

# Imagining Higher Education in the European Knowledge Economy: Discourse and Ideas in Communications of the EU

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## Abstract

*The paper focuses on the role of EU institutions in European higher education. Following the outset of the EU Lisbon Strategy (2000), the EU Commission positioned itself as an influential venue for generating, coordinating and communicating discourse on higher education (within the Bologna Process and beyond). Gradually, the scattered ideas converged into a relatively detailed set of policy proposals on the systemic and institutional reforms needed to engage higher education in the regional economic project. The ideas evolved within the imagined knowledge economy. The dominance of this political rationale has resulted in the steady advance of the Europeanisation of higher education, including the incremental tendency to transfer national competencies to supranational arenas – so far limited to soft instruments such as recommendations, guidelines, reporting and common actions.*

**Key words:** higher education, EU policy, EU institutions, knowledge economy, ideas, discourses, Europeanisation, university

## Introduction

The policy initiatives and strategies, based on the new emerging political and economic imaginaries, have taken the contemporary (massified) higher education policy beyond the nation-state boundaries, thereby creating new arenas of policy making. This is occurring in an era of a general shift in economic and social governance – increasingly dispersed between Europe's nation-states and other levels or scales. The new context for developing and communicating ideas, discourses and political rationales is affecting the course of European higher education.

The institutions of the European Union (EU) are indeed an important source of such ideas and programmes within and beyond the Bologna Process, inspiring the reforms of higher education to serve the present and future of European society. This paper aims to analyse the discourse of EU institutions and shed light on the underlying ideas and ideologies. The central question is which ideas and discursive meanings about higher education are presented by this EU discourse. The analysis focuses on the role of the European Commission (EC) in relation to other EU institutions (especially the Council of the EU) and on frictions between the supranational level and the nation-states, whereby the nature of ideas and their broader implications will be investigated.

This paper is an attempt to contribute some empirically based findings and theoretical reflections to the existing literature on the EU's role/position in the Europeanisation of

higher education with particular attention to the meaning of higher education in the European political and socio-cultural setting.

## Approaches and methods

In this analysis, we have integrated several approaches and tried to relate them as closely as possible. A good share of our empirical work addresses the written trail of the European institutions' involvement with higher education. We examine the main higher education related documents of the EC and the Council of the EU released since 2000. The selected documents were viewed as relevant and directly addressing higher education. We disregarded documents that address particular subfields (e.g. mobility) or were dedicated to other policy areas, thereby treating higher education only as a secondary field.

**Table 1. Types and number of EU policy documents included in the analysis**

| Institution         | Type of document | Number of documents |
|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Council of the EU   | Resolution       | 2                   |
|                     | Recommendation   | 1                   |
|                     | Conclusion       | 3                   |
| European Commission | Communication    | 7                   |
|                     | Report           | 4                   |
|                     | All              | 17                  |

The empirical part of this study also includes nine interviews with various officials ranging from civil servants to external experts responsible for higher education or involved in the creation of the texts in the EC and the Council of EU.

We primarily analysed the discourses and only to a modest extent their materialisation or institutionalisation. Engaging the *Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)* and more broadly *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* (Wodak 2001, Fairclough 2003, Fairclough and Wodak 2008, Wodak 2008, Krzyzanowski 2010, Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2011) the analysis is context-sensitive and relies on a multi-level definition of context encompassing the influence of changing socio-political conditions on the dynamics of discursive practices – especially policy documents and the processes leading to them. In our endeavour to outline the social and normative context, we found it appropriate to combine the CDA/DHA with the framework of the *cultural political economy* (Jessop 2008) that we present in the next chapter. We refer to the concepts of semiosis, political rationale, (hegemonic) policy and economic imaginaries (Jessop 2008, Robertson 2008, Robertson 2010). Within the CDA/DHA we were sensitive to the development of concepts over time and referred to analytical categories such as *discursive strategy*, *discursive topic*, *narratives*, *legitimizing strategies*, *arguments*, *argumentative devices* or *topoi* and *intertextuality*.

