



Networking Administration in Areas of National Sensitivity - The Commission and European Higher Education

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Working Paper

No. 02, January 2007

Working Papers can be downloaded from the ARENA homepage:

<http://www.arena.uio.no>

Abstract

This paper examines the networks that connect the European Commission to various levels of governance within higher education as a policy sector. The central question is how the development of European networked administrative capacity can be understood taking into consideration the traditional national sensitivity of higher education and how this sensitivity has been handled in the European Union. The paper gives an overview of the administrative infrastructure and network configurations that have been established in this policy area within the Commission and in the expert groups that link the DG to other levels of governance in this policy area. It goes on to explore the dynamics underlying the development of such administrative networks based on a reading of the history of three cases of European integration in higher education, the education programmes, agency networks as part of European cooperation in quality assurance and mutual recognition of degrees, and the role of the Commission in the Bologna process. These observations are the basis for a concluding discussion of the potential challenge that networked administration poses for the nation state prerogative in higher education policy.

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1. Introduction*

Education as a policy area in the European Union has a weak legal basis for Community action and institution building. It has traditionally been regarded as nationally sensitive; an area that belongs to the core of the nation state and therefore resilient to “Europe”. Yet, European higher education reveals a complex governance system where multiple levels are in action and interaction, including the supranational level with the European Commission as the core actor. Strikingly, no attempts have been made to systematically map the nature of the administrative infrastructure of European integration in higher education. This paper is a first attempt to identify the characteristics of the European administrative capacity with respect to higher education and in particular the administrative networks in several versions that connect the European level to other levels of governance. This paper asks how the development of European networked administrative capacity can be understood taking into consideration the traditional national sensitivity of higher education and whether these connections represent a challenge to the assumed hegemony of the nation state in the higher education policy area.

An underlying assumption, spelled out as part of the analytical starting point (part 2), is that a key to understanding such networks lies in the characteristics of the policy area. Consequently, this paper gives a brief run through what constitutes the sensitivity of higher education as a policy area and how this sensitivity has been handled in the European Union (part 3). Next the paper gives an overview of the administrative infrastructure and network configurations that have been established in this policy area at the European level within the Commission and in the expert groups that link the DG to other levels of governance in this policy area (part 4). It goes on to explore the dynamics

* **Acknowledgements:** I am grateful to Peter Maassen, Maria Martens, Ulf Sverdrup, Johanna Witte, and to participants at the Connex Conference in Oslo 27–28 May 2005 and Douro6 seminar October 2006 for their valuable comments. I also thank Øivind Bratberg for his assistance in data collection.

underlying the development of such administrative networks based on a reading of the history of three cases of European integration in higher education, the education programmes, European cooperation in quality assurance and mutual recognition of degrees, and the role of the Commission in the Bologna process (part 5). These observations are the basis for a concluding discussion of the potential challenge that networked administration poses for the nation state prerogative in higher education policy.

2. Administrative Networks: An Analytical Starting Point

If we see political integration as institutionalisation, a sign of increase in the level of integration in Europe is the development of common European institutions and administrative capabilities (Olsen 2001:327). Administrating a policy area requires a minimum measure of organised attention, organisational autonomy and capacity for gathering area-relevant information, preparing decisions and actions, proposals, implementing actions, programmes and policies. If the European Commission as the independent executive would organise the supranational responsibilities for the policy area in question in a systematic manner and establish independent administrative capacities that can handle the Commission's services with respect to this policy area, then this should be seen as an indication of evolving European integration. The Commission is in this respect unique compared to the secretariats of other international organisations in its capacity to potentially act independently as an executive (Egeberg 2006a). Administrative capacity building at the European level might also imply setting up European agencies (Geradin and Petit 2004). The build-up of a sector specific DG and European agencies is in itself important as an indicator of integration within a policy area. Moreover such institutionalisation of European involvement in specific policy areas is important because it impacts on the dynamics of integration by creating autonomous capacity to pursue integrative agendas (Stone Sweet and Sandholz 1997).

Few, if any, organisations can claim to operate without links to their environments. This also applies to executive organisations. They connect and establish links both horizontally and vertically and such interconnections form networks. Without such connections executive organisations would be “autistic”, unable to reach out to, interact with and respond to their surroundings. The European Commission is not different from other executives in this respect; rather it appears a particularly paramount characteristic of the Commission. A trait that can, amongst other things, be attributed to the cap put on the size of the Commission (Egeberg 2006a).

The concept of “network” is used in a number of ways in the study of public administration as well of European integration (Schout and Jordan 2005). It can also be used to denote a preferred steering arrangement where networks represent an alternative and normatively superior coordinating mechanism to hierarchical and market steering models. This paper is not concerned with network theory nor with the normative qualities of network as a governance arrangement; here the term network is used as an analytical tool to characterise the properties of interactions between actors. The focus is on the organisational arrangements that connect the supranational executive to other administrative levels in the higher education sector. This concerns the formal and publicly recognised connections that the Commission forges with other units, and the organisational structures that are part of the administrative capacities that have evolved in one particular policy area. The ambition of this paper is not to chart all sorts of perforations that an executive body such as the Commission might have, nor the possible backchannels of policy making and the informal policy networks. Moreover, I do not map the interconnections between the Commission and other EU institutions. I use a simple classificatory heuristic: types of actors involved and content of networks. These two dimensions combined might allow us to tentatively approach the issue of what challenge – if any – these connections represent to the assumed hegemony of the nation state in the higher education policy area.

