Abstract

The influence of European policies to create an integrated political and social area under the aegis of the ‘Europe of knowledge’ can be seen as relying on the influence of driving ideas and discourses. How these ideas and discourses are interpreted and translated into the national contexts is a major issue in policy analysis. In this paper, we will focus on these processes on the basis of the Portuguese case of higher education governance. In the aftermath of previous research on the prevailing ideas, interests, instruments and institutions enacted at the European level, this paper focuses on the analysis of the interviews to national key-actors in higher education. Their interpretations of the ‘four I’s’ (ideas, interests, instruments and institutions) in the context of European governance is under scrutiny. The analysis of the (mis)matching of European and national actor’s views aims at contributing for the study of the ideational component of European and national governance.

Introduction

Political coordination at the European level is an enduring issue of European integration. On the one hand, compliance with European norms and values varies across political levels and sectors; on the other hand, the authority and legitimacy of nation-states has been fragmented upwards to the European level, downwards to the regions and local authorities, and sideways to public/private networks (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). This is particularly visible in education, in which the EU can only take action by means of incentive measures, without having the power to enforce legal compliance, as European treaties have reserved education as a national remit.

In higher education the difficulties associated with the creation of a more politically integrated entity assume two configurations. The first relates to obstacles resulting from national specificities and characteristics that, from an European perspective, is “an illegitimate brake
upon the drive by Europe towards a multinational system of higher education” (Neave & Amaral, 2012: 15). The second difficulty relies on the definition of European political goals and the means for their achievement. The political coordination of the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is showing that Bologna appears “to amount to nothing less than a ‘ends/means reversal’ in which Bologna is itself viewed as an end, rather than as a means with the EHEA as the end result” (Neave & Veiga, 2013: 74).

At the European level, the need to develop incentive measures as instruments to promote and achieve common goals has been enforcing the EU steering capacity which is visible, for instance, in the frequent attempts made by the European Commission (EC) to extend its powers, sometimes with the help of the European Court of Justice. In the case of the Bologna process, the EC has taken over a central role “that acquired a very particular consistency by associating Bologna with the Lisbon strategy” (Amaral & Neave, 2009: 277). This is where the ideational repertoires assume importance. For instance, ‘Europe of knowledge’ appears as central ideograph and powerful political driver as well as ideas such as ‘governance’, ‘knowledge-based society’, ‘competitiveness’. The influence of European policies in the EU’s attempt to create an integrated political and social area can be seen as relying on the power of these ideas and discourses over EU policy action.

In this paper, governance processes are analysed using the lens of European governance as it emphasises systemic features of policy-making that ascribe relevance to actors as the main driving forces of political processes. Consequently, European governance also brings to the fore the role played by ideas and discourses in politics and policy-making as underlined by discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008). This newest version of the institutionalist approach feeds a dynamic perspective of institutional change contributing to explain why policies at the national level develop in specific ways.

The argument in this paper is that political action is enacted by normative and cognitive ideas that shape interests, instruments and institutions, thus providing legitimacy and effectiveness to European governance. Discursive institutionalism might also contribute to explaining the commitment of political actors to European education policies and provide a perspective on the national policy enactment (Ball, 2004). European policies aim to coordinate national policies and the pursuit of European goals. A mere top–down and/or bottom–up approach of the relationship between EU policies and national higher education sectors would oversimplify the processes shaping the political context within which higher education systems, institutions and actors are evolving.
In spite of the fact that policy action by the European level bodies does not have enforcing capacity in the education policy area, their powers are exerted by mechanisms that configure European governance (Magalhães, Veiga, Sousa, & Ribeiro, 2012). In this paper, we analyse the perceptions of policy actors driving Portuguese higher education policy processes. When we focus on actors and processes engaged in policy making we are no longer looking at on the political-administrative system of implementation, but rather on the process of realizing policy through practice (Ball, 2004). The analysis of national level actors’ perceptions about ideas, interests, instruments and institutions allows us to grasp the workings of European governance in interaction with the national level. Hence, the question to be addressed focuses on what can we learn from the perceptions of Portuguese national actors about the workings of European governance in higher education?

European governance, while underlining the steering and coordination of the rules of the game, brings forward national ‘brakes’ corresponding to the enactment of national discretionary decisions and practices (Neave & Amaral, 2012). While underlining how policy gets ‘done’ requires the involvement of multiple reference points located at different levels and beyond the European Union, simultaneously, this perspective also emphasises national and institutional discretionary decision-making and practices that affect European and national governance. Discretionary aspects associated with policy enactment underline how national agendas are influenced by their own dynamics and values. Hence, we are looking at the visions of the parliament (members of education and culture commission), minister (secretary of the state), top civil servant (ministry director general), funding and accreditation agencies and universities representatives (national council of rectors).