We were interested in the connection between ideas and action and their prevailing institutional contexts. We thus introduced the aspect of agency into our study for which we used the *discursive institutionalism* framework (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004, Schmidt 2008, Schmidt 2010). This approach helped us see the discourse through the following analytical categories:

- we observed: a) *cognitive activity* whereby actors make sense of reality and seek solutions to identified/defined problems; and b) *normative activity* whereby actors try to fit the policies and ideas to the prevailing normative/value setting;
- in the *interactive dimension* of the discourse we distinguished between: a) the *coordinative sphere* where policy actors are involved in the process of coordinating agreement on policy ideas and creating coordinative discourse; and b) the *communicative sphere* where the coordinative discourse is carried over into the communicative discourse with the aim of presenting, deliberating and legitimating political ideas;
- in the fashion of discursive institutionalism we also looked into the levels of generality and types of ideas that appear in the texts, communications or other sources of ideas. There are three levels of generality: *policy*, *programmatic* and *philosophical* ideas.

However, some space was left for inductive approaches, especially when examining the interviews. Therefore, the theoretical framework outlined above was not adopted in an orthodox manner.

### **The context – imaginaries and political rationales**

The ideas expressed through the ‘knowledge economy’ are rooted in the history of the last few decades. It gradually replaced the notion of industrial competitiveness when technological progress affected the economic indicators of leading industrial countries in the 1980s. The policy response in, e.g. the USA, was to encourage talented people to acquire skills and generate innovative technologies to keep the economy strong (Jessop 2008: 23). Knowledge gradually reinforced itself in a large number of discourses along with forming what Jessop (2008) calls the *hegemonic economic imaginary* – discursively constructed imagined economies. Specialised international organisations and think-tanks, like the OECD, took over the provision of theoretical and policy paradigms to support a specific structure of thinking in which various social actors operate and favour the enhancing of this imaginary. The knowledge economy imaginary sits well alongside the ideological shifts in the 1970s and 1980s: e.g. Keynesian full employment switched to the idea of individual responsibility for the employability of a qualified labour force and the post-Fordist flexible labour market where skills and competencies are the main currency (ibid.). It progressed as a social process integrating ideational, material institutional and relational moments (Robertson 2008: 91), eventually also representing the nodal strategy and discourse in modern Europe (Fairclough and Wodak 2008: 114).

In this imagined knowledge economy the role of higher education has experienced a substantial ideational and representational shift (Robertson 2008: 92). The driving force behind economic growth is supposed to be technological change, thus public policy focuses on disciplines such as science and technology (Olssen and Peters 2005) which are economic in their nature (Skulasson 2008). Higher education is rapidly altering its position in the newly constructed policy realm, including two main role changes: 1. higher education became an industry per se providing skills and competencies to customers; and 2. higher education became largely subdued to economic necessities, especially supporting the economy with skilled labour, research and innovation (Jessop 2008).

### **Positioning the EU in European higher education**

Education policy was not on the European Community's agenda until the 1970s and since then it has been a very sensitive topic since it has been understood to be a matter of national sovereignty. There were attempts to raise the competence over higher education to the EU level, although they were never far-reaching. The most important action was the Erasmus Programme established in 1987 (Corbett 2006). Activities related to higher education in this period were intertwined with idea of Mitterand and Delors to further European integration in the field of the market and economy, which also implied the free movement of labour (mobility) and recognition of professional qualifications. The idea gained momentum in the early 1990s with Jacques Delors' call to modernise education and training systems connected to the challenges of employment (Pépin 2011: 25). This was accompanied by the general view that Europe needed to exploit its higher education systems better, if not improve them, as part of contemporary EU structural shifts towards the imagined knowledge economy (Corbett 2005). We will return to this in the next section.