A distinction can be made between the connections of the Commission with national administrations through Commission committees and expert groups, connections with national agencies through agency networks, and with transnational networks as well as connections with sub-national levels. Distinguishing between different types of actors that become connected to the supranational organisation is highly relevant for exploring the possible loss of control over a policy area from the national to the supranational level. Egeberg (2006b), in particular, makes the argument that the European Commission will by connecting to other levels than national ministries assert its independence from member states as a supranational executive. Categorising Commission networks according to content, we can refer to notions of policy instruments and of “stages heuristic” of policy processes, i.e. networks for policy making and development, and networks for implementation of EU policies, regulations and programmes. In addition, networks can be forged that are not directly connected to any specific decision-making cycle or stage, i.e. general connections for transmitting information.

Under the conditions of assumed national sensitivity we might expect a state centric perspective on European integration to have more relevance than a perspective that sees European integration as diluting the sovereignty of the individual states (Marks *et al.* 1996) and “gradually, but inevitably, reduce the capacity of the member states to control outcomes” (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1997:300). If indeed national sensitivity is the core conditioning factor we could first of all see limited build-up of supranational organisations, and limited organisational atomisation of European institutions relevant to this policy area. Second, we would expect there to be little basis for building connections between the European level and other levels of governance that do not run through the national-governmental level. Third, it can be argued that administrative infrastructure and networks would tend to be set up as information channels rather than as more “challenging” policy making and implementation networks¹.

¹ I base my analysis on historical reviews, official documents and administrative data accessible on the European web and other studies

3. Education, national sensitivity, and Europe

3.1 The sensitivity of education

Since the Coal and Steel Union education has been considered to be an area of national sensitivity in the European context. This consideration has framed the European level interest and involvement in this area. It is based on the recognition that there is pronounced and legitimate diversity between national systems of education. Other policy areas also have traditionally had claims of legitimate diversity. Scharpf refers to national pension systems, for instance, where imposition of a common European solution overriding national diversity and minority positions could be seriously disruptive and unacceptable in national constituencies, which in turn would be upsetting for the EU. In other areas subject to European integration diversity does not have the same status allowing for a legitimate continuity of national sovereignty (Scharpf 2002: 22-27)..

Why is education then an area with legitimate claims of national diversity? That there is severe national diversity at all levels of education in Europe is clear from any reading of structural overviews of educational systems, statistics on student participation, or funding and regulatory regimes within Europe. The structural diversity of higher education systems in Europe should also be interpreted as expressions of national heritage and history (Leitner 1993). From this it does not naturally follow that this diversity is “sensitive”. The legitimacy of the national diversity in education, and the resulting sensitivity, has a number of foundations. To start with education is a service of general public obligation that public authorities have to provide, as long as education at primary level is compulsory. How far this obligation extends differs from system to system. Especially the private versus public responsibility for higher education is blended in a number of ways across Europe.

Second, national sensitivity springs out of the educational institutions’ role as instrument for transferring the cultural-national heritage, i.e. these institutions form nationally embedded *socialising institutions*. Historically the battle over school

issues has precisely revolved around what kind of identity schools should represent and what kind of allegiances they should promote. As institutions, schools create and shape identities, they provide e.g. through history and language teaching, national collective frames for interpreting the past, harbouring the collective memories of societies and transmitting the “national stories” (March and Olsen 2000). The nation state with its education system is also the locus of linguistic conformity, historically a core aspect of nation building (Rokkan 1975). Linguistic conformity implies abiding by the norms of a national standard and the dominant language(s) of the nation. For instance, in primary schools, norms of national languages are transferred through teaching and learning of the most important basic skills – reading and writing.

This is in turn linked to linguistic plurality in Europe, which is clearly an area of legitimate diversity in the European Union and celebrated as part of its cultural hallmark (Mayer and Palmowski 2004: 582). Universities and colleges across Europe also share the linguistic diversity even though the international elements are much more present in teaching and learning in tertiary education. Higher education trains teachers that eventually end up as custodians of linguistic and other norms in domestic school systems. In most countries the content of teaching and also the way in which teaching and learning take place is a prerogative of the nation state and subject to national homogenisation. Also in higher education the curricular content of study programmes is in many European countries under a national regulatory and coordinating regime (Gornitzka *et al.* 2001).

The national sensitivity rests moreover on the mutual dependencies between educational institutions and the nation state: political institutions sustain schools/universities and schools/universities sustain other institutions of a political system (March and Olsen 2000: 167). The link between nation/state building and education is evident in the history of European universities which shows how such institutions were major symbols and instruments of emerging nation states (Olsen 2007, Gornitzka and Maassen 2007) that served essential functions for

other national institutions especially in providing qualified professionals for the civil service, judicial system, health care, and education. Technological innovations and scientific knowledge have been intricately linked to the political organisation and economic modernisation of nation states (Jacobsen 1978). Also other parts of the educational system have strong links to the needs of the economy through the public provision of qualified labour and investment in “human capital”.

3.2 Enter Europe

Education featured on and off as an issue on the agenda in the early history of the European Community (Corbett 2005). The Treaty of Rome linked higher education to the Community’s agenda through the articles on “an institution of university status”, the freedom of movement of people and goods, and vocational training. Already in the 1950s education had a position in the European integration activities triggered mainly by the internal market efforts and the link to vocational training. As underlined by Petit (2003, 2006) there was also a cultural rationale underlying the attention given to education in the early years of the European Community, in particular promoting the education of the idea of “Europe” to younger generations. Another example from the early 1960s concerns the Council decision on the general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy² and an agreement on a policy for mutual recognition of qualifications.

