPM hypothesis can be confirmed empirically by the state's continued upper hand in orienting public policies in higher education. Neave's (1988) point about "[higher] education being less part of social policy but increasingly a subsector of economic policy" (p. 274) was already indicative of many states' agenda of turning higher education potential at the disposal of the economic sector, through vocationalization and focus on applied research. A point confirmed by the recommendations of the Rapport Attali (1996) in France and the Dearing Report (1997) in England. The Bologna Declaration, as inter-governmental agreement, echoed such an agenda through its call for the employability of first-cycle degrees, enhancing quality of research, the inclusion of the doctoral level and linking EHEA

with the EU's European Research Area (ERA) in 2003 (Berlin Communiqué 2003), which all serve the establishment of a knowledge-based economy. Hence, some extreme views went as far as associating the Bologna process with the EU's initiatives *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* (1991) and the 2000 Lisbon Strategy.⁶ Consequently, the mere participation of non-state actors' (e.g. EUA, ESU, EURASHE, Business Europe) in the deliberation of the Bologna process cannot necessarily turn the Bologna reforms into a bottom-up undertaking as some (Gaston, 2010; Adelman, 2008) have argued.

Thus, from this standpoint the argument on non-state actors' participation and their impact on public policies, which is central in network governance, turns out to be somewhat overstated in that the policies adopted ultimately tend to be closer to the states' own strategic goals than to the non-state actors'. Instead, non-state actors' participation boils down to essentially a sugar-coated NPM strategy to adopt neo-liberal reforms top-down rather than a real network of (non-) state actors operating in a 'level playing field'. It mainly marks a shift from "the interventionist state to the evaluative state, from dirigisme to supervision and from ex-ante control to ex-post evaluation from rules to regulation" (Ferlie et al. 2009, p. 5) without compromising the central role of states as the real power behind the throne.

Broadly speaking, this trend cuts across political systems worldwide, though it tends to follow softer and more sophisticated styles in democracies compared to the rough and visibly vehement style in autocracies. In transition systems, the situation will likely be somewhat more confusing in that the momentum resulting from the political upheaval (revolution or uprising etc. leading to a regime change) could mean more visible presence of non-state actors in the public arena and a more glamorous front, which however often conceals a sustained continuation of the old culture. Allaste and Cairns (2016) refer to a distinctive characteristic of transition societies, consisting in the discrepancy between the speed of institutional reform and the slowness of cultural change. Thelen and Steinmo (1992, p. 15) argue that in such times of political upheaval, political actors 'shape' the new culture of the corresponding society.

Yet, even in establishing a new culture political actors still refer back to the policy legacies of the inherited cultural setup, which according to can never be simply read off. They also maintain that "policy making is inherently a historical – that is, over time – process in which all actors consciously build on and/or react against previous governmental efforts for dealing with the same (or similar) problems" (Weir & Skocpol cited in Witte 2006, p. 42). Further, in a transition system – a typical case of what Denzau and North (1994) called "conditions of uncertainty" – political actors tend to be path dependent and act according to their previously-acquired "learning", meaning that their culture will still shape their policy behavior, at least for a certain period of time. The dependence of (new) political actors on the path of the 'old tools' of top-down, state-actor centered policy-making remains likely, especially on matters of strategic policies, including higher education, though it may be coated with a democratic outlook. The impervious aspect of culture will likely make it relevant for predicting political actors' policy behavior.

Transition societies, therefore, occupy a political no man's land in that they are caught between the autocratic cultural legacies and the promises of pluralism. In practice, non-state actors might gain some advantages at the policy making level, but state actors could still hold the ring and set the rules. Now, whether non-state actors' limited potential there can be drawn on the whole process of institutional change is a different story. At the front-line level individual non-state actors are assumed to still maintain a seminal role.