The member states had considerable reservations in letting the EC take the initiative in the field of education, which were a reflection of the strong meaning ascribed to education and higher education in the national normative and value settings. For instance, the *Memorandum on Higher Education* (European Commission 1991) underscored the dramatic importance of higher education for the economic future of the Community and triggered a heated reaction in the higher education sector as the memorandum was criticized as merely economy-oriented and neglecting the nature of higher education (Corbett 2011). Thereafter, the EC moved to the fringes of European higher education policymaking until the turn of the century, thus leaving a policy vacuum in the higher education field. The first serious political attempt to fill this vacuum was initiated with the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), signed by the ministers of the four largest EU countries, and followed by the Bologna Declaration (1999). The EC was caught by surprise, was left out and then only allowed to fully enter the process in 2001 when the first evaluation showed that the Bologna Process had been too fragile and lacking support the EC could offer (Corbett 2011).

Once the EC became an official partner at the Bologna table, the Bologna Process represented a back door for it to enter higher education policy. The implementation of the Bologna policies in the member states has been underpinned by the substantial share of funds dedicated to support the projects that involved governments, their agencies and (notably) higher education institutions (Batory and Lindstrom 2011). One of the interviewees argued that the Bologna Process was a project without a vision or strategy. In contrast, they were offered by EU policy:

*Bologna has no goals, no policy goals. Bologna is a tool to achieve something, but it has no goals of its own. The European Union had with Lisbon these ambitious goals in the area of – well, about the Europe of Knowledge in the world. And this has obvious consequences or it entails obvious actions in the area of high education, education, training, research etc. (Interview 8; 29/06/2012).*

This leads us to another important decision taken in 2000, namely the Lisbon Strategy (Council of the European Union 2000) whereby the EU set clear policy goals ultimately leading to the EU's global competitiveness and the strategy to achieve them. The

knowledge economy and society were brought into the centre of the policy discourse. The new programmatic initiative gave a decisive impetus to the enforcement of this economic and political imaginary, affecting the economic, political, social, historical and cultural conditions in the EU including the region of members to the east. The open method of coordination came as a new and effective regulatory tool at the supranational level of governance. Higher education moved onto the agenda of EU institutions, which will be dealt with extensively later.

Despite the persisting tension regarding subsidiarity, the EC managed to gradually institutionalise higher education in the subsequent years and created a self-standing policy domain. Thereby, direct confrontation with the member states on the competence in the field was circumvented. From its marginal role in the 1990s, the EC became a major actor on the European higher education policy stage in the 2000s, especially through new modes of governance (such as the open method of coordination) and new institutionalised governance structures (Gornitzka and Ravinet 2011).

The path of evolution and nature of the normative context for the Europeanisation of higher education was closely linked to the knowledge economy hegemonic imaginary. Our findings can be synthesised into three unequivocal categories in an attempt to explain the ideational and discursive practice of the EU. They are:

1. instrumentalisation of higher education for economic goals;
2. ideating the new governance and steering of higher education; and
3. ideational and normative convergence – towards new constitutionalism.

#### *The instrumentalisation of higher education for economic goals*

As mentioned above, the decisive signal for the EU's intervention in the sector came when higher education was recognised as one of the most important policy fields for realising the knowledge society envisaged in the Lisbon Strategy (Council of the European Union 2000). The underlying idea of the Lisbon Strategy is to boost the European economy and guarantee strong economic competitiveness by placing knowledge in the core of the economic activities (Nokkala 2007). Thus, higher education was no longer treated as untouchable due to the subsidiary principle. Instead, it transformed into an instrumental field for managing the knowledge and society. In other words, it turned out to be an essential means for reaching wider European objectives.

Already since the communication of 2003 (EC 2003), *Europe of knowledge* appears as an abstract narrative oriented towards a better future and an ideational project in which universities are the essential and central instruments. Intervention into the hitherto protected status of the university is justified as [the universities] “*live thanks to substantial public and private funding*”. Serving society is understood as propelling the economic competitiveness, thus contributing to the Lisbon Strategy. The flow of (applied) *knowledge from universities into business and society* is the dominant discursive topic. The idea of approximating *industry* or *enterprise* and university is strongly exposed throughout the text and proposed in various modes (spin offs, start-up companies, attracting talents from other regions, more and employable graduates, innovation).

