

Evolutionary Theory Applied to Institutions: the Impact of Europeanization on Higher Education Policies

Prof. dr Vojin Rakic

Center for the Development of Liberalism

Belgrade, Serbia

Vojin.Rakic@EUI.eu

+381.11.2276473, +381.63.7663067

(Abstract)

My paper examines the impact European integration had on higher education policies of European states and the ensuing adoption of the Sorbonne Declaration and Bologna Declaration. The central question is why higher education policies of European states were converging for many years, thus preparing the environment for an institutional formulation of the entire process. Since the European Union did not have much legal authority in the policy sector in question, an explanation for converging national policies is to be sought elsewhere. Special attention will be devoted to the cases of the Netherlands, Belgium/Flanders, Germany, Sweden, Finland and Great Britain. Borrowing from evolutionary theory, my paper will attempt to prove that institutional imitation was a primary mechanism responsible for convergence of higher education policies of European states. The ensuing mimetic isomorphism can be related to either a rational, calculative understanding of its benefits or on motivations that cannot be reduced to rational calculation. The latter can be broken down into non-calculative imitation of policies of an authority and non-calculative imitation of numerically dominant policy examples. It will be argued that Europeanization augmented institutional convergence that resulted from increased competition. Specifically, it created an increasingly homogenous environment in which imitation mechanisms among higher education policies became more pronounced. In other words, it was the survival mechanism of institutional imitation rather than direct EU policies that accounted for observed convergence of higher education policies of European states. This convergence resulted in corresponding institutional solutions at the European level: the Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration. This paper will be concluded with a thesis that is based on the repercussions of institutional adaptation for evolutionary theory in general.

1. The Problem and a Tentative Theoretical Model

What was the impact of European integration on higher education policies of its member states and the subsequent adoption of the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and Bologna Declaration (1999)¹? To answer this question I will focus on six states of the European Union: Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium/Flanders², Great Britain, Sweden and Finland. The selection of these six cases is based on the fact that they represent states that are culturally related, but that enclose both the founding members of the European Community, as well as “newcomers” to the European union of states. Hence, the higher education policies of the selected cases:

- were not isolated from each other;
- contained similarities that might not only be attributed to their membership in the European Community/Union, but possibly also to other mechanisms that resulted in a convergence of their higher education policies.

An attempt will be made to assess whether the higher education policies in these six countries were converging, diverging or not changing at all - before the signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declaration. After proposing an answer to this question, I will deal with the issue whether change (convergence or divergence) or its absence was a consequence of EU policies or of other circumstances. First, however, the concepts of convergence/divergence (homogeneity/diversity) in higher education will be discussed. Borrowing from evolutionary theory, I will attempt to prove that institutional imitation, rather than EU policies, was a primary mechanism responsible for observed convergence of higher education policies of European states³. In the last section (termed “epilogue”), the paper will briefly return from higher education policy issues to evolutionary theory in general, advancing the thesis that *adaptation mechanisms* are not incompatible with *creation mechanisms*: isomorphic processes in higher education policies do not exclude the existence of “policy creators”, as adaptation mechanisms in nature are not incompatible with the idea of “intelligent design”.

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A body of literature in the field of higher education deals with convergence/divergence (homogeneity/diversity⁴) at the level of higher education *institutions* and at the level of *disciplines*. Similarly, Birnbaum (1983) distinguishes two forms of diversity: *external diversity* is based on differences *among* higher education institutions, whereas *internal diversity* denotes differences *within* higher education

¹ The expressions “European integration” and “Europeanization” I understand as coterminous. They refer to wider integration processes than those that are merely a direct result of European Union policies.

² After the federalization of Belgium in 1989, higher education policies were almost completely transferred to the regional level and the level of the language communities. I will concentrate on the higher education system in Flanders, treating it as a part of the Belgian system before 1989.

³ The argumentation will to some extent be based on Rakic (2001) and Rakic (2002).

⁴ I will use the terms homogeneity/diversity to denote a particular (static) state of affairs, whereas convergence/divergence and homogenization/diversification (or differentiation) I will employ to denote a particular process, i.e. a dynamics. For an extensive review of diversity concepts, consult Huisman (1995).

institutions. I will not concentrate on either, but on a third form of diversity, that is on differences among higher education *policies*. The term most suited for it might be *systemic diversity*.

Changes of one form of diversity can be accompanied by changes of another form of diversity *in the opposite direction*. For instance:

- divergence among higher education institutions within a higher education system can be the result of converging policies at the systems level. As an example, EU policies that promote diversity can lead to convergence at the systems level (the EU member states adopt similar policies aimed at the promotion of diversity) which might result in divergence at the level of higher education institutions within the member states;
- convergence among higher education institutions *within* a system (external convergence) might be the result of diverging policies at the systems level (systemic convergence). For example, different policies of a given number of governments can result in higher education institutions affected by the policies of those governments becoming less diversified.

It is therefore crucial:

- not to confuse convergence or divergence among higher education institutions (or even within a higher education institution) with the same phenomena at the systems level, i.e. with higher education *policies*;
- to understand that the observation of convergence or divergence is contingent upon the level of aggregation (e.g., divergence may take place at the level of higher education institutions, whereas convergence may be observed at the systems level).

To clarify the distinctions mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, I will discuss three influential perspectives on the question of diversity/homogeneity and divergence/convergence in higher education. The first, internal perspective, is promoted in a text by Burton Clark, the second, systemic perspective, is discussed by Guy Neave, and the final, mostly external perspective, can be understood nicely on the basis of a text by van Vught⁵.

Burton Clark (1996) elaborates on the *internal perspective*, which emphasizes the basic unit in higher education institutions, i.e. the academic discipline. According to him, differentiation is a natural process in higher education (“the creation of finely distinguished subcultures in academia is a natural process” [Ibid., 19])⁶. Clark writes even about “balkanized authority” in the higher education field (Ibid., 20). In his own words:

“...higher education is a differentiating society *par excellence*. It adjusts internally to increasing arrays of input demands and output connections by greater specialization in its production units and the programs they offer. Adapting to the changing contours of rapidly expanding and highly specialized

⁵ My discussion of the three perspectives on the basis of texts by Clark, Neave and Van Vught, does not suggest that these authors are somehow proponents of the three perspectives. They only used the mentioned perspectives in their specific texts, without suggesting that any one of the three is the only right or most important one.