The Maastricht Treaty states as one of the objectives of the EU to contribute to education “of quality” (article 3). It made for the first time a reference to the European dimension in education and culture (article 126). The Maastricht Treaty established Community action on subsidiary terms and also made the distinction between education and training in the context of European integration (Murphy 2003, Corbett 2006). The Maastricht Treaty explicitly

² Official Journal of the European Union P 063 20.04.9163 p.1338

excluded harmonisation of national laws and regulations in the education area.

The Treaty contains the following main article relevant for education:

“The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action” (Treaty of Amsterdam article 149.1 (formerly 126.1, Treaty of Maastricht)

The Community programmes have been the EU’s main instruments in the area of higher education. First, the rationale behind the Erasmus programme (from 1986) was not merely the idea of promoting mobility that paralleled the free movement of workers within the European labour market, but it clearly stated the ambitions of developing a European identity through mobility of students, in addition to the labour market asset that “a European experience” would give. This has been done not only through working on removing the barriers to mobility of students and teachers, but also by actively promoting mobility through incentive systems. The core of this EU involvement in higher education has consisted of mobility programmes, at least until the end of the 1990s. These activities have been perceived to be desirable and not flavoured by the same type of sensitivity attached to the Europeanisation of the curriculum or educational structures.

4. The European Commission’s network configurations in higher education

4.1 Administrative capacity at European level

Since its major reorganisation around the 1973 enlargement, the European Commission has had some administrative capacity in the area of education. First education was formally recognised as a division in one of the DGs (DG for Research, Science, and Education). Later a special DG for education and culture was set up (DG EAC). The administrative capacity at the supranational level is currently estimated to consist of about 550 officials and temporary agents, being far less than the administrative capabilities assigned to European research policy, which is about 1100 staff (Spence and Stevens 2006: 176-177). As such there is

limited capacity for policy development and implementation. But it has nonetheless represented a basis for autonomous action at the supranational level, and for developing connections to the other levels of administration and education policy actors. Since the DG is organised according to sector and sub-sectors, it also attracts similarly organised administrations and societal interest groups (Egeberg 2006c: 42). Internally DG EAC is organised according to policy themes (especially levels and sectors of education) and also, more recently, according to function of the supranational executive. A reorganisation in 2005 separated more clearly the policy oriented tasks from the administration of programmes and actions and was designed to better integrate education and professional training according to a “lifelong learning logic”³.

As far as higher education is concerned, the development of Union administration has not come in the shape of European agencies, contrary to many other policy fields (Egeberg 2006a:7-8, Geradin and Petit 2004, Ugland and Veggeland 2006:150-151). However, in the tangent policy area of vocational education and training, two major European agencies have been established. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), established in 1975⁴, was one of the first specialised and decentralised agencies set up to provide scientific and technical know-how in a specific field and promote exchanges of ideas between different European partners. Its function is predominantly ideational: to provide information on and analysis of vocational education and training systems and policies, and to contribute to developing and coordinating research, information dissemination and to be a forum for exchange of ideas⁵. Cedefop is in itself the hub of a network of national administrations and expertise in the area of vocational training⁶. Similarly, the European Training Foundation (ETF) was established to contribute to the development of the

³ DG EAC Annual Activity Report 2005, RAA 2005 DG Education et culture - Version finale

⁴ Council Regulation of 10 February 1975 establishing a European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) EEC No 337/75, *Official Journal of the European Communities* L39, 13.2.1975 as last amended by Council Regulation EC No. 2051/2004

⁵ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?section=2>

⁶ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?section=2&sub=1>

education and training systems of the EU partner countries and to promote knowledge sharing and expertise development⁷.

In this respect, the tasks and responsibilities of these agencies illustrate the informational role assigned to the European level in a policy area with limited mandate and few discretionary powers. Also these two agencies have no formal decision-making power relative to the Commission – i.e. all relevant decisions are taken by the Commission (cf. Geradin and Petit 2004:48).

4.2 Administrative networks and the Commission's expert groups

The European Commission's committee structure is an important part of the EU system of governance. It represents the expertise structure underlying the drafting of legislative proposals and preparation of new policies, as well as the linking of partners in putting programmes and policies into action. It links the member states' governments and different levels of administration with the Commission (cf. Egeberg *et al.* 2006). These committees and the administrations that are connected through them are part of what makes the EU a "living multi-level system" (Wessels 1998: 210). DG EAC's structure of committees and expert groups is a poignant indication of the networked administrative systems dealing within education and training as a policy area. The DG EAC has a well developed committee structure that connects the European Commission to education policy actors and expertise across Europe: In 2006 it organised 70 expert groups⁸. It ranked eight of all the DGs in terms of number of expert groups. Several of the policy areas with far more legal responsibilities and resources assigned to the EU level have less expert groups (see table 1 and Gornitzka and Sverdrup, forthcoming). This indicates that the national sensitivity of a policy area does not preclude the setting up of rather elaborate connections between the European executive within this sector. We could see such collaborative arrangements as a

⁷ www.etf.europa.eu

⁸ In addition there were in 2005 7 Comitology committees in education,(cf.COM(2006) 446 final)

way for the EU to provide itself with an administrative infrastructure without more formal responsibilities being transferred to the Community level.

Table 1 Number of expert groups organised by the Commission's DG in 2006*.

Research	129
Environment	126
Enterprise and industry	120
Taxation and customs	95
Energy and transport	94
Health and consumer protection	89
Eurostat	85
Education and Culture	70
Agriculture	64
Employment and social affairs	62
Regional policy	58
Internal market	51

* Only DGs with more than 50 expert groups are included in the table.

