What really happens in higher education governance? Trajectories of adopted policy instruments in higher education over time in 16 European countries

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Giliberto Capano and Andrea Pritoni

Abstract
Over the past three decades, governments have recurrently intervened in higher education. Over time, significant changes have occurred in inherited national governance modes. These reforms have been assessed in different ways, such as by emphasising the shift to the more supervisory role of the State, or the increasing privatisation and marketisation following the neoliberal paradigm, or the overall process of re-regulation. This paper sheds light on these different judgements by addressing the governance shift by focusing on the sequences of policy instrument mixes adopted over time in 16 European countries. By analysing 25 years of policy developments, it is shown how the content of national governance reforms consistently varied over time and that no common template has been followed.

Introduction

Higher education (hereafter HE) policies have undergone significant changes over the past decades in Europe and other continents. Many components of higher education systems (hereafter HESs), especially those related to the governance dimension, have been changed. Through changes in the governance dimensions, governments attempted to push HESs to be more effective, efficient and responsive to societal needs. These reforms have been considered a very relevant historical watershed that represents the rise of the evaluative state (Neave 2012), 'supervisory/steering at the distance' policies (Van Vught 1989; Capano 2011), and New Public Management applications (Paradeise et al. 2009; Bleiklie 2018).

However, the judgement of the content of these reforms has changed over time. In fact, while there was initially great emphasis on the politics of autonomy (through which universities were given more autonomy in pursuing their missions under the supervision of the state (Neave and Van Vught 1991)), the other side of this policy has recently been emphasised by noting that the reforms have constituted a kind of re-regulative process (Hedmo and Wedlin 2008; Enders et al. 2013). By using evaluation and specific regulation, governments have substantially constrained the autonomy of their universities. Furthermore, this long process of continuous reforms has been the object of more radical critics, who stigmatised the neoliberal nature of such reforms and their common goals to transform HE into a commodity and push HESs to becoming more competitive (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhodes 2009). Thus, it appears that there are different assessments of the real content of these reforms.

To shed light on this controversial issue, we propose to adopt a sequential perspective to reconstruct the trajectories of policy design (intended as the temporal dynamics of the adopted policy instruments) in order to identify the diachronic choices in policy instruments governments in 16 European countries have made over time. Through this reconstruction of the adopted policy changes, we can see not only the development of the adopted policy combinations but also, through their comparison, whether there are specific sequential paths and causal logics behind their development. Furthermore, we can empirically examine whether and how uniformity or diversity exists in HE reforms and whether attempts have been made to follow a common template. Thus, based on this analytical path, we can offer some insight into empirical elements and contribute to the ongoing and never-ending debate regarding the characteristics of these reforms.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section presents the conceptual framework, the research question, the concept of sequencing policy instruments and its descriptive and theoretical relevance. In the third section, the research design and methodology are presented. In section four, the results are presented and discussed. In the conclusion, areas for future research will be suggested.

Sequencing governance reforms in higher education

Waves of governance reforms in higher education: three different assessments

Over the past three decades, new challenges have called for a radical re-thinking of governance models at the institutional and systemic levels (e.g. the massification of HE and the shared

governmental perception that universities should better help the socio-economic development of their countries). These challenges have led to the redesign of governance arrangements, i.e. how decisions and policies are made, implemented and coordinated.

Generally, the basic levers of reforms can be summarised as follows (see Enders and Fulton 2002; Gornitzka et al. 2005; Lazzaretti and Tavoletti 2006; Maassen and Olsen 2007; Trakman 2008; Shattock 2014; Capano and Jarvis 2020): institutional autonomy; new competitive funding mechanisms; the quality assessment of research and teaching; internal institutional governance; and the changing role of the state (less commander and controller and more supervision from a distance).

In Continental European countries, according to the existing literature, these basic levers have been moulded differently at the national level, although some common features have emerged. Governments have abandoned the state-control model in favour of steering universities from a distance (by providing more autonomy to institutions). In some countries, such as the Netherlands (De Boer et al. 2007), Sweden (Bladh 2007), Denmark (Oecd 2005), Austria (Lanzendorf 2006) and Finland (Ursin 2019), governments have radically changed the institutional arrangements of universities by abandoning traditional democratic mechanisms to elect the institutional leaders and the governing body through an appointment system. The supervisory role of the state (Neave and Van Vught 1991) is implemented by steering on the basis of new 'soft' methods of coordination that are no longer based on hard rules but on soft contracts, targets, benchmarks, indicators and continual assessment.

At the same time, it must be noted that in the English-speaking world, governments have increased their intervention and regulation despite a tradition of institutional autonomy. In the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Shattock 2014; Capano 2015; Capano et al. 2016), governments have substantially restructured the national governance framework by creating national agencies for the assessment of research and teaching and through a strong commitment to realigning the behaviour of universities with socio-economic requirements.

Over time, the judgement of the content of reforms has changed and continues to be extensively discussed. Three types of general assessments can be identified and correspond to three different models of governance:

1. *Supervisory model.* The supervisory model implies a supervisory role of the State in the new governance arrangement according to which universities are considered more autonomous than in the past (Huisman 2009; de Boer and Van Vught 2015; Shattock 2014). This perspective assumes that the state gives universities more autonomy while steering them from a distance through various types of evaluations;
2. *Re-regulatory model.* The re-regulatory model is based on empirical evidence that, at least in recent years, strong re-regulation has been the final result of the diachronic process of reforms (Enders et al. 2013; Donina et al., 2015; Capano 2014) and of policy design (Capano 2018);
3. *Neoliberal model.* The neoliberal model considers these reforms to be a product of the neoliberal age, thus emphasising privatisation, deregulation, competition, managerialisation and the limitation of academic freedom (Olssen and Peters 2005; Harvey 2005; Marginson 2009).

These three models continue to be widely used by scholars and observers to attempt to grasp the ongoing changes and reforms in the systemic governance of higher

education. The debate regarding the nature of reforms is likely justified by the lack of sufficient empirical and detailed knowledge regarding how these reforms have been designed over time. We attempt to increase this knowledge through the empirical evidence presented below.

Trajectories of policy design

To unpack the content of reforms, we focus on policy instruments and, thus, the means that policymakers can use when designing policies (Vedung 1998; Salamon 2002; Howlett 2019). Through this focus, we can operationalise the meaning of institutional autonomy, how HE is funded, the delivery of regulation (hard/soft) and whether and how evaluations are concretely implemented in a more detailed and realistic way. By focusing on policy instruments, it is possible to have a unit of analysis that allows for a more fine-grained picture of the content of governance reforms in HE. We assume that by focusing on the basic units of policy design (policy instruments), it is possible to concretely and realistically describe the changes in the content of governance reforms and thus to shed light on the controversial debate on the nature of these reforms. Furthermore, we assume that also focusing on the temporal dynamics of how policy is designed over time in terms of instrumental content will allow to provide a better view of the actual process and offer empirical evidence on how trajectories of policy design have evolved over time (Howlett and Goetz 2014; Howlett 2019).

