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Coping with the flow – state mediation in European higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how global and transnational trends manifest in the governance reforms in European higher education. It brings together Finland, France, Poland, Portugal, and the Netherlands to analyse how the states mediate transnational trends and national policy priorities. While lacking official decision-making authority in higher education policy, transnational organisations have significantly influenced policy and practice changes due to the perceived importance of higher education for economic and social development. Their influence can be described as facilitating policy borrowing and policy lending, articulating the characteristics of the states and the established academic cultures with governance narratives. The study employs a comparative document analysis of national policy contexts across five countries. The analysis brought forward the role of the state in mediating higher education institutional autonomy, opening avenues for further research on the rationales influencing the national interpretation of transnational trends.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the environment within which Higher Education (HE) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are evolving has been marked by the influence of neoliberal policies reshaping their culture, missions, and purposes: the education of citizens to serve social and moral progress, intellectual development, and the preservation, advancement and creation of knowledge and its free access by the community (Palmadessa 2014). Governments' preferences for quasi-markets, competition, and New Public Management (NPM), aimed at increasing the efficiency of HE systems and their institutions (Jauhiainen et al. 2015; Kallo 2009; Kogan and Hanney 2000), have been inducing various, and sometimes contradictory, demands from stakeholders (government, funding agencies, taxpayers, students, business and industry), impacting HEIs' autonomy (Jankowski and Provezis 2014; Lynch 2006). NPM can be seen as an administrative and managerial practice within the neoliberal approach, even though the relationship between the two has been debated both conceptually and historically (Knafo 2020; Dutta et al. 2023).

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In Europe, HEIs are facing increasing pressures to cater to economic demands. These range from the need to supply the labour market with skilled graduates, to promoting economically relevant research and development (R&D), and the market deployment of innovations. This mandate claims for a closer articulation between education, research and innovation (Amaral 2018; Magalhães and Veiga 2018) to promote stronger links between the missions of HEIs and the economy, enhancing the quality and relevance of HE (Mokyr 2002).

Political drivers based on economic relevance and the pursuit of useful knowledge (Magalhães and Veiga 2018; Mokyr 2002) are interpreted and managed at the national and institutional levels, resulting in diverse responses. Moreover, the tension between the rise of nationalisms and the ongoing efforts towards international cooperation, mobility and institutional alliances, as well as the tension between openness and resistance to social and economic pressures on HE, also make relevant the awareness of global, national and local interests. Additionally, the pressure to ensure that the HEIs are 'relevant' influences HE governance, management and the role of professionals (Teixeira et al. 2019).

European HE reforms (e.g. Magalhães et al. 2013;Musselin and Teixeira 2013) have had a significant impact on the external and internal regulation of HEIs, namely by enhancing their economical dimensions and their potential contribution to individual and socio-economic goals (Teixeira et al. 2019). The need to adapt to national contexts marked by the reconfiguration of HE, along with market regulation (Sarrico et al. 2016; Teixeira and Dill 2011), has induced an explicit and pervasive emphasis on managerial and economic dimensions, promoting the influence of management over governance (Magalhães, Veiga, and Videira 2017; Magalhães and Veiga 2018; Sarrico et al. 2016). This trend justifies a need for the participation of external stakeholders in HE management (Veiga, Magalhães, and Amaral 2015; Amaral and Magalhães 2002; Magalhães and Veiga 2018) aiming at effective coordination and control systems (Sarrico et al. 2016).

Marginson's description of universities facing two alternative strategies is still relevant: either the reaffirmation of HE as a public good; or submitting 'education to the disciplines of the market and the methods and value of business', redefining education as a competitive private good (1999, p. 122). Palmadessa (2014) also underlines the paradox HE is dealing with, as it is expected to be both an institution for the public good that supports the welfare of citizenry and an institution that seeks capital interest for itself and private partners, placing market value over social value.

