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**Changing Patterns of Governance and Management in
European Universities:
Emerging Paradoxes in Spanish Universities**
M. Paloma Sánchez and Susana Elena

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Edited by: UAM-Accenture Chair on the Economics and Management of Innovation, Autonomous University of Madrid, Faculty of Economics
Editado por: Cátedra UAM-Accenture en Economía y Gestión de la Innovación
E-mail: catedra.uam-accenture@uam.es URL: <http://www.uam.es/docencia/deg/in/catedra/>

(First author) M. Paloma Sánchez (Author for correspondence)

Professor of Applied Economics
Autonomous University of Madrid
Julian Hernandez 8
28043-Madrid, Spain
Tel. +34 91 3882180 Fax. +34 917599612
E-mail: mpaloma.sanchez@uam.es

(Second author) Susana Elena

European Commission - Joint Research Centre
Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS)
Edificio Expo
C/ Inca Garcilaso s/n
41092 Sevilla, Spain
Tel. +34 95-448-8364: Fax. + 34 95-448-8326
E-mail: Susana.ELENA-PEREZ@ec.europa.eu

Abstract

Higher Education Institutions have to respond today to an increasing number of societal and economic demands. Supranational institutions, such as the European Commission and the Association of European Universities, as well as different national Governments are recommending and developing initiatives to provide universities with more institutional autonomy in order to allow them to better satisfy such needs. Two case studies –at two different Spanish universities- have been analysed using Grounded Theory methodology, which show that real autonomy (not only legal) may be difficult to effectively implement without rethinking, and eventually changing, the university governance system. By analysing the Spanish case, the article shows that a number of interesting paradoxes emerge from the public discourse and argues that the governance styles based on a collegial decision-making process, particularly widespread in Southern European countries, may be a constraint on the necessary transformations and management changes.

Key words: Higher education institutions, research, governance, management, autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are critical players in the knowledge-based economy today. Being essential for knowledge production, transmission and dissemination, they are at the forefront of the policy agenda. At European level, the Lisbon Agenda (March, 2000) calls for their particular involvement in the creation of the “Europe of Knowledge”. European universities have been immersed in an intense modernisation process driven by both EU-level policies aiming to establish the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna process) and a more general commitment from Member States to reform their Higher Education (HE) sector. These processes aim to foster crucial structural changes to successfully compete with HEIs in other parts of the world (European Commission 2007 and 2009).

Internationalization and globalization are also trends that greatly affect the HE sector (Enders, 2004, p.361). Partly as a consequence of such trends, HEIs are today much more conscious of their other duties to society (the so-called *third mission*) and have become multifunction (Laredo 2007), multimission and multipurpose (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007).

Reforms of national laws on HE in most European countries (ERAWATCH 2008) and supranational institutions (OECD 2007; European Commission 2007; European University Association 2005 and 2007; Esterman and Nokkola 2009), based on New Public Management principles (Sanchez et al. 2009; Schimank 2005), send the following message: universities need more institutional autonomy to better respond to new societal demands and a larger number of stakeholders. To do this, their management systems should more closely reflect the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness observed in the business world. At the same time they should be more accountable to society. The multiplicity of needs to satisfy and the larger number of stakeholders may lead to tensions and new dynamics (Huisman, 2007, p.220) which could call for a serious debate on results assessment (European Commission 2009).

The paper draws attention to the current debate on autonomy, and its counterpart, accountability, and how the former is needed if we want to transform our universities into more competitive organizations, able to fulfil the roles society is demanding of them. Our main argument is that the existence of legal or formal autonomy (in theory granted by law) does not guarantee real or effective autonomy because this latter is contingent to the university’s governance system. Stemming from this is our argument that it is difficult to really transform universities into more autonomous institutions without in-depth discussions, and eventual changes to the way they are governed in some European countries.

By focussing on the Spanish case, we will show that a number of paradoxes emerge from the public discourse and owing to these, that the governance style of most Spanish universities, based on collegial models, may be a constraint on the necessary changes. While a new management style appears to be needed to produce good quality teaching, research, and better links with society, certain characteristics of such a model make the introduction of new management procedures difficult. If this is true, some of the above policy recommendations and reforms might not produce the necessary transformation processes. Eventual changes in the organisational culture and internal dynamics of universities are important current challenges.

The arguments presented are illustrated by data taken from the analysis of two Spanish universities (Autonomous University of Madrid and Pablo Olavide University of Seville)

following the Grounded Theory methodology. Despite their differences in terms of location, size, age and scientific production, both follow a collegial model with collective styles of governance and face similar managerial problems. Since governance of public universities in Spain is regulated by law, with a similar model in all public universities, the results obtained in these case studies could be applicable to most Spanish institutions.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 defines the main concepts used and shows how countries have evolved in interpreting them, section 3 presents the methodology used in the empirical analysis while section 4 describes the two cases studied and discusses the above arguments. Finally, section 5 draws some conclusions.

2. Main concepts and trends

There has been much literature in recent years on university governance and management. The two concepts are often linked to those of autonomy and accountability in governmental and supranational recommendations on the reforms of the HE sector. However, universities as organisations may be considered, to some extent, a “black box” (Observatory of European University 2006) where it is difficult to visualise the knowledge creation process and appreciate where the real power for decision-making is. The definition of these four concepts, which we attempt below, aims to open this box and help the understanding of HEI practices. Our aim is to show how these concepts are intertwined and how they are interpreted in different countries around the world.

