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Higher education policy in practice: digitalization and the governance reform in an Italian university (1988-2021)

Leonardo Piromalli 

Department of Communication and Social Research, 'Sapienza' University, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

Academic research has extensively inspected the changing modes of governance in higher education systems through systemic and comparative research. This article aims to investigate these processes from a different perspective and vantage point. In particular, the translation of (trans)national instances into local micro-policy and practice is examined by historicising the social construction of digitalisation as a policy field in an Italian university over three decades (1988–2021). The emergence of knowledge and power arrangements across the complex entanglement of broader cultural history and local microhistory is thus examined. A hybrid configuration emerges in the observed university that features aspects from both its legacy bureaucratic mode of governance and the entrepreneurial paradigm. These institutional dynamics are consistent with wider systemic patterns in Italian higher education. The divergence between planned policy change and experienced realities is thus confirmed.

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Introduction

We were upset when the university governance decided to outsource IT management. ... They have failed to recognise our professional value—the value they've got in their own technical community. ... First, they tell us that we're good. Then, when it comes to investing, they outsource to someone else. ... That is, you do your job, and you're good at it. Then, when you've finished with your gig, they fire you, and hire someone from the market. (IT Specialist L)

Struggles over meaning-making are found today in all realms of social life, including higher education. Being both educational agencies and organisations, universities today host both collective debates on the future of societies, and self-reflection efforts by professionals. Questions are raised by social actors that are as much about ethics and values as they are about experience and practice. How should a university be governed, and by whom? What kind of equilibrium should there be between the State and the market? More broadly, what could the purpose of higher education be? These concerns weave together (trans)national narratives and discourses, systemic and institutional

policy-making, and the lives and experience of social actors, along with power relations, knowledge and social configurations.¹

The global landscape of higher education is changing today, as higher education systems around the world are experiencing similar tensions and dilemmas.² Extensive scholarly research has highlighted ongoing processes of convergence in higher education systems towards the Anglo-Saxon neomanagement mode of governance and cultural frame.³ This paradigm posits (higher) education as a pivot for economic development. While the State is given a marginal role in ensuring compliance with market rules and assessing outputs, universities are expected to compete with each other in order to provide increasingly efficient, cost-effective and flexible education.⁴ This is the dominant mode of governance in western higher education today, although historical legacies and contextual specificities frequently result in local rearticulations and trajectories.⁵

The policy field of digitalisation provides a fertile vantage point for exploring these processes.⁶ On the one hand, university policy on digitalisation in western countries is still influenced by national governments, which provide their own framework of means and/or goals and put forward their specific idea of higher education.⁷ On the other hand, private global edtech companies and heterogeneous digital ‘power networks’ in higher education exert significant social and cultural effects, and constantly challenge state regulations.⁸ Not least as a result of the ‘pandemic acceleration’,⁹ the policy field of digitalisation has thus become increasingly multiscalar and central on the economic, social and cultural levels.

Continuity and change in the modes of governance in higher education systems are thoroughly studied by scholars in order to observe broader social processes that pertain to the very relations between the State and the market in contemporary societies. These studies allow for analysis of the shifting patterns of national and global higher education

¹Christine Musselin, *La Longue Marche des Universités Françaises* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

²John Clarke and Janet Newman, *The Managerial State: Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare* (London: Sage, 1997).

³Guy Neave and Frans van Vught, *Prometheus Bound: The Changing Relationship between Government and Higher Education in Western Europe* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991); Clarke and Newman, *The Managerial State*; Guy Neave, ‘The Evaluative State Reconsidered’, *European Journal of Education* 33, no. 3 (1998): 265–84; Romuald Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education: The Fabrication of the Homo Academicus Europeanus?* (Cham: Springer, 2016).

⁴J.P. Olsen, ‘Administrative Reform and Theories of Organization’, in *Organising Governance: Governing Organizations*, ed. C. Campbell and B. G. Peters (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 233–54; Neave, ‘The Evaluative State Reconsidered’.

⁵Åse Gornitzka and Peter Maassen, ‘Hybrid Steering Approaches with Respect to European Higher Education’, *Higher Education Policy* 13, no. 3 (2000): 267–85; Roberto Moscati et al., ‘Marketization and Managerialization of Higher Education Policies in a Comparative Perspective’, in *Restructuring Welfare Governance*, ed. Klenk Tanja and Pavolini Emmanuele (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015), 46–72.

⁶Neil Selwyn, *Digital Technology and the Contemporary University: Degrees of Digitisation* (London: Routledge, 2014); José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn De Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Paolo Landri, *Digital Governance of Education: Technology, Standards and Europeanisation of Education* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁷Giliberto Capano, ‘Government Continues to Do Its Job: A Comparative Study of Governance Shifts in the Higher Education Sector’, *Public Administration* 89, no. 4 (2011): 1622–42.

⁸van Dijck, Poell and De Waal, *The Platform Society*; Mathias Decuypere and Paolo Landri, ‘Governing by Visual Shapes: University Rankings, Digital Education Platforms and Cosmologies of Higher Education’, *Critical Studies in Education* 62, no. 1 (2021): 17–33; Ben Williamson, ‘Making Markets through Digital Platforms: Pearson, Edu-Business, and the (e) Valuation of Higher Education’, *Critical Studies in Education* 62, no. 1 (2021): 50–66.