⁶ For a more elaborated statement of Clark’s position, see Clark (1983).

knowledge, it creates more varied types of academic tribes.....Higher education is pre-eminently an internationally shaped component of modern and modernizing societies.....The dynamic of differentiation is a powerful root cause of the tendency for higher education to be a self-guiding society. Governments and other patrons will increasingly find higher education to be a contentious area highly resistant to command and control” (Ibid., 24).

Apparent convergence processes, Clark explains by his notion that what we interpret as convergence is in fact divergence along a continuum:

“Academic drift is a converging form of drift; second and third sectors of institutions converge on a first sector as they seek to emulate its ways and to gain similar power and prestige....They only achieve ‘weak emulation’. Individually the emulating institutions add to differentiation as they become variously sorted out along a continuum of degrees of difference” (Ibid., 23).

Guy Neave (1996) concentrates on the systems level. He directs his attention to higher education *policies*, in particular to the national and supranational policy levels. The “European dimension” has to be taken into account seriously in research on higher education policies of its member states, “even if it is not entirely clear at present how it bears upon the issue of convergence versus divergence” (Ibid., 29).

In others instances, Neave appears to believe that EU policies do result in convergence among national higher education policies:

“There can be little doubt of the influence the European Commission is already exerting at establishment level and, no less important, as a force for convergence between systems” (Ibid., 31).

“The ‘European dimension’ -or what is termed as ‘Community level’ action in the inimitable jargon of Brussels- is explicitly constructed around the ultimate aim of economic, financial and industrial integration in which convergence stands as the highway leading to this ultimate goal. These three areas of activity cannot, unless one believes in the convenient legend of the university as an ivory tower, but move higher education systems in the member states towards a similar condition” (Ibid., 38).

However, Neave also observes the difficulties in assessing if we deal with convergence or divergence:

“In effect, the perception we have of a particular system and *a fortiori* of whether it is diverging or converging is largely a function of where we focus our attention. Like the Cheshire Cat, sometimes we see a tail, sometimes a head and sometimes just the grin” (Ibid., 28).

“...homogeneity, convergence, diversity and variety are not absolutes. They are temporary and unstable conditions which always bear watching and, for that reason, will always be part of the warp and weft to our fields of enquiry” (Ibid., 39).

Van Vught's (1996) explanatory framework is to a significant extent derived from three theoretical perspectives from organizational theory: the population ecology perspective, the resource dependency perspective and the institutional isomorphism perspective (Ibid., 43). His emphasis is on the environments (primarily governments) in which higher education institutions operate, as well as on academic norms and values (i.e. the academic culture):

“The various empirical studies appear to underline the notions of the theoretical framework presented earlier. According to the authors of these studies, environmental pressures (especially governmental regulation) as well as the dominance of academic norms and values (especially academic conservatism) are the crucial factors that influence the processes of differentiation and dedifferentiation in higher education systems. In all cases, the empirical observations point in the direction of dedifferentiation and decreasing levels of diversity. The overall impression is that, in empirical reality, the combination of strict and uniform governmental policies and the predominance of academic norms and values leads to homogenization” (Ibid., 56).

All three approaches insist on change. Thus, they attempt to establish if there is convergence or divergence in the field of higher education. However, the three approaches concentrate on different levels of analysis. Clark primarily focuses on academic disciplines, i.e. on *internal diversity*. Neave's interest in his chapter is mostly directed toward (national and supranational) policies, i.e. toward *systemic diversity*. Van Vught's chapter deals mostly with developments *within* higher education systems, i.e. with *external diversity*. Clark observes divergence, Neave and van Vught mostly convergence (though with reservations). Since these three approaches deal with different levels of analysis, however, they are not mutually exclusive. It is, for instance, possible that divergence takes place at the level of academic discipline, while convergence occurs simultaneously at the level of institutions within a system and among systems. For the approach in this paper (which focuses on the systems level), these distinctions are relevant, because national policies might have been influenced not only by EU policies, but by higher education institutions and developments at the level of academic discipline (e.g., academic norms and values).

The question now is whether change (convergence or divergence) was caused by EU higher education policies or by other circumstances? In principle, convergence in national higher education policies might have been a consequence of:

- a. Reactions by EU member states to policies of European institutions (the Commission and the European Court of Justice are particularly relevant in that regard);
- b. Developments at the level of higher education institutions in the individual EU member states, as well as developments at the level of academic disciplines;
- c. Mutual influencing of policies by individual EU member states.

Hence, reasons for convergence could have been based on:

- a. EU-related coercion and an insight into the benefits of abiding by EU decisions⁷;

⁷ In the latter case we deal with benefits that are not related to coercion.

- b. An insight into the benefits of accommodating to institutional changes *within* national higher education systems, as well as an insight into the benefits of accommodating to developments inside academic disciplines;
- c. Imitation and member state-related coercion (i.e., one state bullying another state into accepting a particular policy).

EU-related coercion and member state-related coercion, as well as insights into the benefits of abiding by particular EU decisions or of accommodating to developments at the level of higher education institutions or academic disciplines, can be subsumed under self-interest guided motivations⁸. Imitation can be based on rational self-interest, as well as on “self-prescription”⁹. Self-prescription includes non-calculative imitation of authority and non-calculative imitation of a numerically dominant example¹⁰. This leads us to developing the following tentative general scheme:

General scheme

Possible reasons for convergence of national higher education policies in the member states of the European Union include (from the perspective of national policy-makers)¹¹:

(A) *Self-interest*

- 1) Coercion
 - a) by EU institutions;
 - b) by other member states.
- 2) Self-interested behavior that is unrelated to coercion;
 - a) benefits related to responses to EU policies;
 - b) benefits related to developments at the level of national academic institutions;
 - c) benefits related to developments at the level of academic disciplines;
 - d) calculative imitation of other policies¹².

(B) *Self-prescription*

- 1) Non-calculative imitation of the policies of an authority;
- 2) Non-calculative imitation of numerically dominant policy examples.

