

Spain – The International Campus of Excellence Initiative

One of twelve case studies produced as part of the project on Structural Reform in Higher Education (EAC-2014-0474)

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Introduction

This case study is part of the "Structural Higher Education Reform – Design and Evaluation" project, commissioned by the European Commission (EAC/31/2014). The main objective of this project – carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands, and the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Ghent University, Belgium - is to investigate policy processes related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of structural reforms of higher education systems. The focus is on government-initiated reform processes that were intended to change the higher education landscape, with the following questions foremost: What kind of goals were envisaged with the structural reform? How was the structural reforms? How can these achievements be explained in terms of policy process factors?

Three types of reform were distinguished: reforms designed to increase horizontal differentiation (developing or strengthening new types of higher education institutions such as the creation of a professional higher education sector), reforms designed to increase vertical differentiation (bringing about quality or prestige differences between higher education institutions, e.g. by creating centres of excellence) and reforms designed to increase interrelationships between institutions (supporting cooperation and coordination among institutions, forming alliances or mergers). In total, structural reforms in twelve different countries (eleven in Europe, one in Canada) were investigated: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada (Alberta), Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom (Wales). The twelve case studies – for ease of reference published as separate documents - all follow the same logic and are presented in a similar format, with sections relating to the reform and its context, policy goals, policy design, policy instruments, policy implementation, policy evaluation and goal achievement.



Spain - The International Campus of Excellence Initiative

Marco Seeber¹

Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals

From the beginning of the 21st century, the increasing effects of globalisation as well as social, economic and political changes have put the Spanish university system under pressure to modernise. In that context, the Government of Spain introduced the Organic Law 4/2007 on Universities ("LOMLOU"), which established a new legal framework for implementing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and modernising the Spanish university system, thus aligning it with the European Commission's recommendations (EC, 2006). In April 2008, a General Secretariat for Universities was established within the Ministry of Education and Science, which took responsibility for implementing the modernisation of the Spanish university system. This body developed the University strategy 2015 policy framework (EU2015), of which the International Campus of Excellence initiative (CEI) was the central pillar (Ministerio de Educacion, 2008).

The CEI initiative was expected to create knowledge hubs by promoting strategic partnerships and aggregations between universities, and between universities and other private and public institutions around a common project and campus. The strategic aggregations were expected to foster critical mass and economy of scale, to promote differentiation and smart specialisation of university profiles in specific knowledge domains, and hence (Rubiralta, 2010):

1. To reduce fragmentation and atomisation of the HE and research system, improving the position of Spanish universities in international rankings, towards campuses of global recognition.

2. To open the universities and reduce their isolation by fostering strategic alliances with a variety of partners in the regional environment. CEIs had to achieve a closer fit with the societal demands and economic needs of their host territories. The involvement of industry in CEI clusters was expected to enhance labour market inclusion, knowledge transfer and the social and economic development of the region.

3. To increase diversity of teaching offers and research profiles. Ideally, the transformation of comprehensive universities into CEIs that specialise in only one to three disciplinary areas was envisaged.

4. To increase internationalisation and attractiveness for international students, academics and knowledge-related investors by encouraging international mobility, articulating an international academic offering and recruiting international faculty.

5. To improve university governance. Campuses were expected to adopt and experiment with governance arrangements and practices new to the Spanish system, which could eventually be extended to the whole university.

6. To increase excellence and efficiency in teaching and research, by creating economies of scale and critical mass, optimising investment in facilities.

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Context and background to the reform

The Spanish higher education system is a unitary system² comprising 76 universities, of which 49 are public. It is among the largest HE systems in Europe, with approximately 1.9 million students, 150 thousand academic staff (source: OECD), and yearly public investment of 1.2-1.3% of GDP (source: Eurostat). Spanish universities were regulated by the central authorities of the Ministry of Education until 1983, when the University Reform Act transformed them into autonomous bodies with a wide scope for self-government. The direct responsibility over universities was transferred from the central authorities to those of the autonomous regions, although this process of devolution was only completed in 1997 (Mora et al., 2000). There was a great increase in the number of universities, from 28 in 1975 to 73 in 2005, due to the transfer of education competences to the regions as well as to increasing access to university education all over Spain (Delgado and Leon, 2015).

Design process for the reform

In trying to address the challenge of university modernisation, some in the Ministry were concerned about introducing a new ambitious initiative at a moment when Spanish universities were already involved in a time-consuming process of adapting their curricula to the Bologna Process standards. However, with the creation of the General Secretariat for Universities, the prevailing direction was to more actively promote collaboration and competition between Spanish universities. The General Secretariat for Universities had a prominent role in designing the EU2015 and the CEI initiative. This body was led by representatives of the academic community and brought forward the ambitions, ideas and expectations about what parts of the university system to modernise. With the support of external experts, a first proposal was drafted and the policy was presented in October 2008 at a large public meeting, and afterwards during several visits to Spanish universities and the autonomous regions.