From Policy Change to Institutional Change: Frontline Actors' Potential

Witte's framework assumes that reforming policies at the formal level of politics may be *radical* and *fast*. She based her assumption on the concept of "representational re-description" where top level, (non-)state actors' "shared mental models" come to admire a model other than the existing one and decide to introduce a policy reform, i.e. pass relevant laws in that regard. Transition societies provide a stronger trigger for representational re-description than merely the availability of an alternative institutional set-up; revolutions and wars could lead to more wide-ranging formal institutional breakdown (North, as cited in Witte 2006, p. 56). Now, whether planned reforms resulting from such an upheaval will trickle down intact with the same zeal among front-line actors remains questionable. Potential infelicities in higher education reforms, as in other public sectors, may not be obvious at the policy formulation stage since they are by definition generic and meant to target a whole system (Tolofari, 2005). When they surface at the point of delivery, individual actors implementing the reforms (faculty, administrative staff or employers) will have to deal with them privately. Every faculty member in every department in every faculty in every university may provide a different response to them. Some might simply 'cobble' a response together using their own experience; others might consult with their peers and agree on a reasonable common solution; still others will likely simply lose sight, if that is an option, and go about business as usual, etc.

According to Lipsky's theory of SLBy, deciding how to deliver a given policy aspect, thus, is generally guided by the front-line actors' own discretion, which is a defining characteristic of shop floor workers which they use "substantially in the execution of their work" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). In general, discretion is not a unique "coping mechanism" in the hands of shop-floor actors (p. xviii) whose performance is also influenced by the "incomplete information" they may have on certain policy aspects (North, 1990, p. 8), human agency (Vaira, 2004) time constraints, lack of resources or the structural conditions of the working environment (Gilson, 2015). As will be explained below, however, in universities,

as profession-led organizations, academics' use of discretion is likely to be more even more central. From this perspective, the mechanisms that "street-level bureaucrats" develop to process their work make them key actors in the shaping the ultimate policy outcome of institutional change. Brodtkin (2012) refers to the "importance of street-level bureaucracies who "indirectly but significantly shape policies on the ground" (p. 943). Sometimes, as one case study in the field of nursing found, they even employ "strategies to circumvent policies which are not agreed with" (Hoyle, 2014, p. 191).

Lipsky's Bottom-up Perspective: Misgivings and Legitimacy

Invoking SLBy to account for frontline actors' potential at policy delivery of higher education reform entails at least one essential pitfall.⁷ The state's use of NPM tools, which are "distrustful" of professionals (Hudson & Lowe, 2009, p. 137), such as performance measurement and accountability against well-defined indicators have measurably curbed frontline actors' use of discretion, thereby neutralizing their potential. For some (Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski, & Shire, 1998; Kinnie, Hutchinson, & Purcell, 2000) NPM's constraining of actors' use of discretion calls the whole bottom-up perspective into question. However, many other empirical studies in various public sectors maintained the sustained use of discretion and even in more sophisticated and subtle ways (Ellis, 2011; Gilson, 2015; Brodtkin, 2012; Tummers, Vermeeren, Steijn, & Bekkers, 2012; Hoyle, 2014; Zedekia, 2017). For the purpose of our argument, – showing the potential of frontline actors at policy delivery – we mainly focus on the manifestations of the sustained use of discretion by professional front-line actors since, as mentioned above, higher education sector is often subsumed, along with health care and engineering sectors, under the "more general archetype of the professionalized sectors developed by Mintzberg (1979)" (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2009, p. 2).

Special Features of the Academic Profession

The academic profession is commonly associated with some "peculiar" characteristics that allow academics to be elusive to standard forms of coercion and external steering because of their typically "strong influence on the determination of goals, on the management and administration of institutions, and on the daily routines of work" (Enders 2006, p. 5). This peculiar aspect is often attributed to academics' "advanced education, and [the] specialized body of knowledge over which they have monopoly; a normative structure of codes of ethics and the rule of meritocracy; a level of autonomy embedded in peer review and considerable professional self-regulation" (Marginson & Rhoades, 2007, pp. 120-121). These features entrench what Clark (1983, p. 102) (referencing Dahrendorf) called the "sectoral hegemony" which tends to inhibit change especially if coming from outside the sector in that "inside professionals have heavy influence and outsiders have great trouble in finding handles".