The political steering of autonomous institutions raises the question of how supranational trends feed and are fed by the development of HEIs missions (Amaral and Magalhães 2007; Santiago, Carvalho, and Cardoso 2015). Market-driven political rationales have been inducing the states to develop instruments based on institutional and individual performance management along with NPM reforms. The transnational policy diffusion has been studied with the theories of policy borrowing and policy lending (Lingard 2010; Steiner-Khamsi 2012). Instead, this paper investigates how states in Europe mediate transnational political and economic drivers in the reform of higher education governance. The paper addresses the following overarching research question: How do European states mediate transnational policy trends in shaping national governance reforms and institutional autonomy in higher education?

By looking at systems and HEIs where the state regulation plays a particular mediation role, the paper will analyse how the state mediates the translation of transnational trends influencing governance reforms in HE. Across Europe, there are national contexts where the state plays a stronger regulating role (e.g. France and Finland) (Kauko 2013; Musselin and Paradeise 2009; Pekkola et al. 2020; Siekkinen, Pekkola, and Carvalho 2020), where the national dimension is salient and supranational policies tend to be resisted (e.g. Poland) (Kwiek 2012), where market-driven coordination is more influential (e.g. the Netherlands) (Huisman 2009), and where mixed features of state regulation with the autonomy of HEIs prevail (e.g. Portugal) (Magalhães et al. 2013).

The paper begins by identifying the influence transnational organisations such as OECD, the World Bank, the European Union, and the European Universities Association have over reshaping the purpose and governance of higher education. While lacking official decision-making authority

in higher education policy, these transnational organisations have significantly influenced policy and practice due to the perceived importance of higher education in economic and social development (Magalhães et al. 2013; Sarrico et al. 2016; Barnett 2017). By doing so, this paper addresses the research question of the role of the state in mediating transnational trends into national priorities. In the following section, the research design is described and the analysis of each country is based on the state's alignment with transnational trends influencing institutional autonomy.

The influence of transnational trends at the national level

The question of how transnational or supranational trends influence national higher education systems is one of the main issues in the field. We approached this issue from the perspectives on how transnational trends create a political 'grammar' based on evaluation and funding, as well as models of governance and management of higher education systems and their institutions (Neave 2012). We developed an understanding of the extent to which different countries perform state regulation and institutional autonomy in higher education based on this grammar. We focus on two levels: the role states play in mediating transnational trends and the relationship between institutional autonomy and the state (Kjaer 2010). This brings forward a complex interplay between state regulation and autonomy of institutions and academics in higher education systems across different national contexts.

The institutions of the European Union, for instance, have disseminated a policy grammar based, on the one hand, on the concern for the financial sustainability of higher education systems and, on the other hand the reconfiguration of institutional autonomy. The leeway of autonomy is strongly articulated with the financial management framework of higher education and research systems. While fundamental values such as democracy and institutional autonomy are being reaffirmed, financial stringency and the specificities of national contexts are emphasised. Moreover, market-like regulation, by promoting competition between institutions, ascribes centrality to financial autonomy, for instance:

> competitive-based government funding increases with increasing levels of financial autonomy. As before, a significant difference only occurs when universities are completely autonomous. This could indicate that national or institutional settings which do not allow universities to act in a fully financially autonomous way are less likely to produce a real change. (European Union 2011, 24)

The European Commission sees reforms underway as it reports that most Member States are 'restructuring governance and funding (increasing the autonomy of higher education institutions, reforming governance and course structures, allocating increased funding, etc.)' (European Commission 2022, 67). In the same vein, the OECD recommends decreasing centralisation in the regulation of higher education so that universities are flexible enough to address national and local needs (OECD 2022). The reform of governance and funding is a key issue in addressing the autonomy of European HEIs. The articulation between governance and funding promotes the idea that by increasing the autonomy of higher education institutions, their relevance and efficiency in developing their missions will improve.

According to previous studies, the transnational discourses on higher education governance have different implications in different national contexts under our study: Finland, Portugal, Poland, France, and the Netherlands. At the national level (e.g. Portugal, Finland), transnational trends enacted through external reviews of the development needs of higher education can be identified. In Finland, according to Kallo (2009), transnational influences, namely from the OECD, have played a major role in shaping higher education governance. Finland has a strong tradition of cooperation with international organisations. In the Finnish context, there is a dense network of policy-making (Kauko 2025). Transnational influence is channelled through organisations such as the EU and through Nordic cooperation, and it is difficult to draw lines of 'international influence', as many policies are not explicitly national or international (Volmari 2024). In this sense, the

big drivers of change in Finland have been the aspiration and actions to join in the transnational networks.