However, the government was concerned about committing to such a large investment due to the global financial crisis which erupted in late 2007 and was expected to impact the economic and financial stability of Spain in the near future. As a result, the funding of the CEI initiative mostly occurred in the form of loans (85%) and only a small contribution in the form of grants (15%). Moreover, as autonomous regions are responsible for the financial viability of the universities, loans had to be allocated through and under their supervision.

In July 2009 the first CEI call was launched (Boletin Oficial del Estado n.177). The first phase of the policy design was rather top-down and run by a small group of experts mostly from the academic community. Rather clear goals were set, producing a complex and detailed policy infrastructure. On the other hand, no alternative to the campus model was seriously explored, probably because this model was already perceived as successful in that it had been adopted by reputed European countries and was coherent with EC guidelines in the modernisation agenda (Casani et al., 2014). In turn, important contextual conditions were not sufficiently taken into account during this phase, such as the federal nature of the Spanish system and the implications of the global financial crisis.

² In a unitary system, only one type of higher education institution exists (universities).



Changes in the policy design for the calls in 2010 and 2011 followed a more incremental approach, with adaptation and integration following the suggestions from the actors and stakeholders involved as well as from experts in dedicated working groups.

Policy instruments used

The design process led to a combination of information and funding instruments. In October 2008, various stakeholders were *informed* about the goals and content of the reform through a public presentation, and in the following months several onsite meetings with universities and regional representatives were arranged in order to emphasise the importance of the project and spur university leadership to draft proposals for CEIs.

The calls envisaged the following steps (Rubiralta, 2010). First, *pre-selection*: aggregation proposals were submitted to a Technical Committee for pre-selection of plans for transformation into an International Campus of Excellence which, by comparing starting conditions to the final objective and specifying a strategy for conversion, presented reasonable chances of success in four years. Candidates submitting pre-selected proposals were granted a subsidy of up to €200,000 for the purpose of further preparation for the final selection.

In a second stage, shortlisted projects were *selected* by an International Assessment Committee. Three categories of projects were identified: i) CEIs proposals most closely comparable to the best projects produced in other countries; ii) CEIRs (Regional Campus of Excellence projects) - proposals viewed by the evaluators as incapable of realistically competing with the leading international campuses of excellence, while regarded strong enough to act as "regional" (in the European sense) drivers of knowledge; and iii) promising proposals that earned a positive appraisal, but not qualifying as CEI or CEIR. The selected CEIs and CEIRs were awarded grants coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Innovation and loans under agreement by the Ministry of Education with the devolved regions. Other Ministries and institutions could complement and incentivise changes in the universities in selected aspects to improve quality and excellence.³ Third, in the evaluation stage, qualifying CEIs and CEIRs had to implement and sustain the approved plan of action throughout the entire period, and had to produce a yearly report to be evaluated by an international evaluation committee assessing the stage of advancement and eventually granting the label of Campus of Excellence.

Overall, the total funding of the CEI programme in the period since launching the preparatory actions in 2008 until the last call in 2011 was \in 686.7 million, of which 84.5% was in loans and 15.5% as direct grants to universities (Delgado and Leon, 2015).

Implementation of the reform

Before the official launch of the first call in July 2009, the policy designers - the members of the General Secretariat for Universities - were involved in spreading

³ The sub-programmes designed were either R&D sub-programmes managed by the MICINN (Ministry of Science and Innovation) or other related initiatives which included, for example, accessibility with support from ONCE (Spanish National Organisation of the Blind).



the concepts of the policy among potential participants and making them aware of the potential call. At the same time, they also tried to convince the government to invest a considerable amount of resources in the form of grants. In turn, they received resources to invest 15% of the budget in the form of grants and 85% in the form of loans with a 0% interest rate reimbursable in 15 years. This form of funding obliged the Ministry of Education to establish bilateral agreements with all 17 autonomous regions, which are legally responsible for the financial stability of universities under their jurisdiction. Loans had to be transferred under the approval of and through the regions, which then emerged as important actors.

Despite initial scepticism of the loan form of funding, which was unusual for Spanish universities, almost all universities decided to participate in drafting a proposal. They became active not only in looking for other partners, but also in gaining the political support of regional representatives. Universities were autonomous in drafting the proposals within very broad parameters, and could design particular governance structures for each CEI. They were fully autonomous in managing the implementation of the proposal and the related funds, although under the financial supervision of the regions. This was to a large extent a bottomup process with moderate ministerial supervision, allowing flexibility, on-going changes and hence a moderate obligation to follow the policy design.