2.1 Governance and Management

These two terms are often used as separate concepts (OECD 2007), although a clear-cut definition for each is not always provided.

To make things simple we coincide with Nelson’s (2008, p.2) perspective when recalling Veblen (1899) who considers university governance as “the way things are done”. This simple definition hides the complexity which characterizes a particular governing style, partly due to the multiple stakeholders (students, graduates, teachers, researchers, taxpayers, sponsors and university managers) with different interests and objectives (Jacobs and van der Ploeg, 2006, p.553).

The term *governance* refers to the “decision-making processes” (University of Oxford, 2006, p.5). It is the way to solve university organisational problems and is related to who decides what and when, and the institution’s capacity to change (Mora and Vieira 2008). It is concerned with university values, its system of resource allocation, its mission and purposes, authority and hierarchy patterns and relationships with external partners (Marginson and Considine 2000). These ideas have much in common: university governance includes decision-making processes at all levels, the definition of strategic long-term objectives, and the way conflicts are addressed (Observatory of European University 2006). In other words, it means less about what organisations do and more about how they do it.

The term *management* is usually related to the way the activities are organized and coordinated within the institution in accordance with certain policies and strategies and in the achievement of defined objectives.

However, the distinction between *governance* and *management* is often blurred in the literature, particularly when referring to universities. For analytical purposes, however, we believe it is wise to distinguish between them, considering that *governance* refers mainly to the decision-making process and the setting of objectives and goals (e.g. models ranging from autocratic to democratic, or very independent to greatly constrained by national or regional authorities), while *management* refers to the organization and coordination of the daily activities to attain those goals efficiently.

The following section describes the two governing modes of universities most often referred to in the specialised literature, although it should be born in mind that any categorization hides the richness of institutions as complex as universities.

The *collegial* model is generally associated with democratic decision-making procedures, where most members are heard (Mora 2001). There are usually governing boards organised so as to ensure that all relevant groups (academic staff, administrative staff, students, etc.) are represented at the different levels (University, Faculty or School, Department, etc.). The members of these boards are elected within and by the academic community. This model is compatible with different degrees of decentralization and different teachers' decision-making powers (Durand and Pujadas, 2004, p.35). This is the governance system predominant in public universities in Spain.

The *managerial* model is more associated with a hierarchical decision-making model. Although in this model academics certainly play an important role which varies considerably according to the institution, decision-making does not necessarily include representatives from the above mentioned relevant groups¹. The use of the term *managerial* has a clear connotation and is used to mean that some of the main decisions are taken by managers, appointed by different authorities, following a business-like decision-making process (Allen 2003). This implies that the institutions governed this way show a certain erosion of the balancing role played by collegiality (Kolsaker 2008).

Sometimes, the term “new managerialism” is used to refer to this governance mode (Clarke and Newman 1994). It means that the values and techniques of the private sector are applied and that the market-oriented mechanisms provide universities with the necessary tools to improve internal management (Clark 1998; Ferlie et al. 1996; Meek 2003). The new managerialism assumes not only the language of business but also some related practices, such as the creation of new layers of management or the introduction of performance management (Deem and Brehony, 2005, p. 223)

In order to avoid confusion we will use the term *management* when referring to the organization of daily activities, as defined before, and *managerial* to refer to the second type of *governance* style.

2.2 Autonomy and Accountability

Autonomy may be defined as the power to make decisions within universities (Ordorika, 2003, p.371), or govern without outside controls (Berdahl et al., 1971, p.8). It also refers to the degree of freedom universities have to make these decisions (Askling et al., 1999, p.177)

¹ Some authors use the term “leadership” when referring to this governing mode (Mora 2001; Salmi 2007).

which are taken by the governing boards in a *collegial* governance system, by professional managers in a *managerial* system or by boards sharing both characteristics.

Autonomy is classified in different ways in the literature. For example, Blath (2007, p.244) distinguishes between “institutional” and “academic”. The former refers to the state of self-governance of the institution, and the latter to the conditions for faculty members. Ordorika (2003, pp.371-381) differentiates between a) academic, b) political and c) financial autonomy. “Academic autonomy” refers to “free speech” and the right of teachers to decide on what to teach or research. “Political autonomy” refers to the power to appoint the heads of different units (Rector, Dean, Head of Department, etc.) and to deal with internal political conflicts, and “financial” refers to having the freedom to decide on salaries, tuition fees, allocation of governmental funds, etc, and looking for additional funds. A similar distinction to this latter, although using different words, is also made by Pechar (2003).

We are interested in the “institutional autonomy” which, in our opinion, may group together the concepts of “political” and “financial” autonomy and is the type currently encouraged by national and supranational bodies.

Moreover, we should also distinguish between “legal” (or formal) autonomy granted by law and “effective autonomy”, noting that mere “formal autonomy” does not guarantee the transformation of institutions (Clark 1998). We argue that although most European universities have to a greater or lesser extent “formal institutional autonomy” granted by law, the national context and organisational culture may not allow them to effectively implement it. We also argue that “formal autonomy” is a requisite for change but this is only possible if there is also “effective autonomy”. It is very true that autonomy “should not be confused with total independence” but, at the same time “...it should not remain a concept that exists only on paper” (Salmi, 2007, p.241). Our empirical analysis suggests that the autonomy granted by law for Spanish universities is less likely to be effectively implemented because the characteristics of the collegial model of governance predominate.