Thanks to the deep and detailed operationalisation of policy instruments, it is possible to grasp the real content of the policies and thus to understand whether and how those instruments that are considered prominent in the three types of general assessment have really been adopted. We should expect, in fact, a consistent use of deregulation in the case of prevalence of the neoliberal model; a mix of increased evaluation and institutional autonomy in the case of prevalence of the supervisory model; and a consistent increase of the use of instruments regulating and constraining universities in the case of prevalence of the re-regulatory model.

The analysis of trajectories of policy design implies a focus on long-term policymaking. In doing so, we follow the example of those few scholars that have analysed long-term changes in public policy. We refer particularly to the analysis by Jacobs (2011) of pension policy as well as the recent analysis of temporal dynamics of policy mixes in energy policy by Schmidt and Sewerin (2019). Long-term analyses of policies are very relevant because, by taking into consideration the relevance of 'time' in policy developments, they permit a better understanding of whether and how policies have changed. The advantages of long-term analysis include the ability to clarify not only the political trade-offs that decision-makers have at their disposal when deciding between short-run and long-term policies, as shown by Jacobs, but also how specific characteristics of the policy design can drive the dynamics and the effects of the design itself (as shown by Schmidt and Sewerin). The long-term analysis we propose here is less ambitious but still represents a first attempt to empirically analyse the evolution of the content of governance reforms in a larger *n*-study according to a specific and theory-driven framework of analysis.[1]

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[1] The most recent large *n*-study comparison of reforms in higher education considered 10 countries (Broucker et al. 2017).

Furthermore, the analysis of the trajectories of policy design implies the reconstruction of their sequencing, that is, the order of succession through which policy design (in terms of instrumental choices) develops over time (Howlett 2009). By sequencing the trajectories of policy design, it is possible to understand whether their progression (the logic of direction) has been a linear process of reform (and thus potentially irreversible) as sustained by the critics of neoliberalism and those emphasising the emergence and institutionalisation of the supervisory state model or, alternatively, has been characterised by some type of variation (like disconnected linearity or reversal, and thus potentially reversible) as sustained by those who emphasise the re-regulatory dimension of the reform processes. Our definitions clearly echo the positions of the debate on the role of temporal dynamics in understanding policy change: the logic of linear/irreversible trajectories is typical of the path-dependent approach, while the logic of disconnected/reversible trajectories belongs to the punctuated equilibrium approach (Howlett and Goetz 2014) and assumes a dialectical confrontation between problems and solutions over time (Haydou 1998). However, in this paper we are not interested in explaining why the trajectories of policy design developed in a specific way but in providing empirical evidence of the evolution of their content and shedding light on their trends over time with respect to the actual scholarly assessments. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that the body of literature supporting the proposed dichotomisation of trajectories of policy design could help generate some propositions or hypotheses for the discussion of the empirical results of our research.

Based on this conceptualisation, we reconstruct the policy design sequences in HE reforms in 16 European countries from 1990 to 2014. The goal of this analysis is primarily descriptive, but we believe that the empirical evidence derived from this analysis could be helpful in better addressing the scholarly understanding of what really happened over the last 25 years in HE governance reforms.

Research design

Case selection and time span

Our analysis is based on a specific dataset of policy tools used in 16 European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Sweden) between January 1, 1990, and December 31, 2014 (25 years).

Regarding the country selection, we initially intended to cover all 15 pre-2004 enlargement EU countries and the following four most densely populated Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. However, we were forced to exclude the following four countries: Luxembourg due to its small size (one university), Belgium and Germany because of their federal structures and Spain because of its very decentralised regionalism, which has a significant impact on the systemic governance of HE. The 11 pre-2004 enlargement countries reflect all historical types of university governance that have developed in Europe and can therefore offer sufficient differentiation in terms of policy legacy (Clark 1983; Braun and Merrien 1999; Shattock 2014) and the inherited set of policy instruments.

The inclusion of Eastern European countries in this 'traditional' set of polities is very interesting and potentially promising because, in this way, we can ascertain whether Eastern countries (which have in common the 're-birth' and 're-design' of all their policies after the end of the communist experience) are characterised by their own similar trends and features or whether they can be associated with other Western European countries and policy traditions. We also included a non-EU country, Norway. Thus, all Nordic countries assumed to have adopted a welfarist approach to HE could be considered, and it was possible to examine whether this common characteristic influenced the analysed outcome.

We decided to begin our analysis in 1990 to encompass all major changes involving HESs over the course of a 25-year period; because our sample also includes Eastern European countries, it would make little sense to start our empirical analysis earlier because of the non-democratic nature of those countries before 1989. Obviously, each country presents its own reform 'starting point' in the field, which means that some of the countries had already produced relevant legislation by the early 1990s, while others began much later.

Operationalisation

By following the framework of operationalisation recently proposed by Capano et al. (2019), who built upon the classic categorisation originally proposed by Vedung (1998), we operationalised the four families of substantial policy tools (regulation, expenditure, taxation and information) while considering a long list of instrumental shapes (24 in total). These are the forms through which regulation, expenditure, taxation and information are concretely delivered in reality and thus are the real object/content of policy design (Table 1. See Appendix, Table A1 for further details).

In this way, we attempted to capture all the possible shapes that substantial HE policy instruments can take. We also avoided constructing categories that were overly exclusive, which would have made the data collected in different countries difficult to compare. Through this operationalisation of instruments, we can reconstruct the policy design sequences in the 16 chosen countries.

Furthermore, we attempt to assess the characteristics of the instrumental sequences of reforms on the basis of the following two points of view: (1) by focusing on the 4 different dimensions of systemic governance pursued by the adopted policy design (i.e. institutional autonomy, the centralisation of procedures, evaluation and information) and (2) by evaluating the adopted policy instruments in terms of either opportunities for or constraints on universities (Capano and Pritoni 2019a, b).