The proposals were pre-selected by a Technical Committee composed of national academic and research experts, and an assessment was made of the quality and excellence of the proposal and its potential to develop into a CEI within a four-year period.

After this first scrutiny, full proposals were developed by the leading coordinator (a university) with the support of associate members. The preparatory phase was particularly delicate for internal relationships within the universities. The governance of Spanish universities has traditionally been consensual, egalitarian and weak strategically. The leadership had limited formal powers and legitimation to make strategic decisions, such as which activities of the university to prioritise. On the contrary, the CEI initiative was asking universities to signal which parts were flagships in which they wanted to invest. Understandably, in many cases this was contentious and raised internal debate. While for the sake of drafting the proposal university leadership was legitimised by the external stimulus of such a selection, on the other hand only in some cases was there a sufficiently strong commitment of the university leadership to provide long-term support to the CEIs. In most cases, the CEI budget was limited to the loans and grants, whereas crucial decisions such as recruitment and management of general funds remained under the authority of the universities. This contributed to making CEIs an appendix of universities managed "like any other university project", although an important one (Ministerio de Educacion, 2015), rather than a 'Trojan horse' for virtuous practices within the university or a 'butterfly' on which activities and key resources had to gradually move.

Full proposals were selected by an International Assessment Committee of nine experts (one-third renewed each year), whose profile was proposed by the Ministry of Education after agreement with the General Conference on University Policy, a body formed by university officials from each Spanish region. Candidates included the initial details of the proposed cluster, its final objectives and the strategy by which they were to be achieved. They had to specify the partners involved in the aggregation and the governance structure.



All CEI candidate proposals were presented at a public event attracting widespread media coverage held on the day before the official assessment session. Each presentation consisted of a video, a ten-minute talk, explanatory hand-outs and promotional material.

The official call set some generic criteria for the selection of the proposal, leaving quite a lot of discretion to the International Assessment Committee (Boletin, 2009). While the original idea of the policy design was to identify only Campuses of International Excellence and aggregations were expected in few locations, during the selection phase it became clear that a very selective approach would have been problematic. In fact, the number of proposals and the degree of involvement was large and much higher than expected. There was concern that a strongly selective approach would have created discontent among excluded universities and regions, as well as result in a waste of potentially valuable initiatives. Hence, it was decided that different categories of projects were to be awarded. Also proposals with a European ambition of visibility and quality were to be taken into consideration. In turn, the vertical differentiation dimension of the reform (spurring an elite) was gradually softened, because of the pressure by universities (and related regional authorities). The CEI turned into a very comprehensive initiative, and the 32 projects awarded involved almost all universities and research centres, as well as a large number of public and private actors (Casani et al., 2014).

An international committee evaluated the progress made by each CEI on a yearly basis through the analysis of a progress report and the website. It was then decided whether or not the campus had gained a level of international or regional excellence and was worthy of the CEI or CEIR label.

The regions had frequent interactions with the government, as well as strong veto power in the allocation of funds. In fact, when Spain instituted the Stability Pact and the interest rate on the loans was gradually raised from 0% to 5.67% in 2011, the regions became more concerned about the financial burden and the risks related to loans and exerted their veto power on new loans.⁴

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback

The campuses had to present a yearly progress report to an international evaluation committee composed of two members of the General Secretariat for Universities, one acting as Technical Secretary, and six foreign experts.

Each campus was evaluated by two foreign experts, first with an independent evaluation, and finally by reaching a consensual final evaluation with the support of the Technical Secretary of the Commission. The main task was to produce recommendations for improvement and assess whether the campus had reached a standard of international (or European) excellence, and eventually assign an official label of CEI or CEIR.

The progress reports had to include: 1) a summary of progress (up to 4 pages); 2) quantitative and qualitative descriptions of activities using indicators, use of resources and milestones on the four strategic axes of the programme, which are i) teaching improvement and adaptation to the European Higher Education Area, ii) scientific improvement and knowledge transfer, iii) development of a Social Campus

⁴ Some interviewees also report governmental pressure on the regions to limit universities' financial position and not sign new loans.