In Portugal, the resulting recommendations from the OECD Review (2019) aimed to further strengthen the country's performance in terms of an international perspective and multidisciplinary approach. In line with this, the Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education reaffirmed the commitment to fully achieve European convergence by 2030. The commitment extended, also, to the promotion of knowledge and innovation as the main drivers for the country's development, as well the creation of networks of opportunities (OECD 2019, p. 3). Despite the recognition that HEIs have a high degree of autonomy (OECD 2019, p. 61), the ongoing public and private international partnerships and related initiatives are expected by the OECD to be further strengthened. Simultaneously, public-private partnerships aimed at changing the national economic paradigm by fostering the creation and growth of science-based start-ups and industry-science partnerships that leverage science and technology in Portugal to address global markets (OECD 2019, p. 39).

The Polish case can also be convened as a specific case of the influence of transnational drivers on the higher education system. After the implementation of the Bologna process, the policy discussion on higher education in Poland gained new momentum with two reports published by the World Bank (2004) and the OECD (2006), which see higher education primarily as a tool for economic development. These organisations also expressed concern about the structural arrangements for the internal and external governance of higher education. Nevertheless, Polish universities have shown considerable resilience to transnational modernisation pressures. As Michael Dobbins (2015) acknowledges, the governance of Polish public higher education was relatively resistant to change, characterised by the steadfastness of historical institutions rather than political change. The idea of neoliberalism and NPM has not really taken hold in Polish higher education as compared to other European countries, but there are also scholars who argue otherwise (Szadkowski and Krzeski 2022).

Similarly, in France, the influence of these transnational trends was mostly absent until the beginning of the 2000s (Musselin and Paradeise 2009). While the French Ministry of HE was among the main initiators of the Bologna Process in 1998, laying the first brick of a European area of higher education, his endeavour was a leverage to justify national reforms (Ravinet, 2008). Besides, there was no clear influence of the NPM narrative on the 'silent' contractual reform of the mid-eighties (Musselin 2004) that contributed to strengthening the universities' institutional autonomy. By the mid-2000s, however, the rising force of the 'knowledge economy' paradigm in Europe combined with the growing influence of NPM in different spheres of the state (Bezes 2005) drove an unprecedented series of reforms in the higher education sector (Mignot-Gerard, Normand, and Ravinet 2019).

The Netherlands as an open higher education system has been receptive to transnational trends, such as New Public Management in general or the EU's Lisbon agenda in particular. However, in the Dutch case it is difficult to say whether the country has been responding to the trends, or setting and contributing to the trends, or using the transnational trends to legitimise its own preferences (Vukasovic and Huisman 2018). Nevertheless, the congruence with transnational trends is noticeable. In terms of governance structures, there has been a clear shift towards greater institutional autonomy, concentration of authority within universities, and involvement of external stakeholders in university governance (Gornitzka, Maassen, and de Boer 2017). We can also see the effect of the European agenda and the rhetoric of global competition on research policy, innovation policy and higher education. On the other hand, we can also observe a counter-reaction of the Dutch government and universities' associations to some strong transnational trends. This is particularly related to dysfunctional effects of competition in research that focuses on limited metrics (impact factors) and creates wrong incentives for the entire research system. In these lines, the Netherlands has been particularly active in setting the agenda for open access publishing internationally and broadening the measurement of research productivity locally.

Research design

Different country cases underline the importance of understanding how the influence of transnational trends promoted by transnational organisations evolves. The paper assumes a multi-level approach, bringing forward the role states play in mediating the challenges stemming from the higher education ecosystems.