Just like doctors, engineers and judges, discretion for academics is part and parcel of their daily work. They, for instance, have to customize their teaching or supervision to students of different abilities and needs, as well as adapting their essentially research-oriented skills into instruction-oriented tasks. Yet, unlike doctors who have established rules about regular professional updating courses, university faculty were hardly trained about teaching let alone teaching with the aid of modern techniques such as online tools and materials. Zekedia (2017, p. 306) points out that "sometimes bureaucratic executives may not have similar skills as the tasks that s/he is supervising their execution, hence the need for professional independence". Gilson (2015) refers to an interesting distinction between weak and strong discretion. He argues that weak discretion pertains to rank-and-file clerks and entails decision making within the prescribed rules, that is "what rule to apply in particular situations or how to interpret a rule in a particular situation" (2015, p. 387). NPM has measurably 'cornered' average frontline bureaucrats to this narrow leeway of discretion and, according to Taylor and Kelly (2006, p. 631), "eroded" it altogether. Strong/value discretion, however, which pertains to bureau-professionals who, by dint of their advanced academic training, hands-on experience and profound knowledge are "entrusted [...] with making sound and ethical judgments" that are led by "notions of justice and fairness" in the delivery of services (Ellis, 2011, p. 223). This type of discretion is assumed to persist. The new managerial approaches brought forth a labyrinth of "conflicting rules and tasks [and] create[d] policy and operational ambiguity which, in turn, made the exercise of discretion not only possible but necessary amongst staff responsible for managing scarce time and other resources" (Ellis, 2011, p. 235). Ambiguity, therefore, legitimates professionals' resort to discretion and informed judgment to demystify the complexities for themselves and the rank-and-file staff in their corresponding organizations/universities.

Consequently, standard forms of monitoring introduced by NPM could hardly pay off in university reforms, let alone if imposed top-down. In transition systems, the intrinsic qualities of the academic will likely contradict with the potentially persistent cultural memes of top-down governance which, as mentioned above, cannot be unlearned overnight. State actors are likely to 'go about business' as usual if top-down policy making had been the rule/path. It turns out that hindrances against 'literal' translation of policies do not always arise from malevolent recalcitrance on the part of the academics (Gilson, 2015; Clark, 1983); rather they seem to come from the intrinsic characteristics of the academic profession. Frontline academic practitioners do not view themselves as implementers of policies as much as makers of their own practice and, hence, coercive isomorphism may not readily pay off as normative isomorphism would. When, however, confronted with the realities of hierarchical imposition, as in the case of less democratic

societies, academics will likely be pushed to what Lipsky (2010) (referencing Lisa Dodson) termed as the "moral underground" with the policy outcome winding up dissonant with the original policy texts.

Empirical studies about the sustained potential of bureau-professionals refer to a variety of responses that, intentionally or unintentionally, resist the new finicky NPM-inspired managerialism or the legacy of rough top-down managerial model. They range from cases of 'passive resistance' of overt acquiescence and covert bungling performance (Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, & Pithouse, 2010) to straightforward resistance to the rules (Tummers, Vermeeren, Steijn, & Bekkers, 2012). They all overlap on confirming their sectoral hegemony or what Lipsky (2010) termed the continued "intractability" of front-line bureau-professionals (in Ellis, 2011, p. 222) as the policies delivered still depart from the policies intended. When shop-floor actors observe rules as closely as possible, the outcome is a rather perfunctory implementation of the form that often disregards the essence of policy goals (Brodkin, 2012). A common misgiving in the stocktaking reports on the implementation of the Bologna process was the "superficial implementation" of many action lines such as the "relabeling of existing programs" to make them compatible with the required template led to the first cycle degree "having an unclear value to students and to the labour market" (Mikkola et al., 2007, p. 5-7); the European University Association's Trend Report also pointed out that "response to a ministerial dictate that degree cycle reform would be done within one year – did not always lead to meaningful curricular renewal, but rather to *compressed* Bachelor degrees that *left little flexibility for students*" (Sursock, 2015, p. 69, emphasis added). This 'policy delivered' contradicts with the 'policy intended' by the designers of the Bologna process to make higher education student centered and the first degree "relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification" (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 3).

Sometimes, the obsession of implementing actors with auditing and monitoring "creates powerful inducements to focus on measured dimensions of work", which often pushes them to what Lipsky referred to as the moral underground (Brodkin, 2012, p. 945). Other than the reductionist approach to services, "cooking the books" in reporting progress or actually implementing policy rules, become common practice as the veneer now outweighs the essence (*ibid*, p. 947). On the other extreme, bureau-professionals often openly resist policies and hold onto their professional values and, at times, personal interests in case of 'uncongenial' policies (Tummers et al. 2012, p. 1042). Tummers et al. (2012, p. 1054) found an interesting impact of the different types of "role conflicts"⁸ on doctors' willingness to implement controversial policies. They concluded that "when professionals experience a stronger conflict between policy demands and the demands and wishes of their clients, they become less willing to implement the policy".