Regarding the first empirical lens, institutional autonomy is defined as a university's level of substantial and procedural freedom in deciding regarding matters of interest (Berdahl 1990; Verhoest et al. 2004). The 'centralisation' category represents the opposite of the 'institutional autonomy' category. In this case, all instrumental shapes that give governments (or any other national public institutions) the right to determine what to do and what not to do are linked with this concept. Evaluation involves the instruments through which governments design different approaches to address institutional behaviour and thus constrain the institutional autonomy of universities (e.g. by abandoning the command and control system in Continental Europe and the traditional institutional self-government in Anglo-Saxon

Table 1 Classification of policy instruments and their shapes

Family of policy instruments (Vedung 1998)	Condition	Shapes
Regulation	R1	Assessment, evaluation and accreditation (procedural rules)
	R2	Agency for assessment, evaluation and accreditation
	R3	Content of curricula: more constraints
	R4	Content of curricula: more opportunities
	R5	Academic career and recruitment: more constraints
	R6	Academic career and recruitment: more opportunities
	R7	Regulation of students (admission and taxation): more constraints
	R8	Regulation of students (admission and taxation): more opportunities
	R9	Institutional and administrative governance: more constraints
	R10	Institutional and administrative governance: more opportunities
	R11	Contracts
	R12	Rules related to goals in teaching
Expenditure	E1	Grants
	E2	Subsidies and lump-sum funding
	E3	Targeted funding
	E4	Loans
	E5	Performance-based institutional funding
	E6	Standard cost per student
Taxation	T1	Tax exemption
	T2	Tax reduction for particular categories of students
	T3	Service-based student fees
Information	I1	Transparency
	I2	Certifications
	I3	Monitoring and reporting

Source: authors' own elaboration

countries).[2] Thus, this condition reflects the increase in the evaluative state through which institutional autonomy is redesigned, addressed and practically bordered (Neave 2012). Finally, our 'information category' perfectly mirrors what was originally proposed by Vedung (1998).

In Table 2, we differentiate among and attribute the policy shapes to the following four previously explained categories: institutional autonomy, centralisation, evaluation and information.

The main rationale for differentiating between opportunities and constraints is the fact that policy measures either allow or oblige (either directly or indirectly) HE institutions to do something. Thus, for example, all instruments undergoing evaluations have been coded as constraints because universities are (more or less) forced to behave in a particular way to reach objectives identified elsewhere (i.e. by the government or the competent national agency). The same holds true for all instrumental shapes belonging to the 'information category' when the law states that HE institutions *must* (not *can*) inform about their procedures and results. In contrast, in any case in which the specific instrumental shape allows universities to choose how to behave, such policy shapes have been coded as opportunities. For example, service-based student fees are considered opportunities because universities *can* decide to develop further services and to link fees to them. Grants, subsidies and loans are not characterised by any particular constraints; thus, they represent opportunities for universities. This distinction is

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[2] Research evaluation, quality assurance in teaching, performance, target funding and contracts are evaluative instrumental shapes that governments have adopted to make autonomous universities more accountable.

Table 2 Autonomy, centralisation, evaluation, and information

Dimension	Family (Vedung 1998)	Shapes
Autonomy	Regulation	R4; R6; R8; R10
	Expenditure	E1; E2; E4
	Taxation	T3
	Information	/
Centralisation	Regulation	R3; R5; R7; R9
	Expenditure	E6
	Taxation	T1; T2
	Information	/
Evaluation	Regulation	R1; R2; R11; R12
	Expenditure	E3; E5
	Taxation	/
	Information	/
Information	Regulation	/
	Expenditure	/
	Taxation	/
	Information	I1; I2; I3

Source: authors' own elaboration

quite relevant because it is a way to assess the characteristics of the content of the reforms. In fact, we should expect a dramatic increase in opportunities if the neoliberal turn is empirically confirmed, whereas exactly the opposite should occur if the re-regulatory model prevails. In the case of prevalence of the supervisory model, there should be a moderate increase of opportunities or a balance between changes in constraints and opportunities. Table 3 presents our codification.

Regarding the data collection, dataset construction and coding, we collected, analysed and coded all pieces of national legislation and regulations related to HE in all 16 countries under analysis from 1990 to 2014. Hundreds of official documents and thousands of pages of national legislation were scrutinised and hand-coded in the search for both substantial and procedural policy instruments. The coding procedure was performed in four steps. First, we identified a list of relevant pieces of legislation in national HE policy, namely, laws, decrees, circulars and ministerial regulations that affected the HES of each country under scrutiny. Second, we reduced every piece of legislation to its main issues. Third, we attributed each of those issues to one of the shapes in which we classified the policy instrument repertoire in HE. Fourth, we categorised all shapes of instruments into our main analytical categories (institutional autonomy, centralisation, evaluation and information; constraints or opportunities).

For the first two steps, the research strategy was twofold. With respect to Italy, France and both English-speaking countries (England and Ireland), the analysis was conducted 'in house', meaning that the authors of this paper were responsible for entering the Italian, French, English and Irish pieces of legislation into the dataset. Linguistic barriers rendered the selection of regulations and their direct coding impossible for the other twelve countries. Therefore, we contacted a highly reputable country expert for each case to achieve a perfectly comparable list of pieces of relevant regulation and legislative provisions regarding HE for those countries.[3]

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[3] In addition, the list of regulations provided by every country expert (who is one of the most reputed scholars on HE policy in that particular country) was subsequently verified by the authors on the basis of an extensive secondary literature: OECD reports, scientific articles and books, etc.

Table 3 Opportunities vs. constraints

Opportunities			Constraints		
Family	Shape	Description	Family	Shape	Description
Regulation	R4	Content of curricula: more opportunities	Regulation	R1	Assessment, evaluation and accreditation (procedural rules)
	R6	Academic career and recruitment: more opportunities		R2	Agency for assessment, evaluation and accreditation
	R8	Regulation of students (admission and taxation): more opportunities		R3	Content of curricula: more constraints
	R10	Institutional and administrative governance: more opportunities		R5	Academic career and recruitment: more constraints
				R7	Regulation of students (admission and taxation): more constraints
				R9	Institutional and administrative governance: more constraints
				R11	Contracts
				R12	Rules regarding goals in teaching
Expenditure	E1	Grants	Expenditure	E3	Targeted funding
	E2	Subsidies and lump-sum funding		E5	Performance-based institutional funding
	E4	Loans		E6	Standard cost per student
Taxation	T3	Service-based student fees	Taxation	T1	Tax exemption
				T2	Tax reduction for particular categories of students
Information	/	/	Information	I1	Transparency
				I2	Certifications
				I3	Monitoring and reporting

Sources: authors' own elaboration

The attribution of all analysed relevant decisions to the appropriate units of analysis (substantial policy instruments and related shapes) was again conducted by the authors. This third step of the coding procedure was developed as follows. First, each issue of each legislative provision in each country was coded separately by each author. Second, contradictory cases (i.e. policy instruments placed in different categories by the coders, constituting approximately 15% of the entire sample) were solved jointly in a subsequent stage. Finally, the decision to attribute each policy shape to a particular analytical category (i.e. institutional autonomy/centralisation/evaluation/information and opportunities/constraints) was conducted together by the authors of this paper.

Because we analysed a temporal range of 25 years, in order to better obtain and assess the dynamics of the trajectories, we decided to construct them as sequences of 5-year periods. Furthermore, we considered it reasonable to adopt a threshold of 15 years for assessing whether a trajectory is linear.

