

Research frontiers in Economic Sociology and Labour Studies (ResFron ESLS)

Seminar

Unintended consequences of governance reforms of European universities

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16 February 2015
Room A, h. 13.00-14.30
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The mantra of “reforming governance” has characterized all recent efforts to transform universities in Europe. But the political attention of decision-makers and the analytical attention of scholars have focused on the design of national reform strategies, whereas very little attention has been paid to the actual changes that they have produced. In this paper I focus on one specific and often neglected phenomenon which stands between reforms, or public policies more generally, and their outcomes: namely, the emergence of what Robert Merton, in his seminal 1936 essay, called the “unanticipated consequences of purposive social action”. My aim is twofold. On the one hand, I will show that the systematic use of this concept allows for an interpretation of the empirical evidence on recent changes in university governance that is more appropriate and far more interesting than the traditional ones. On the other, I will maintain that Merton’s treatment of the factors that account for the emergence of unintended consequences was weak and generic, and needs to be supplemented by more specific and convincing explanations such as the ones that I will propose in the conclusions.

The empirical evidence on the ways in which national reforms are implemented by individual universities is provided by case studies that have been conducted in six national systems typifying the different ways in which higher education is organized in Europe: the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Two UNIRES research teams carried on extensive interviews in three universities in each country. In Italy case studies of twelve universities were conducted, and an online questionnaire was submitted to all 66 state universities. This comparative evidence provides the empirical basis for an extensive discussion of four main types of unanticipated consequences of university governance reforms: a shift to forms of collective institutional leadership; the apparent shortcomings of governing boards with external members; the resilience of forms of self-government; and the fluctuations between centralization and decentralization trends.

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A NASP project
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