The four ‘I’s’ are the analysers of national higher education governance in practice. Ideas are principles, values and taken-for-granted assumptions that permeate political action (Schmidt, 2008); interests refer to policy action by means of interplay and intervention (Kooiman, 2003); instruments structure the political process and its outcomes (Lascoumes & Galès, 2007) supporting the translation of policy into action or enactment (Ball 2004); institutions are elements internal to the actors structure and are structured by actors’ discourses and action (Schmidt, 2008: 314). The analysis of the four ‘I’s’ contributes to the understanding of the workings of European governance as voiced by national policy actors.

In the first part of this paper, the concept of European governance will be presented, emphasising the role of the national actors in setting the governance framework for education in Portugal. In what follows, the analysis of the interviews to national actors focuses on the four ‘I’s’ as analytical themes of the national governance as part of the European governance system.
European governance: ideas, interests, instruments and institutions

The concept of European governance emphasises the political management of rule systems, both formal and informal, that drive values and norms affecting behaviours and attitudes of actors (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Kjaer, 2010). In this sense, European governance is “the steering and coordination of the rules of the game, be they networks, markets or hierarchies” (Kjaer, 2010: 114). This perspective assumes, not only that the policy dynamics of the EU are broader than the dynamics of national governments, but also that it “does not take place without the governments” (Kjaer, 2010: 114). European governance, by means of ideas, frames political action promoting discourses to ensure consistency between European and national policies (Magalhães, Veiga, Ribeiro, Sousa, & Santiago, 2013). For instance, at the national level the ‘evaluation common grammar’ and the ‘funding common grammar’ in higher education are ideas providing legitimation to discourses on accreditation and output-based funding, respectively.

European governance brings together ideas, interests, instruments and institutions. Discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008: 306) emphasises the role of the ideational dimension of European governance and identifies two types of ideas. Normative ideas “attach values to political action and serve to legitimate the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness (see March and Olsen 1989)” (Schmidt, 2008: 307) and cognitive ideas “provide the recipes, guidelines, and maps for political action and serve to justify policies and programs” (Schmidt, 2008: 306). While the former uses principles and values to legitimate social compliance to policies and programmes (e.g. Europe of knowledge), the latter provides taken-for-granted assumptions on political procedures and instruments that justify political action (e.g. Open Method of Coordination). The extent which the actors referred to above bring forward normative and cognitive ideas, in accordance with the role played by the governance bodies that they are part of, remains to be seen. Normative and cognitive ideas are analytical tools and it is expected that they are conflated in the perceptions of national level actors when they voice principles and values as well as taken-for-granted assumptions about higher education governance.

The interaction between European and national levels is shaped by interests that play an important role in European governance. They may assume two configurations: interplay and intervention. The former implies that “there is no formal authority, domination or subordination” (Kooiman, 2003: 21) within and between the European, national and institutional levels; the latter “bind[s] those who explicitly agree to be bound by them, who thus
accept this intervention in their behaviour either individually or as a collective” (Kooiman, 2003: 22). Interplay can be seen at work in the framework of the Open Method of Coordination by means of incentive measures developed at different levels. Interplay involves ‘technical governance’ (Balzer & Martens, 2004) and one may add to it ‘proceduralism’, which “acts as the analytical handmaiden to ‘soft law’” (Neave, 2012: 18). In Neave’s view, the efficiency of such governance is based on the fact that it is easier to build consensus around operational procedures and shared common administrative practices rather than to accommodate and converge in common visions and values about higher education. The development of incentive measures stems from discourses legitimizing hierarchical relationships between goals and policy instruments as “the capacity of the EU to initiate and influence national discourses about educational issues” (Balzer & Martens, 2004: 7). The development of common core notions, policy principles and understandings of causal linkages between goals and instruments has been crucial for the development of European higher education policies. This dynamic shows a considerable degree of convergence, if not around a specific narrative, at least in the notions and jargon that nationally and internationally are used to ‘talk’ about higher education issues. This means that cognitive ideas prevail in driving the technicality of European governance. Previous research has shown that in higher education the interactions between European, national and institutional levels are based on the normative idea of ‘voluntariness’ of those involved in the process (Veiga & Magalhães, 2014). This is important as the European governance depends on the extent to which nation-states accept and incorporate European political goals.

