

# Globalization of higher education: empirical study of a theoretical model in the context of the Bologna process

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The influence of globalization on higher education is an under-studied topic. Higher education is trying to be more efficient, self-sufficient and accountable, but there is little research on the specific global forces that are the cause of this tendency (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Through the Bologna Declaration Europe made a commitment to establish a European Higher Education Area. One of the objectives to reach this goal is the adoption of a system based on two cycles, a bachelor level and a master level. In many countries this binary system is already implemented. Van der Wende (2000) notes the fact that European policy makers have little to say on higher education because of 'the subsidiarity principle'. This principle means that community policy will only be developed where national policy-making is insufficient. Education thus remains an issue of the individual Member States of the European Union. One of the effects of this principle is that Member States themselves are responsible for implementing the bachelor and master system in their national higher education system, so inter-institutional co-operation and national government action will be crucial.

In Flanders the binary system has been implemented in the academic year 2004-2005. The regional Government of Flanders<sup>1</sup> has adjusted the higher educational laws to the bachelor and master level. All institutions of higher education adjusted their offer. The main question in our research will be: what influences were taken into account by the different institutions of higher education in order to reform their program to accomplish the binary system? In order to find an answer on this question we are going to use the theoretical model on globalization and higher education organisational change of Vaira (2004). Vaira argues that neither the convergence, nor the divergence thesis is entirely applicable to measure and identify the organisational change in a higher education institution.

Adapts of the convergence thesis believe that homogenisation processes are central for the organisational change. Dimaggio and Powel (1983) declare that higher education institutions will answer to the pressure to implement new global criteria. Halpin and Troyna (1995) speak of policy borrowing and notice an equality among the policies of different states. The divergence thesis on the other hand sees local differences as the most important influence on higher education organisational change. Kondra and Hinings (1998) defend this thesis by explaining that changing institutions will use a strategy to defend their autonomy. This way differences between different institutions will be a reality. Vaira (2004) is not the only one believing the convergence and divergence thesis's are not able to explain organisational change in higher education. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) offer a new heuristic to shape comparative higher education research with regard to globalisation: the *glonacal agency* heuristic. In this heuristic the influence of three levels is taken into account: first of all *global* phenomena are being studied, but they are not believed to be deterministic in their effects, so the *national* dimension has to complement the global level. A third significant dimension is the *local* one. Marginson and Rhoades speak of agency in two meanings. First agency means an organisation that could exist on the global, national and local level. Second the word agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to take action at the three previously mentioned levels. Their heuristic doesn't present a linear flow from a global to a local level, but believes in different interactions between all levels and agencies.

The introduction of more actors in the organisational change of an institution is positive according to Vaira (2004), but he suggests a framework of analysis to take both homogenisation and individual

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<sup>1</sup> In Belgium the educational policy making is in the hands of the regional governments.

differences into account based on the concept of organisational allomorphy. The concept of allomorphy was already used in the field of linguistics and arts. Now it is applied by Vaira to investigate organisational change. Vaira has 5 propositions, each followed by a hypothesis (Vaira, 2004, p. 499- 502):

*Proposition 1: Organisational change is to be understood within the constitutive framework of wider institutional structure and dynamics.*

*Hypothesis 1: The more organisations enter in a globalized, or de-localised organisational field, the more they must contend with wider competitive and institutional pressures, the more they depend on definitions of organisational work elaborated at world economy and world polity structures.*

*Proposition 2: Contents of institutional and competitive imperatives, archetypes and pressures are subject to a process of articulation, sectoralisation, specification and adaptation, in relation to different organisational fields.*

*Hypothesis 2: Institutional carriers' agency while incorporates and re-defines the institutional imperatives and archetypes, also constructs a broad allomorphic institutional structure congruent both to world polity and world economy institutional structure and to organisational field one.*

*Proposition 3: The institutional carriers and competitive, global dynamics exert pressures at the national level to make the individual nation-state incorporate the institutional and competitive imperatives and archetypes in their sectorial policy and governance structures.*

*Hypothesis 3a: The combination of broad institutional archetypes with the institutionalised national-sectorial patterns of policy making and governance structure give rise to a national allomorphic institutional structure.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Organisations operating in a given field are pressed for adapting their structures and actions to the institutionalised archetypes. This occurs under coercive pressures exerted by nation-state via policy-making, but also through institutional and competitive pressures exerted by the institutional carriers and by similar organisations populating the field.*

*Proposition 4: Institutional and competitive pressures at work in a given organisational field are themselves subject to a process of articulation, specification and adaptation through their incorporation in the individual organisational structures.*

*Hypothesis 4: Organisations facing institutional and competitive pressures towards change in accordance with the new definitions of organisational work, decline archetypes according both to them and to their organisational features and repertoires, becoming morphological variants of the same institutionalised patterns, i.e. allomorphs.*

*Proposition 5: Organisational allomorphy lets enough room for the social processes of definition and selection of the low and high performing organisations.*

*Hypothesis 5: The kind of performance of each morphological variant depend on the way the declension of archetypes is internally (organisationally) successful and ,above all, externally (socially) evaluated and represented as such, on the basis of institutionalised definitions or organisational effectiveness, efficiency and success.*

In accordance with these hypothesis of Vaira, our own research will investigate the organisational change that took place in every individual higher education institution of Flanders when the binary system was implemented. First of all, a research on the new higher educational laws intended to

implement the binary system in every higher education institution will be done. We will try to define the Flemish allomorphic institutional structure as proposed in proposition 3 and hypothesis 3a. Here for we will interview 20 policy makers to define a framework of indicators on the policy level. This will be complemented with an analysis of policy documents.

A second phase of our research consists of semi-structured interviews with several policy-makers of every individual higher education institution of Flanders (N=28). This way we will test hypothesis 1, 2, 3a and 4. During the analysis the structural relation between the different variables of Vaira's framework will be tested through a Structural Equation Model and variance-analysis. Again this will be complemented with an analysis of policy documents on an institutional level.

A third phase of our research will be devoted to hypothesis 5. When we look closer at the outcome of organisational change, several authors (Ford et al, 1996; Kotter, 1995) see internal support for the organisational change as a key factor for success. Schuller (1995) states that co-operation and autonomy are of big importance to reach a common goal within an organisation. To measure the internal support for the implementation of the binary system in the individual higher education institutions, a questionnaire will be used to be filled out by several employees per institution. A second factor that influences the succes of the outcome of organisational change is the reaction stakeholders of the institution have. Ford et al (1996) see students as an important party to evaluate the organisational change in a higher education institution, while Harvey and Knight (1996) pay attention to the reaction of the labour market on the organisational change in higher education institutions. Both parties will receive a questionnaire.

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