Accountability is the logical corollary of increased autonomy. It may be defined as “answerability for performance” (Romzek, 2000, p.22) or “the obligation to report to others, explain, justify, answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect” (Trow 1996: 310). Accountability is considered by some a precondition for autonomy (Romo de la Rosa, 2007; 286)

During the last two decades there has been an increase in external requests to universities for greater transparency in their use of public funds. Economic pressures were translated into financial demands, and an accountability culture has arisen in order to justify not only the expenditures but also the outputs of these institutions –paid for through taxes-, and has induced “a more business-like attitude to institutional efficiency” (Ziman, 1987, p.26). According to the European Commission, “universities have a duty to their stakeholders (students, public authorities funding universities, the labour market, society as a whole) to maximise the social return on investment” (European Commission, 2003, p.13)

Accountability may be understood in four different ways (Benh 2001): (a) Accountability for finance: Where did the money go?; (b) Accountability for fairness: Has the government organisation and its employees behaved according to the rules established to insure consistency with norms of fairness and equity?; (c) Accountability for the use of power: Have those rules prevented or constrained the abuse of power by public officials?; and (d)

Accountability for performance: Has the organisation produced the goods and services expected? These four ways of understanding accountability have different implications for university management (Feller, 2009, p.328).

The demand for accountability requires agreements on how to be accountable; a common language and model to measure and diffuse university performance. Different European Commission initiatives (European Commission 2006 and 2009) encourage the development of a European (and global) framework to assess results on a comparable basis. This framework should allow HEIs to explain “why” and “how” things are done and help to comprehensively visualize inputs, processes and outputs.

2.3. Main trends in governance models

It is usually considered that the *collegial* model is more common in continental Europe, while the *managerial* system is pre-eminent in Anglo-Saxon countries such as UK, the U.S. or Australia.

The current situation is the result of the way universities have evolved since their creation in the Middle Ages. The last major restructuring took place at the end of the twentieth century and has been referred to as “the managerial revolution” which has led to an increase in administrators’ power and somewhat reduced faculty authority (Altbach, 2005, p.26).

Some claim this latter model is the one European HEIs should adopt (Jacobs and van der Ploeg 2006). In fact, many continental European countries have already started moving towards to the *managerial* system (Moodie, 2007, p.80). This is particularly true in the Netherlands (Boer et al. 2007; Huisman and Currie, 2004) and in Norway (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004; Stensaker 2006). In others, such as Germany (Enders 2001) and Sweden (Santiago et al. 2006) at least the vocabulary is beginning to change. These European countries show two tendencies: 1) strengthening the leadership of Rectors and Deans, and 2) weakening the deliberating bodies in the decision making-process (Mignot-Gerard, 2003, p.72).

This tendency towards a more managerial model is acknowledged and recommended by the Bologna agreement. Accordingly, Member States have agreed to reform university structure tending towards the Anglo-Saxon system (Jacobs and van der Ploeg 2006: 555). In line with this, Karran (2007, p.290) quotes Lay (2004, p.86) and Rochford (2003, p.252) when noting that the Bologna Magna Carta recognises that many universities are moving from a collegial to a more managerial model, and that this shift is due to a concern about the former’s ability to cope with current challenges. Karran also notes that such concern is voiced in Spain where the new University Law issued in 2007 reinforces university autonomy, and where the collegial model still predominates.

The changing trend towards the *managerial* model is also found in Japan (Yokoyama 2006), Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore (Mok 2005) and China (Yang et al. 2007). Based on the fact that 41 of the 50 world-ranking top universities have a system approximating the *managerial* one (Jacobs and van der Ploeg 2006), it is held that shifting to this model is advisable and irreversible (Mowen, 2000, p.47). However, others suggest that the changes are creating tensions (Huisman and Currie 2004) and warn about the risks of over-managerialism

(Allen 2003) or the potential risks of damaging academic autonomy (Romo de la Rosa, 2007, p.282; Karran, 2007, p.299).

However, it is not easy to find the two models exactly as categorised and it is actually the prevailing characteristics of one of the two systems that differentiates them. Even in the U.K. where *managerial* is the most common governance system, “universities have not abandoned their collegial roots entirely” (Kolsaker, 2008, p.515). This is also the case in many U.S. universities, particularly those specializing in research, where academics play a very important role (Waugh 2003). Moreover, it is also claimed that the adoption of more effective managerial models is not necessarily inhibited by collegial government (Gibbons et al. 1994, 72)

As if to reinforce this statement, some authors also see a certain degree of convergence between the two modes over the last ten years (Moses 2007; 264). In fact, in many cases what we find is that mixed modes of governance may coexist and that a shared model emerges with a strong governing board and lay membership governing the institutions but, at the same time, academics having a central role in academic matters (Mora and Vieira 2008). This model is also called “convergent” (Yokoyama 2006) or “hybrid” (Baird 2006: 299). The pre-eminence of the first or second style in the hybrid model will reflect the different kinds of tensions between groups (Cornforth, 2003, pp.245-251). Although it is argued that the shared governance model is a good alternative for overcoming some of the difficulties of the other two systems (Sporn 1999) by looking for an equilibrium between them (Shattock 2003), the model is not free of conflicts and it is not always clear how it should be implemented. However, tough decisions, such as the discontinuance of programmes, departments, etc., are more likely to be accepted without much disruption in an environment of shared decision-making (Eckel, 2000, p. 33).