⁹Lucas Cone et al., ‘Pandemic Acceleration: Covid-19 and the Emergency Digitalization of European Education’, *European Educational Research Journal* 21, no. 5 (2021): 845–68; Sotiria Grek and Paolo Landri, ‘Editorial: Education in Europe and the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *European Educational Research Journal* 20, no. 4 (2021): 393–402.

systems over time, as well as long-standing frictions between public and private players in higher education. A broad range of studies deploys systemic, diachronic and often comparative vantage points and methodologies for observing these tensions and transitions in national and global higher education systems.¹⁰

However, fewer studies have been devoted to investigating the processes of policy enactment in higher education and the translation of (trans)national reforms into local practices.¹¹ Such an approach could help better to understand what happens after planned change is initiated in Europeanised higher education, and what its consequences are.¹²

This article aims to investigate the translation of (trans)national instances into local micro-policy and practice by historicising the social construction of digitalisation as a policy field in an Italian university over three decades (1988–2021). This will allow an exploration of the continuity and change patterns in Italian and European higher education with a particular focus on the complex interplay between local microhistories and broader national and transnational cultural history in the governance of higher education.

Theoretical framework

Two approaches to the study of the social construction of knowledge will be interwoven in this research: (i) the neoinstitutional approach to decision-making in organisations; and (ii) the historicising critical policy analysis framework.

The neoinstitutional and constructivist approach to decision-making in organisations focuses on how knowledge and narratives travel between heterogeneous scenarios and are translated from global arenas to local contexts.¹³ Ideas and artefacts are understood as ‘tokens’¹⁴ that are constantly interpreted, translated, reconstructed and remade in local contexts. ‘Successful’ ideas move by translating the interests of the actors in the network, and possibly co-evolve with them. The key concept is that of ‘translation’, to which Science and Technology Studies scholars refer as ‘a displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents’.¹⁵ After being ‘disembedded’ from their original context, ideas become ‘packages’ that travel across spaces and times until they are re-embedded in a local context and ‘edited’ according to their particular frame of

¹⁰Burton R. Clark, *The Higher Education System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Neave and Vught, *Prometheus Bound*; Clarke and Newman, *The Managerial State: Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare*; Michael Dobbins, ‘Convergent or Divergent Europeanization? An Analysis of Higher Education Governance Reforms in France and Italy’, *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83, no. 1 (2017): 177–99.

¹¹Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education*; Elizabeth Alexander, Wendy Phillips and Dharm Kapletia, ‘Shifting Logics: Limitations on the Journey from “State” to “Market” Logic in UK Higher Education’, *Policy & Politics* 46, no. 4 (2018): 551–69; Gioia Pompili and Assunta Viteritti, ‘Challenges in Higher Education: Teaching Innovation between Experimentation and Standardization’, *Scuola Democratica*, no. 3 (2020): 417–36.

¹²Martin Lawn and Sotiria Grek, *Europeanising Education: Governing a New Policy Space* (London: Symposium, 2012); Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education*; Dorthe Staunæs, Katja Brøgger and John Benedicto Krejsler, ‘How Reforms Morph as They Move: Performative Approaches to Education Reforms and Their Un/Intended Effects’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31, no. 5 (2018): 345–52.

¹³Barbara Czarniawska and Bernward Joerges, ‘Travels of Ideas’, in *Translating Organizational Change*, ed. Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 13–48.

¹⁴Bruno Latour, ‘On Technical Mediation’, *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 2 (1994): 29–64.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 32.

reference.¹⁶ Therefore, translation processes are never linear nor complete, but rather contingent and reversible. Hence, policy-making is intended as a messy and contested process of ongoing negotiation and meaning-making in which anticipated outcomes and experienced realities are often divergent.¹⁷

The historicising critical policy analysis framework is a multi-theoretical form of policy analysis that aims at diachronically investigating the social construction of knowledge through power settlements using methodologies embedded in cultural history and microhistory.¹⁸ On the one hand, writing long-term cultural histories¹⁹ through a critical policy analysis approach can help shed light on the discursive production – or disruption or reorganisation – of knowledge through power. On the other hand, the microhistorical approach²⁰ to historiography enables thorough and ‘thick’ explorations of the fluid entanglement between a single event and wider social and cultural processes. Scholars interweave these methodologies to examine how knowledge and power relations emerge in social life. By interrogating the complex interaction between long-term historical and global narratives and the local and situated practices of people living in history, this approach allows for the unravelling of the construction of potentially unequal power arrangements in the interplay of systemic forces and individual actors struggling over meaning-making processes.²¹

Higher education in Italy and international patterns

Although extensively studied by scholars, the historical trajectories and distinctive features of the Italian higher education system still remain ‘a mystery for many observers’.²² Scholarship has frequently referred to the Italian higher education system as a particular case of the ‘continental’²³ or ‘procedural’²⁴ mode of governance of higher education. In this model, relations between the State and universities are governed through centralist and ‘control-and-command’ logics, wherein ‘the actors involved (regardless of whether they are public or private) are free to choose their own goals, but in order to pursue those goals they are obliged to abide by the procedural regulations issued, controlled, and enforced by public institutions’.²⁵

¹⁶Barbara Czarniawska and Bernward Joerges, ‘Winds of Organizational Change: How Ideas Translate into Objects and Actions’, in *Research in the Sociology of Organizations: Studies of Organizations in the European Traditions*, ed. Samuel Bacharach, Pasquale Gagliardi and Bryan Mundell (London: JAI Press, 1995), 171–210.

¹⁷Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón, *Translating Organizational Change* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

¹⁸Curtis A. Brewer, ‘Historicizing in Critical Policy Analysis: The Production of Cultural Histories and Microhistories’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27, no. 3 (2014): 273–88.

¹⁹Cultural history aims at interpreting past events to unveil the underlying cultural and social forces presumed to be in operation. It particularly focuses on history from below, history of everyday life, history of material culture, history of *mentalités*, and the emphasis on the agency and creativity of historical subjects. See Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (London: Wiley, 2019).

²⁰Microhistory is understood as an attempt to illuminate vast social and cultural issues through the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object whose agency is stressed in the face of the broader underlying forces of history. See Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, ‘Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It’, *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

²¹Sue Winton and Curtis A. Brewer, ‘People for Education: A Critical Policy History’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27, no. 9 (2014): 1091–109.