The intervention form is visible in the legislative and regulatory operation of European governance (see below section on instruments). The political coordination of interests expressed by means of interventions addresses issues of, for instance, structural adaptations of higher education systems (e.g. the directive 2005/36/EC establishing the number of years of study required for professional practice). At the national level, the case of Portugal illustrate how the legal framework is a major driver of policy enactment of European governance. The law on Regulation Principles of the instruments for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (decree-law number 42/2005), the Legal framework of degree programmes and diplomas (decree-law number 74/2006) and the law on the Recognition of foreign academic degree programmes (decree-law number 341/2007) exemplify the intervention features of the European level policies on the structure and functioning of Portuguese higher education system. Political instruments structure, at least partially, the political process and its outcomes (Lascoumes & Galès, 2007), thus the ideational component influences the structures of the
policy and its outcomes. In the political coordination of higher education, policy instruments may be classified as legislative and regulatory, agreement-based and incentive-based, information-based and communication-based and best practices. Underlining the importance of the political choice of instruments, it might be argued that actors choose the political instruments according to the role they play in the system. The ideational dimension of policy instruments is increasingly important as “the popularity of information (or exhortation) instruments has grown”; i.e. this dimension is based on the attempt to exert influence by means of “transfer of knowledge, the communication of reasoned argument, and persuasion” (Vendung, 2003: 11). The political instruments “embodied in policy and the ideas upon which they rest are as important as the exercise of power and influence that produces policy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1990: 510). In other words, ideas are part of decision-making inherent to policy action. To this account, policy enactment (Ball, 2004) replaces policy implementation underlining the process of translation of policies into practices. The analysis of policy tools as motivational strategies for the actors involved (Schneider & Ingram, 1990) are a core ingredient of political action.

Institutions are “internal to the actors, serving both as structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors” (Schmidt, 2008: 314). Ideational dynamics shaping political action provides its legitimacy in promoting the dissemination of a political common grammar which drives core notions and policy principles. Core ideas about accountability, effectiveness, and the reinforcement of the subsidiarity principle pervade the context within which national actors are positioning and acting (Veiga & Magalhães, 2014). Institutions are translating these ideas into their own policy practices according to the role they are expected to play. While Parliament members and government’s actors are expected to assume a normative view in the development of policies, funding and accreditation agencies promote cognitive-driven approaches to higher education. It may be argued that the former actors are expected to be concerned with the legitimacy and mind-setting of the political process while the latter focus on the actual compliance to norms and guidelines stemming from European and national level institutions.

Discursive institutionalism contributed to underlining the ideational dimension of the four ‘I’s’ as constituents of European governance that, in turn, brings to the fore the role of actors involved in the political process held at the national and European levels. The analysis of empirical data convenes the views of national level actors precisely to grasp their role in promoting the ideational component of European higher education governance system.

Methods and data collection
The study was based on data from 7 semi-structured interviews conducted in June 2012 with national policy actors (see table 1).

Table 1 – National actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E1</th>
<th>Member of the parliament (and of education and culture commission)</th>
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<tr>
<td>E2</td>
<td>Member of the parliament (and of education and culture commission)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3</td>
<td>Representative of the national research funding agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4</td>
<td>Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Universities’ representative (national council of rectors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E6</td>
<td>Representative of the government</td>
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<tr>
<td>E7</td>
<td>Top civil servant</td>
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</table>

For reasons of anonymity, the names of the interviewees are not identified. The interviews focused on the role of national actors in coordinating the EHEA. The topics covered politics and policies of higher education, the influence of national and supranational institutions (e.g. European Union, OECD, UNESCO) in promoting higher education policies, the relationship between European and national actors and their concerns about higher education, and the instruments used to coordinate national higher education policies.

The interviews were held in Portugal and were validated by the interviewees for research purposes. The transcription of the interviews was submitted to thematic content analysis focusing on (1) meanings for political principles and goals (ideas), (2) how national and European agendas interact (interests), (3) the relationship between normative and cognitive dimensions of policy instruments (instruments) and (4) the role of national institutions in structuring and being structured by actors’ discourses (institutions).