⁸ It will be difficult, however, to find an instance of one EU member state bullying another one into accepting a particular policy in the field of higher education.

⁹ I am using the term “self-prescription”, instead of merely “prescription”, because the latter may imply prescription by others, i.e. a form of coercion.

¹⁰ Fashion is a good example of the latter type of behaviour.

¹¹ Divergence, on the other hand, can be a result of an absence of coercion at the European level, or of individual EU member states reacting differently to EU legislation. In both cases, divergence will be the consequence of EU member states adapting their policies in dissimilar ways to the environment.

¹² Imitation can be based on either a rational, calculative understanding of its benefits or on motivations that cannot be reduced to rational calculation. The former type of imitation will be called “calculative imitation”, the latter “non-calculative (or self-prescriptive) imitation”.

My next steps will be to assess whether convergence/divergence has occurred in the policies of the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium/Flanders, Great Britain, Sweden and Finland. Subsequently, I will attempt to assess if convergence/divergence (or none of the two) was the result of EU policies or of other factors. First of all, let it be noted that at the time we are concerned with, the EU had promulgated very little legislation on higher education. It had, however, passed a variety of policy initiatives in the domain of mobility (e.g., COMMETT, ERASMUS, SOCRATES and DA VINCI action programs). The Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration were essential for the promotion of convergence processes in a number of domains, but they were not EU documents. The Sorbonne Declaration was an initiative taken by four member states (Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy). The Bologna Declaration was an initiative by a very significant number of European countries, many of which were not even EU members.

2. Developments in the Netherlands, Belgium/Flanders, Germany, Sweden, Finland and Great Britain

Before the 1980s, the state was an essential actor in higher education policies in the Netherlands, Flanders, Germany, Sweden and Finland. Governmental authority, however, did not play the same role in the higher education systems in these countries. In the Netherlands, Belgium (until the federalization of the Belgian state in 1989), Sweden and Finland this authority was in the hands of the central government (with regard to the policy sector in question), whereas in Germany the *Länder* had the essential decision making power in higher education issues.

The Belgian higher education system was heavily dependent on the delicate Belgian balance between the different language communities, as well as the different ideological groups. Belgian politics in general, as well as educational policy in particular, were thus influenced to a significant degree by political relationships and deals (Wielemans 1991: 1). In 1959 a law was adopted which split the education system into three networks:

- A public (state) network, the Minister of Education being the organizing authority;
- An officially subsidized network, organized by municipalities and provinces;
- A “free network”, run mainly by Catholic authorities (Ibid., 3).

The higher education systems in the Netherlands and Germany, on the other hand, were not characterized by this complicated ideological-political balance.

All the five mentioned systems were imbued with the ideals of equality and equivalence and all five faced a massification of higher education in the 1960s. In the 1980s all five systems gradually switched from the equality and equivalence policy to policies based on institutional competition and on the quality of the product they were delivering. In Belgium and Germany, higher vocational schools were officially introduced in 1970 (Wielemans 1991: 2-3; Van de Maat 1999: 17).

The problems that the Netherlands faced in the 1970s, and that resulted in a change of policy towards more competition in the 1980s, were a high student drop-out rate,

lengthy study periods, insufficiently adequate academic staff and inefficient institutional management (Goedegebuure 1993: 190). In the late 1970s the two-tier structure was introduced, as well as retrenchment operations that resulted in the closure of some departments and the reshuffling of programs. Conditional funding for research was introduced as well (Boezeroy 1999: 11). In 1982, the funding of universities ceased to be enrolment driven and began to be based on an assessment of quality and social relevance. Instead of receiving a block grant, universities had to “earn” a part of their budget (Goedegebuure 1993: 199). In 1983, the Netherlands became the first country to adopt a formal quality assurance system. This system was called the “conditional funding policy” and it came down to institutions obtaining more autonomy if they delivered quality education (Boezeroy 1999: 50-51). Also in 1983, the Dutch Ministry of Education published the White Paper “Scale Enlargement, Task-Reallocation and Concentration” (STC). The Ministry envisioned merger processes, i.e. the emergence of multidisciplinary, medium-sized institutions with considerable autonomy in the sector of vocational education. These processes did indeed occur, even to a higher degree than the Ministry envisioned (Goedegebuure 1993: 191). The document also aimed at an increase in institutional autonomy and an increase in institutional efficiency through economies of scale (Boezeroy 1999: 12).

Developments in the German higher education system in the mid 1980s followed many Dutch trends of the first half of the 1980s. In 1983, the Federal Ministry of Education came up with the idea of more differentiation and competition (Frackmann 1993: 151). The new 1985 Framework Act (*Rahmengesetz*) provided higher education institutions with even more autonomy than they had on the basis of the 1976 Framework Act (according to which institutions provided input into state level planning) (Ibid., 143). The planning sections from the 1976 law were entirely removed in 1985 (Ibid., 143). According to the 1983 Act, institutions were allowed to propose new programs, but the ultimate authority was with the state Ministry of Education. Final decisions concerning curricula were within the institutions (Ibid., 143). In 1985, the German Science Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) followed the recommendation of the Ministry of Education and decided that differences in quality and performance should be made visible and that funds should be allocated competitively (Ibid., 151). This decision corresponded to the in 1983 adopted Dutch quality assurance system and to the Dutch idea of “conditional funding”. Hence, changes in the German higher education system of the mid 1980s were in line with similar developments in Holland from a few years before. These changes took place in the domain of the idea to establish more competitive, market-oriented, efficient higher education systems, in an increase of institutional autonomy, as well as in the domains of quality assurance and funding.

In Belgium, the relationship between the government and the higher education system underwent some changes as well in the mid 1980s. In 1986, the Saint-Ann austerity plan was adopted, as well as a plan according to which the non-university sector was to be rationalized. Both plans were promulgated by the Ministry of Education (Wielemans 1991: 4).

The second half of the 1980s was not marked by major developments in the field of higher education in any of the analyzed countries, except for one essential event in Belgium. Its relevance, however, exceeded the higher education sector. In 1989, the Belgian state was federalized and higher education policies were almost completely

transferred to the level of regions and language communities. Policies regarding research were somewhat less affected (Ibid., 2). Local boards of administration were set up in all non-university institutions of higher education (Ibid., 4). From this point we will focus on the Flemish system of higher education.