²²Dobbins, ‘Convergent or Divergent Europeanization?’, 188.

²³Burton R. Clark, *Academic Power in Italy: Bureaucracy and Oligarchy in a National University System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

²⁴Capano, ‘Government Continues to Do Its Job’.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 1627.

The historical peculiarity of the Italian higher education system lies in the ‘bureau-professional compromise’²⁶ that has been singled out as the driving force underlying its early development and trajectory. As famously argued by Burton Clark, the Italian higher education system stood ‘well down toward the oligarchic extreme, since its prestigious and powerful national academic oligarchs traditionally have been more than a match for a relatively impotent bureaucracy’.²⁷ On the one hand, the State bureaucracy formally imposed centralisation through the zealous enunciation of tools and procedures to be adopted all across the system to regulate the design of academic programmes and system parameters.²⁸ On the other hand, the effective *locus* of power in higher education has long been internal to the system,²⁹ because actual decision-making has traditionally happened through informal bargaining between interest groups.³⁰ Internal personnel matters have been regulated by ‘academic guilds’ whose role has been ‘far stronger . . . than that of the state’³¹ in steering the higher education system.³² Intermediary structures between State and academic oligarchy have been chronically weak,³³ as Rectors themselves mostly acted as mediators between diverse ‘academic tribes’.³⁴ As poignantly argued by Giliberto Capano, ‘[u]niversities as autonomous institutions simply did not exist. . . . In fact, they were not in a position to decide anything of any importance themselves.’³⁵

While mass access to universities during the 1960s did not result in structural change in the governance logics or organisational culture, significant systemic reforms in Italian higher education were developed in the 1990s. These reforms aimed at shifting the balance of the system towards a ‘steering-at-a-distance’ mode of governance of the State over academic activities. University autonomy was thus introduced with regard to governance, finance and teaching processes, along with a Ministry for University and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST) and some early quality assurance tools. These policies were supposed to mitigate the (formal) dominance of the State over universities, limit the power of the academic oligarchy, and steer universities towards a greater exposure to external social worlds and partnerships. However, gaps arose between planned change and enacted reforms.³⁶ Indeed, these reforms had been dropped top-down with no clarification of their broader systemic objectives, consultation with academics or

²⁶Clarke and Newman, *The Managerial State*.

²⁷Clark, *The Higher Education System*, 143.

²⁸Capano, ‘Government Continues to Do Its Job’; Dobbins, ‘Convergent or Divergent Europeanization?’.

²⁹Matteo Turri, ‘The Difficult Transition of the Italian University System: Growth, Underfunding and Reforms’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 40, no. 1 (2016): 83–106.

³⁰Stefano Boffo, Pierre Dubois and Roberto Moscati, ‘Changes in University Governance in France and in Italy’, *Tertiary Education and Management* 14, no. 1 (2008): 13–26; Damiano De Rosa, ‘Hic Sunt Leones – When Ideas Don’t Meet Policies: Italy and the Reform of Higher Education’, *Anali Hrvatskog Politološkog Društva: Časopis Za Politologiju* 9, no. 1 (2012): 359–69; Moscati et al., ‘Marketization and Managerialization of Higher Education Policies in a Comparative Perspective’.

³¹Moscati et al., ‘Marketization and Managerialization of Higher Education Policies in a Comparative Perspective’, 46–7.

³²Clark, *The Higher Education System*.

³³Rosaria Lumino, Dora Gambardella and Emiliano Grimaldi, ‘The Evaluation Turn in the Higher Education System: Lessons from Italy’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 49, no. 2 (2017): 87–107.

³⁴Paul R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories* (London: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

³⁵Giliberto Capano, ‘Looking for Serendipity: The Problematical Reform of Government within Italy’s Universities’, *Higher Education* 55, no. 4 (2008): 481–504.

³⁶Edoardo Ongaro and Giovanni Valotti, ‘Public Management Reform in Italy: Explaining the Implementation Gap’, *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 21, no. 2 (2008): 174–204.

opportunities for experimentation and learning.³⁷ Hence, aiming at preserving the traditional life of the system, academic guilds put up a resolute resistance to these ‘centralised decentralisation’³⁸ attempts, and ‘outsmarted’³⁹ the reform via local circumventions and rearticulations. Whether due to the lack of State capacity to engage academics in the reform process or to the resilience of the academic oligarchy, the neomanagerial narrative could penetrate Italian universities only on a purely ideological rather than a pragmatic and cultural level.

In fact, Italian governments pioneered university autonomy in Europe. Until the end of the 1990s, European policy either neglected the issue of (higher) education, or framed it according to the Humboldtian vision.⁴⁰ It was not until the 2000s that European governance launched a broad reform process through the Bologna Declaration, the Lisbon Agenda and other communications concerning the harmonisation of European higher education. University autonomy and quality assurance in higher education thus became a transnational ‘best practice’, as universities were expected to play a novel role as drivers of economic competitiveness in Europe. These reforms introduced a ‘Europeanisation’ process in education systems⁴¹ and brought significant change in the governance architecture of European higher education systems, which began to converge towards the Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurial paradigm.