At the national level, data were collected on the basis of a common template gathering documents identified by national research teams and guided by the overarching research question. The template used to identify the relevant policy documents was collected by each national team and analysed considering the questions such as: How are supranational trends influencing HE autonomy at the national level? How do economic, political drivers/discourses legitimate the uses of institutional autonomy? How are supranational trends being translated and adopted at the national level? What is the political emphasis of the priorities established by the government with regard to the uses of institutional autonomy (financial, pedagogic, research) by HEIs? How do national policies reflect (or not) a stronger coordination by the state market regulation? Additionally, five working papers were produced by each national team exploring the main challenges impacting the reconfiguration of institutional autonomy. By using thematic analysis, in this paper we bring forward national developments associated with higher education reforms (see Table 1) to support the comparative approach of this paper.

Taking into consideration this methodological step, it was possible to further explore how these national features relate to the mediation role of the state, which refers to how and to what extent the state favours, resists, buffers, and adapts to the transnational trends.

Table 1. National developments and the reconfiguration of institutional autonomy.

Selected countries	National issues	Themes
Finland	– A dense network that is conducting policy-making. – Public universities have 60% of tripartite (professors, personnel and students) and 40% of external members in the university board (2010). – Universities have chosen managerial shifts even though the university law would have allowed leeway (2009).	Foundational universities (private institutions with public mission) Managerial shift
France	– Evaluation of universities performance (2007) – 'Excellence initiatives' (2009) – The abandonment of metrics, but still an emphasis on institutional autonomy & maintenance of competitive funding (2013)	Performance evaluation Competitive funding
Poland	– Polish Accreditation Commission (PKA) (2002) – Instrumentalization of education and greater subordination of education to the needs of the labour market. – Strong emphasis on international publications through institutional evaluation system (2006).	Accreditation Publishing performance
Portugal	– The Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (RJIES) was explicitly inspired by NPM (2007). – The strengthening of the managerial power of the bodies in detriment of collegial influence, the centralisation of decision-making processes and the presence of external agents at central and intermediate levels.	Managerial shift
The Netherlands	– Liberalisation: competition for students and research funding – Formalisation and standardisation: quality assurance – Performance contracts: communicating state expectations – Direct and indirect market and performance pressures – Strengthening collaborative governance (medezeggenschap) (2017)	Performance indicators and market pressures Collaborative governance

The comparison of HE systems aims at analysing the interactions between supranational governance drivers and the regulation of national higher education systems and institutions.

National responses: the mediation role of the state

The interactions between supranational governance of higher education and national higher education systems and institutions brought to the forefront the potential impact of economic and financial policy drivers on institutional autonomy. As argued, the role of state regulation based on the attribution of autonomy to institutions also plays a role, and it is debatable whether or not the reconfiguration of institutional autonomy represents a *de facto* threat to their autonomy.

In the 1980s, the state supervision model replaced the state control model throughout Western Europe. Institutions were granted autonomy and their capacity for self-regulation was promoted. Institutional autonomy was seen both as an incentive for self-regulation of systems and institutions and as an affirmation of the public good. In higher education, this was translated into the assumption that the more autonomous institutions are, the better they will respond to changes in their organisational environment, which would lead them to be more effective and efficient (Bailey 2008). This assumption highlights the need for HEIs to be sensitive to the external environment, resulting in the presence of stakeholders who represent external interests in their governance structures and ultimately contribute to their reconfiguration as 'complete organisations' (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersen 2000). However, the granting of institutional autonomy creates tensions in the relationship between the political steering by the state and the governance activities of HEIs. This tension is reflected in a contractual relationship that, somewhat paradoxically, neither weakens nor reduces the extent and intensity of state regulation (Neave 2008).

The transformation of the relationship between the state and HEIs has replaced *a priori* control, based mainly on funding and the prior approval of many HEIs activities and initiatives by *a posteriori* control focused on outcomes. In terms of regulation, institutional autonomy has evolved in the context of the development of the 'evaluative state', materialising the political shift from the 'guardian' to the 'supervisory state' (Neave 2008). Under the influence of neoliberal perspectives, the role of the state and its agencies was seen as socially pernicious and its action should ultimately be limited to ensuring social order and mitigating the worst effects of market regulation. In line with this, markets have been introduced to regulate the role of institutions and students. The former, configured as suppliers, should be free to enter the market to determine prices and products, while the latter, configured as consumers, should be free to choose products and suppliers based on adequate information about prices and quality (Teixeira and Dill 2011). Thus, the market principles are induced by state regulation, strengthening its governing role over higher education systems.