To conclude, NPM approaches might have managed to influence the behavior of front-line actors with more finicky accountability and sophisticated monitoring but the top-level policy makers' desire to control bureaucrats' behavior to the point where policies be delivered intact, as Total Quality Management may have done in the industry sector (Readings, 1996) is yet to materialize in the field of public policies.

The Adapted Framework: Politics-Institution Interplay⁹

In view of the critique on the network-governance model, the changing topography of the non-state actor's potential from the policy level to the shop-floor, and with the aim of adapting Witte's original model to study higher education reform in the transient societies, the ensuing framework looks like Figure 2.

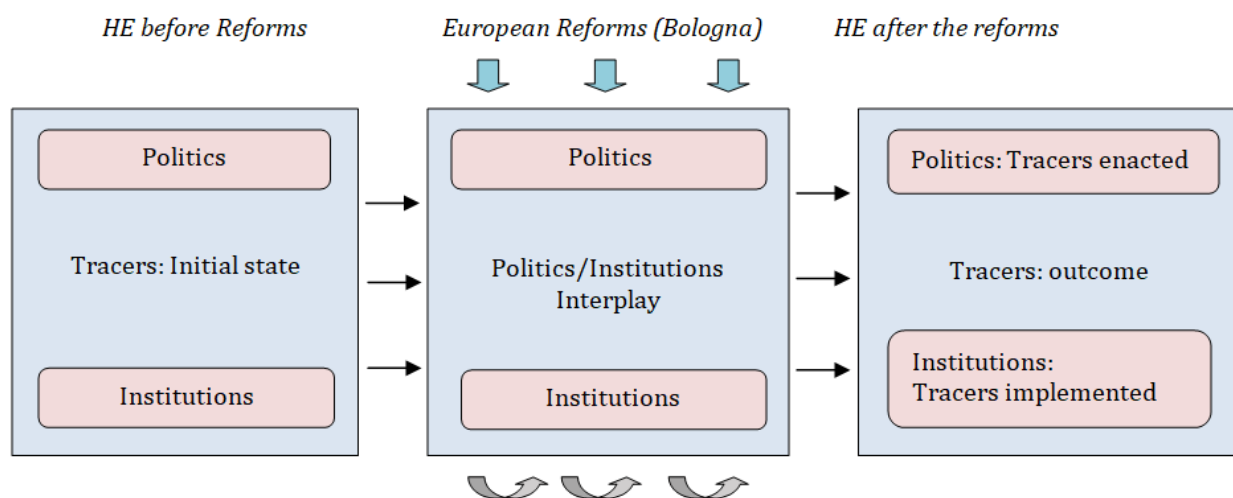


Figure 2: Politics-Institutions Interplay

In the 'politics-institutions' framework, the concept of actors is no longer restricted to the organizational actors involved in policy making at the top/formal level as Witte assumed¹⁰; rather it now bifurcates into those (non-)state actors operating at the top level shaping policies and those individual actors delivering policy outcome on the front line. At either level, actors are of both public and non-public provenances but are different in character (organizational v.

individual) and authority (political v. discretionary). The same top-down dichotomy is drawn on the concept of institution, though the latter is understandably more complex. Following the same distinction (formal/informal) as Witte's, the formal level of politics is associated with the top level of policy making, where state actors prevail and is, thus, the incarnation of politics. That is, (non-)state organizational actors and what happens there in terms of (formal and informal) processes of making formal policy. The informal institutions, however, are associated with the bottom level which is the fiefdom of the street-level frontline actors who represent the actual culture of higher education, including the traditions and routines that underlie – and are thus reflected in – the day-to-day working of HE institutions, faculty, students, administrative staff, etc., or whatever aspects that give the system its idiosyncratic identity.¹¹ Thus, the need to get to grasp of the whole undertaking of the institutional change compels investigating both levels.