The changes needed to adapt universities to the increasingly demanding situation are probably better attained if, on the one hand, neither *collegial* nor *managerial* participation are sacrificed (Meyer, 2007; 234), i.e. that both academics and managers cooperate closely towards the goals, and, on the other hand context and history are duly taken into consideration (Musselin 2005) when establishing reforms.

All the above has created much controversy and the resulting debate on the governance model is likely to stay with us for some time.

3. Research methodology: Case studies following the Ground Theory logic

The analysis of university governance and management faces important methodological problems: We are dealing with political decisions which are difficult to translate into numbers and where data are not gathered systematically. Therefore, like other studies in this field (Gonzalez López 1996; Etzkowitz 2003; Huisman and Currie 2004; Stensaker 2006; Newton 2003), just to name a few, we have built up data and information using qualitative methods, such as interviews and questionnaires.

We have followed, like Allen (2003), the Grounded Theory (GT) approach. As is well known, this is an inductive research methodology of analysis and data-gathering that uses systematically applied methods to generate theory about a substantive area (Glaser and Strauss 1967). These two authors’ perspective has diverged over time and for our analysis, we have followed the Strauss line (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Under the GT logic, two case studies from two Spanish universities have been carried out by means of 30 in-depth interviews², following an iterative process (Miles and Huberman 1994). The data collected shape the final report and, simultaneously, the ongoing conclusions affect the data-gathering process. The case study logic (Yin 2003) has also been followed.

The data collection has been systematic, applying the coding process, coined in GT as *micro-analysis*, to the fieldwork (interviews and secondary information sources such as internal reports, strategic plans, budgets, etc.). Each paragraph and line is analysed to arrive at categories that contribute towards theoretical development (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Using this theory building research approach, two case studies have been made: The Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) and Pablo de Olavide University (UPO). They have been singled out for their notably different characteristics in terms of age, size, location and performance as we wanted to see how two contrasting institutions were facing the current recommended changes.

The UAM is located in Madrid, the Spanish region with the highest level of scientific production in international journals with 15,46 papers per 10,000 habitants per year (COTEC 2009). Funded at the end of the 60s, it is one of the biggest universities in Spain today, with more than 33,000 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and approximately 2,400 full time teaching and research staff (UAM 2008). It has a good reputation at both a national and international level and occupies a prominent position in the most consolidated university ranking (the Ranking of World Universities 2009, produced by the Institute of Higher Education of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University). It is also considered second among Spanish universities³ and is one of the five having received the title of “Excellence Campus” granted by the Spanish Government in 2009.

In contrast, the UPO is one of the smallest universities in Spain, with less than 1000 teachers and researchers and approximately 9,000 students. It is the most recently created university in Andalusia (1997), a region which produces few scientific papers in international journals (6,08 papers per 10,000 habitants per year (COTEC 2009). Given its small size and recent foundation, UPO ranks low at national level and does not appear in international ranking.

The governance system predominant in public universities in Spain is established by law (Organic Law on Universities (LOU) 6/2001, amended in April 2007) which determines a number of collegial bodies and individual roles of Rectors, Vice-rectors, etc (OECD, 2009; 28). Four main collegial bodies are established (Social Council, Governing Council, University Assembly, School and Faculty and Department Councils) although the practical way to elect (or nominate) their members is left mostly to individual University Statutes (internal set of rules). Together with this, the law grants Spanish universities a significant degree of institutional autonomy to develop their Statutes and, among other things, to create specific structures to support their research and teaching activities, contract new teachers and researchers, define their curricula, manage the budget, administrate their assets and establish relations with other entities (OECD 2009: 16). In fact, one of the main aims of the amended LOU was to strengthen the institutional autonomy of Spanish universities.

² Detailed information on these and the interviewing process are available in Elena (2007).

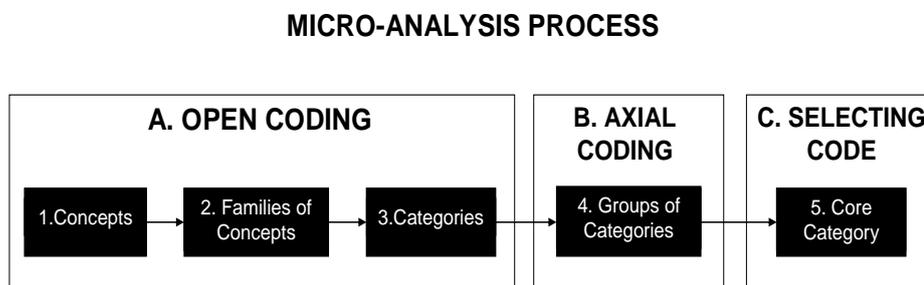
³ UAM’s position in 2009, number 201. [Http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking2005.htm](http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking2005.htm)

The case studies analysed will show the implications of the collegial style of governance on the workings of the universities and the actual implementation of the autonomy granted by law. As we argue in the next Section, this institutional autonomy is actually greater than that being practiced and it appears that the university governance model is the main constraint to maximising the benefit of the new legal framework. With this framework in mind, the results obtained in the cases studied could be generalised to most Spanish public universities and to other countries with HE institutions with similar characteristics.