In the 1990s, the higher education systems of the Netherlands and Flanders continued to converge with regard to a number of essential issues, whereas the German higher education system did not experience major changes (Frackmann 1993: 160). In 1990, HBO (*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs* - Higher Vocational Education) institutions in the Netherlands started with contract research activities (Boezeroy 1999: 19). The "HOOP document" of 1992 acknowledged the importance of the report on skills shortages in Europe by the advisory Committee of the European Commission (IRDAC, 1991) and supported its most important recommendations, which included an increase in graduates in science and technology, more investment in recurrent education and an improvement of the productivity of education systems. This policy position can also be found in the ministerial budget statements of 1992 and 1993. The Higher Education and Research Act of 1993 (based on the 1985 HOAK document) also insisted on institutional autonomy and a governmental non-intervention policy (Ibid., 13). Institutions were to obtain substantial freedom of programming. The quality of a new program was to be judged *ex post* (Goedegebuure 1993: 1998). In general, the quality assessment system expanded considerably in the 1990s and was based both on self-evaluation as well as external evaluation (by the Inspectorate of Higher Education or by peer review) (Ibid., 208). In terms of funding, the Dutch higher education institutions acquired their financial means from three sources: directly from the Ministry (some 73%), from the Dutch Research Council (some 5%) and from contract research. The trend was that contract research funding was on the increase (Boezeroy 1999: 31). Tuition was also required and was equal for Universities and the HBO sector (Ibid., 31). Since 1999 the specific Dutch system of *numerus fixus* is also being transformed: all students who have 8.00 or more as their G.P.A. would be automatically admitted to University programs they wish to enrol in (Ibid., 20). Finally, Holland adopted the (Anglo-Saxon) mode of the BA/MA degree structure (Kammerman, 1999).

In Flanders a governmental decree was issued in 1991, according to which vocational education (HOBV) was to obtain much larger autonomy, whereas less central regulation and more "steering from a distance" was prescribed for Universities (Beverwijk 1999: 33). The 1991 decree also dealt very seriously with quality assurance. The Flanders Inter-University Council (VLIR) was established and supposed to coordinate quality assurance, based on internal and external control (external control through peer review and without government intervention). The VLIR was to cooperate closely with a similar body in the Netherlands (VSNU) and used its reports as a guideline (Ibid., 45). The decree reformed the academic personnel structure also substantially, making it not much different from the Dutch, British or US structure (assistant professor - associate professor - full professor). A more flexible system of transitions between different training levels was introduced (Ibid., 11). In general, changes in the Flemish system of higher education in the 1990s included a reduction of government involvement (including a reduction in government subsidies and more competition (Wielemans 1991: 10)). Apart from these general trends, convergence with the Dutch system took place on the level of quality assurance, on the level of entrance requirements, and possibly on the level of higher

education structure (the Netherlands adopting the in Flanders already existing BA/MA degree structure).

The German higher education system, though converging with the Dutch and Belgian/Flemish in the 1980s, did not change substantially in the 1990s and remains different from the systems in the two Benelux countries in, for instance, its specific federal structure with decentralized authority, its insistence of the primacy of equality and equivalence (something which in Belgium was assumed in light of its specific ideological-political balance, but that was being gradually suppressed), the absence of tuition fees (Van de Maat 1999: 42), open access policies in Universities (at least in principle) (Frackmann 1993: 135), as well as the absence of a national quality assessment system (Van de Maat 1999: 47). On the other hand, the Conference of Rectors and Presidents of Universities adopted in 1995 a resolution with special reference to assessment of teaching (both internal and external assessment), whereas in 1997 consultations took place both at the level of *Länder* and at the inter-regional level about the adoption of a national quality assessment system (Ibid., 47). Another trend in the direction of convergence was the increase in importance of higher education funding from the private sector (Ibid., 40).

Part of the distinctiveness of the Finnish higher education system is largely a product of early twentieth-century Finnish nationalism. The salient features of this system were the high proportion of women, people from less privileged social backgrounds, as well as a high proportion of the general population attending higher education, a delayed expansion of technology and business science, and, last but not least, a significant growth in higher education (especially in the natural sciences and humanities) prior to the full impact of industrialization (Kivinen and Rinne 1996: 102). Since the 1950s enrolment in higher education increased sevenfold, which was followed by the introduction of entirely new fields and subjects (Ibid., 101).

During the 1970s, the higher education system in Finland was being strongly centralized. It became structurally homogenous: the state became the owner of all higher education institutions, major reforms were carried out concerning curricula, degrees and the internal administration of the universities, the structure of degrees was standardized, while a non-university higher education sector remained absent (Ibid.: 100-101, 110). This homogeneity remained unchanged during the 1980s. In the 1990s, however, many previous reforms were undone: the state ceased to be the sole owner of the institutions, the ideal of standardization was replaced by diversification as the dominant trend, whereas a non-university higher education sector began to emerge (Ibid., 110). Traditional demands for equality were replaced by demands for greater efficiency (Ibid., 103).

In 1994, the Finnish Ministry of Education concluded that the status of vocational education in Finland (which is somewhere between secondary and higher education) does not correspond to developments in other countries, and stated: "The structure of the Finnish system is obscure. The polytechnics are to be built up on the foundation provided by the current vocational education system. At a time of growing international cooperation and European integration, advanced vocational education should evolve into a system with an identity of its own, forming a distinct non-university sector of higher education" (Ministry of Education, 1994). Access to polytechnics ("AMK institutions") is open to those who have taken the Matriculation

examination, have completed upper secondary school, or have a vocational basic qualification (or post-secondary qualification) or a corresponding international or foreign qualification (Beverwijk and Schrier 1999: 17). Student selection was based on school achievement, work experience and (in a significant number of cases) entrance examinations (Ibid., 17). Access to Universities was open (Ibid., 23). Another difference between Universities and AMK institutions was in the manner in which they were governed: Universities were run by the national government, AMK institutions by local authorities or privately (Ibid., 37). The principle of equality still appeared to be preserved in the fact that there were no tuition fees¹³ (Ibid., 38). Funding of higher education institutions was based on lump sums administered by the government (Ibid., 35).