Data: sequencing trajectories of policy design in 16 European countries

The evolution of the policy mixes

The presentation of the data we collected and coded is not simple because of its richness. Furthermore, the rationale behind the trajectories of the adopted policy instruments is truly difficult to grasp because there is no significant regularity. Figure 1 presents the aggregated data on instrumental choices in the 16 countries grouped by family of policy instruments.

Clearly, regulation is the most commonly used family of policy instruments, followed by instruments pertaining to the family of expenditure. However, if the data are disaggregated according to geo-political areas, as shown in Table 4 and Fig. 2, the picture changes. In fact, the trends are quite different with regard to the different groups of countries.

In the four Eastern European countries, there is an initial strong use of regulation (probably justified by the need to redesign the overall systems after the fall of the communist regimes). This prevalence of regulation persists over the course of the entire period, although relative ups (1990–94 and 2010–14) and downs (1995–2009) are observed. In England and Ireland, the trajectory is different because it is characterised by ups and downs of the two most frequently adopted types of instruments (regulation and expenditure), with a significant increase in taxation during the last 5 years of the considered period. In the 10 countries in continental Europe (those historically characterised by a strong command and control governance), regulation is dominant along with a relevant contribution of expenditure and a notable presence of information tools, which appear to become increasingly relevant over time.

Obviously, these trends could hide more specific national paths in terms of the characteristics of the policy mixes adopted over time. Surprisingly, however, the national trajectories are very difficult to order and to rationalise. As shown in Appendix (Table A2), which presents all instrumental shapes adopted in the three clusters of countries, there is no type of coherent dynamics when the national adoption of instrumental shapes in each country is considered. In fact, there is great variation over time of the instrumental shapes adopted and thus great variance in the way the existing policy mixes are changed. Thus, it is very difficult to identify any kind of regularity in the evidently disconnected linearity that characterises the trajectories.
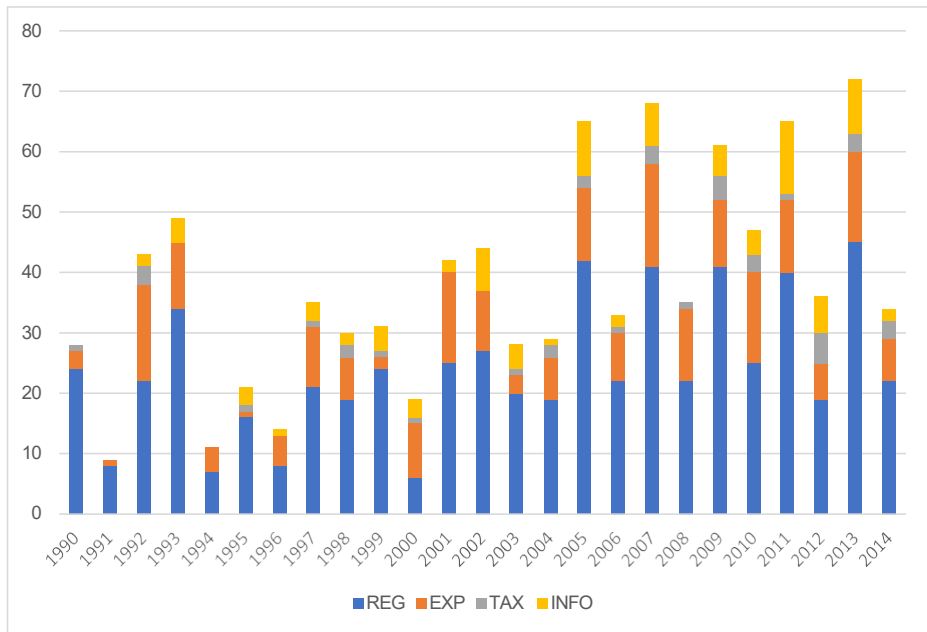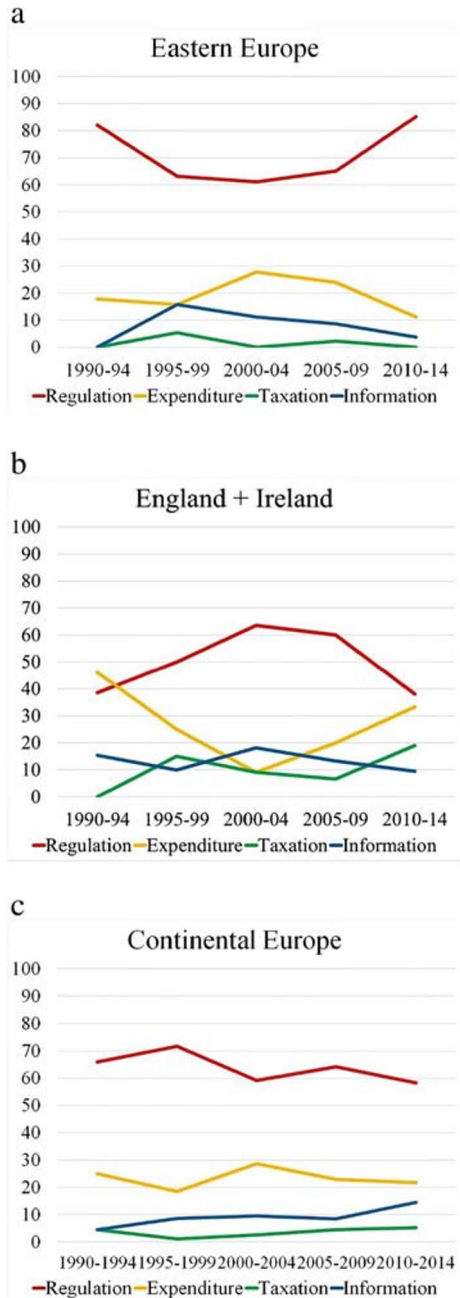
Fig. 1 Changes in policy design in 16 countries aggregated according to 4 families of policy instruments (1990–2014)

Table 4 Changes in the types of instrumental shapes adopted over time (1990–2014) in 16 countries aggregated according to their geo-political areas