In Western European countries, institutional autonomy has been widely assumed as a regulatory tool to politically steer public systems and institutions, with the aim of implementing governance models that can adequately respond to competitive and ever-changing environments. Even though there is a broad consensus on granting autonomy to HEIs and on the need to increase institutional self-regulation, governments need to ensure that their objectives are really taken into account; therefore, strengthening their coordination and regulation frameworks (Peters 2010).

The features of state regulation and its mediating role in translating transnational trends at the national and institutional levels assume different forms in line with national contexts and regulations while influencing higher education legal and normative frameworks. The national mediation role of the state can be analysed considering its effects on institutional autonomy. Actually, different forms of the state's alignment with transnational trends influencing institutional autonomy are brought forward by analysing specific indicators such as the composition of governing boards, the influence of the state on institutional autonomy, and the governance reforms as indicators of the influence of transnational trends.

State regulation: Finland

In Finland, during the previous revision of the law on universities, the initial proposal to have only external members on the boards of foundation universities was contested in the Constitutional Committee of Parliament, and a minimum of one internal representative in the university board was decreed (Poutanen et al. 2022). The decision on the composition of top governance of foundation universities was a longer struggle. A coalition of business, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and university rectors pushed for foundation universities as part of the law reform (Kuusela et al. 2021). The MEC used financial incentives and disincentives to facilitate this, and university communities that were critical of the issue were sidelined (Poutanen et al. 2022).

The internal governance of universities, especially in the case of foundation universities, became politicised during the legislative process leading to the University Law of 2010. The main issue was the continuation of tripartite internal governance, with equal representation of professors, staff and students at different levels (Välimaa 2019). For public universities, it was stipulated that the university board should have 60% tripartite and 40% external members. Before the 2007–2008 reforms, academic staff perceived that decisions were made by academics in about 70% of cases (Pekkola 2011). After this reform, for example, at the University of Tampere, only 11% of the staff supported the existing internal regulations and 29% perceived a need to shift power to university staff (Kuusela et al. 2019). When the new University Act 2009/558 came into force, a managerial shift also took place in public universities. Silvén (2024) points out how universities choose to move from tripartite governance to managerial models, even though the University Act would have allowed leeway.

Increasing institutional autonomy and organising competition between universities: France

In France, since 1968, increasing the institutional autonomy of universities has been an objective for all national governments, regardless of their political orientation. Although strengthening HEIs' institutional autonomy has never been synonymous with state retreat, the state modes of intervention dramatically changed in two respects since the early 2000s. Firstly, the state started measuring HEIs' performance results and developing performance-based funding. The 2007 Law on the Universities' Liberties and Responsibilities (LRU) primarily aimed at strengthening institutional autonomy but also introduced the evaluation of university performance. The LRU was indeed related to another law, the Organique Law of the Laws of Finances (LOLF) of 2001 (Boitier and Rivière 2013). The LOLF gave the French Parliament a greater role in the control of the state budget and established a budgetary structure that included a commitment to priority objectives linked to performance indicators for all state expenditure. Within this framework, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research defined a new performance-based system of state funding, which took into account the performance of teaching (up to 15%) and research (up to 20%). Evaluation was led by a new national agency created in 2006, the Agency for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (AERES), renamed High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) in 2014. The main change introduced by AERES was the use of grades (A +, A, B or C) for the evaluation of research laboratories, evaluations which were made public (Musselin 2017). Secondly, the state started organising competition between universities. The 'Excellence Initiatives' launched in 2009 by President Sarkozy aimed to differentiate universities according to their performance. The main objective was to distinguish 10 excellent campuses being able to compete with the best world universities". It consisted of project-based funding where the state would select 'excellent' institutions ('IdEx') or research labs ('LabEx'). The 2007 Law for Universities' Liberties & Responsibilities that reinforces universities' autonomy and presidents' decision-making power has been analysed as an adoption of NPM principles in French higher education (Boitier and Rivière 2013).