Source: Gornitzka and Sverdrup forthcoming

Most of these groups have mixed memberships, and national administrations and competent national authorities are most frequently connected to the Commission via such groups. The DG EAC's expert committees are thus predominantly venues of administrative interaction. Independent experts/academics are the second most frequently represented type of actor. Non-governmental organisations and social partners are also present in these structures.

These expert groups have thus contributed to the establishment of elaborate networks between DG EAC officials from national administrations involved in the education policy area, and trans-national actors. Less than 40 per cent of these are permanent or/and have a formal status, implying that their durability is uncertain (Gornitzka and Sverdrup forthcoming). Consequently we cannot argue, based on these data, that these expert groups represent the long-term, organised connections of stable policy networks or of an education policy "epistemic community"⁹. Nonetheless, they represent the proliferated connections between

⁹ Based on an interview study of education policy makers in Europe, Lawn and Lingard (2002) make the argument that there is such a transnational policy community present in Europe with a specific

the supranational executive, national administrations, technical experts and the various NGOs that operate at the European level.

The types of function performed by these groups are also mixed. These networks are essential for programme development and execution, and for drafting communications and other types of policy development activities. Most of these groups are given the task of coordination and exchange of views, but several also are assigned tasks in preparation of policy and policy definition and providing assistance to the Commission in the preparatory stages. Monitoring and evaluation and expert advice for Commission studies in the area are also listed as part of the task of such committees. We cannot ascertain the actual working mode of these committees with the current data, but there are indications of what type of EU activity they relate to. Many of them are set up in connection with EU's education programmes, and also in preparation for the new integrated lifelong learning programme (see below). Several of the expert groups are set up to deal with more specific policy development issues, such as the expert group on the European Qualifications Framework and the one on EUROPASS.

The use of the Open Method of Coordination in education has made an imprint on the development of Community administration in education, including higher education. In practice it seems that the DG EAC has used the OMC to create an organised connection between national ministries, and non-territorial organisations and associations. About 1/3 of the DG EAC expert groups in 2006 (cf. table 1) have been established with reference to the OMC. The content of what goes on inside the OMC structure is on the other hand more elusive in this sector. The indicative data on the working groups under the OMC suggest that these groups do not have one single uniform mission, but have various formal mandates and also interpretations of their mandates. On the other hand the OMC in its organisational setup has been a networking opportunity for the DG EAC (Gornitzka 2006).

policy discourse that amongst others is cultivated in the EU committees and groups; they refer to this as the magistracy of influence in the European educational policy domain (Lawn and Lingard 2002:292).

5. Underlying dynamics of networking administration: three explorative cases

5.1 Administrative networks of Community action: the EU's higher education programmes

The Action Programme in the Field of Education (formally launched in 1976) marked a milestone also because it represented an institutionalisation of education as a policy area. It gave the DG for education something specific to do, and the administration of that programme entailed a permanent organisational capacity attached to this area and a budget item to administer. With the 1980s came the advent of an increasing number of Community Actions, most importantly the launching of the prime mobility programme in higher education, Erasmus. The establishment of Erasmus and other educational programmes was by no means uncontested and their story has been phrased as a battle between the national versus the Community interests (Wit and Verhoeven 2001). Despite the controversies a steady increase in the funds available for these programmes can be observed over the years (Beukel 2001). The Erasmus programme established mobility in *higher* education as among the least nationally sensitive areas of EC/EU involvement in education. While after the Maastricht Treaty the educational programmes expanded in scope and financial size, a major bone of contention was still the balance between community action and member states in the *implementation* of the educational programmes.

In 1995, *Socrates* became the umbrella of EU's educational programmes. The Socrates-decision became one of the first where the co-decision procedure was applied (Benedetto 2005). The Council was in major disagreement with the Commission and the European Parliament over the balance of decentralised versus centralised measures (Steunenberg and Selck 2006). The Socrates compromise meant that the Community programme was kept in volume, but with partly decentralised implementation and with a more active role of national executive bodies than the Commission initially proposed (Wit and Verhoeven 2001: 210-

211). Unlike the central actions of the programme and the EU's Research and Development programmes, decentralised actions are distributed nationally and not according to European level competition for funds.

Connecting to national ministries and agencies

At the EU level there are dense organisational structures that carry the education programmes, and these also involve a range of experts and national civil servants that prepare and are involved in the running of them. These are multi-annual programmes that have time to establish themselves when the "dust settles" between the at times highly conflict-ridden processes when their profile and size are determined. For the questions raised in this paper, the case of Erasmus /Socrates illustrates the kinds of connections that have evolved between the Commission and the national and sub-national administration.

The Socrates committee is a comitology committee led by the Commission and its members are appointed by national ministries. It is the most active of the Comitology committees in the area of education¹⁰. It has operated over two programme periods with to some extent, a stable membership from national ministries, and as such it has become the basis for informal and durable policy networks¹¹. It has an important function in that the Commission is required to consult this committee for the development of the programme's profile, its annual programme for implementation and budget-issues, and also the rules and procedures for running the programme.

The connections between the Commission and national administrations linked to the education programmes also come in the shape of an information network, Eurydice. *Eurydice*, the Information Network on Education in Europe was set up by the Commission in 1980. It is a network consisting of a European Unit and national information units (most of them based in national education *ministries*). Since 1995, Eurydice has been an integral part of Socrates. Eurydice is

¹⁰ In 2005 it met three times, in total for 6 days and issued 23 opinions (COM(2006) 446 final Report from the Commission on the working of committees during 2005, with annex SEC(2006) 1065, Commission staff working document.

an institutional network for gathering, monitoring, processing and circulating comparable information on education systems and policies throughout Europe. Eurydice covers the education systems of the EU member states, the EEA countries and the EU candidate countries involved in the Socrates Programme. It is in the hands of the Commission to coordinate the Eurydice network and act as its link with the national administrations.