4. Learning from the Spanish case: Main results

The micro-analysis process followed is represented in Figure 1 and explained below:

Figure 1. Micro-Analysis Process



The first step is A) *Open coding* which aims at labelling *concepts*. These are the basic units of analysis, the preliminary variables that emerge. They are ideas that appear frequently during the interviews and reflect the “organizational climate” of the institution, which is the way people perceive and describe their environment. Different concepts a priori disconnected show, after deeper analysis, common characteristics and interconnections allowing the large number of preliminary concepts (37 concepts) to be grouped in 8 *families* taking into account common properties and features. These *families* were transformed into 7 *categories*, which are abstractions representing the interviewees’ stories. Results of the *open coding* are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Open Coding Process: Concepts, Families of Concepts and Categories

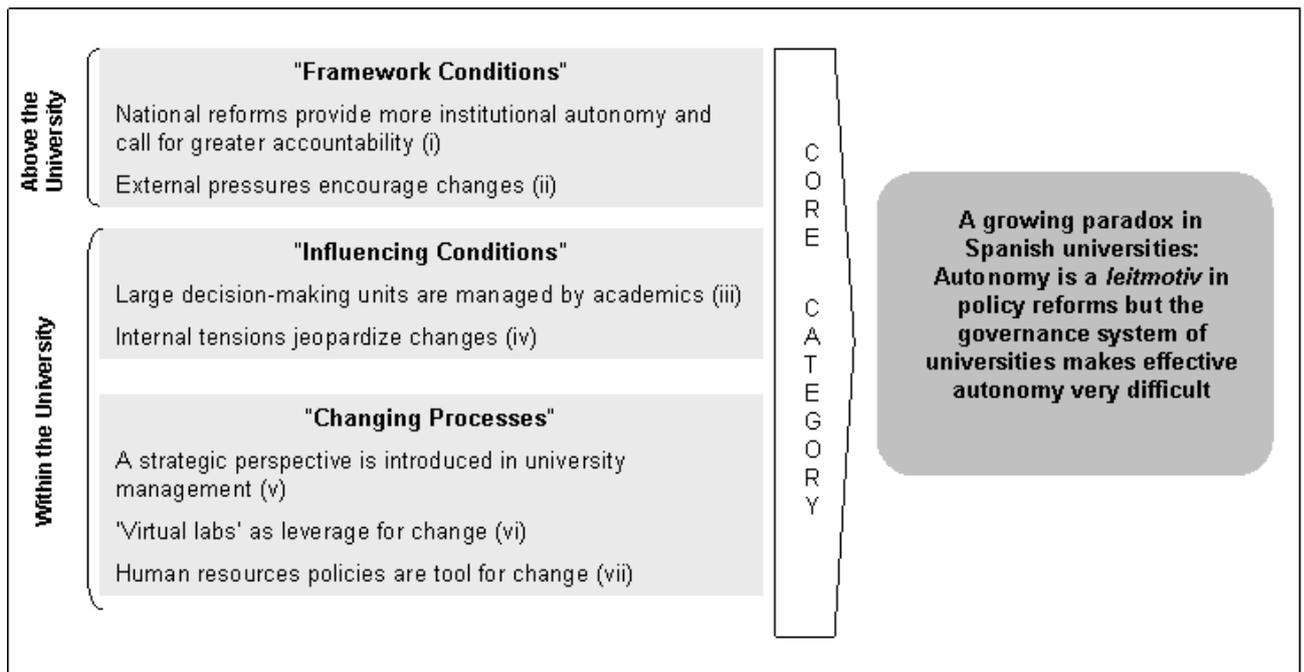
CONCEPTS	FAMILIES OF CONCEPTS	CATEGORIES
Growing importance of accountability	Institutional Autonomy and accountability	i) National reforms provide more institutional autonomy and call for greater accountability
Increased use of indicators for reporting university performance to governmental agencies		
Perception of lack of financial resources		
Existence of formal but not effective autonomy		
Need for new governmental frameworks to increase transparency		
Redefinition of the role external stakeholders should play in defining university priorities	External Pressures	ii) External pressures encourage changes
Increase in national and international competition for financial resources, students, and researchers		
Generalisation of financial and performance agreements between HEI and funding agencies		
Imposition of excellence criteria by external agents		
Increasing use of research assessment exercises		
Decision-making based on collegiate system	Organisational Model	iii) Large decision- making units are governed by academics
Democratic election of university unit heads		
Egalitarianism and democracy should be ensured. Large decision-making bodies		
Importance of history and context when defining the organisational model. Tendency to keep the <i>status quo</i>		
Electing University unit heads: intellectual leadership more important than managerial capabilities		
Disciplinary-based faculties and departments		
More emphasis on knowledge transfer mechanisms and industry-academia collaborations	Tensions among disciplines	iv) Internal tensions jeopardize change
Struggle to define resource allocation criteria		
Tension among disciplines in the definition of criteria to reward excellence		
Conflict of interests in the definition of research priorities		
Problematic distribution of time between teaching and research	Tensions between teaching and research	
Tension between evaluation criteria and teaching or research accreditation system		
Increasing use of business management tools	Strategic	v) A strategic

Existence of Strategic Plans: definition and implementation processes not well linked	Management Perspective	perspective is introduced in university management
Increasing use of indicators for internal management		
Timeliness and flexibility in the decision-making process required		
Management skills and capabilities in university governing bodies can be improved		
Existing institutional and cultural barriers for the implementation of change		
Pervasive role of trade unions		
Controversy around the idea of professionalization of management		
Researchers can define their own research lines (Academic autonomy)	Role and importance of researchers	vi) 'Virtual labs' as leverage for change
Growing importance of researchers with non-permanent contracts		
Increasing decision-making power of lab heads and their capacity to attract resources		
Perceived need for incentive and penalization schemes for teachers and researchers	Human Resource Policies	vii) Human resource policies are a tool for change
Perceived need for new schemes to foster meritocracy		
Actual rigidity of recruitment and hiring processes		

The following step in the micro-analysis is B) *Axial coding* (see Figure 1) to identify relationships between categories to improve understanding of the phenomenon. To analyse the categories in terms of context (as recommended by Strauss and Corbin 1998) they were divided into two groups, those that could be considered “**Above the university**” labelled *Framework Conditions* and those that are “**Within the university**” which we have split into *Influencing Conditions*, that affect the phenomenon under analysis, and *Changing Processes* which can be defined as consequences, implications or leverage effects.