In the following document of 2005 entitled *Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: Enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy* (EC 2005), the

universities are said to be “*motors of the new, knowledge-based paradigm*”. It is obvious from this document that there is agency and cognitive/instrumental logic in the constructing of ideas. There is a notable inclination towards more economic key terminology (e.g. knowledge sector, knowledge industry, investment, competitiveness, human capital). The discursive topic of university–industry approximation is reiterated and refined with an upgrading of the topos of the need to serve industry with: a) applied knowledge; and b) the employability of graduates. There is a gradual advance in the policy proposals crossing into the academic domain, notably addressing the organisation of learning, arguing for output-based curricula, interdisciplinarity, emphasising transversal skills, calling for entrepreneurialism etc.

Both of the above mentioned communications (EC 2003 and 2005) extensively elaborate on the many problems within European higher education and give the contextual legitimacy for the presented policy and programmatic ideas. The topos of the need for the EU to compete with other world regions underlies the discourse. The basic conditions that call for a solution are presented through the changing world and the implied assumptions on the poor state of European universities. This can be partly explained as an attempt to build a normative background in order to present the ideas as appropriate, but the cognitive/instrumental component of the discourse is much stronger, justifying the presented course of action as a rational and feasible solution to the outlined challenges:

Universities failing to undertake these changes – for want of drive, power to act or available resources – will create a growing handicap for themselves, their graduates and their countries (EC 2005).

Following this assertion, the EU decided to strengthen the role of higher education in reaching the Lisbon objectives. Another communication on higher education followed swiftly (EC 2006b). The previously introduced knowledge triangle appeared already in the title. The attractiveness of European higher education became the central concept used in the topos of competing with other higher education systems and institutions in order to improve the European ones. The discursive construction of the argument is completed by the key word *excellence* which emerges from *competition* and ensures *attractiveness*.

By using the term *relevance* as a new discursive element, a strategic interlinking was presented of the concept of *public interest* with the responsiveness of universities to the demands of the economy. It is assumed that “*their [universities] relationship with the business community is of strategic importance and forms part of their commitment to serving the public interest*” (EC 2006b). One of the authors presented the core idea with the following thoughts:

[...] *higher education is not something that functions in an abstraction of society. Higher education needs to function within society and to make its contribution to society, not just expect support from society for professors to do whatever they want without any reference to society* (Interview 8; 29/06/2012).

In the same communication, the EC further advanced the policy proposals (the modernisation agenda) aiming at the academic domain and micro level, which have traditionally been the autonomous responsibility of the academic community:

in order to overcome persistent mismatches between graduate qualifications and the needs of the labour market, university programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates and to offer broad support to the workforce more generally. [...] development of entrepreneurial, management and innovation skills should become an integral part of graduate education, research training and lifelong learning strategies for university staff (EC 2006b).

It emerged from the interviews that this formed part of a continuous attempt to strengthen the communicative discourse and break through the established academic insulation from the interests of business and industry.

*In terms of is it a more instrumentalist or is it a – I don't like the term instrumentalism. Perhaps I – is it more – Is it more tied to education's role in driving economic growth and the regeneration of our societies, more plainly, more concretely, more overtly? Absolutely. Absolutely yes. And I don't think we should be ashamed of that. I don't think it's a bad thing. And I don't think it then means that everyone has to become engineers, for example (Interview 2; 28/06/2012).*

The idea extended to the economic needs of individuals:

*The university has the main role which students expect – the universities to perform for them is to give them the key to society. And the key to society passes through an economic activity (Interview 8; 29/06/2012).*

Among other things, here the controversy regarding use of the concept of autonomy is visible, which in the EC's case was devised for reasons other than protecting the academic world from external pressures (see the next section).

A more substantial discursive evolution can be found in the 2011 communication (EC 2011). Jobs became a central discursive item, appearing in syntaxes like *job creating*, *high qualification jobs*, *knowledge intensive jobs*, *growth and jobs*, *research jobs*, *matching skills and jobs*. The genre lost a little of its academic character by moving towards the more political and apparently aiming at a system instead of institutions. Human capital theory seems to particularly strongly underpin this text with the argument of more graduates (more knowledge workers) for more knowledge jobs.