As concerns higher education in the Socrates/Erasmus Programme, the actual implementation is two-fold. “Centralised actions” are managed by the Commission¹². On these actions the DG education deals directly with the higher education institutions that apply for participation. The role of national agencies is limited for these actions although they are responsible for national PR activities and for providing information.

The “decentralised actions” of Socrates/Erasmus are managed by national agencies designated in the countries taking part in the programme. These units are in turn linked to the Commission¹³. For instance, the expert group established for national agencies involved in the new lifelong learning programmes (see below) organises the directors of these agencies in order to “ensure consistent implementation of the LLL Programme and its actions across participating countries by a regular monitoring, consultation and exchange of information with the National Agencies”¹⁴. The profile of such national agencies varies, they may be agencies charged with the national task of academic programme development or internationalisation, or they are agencies that have been set up specifically to

¹¹ Fouilleux *et al.* 2002: 79, Informant interview May 2005.

¹² Programme management of Socrates was also assisted by a so-called Technical Assistance Office (TAO). Since 2000, the use of such TAOs in the EU has in general been phased out and their functions replaced by public law entities specialised in programme management. Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 empowers the Commission to set up executive agencies for the management of Community programmes. From 2006 the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency was operational for the EU’s programmes in education (Decision 2005/56/EC).

¹³ COM(2004) 153 final: Report from the Commission. Interim evaluation report on the results achieved and on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the implementation of the second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education ‘Socrates’.

¹⁴ <http://c.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/detail.cfm?ref=1910&l=all>

deal with the range of EU education programmes and/or with Socrates/Erasmus (Huisman and van der Wende 2005).

The Socrates network connects national agencies that are not particularly uniform, yet they also deal directly with the Commission in addition to the national education ministry in the practical implementation of the programmes. Their orientation is towards fulfilling the rules provided by the EU programmes (Hackl 2001), as these administrations are the caretakers of the rules that apply to these programmes. Also the rules set by the Commission for running the decentralised actions have been seen as so detailed that “in practice little scope is left for action at national or local level” (Regeringskansliet 2003:27).

Consequently, an outcome of the Erasmus programme, also as part of Socrates I and II, has been to create permanent administrative attention for the European dimension in higher education at the national ministerial and agency level, and those units in turn are networked with Community level administration. The national agencies represent permanent administrative capacity attached to EU programmes and are heavily involved in promotion and distribution of information to sub-national actors. Even if the attention is turned to Europe this does not necessarily imply that the loyalty of these units is to the Commission. There is some evidence of a Janus-faced relationship between the national agencies and the Commission: the latter is a facilitator but also a controlling unit that imposes a number of irksome reporting requirements on the national institutions (cf. Teichler, *et al.* 2000, evaluation of Socrates I and II¹⁵ and national evaluations reports, e.g. Pirrie *et al.* 2003, Regeringskansliet 2003, Nuffic 2003).

The new generation of education programmes has been integrated into one Lifelong Learning Programme (2007- 2013) covering learning from “childhood to age”. The biggest budget item in this programme is still Erasmus for higher education. A requirement of this integrated programme has been for each member state to appoint one single national agency to replace the various national

organisations that have been involved in the administration of the different programmes under Socrates until now. A national ministry cannot be designated as a national agency¹⁶. This indicates that from 2007 on the multilevel administrative infrastructure of community action will become more streamlined.

Connecting to administration at local level

After 20 years of operation a large part of European universities has been in some way or other involved in the Erasmus and Socrates/Erasmus programmes. The Erasmus University Cooperation scheme, for instance, included in 2005 more than 80 per cent of all European universities across 31 countries¹⁷. Administrative consequences are also seen at the level of the individual universities across Europe, in the sense that the Community programme has created institutional level “partners”. The structure of the programme in the beginning implied a direct relationship of the Commission with individual students and university departments that were involved in the programme largely bypassing the national and the central level of the University. With the transition to the Socrates programme the central university level involvement was strengthened (Teichler *et al.* 2000).

Administrative implications of Socrates/Erasmus include the development of a managerial stratum of officers and specialised administrative units at the central level of universities, and at faculties and departments (H. Olsen 1998, Gornitzka *et al.* 1998). Universities have increasingly set up organisational arrangements and administrative units to deal with their involvement in the programmes. These have also in many cases been the spur for the establishment of permanent internationalisation offices, and for centralising and formalising the mobility activities within European universities (H. Olsen 1998, Nuffic 2003: 19, Huisman and van der Wende 2005).

¹⁵ COM(2001) 75 final and COM(2004) 153 final.

¹⁶ DECISION No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning.

¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/erasmus/erasmus_en.html

A survey conducted among universities participating in the Socrates programme showed that 40 per cent of universities had established units exclusively related to this programme and 30 per cent had staff uniquely assigned to administer the institution's involvement (Maiworm and Teichler 2000: 53-56). Many of the administrative units and staff in charge of European programmes at the local level are meshed with more general administrative units in the area of internationalisation. They are not homogenous organisational solutions to the administration of EU programmes (Huisman and van der Wende 2005). Yet such administrative capabilities represent the university/college level's organisational capacity for attending to the European programmes that bypass the national level. Higher education institutions across Europe are investing time, attention and personnel into knowing the rules and regulations of Community action programmes. In a sense they are sunk costs and institutionalised behaviour where the costs involved for the universities exceed the narrow financial benefits they can receive from the Programme (Vabø and Smeby 2003, Williams and Evans 2005:82).