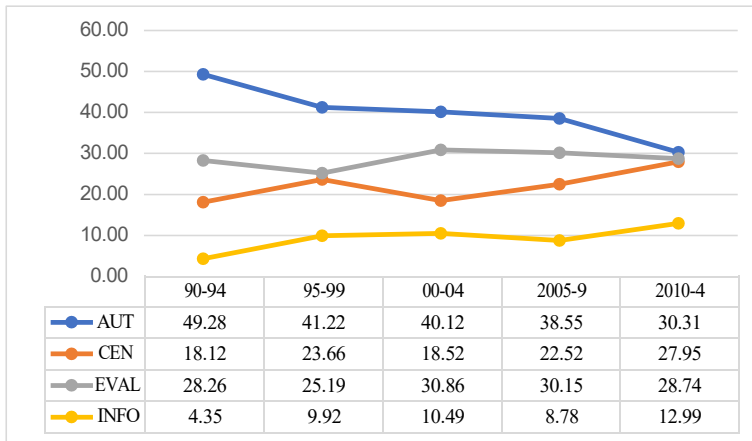| Areas	Shape	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014
Eastern EU	Regulation	32 (82.1%)	12 (63.2%)	22 (61.1%)	30 (65.2%)	23 (85.2%)
	Expenditure	7 (17.9%)	3 (15.8%)	10 (27.8%)	11 (23.9%)	3 (11.1%)
	Taxation	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
	Information	0 (0.0%)	3 (15.8%)	4 (11.1%)	4 (8.7%)	1 (3.7%)
	Total	*39 (100%)*	*19 (100%)*	*36 (100%)*	*46 (100%)*	*27 (100%)*
England/Ireland	Regulation	5 (38.5%)	10 (50.0%)	7 (63.6%)	9 (60.0%)	8 (38.1%)
	Expenditure	6 (46.2%)	5 (25.0%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (20.0%)	7 (33.3%)
	Taxation	0 (0.0%)	3 (15.0%)	1 (9.1%)	1 (6.7%)	4 (19.0%)
	Information	2 (15.4%)	2 (10.0%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (13.3%)	2 (9.5%)
	Total	*13 (100%)*	*20 (100%)*	*11 (100%)*	*15 (100%)*	*21 (100%)*
Continental EU	Regulation	58 (65.9%)	66 (71.7%)	68 (59.1%)	129 (64.2%)	120 (58.3%)
	Expenditure	22 (25.0%)	17 (18.5%)	33 (28.7%)	46 (22.9%)	45 (21.8%)
	Taxation	4 (4.5%)	1 (1.1%)	3 (2.6%)	9 (4.5%)	11 (5.3%)
	Information	4 (4.5%)	8 (8.7%)	11 (9.6%)	17 (8.5%)	30 (14.6%)
	Total	*88 (100%)*	*92 (100%)*	*115 (100%)*	*201 (100%)*	*206 (100%)*
TOTAL	Regulation	95 (67.9%)	88 (67.2%)	97 (59.9%)	168 (64.1%)	151 (59.4%)
	Expenditure	35 (25.0%)	25 (19.1%)	44 (27.2%)	60 (22.9%)	55 (21.7%)
	Taxation	4 (2.9%)	5 (3.8%)	4 (2.5%)	11 (4.2%)	15 (5.9%)
	Information	6 (4.3%)	13 (9.9%)	17 (10.5%)	23 (8.8%)	33 (13.0%)
	Total	*140 (100%)*	*131 (100%)*	*162 (100%)*	*262 (100%)*	*254 (100%)*

Fig. 2 Changes in the types of
instrumental shapes adopted over
time (1990–2014) in 16 countries
aggregated according to their geo-
political areas

a

Eastern Europe

─Regulation ─Expenditure ─Taxation ─Information

b

England + Ireland

─Regulation ─Expenditure ─Taxation ─Information

c

Continental Europe

─Regulation ─Expenditure ─Taxation ─Information

Changes in the governance dimensions over time: institutional autonomy, centralisation,
evaluation and information

Regarding the four dimensions of systemic governance (i.e. institutional autonomy, evaluation,
centralisation and information), Fig. 3 shows in aggregated terms that institutional autonomy,

	90-94	95-99	00-04	2005-9	2010-4
AUT	49.28	41.22	40.12	38.55	30.31
CEN	18.12	23.66	18.52	22.52	27.95
EVAL	28.26	25.19	30.86	30.15	28.74
INFO	4.35	9.92	10.49	8.78	12.99

Notes: percentages in column.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Fig. 3 Aggregated dynamics of institutional autonomy, centralisation, evaluation and information

which characterised almost half of the policy design adopted during the 1990–1994 period, consistently decreased in the following 20 years, while centralisation slightly increased. Moreover, clearly, the policy instruments pertaining to the 'information family' increased their relevance over time.

In Fig. 4, which presents the national sequenced trajectories, no clear paths can be observed. At least in terms of the content of adopted policy design over time, there is not a clear linearity or recurrent relation between the four considered dimensions.

To better order this variety, we extracted four types of design sequences to assess the content of the combinations for every five-year term:

− Autonomistic policy (AP); when the newly designed instruments of autonomy are greater than evaluation and centralisation, the autonomistic side of the steering at the distance governance model prevails;
− Centralisation (C), when the changes in centralising instruments are greater than others (and even equal to others at the highest level);
− Re-Regulation (RR), when autonomy is higher than the others but the sum of centralisation and evaluation is higher than autonomy;
− Evaluative State (ES), when evaluation is higher than the remaining dimensions.

A few trends emerge from Table 5. First, as previously claimed, the overall tendency exhibits a clear drop in countries following a 'pure' autonomistic/steering at a distance model over time. This pattern is particularly clear from 2005 onwards, thus depicting a sort of critical juncture in the politics of HE in Europe as follows: while between 1990 and 2004, the number of countries following the 'AP path' remains between 8 and 10, over the past 10 years (2005–2014), this number decreases to 5 during the 2005–09 period and 3 during the 2010–14 period.