As we dealt with elite interviews, the limitations related to the representativeness of the sample were taken into account. In other words, we are aware that the views of the interviewees reflect both their political affiliation and their individual perceptions. However, these interviews aimed to gather information and provide context that only these interviewees could offer about the process of political coordination. Additionally, given the exploratory nature of the study, the data gathered nevertheless provided an appropriate pointer to issues emerging at the national level in interaction with the European level involved in European governance of higher education not addressed in the literature.
Ideas, meanings for political principles and goals

To identify the normative and cognitive ideas attributed to the development of political principles and achievement of goals the analysis focused on the perceptions of the actors about the characteristics of the major challenges Portuguese higher education is facing in the last twenty years. Attention was drawn to national level actors’ views about quality, efficiency, funding, organization, recruitment and mobility.

In the perceptions of the interviewees the political management of the massification of the Portuguese higher education came out as a central challenge. The normative perspective on the need to have an accurate regulation of the supply of study programmes and control over the increased number of higher education institutions (mostly private) is the most evident trait. The need of regulation was underlined by a representative of the accreditation Agency and stressed by a representative of the government and a member of the Parliament:

(...) massification was accompanied by a huge increase of the higher education system in terms of the number of public higher education institutions and of an increasing supply of private higher education institutions that rose hastily since the mid 80’s (...) the supply is extremely diversified raising tensions and problems (E6, Representative of the government).

In the last years the question whether we grow, how do we grow with the required quality calls for the question if the programmes we supply correspond to the needs of the labor market and the European needs (E1, Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission).

The structure of the network made of institutions and degree programmes together with the quality are the normative ideas legitimized the regulation of the fast expansion of the system.

In this sense, quality is assumed to be the main issue that emerged in the aftermath of the massification of the system: “I think that the first [challenge] to be dealt with is quality. Is to guarantee quality” (E5, Universities’ representative). From the perspective of the representative of the government the same view was pointed out: “This topic has also emerged with massification, with the need to better understand the missions that are differentiating” (E6, Representative of the government). The normative features of these ideas about quality are, however, nuanced by pragmatic approaches emphasizing cognitive ideas. On the one hand, quality is perceived as a mean for consistent internationalization and effective funding (E5, Universities’ representative). On the other hand, quality is perceived as a means to enhancing mutual trust across European higher education systems and institutions (E4, Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency).
The emphasis on cognitive aspects regarding quality underlines its use as a form of political steering of the process of massification. Actually, the accreditation agency and the research funding agency are very much focused on administrative aspects and development of procedures rather than on normative approaches to education and research. For example, the representative of the Portuguese research funding agency critically underlines that “To a certain extent the thinking about scientific and university policies is cleaned out from the Agency… and therefore it is more focused in administrative processes, payments, etc.” (E3, Representative of the national research funding agency).

Funding, in an austerity context, is also seen as a major challenge for policy-making in higher education to be dealt with a cognitive approach. Austerity might have been aggravated by the 2008 financial crisis, but interviewees pointed out that the budget crisis was the result of previous policies that disregarded the coordination of priorities and institutions’ actions and choices. Actually “higher education system is not different from the general landscape of the country, featured by the lack of rigor, i.e. the country never had the capacity to efficiently regulate the system” (E4, Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency). In this context, finding alternative sources to public funding is underlined by the majority of the interviewees “to find funding sources beyond the traditional ones, i.e. public funding and students fees” (E7, Top civil servant) is a major challenge. This perspective is not based on the normative idea that linking between research and industry and society at large which, in the perspective of the representative of the Council of Rectors, is missing in the development strategy of higher education system and institutions.

In sum, cognitive ideas appear to subsume normative ideas in the Portuguese governance context, pressed by the need to cope with massification, lack of effective regulation and clear priorities setting. Massification is being dealt with as if the equity and the equality of access was solved and only adequate procedures, information and consistent regulation are the main concern. However, as stated by the Representative of the Council of the Rectors “there is also a challenge of equity that I think is extremely important to be seen and reflected upon, because in spite of the advances in the last years in public policies, we did not manage to attain” (E5, Universities’ representative) reflecting the lack of normative ideas in this process.

*Interests, national agendas and interaction between European and national levels*
To understand how national actors perceive the interests of European, other international organizations, and those stemming from national agendas, the analysis focused on their interaction in promoting higher education policies.

In higher education the interactions between international and national agendas stem from the normative idea of ‘voluntariness’ based on soft law. Interplay and intervention are forms of interaction and while the former emphasises cooperation, the latter addresses structural adaptations that imply compliance at the national level.

The influence of international institutions in setting priorities and political agendas for higher education is visible in the perceptions of the interviewees.

“I think that we must look [to that influence] as benchmarking. In other words, I think that OECD has an important role because it is more neutral and has a vision beyond Europe, more global (...) OECD had a key role in the preparation of the legal framework of higher education institutions (RIIES) and the creation of the quality agency and evaluation” (E5, Universities’ representative).