Finally, we come to C) the *Selecting code* which results from the development of the story line that allows a “core category” to emerge (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Steps B) and C) of the micro-analysis process are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Axial Coding and Selecting Code: Emergence of a Core Category



In the following paragraphs we develop the storyline grouping the ideas according to the above axial coding, and in this way explain the Framework Conditions (mostly external), the Influencing Conditions and the Changing Processes (mostly internal to the institutions). They will reflect how governance and management is understood in the analysed institutions and how much effective institutional autonomy they implement. This will allow us to come to the Core Category, which is the following: *There is a growing paradox in Spanish universities: Autonomy is a leitmotiv in policy reforms but the way universities are governed makes effective autonomy very difficult.*

Framework conditions

i) National reforms provide more institutional autonomy and call for greater accountability

As mentioned earlier an increasing number of countries are implementing significant changes in their HE sector. Spain is following this on-going trend: The Law issued in 2001, widely modified in 2007, is intended to transform Spanish universities into more autonomous entities.

However, the autonomy granted by this Law, although acting as an important framework condition, is not enough to change the internal dynamics of universities. Our empirical analysis suggests that the institutional autonomy granted to make decisions and allocate resources (the legal or formal autonomy) is actually greater than that which universities put into practice. Respondents explain that this situation is mainly the consequence of the characteristics of the current university governing system.

Better understanding of the governing bodies' real decision-making capacity shows that the lack of effective autonomy has less to do with limits imposed by external agents or legal frameworks and more with the governance model itself and related aspects (such as the current election system for university representatives) and with the organisational culture.

This analysis illustrates the core element of our paradox: the collegial model of governance used by Spanish universities could be considered a barrier to implementing the greater autonomy provided by national reforms. Legally, management change is possible but the governance model makes it difficult. The following *in vivo* codes illustrate this idea:

“We have capacity but we do not use it” or

“There is great autonomy but it is not used, nobody wants to create conflict”

As a counterpart to the autonomy granted by law, universities need to be more accountable. Spanish universities are now reporting on their activities, mainly research results, more systematically. Our empirical analysis suggests that the growing importance of accountability for public universities is not only a consequence of their greater autonomy and government interest in increased transparency, but is also closely related to the financial scenario in the HE sector and the need to raise funds from other sources. These findings are in line with the idea that the demand for greater accountability is a result of external pressures (Huisman and Currie 2004) and a consequence of the relative decrease in governmental funds (OECD 2007)

ii) External pressures encourage changes

The evidence of the effect of external pressures on change is found in different countries, independently of the governance model followed. Sporn (1995: 72) argues that “the future of the university is contingent on how well internal adaptation processes to external change are implemented”.

The external pressures identified in the case studies are very much related to financial autonomy, an important element of the institutional autonomy (Blath 2007: 244) previously defined.

The respondents identify the following main external pressures:

- While acknowledging the importance of relations with business, they felt that the stakeholders really affecting the university, and particularly its research activity, are the regional and national agencies launching research programmes, and the European Commission (through the definition of research priorities in the Framework Programmes). They all play an important role since they act as funding agencies and set research priorities.
- Also, the new performance agreements (financial resource allocation mechanisms developed between universities and Ministries or regional governments, that link funding with scientific results) show that funding is not only a necessary input to develop better research but also an indicator of excellence. The institutions analysed perceived these funding mechanisms as a constraint, to some extent, on their own definitions of research priorities.

Thus, on the one hand, regional, national or supranational authorities define research priorities and allocate funds on a competitive basis; while on the other, they provide lump-sums on the basis of performance indicators. This situation reduces the university’s financial autonomy to allocate funds to specific research or to other priorities that they have collectively decided on.

The following code *in vivo* illustrates this perception:

“The national and European research plans already set those lines (research lines); people adapt to the lines which have funding”

In a context where the funding model of the HE sector is clearly moving towards increasing competition for funds while decreasing block grants (ERAWATCH 2008), financial autonomy in the hands of university governing bodies is neither legal nor effective. As central funds are limited so too is the ability to decide on research priorities. Most funds for research are obtained by individual researchers or research groups in competitive processes at regional, national or European level, or from private sources.

Hence, another explanation which sheds light on the real margin of manoeuvre Spanish universities have is related to the financial resources at their disposal. Given the scarce resources that universities can freely allocate, interviewees holding managerial positions affirm that there is little effective autonomy since *"the autonomy that we use is constrained by the funds that we can manage freely"*.

On top is this, the allocation of funds actually in the hands of the university governing team is also limited by the characteristics of the governance system further detailed below.