In the domain of quality assurance, the Finnish authorities became active in 1986. In that year, the government decided to require from all universities to introduce assessment systems with compatible information about the results of research and instruction (Ibid., 49). In 1996, The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) was established. It was supposed to advise the Ministry of Education and to assist higher education institutions with self-evaluation (Ibid., 49). In general, evaluations of higher education institutions consisted of three stages: self-evaluation, external evaluation and a final report from this (Ibid., 50).

Finally, it deserves mention that the degree structure in Finland had changed as well. In the 1970s, the first degree was established as a standard at the Master's level. Since the 1990s Finland has the BA/MA structure (Ibid., 21).

In Sweden, the higher education system was reformed in 1977 on the basis of a 1973 parliamentary report. Unlike the Finnish higher education system that was being centralized during the 1970s, the Swedish system was reformed in the direction of a decentralization of authority from the national to the regional and local level, as well as in the direction of more flexible funding schemes (Klemperer 1999: 15). In addition to these changes, the 1977 reform resulted in the development of new institutional classifications¹⁴, a reorganization of the institutional structure and of access to higher education (limited access, determined by government, and more places for students above 25), as well as a new organization of programs, courses and the credit system (Svanfeldt 1994: 241). The 1977 reform also aimed at helping people with working class backgrounds to get access to the higher education system (Klemperer 1999: 16).

In 1983, the Swedish higher education system was being reformed again. This reform consisted of the following: a further decentralization, an increase in the autonomy of higher education institutions (although representatives of external interests were supposed to be a substantive part of the governing boards of the institutions), as well as of a move towards less bureaucracy (Svanfeldt 1994: 241).

¹³ The Finnish government's proposal to introduce tuition fees was not accepted by parliament, which alleged that the proposal violated the principle of equal opportunities (Ibid., 35).

¹⁴ Prior to 1977, higher education was divided into four sectors: universities, colleges, institutes and vocational schools. After the reform, Sweden adopted an integrated unitary system of higher education (Svanfeldt 1994: 241).

In 1993, a law was being prepared that would give vice-presidents and local boards much greater freedom to administer their University or college, reform the degree system (reducing the existing 120 programs to some 47 degrees) and allow some institutions to become private NPOs (Ibid., 251-252). This reform was in line with the idea of developing competition among the institutions (Ibid., 251). In practice, the 1993 law resulted in a number of changes in the Swedish higher education system. The curricula of individual programs were to be determined by individual institutions instead by the Ministry of Education. Institutions were given the freedom to distribute the financial resources granted to them by the government. The allocation of grants among institutions became to be determined by student demand and by the achievements of the individual institutions. The organization of study and the range of courses was to be decided locally rather than nationally. Students were given the freedom of choice concerning their study paths on the basis of a new internationally valid Degree Ordinance, attached to the 1993 Higher Education Ordinance. Finally, the Office of the University Chancellor (*Kanslersambetete*) was established with the aim to assess the quality of institutions and programs, as well as to examine the right of institutions to award degrees (Klemperer 1999: 16)¹⁵.

Similar to the funding of higher education in Finland, the Swedish Parliament began to allocate lump sums to institutions, which were supposed to divide them as they considered appropriate (Svanfeldt 1994: 255-259). Government funding of Universities, however, became much more extensive than that of vocational schools (*högskolan*), which thus had to sell courses to companies and other organizations (Ibid., 258). As in Finland, students in Sweden were not supposed to pay tuition fees, since the still existing principle of equality was considered to imply that all students who need assistance from the central government were supposed to obtain it (Klemperer 1999: 39).

General admission to Swedish higher education institutions was determined by the parliament and government (Svanfeldt 1994: 245-246). After the reforms, individual institutions obtained the right to decide themselves about *specific* requirements for admission to programs (e.g., about how many and which students to admit). This could lead to a situation in which the central admissions system would become a merely coordinating one (Ibid., 248). General criteria for student selection were: 1) that the student has at least completed upper secondary school, adult secondary school, folk high school, foreign secondary school, or that (s)he has reached the age of 25 with four years of previous work experience, and 2) that the student is sufficiently proficient Swedish and English (Klemperer 1999: 20).

The uniformity of the higher education system in Sweden decreased with the passing of time, while the principle of competition became increasingly prominent. The integrated system of higher education that was developed after 1977, had changed substantially. *Högskolan*, for instance, developed a profile of their own.

¹⁵ In 1995, this Office was abolished and its role taken over by a new organization which is supposed to read self-evaluation reports and to employ special audit teams (Klemperer, 50). In the 1980s, quality assessment took generally place on an *ad hoc* basis, while studies on the evaluation of institutions began to emerge in the late 1980s (Ibid., 49).

The degree structure in Sweden differed from the BA/MA structure. Although both degrees do exist in Sweden, they were preceded by another one (the *diploma*). This made the Swedish situation in this domain relatively unique (Ibid., 18).

When comparing the Finnish and Swedish system of higher education, one can conclude that they became similar even before Bologna, but that they converged via different paths. In both systems, the state traditionally played an important role. The Swedish system, however, experienced decentralization in the 1970s, while the Finnish system became less centralized only in the 1990s. In Finland of the 1970s and 1980s, the state was the owner of all higher education institutions, degrees were standardized, while the non-university sector remained absent. The 1977 reform in Sweden, on the other hand, resulted in decentralization, while the 1983 reform increased the autonomy of higher education institutions. With the passing of time, higher vocational education also developed a profile of its own in Sweden. In the meantime, no significant changes occurred in the centralized and government controlled system of higher education in Finland.

In the 1990s, however, important changes in the direction of more competition and decentralization did take place in Finnish higher education. The state ceased to be the sole owner of higher education institutions, standardization was replaced by diversification, and a locally or privately run non-University higher education sector emerged (the AMK institutions). The principle of equality remained present in the fact that access to Universities (not to AMKs) remained open and that tuition fees were not introduced. The BA/MA structure was introduced in Finland, while Universities obtained financial resources from the government in the form of lump sums. The system of quality assurance developed in Finland after 1986 with the establishment of the FINHEEC.