Second, a complementary trend characterises countries where evaluative policy instruments have become increasingly central over time. Since their introduction in the mid-1990s,
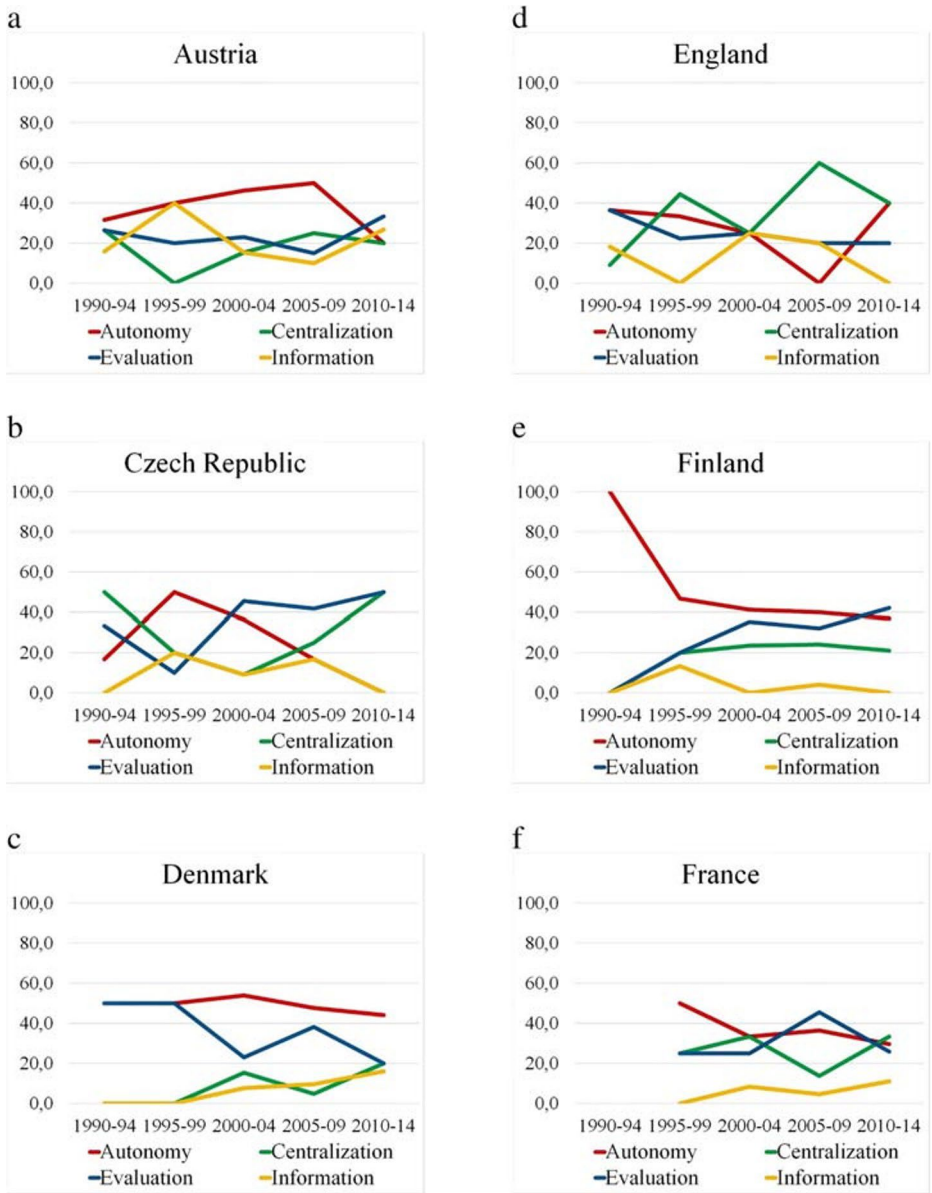
a

Austria

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

b

Czech Republic

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

c

Denmark

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

d

England

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

e

Finland

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

f

France

| | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-09 | 2010-14 |

—Autonomy   —Centralization
—Evaluation   —Information

Fig. 4 Autonomy, centralisation, evaluation and information in 16 countries (1990–2014)

the number of countries following the 'ES path' is rather stable between 1995 and 99 (3 countries: Ireland, Italy and Sweden) and 2000–04 (2 countries: Czech Republic and Hungary) but dramatically increases from 2005 onwards, reaching 7 in 2005–09 and 5 in 2010–14. The recent tendency to diminish institutional autonomy is also clear if we consider countries that decided to (re-)centralise the politics of HE. For example, during the 2010–14
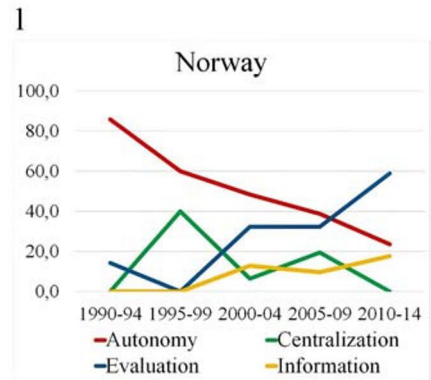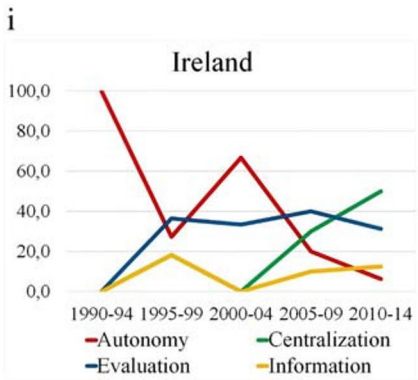
g

Greece

h

Hungary

i

Ireland
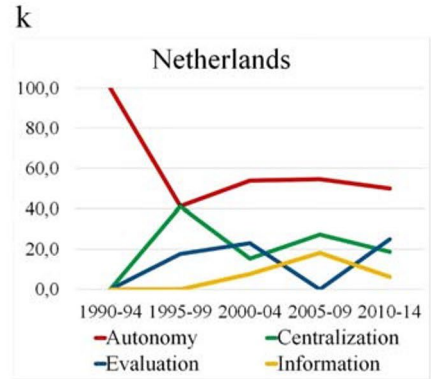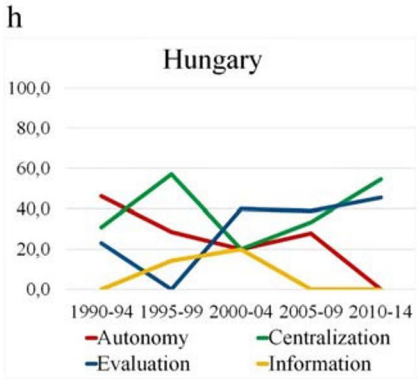

j

Italy

k

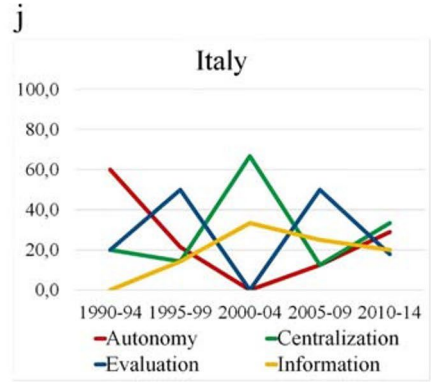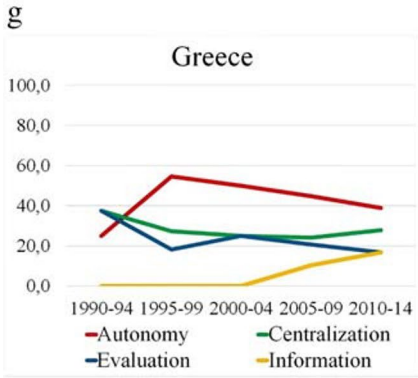### Netherlands

l

Norway

Fig. 4 (continued)

period, the following five countries followed the 'C path': Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Ireland and Italy.