These European initiatives reinforced the university autonomy policy trends in Italy. In fact, they resulted in the opening of a ‘Pandora’s box’ of autonomy.⁴² In the 2000s, Italian universities exploited the (regulated) deregulation⁴³ phase in higher education policy-making to multiply their activities through the establishment of new degree courses and organisational forms. An anarchic situation thus emerged that was tentatively buffered by the State through the introduction of new regulations⁴⁴ such as constraints on the creation of degree courses and the establishment of a national agency for the evaluation of universities and research (ANVUR). Indeed, this spiral of centralisation–decentralisation–recentralisation had not really brought any effective change in the governance of the system.⁴⁵

³⁷Boffo, Dubois and Moscati, ‘Changes in University Governance in France and in Italy’; Roberto Moscati, ‘Autonomy for What? The University Mission in a Centralised Higher Education System – the Case of Italy’, *International Trends in University Governance* 20, no. 2/3 (2014): 89–104; Giliberto Capano, Marino Regini and Matteo Turri, *Changing Governance in Universities: Italian Higher Education in Comparative Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Giliberto Capano, ‘Policy Design Spaces in Reforming Governance in Higher Education: The Dynamics in Italy and the Netherlands’, *Higher Education* 75, no. 4 (2018): 675–94.

³⁸Capano, ‘Looking for Serendipity’, 486.

³⁹Michael Dobbins and Christoph Knill, ‘Italy: The “Outsmarted” State?’, in *Higher Education Governance and Policy Change in Western Europe: International Challenges to Historical Institutions*, ed. Michael Dobbins and Christoph Knill (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 79–109.

⁴⁰Giliberto Capano and Simona Piattoni, ‘From Bologna to Lisbon: The Political Uses of the Lisbon “Script” in European Higher Education Policy’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 18, no. 4 (2011): 584–606.

⁴¹Lawn and Grek, *Europeanising Education*; Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education*.

⁴²Gianfranco Rebori and Matteo Turri, ‘Governance in Higher Education: An Analysis of the Italian Experience’, in *International Perspectives on the Governance of Higher Education: Alternative Frameworks for Coordination*, ed. Huisman Jeroen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 39–58.

⁴³Michael Dobbins and Christoph Knill, ‘Higher Education Governance in France, Germany, and Italy: Change and Variation in the Impact of Transnational Soft Governance’, *Policy and Society* 36, no. 1 (2017): 67–88.

⁴⁴Emanuela Reale and Bianca Poti, ‘Italy: Local Policy Legacy and Moving to an “In Between” Configuration’, in *University Governance: Western European Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Catherine Paradeise et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2009), 77–102.

⁴⁵Dobbins, ‘Convergent or Divergent Europeanization?’.

Further reformist efforts were put forward in the 2010s. In particular, Law 240/2010 (the so-called ‘Gelmini Law’) – which was anticipated by Decree Law 112/2008 (the so-called ‘Brunetta Law’) – introduced new grammars, repertoires and financial levers that were more overtly inspired by the neomanagerial paradigm and the ‘steering-at-a-distance’ model.⁴⁶ Narratives (efficiency, accountability, quality assurance) and tools (performance indicators, economic rewards and sanctions, ex-post evaluation, cost-cutting, outsourcing, university managers) were imported from the managerial world. These reforms aimed at positioning the State as an ‘evaluator’ of academic activity, and universities as ‘entrepreneurial’ and goal-oriented agencies.⁴⁷ However, these policies did not have the cultural and organisational success expected.⁴⁸

Ambiguity and contradictory patterns can thus be singled out in the historical development of the Italian higher education system. On the one hand, it explicitly converges with European trends towards the predominant Anglo-Saxon model. On the other, the full achievement of this process is apparently hindered by local legacy and historical features (such as the traditional resilience and resistance to change in Italian higher education,⁴⁹ and the poor capacity of the State to attend to the enactment of the policy).⁵⁰ Thus, elements from both the ‘procedural’ mode of governance and the ‘steering-at-a-distance’ model seemingly coexist in the hybrid governance of contemporary Italian higher education.

Methodological engagements

I will attempt to unravel the unstable and precarious process of social and cultural construction of a policy field in an Italian university over three decades by focusing on the entwinement of global discourses and local contexts, as well as collective history and individual experience. The empirical field chosen for this research is Italy’s largest higher education institution by student enrolment – the Sapienza⁵¹ university in Rome – and the policy field of digitalisation.

To collect the required empirical data, I performed analysis of documents and interviews.⁵² The analysis of documents that has been carried out on Sapienza’s archives and website enabled the knitting together of a historically grounded narrative on the construction of digitalisation at Sapienza. The interviews both contributed to the recognition of historical trajectories at Sapienza, and provided elements for tracing everyday

⁴⁶Martina Dal Molin, Matteo Turri and Tommaso Agasisti, ‘New Public Management Reforms in the Italian Universities: Managerial Tools, Accountability Mechanisms or Simply Compliance?’, *International Journal of Public Administration* 40, no. 3 (2017): 256–69; Lumino, Gambardella and Grimaldi, ‘The Evaluation Turn in the Higher Education System: Lessons from Italy’.

⁴⁷Neave, ‘The Evaluative State Reconsidered’.

⁴⁸Capano, Regini and Turri, *Changing Governance in Universities*.

⁴⁹Clark, *Academic Power in Italy*.

⁵⁰De Rosa, ‘Hic Sunt Leones’; Turri, ‘The Difficult Transition of the Italian University System’.

⁵¹Sapienza university has been chosen as an empirical field due to its exemplarity. It is the public, non-virtual and non-confederate university with the highest number of enrolled students in Europe (119,985 enrolled students; data: academic year 2020/2021). As a reference, the next largest Italian universities by enrolled students are Bologna (90,291 enrolled students; data: academic year 2020/2021) and Naples (74,983 enrolled students; data: academic year 2020/2021). Data are drawn from the Higher Education Data Portal by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR, 2022).

⁵²A total of 16 privileged witnesses have been interviewed who worked in Sapienza as governance staff (7) or IT specialists (9). The average duration of interviews was 62 minutes. All excerpts from archive material and interviews have been translated from Italian to English by the author. Pseudonymisation was applied on the research partners’ names to mitigate the possibility that contextual information provided could lead to ‘deductive disclosure’ of their identities. See Karen Kaiser, ‘Protecting Respondent Confidentiality in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 11 (2009): 1632–41.

organisational life, cultural visions and implicit theories underlying policy-making and organisational activity in the IT field at Sapienza, 1988–2021.