In Sweden, the reforms of 1993 introduced more competition, some privatization of higher education institutions, as well as a system of quality control. These changes made the Finnish and Swedish higher education systems rather similar. In both countries, diversification was on the rise, the state ceased to be the sole owner of higher education institutions, the non-University sector gained in importance, higher education institutions were financed in a rather similar manner (lump sums from the national government to the University sector, less funds for *högskolan* and AMKs respectively, no tuition fees), while entrance to higher education was also based on similar criteria. The system of quality control developed in both countries as well, and was operationalized in a similar manner by the FINHEEC and *Kanslersambetet* (until 1995) respectively. The degree structure in Finland and Sweden was not identical, but relatively similar as well.

It would be interesting to understand why convergence between the Finnish and Swedish systems of higher education occurred via different paths. The Finnish system proved to be very open to European influences (Ollikainen 1999: 5). The attitude of the relevant institutions in Finland (the government, Ministry of Education, expert bodies, interest organizations and educational institutions) was highly favorable towards E.U. higher education policies (Ibid., 6). This positive attitude was most pronounced at the highest political level (Ibid., 7). Its impacts had been most visible in the domain of international cooperation. Indirect consequences of European

integration, however, influenced also the structure and content of Finnish higher education (Ibid., 13).

The impact of the European Union on Swedish higher education appears less pronounced. As a matter of fact, Sweden began reforming its centralized system before Finland and before joining the European Union. It seems also that changes in Swedish higher education were more influenced by changes in government at the national level. It is interesting to note in that regard that the turn of Swedish higher education toward more competition occurred with the installation of a center-right government in the early 1990s, while another turn *away* from the market occurred with the Socialists coming to power again in the mid-1990s.

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom were traditionally marked by a high degree of institutional autonomy¹⁶. The role of government in the higher education system was limited (Brennan and Shah 1994: 290). When the demand for higher education began to rise in the 1950s, the higher education institutions responded with raising entry requirements. This led to tensions inside and outside the system. In the sixties, a Committee (the Robbins Committee) was established with the objective to investigate the future of higher education in Great Britain. It published a report in 1963 that insisted on the principle of equality: “all young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full time course in higher education should have the opportunity to do so” (Ibid., 292). Contrary to the recommendations of the Robbins Committee, however, the expansion of higher education did not take place in the University sector, but through the development of polytechnics and colleges (Ibid., 292-293).

In 1985, a report was published (the Jarratt Report) which contained proposals for a transformation of university management practices. The proposals were very much in line with the concept of university as corporation. The report indicated, among else, that vice-chancellors should be chief executives and that more corporate planning should replace the power of the departments (Ibid., 299). For the polytechnics, a similar document was presented in the same year by the National Advisory Body’s Good Management Practice Group. This document, however, insisted on a lower degree of centralization of institutional control, and emphasized the role of departments, sub-units and individuals in it (Ibid., 299).

With the Education Reform Act of 1988, the polytechnics and most of the colleges were removed from the control of local education authorities, and tenure was removed from Universities. With the same Act, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council were created, as well as the Universities Funding Council (replacing the old University Grants Committee). Both new funding councils were responsible to the government’s Department of Education and Science, which resulted in convergence between the university and polytechnics/colleges sector (Ibid., 297). Furthermore, funds were not given anymore as a block grant. Instead, they were separated and handed over to research councils to which applications were supposed to be made on an *ad hoc* basis. The funding councils introduced a comparative element in making

¹⁶ There are substantial differences between the English, Scottish and Welsh higher education systems (Brennan and Shah 1994: 290). I will concentrate on the English system, because of its comparative relevance.

their decisions, based on considerations relating to student demand, price and quality (Ibid., 300).

The government published in 1991 a White Paper, "Higher Education: A New Framework", which became legislation the following year. It allowed the polytechnics to award their own degrees and the right to adopt the title of "University" (Ibid., 296)¹⁷. In 1992, polytechnics were granted university titles, which meant the end of the binary divide (Ibid., 293).

Universities in the U.K. were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council (this applied primarily to teaching, but also to research, and it was the responsibility of the Ministry of Education), by Research Councils (this applied to research only, and it was the responsibility of the Department of Trade and Industry), and by private sources (Beverwijk 1999: 29). An increasing number of funds came from non-core funding. This led a number of observers to talk about the emergence of an "intellectual proletariat" in Britain (Brennan and Shah 1994: 309). Tuition fees used to be high up to 1997/1998, but were paid by the Local Educational Authorities (in the case of British full-time students). Since the 1998-1999 academic year, however, full-time students were generally charged 1,000 pounds annually. Students from low-income families were partially exempted from paying tuition fees (Beverwijk 1999: 47-48).

The legislation resulting from the White Paper of 1991 created also a new quality assurance agency (the Higher Education Quality Council - HEQC). Funding councils could also undertake quality assessment at the program level (Brennan and Shah 1994: 297). The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 stated that quality control is not only possible through the market, but also through institutions and the newly formed HEQC (Ibid., 305). Also, funding councils should take into account quality in making their decisions (Ibid., 305)¹⁸. In 1997, the Quality Assessment Agency was established. Its aim was to work together with higher education institutions on quality assurance and the development of a common terminology and credit system in higher education (Beverwijk 1999: 59).

The system of admissions in the United Kingdom became very selective. Only 40% of the candidates were admitted. Because of their autonomous status, Universities had a lot of freedom in deciding who to admit. (Ibid., 21). In general, admission criteria consisted of exam results, references, personal arguments and motivation (Ibid., 22).

Finally, it is in order to mention that almost all UK Universities were public (the only exception is the University of Buckingham), but that there was no national curriculum. The latter phenomenon was the consequence of the fact that the Senate of Universities had the exclusive power to approve new courses and programs (Brennan and Shah 1994: 294-297).

When comparing the situation in British higher education with developments in the other five selected countries, one will notice convergence in terms of an overall trend

¹⁷ Prior to the White Paper, degrees were awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (Brennan and Shah 1994: 298).