The above analysis shows the strong drift of higher education and research to the centre of the European integration project as one of Europe's answers to the challenges of the global knowledge economy. Gornitzka (2010: 545) refers to the *horizontal dynamics of the Lisbon strategy* as causing the approximation of the academic sphere and the economic sector. In a later phase, the first became discursively almost entirely subdued to the second. According to sociological institutionalists, this phenomenon accompanies the change of structures, norms, practices and identities eventually resulting in a redefinition of the purpose of the policy field (Gornitzka 2010).

#### *Ideating a new governance model and the steering of higher education*

The modernisation of the governance structure and financing in conjunction with the revision of the concept of autonomy have emerged as salient issues in the reform

discourse. Our analysis illuminates the discourse and ideas on restructuring universities which involve a mix of a cognitive ideational line offering solutions to the identified problems, and the normative one stemming from the increasingly powerful economic imaginary gradually setting the normative conditions.

The discursive strategy is built on providing legitimacy and substantiating the notion of inevitability and urgency as well as advocating the hitherto unfitness of European universities. They are portrayed as ossified institutions that function in an old and outdated fashion rooted in the ideas and context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (EC 2003). Further on, the characterising of the outdated situation presents the egalitarian principle as an obstacle to delivering excellence by keeping the institutions in mediocrity (EC 2005). Especially in the first half of the decade, the term *excellence* became the key word – an undefined concept that stood for the ultimate direction of the reforms. In this narrative, the reference to US universities is a constant discursive element.

As hinted at in the previous section, the argumentative device culminated in the normative assertion about the duty and obligation of the university towards society which persists and upgrades throughout the analysed paper trail:

After remaining a comparatively isolated universe for a very long period, both in relation to society and to the rest of the world, with funding guaranteed and a status protected by respect for their autonomy, European universities have gone through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century without really calling into question the role or the nature of what they should be contributing to society (EC 2003).

The leading idea in terms of responding to the presented problems is to diversify the European higher education system; there should be different higher education institutions with regard to the focus on the groups of potential students, the study offer, the way of teaching etc. More importantly, each university is to find its own strength and focus on it, thus specialising in the identified fields. There should be a smaller number of renowned, excellent research universities. Not all universities are encouraged to do research. This idea was developed over time so that it starts by saying that not all institutions are expected to do research at the same level.

Besides diversification, vertical differentiation (hierarchy) seems accepted as the necessary way to develop the system. In the second half of the decade, the egalitarianism (previously seen as an obstacle resulting in mediocrity) was overtaken by the idea of vertical diversification and categorisation. The relevance of the institutions was divided between global research-oriented universities and regional teaching and professionally-oriented ones. This solution is normatively reinforced with the recognition that Europe has too few universities excelling at the global level. The topoi of competitiveness are grounded in the arguments of the poor positioning of European universities in world rankings and lagging behind their US counterparts.

The EC was not hesitant in advancing far-reaching policy proposals in the fields of funding and quality assurance – the two strongest steering mechanisms of the higher education system. Integral to rearranging the system, the funding mechanisms are suggested to be changed in a way so as to help diversification, i.e. to concentrate funding on a chosen institution and/or fields, as well as to move towards greater *efficiency*, *quality* and *competitiveness*. For this, the funding should be based on multiyear contracts setting



out agreed strategic objectives. Thus, the funding system is suggested to change from basic funding towards outcomes-based, competitive and relevance rewarding:

Encourage the use of skills and growth projections and graduate employment data (including tracking graduate employment outcomes) in course design, delivery and evaluation, adapting quality assurance and funding mechanisms to reward success in equipping students for the labour market (EC 2011).

The funding of higher education should increase, notably from private sources (i.e. industry and students). The reason is said to be that in Europe the level of public funding is comparable and even slightly higher than in the compared countries (USA, Canada, and Japan). In advocating tuition fees, the EC brings forward the ideas of retracting public funding in favour of private funding which fits with the neoliberal grand idea of reforming the state (Harvey 2005, Hill 2007).