The social construction of digitalisation as a policy field at Sapienza, 1988–2021

How do global ideas become local actions and institutions? What might emerge out of the interaction between systemic tensions and local practices? These issues will be addressed through an exploration of the social construction of digitalisation as a policy field at the Sapienza university over three decades (1988–2021).

Tinkering: practising digitalisation from below (1988–2006)

Until the mid-1980s, Sapienza was governed through analogue communication. Piles of paper travelled in and out of the university as crucial intermediaries for teaching, governance, administration and communication processes.

The first step in the construction of digitalisation as a policy field at Sapienza was taken in 1987, with the foundation of the Interdepartmental Centre for Scientific Computing (CICS). CICS was composed of academics in computer science and engineering who collaborated ‘from below’ on digitalisation projects at Sapienza. For example, CICS introduced an ‘electronic record book’ in 1988 for the registration of exams and the enrolment in degree courses at Sapienza. This innovative project was reported by an important Italian newspaper:

The ‘electronic record book project’ is finally underway. As of this year, it will be possible for current students to enrol without having to queue in front of the secretarial desks. There will be 1,000 terminals to record exams and 50 self-service electronic desks... This ‘magic wand’, which promises simple administrative procedures and shorter queues... will be used to make it easier for students to enrol.⁵³

This project was achieved as a collaboration between Sapienza and the (then) public company Enidata. A few Sapienza professors still remember this system:

It was a nightmare. You had a so-called ‘laptop’ that actually... weighed several kilos... big, really big. And this thing had a small printer with which you printed out the results of the exam, and you gave them on the spot to the student. Then you would take it back to your office and connect with the modem to the central systems for uploading these results. (IT Specialist H)

The professor had to transmit the grades with a modem that they had to attach wherever they could. It was a total failure. (IT Specialist D)

Additional IT projects were introduced in the first half of the 1990s by the CICS. Notwithstanding the half-hearted engagement by central governance, CICS succeeded during this period in laying the foundations for Sapienza’s interconnectivity and communication between faculties and professionals. By 1995, it had successfully set up network infrastructure, a University Information System, an email system for professors and governance, and a digital library system.

⁵³Marina Mastroluca, ‘Ecco il Libretto Scaccia-Code’, *L’Unità*, July 27, 1988, 20.

It was not until the late 1990s that the Sapienza governance actively intervened in the issue of digitalisation. CICS was reorganised, and its functions were distributed between two bodies. The Interuniversity Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Research and Teaching (CITICoRD) was in charge of web services and e-learning, while Applications and Information Technologies of Sapienza (SATIS) managed the web portal, telephony, email messaging and other services. Notably, CITICoRD was an academic centre, while SATIS was an administrative body.

Several digitalisation initiatives were rolled out in this phase. For example, an ‘e-Learning project’ was launched in 2002 using the Moodle Learning Management System. Furthermore, an Italian software house was commissioned to build an online platform for the management of students’ careers. Moreover, in the wake of the transparency requirements introduced with teaching autonomy reforms in Italian universities, Sapienza contracted out to a software house the development of a management and reporting platform for professors and the governance.

These early projects were developed through tinkering by in-house professionals and occasional outsourcing. There was not yet any kind of full-scale governance of digitalisation at Sapienza. As reported by many IT specialists, they felt a strong commitment on both a professional and a personal level:

It all began with shared concern and a strong desire to do things together. ... It was a very happy period ... with a strong harmony in working together, because seeing each other every week also produces significant personal relations. So, when we needed something urgently, we ... just did it – in the evening, on Saturdays and Sundays. (IT Specialist B)

Once, during the Christmas holidays, the server went down because the crawl space underneath flooded. ... I had to go there and pull the switch. (IT Specialist D)

There was no such thing as a disaster recovery plan. ... The sewer pipe passed through the administrative computer centre. One day, it just blew up. It was a mess. (IT Specialist D)

In the absence of central policy and institutional engagement, digitalisation remained a vague idea with no coordination or standardisation. Institutional governance had not yet really connected with Italian and European narratives and reforms that encouraged autonomy, efficiency and quality in the national and transnational higher education systems. In other words, digitalisation did not yet resonate at Sapienza as an idea ‘whose time has come’.⁵⁴

The translation begins: ideas, artefacts, facts and the entrepreneurial governance at Sapienza (2007–2019)

By the 2000s, European policies were fast converging towards the neomanagerial vision of education that was dominant in the Anglo-Saxon context. Intermediary entities and knowledge brokers – e.g. ‘best practices’, political agendas, standards, seminars – were handling the ‘packaging’ and translation of this vision from transnational scenarios to national contexts.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Czarniawska and Joerges, ‘Travels of Ideas’.

⁵⁵Lawn and Grek, *Europeanising Education*; Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education*.

Eventually, these narratives found their way into Sapienza. The global neomanagerial rationale was coupled with the elusive idea of digitalisation at Sapienza, which began to stabilise through the re-embedding and articulation of global scripts according to local specificities and frames of reference. Digitalisation thus emerged as an ‘invention’ in Sapienza and a solution for a new-found problem – that is, quality assurance and efficiency in the European space of higher education.

Mediators of the translation

A crucial role in these processes was played by a few material and symbolic actors that mediated the translation of the global neomanagerial vision into the local context of Sapienza policy-making on digitalisation. These were the first Strategic Plan for university development, which framed the issue as part of a new political agenda; the establishment of an ICT Centre, which accelerated its institutionalisation on an organisational and symbolic level; and the election manifesto of the new Sapienza rector, which promoted its importance.