Finally, another long term administrative consequence of the EU education programmes has been the establishment of European associations and interest groups that were formed, amongst other things, to lobby in Brussels (e.g. Erasmus Student Network), as well as the increased activities of stakeholder associations that were already in existence. As we shall see below these trans-national organisations have later become an important part of the Commission's networks that were formed in connection to European activities outside the Programmes (Hackl 2001).

5.2 Calibrating European higher education through agency networks: recognition of degrees and quality assurance

Referring back to Europe's mandate as expressed in the Treaty, the European dimension becomes legitimately (re-)activated when the issue of quality of education is raised. The area of mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and

other formal qualifications has a long tradition of Community activities, as it is regarded as essential for facilitating the free movement of people and services. Since it was linked to the area of vocational training it had a much clearer legal basis for Community action. The first directive in this area was adopted already in the 1970s for medicine and health professions, and in 1988 a directive was adopted for a general system of recognition of higher education diplomas for professional education and training “with a duration of three years or more”¹⁸. The directive was followed by the establishment of an agency network, *NARIC*, the origins of which were dating back to 1984. It was intended to improve academic recognition of diplomas and study periods in EU member states and associated countries. *NARIC* was linked to a parallel network (*ENIC*) set up by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. The *NARIC* network is financially supported by the EU, as the smallest item in the Socrates budget¹⁹.

The network involves the coordinators of the EU Directives on recognition for professional purposes. *NARIC*’s constituents are the *national recognition centres* designated by the national ministries of education to be in charge of the implementation of policies on the recognition of degrees, but their scope of action may differ. In the majority of member states higher education institutions have the autonomy to take their own decisions on the admission of foreign students and the exemption of parts of courses of study programmes that students may be granted on the basis of education undertaken abroad. As a result, most *NARICs* do not take decisions, but offer on request information and advice on foreign education systems and qualifications. The *ENIC/NARIC* networks see it as their task to improve common recognition standards as part of the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), thus their work is linked to the implementation of the Bologna process.

The network’s relationship to the DG EAC is not formally elaborated and is subject to some confusion among the network members. The view on the role

¹⁸ Directive 89/48/EEC

of the DG EAC underlines primarily its role as funder and coordinator of the network. The national agencies in the NARIC network also underscore that their connections to the DG EAC and the status as an EU network belonging to the EU structure give added recognition nationally as “an authoritative body”²⁰.

The more general area of *quality assurance and accreditation* in higher education is contested. Yet, it is an area where the national prerogative is being tugged at by the embryonic development of common European standards *and* efforts of decentralisation to the higher education institutions themselves. What triggered or boosted this process at the European level is not readily ascertained, but a major contributor was a pilot project organised by the Commission in the 1990s. This is claimed to have laid the foundations of the Council recommendation on quality assurance in 1998²¹. In 1999/2000 a network of national quality assurance agencies was established (ENQA)

The Commission was central to the formation of this network. The first meeting of ENQA’s general assembly was, for instance, co-chaired by a representative of DG education and the establishment was funded also through the Socrates programme. However, it is doubtful whether ENQA can be seen as a network with the Commission as the hub; rather ENQA underlines that it acts in its own capacity. This was further underlined when ENQA changed its status from network to association. Membership in ENQA is open to quality assurance agencies in all signatory states to Bologna, and as such it is not restricted to the EU member states.

Also this network has become closely related to the Bologna process and its implementation. ENQA was fortified with a concrete mission given by the Bologna follow-up meeting in 2003 in Berlin. It provided ENQA with a double

¹⁹ Although its rights to automatic and exclusive EU funding have been weakened under the Socrates II programme.

²⁰ External evaluation of NARIC, August 2002: 39, 116.

²¹ Council recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education.

mandate to first develop a peer review system for quality assurance agencies, and second to develop an agreed upon set of standards and procedures for national quality assurance systems. The Commission on the other hand has used the ENQA network directly in its proposal for Recommendations of the Council and the European Parliament. In 2004 the Commission proposed, drawing on the work of the ENQA network, the establishment of a European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies where such agencies are subject to assessment and accreditation as to whether they meet the common European standards for such agencies²². The proposal stated that European universities should be free to choose where they wanted to get their accreditation for their activities, and that they should not be limited by nationality in choice of accreditation agency, thus implying a potential challenge to a traditional national ministerial responsibility towards universities across Europe²³. The idea of having a European *agency (or agencies)* performing these functions is at present not seen as a viable and acceptable option (Musselin 2005). The question then would be what role the Commission would play in a European *networked* solution to support such a register. The Council and EP parliament recommendation assigns a networking role for the Commission to support cooperation between universities/colleges, national agencies and administrations, and to monitor the developments in quality assurance at national level and the European cooperation activities²⁴.

5.3 External representation of the EU: the Commission in the Bologna process

In 1991 the European Commission issued a *Memorandum on Higher Education* that signalled the ambitions of a broader and more active role of the European level in

²² Commission of the European Communities Brussels 12.10.2004 COM(2004) 642 final 2004/0239 (COD): *Proposal for a recommendation for the Council and of the European Parliament on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education.*

²³ The final recommendation from the European Parliament and the Council, on the other hand added “provided that this is compatible with national legislation or permitted by national authorities” REC 15 Feb. 2006 PE-CONS 366611/05 REV.