Notwithstanding these overall trends, there is no similarity among the countries; we have 16 different paths. However, there are some interesting points. First, if the trajectories are assessed according to the linear/disconnected criterion, only 5 countries exhibit three or more autonomistic sequences. Among them, Denmark is truly an outlier with 25 years of continuing
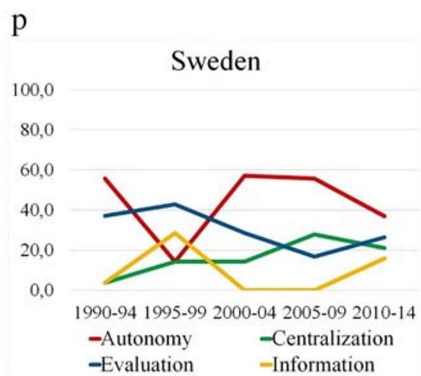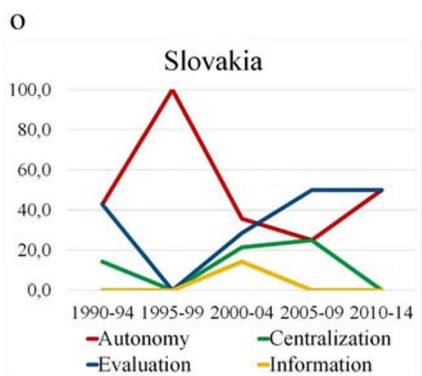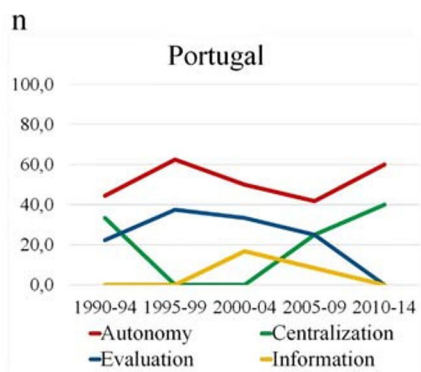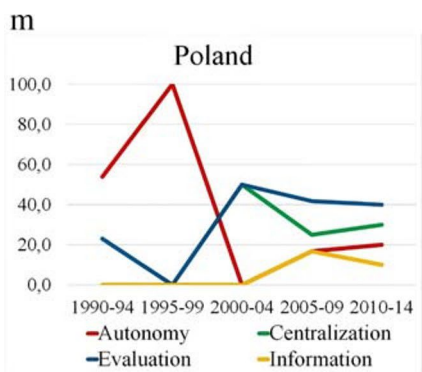
Fig. 4 (continued)

Table 5 Policy sequences in 16 countries (1990–2014)

Country	1990–94	1995–99	2000–04	2005–09	2010–14
Austria	RR	AP	AP	AP	ES
Czech Rep.	C	AP	ES	ES	C
Denmark	AP	AP	AP	AP	AP
England	RR	C	RR	C	RR
Finland	AP	AP	RR	RR	ES
France	/	AP	RR	ES	C
Greece	C	AP	AP	AP	RR
Hungary	RR	C	ES	ES	C
Ireland	AP	ES	AP	ES	C
Italy	AP	ES	C	ES	C
Netherlands	AP	RR	AP	AP	AP
Norway	AP	AP	AP	RR	ES
Poland	AP	AP	C	ES	ES
Portugal	RR	AP	AP	RR	AP
Slovakia	RR	AP	RR	ES	A/ES
Sweden	AP	ES	AP	AP	RR

Source: authors' own elaboration

redesign in terms of steering at a distance, while Austria, Greece, the Netherlands and Norway present persistence over the 3 five-year periods. This empirical evidence is interesting because it shows not only that linear trajectories are not so common in designing higher education policies but also that when they occur, they are focused only on increasing the autonomistic characteristics of the system.

Notably, in some countries, the type AP is absent or minimally present in the five-year sequences. This is the case in England and Hungary, where the path AP has been totally absent; while in France and Italy, only one period exhibits the typical characteristics of the steering at a distance type. Furthermore, notably, one country adopted all four types of policy instrument mixes (France), and twelve countries (with the exception of Portugal, the Netherlands and England) designed their policies according to 3 of the 4 types of design combinations.

Constraints and opportunities

When observed according to the distinction between constraints and opportunities in the newly adopted policy instruments, some clear trends emerge in the content of the trajectories. In fact, Fig. 5 shows that, from a general perspective, constraints have dramatically increased in the last 25 years relative to opportunities, from 50/50 to almost 70/30.

This final result is even stronger in the Eastern European countries, England and Ireland, as shown in Appendix (Table A3). Furthermore, there has been a dramatic decrease in opportunities over time in all countries except Southern European countries. This general trend obviously jeopardises the neoliberal interpretation of the reforms while potentially reinforcing the re-regulatory perspective and problematising the supervisory model.

To order this wide variety, we assess whether and to what extent variation over time has occurred in the five-year period in the ratio between constraints and opportunities. The results of this exercise are presented in Table 6.

We can observe that there are 13 different trajectories for the 16 countries (the only results that follow similar paths are the pairs of the Czech Republic and Greece, Portugal and Slovakia

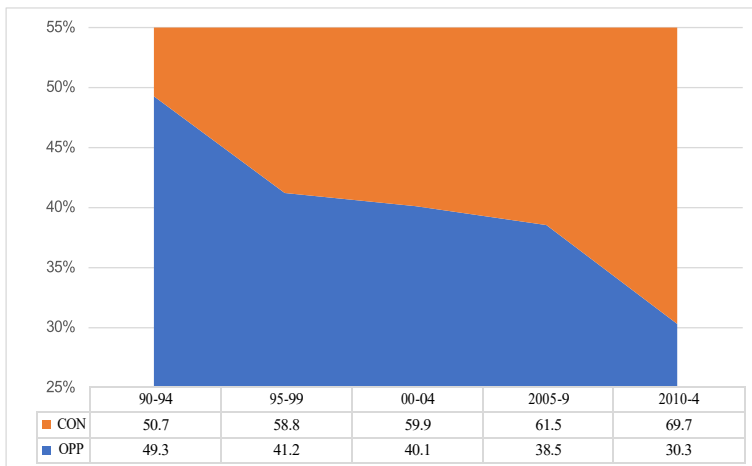|	90-94	95-99	00-04	2005-9	2010-4
CON	50.7	58.8	59.9	61.5	69.7
OPP	49.3	41.2	40.1	38.5	30.3

Fig. 5 Aggregated constraints and opportunities adopted by policy design in 16 countries (1990–2014)

Table 6 Sequences of constraints/opportunities in 16 countries 1990–2014

Country	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014
Austria	CON	OPP	OPP	OPP	CON
Czech Rep.	CON	OPP	CON	CON	CON
Denmark	STAB	STAB	OPP	CON	CON
England	CON	CON	CON	CON	OPP
Finland	OPP	CON	CON	OPP	CON
France	/	STAB	CON	OPP	CON
Greece	CON	OPP	CON	CON	CON
Hungary	CON	CON	CON	OPP	CON
Ireland	OPP	CON	OPP	CON	CON
Italy	OPP	CON	CON	OPP	OPP
Netherlands	OPP	CON	OPP	OPP	CON
Norway	OPP	CON	CON	CON	CON
Poland	OPP	OPP	CON	OPP	OPP
Portugal	CON	OPP	CON	CON	OPP
Slovakia	CON	OPP	CON	CON	OPP
Sweden	OPP	CON	OPP	CON	CON

Source: authors' own elaboration

OPP Increase in opportunities with respect to the previous 5 years, *CON* Increase in constraints with respect to the previous 5 years, *STAB* Stability in the OPP/CON ratio

and Ireland and Sweden). There is no country in which all five periods have been characterised by the prevalence of changes in opportunities with respect to the previous period.