European coordination is also a major factor in the configuration of the Portuguese higher education system as underlined by E2 (Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission). In her view, for instance, national regulation promoting competitiveness stems from the EU level, which, in turn, is “oriented and dominated by central European countries” (E2, Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission). This influence was also underlined by E7 as Portugal is “to absorb the commonly established practices in Europe and other parts of the world” (E7, Top civil servant). In the same vein, the representative from the Ministry states that “the main impact of Bologna is that there is an increased awareness about quality” (E6, Representative of the government).

The taken-for-grantedness of ‘internationally accepted models’ suggests that the coordination of higher education policies is assumed as a cognitive idea of interaction between national and international levels. As a consequence, the boundaries between interplay and intervention become blurred, in spite of the voluntariness with regard the acceptance of dominant models.

Interestingly enough, the higher education sector was not envisaged as a reform priority, even in the context of the financial crisis and of the presence of Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) in Portugal from 2008 to 2014:

“the sole item that was not envisaged by Troika memorandum was precisely higher education (...) the Ministry of Education and Science has managed to protect itself from the general intervention the country has suffered (...) since the necessary reforms have been already implemented” (E1, Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission).

This might explain the dominance of cognitive ideas with regard to interests in higher education. Actually, the issue appears to be how to develop ‘well-established’ international models rather than pointing out values and principles legitimizing political action.
Table 3 illustrates normative and cognitive ideas pervading the interests that shape the interaction between the European and the national levels.

Table 3 - Types of political interaction and their ideational component

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interplay (cooperation)</td>
<td>Benchmarking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention (adaptation)</td>
<td>Voluntariness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of dominant models</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Benchmarking and acceptance of established models at the international level are the justifications of cooperation and adaptation, respectively. The Portuguese context is showing the willingness to accept and comply with international political models, which imposes an additional “effort that competition demands to fulfill the goals” (E2, Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission).

**Instruments and the relationship between normative and cognitive dimensions**

The analysis also focused on how interviewees characterized the changes of regulation instruments and their influence on the political steering of the system. These instruments (Lascoumes & Galès, 2007) entail an ideational component stemming from the legitimacy of mandated representatives (e.g. ‘legislative and regulatory instruments’), of direct involvement of actors and institutions (e.g. ‘agreement-based and incentive-based instruments’), of explanation of decisions and accountability of actors (e.g. ‘information-based and communication-based instruments’) and of scientific-technical, democratically negotiated instruments (e.g. ‘best practices’).

In the perspective of the majority of the interviewees, a normative idea pointing out to the reinforcement of institutional autonomy as it is written in the legal framework passed in 2007. By the same token, evaluation and quality assurance were reinforced by means of establishing a common rule system. Furthermore, as E4 (Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency) stated, the independence of the Agency from the government and from the institutions is a major achievement of policy coordination of higher education. This view was shared by the representatives of the government:
“With regard to quality we have an Agency that evaluates, which was a huge progress. There was a time in which one did not know what the model of evaluation of higher education was and what it was aiming at. Now the situation is clear, and that was very good for higher education. The rules are defined, there is an independent entity that makes that evaluation, which is, from my perspective, very positive” (E7, Top civil servant).

The legal framework regulating the supply of programmes and the vacancies also drives the normative idea of “stimulating either the supply of training in certain areas or for specific type of population, or forms of limiting the supply of some degree programmes that should not be promoted” (E7, Top civil servant).

The links between ‘legislative and regulatory instruments’ and instrument that require the direct involvement of the actors and institutions (e.g. ‘agreement-based and incentive-based instruments’) can be found, in the perceptions of the interviewees, in the shortcomings of the funding legal framework. The reason was that “in practice the funding framework did not regulate the system as the model is based on the historic distribution of funding hence not incorporating incentive mechanisms that could promote what should be incentivized” (E7, Top civil servant). On the contrary, the workings of the accreditation Agency is promoting the development of ‘agreement-based and incentive-based instruments’ stemming from accreditation processes and procedures as, for instance, higher education institutions “are aligning the internal information system requirements to the electronic platform of the Agency” (E4, Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency). Additionally, the reconfiguration of degree programmes complying with the accreditation criteria and norms is visible in the “substantial increased qualification of the teaching staff, namely in scientific areas where qualification was deficient” (E4, representative of accreditation agency). This linkage between ‘legislative and regulatory instruments’ driven by normative ideas and the use of ‘agreement-based and incentive-based instruments’ corresponds to the shift from normative to cognitive ideas permeating these instruments.