¹⁸ The reports of funding councils are based on institutional self-assessment, statistical indicators and external reviews (Brennan and Shah 1994: 312).

toward the domination of market mechanisms, but also a number of essential differences. The non-University sector in the United Kingdom began to develop already in the 1960s, but in 1991 polytechnics acquired the status of Universities. In that regard, therefore, one will notice divergence. Other important differences between the British system and the other five, included funding mechanisms (e.g., students did have to pay tuition in Britain, while non-core funding also played a more important role in Britain than in the other countries), as well as the admissions system (the British being the more selective one). Convergence between the six systems, on the other side, had also taken place in the domain of the emergence of quality assurance systems, decentralization (in Britain the polytechnics system was being decentralized in 1985), and the development of similar degree structures (to a lesser extent in Sweden).

In conclusion: the Dutch, Flemish, German, Finnish and Swedish systems of higher education converged in terms of structure, funding and quality assurance, whereas the system in Great Britain converged with the other five with regard to some structural aspects (the degree structure to some extent - the abolishment of polytechnics in Britain, however, being an example of divergence), as well as the development of systems of quality assurance. The funding of higher education institutions in Great Britain remained different. In terms of student and teacher mobility, EU policies had a direct impact on all six states. Finally, it deserves mention that up to the Bologna Declaration the effects of European policies on British higher education were limited. One of the reasons may be the fact that Britain was until then ruled by Conservative governments, which were not too favorably disposed to European integration.

* * *

In all six analyzed higher education systems, one can observe a trend toward the principles of competition in the period we are concerned with. European integration, together with the process of globalization, played an essential role in the development of this trend. Higher education institutions became less dependent on the state, functioned more autonomously, and were increasingly subjected to “natural selection”. This was an overall trend in all six states (although there were periodical increases in government involvement), and it can be concluded that convergence of national higher education systems and policies has outweighed divergence in the six countries in the period under investigation. This convergence resulted in its institutional formulation: the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and the Bologna Declaration (1999).

The highly important impact of national higher education policy making on the increasingly competitive European environment has also been assessed. Governments in the six analyzed countries had indeed reacted to European integration and globalization with creating a more favorable environment for increasingly competitive higher education systems. The government of the United Kingdom has done that even earlier. This trend indicates that it is warranted to speak about a “snowball effect” in the six countries. The emergence of an increasingly competitive environment leads policy makers to create favorable conditions for institutions to compete in this

environment, which results in an even stronger role of competition. In light of this effect, it is clear why convergence outweighed divergence in higher education policies of EU member states. That has indeed occurred in all six analyzed states.

European integration resulted in a decrease of environmental diversity and a more salient role of the principles of competition. National policies reacted to this by creating more favorable conditions for competition, which led to a further decrease of diversity. Furthermore, policy examples were imitated, while the role of isomorphism was augmented by the high degree of professionalization of the sector in question¹⁹.

It thus appears that convergence in the higher education policies and sectors did occur in the analyzed countries in the 1980s and 1990s, but the role of the European Union in that regard was only minor. Specifically, the European Union hardly adopted legislation that forced any of the six countries to make changes in their higher education systems. Thus, there was barely any direct impact of EU higher education policies in the six member states in question. The only exception in that regard was the domain of mobility, which was stimulated by the EU through a variety of action programs (COMMETT, ERASMUS, SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI etc.). In terms of indirect impact, however, it seems that the mentioned EU action programs in the domain of mobility impacted on changes in the structure of higher education systems (e.g., an insight into the convenience of having similar BA/MA degree structures may translate into relevant institutional changes), as well as on changes in the domain of quality assurance (e.g., similar quality assurance criteria among the member states will positively influence student mobility).

Convergence in higher education policies in the six countries may certainly be explained by authorities imitating each other's policies. Behind this imitation, however, appeared to be self-interest. The relevant governments judged what the dominant trends would be in Europe in the future and generally avoided to lag behind with their policies. In that regard, the European Union was an integrating factor and the authorities of the member states were generally aware that, even if they were not directly coerced into a particular policy by the EU, major deviances from the dominant trend would have a negative impact on their country. It should also be emphasized that the ensuing important documents in the field of higher education (the Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration) were initialized bottom-up from the member states. In fact, Sorbonne and Bologna appear to have been both a *reaction* to convergence processes that have taken place among higher education policies of European states, as well as an *instrument* for promoting further convergence. All in all, the EU did not have a central role. Circuitously, EU policies had an impact. Thus, the dominant motives behind convergence processes have to be sought in benefits related to EU policies, as well as the member states' calculative and possibly non-calculative imitation of each other's policies²⁰.

¹⁹ For my analysis of competition and cooperation processes between private and state universities in one specific non-EU country (Serbia), see Rakic (2006).

²⁰ These three motives are classified under A2a, A2d, B1 and B2 in the "general scheme".

3. Link to Theories of Institutional Isomorphism

The situation in which government institutions imitate each other's policies introduces us to literature on institutional isomorphism. In this chapter I will firstly position the theoretical model from the "general scheme" in relation to two pivotal works dealing with institutional isomorphism: DiMaggio and Powell's article "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields" (1983) and Richard Scott's book *Institutions and Organizations* (1995). Afterwards I will demonstrate why our model can fully account for the problem that was raised in this paper, and consequently does not have to be upgraded with either DiMaggio and Powell's article or Scott's book.

(1) "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields"

According to the authors, rational actors make their institutions increasingly similar, while attempting to change them. This convergence is based on three isomorphic processes: coercive, mimetic and normative (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 147). Coercive isomorphism results from formal and informal pressures on one organization by another organization which is dependent upon it and by "cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function" (Ibid., 150). Mimetic isomorphism is encouraged by uncertainty, "when organizational technologies are poorly understood, when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty" (Ibid., 151). Normative isomorphic change is a consequence of professionalization, i.e. of "the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work" (Ibid., 152)²¹.