The first Strategic Plan at Sapienza

Strategic Plans serve multiple purposes in an Italian higher education institution. They are employed to define the institutional vision and mission, review the administrative processes and determine indicators to measure future developments.

Sapienza’s Strategic Plan 2007–2012 – which was its first ever – called for ‘entrepreneurial management’⁵⁶ at the university with the aim of fostering effectiveness, efficiency and accountability, and achieving competitive advantage in the ‘quasi-markets of higher education’.⁵⁷

‘Technological innovation’ was given a crucial role in this vision. In particular, it was framed as a tool for economic development and evidence-based measurement of outputs. It was expected to foster ‘productivity gains in research, teaching and learning processes’⁵⁸ and the verification of ‘the economic correlations between the efforts required (resources consumed and hence costs incurred), the results obtained (revenues and hence levels of profitability generated), and the ability to satisfy the user with regard to their expectations (the value generated for the customer)’.⁵⁹

Uncertain ideas concerning the role of digitalisation were thus being materialised into words and standards that embedded an entrepreneurial vision of higher education. The narratives that had been disseminated by the Lisbon declaration, with its emphasis on the role of education as a driver for the knowledge economy in Europe, thereby began to penetrate policy-making at Sapienza.

⁵⁶Sapienza, ‘Piano Strategico 2007–2012. Versione 2.0’, 2007, 4, https://www.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/PianoStrategico2007_2012.pdf.

⁵⁷Ibid., 52.

⁵⁸Ibid., 65.

⁵⁹Ibid., 55.

Governance deliberation on the new ICT Centre

During the 23 October 2007 session of the Sapienza Academic Senate, Rector Renato Guarini and the Pro-Rector for Infrastructure at Sapienza presented their proposal for the establishment of an 'ICT Area' as a new organisational entity at Sapienza that would integrate CITICoRD and SATIS.

In his presentation, the Pro-Rector for Infrastructure maintained that Sapienza had underestimated the importance of digitalisation in recent years, and was lagging behind other universities. Information technologies had to be considered as a major asset for the development of Sapienza, as 'information management' was 'crucial and strategic, and will increasingly be so' in 'modern societies . . . [and] in particular for a university of the size of Sapienza' in order to 'respond to the current – and, above all, the future – requirements of research, teaching, administration, and all evaluation activities'.⁶⁰ The time had therefore come to 'politicise' the management of information technology, thus ensuring 'maximum efficiency in the management of services, effectiveness of coordination, and excellence in innovation processes, as well as the acceleration of operational and management action'.⁶¹ After discussion in the Academic Senate and Board of Directors, a rectoral resolution was approved that established the ICT Area of Sapienza – which would later become known as InfoSapienza – as an autonomous centre for the integrated management of Sapienza's information services across research, teaching and managerial activities.

Information technology acquired its specific centre of coordination in Sapienza, thus beginning to stabilise as a political vision and strategic tool that would ensure compliance between local procedures and external demands.

Election manifesto of the new Rector

In 2008, elections were held for the renewal of the position of Sapienza Rector. The winning candidate was Luigi Frati, who governed Sapienza from 2008 to 2014. The digitalisation of university infrastructures was given a significant role in his election manifesto. In particular, digitalisation was framed as a tool for increasing Sapienza's efficiency through quality assurance and evaluative technology:

in addition to improving overall efficiency . . . [information technology] can allow for effective control and real-time verification of results . . . a pervasive tool . . . the management of information technology must be *transparent and neutral*, as well as *professional*, and must be *under the direct responsibility of the elected Rector*.⁶²

The neomanagerial narrative thus stepped onto a rectoral agenda for the first time, thereby consolidating its penetration from the transnational to the local scenario.

⁶⁰Sapienza, 'Senato Accademico – 23-10-2007', 2007, <http://www2.uniroma1.it/senatoaccademico/verbali/verbale2007-10-23.htm>.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Frati, Luigi. 'Appunti per il dibattito', 2008. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201021050749/https://sites.google.com/site/perquattroanni/>. Emphasis in the original.

From ideas to deeds: digitalisation as a policy field

Through the intermediation of these actors, digitalisation began to stabilise in Sapienza as a policy field to be exploited for improving the competitiveness of the institution. The Sapienza governance strongly fostered the development of IT services in this phase, intending to improve efficiency and quality. New IT services were launched that were mostly outsourced to market edtech rather than developed in-house.

For example, an arrangement was made with the private CINECA⁶³ interuniversity consortium in 2011, which provided Sapienza with a set of administration and accountability platforms. Sapienza also partnered with the global edu-business Alphabet-Google, which supplied Sapienza with free access to its G Suite for Education. In 2014, as the first Italian university, Sapienza made an agreement with the global MOOC Coursera, which would have hosted some online courses by Sapienza in exchange for a percentage of the revenue. Two years later, Microsoft began providing free-of-charge Microsoft Office features and applications to Sapienza students and staff.⁶⁴

In 2017, the Sapienza governance resolved to discontinue two platforms that had been developed and managed by its IT community since the early 2000s, and replace them with an integrated solution to be developed by CINECA. This was the most drastic policy choice made by Sapienza on the outsourcing of digital services. A large part of the InfoSapienza community reacted with disappointment to this decision:

Things have turned badly ... we all felt bad...The relationship with a part of Sapienza's governance was ruined. Not for technical reasons, though. Simply because of a different vision of where Sapienza would want to go. (IT Specialist B)

By now we've got used to it. We go on. We're paid to work... We cannot do anything but be diligent and do what they ask of us. (IT Specialist E)

We keep innovating because ... that's the only motivation we can give to professionals to continue working in this kind of situation. Otherwise, they get annoyed, and leave. (IT Specialist A)

A struggle was thereby surfacing at Sapienza that opposed global pressures and local actors. However, ambiguities emerge in this affair that expose the layout of a hybrid arrangement in Sapienza's governance. On the one hand, this agreement seemingly outlined a decisive shift by Sapienza towards outsourcing in accordance with the neo-managerial frame. On the other hand, the project is reportedly stuck before even starting. Originally intended to be rolled out in 2020 at the latest, at the time of writing (April 2022) 'nothing has come out of it, not even as design work' (Sapienza Governance, A). It seems therefore legitimate to wonder what the effective political investment of governance has been in the project.