The politics-institutions framework is designed to depict the tug of war between the forces of change and forces of stasis intrinsic to any reform undertaking. The critical juncture strand of path dependence (Pierson, 2000) seems to identify – more readily, though by no means exclusively – with the top-level of politics which is often led more by the idea of change, decision-making and the opportunities of the new alternative. The Bologna process reforms were introduced as a remedy for systems that were perceived anomalous (lack of competitive economic edge, decreasing graduate employment, decaying quality, lack of international recognition, etc.). The inertia strand, however, seems more characteristic, though again by no means exclusively, of the frontline bureau-professionals (faculty), whose profession – among other things such as incomplete information, human agency etc. –, can impede the implementation of the reforms, at least as they were intended by the policy making elite, especially if they were not aptly involved in policymaking. While the politics-institution duality is not clear-cut, it still reduces the confusion entailed with the actor-institution duality where both "legs" trespass each other, and actors need to be identified beforehand whether frontline or top level ones. Politics clearly singles out organizational actors from individual frontline implementers, notably in less democratic politics. In the framework, this gap is visualized in the outcome stage (Higher Education system after the reform) by a politics tier that is clearly more advanced (to the right in Figure 2) than the typically inert institutions.

Therefore, one key advantage of this framework is that it follows policies to the point of delivery and is not only interested in the policy interaction between political (top-level) actors. The risk of the "missing link" that Gornitzka and colleagues talked about above is addressed and research findings attained using this framework can be more rigorous.

The Politics-Institutions Framework as an Empirical Approach

Using this framework to investigate the hypothesis of institutional change that ensues a policy reform requires the researcher to consider a number of things. The guiding research questions generally derive from the broad question as to whether the policy reforms trickled down to the shop floor intact, i.e. in the same pace and depth, or not. To approach this question, one may consider a longitudinal case study in which over a period of at least ten years (Sabatier, 2005) a reform is scrutinized in order to allow for a judicious comparison of the state of affairs before the reform and afterwards. While a single university or a single aspect of the reform may qualify for a case study, an entire higher education system can also be studied. Obviously, the bigger the number of the universities included in the corpus of the study is better, especially if the pace and depth of reforms were to be put in perspective. With large numbers, a more important consideration would be the sampling. For the sample of disciplines included in the corpus to be as much representative of the higher education spectrum as possible, one might consider any of the disciplinary taxonomies available such as the one proposed by Becher and Trowler (2001).

Then, since the concept of higher education in itself is rather vague, elusive and hard to track, the comparative education tradition of comparing educational systems following certain specific dimensions (Witte, 2006) can be useful in this regard and corresponding variables could be identified along which change can be measured at either level of politics and institutions. Witte's framework is a great help in this regard. One may be interested, for instance, in tracking change in the curricula delivered, employability of graduate output, or the impact of the quality assurance measures adopted in the reform, curricular relevance to the job market, or the funding patterns of higher education institutions, etc. Each of these areas, or tracers as they are referred in the framework, should be studied at the level of politics (the legislation passed to reform it) and then follow it up at the shop-floor level of HEIs i.e. how it was implemented (Kolster & Westerheijden, 2014). Qualitative data (interviews of leading organizational actors and document analysis of relevant legal texts) could cater for the former, whereas the latter may be approached 'quantitatively' by literally surveying different frontline actors entrusted with implementation to ascertain how far the reforms have paid off. Survey data may be backed up by more in-depth interviews to find out about the use of discretion and other coping mechanisms that implementers may have had recourse to.

Conclusion

Until recently, the core argument of this article would have looked unorthodox – not to say an aberration – from the standpoint of mainstream higher education research. The assumption about the hierarchical governance, which literally undermined classical implementation analysis back in the mid-1980s, is in some way vindicated here. This vindication was partly grounded on the argument, deriving from public administration literature, that the multi-actor

governance model is largely a front for a sustained state-steered hierarchy, though in democratic clothing. While, according to public administration, this is true for many established democracies, its applicability to transition societies, the ultimate focus of this article, remains even more likely, owing to the persistence of the top-down culture inherited from the old set-up, as well as the potential of the frontline actors specifically in the case of professionalized sectors such as higher education where discretion is part and parcel of academics' work. Thus, the potential of frontline actors gives further credence to the vindication of implementation analysis, specifically Lipsky's street-level bureaucracies and the bottom-up perspective in general in other public policy fields.