Model and iv) interaction with the territorial and business environment (up to 10 pages, excluding tables); 3) governance of the campus (up to 3 pages). The evaluation was only based on official reports and the content of the websites, with no visits in situ, as well as on the intended goals of the CEI programme. Key criteria identified for the assessment of the CEI were: i) the existence of strategic other universities and knowledge-related aggregation with agents; ii) internationalisation level and initiatives to increase the international visibility and recognition of the best CEI; iii) specialisation, based on their own strengths; iv) interaction with the business and territorial environment contributing to their socioeconomic development. The international committee members assessed the progress report by preparing a one-page summary evaluation including the following sections: general comments, strengths, weaknesses, potential impact, recommendations, score, and decision proposal. The scoring was on a three level scale: A (Good Progress), no need for further action besides sending annual reports; B (Reasonable Progress), needs to address specific weaknesses and follow recommendations in the next Progress Report; C (Low Progress), removal of the CEI label. Following a positive assessment, the CEI or CEIR label was granted to the joint initiatives and aggregations developed by the actors involved in the proposal and located on the campus (or campuses) which was the object of the proposal.

The lack of meetings between evaluators, representatives of the universities and stakeholders was arguably a major limitation of the evaluation procedure, especially regarding the capability to evaluate integration with the territory and the technology transfer progress, which are hardly captured by standard indicators alone. Moreover, there was no instrument to enforce the committee recommendations, apart from the risk of not receiving the label of excellence in the next evaluation. In practice, none of the selected campuses failed the target of the 'excellence' label.

Important changes in the context for the reform

The emergence and development of the policy is deeply related to events occurring in the broader environment, and affecting the Spanish HE system and its relationship with Spanish society.

As in other European HE systems, the increasing global competition between countries and universities, and in parallel the recognition of the role of knowledge for societal and economic development, has put the Spanish university system under pressure to modernise. The Government of Spain introduced a new legal framework in order to implement the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) guidelines and align with the Modernisation Agenda for Universities produced by the European Commission. The EU2015 strategy and the CEI programme were key policy reforms to implement this change.

At the same time, the financial and then economic global crisis impacted Spain in a particularly strong manner, affecting the CEI initiative. In particular, the funding available was much less than initially expected, occurred mostly via loans, and the interest rate was gradually increased. Such financial constraints impacted the policy implementation and its overall success (Casani et al., 2014).

Moreover, in the same period when the CEI initiative was designed and launched, Spanish universities were involved in the adoption of the Bologna Process guidelines for the organisation of teaching courses. This process required a lot of effort from their side, and was accompanied by student protests. As a matter of



fact, part of the CEI resources was allocated for the implementation of the Bologna Process (under the umbrella of the EHEA initiative). Coexistence with this challenging process arguably limited the time and effort that universities and their leadership could devote to the CEI initiative, which was itself a very ambitious and time-consuming task.

Achievements and effects

Some but not all of the operational goals were achieved. The initiative was able to attract a high degree of attention from the universities, which all participated in the competitive bid as leading or associate partners. Universities actively competed and collaborated with each other, and university leadership was able, under the external pressure of the initiative, to reflect strategically and identify institutional flagships. The campuses have been established as well as positively evaluated by the assessment committee and they are still active.

The relationship dimension of structural reform has been partly achieved. Several observers, from different points of view, recognise that as a consequence of the policy, the universities are now interacting more with each other and with external partners, such as ministries, regional authorities and private organisations. On the other hand, not all initiatives implied aggregations between different universities, as several were led by one university alone. Moreover, differentiation and specialisation only occurred to a limited extent, as the resources available for the campus were not large, and departments and faculties initially not involved in the proposals were often involved later during the implementation. Finally, the campus existed physically only in some projects, whereas initiatives involving universities located in different cities did not have and did not create a new common campus, but rather added the CEI label to their existing locations and facilities.

The vertical differentiation dimension of the structural reform has not been achieved. The identification of an elite group of institutions for the sake of global visibility and ranking positioning was used by policy proponents (mostly academics occupying political roles) as leverage to stimulate interest among universities rather than representing a key priority. During the implementation phase this goal emerged as the most politically problematic, because of the opposition of universities (and related regional authorities) whose proposals were not deemed as excellent at first glance. As a consequence, the elitist approach was radically changed into a rather distributive approach, involving small universities and peripheral regions as well.

Arguably, a number of contingent factors can also explain why the relationship and the vertical structural reform dimensions have not been fully achieved, most prominently: i) the lack of resources and their form (mostly loans), along with the rising interest rates; ii) the co-occurrence of the Bologna Process adaptation at the same time, which actually steered part of the CEI resources in an "adaptation to the EHEA" direction; and iii) the fact that many additional ambitious goals were set at the same time which partly competed for universities' efforts, such as aiming at both scientific excellence and regional economic relevance.