²⁴ REC 15 Feb. 2006 PE-CONS 366611/05 REV.

the area of higher education policy²⁵. Overall, the memorandum was not well received by the major member states (Petit 2003), implying in practice in many respects an end to the EU's ambitions to develop a formal responsibility in the area of higher education policy, at least for the time being.

Some years later, four governments (Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany) initiated an intergovernmental process with the intention of developing a European Higher Education Area *outside* the framework of the EU. This initiative formed the basis for the Bologna process. The role of the European Commission was limited in the initial stages of this process, but the Commission enlarged its role in the follow-up to the Bologna Declaration (Wende and Huisman 2004:24). The Declaration set up a wide menu of areas of cooperation and in 1999 there was no obvious way for an intergovernmental structure to coordinate and survey the implementation of the items on the agenda. Also parts of the Bologna process promoted initiatives that had been developed in the course of the EU's educational programmes, notably the introduction of a European credit system (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement, and the issues related to common European quality standards in higher education (see above) (Cerych 2002).

The way in which the Commission entered the Bologna process illustrates the multifaceted aspect of the administrative infrastructure that has emerged in European higher education. The administrative capabilities of the Commission, its capacity for acting independently, and the organised networks of the DG for education should be seen as one of the bridges that connected the supranational executive to the intergovernmental process towards establishing the European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna process follow-up activities include a number of monitoring studies and reports. The Commission has provided funding for and in other ways contributed to the stocktaking exercises of the Bologna process and in doing this

²⁵ European Commission, *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community*. COM(91)349 final.

it has drawn on its networks, especially *Eurydice*²⁶. In consequence, part of the information and documents that have been essential to the development of the Bologna process is processed “through Brussels”. This information has also involved stakeholders, such as the European University Association (EUA), as paid information providers, that have produced core publications such as *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education, I, II and III*. The latter documents have preceded the bi-annual Bologna meetings of the Education Ministers. In addition, the Commission has organised seminars and conferences on numerous issues relating to the Bologna process and thus further acted in its informational role. The permanent administrative capacities and “stayer qualities” of the Commission have made it a central player in what started as an intergovernmental process.

6. Networked administration – a challenge to the national prerogative?

The Commission has forged a number of links that demonstrate the multi-level connections that have hosted the Europeanisation of higher education. The EU’s involvement has gradually formed a basis for administrative networks to be established. First of all, the functional differentiation of the Commission services that organisationally separated education from other policy sectors was a crucial step. It created a basis for action and clear access points for actors organised along the sectoral line. Second, having traced the histories of some of these connections, it is rather striking that the Erasmus/Socrates programmes have been the “placenta” that nourished the initial establishment and development of such connections. This implies that the programmes have been an important basis for extending the activities of the European Union in this area. In practical terms it has especially meant that the costs of such activities have found a budget line in the Socrates funds.

²⁶ DG EAC Annual Activity Report 2005, RAA 2005 DG Education et culture - Version finale, p.9, European Commission – Education and Culture (2003): Berlin Conference of European Higher Education Ministers “Realising the European Higher Education Area” Contribution of the European Commission. Brussels, 30 July 2003.

However, these connections are not of identical quality. Some agency networks are more permanently welded to the Commission through funding and/or secretariat functions, for example, Eurydice and NARIC; others are connections with respect to which at one stage the Commission had a parenthood function, yet the “family ties” have been loosened considerably, as in the case of ENQA. The story of how national agencies have been connected to the Commission is also a tale of the increasing pressure that has been built up to establish national agencies that administer European standards of quality and recognition of qualifications, and frameworks for measuring qualifications. These pressures stem both from the Commission led/supported activities and from the outcomes of the intergovernmental process to establish the European Higher Education Area, and not in the least the interaction between them. However, the developments in quality assurance as seen from the perspective of national actors are nationally determined and controlled (Witte 2006). It is untenable to assign the European Commission the role as the main ideational entrepreneur, or transmission belt for transporting European concepts, that has generated this process of national level agencification. As argued by Kohler-Koch on the basis of a study of the EU’s regional policy (2002:7), such views on the role of the Commission and its networks are likely to underestimate the significance of parallel developments, competing networks and ideas, as well as travelling ideas that do not materialise into practice. The agencification of quality assurance in higher education is a process that has run parallel and co-evolved with the developments at the European level. On the other hand these national agencies have, undoubtedly with the assistance of the Commission, created formal national agency networks that may come to represent a challenge to or change in national ministerial control. The extent to which such networks are “at the disposal of” and in consensus with the European Commission, is on the other hand questionable.

The national *legal* responsibilities for higher education are in essence neither contested directly by the Treaty nor by the Commission’s development of

administrative capacities in this area. Rather the DG EAC sees itself as defender of the Treaty paragraph. The network configuration we have seen might just be the pattern one can expect when the Commission tries to make the most out of a sector's legal and historical parameters that combine weak legal provisions and national sensitivity/diversity. Some of the Commission's connections in the area of higher education are in this sense "networks of compensation". The Commission's strength in this sector is certainly not coming from its legal basis, but from the resources it can offer for sub-national institutions, the possible opportunity to circumvent the national grip on higher education institutions and the additional legitimation it gives to the trans-national European associations. The Commission's "competitive advantage" here would be its centrality in the European decision-making procedures with respect to the education programmes, and the initiatives that it can provide in this sector. The Commission is unique as a permanent nexus in this policy sector. Its position would be hard to fill for any other national administration, or international organisations' secretariat as it connects permanent administrative capacity with trans-national actors, agencies and national administrations, and not in the least provides the link to the general infrastructure of the EU outside the education sector. It has also shown how it can act independently of member states in its external representation within the Bologna process.