Institutional autonomy is a strongly present concept with a specific discursive role and meaning. In the earliest of the analysed EU documents (EC 2003), the strong ideational stream on reforming the institutional governance emerged. It was characterised by the use of the topos of accountability as counterbalancing the relative autarchic state of European universities. In this phase, autonomy still appeared as an ambiguous concept. Two years later, institutional autonomy became: “*a pre-condition for universities to be able to respond to society’s changing needs*” (EC 2005). The idea was communicated with a persuasive strategy of portraying the national regulations as exaggerated and inappropriate interference with the universities’ ability to make the necessary changes, manage funds and especially enable the process of diversification. Thus, the concept of autonomy is coupled with the topos of the need to deregulate the higher education systems.

The concept of autonomy was clearly seen by the EC as an essential element of the communicative discourse bringing forward the cognitive idea of new governance. The governance structure was explained in ever more detail:

This requires new internal governance systems based on strategic priorities and on professional management of human resources, investment and administrative procedures. It also requires universities to overcome their fragmentation into faculties, departments, laboratories and administrative units and to target their efforts collectively on institutional priorities for research, teaching and services. Member States should build up and reward management and leadership capacity within universities (EC 2006a).

Reformers conceptualise *autonomy* as a management tool for achieving *efficiency* (Olsen 2009). In the EC discourse, autonomy refers to professionalised central management strategically running an integrated institution rather than autonomy as the protection of academic freedom and critical thought. It is possible to observe a shift in external dependency from one field (political or legal) to another (markets, stakeholders, ranking entities etc.). Universities are expected to change in line with the New Public Management principles to become more efficient, productive and economically relevant (Bleiklie and Lange 2010). In its communication, the EC also tries to balance its discourse of managerial shift by keeping references to the concept of autonomy as autonomy from the state and politics, thereby attempting to resuscitate something

traditional or symbolic about the European university and introducing an appropriateness (normative) tone.

The conceptualisation of autonomy represents an integral part of the hegemonic economic imaginary containing reforms in line with a trend often referred to as the *neoliberal project* (Hartmann 2008, Hill 2007). A new kind of *social contract* emerged, shifting the focus to the strategic orientation of the system as a whole, evaluating the outcomes and avoiding micro-management and over-regulation. The idea of governance is thus embedded in a general trend which echoes the imagined global knowledge society and the related growing supranational note. In the next section, we will explore this trend further and present the broader transnational impact of the discursive and material shifts in higher education in the EU.

### *Ideational and normative convergence – towards new constitutionalism*

As above, the ideas pertaining to the knowledge economy hegemonic imaginary indicate a tendency to shift power to the supranational level which the EC documents do not explicitly announce. It is communicated through the argument that the global/regional level of social and economic problems (notably economic growth and global competitiveness) requires regional (supranational) solutions:

The nature and scale of the challenges linked to the future of the universities mean that these issues have to be addressed at European level. More specifically, they require a joint and coordinated endeavour by the Member States and the candidate countries, backed up and supported by the European Union, in order to help to move towards a genuine Europe of knowledge (EC 2003).

In addition, higher education is compared to other economic sectors:

The EU has supported the conversion process of sectors like the steel industry or agriculture; it now faces the imperative to modernise its 'knowledge industry' and in particular its universities (EC 2005).

During the years of the increasing Europeanisation of higher education, one can observe the tendency to shift some regulatory competencies for higher education to the supranational level. The result of these activities and initiatives is increasing supranational soft regulation such as harmonising criteria/standards, setting guidelines and producing comparative figures. In other words, it is up to nation-states and single higher education institutions to regulate and govern higher education reform on their territory, but they do so in accordance with the guidelines, objectives and procedures that are regulated on the European level (Fairclough and Wodak 2008: 113).

Moreover, the already mentioned open method of coordination used in the Lisbon Strategy was also transferred into the practice of the Bologna Process (Ravinet 2008). With its expertise and financial resources, the EC accelerated its advance into higher education policy field – both through the Bologna Process and parallel to it. Namely, the EC had a substantial budget available to incentivise the domestic actors and thereby turn them into agents of its policy and programmatic proposals, causing the leapfrogging of national governments in complying with the EC's requirements (Batory and Lindstrom 2011: 311). It has gradually developed policy making and policy implementation

networks formed by national and independent experts, civil servants, various agencies on the national and international level, which has led to the diluting of individual state power over policy outcomes in higher education (Gornitzka 2009).