In the last two decades, the state regulation of higher education in France has therefore not declined, but the modalities of state steering have evolved from bureaucratic control to organising competition and differentiation between universities based on their performance (Mignot-Gerard, Normand, and Ravinet 2019).

Mixed features of state regulation with the autonomy of HEIs: Portugal

In Portugal, since the mid-1990s, debates on institutional autonomy have focused on the tension between the autonomy attributed to HEIs by the 1988 (universities) and 1990 (polytechnics) laws; the need for more consistent regulation by the state and greater efficiency in decision-making processes at the level of the institutions. The 1988 Autonomy Law assumed a model of governance based on collegial bodies representing all the constituencies of the institutions. This was changed in 2007, when the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (RJIES) was passed, explicitly inspired by NPM (Moreira 2008).

Nevertheless, its formulation was not presented in its most radical expression as, for instance, the members of the university board are chosen by the institution instead of by the government, and external members are a minority. However, RJIES clearly defines which are the compulsory governance models, their composition and prerogatives, thus limiting the role of institutions to the eventual definition of advisory bodies in the statutes. Despite its attenuated features, the RJIES has strengthened the managerial functions of rectors/presidents, faculty/school/department heads. RJIES also strengthened the centrality of efficiency (and the cost–benefit equation), the development of strong central administrations and the weakening of faculty and student representation in higher education management.

Under the previous legal framework (1988), universities enjoyed statutory, scientific, pedagogical, administrative, financial and disciplinary autonomy. With the RJIES (2007) institutional autonomy has been affected. It has also promoted the strengthening of managerial power of boards to the detriment of collegial influence, the centralisation of decision-making processes and the presence of external actors at central and intermediate levels, which is reflected in the interplay of forces between actors in governance structures and processes (Veiga, Magalhães, and Amaral 2015). In the case of the HEIs foundation model (public institutions ruled by public law), financial autonomy has even increased (Magalhães, et al., 2013). The NPM features of governance reforms seen as a transnational trend had a mixed effect on the state regulation role in mediating institutional autonomy.

Academic self-governance and the resistance to supranational influences: Poland

In Poland, universities enjoy a high level of institutional autonomy rooted in a decentralised collegial governance model with a dominant role of the professorship (Kwiek 2015). They are characterised by a low level of influence from transnational political drivers due to their traditionally strong historical embeddedness (which spans the entire higher education sector) and the lack of a strategic policy agenda for resource allocation. In Europe, Polish universities remain with the highest broad scope of academic self-governance and a particularly strong notion of a university as a self-governing community of scholars (Kwiek 2015). However, there are steady and gradual legislative changes that are transforming Polish universities into organisational actors (Krücken and Meier 2006), despite a backlash from the academic community that has slowed down the process and mitigated its outcomes. The Law of Higher Education (2005) only slightly modified the role of university rectors, giving them more stable positions and (since 2011) greater managerial responsibility, allowing them (since 2018) to appoint and dismiss vice-rectors and deans. In addition, since 2012, public universities are required to adopt institutional strategies, whose implementation is regularly monitored by the senate. Finally, in 2018, the university governance was changed with the introduction of university boards (councils) with mandatory participation of external stakeholders

(Urbanek 2020). However, it should be noted that the boards were adopted in such a way that it did not affect the collegial model of governance as they have mostly soft and symbolic powers (Antonowicz et al. 2024; Antonowicz, Rónay, and Jaworska 2023).

Overall transnational trends on governance reforms did not affect the state mediation role, allowing HEIs to preserve collegial perspectives regarding institutional autonomy. Polish universities still remain conservative and immune to managerial pressures regarding institutional governance as a result of 'policy of non-policy' (e.g. Kwiek 2008) in which the state performed only basic administrative functions without undertaking any serious policy steps. This was largely due to the fact that in the post-authoritarian society, the government had no moral right to interfere in the affairs of autonomous universities. The chronically underfunded system led to the gradual de-institutionalisation of the research function (Kwiek 2012) as a result of internal and external privatisation. Ultimately, these factors became the main reasons that called for the implementation of stronger policy measures to address the emerging challenges in higher education (Antonowicz, Kohoutek, and Hladchenko 2017). This was done at the expense of institutional autonomy, as HEIs were unable to stop the deterioration of the quality of (mass) education and the high decline of the research mission.