A second element of the paradox thus emerges: there are external pressures for management changes encouraging financial decisions in line with the institution's objectives. However the lack of real financial autonomy makes it difficult to change the present situation.

Influencing conditions

iii) Large decision-making units are governed by academics

In universities with collegial structures, such as Spanish universities, the decision-making committees that act as governing bodies are large units, assuring that all groups are represented and avoiding power concentration. The academic community democratically elects the Rector from among candidates with recognised prestige in their discipline and an active role in academic life. A similar process is also followed at the Faculty and Department Council.

While acknowledging the benefits, such an organisational model has some unintended consequences, highlighted by most respondents:

- a) The unwieldy size of the units makes consensus difficult to reach. This constrains the definition and implementation of internal policies and hinders the introduction of changes needed to meet the new societal challenges. A decrease in university councils has been a feature of the reforms towards a managerial model, such as in Australia (Baird, 2006, p.301).

The large size was considered a shortcoming of the current governance structure by one respondent, because:

"They are unable to react quickly to the social necessities"

- b) The election system is viewed as another constraint on the decision-making process, since researchers-managers are still part of their disciplinary groups and will return to their posts once their mandate is over. Hence, their involvement in resource allocation is somewhat controversial as they are directly affected by their own decisions, which jeopardizes radical decision-making. This also happens to be the case in Portuguese universities (Magalhaes and Amaral, 2007, p.322).

Nearly all interviewees expressed this idea that was succinctly put by one of them:

“The way the university is governed is constrained by the way the main governing positions are elected”

- c) It does not adequately balance the different skills and time that research, teaching and management activities require. It seems that this governing system is more focused on assuring the intellectual leadership of the organisation than on the management profile of the candidates. Concerning the different set of skills and capabilities required to govern an HEI, one respondent argues that:

"A university has to have an academic representative to front it, but he or she should be elected taking into account his/her managerial skills"

However, despite the criticisms and acknowledged limitations of the collegial system, moving to a more professional model is still controversial. In the Spanish case analysed, the main reasons argued for keeping the *status quo* are the national context, tradition in the organisational structures and fear of losing power in academic decision-making. A reluctance to abandon the collegial roots observed by Kolsaker (2008, p.515) for UK universities is also present in Spain. Nevertheless, the potential advantages and risks that the professionalisation of the top university authorities would bring to academic life and the production of knowledge, is becoming an object of debate in Spain (FCYD 2008)

Summing up, although the election system of unit heads in the collegial model assures democracy and participation of all internal stakeholders while protecting academic autonomy, it is perceived as a restraint on the implementation of change. The paradox appears again: The way the institution is governed is holding back the necessary management changes.

iv) Internal tensions jeopardize change

The effect of other *internal tensions* merits attention since they may *jeopardize change*. Two main tensions are identified: Tension between teaching and research activities and tension among disciplines.

In general terms, professors at different stages of their academic career at Spanish universities have two main tasks: research and teaching. However, as is the case in most European countries, the distribution of time devoted to either is based on individual priorities. While teaching often appears as an important decision-making criterion in the recruitment process, research accreditation agencies are putting much more emphasis on research results. It could be argued that research activity is more profitable for universities as institutions and for individual researchers since more financial (in the case of patents or licences, for instance) and prestigious (e.g., in the form of publications and citations) benefits can be generated. For

that reason, it is possible that teachers-researchers dedicate more time, in the long run, to research than teaching. In addition, and taking into account that performance assessment exercises evaluate more research outputs than teaching activities, in practice, research is promoted in detriment to teaching and, as a consequence, to student's training and education.

This situation causes serious imbalances between teaching duties and research interests. This tension could be illustrated through the following *in vivo* codes:

“Who are the researchers here? I only know who the teachers are”

“How much time does each teacher devote to research? We do not have any internal parameters”

The tension among disciplines is another important issue. Although it is argued that we are now in a knowledge-based society and that multidisciplinary approaches and networks are essential features, the analyzed institutions are still organised following a disciplinary structure and struggles to define resource allocation criteria are observed. Another friction point relates to the research evaluation criteria. The same, or very similar, criteria are used to assess results in experimental sciences, social sciences and humanities. Given the differences among disciplines (as diverse as music, palaeontology, economics, chemistry or engineering), some respondents are calling for differing evaluation systems.

The European Commission (2009) acknowledges these two tensions and suggests, on the one hand, that attention paid to research should not detract from teaching and third mission activities, and, on the other, that the peculiarities of social sciences and humanities should be taken into account when designing evaluation methods. Finally, it is recommended that trans-multi- and interdisciplinary work is covered adequately when assessing university-based research.

Changing processes

v) A strategic perspective is introduced in university management

Strategic management has been recognised as a key element in the current and future success of universities (OECD, 2007) and our fieldwork identifies this strategic perspective. A tendency to increasingly use business tools to improve their internal management and transparency – as Ferlie et al. (1996) or Meek (2003) suggest- is clearly perceived. Universities seem to understand that the design and implementation of Strategic Plans, as in private companies, are essential tools for defining priorities and strategic objectives to map out where an institution is going. We would agree with Kolsaker (2008, p.517) that these practices are not only reactions to external pressures and attaining certain goals, they also reflect the acceptance of the managerial discourse.