⁶³Founded in 1967, CINECA (Northeastern Interuniversity Consortium for Automatic Computing) is composed today of around 80 higher education institutions, as well as ANVUR and the Ministry of University and Research itself.

⁶⁴Interestingly, university access to Microsoft licences and services is now mediated by the Rectors' Conference of Italian Universities (CRUI) on the basis of an Educational Transformation Agreement arranged with Microsoft.

De-stabilisation (and re-stabilisation): reframing digitalisation in the pandemic emergency (2020–2021)

On 11 March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was imposed in Italy with the aim of containing outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus began the so-called ‘phase 1’ in the pandemic control effort carried out by the Italian government.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, higher education institutions had to step to the forefront and confront important transformations that affected students, policy, research, teaching, safety, funding, mobility and much more. Hitherto known university experience and everyday life for higher education professionals and students were thus disrupted.⁶⁵

As university life moved online, the issue of digitalisation became crucial for Italian higher education institutions. In the case of Sapienza, the critical juncture destabilised the consolidated vision of digital technologies as tools for effectiveness, economic development, quality assurance and accountability. During the national emergency, they had to represent institutional resilience and the continuity of social and educational life through the national – and global – crisis. The robustness or vulnerability of infrastructure at Sapienza thus became fundamental for its legitimacy to stakeholders, i.e. students, staff and all social worlds concerned. Strong financial, organisational and ideational efforts went therefore into the expansion (and, in some cases, the development from scratch) of digital infrastructure for university teaching and governance. Among the first actions undertaken by the governance, professors and students were given guidelines and guidance on how to cope with the pandemic contingency, and internal working groups were set up that determined Alphabet-Google’s G Suite market platform as the primary Sapienza recommendation for remote teaching.

‘Phase 2’ in the pandemic control attempts by the Italian government began in May 2020 with the mitigation of the containment measures. At that point, the most hectic times of the emergency had gone. Lessons still had to be carried out online at Sapienza, while exams could be conducted in blended mode starting from July 2020. Despite continued trust with selected edtech products, in-house expertise and insourced software had a renewed momentum in this phase. Unlike the large standardised software that had been outsourced to edtech companies, the platforms built by InfoSapienza and internal partners were flexible enough to transform quickly and adapt to unexpected and changing circumstances. This was emphasised by some members of the Sapienza governance staff:

The strong side of InfoStud? That it is an internal product. If you need to make a change, you can just do it. ... If you have a product that you can easily handle from the ‘inside’, you can easily manage emergencies (Sapienza Governance, E)

We always wonder whether it is better to have an internal system or an external one. ... Based on the experience gained in this unpredictable period, I believe that the best solution today for us is to have an internal centre with constant and direct collaboration with the governance. (Sapienza Governance, M)

Another ‘wave’ of COVID-19 outbreaks hit Italy between late September 2020 and late December 2020. ‘Phase 3’ of ‘restoration’ from the pandemic crisis began at Sapienza

⁶⁵Cone et al., ‘Pandemic Acceleration’.

with the governance engaging in digitalisation with unprecedented political and financial commitment. Considerable investments were made in digital technology – almost 6.5 million euros, with 50% support from the Ministry of University and Research – with regard to both software and hardware.

In this complex chain of events, the policy field of digitalisation thus became even more crucial as a matter of concern for heterogeneous stakeholders. Following the pandemic de-stabilisation, digitalisation had in fact to be reframed in terms of democratic participation and the right to education. In this process, the persistent trust in external partnerships was complemented by a new interest in internal production.

Translating digitalisation into practice: between stories and history

Once governed through hard copy only, Sapienza is now moving steadily – though not without struggles – towards dematerialisation. Many changes have occurred in Sapienza's vision of digitalisation from the early tinkering phase to the pandemic period. These transformations have concerned cultures, organisational architectures and the very materialities of education. How have these policies, practices and knowledge been constructed over time? What could this tell us about broader social and cultural issues in higher education in Italy and globally?

As shown, the relevance of digitalisation as a policy field at Sapienza has emerged across a contested and non-linear trajectory. In the first phase (1988–2006), 'proto-informatisation' initiatives were carried out by dispersed pioneers as an artisanal effort. This phase lasted almost two decades, after which a period of strong expansion opened up (2007–2019). With the new rectorate, the digitalisation project was framed within the new public management narrative and became the focal point for a market-oriented network at Sapienza. The internal IT community thus lost ground to Italian and global edtech companies (such as CINECA, Google and Coursera) to which the digital transformation of the university was outsourced. In the last phase (2020–2021), the idea of digitalisation at Sapienza underwent a de-stabilisation and re-stabilisation due to exogenous emergency events that prompted the university governance to reframe the policy matter. In this re-negotiation, the urge towards outsourcing was confirmed while a new push was also given to Sapienza's internal community.

Overall, a hybrid governance architecture is apparently taking shape in the policy field of digitalisation at Sapienza after three decades of social construction. Exogenous entrepreneurial elements and internal cultural resistance have in fact coexisted so far (albeit with a variable balance and not without friction).