As an exemplar initiative in this sense, quality assurance has been present as the EC's central policy stream in the field of higher education since the second half of the 1990s (Gornitzka 2009). The establishment of the European network of quality assurance agencies (ENQA) was an EC idea and represented a front-running initiative for the essential role of the concept of quality assurance in the Bologna Process. The idea evolved through the adoption of European standards and guidelines in quality assurance (2005) and later culminated in the European register for quality assurance (EQAR). The latest of the Bologna communiqués (Bucharest 2012) favours the agencies listed in the EQAR to perform activities across the EHEA.

The quality assurance policy evolution in the EU and the Bologna Process indicates a transition from soft law to supranational provisions with strong enforcement mechanisms continuously enhancing the consensus among governments and stakeholders – a clear case of a trajectory leading towards the transnationalisation of the evaluative state (Hartmann 2008: 82). Even though the idea was limited to the policy level and addressed concrete problems, the interviews reveal the temptation of the authors to push the topos of the need for an international referee:

*We wanted something outside the country but within a quality assurance framework that was capable of saying to the Greeks or the Italians or whoever. 'You aren't doing these well enough, you should be tougher with people because they are not actually producing what they should.' No, we didn't get that because of course the member states didn't want it. But that's what lies behind it, an attempt to assure the quality of the quality assurance agencies (Interview 5; 09/06/2012).*

The same logic revolved around the so-called transparency and information tools. The first outstanding one was the qualification framework, which followed the logic of supporting the integrating EU labour market by informing employers about the learning outcomes of graduates and easing students' choice of learning paths. A similar motive can be found in another, more recent example: the classification of universities and the multidimensional transparency tool (called *U-Multirank*) devised to respond to the growing popularity and influence of global university ranking initiatives. Grounded in this problem, the communication of U-Multirank is very refined and well placed in a series of arguments:

*It is essential to develop a wider range of analysis and information, covering all aspects of performance – to help students make informed study choices, to enable institutions to identify and develop their strengths, and to support policy-makers in their strategic choices on the reform of higher education systems (EC 2011).*

The interviewees who have been involved in the DG EAC work since the late 2000s to the present all master a very well-developed persuasive discursive strategy based on rational arguments supporting the cognitive idea of this policy instrument (Interview 6; 14/05/2012, Interview 2; 28/06/2012 and Interview 3; 02/07/2012). They have used

consistent argumentative devices and brought about the reasoning whereby the U-Multirank appears as a well-considered solution to a discursively created reality where there is an obvious need for transparency and information which only can be achieved by transferring the regulatory power to the supranational level. On the other side, the interviewed members of the permanent representations did not show signs of scepticism and did not remember any serious resistance among the other member states against the U-Multirank initiative (Interview 7; 05/06/2012, Interview 4; 28/06/2012 and Interview 9; 01/06/2012). From the late 1990s to date the EC has learned the methods and ways to circumvent confrontation with the member states, especially those which bring up the subsidiarity argument – notably Germany and the UK (Interview 4; 28/06/2012 and Interview 9; 01/06/2012).

The trend (Gornitzka 2009) characterised as ideational and normative convergence is opening ground to a de facto regulatory integration. This can be observed in the case of some other organisations like the WTO, World Bank and OECD. Some authors use the term *new constitutionalism* – a process whereby governments abdicate some of their regulatory powers in order to facilitate the implementation of policies and institutional change (Scherrer 2005, Hartmann 2008). This is supposed to promote competitiveness, more accountability of the state regarding market needs and aims at facilitating further commodification of social relations in the adhering states (Hartmann 2008: 67). As we concluded above in the case of the EU's higher education policy involvement, there is an obvious shift of sovereignty towards the supranational level. It is possible to conclude that European integration is paving the way to a new institutional arrangement that takes up the state functions important for establishing ideational hegemony (Hartmann 2008: 81), creating a new constellation of regulatory powers especially in relation to the global market and competition.