Two major differences appear between the previously presented "general scheme" and DiMaggio and Powell's theory. First, the "general scheme" deals with *reasons* for convergence, whereas DiMaggio and Powell have *mechanisms* of convergence in mind. Second, DiMaggio and Powell address exclusively rational mechanisms, while I believe that non-rational (or rather non-calculative, to avoid confusion with "irrational") mechanisms may also lead to certain policy outcomes, including the direction of institutional change²². Thus, "calculative imitation" in the general scheme can be a motivational background for all three types of isomorphic processes in DiMaggio and Powell.

(2) "*Institutions and Organizations*"

²¹ The authors note that universities and professional training institutions are important for the development of organizational norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 152). Normative isomorphism may, therefore, be an important explanatory mechanism in research on the impact of academic institutions and disciplines on national (and supranational) policy making in the field of higher education.

²² Fashion is an example of isomorphism that is mostly based non-calculative imitation.

Scott also distinguishes DiMaggio and Powell's three mechanisms of isomorphic change, but regards them as elements of three *pillars of institutions* as well²³ (Scott 1995: 35). He differentiates the regulative, normative and cognitive pillar. The regulative pillar includes rule-setting, monitoring and sanctioning activities (Ibid., 35). The normative pillar relates to rules that introduce a prescriptive, evaluative and obligatory dimension into social life. In Scott's words: "Actors conform not because it serves their individual interests, narrowly defined, but because it is expected of them; they are obliged to do so" (Ibid., 39). The cognitive pillar emphasizes stabilizing effects of shared definitions of social reality (Ibid., 40).

It seems, however, that the normative and cognitive pillar do not differ much from each other. They both pertain to a particular moral obligation, with the difference that "cognitivists" do not tend to attach an absolute (or even objective) value to their morality. In that sense, the cognitive pillar can be regarded as a relativized normative pillar. In contrast to the normative and cognitive pillar, the regulative pillar does not pertain to moral obligation, but to a more coercive element in obligation. Thus, the regulative pillar stimulates compliance on the basis of self-interest, the normative and cognitive pillar on the basis of what I called self-prescription.

We have seen that the *direct* role of the European Union in convergence processes in the six analyzed countries was only present in the domain of mobility. Its *indirect* role could be noted in other domains as well. For instance, an increase in student mobility within the European Union had an impact on the development of similar programs or similar degree structures in the member states, as well as on the development of comparable quality assurance mechanisms. In all this, calculative imitation of each other's policy examples by member states was the dominant mechanism of institutional isomorphism. Apart from this calculative imitation, it is also possible that non-calculative motivations were behind imitation, i.e. that policy makers in a particular state imitated the policies of other states on the basis of moral authority or numerical domination, rather than on the basis of pure calculation. Thus, it was a (soft) form of coercion by the European Union that led to convergence in the domain of mobility (with side-effects in other domains), and calculative (and possibly also non-calculative) imitation of policy examples that resulted in convergence in quality assurance and the structure of higher education systems in the six member states. All things considered, it turns out that the issue of interest here can be fully explained by the theoretical model from the "general scheme", and that it is thus unnecessary to seek additional explanatory power in the works of DiMaggio/Powell and Scott.

* * *

It remains to be clarified why convergence in the higher education systems in the six countries was on the increase in the period we dealt with, while similar developments were not present to that degree before. It appears that the policies of the European Union were a significant contributing factor in the analyzed time-frame. In addition to that, it is important to note that a massification of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in governments being less able to spend sufficient financial resources on higher education. This development was augmented by the economic crisis of the

²³ The three pillars are identified as "making up or supporting institutions" (Scott, 1995: 35).

1970s and 1980s. The consequence was an increasing orientation of higher education institutions toward the market²⁴. Since this orientation became increasingly dominant throughout the European Union, it is understandable that events resulting from it led to an overall trend toward convergence in a number of domains of the higher education systems in the member states. Hence, it appears that it were both the consequences of a massification of higher education in Western Europe, as well the increasingly important role of the European Union, which contributed to significant developments in the direction of convergence in the period in question. It has been demonstrated, however, that the essential mechanism responsible for convergence was institutional isomorphism. It is the survival mechanism of institutional imitation (both calculative and non-calculative), rather than direct EU policies, that accounts for observed convergence of higher education policies of European states in the period leading to Sorbonne and Bologna.

4. Epilogue: Repercussions of Institutional Adaptation for Evolutionary Theory

Let me close this paper with the announced brief excursion that is relevant for evolutionary theory in general. It has been demonstrated in the previous sections that the concept of adaptation mechanisms that is derived from evolutionary theory can explain convergence of higher education policies. Hence, institutional theory can borrow concepts from evolutionary theory. Is a reverse process also possible? In other words, can evolutionary theory borrow from institutional theory?

One important argument in the various debates on evolutionary theory remains that even if life can be explained without the idea of “intelligent design” (and humanity might find such an explanation if it is to survive for a sufficiently long time) it is still not a proof that such design does not exist. It is imaginable that God could have created the world with its laws of development and have let it continue in time²⁵. Similarly, the discovery of adaptation mechanisms of higher education policies to an increasingly competitive and Europeanized environment (substantiated by their convergence²⁶) does of course not imply that these policies do not have a “creator”.

It has been shown that some higher education policies have emerged as a consequence of institutional imitation (calculative or not). This finding, however, does not have to lead to the conclusion that these policies exist independently from concrete political actors. Hence, relevance ought to be attributed both to self-regulating mechanisms of the market, to Europeanization, as well as to policies that have been developed by specific political actors. This conclusion can shed some additional light on the alleged incompatibility of evolutionary theory with the idea of intelligent design, i.e. it can serve as an argument *in favor of their compatibility*. The fact that this light comes

²⁴ This process became even more pronounced in those countries in the European Union in which the center-right took office.

²⁵ Instructive for this line of argumentation is Ivanovic (2009: 380).

²⁶ As already noted, convergence does not have to be the only indicator of adaptation at work. Evidence of adaptation mechanisms can also be divergence of higher education policies - in the case that some policies attempt to find a “niche” for themselves in the market. It is dubious, however, whether cogent evidence of this type has been found.

from a seemingly unlikely source, i.e. from institutional theory, ought not to diminish its usefulness. Moreover, it shows that the answer to our last question is affirmative: evolutionary theory *can* successfully borrow concepts from institutional theory.

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