On the one hand, the mode of governance of digitalisation at Sapienza seems to be slowly but steadily drifting towards an entrepreneurial cultural and organisational frame. Privatisation processes have penetrated Sapienza at both the exogenous (as edtech and big market players infiltrate its digital ecology) and endogenous (as managerial logics insufflate institutional documents and local micro-politics and cultures through calls for competition, efficiency, outsourcing of internal services) level.⁶⁶ Governance is thus opening towards the external *locus* of power that is dominated by educational markets and social actors, and seemingly partaking in processes of convergence in global higher education systems and

⁶⁶Stephen Ball and Deborah Youdell, *Hidden Privatisation in Public Education* (Brussels: Education International, 2007).

towards the ‘steering-at-a-distance’ of the State (along with supranational and transnational entities) over national higher education systems and actors.

On the other hand, Sapienza does not seem ready (yet) to completely relinquish its traditional bureaucratic organisational culture. As shown with the case of the outsourcing project to CINECA, local legacy and logics have apparently so far hampered – if not hindered completely – the full achievement of the convergence processes towards the neomanagerial paradigm. Policy-making on digitalisation at Sapienza thus emerges as a matter of ceremonial adherence to exogenous narratives and political contingency rather than consistent strategic visions or cultural framing.

Aspects from its legacy procedural model thus coexist at Sapienza with features from the entrepreneurial model, which has been conveniently repurposed – by ‘hollowing it out’ of its most incisive cultural implications – in order to allow the very viability of this coexistence. While stuck in this liminal condition,⁶⁷ the neomanagerial discourse still struggles to fully permeate cultural logics and organisational practices at Sapienza.

Final remarks

In this article, I have aimed to contribute to ongoing scholarly research on the translation of global policies into local micro-policy and practices in higher education. To this end, I have historicised the social construction of the policy field of digitalisation in an Italian university over three decades (1988–2021). On the methodological level, I sought to recompose the broader cultural history of higher education in Italy and the local stories of the people who lived through such history in order to provide a dynamic and comprehensive portrait of the transformations that occurred. The empirical investigation was conducted by observing diachronically the social construction of a single policy field (rather than policy-making as a whole) in a single university (rather than at a systemic level). In these very limitations arguably lies the intended originality of this article.

The research provides insights for a better understanding of the processes of continuity and change in higher education across the local, national and global scales. With regard to the local study case, the research has interrogated the social construction of the policy field of digitalisation at Sapienza with a focus on the changing political and cultural frames of reference in the local, national and international higher education arenas. The research shows evidence of an ambiguous pattern that features both persistence and change. On the one hand, an ongoing shift from the legacy bureaucratic model towards the entrepreneurial model has been singled out in the digital policy field at Sapienza with the penetration of marketisation and privatisation processes. On the other hand, university governance still seems hesitant to give up the legacy cultural and organisational framework to firmly shift towards the entrepreneurial paradigm. The governance of digitalisation at Sapienza thus emerges in a hybrid and liminal configuration in which features from both the entrepreneurial model – which has been hollowed out of its most impactful cultural underpinnings – and the bureaucratic and procedural legacy – which has not been overtly pursued – coexist with occasional friction.

⁶⁷ Arpad Szokolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2003); Massimiliano Vaira, ‘The Permanent Liminality Transition and Liminal Change in the Italian University: A Theoretical Framework and Early Evidences’, in *Global Challenges, Local Responses in Higher Education*, ed. Jelena Brankovic et al. (Rotterdam: Sense, 2014), 191–208.

With regard to the issue of systemic governance in Italian higher education, this article intends to complement existing research through a meso-analytical and diachronic perspective. Extensive research has in fact effectively examined dynamics of continuity and change in the Italian higher education system by adopting a systemic and comparative vantage point. Scholars have analysed the difficult penetration of market logics in the systemic governance of Italian higher education due to policy legacy, path dependency and historical resilience.⁶⁸ As discussed, these systemic patterns have also been singled out in this research with regard to the local case of a higher education institution. An interesting congruency between systemic trends and institutional dynamics thus emerges that could be further inspected.

This article also wishes to make a contribution to the body of research focusing on how systemic change happens in higher education systems and policy-making in general. With reference to the field of higher education and the local-institutional level, the research confirms the messiness and complexity of policy enactment processes and their difficult predictability. As shown, experienced reforms diverge from what was expected by policy-makers. Indeed, change initiated from above (e.g. at the European or national level) is not just plainly received by its recipients, but rather actively re-interpreted according to local specificities and frames of reference.⁶⁹

This local microhistory has thus sought to interrogate change in higher education as an ongoing and complex interplay between broad historical forces and the agency of social actors struggling over meaning-making processes. The stake at play in these processes is by no means insignificant, as it calls into question the very purpose of higher education in times of global change. Further research will be able to unravel the processes of social construction of knowledge and power across the complex entanglement of global processes and local experience, transnational convergence and local repurposing, resistance and change.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Leonardo Piromalli, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at ‘Sapienza’ University of Rome (Department of Communication and Social Research) and an Adjunct Professor at University of Cagliari (Department of Pedagogy, Psychology, Philosophy) and University of L’Aquila (Department of Human Studies). His research interests lie at the intersection of Higher Education Studies and Science and Technology Studies. He undertakes research on knowledge practices and processes, higher education governance and policy-making, platforms and infrastructure, and teaching and learning.

ORCID

Leonardo Piromalli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9461-3531>

⁶⁸See the third section of this paper. See also, among others: Capano, ‘Looking for Serendipity’; Eliana Minelli, Gianfranco Rebora and Matteo Turri, ‘Waiting for the Market: Where Is the Italian University System Heading?’, *Higher Education Policy* 25, no. 1 (2012): 131–45; Turri, ‘The Difficult Transition of the Italian University System’; Capano, ‘Policy Design Spaces in Reforming Governance in Higher Education’.

⁶⁹Czarniawska and Sevón, *Translating Organizational Change*.