In the cases studied, the Strategic Plan as a management tool appears to be, in theory, a very important way to reflect on the university's orientation, mission and objectives while being highly valued as a learning process. The next statement illustrates the general view on this point:

“(The strategic plan) as a tool is very interesting, used to reflect on the institution, its future and the way to achieve it”

However, the process of strategic planning is apparently more involved with intentions than implementation. In fact, the respondents show little confidence in seeing radical changes or strategic plans that are implemented. The following statement shows this:

“The strategic plan maintains the status quo, it does not change anything, it reflects what we have”

Thus, once more, the management discourse, when implemented, may be just superficial. The respondents highlighted two main shortcomings in the current process of defining Strategic Plans:

a) The lack of identifiable priorities. In most cases, Strategic Plans do not actually establish priority research lines but provide general directions or objectives, such as strengthening excellence in research, improving evaluation results by the national or regional agencies, increasing researcher mobility and promoting multidisciplinary research. The plans, based on principles, and qualitative in nature, are considered, in general terms, to be very generic.

b) The lack of specific and measurable objectives. The general opinion is that most of the objectives stated in the Strategic Plans are not measurable. It has been admitted that specifying particular objectives would help management, but it would also imply firm political commitment. In accordance with this idea, it has been agreed that a system of indicators would be very useful to describe the real situation regarding research in the university and subsequently to design suitable internal policies. For example, it was suggested that it would be useful to publish every department's research budget in order to analyse their comparative position. Indeed, some institutions, and this is the case of the UPO, are now dealing with strategic management at department level and developing balance score cards for better management. Should a more precise measuring system be established, the likelihood of accountability would increase.

Therefore, we have additional support to the paradoxical situation found: It is claimed that a truly managerial tool, “the strategic plan”, is already being implemented in universities. However, the actual way the plan is defined and implemented in the cases studied shows that it is little more than cosmetic.

vi) “Virtual labs” as leverage for change

Some research groups and networks have been identified as powerful actors in the definition of a university's way forward and as an important driving force to introduce changes, since they attract their own funding and act as 'virtual labs' alongside the university governing bodies.

Although these research groups may not be formally included in the organisational structure of universities and are not visible enough, in practice they obtain and manage financial resources. Some interviewees hold that the university's reputation is mainly maintained by the efforts of individual researchers and research groups, who get research projects, attract funding and develop innovations.

An important part of the university's potential is in the hands of individuals who are outside the governance structures and possibly in a position to take breakthrough decisions. They may constitute a bottom-up way to change the dynamics of the institution. In the cases analysed it was pointed out that even if these groups do not have the legal power to change the traditional governing mode in Spanish universities, they might be key stakeholders in the move towards a more managerial approach. Hence, the power of these "virtual labs" to introduce substantial change should not be underestimated:

"The outstanding researchers that obtain their own resources (through research projects) can be an important lever to promote change"

vii) Human resource policies are a tool for change

Finally, human resource policies, and particularly the design of incentive schemes (and penalisation, if appropriate), are seen as key points to recognise and promote excellence as well as to help reduce tension among disciplines and between research and teaching. In other words, *human resource policies are seen, in theory, as a tool for change*. While ten years ago, many universities were not really able to implement these kinds of mechanisms, the current legal framework allows Spanish universities to design their own initiatives to encourage research and other missions. However, this tool for change is not being used as much as it could be. An important force is mentioned by the respondents which prevents the use of incentives (or penalisation) to encourage excellence and this is the egalitarian objective of the trade unions. Added to this, there is the collegial governance system with its built-in non-conflictive style which does not use the human resource policy to make the necessary management decisions or allow any profound changes to take place.

The paradox appears once more. The analysed cases suggest that although there are legal ways (legal autonomy) to manage human resources, the collegial model makes the management changes needed more difficult to implement.

4. Conclusions

European HEIs are immersed in intensive reform processes to transform themselves into more autonomous and accountable organisations. This will enable them to better satisfy society's increasing demands by allowing them more control over their decision-making process, defining their priorities, and searching for and allocating funds.

The reforms in the European HE sector are being led by the national governments and, at the same time, by European initiatives such as the creation of the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area. The main aim of all these policies is to encourage the institutional autonomy of our universities by increasing their margin of manoeuvre to govern and manage not only their academic but also financial, administrative and political affairs.

The evidence gathered in the analyses of two Spanish universities, using Grounded Theory, suggests that even though the autonomy granted by law to universities is key to setting up the necessary framework conditions it is not enough to transform university practice or internal dynamics. Our argument is that there are organisational and cultural features that hinder the implementation of real autonomy. In the cases analysed, the collegial system of governing appears to be one of the most important constraints on the decision-making process and

clearly hinders the implementation of significant change. Since all Spanish public universities follow a collegial system of governance, the results obtained in this research are applicable to most of them.

A collegial model, mainly based on the principle of representation of all the key stakeholders, and its election process, which relies more on scientific recognition than the candidate's managerial skills, acts as a barrier to the full implementation of the institutional autonomy that Spanish universities are granted by law.

We argue that only with a certain level of hierarchy, which is not provided by the pure collegial model, will it be possible to define objectives and goals, and establish the management systems capable of achieving them. It will also allow for the tough decision-making needed in the competitive environment and by an extremely demanding society. Furthermore, the empirical analysis also shows that the real autonomy of Spanish universities is also limited by the scarce financial resources that universities can freely allocate.

Although controversial and probably incompatible in the short-term with deeply-rooted cultural traditions, both national governments and European policy recommendations should encourage reflection on not only the importance of university governing modes in the effective implementation of the reforms but also the need to discuss alternative models.

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