In terms of assessing whether the trajectories have been more linear or characterised by moments of disconnection, we can observe that only six countries have continuity in one of the two dimensions (demonstrating three or more periods with the same value). There is a linear trajectory of constraints in England, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway, while a linearity of prevailing opportunities is shown by Austria. The other ten countries show a more evident disconnected linearity and a higher propensity to frequently reverse the characteristics of the adopted policy design.

Furthermore, notably, considering the overall period, according to the analysis of the four dimensions of governance, some countries exhibit a prevalence of autonomistic intervention and simultaneously exhibit a prevalence of constraining sequences. This is the case in Norway, Sweden, Greece and Portugal.

Discussion

The descriptive evidence shown by our policy sequences perspective of governance reforms in HE is very clear regarding some points, and its clarity helps to order the ongoing debate regarding what really occurred over the last decades in terms of governance arrangements and policy design.

First, there has not been a unique trend of policy reforms in European countries, but there has been an incredible variety in the design of reforms over time. This variety is demonstrated not only by the way the single instrumental shapes that have been assembled over time (apparently in a very random way) but also by the sequences in terms of the four policy dimensions through which we further operationalised the trajectories of policy design (institutional autonomy, procedural centralisation, evaluation and information) and even in terms of

constraints/opportunity sequences. Therefore, there is not a prevalence of the steering at a distance model or the evaluative state or a complete reversal towards a strong re-regulation of the national governance arrangements. It is clear that the neoliberal interpretation is very stretched and cannot be considered capable of really describing what happened.

However, there has been an incremental but evident increase in re-regulation over time. While clearly contrasting the neoliberal thesis, this finding shows that governments also give more autonomy to universities while counterbalancing this autonomistic policy with instruments (that can belong to the regulation, evaluation and information types) that constrain or clearly attempt to drive the field of action of universities. This continuous counterbalance can be interpreted in terms of either steering at the distance or a re-regulation trend. Obviously, a deeper analysis of cases is necessary to solve this potential double interpretation; however, notably, governments are still there and continue to perform their job.

What seemingly occurs is an ongoing process of layering to reform the actual governance arrangements characterised in most of the countries by disconnected linearity in trajectories and thus by the adoption over time of different design combinations.

Why and how this occurred is beyond the scope of this paper, but the emerging empirical evidence should be considered by those who emphasise convergence in European HE policies (Vögtle 2014) and those who underline the prevalence of one general model of changes in HE: our data on adopted instruments really show how there is not a prevalence of supervisory, re-regulatory or neoliberal governance. There is also no convergence in terms of prevailing trajectories in the content of the reforms (except for the rising imbalance between constraints and opportunities). Very few countries appear to have adopted a supervisory model; whereas in the others, waves of reforms that apparently look to follow a template but are probably reacting to a specific contingency are observed. In fact, during the analysed period, policymakers have capitalised on most policy instruments at their disposal and have very often changed ideas over time, which has produced a logic of direction of policy design characterised by a high level of disconnected linearity (apparently to balance what has been achieved during the previous period of design). Furthermore, our empirical evidence should be taken into consideration by those who emphasise how path dependency is the main driver of reforms in HE (Feeney and Hogan 2017). The frequency of reversal in instrumental choices shows at least a certain difficulty in maintaining the stability of the characteristics of the instrumental content regarding systemic governance.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the extreme variety of instruments adopted over time as well as the frequent reversal points in the trajectories is in opposition to the findings of Schmidt and Sewerin (2019) in their diachronic analysis of energy renewal policy in nine countries. In fact, in their case, the type of composition of the instrument mixes is balanced and very stable over time. This difference is quite interesting because it not only shows how there can be differences in the instrumental choices in different policy fields but also how HE is highly unstable, at least in terms of adopted instruments.

This evidence is challenging because it shows that the instrumental content of policy design in HE has changed quickly in most analysed countries and that these changes over time have not followed a coherent vision or template over time.

Thus, thanks to our sequencing trajectories of adopted policy instruments, we have shown not only that it is substantially impossible to classify in a common way the reforms introduced over time but also even that there has been a high frequency of instrumental changes over time and that, very often, these changes have reversed previous choices.

Conclusions and thoughts regarding further research

The assessment of governance reforms introduced over the last decades is difficult to capture, and there are different scholarly interpretations. In this paper, we attempted to shed light on this issue by operationalising governance reforms in terms of trajectories of policy design (set of policy instruments adopted over time), and we reconstructed the policy sequences of changes in adopted policy instruments in 16 European countries. By sequencing the trajectories in terms of the mix of instruments adopted, prevalence of a specific design dimension, and prevalence of either constraints on or opportunities for universities, we discovered the incredible variety of the pursued national policy sequences. From this variety, some evidence clearly emerges with respect to the assessment of the reforms.

First, the neoliberal interpretation is substantially misleading: governments have continued to govern their HESs and increased the constraints over time.

Second, governments have not abandoned the steering of their HESs but have maintained control by mixing various policy instruments and balancing institutional autonomy with a type of 'iron curtain' of tools restricting or strongly driving the behaviour of universities. The difference between re-regulation and steering at the distance is exactly as follows: whether the adopted policy instruments *oblige* or simply *deeply target* expected behaviours. These differences cannot be grasped by our operationalisation and, thus, should be a topic of further research focusing on the characteristics of the delivery and rules of accountability through which each single instrument is designed (Salamon 2002).

This paper represents a first attempt to develop a more fine-grained analysis of what really happened in governance reforms in recent decades. Obviously, further research is needed to not only obtain, as is surely possible, a better description of the adopted reforms but also above all to try to explain the variety, instability, disconnected linearity and reversibility of the analysed reforms. Here, we can underline that these characteristics of the trajectories of governance reforms in HE could have different drivers to be explored, such as changes in ruling governments due to partisan reasons, a short-run perspective followed by decision-makers due to specific contextual factors (Jacobs 2011, 2016), the characteristics of the policy style or poor design in terms of the technical capacity of the same government that must be reversed (Capano 2018; Howlett et al. 2015).

Governance reforms in HE are complex endeavours, and their assessment cannot be based on general labels and needs better theoretical and empirical lenses to avoid the risk of oversimplification in both explanation and eventually prescription.

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