Attempts to balance between democratic and executive governance models: The Netherlands

Universities in the Netherlands have a high level of institutional autonomy, as demonstrated also by the scorecard of the European Universities' Association (Pruvot, Estermann, and Popkhadze 2023). Institutional autonomy, on the one hand, and internal decision-making structures, on the other hand, have gone through various policy changes over the last years. It is an interesting case where more institutional autonomy seems to go hand in hand with more centralised power within universities, and thereby with less democratic internal governance, which creates its own tensions.

The governance reforms in the Netherlands started relatively early, at the end of the 1990s, and they are as much a subject to a transnational trend as a contributor and enforcer of the trend. The transformation can be summarised as a shift from a democratic to executive governance model, carried by the NPM ideas (de Boer, Denters, and Goedegebuure 1998; de Boer et al. 2010). The new Higher Education Act in 1997 was an attempt to increase universities' autonomy and it was based on the idea that a strong executive body in universities is a precondition for effective and good governance. Democratic decision-making structures were seen as slow and ineffective for a challenging environment, leading to the reform agenda known as 'Modernising Universities' Governance Structures'. In 2012, the government introduced a new steering instrument, performance agreements. These agreements, established between a university and the ministry, aimed to improve performance based on measurable indicators such as contact hours taught, student graduation rates and dropout rates. While universities were not obliged to achieve the targets, there was a financial component linked to achieving the target. Empirical studies demonstrate that universities were indeed responsive to the externally set targets and as a result improved their performance on most of the used indicators (Jongbloed, Kaiser, and Westerheijden 2020).

The 1997 Act made two important changes for universities' governance structures. First, it reduced the role of the democratically elected University Councils to a largely advisory body with very limited veto or decision-making power. The power was instead concentrated in the Executive Board of the university (i.e. in the rector together with a max additional two board members). Secondly, the Act established a Supervisory Board of external members who oversee the Executive Board on behalf of the Minister. At the same time, the new law stipulated that the responsibility for education lay with the faculty and thus with the dean. This meant that power within faculties was also more centralised in faculty boards, in the hands of a Dean in particular (de Boer et al., 2010).

The change in the governance structure has been characterised as a process in which 'managerial power began to replace professional self-governance'. Equally importantly, it is a process where the 'meaning of academic autonomy shifted [from academic self-governance] towards organisational autonomy' (Enders and Westerheijden 2014; Enders et al. 2013). The Act was revised in later years to fine-tune again the balance between the executive core and collegial governance, most significantly in 2017. Through this change, the University Councils received a clearer mandate to participate in the process of appointing the executive board. Programme committees – i.e. study program level committees of staff and students – received a formal mandate to approve certain programme-level decisions regarding programme quality. Programme committees must be independent from programme management, thereby providing collegial control over managerial authority in academic affairs. In this way, attempts are being made to strengthen self-governance within universities (Maassen 2017).

Conclusion

As higher education has moved up the agenda of transnational institutions such as the OECD and the EU, the political drivers that shape the priorities for the sector have a significant impact on the way higher education systems and institutions are governed and managed. As these policy drivers are linked to economic and financial concerns emerging as a key influence in promoting market-like regulatory instruments already in place, challenging possible future trends and developments in HE.

By analysing how European states mediate transnational policy trends in shaping national governance reforms and institutional autonomy in higher education this paper allowed us to identify the state's alignment with these trends and its influence on specific aspects at the national level (Table 2).

In Finland, the regulative role of the state and the academic cultures was challenged by managerial narratives, which are key elements associated with management borrowed from transnational policy drivers. In France, the reforms led by the State were very recently affected by transnational trends; it is only in the late 2000s that the NPM and Knowledge economy narrative was translated into policies aiming to enhance institutional autonomy and competition between universities. In Portugal, institutional autonomy emerged as a mediation political instrument between the state and the power of academics within HEIs. In Poland, the national dimension prevented a clear borrowing and lending of transnational policy drivers, as academic self-governance has been resisting the managerial features, contrasting with the Netherlands, where the influence of transnational policy drivers is more visible. In the Dutch case, viewed as a front-runner in borrowing the managerial

Table 2. State mediation and institutional autonomy.