The content of most of the connections and networks goes under the label of *information*. Even the network that has the foundation in a European directive (NARIC) is also presented as a network of information and advice. Seemingly these connections do not challenge the regulative power of the national governments directly. However, several of the Commission's connections that we have seen developing in this policy area are not passive information channels; they have been used in preparation for the Commission's own policy development and in its proposals for Council/European Parliament recommendations. The connections between national agencies and sub-national actors and the Commission also imply a blending of the implementation of the Commission's

programmes with other activities. This is also the case with the links established through the OMC.

Much of what goes on in the channels that link the Commission to European higher education concerns the establishment of European rules and standards that are able to handle the pronounced diversity of higher education systems (Sandebring 2004), notably without creating a European level legal framework. This is especially evident in the area of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. Also the story of the Commission and its connections alludes to a wider ideational and normative convergence in this sector that may occur when national experts, ministry and agency representatives, meet regularly in Commission committees and working groups, in seminars and conferences, are routinely exposed to the information provided by amongst others the Commission, and as ideas are hardened into statistical categories (Gornitzka 2006).

However, processes of ideational convergence are slow-moving, organic, and not readily identifiable as chains of cause and effect. A likely assumption is that the work that has been going on within the Commission's networks and by the Commission itself over the years has "massaged" the minds of national policy makers and the academic communities involved (cf. Radaelli 2004: 10). We might speculate that part of the challenge to the nation state in higher education is the result of a cognitive/normative change that has lifted up the iron hand of the nation state especially by framing higher education policy as an economic issue referring to the "global challenge" that cannot be met without common European solutions (Maassen and Olsen 2007). In this respect the connections that the Commission has forged suggest more of a subtle than an overt challenge to the nation state's prerogative in higher education.

Intergovernmental reassertion in the shape of the Bologna process has not slowed down the process of Europeanisation, even though it may have challenged the core role of the Commission as a policy initiator (Hingel 2001). The Bologna process has served to connect many of the issues that the Commission worked on

in the pre-Bologna stage and give them an “intergovernmental” face. After the initial hiatus, the networks that connected the Commission to several layers of administration in higher education have come into play also under the auspices of “Bologna” as a state-to-state led process.

The portrayal of the Commission connections that have developed over a long period and in the context of several European level processes could possibly give the impression of the Commission being the dynamic centre of networks that challenge the national control over a sensitive area. That would attribute an exaggerated transformative power to the Commission and overlook the limitations of the analysis presented in this paper. It must be underlined that this paper has kept the focus on the Commission and its connections outside other EU institutions, and therefore underreported its interactions with the Council, and the European Parliament. All of these institutions have or have had roles to play in developments described above, especially the Education Council, and the mere focus on the Commission’s role may have conflated its capacity to act independently.

Furthermore a parallel challenge to the national prerogative of higher education comes from within the domestic level with the changing relationship between national governments and the higher education institutions. Several forces have been tugging at the national prerogative with respect to higher education: supranational developments in combination with the trans-national forces, and trends towards delegation and institutional autonomy, a changing balance between market and hierarchy in higher education, and the strengthening of the regional authority level (Gornitzka *et al.* 2005).

A further limitation lies in the lack of a comparative baseline – the assumption of national sensitivity and sector characteristics as impacting on the development of Community administration cannot be addressed properly without cross-sector comparison. However, the accounts of the historical development can be used as a first step towards understanding the impact of the national sensitivities of policy sectors in the development of European administrative

capacity. Such sensitivities are not necessarily an inherent and durable characteristic of a policy sector, but subject to change.

7. Conclusion

The mapping of the emergence of Commission connections presented here points to core conditions for the establishment of such network configurations. First, the institutionalisation of education as a European policy area through the establishment of Commission *administrative capacities* and second, the subsequent establishment of *incentive programmes*. This gave education, and especially higher education, a common staff and a budget at the European level, and consequently capabilities for analysis, planning and decision-making that has proved essential for the way in which the European level has gradually reached and connected to national sector administrations, the agency level, to trans-national associations and to the level of universities and colleges across Europe.

The “sensitive climate” of this sector has not been conducive to any agencification at the EU level, at least not with respect to *higher* education. Such a climate has on the other hand not hampered the growth of an elaborate committee structure of the DG EAC. These have become a paramount aspect of a European multilevel administrative infrastructure in this sector. In the first place this links national ministries to each other and to the Commission. Connections that we assumed would be a challenge the nation state prerogative in higher education have also developed as part of European expert groups, in agency networks and in the implementation of European programmes: Agencies, trans-national associations, expertise networks university/college administration are linked to the Commission and to each other outside of the immediate reach of national ministries’ of education.

The evidence from the overview presented in this paper suggests at that European links made to the European level have entailed changes in the administrative structures of ministries, agencies and higher education institutions across Europe. Whether these changes are at the margins and of little consequence

to the larger national and administrative infrastructure we cannot tell. At any rate such changes have to be seen in combination with the changes in the governance arrangements that have been and are taking place at the national and sub-national levels.

Without a regulative role, most of these European networks are centred on handling information, and as such they do not represent any overt challenge to the nation-state's legal or funding prerogative of higher education in Europe. Consequently a discussion of challenges to the national governance of higher education systems easily turns into a discussion of the importance of ideas and ideational networks. The patterns and development of networks configurations in higher education pointed to here, underline the need to further investigate the role of ideas, mutual learning and standardisation in the integration process and the role networks of administrations across levels of governance play in the integration of higher education in Europe.

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