The initiative was expected to reach its goals by 2015, and an official evaluation formally recognised that the goals have been reached and campuses were awarded an 'excellence' label. Beyond that, it is probably fair to say that more time is needed to fully grasp the success of the initiative. Moreover, changes occurred in



this period of time that may not be only related to the CEI initiative, but also to processes already occurring in the Spanish system, or at a global scale.

Indeed, international orientation has also improved regarding teaching offers with more bilingual courses (Spanish and English), and the positions of *top* Spanish universities in international rankings as well as their scientific output (+17% on average) and level of internationalisation regarding scientific collaboration (+12%) increased between 2009 and 2014. On the other hand, improvement was reported at almost all Spanish universities, not only top institutions or those more directly involved in the CEI initiative, with a mean growth of +22% in scientific output and +12% in international collaboration.

As previously mentioned, specialisation only occurred to a limited extent, so that Spanish universities have largely maintained their generalist orientation.

The governance of universities has not been affected by the CEI experience, which relies on its own bodies or on the university governance structure (in case of single university CEIs) (Casani et al., 2014). On the other hand, internal re-organisation of departments and faculties, as well as their logistics, have occurred in some universities thanks to the CEI initiative.

Interviewees agree that the most valuable result of the CEI was to increase the visibility of the universities in society by forcing them to communicate with actors at the national and local level, and to emphasise universities' third mission and place them for the first time at the centre of the regional debate on social and economic development. University leaders were in fact encouraged to look for local political and economic partners as a precondition for success in the application. While in some cases universities relied on pre-existing linkages, in other cases new contacts have been established with some durable gains, such as more contract funds, internships, and public-private partnerships.

It is still too early to evaluate the extent to which the obligation to repay loans will burden university budgets in the coming years (Casani et al., 2014).

The reform has been generally accepted by various stakeholders, although the new conservative government resulting from the 2012 election has been rather sceptical of the initiative and has intentions to abandon it. The universities involved in the CEI are opposed to this decision, and there is an on-going discussion about whether and how to give continuity to the campus initiative.

Summary

This case study described and analysed the International Centre of Excellence Initiative in Spain, a case of vertical differentiation, in the period 2008-2014. The CEI initiative was expected to reduce the fragmentation of the HE system, to open universities to society, and increase their specialisation and internationalisation as well as improve their governance. Universities had to draft proposals for strategic partnerships and aggregations among themselves and other private and public institutions around a common project and campus. The accepted proposals received a total of €686.7 million in the form of loans (85%) and grants (15%) under the financial supervision of autonomous regions. During the implementation phase, the vertical differentiation dimension was blurred towards a more comprehensive approach by also including small and peripheral regions and universities, and introducing Campuses of Regional Excellence as well. All the selected proposals have gained an excellence label after a formal evaluation procedure, and the reform



has met the objective of increasing visibility of the higher education sector in society. On the other hand, the overall impact of the reform was limited due to two main factors, namely: i) the economic crisis that occurred after the launch of the reform which reduced the amount of available funds, and ii) by the limited involvement of crucial stakeholders during the design phase of the reform.



Interviewees

Fernando Casani – Professor at the Autonomous University Madrid; Executive Director of the Association CEI UAM-CSIC; author of papers examining the Campus of Excellence Initiative

John Goddard – Professor at the University of Newcastle (UK) – expert of the International Evaluation Committee.

Javier Vidal – Professor at the University of Leon - Director General for Universities in the Ministry of Education and Science 2006-2007; author of papers on Spanish higher education

Luis Delgado – Deputy Director General of Modernisation and Internationalisation of Universities, Ministry of Education 2009 - 2012. Technical Secretary of the International Assessment Committee for the selection of the proposals and of the international evaluation committee

José Manuel Martínez Sierra – Professor at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University and Faculty Associate of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies; former Director General for International Relations, Ministry of Education and President of the International Assessment Committee for the selection of the proposals (2009).

Paz Suárez Rendueles - Professor of the University of Oviedo and Vice-rector for Research and Campus of Regional Excellence "ad Futurum"

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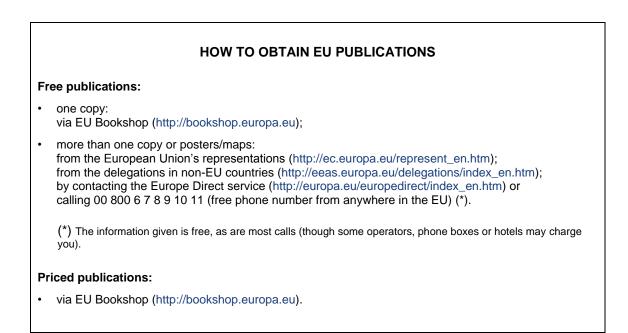
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