## **Conclusion**

EU institutions gradually entered higher education policy in the name of pursuing the economic integration agenda. The idea of economic and labour market integration in the late 1980s and early 1990s created the necessity to address vocational/professional education and qualifications. *The knowledge economy* took over the role of the central integrative paradigm (Lisbon Strategy of 2000) and made higher education subordinate to economic goals which resulted in higher education becoming a de-facto EU policy area. The legal barriers that had hitherto prevented the European Commission taking decisive steps forward were elegantly circumvented.

The EU discourse on modernising European higher education was coordinated and communicated throughout the 2000s through reports, communications and other documents. The fundamental ideational characteristic of this discourse implied imagining universities as central instruments for regional economic growth. The devised communicative discourse illustrates cognitive ideas on how to reform the ossified and outdated higher education in order to restore the fading competitiveness of the European economy. Cooperating with business, assisting industry with research, innovation and human capital and focusing on individual preparedness for the labour market became the guiding policy imperatives.

The scattered ideas gradually converged into a relatively detailed model of the desired higher education system and institutions: the reforms should lead to more efficiency

through integrating (centralising) the organisational units of the university and granting a greater degree of autonomy to professionalising management. This would in turn facilitate the competition and diversification of universities in order to address the diversified needs of society and the economy. One of the essential goals is to enable the emergence of excellent (world-class) universities – leaders in research and innovation. The new, autonomous managerial structures are also expected to bring about greater financial efficiency in managing funds, increasingly originating from private sources (including tuition fees). Education as a payable service is an implicit part of the idea of the financial reform, whereas the state should take care of the economically weaker social groups for competitive purposes.

Gradually, the discourse has acquired a normative accent characterised by socialising into the powerful and hegemonic imaginary of the knowledge economy. All decision-making levels from national governments to EU institutions have subscribed to this political rationale. At the EU level, the European Commission has established itself as the central venue for generating and coordinating the discourse.

The normative convergence under the umbrella of the political rationale of the knowledge economy permits the advancement of the phenomenon of supranational soft governance in the higher education field. Under the topoi of the need to establish *transparency* and *comparability* and accelerated by the *open method of coordination*, the set of policy ideas and ideational trends conveyed by the EU discourses (in the form of recommendations, guidelines etc.) indicate a slow but steady relinquishing of national competencies in the field of higher education in favour of the supranational level (notably quality assurance, qualification framework, recognition). This can be characterised as a sort of *new constitutionalism* – a new constellation of regulatory powers especially in relation to the global market and competition.

It was not possible to find any broader programmatic ideas behind the tendency towards new constitutionalism. Therefore, it is impossible to claim there is an intentional master plan behind the phenomenon. It can instead be attributed to this overall direction of the change, embedded in the hegemonic economic imaginary and dominant ideologies and brought about by the structural dimension of a variety of narratives, constructed realities/problems, and as a collateral result of proposed *obvious* and *appropriate* courses of action.

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*List of interviews:*

Interview 1. A high ranking official responsible for higher education in an EU member state throughout the 1990s and 2000s, also representing a member state in the Council of the EU and other international fora dedicated to higher education

Interview 2. An EC DG EAC officer working in the field of higher education since 1996 and for EC DG EAC since 2008

Interview 3. A seconded expert at the EC DG EAC between 2006 and 2009

Interview 4. A seconded expert to the EC DG EAC since 2011, formerly responsible for education issues at a member state's permanent representation to the EU

Interview 5. The EC head of a unit responsible for higher education between 2000 and 2006

Interview 6. A high ranking official at the EC DG EAC working in the field of higher education between 2000 and 2006

Interview 7. A member state official responsible for education at a permanent member state representation to the EU

Interview 8. An EC expert working for the EC DG EAC between 2002 and 2006

Interview 9. A member state official responsible for education issues at a permanent representation to the EU, formerly an official at the EC DG EAC