This article also tried to put higher education policy studies in perspective with policy studies in other public sectors in terms of responding to the empirical need to measure the impact of public policies at a time of shrinking public funds and thereby increasing the return on investment of a costly undertaking. It appears, at least from the perspective of the literature consulted, that resonance of such an empirical urgency found echo in other public sectors more than it did in higher education research, whose scholars still referred to the missing link. By proposing a politics-institutions framework, this article tried to make a clarion call for higher education research to join the bandwagon and follow up policies to the shop-floor.

Endnotes

¹ Google Scholar's citation index – of the second edition of his ground-breaking book *Street-level bureaucracy, 30th ann. Ed.: dilemmas of the individual in public service* (2010) – points to over 13000 (accessed last on 18 March 2018), yet with few citations in higher education research.

² Following North, the concepts of "informal institutions" and "culture" are used interchangeably to mean "the rules of the game in a society" (1990, p. 3).

³ North avers that although informal institutions can be changed "overnight", the "impervious" aspect of the informal institutions or culture do not wear out as swiftly and thus stymie a radical change (North 1990, p. 6).

⁴ Sturdy because of the momentum the Bologna Declaration has gained in a short period 48 signatory states. The US and Australian responses were another testimony of its robustness. For more on the brand image the Bologna Process has acquired globally, see Zgaga (2006), Adelman (2008) and Gaston (2010).

⁵ This was proposed by Mayntz (1993) as multi-actor governance and it marks a shift from centralized governance to more horizontal governance where the government coordinates with non-state actors to run the public arena. It now makes the mainstream in political science though it has been named variously in the literature: as governance *with* the government rather than *by* the government (Borzel 2010), democratic revitalization (Manin 2012) and deliberative governance (Hoareau 2009).

⁶ These were supranational (EU), not inter-state, initiatives. Therefore, mentioning them here can be viewed as out context given that the EU's competence in higher education is very limited and it (EU) does not always represent the states' agenda. However, the particular case of Bologna process is seen as a point of states' and EU's overlapping agendas, specifically with respect to vocationalization and focus on applied research. The Memorandum called on European higher education to serve the needs of the European market though "partnership with economic life" (Tomusk, 2006, p. 12); the Lisbon Strategy for turning the EU into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic *growth* with more and better *jobs*".

⁷ Another pitfall consists in the fact that Lipsky's theory essentially targets literal bureaucrats whereas the onus on the implementation of higher education reforms is also on non-bureaucrats such as business sector professionals, academics who, in many systems (e.g. UK, Netherlands, US, etc.), are not public servants. This means they are not subject to the state's hierarchy with its common system of regulatory sanctions, coercive discipline to ensure obedience, etc. There are, however, other arguments that consider the non-state actors' profile pure semantics for at least two reasons. First, Bologna reforms are not mandatory in many countries (which means no need for the formal system of sanctions); second, actors who take part in the implementation of the reforms become, in a sense, *de facto* bureaucrats, hence Brodtkin (2012) coined the term "street-level organizations" (p. 944) to solve this problem; this paper goes a step further and proposes "street-level actors" to denote both the corporate and individual aspects of the front-line actors.

⁸ Role conflicts occurs when front-line professionals perceive the demands of binding policy rules to be incompatible with the professional values (policy-professional role conflict) as well as the clients' expectations of optimal and individualized service (policy-client role conflict) (Tummers *et al.* 2012, p. 1042).

⁹ The duality of politics and institution was first introduced by Thelen and Steinmou (1992). "Institutions (...) explain political outcomes in periods of stability, but (...) at the moment of institutional breakdown, the logic of the argument is reversed from 'institutions shape politics' to 'politics shape institutions'" (p. 15)

¹⁰ In Witte's framework, informal institutions refer to the culture of organizational actors negotiating policies with the state actors, which by the standard of the politics-institutions framework relates to politics, i.e. the top level of policy making.

¹¹ It is worth noting that the association between culture and the bottom shop-floor level is essentially grounded on a methodological simplification for research purposes. While even empirically, culture tends to be more genuine at the shop-floor (the daily practices and routines of higher education practitioners), the authors are aware that culture remains diffuse and spans both the top-level actors and bottom-level individual bureaucrats.

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