Country	State's alignment with transnational trends on influencing institutional autonomy	Mediation role of the state on institutional autonomy
Finland	State goals are aligned with transnational trends Transnational organisations supported state regulation	State mediation induces a managerial perspective in institutional governance
France	Late influence of transnational trends on state regulation	State mediation induces a centralization of power in institutional governance + competitive-based approach as a steering instrument
Portugal	Transnational organisations supported state regulation	State mediation induces mixed signs of NPM with other governance perspectives on institutional governance
Poland	Resistance to supranational influences	State mediation assumes an administrative function and preserve a strong collegial governance approach to institutional governance
The Netherlands	NPM drove state regulation aligning with transnational trends	State mediation induces centralisation of power on executive governance bodies at the institutional level, and later re-balancing this with some participatory governance elements.

elements of institutional governance from the NPM perspectives, it configures a role model lending this approach to university governance to other European higher education systems (Paradeise, Reale, and Gostellec 2009).

The state mediation roles are reflected in its interpretations of transnational trends as expressed in the legal frameworks and, simultaneously are embedded in institutional autonomy. While borrowing from the NPM narrative, the features inducing an entrepreneurial approach to institutional governance, institutional autonomy has been reconfigured as the legal frameworks allowed for significant leeway to institutional actors' interpretations and the development of governance practices.

Actually, despite the more or less permeability of each country to transnational trends, all the five HE national systems were influenced by the economic and/or managerial rationale in governing HE. For instance, in the context of what Jussi Välimaa (2012) has called the 'globalisation shock', a discourse of competitiveness has struck a chord in Finnish higher education. Finland has been an active member of the Bologna process, not least because it needed to argue room for its nationally distinctive quality assurance system (Kauko 2011).

In Poland, Portugal and The Netherlands, on the other hand, the national implementation of the Lisbon Strategy (Fitoussi and Cacheux 2007; Veiga and Amaral 2012) reinforced the economic rationale for education. It led to a further instrumentalisation of education and its even stronger subordination to the needs of the labour market, despite in Poland the emphasis is more rhetorical than actual influence in policy or practices (Antonowicz, Kulczycki, and Budzanowska 2020). Furthermore, in the Netherlands and in France, a driver focusing on the management of higher education institutions influenced, on the one hand, the competitive allocation of public funding and the strengthening of central management in French HEIs (Barrier and Musselin 2015; Chatelain-Ponroy et al. 2014) and, on the other hand, both governance structures and performance systems in the Netherlands in line with the NPM perspective.

Looking at the diverse positioning of the states and at HEIs' dynamics, the paper broadened the views on the impact of those drivers on the autonomy of higher education systems and HEIs. Research limitations of this paper relate to the possible lack of comprehensiveness, which may impact the length and depth of the comparison between countries and higher education systems.

Broader implications of these findings bring forward the tension between collegial and managerial models reshaping the governance reforms in HE. Although there are various streams shaping policy trends in university governance, the overall trend is a shift towards a hybrid model of governance (Enders et al. 2013; Välimaa 2019; Silvén 2024). In this hybrid model, collegial decision-making structures (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; Mintzberg 1979; Weick 1976) and managerial top-down governance (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017) are blended into a system that operates between these models. Collegial decision-making structures remain significant and there is a clear increase in managerial influences and political interference in university governance.

It is crucial to understand that this hybrid model is a compromise, where the university community has been compelled to relinquish some decision-making power to safeguard their autonomous position in the middle of transnational and market-driven higher education policy demands. Additionally, it is important to recognise that the hybrid model is not a stable compromise between collegiality and managerialism. Instead, it should be viewed as an accelerating movement towards managerialism, which will continue unless it encounters a stronger counterforce.

Drawing on previous research on the selected countries, this paper acknowledges the need to further research the mediation role of the state as it is contingent to national policy agendas and priorities. This gap in research also suggests the need to go more deeply into the institutional level.

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