Furthermore, interviewees converged in underlying that there is a missing link between data collection and political decision-making. The responsible for data gathering of the Ministry stressed that “the decision-maker does not decide without information. He /she has at his/her disposal channels of information gathering” (E7, Top civil servant). However, the majority of the interviewees recognised that this process is much more complex involving strong shortcomings, as E4 (Representative of the national evaluation and accreditation agency) put forward: “the existence of a cold war” between the ministerial organizations (Directorate-general for higher education and Office for Planning and International Relations) fighting for the supremacy in data gathering and their analysis. By the same token, it was recognized that at the operational level these bodies did not have the capacity to fulfil the task of providing accurate information and
analysis. As a result, the inefficiency of ‘information-based and communication-based instruments’ delayed and impinged on the decision-making process: “we sometimes need to make a decision and we spend weeks compiling data but these data should be made available” (E5, Universities’ representative) by the institutions in charge of data gathering. Hence, interviewees converged in that idea the data basis provided by the accreditation Agency is a major contribute for the enhancement of support for decision-making: “The Agency has been doing a very important work that not only helps the political actors, politic agents to define public policies in this area but also generates a certain kind of, let us say, a self-evaluation and self-regulation of the sector” (E2, Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission).

The cognitive features attributed to this type of instruments is self-evident as it is not the policy goals that are at stake but rather the efficiency of the decision-making. This process was (still is) based on informal communication between the political and technical actors involved. This aspect is seen to balance the inefficiency referred to. E5 argues that “We have some information from our interlocutors (...) there are personal and good relationships (...) and in Portugal we always have that idea of basing things on personal relationships. Dialogue exists (...)” (E5, Universities’ representative). The informality of these communication instrument underlines its pragmatic or cognitive characteristics.

In spite of the fact that ‘good practices’ as policy instruments are expected to serve the achievement of policy goals, they emerge in the interviewees’ perceptions as effective molders of the policy process: “in the area of quality, we follow the models that are internationally recognized. (...) there is influence as we consider that these are the good practices and, therefore, we adopt them” (E7, Top civil servant). The representative of the research funding agency (E3, Representative of the national research funding agency) also underlines that the models for the enhancement of scientific quality should be taken from where research reaches the highest peaks: “England, the United States, Germany are good examples where the scientific output is excellent, mainly in England. (...) So I think that these should be the ideal model of development in Portugal, because it is the one widely accepted as more cost-effective” (E3, Representative of the national research funding agency). The use of ‘best practices’ as a political instrument appears to shift from a cognitive approach to a normative one as the taken-for-granted value of these practices allow for their dissemination as an end in themselves.

Table 4 identifies the instruments and the ideas convened to develop national policies.
Table 4 – Types of instruments and the ideational component

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of instrument</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative and Regulatory</td>
<td>Common rule system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement-based and incentive-based</td>
<td>Regulation of the supply of degree programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information-based and communication-based</td>
<td>Regulation of the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices</td>
<td>Political goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cognitive and the normative dimensions of these instruments are mutually fed, for instance, the linkages between ‘legislative and regulatory instruments’ and ‘agreement-based and incentive based instruments’ represent a shift to a pragmatic approach of policy making. On the contrary, ‘best practices’ were driven by cognitive ideas that shifted into values legitimating policy measures. This illustrates what Lascoumes and le Galès (2007) have argued about instruments impinging on the nature and results of the policy.

**Institutions in structuring and being structured by actors’ discourses**

With regard to the role of national institutions (i.e. Parliament, the government, funding and accreditation agencies and rectors’ conference) in structuring and being structured by actors’ discourses, the analysis of the interviews has shown that there is a dominance of a cognitive approach to it. In actual fact, interviewees converged in underlying the instrumental function of the research funding and accreditation agencies with regard to research and education, respectively.

As argued by E2 (Member of the parliament and of education and culture commission), a member of the parliament, in spite of the fact that, for instance, the Council of Rectors “has a corporative strength, which is not only corporative, it is symbolic and influential”, the Agency was able to develop cognitive features of ‘information-based and communication-based instruments’ impinging on the definition of public policies for the sector (see above). This influence is reflected in the perception of the representative of the Council of Rectors as well:
“The great advantage that this exercise [accreditation] of the Agency resides precisely in the fact that it has been made so far in tune with the institutions, that is, both the Rectors Conference and the Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council, (...) have been looking at the Agency as an instrument that is useful to the institutions themselves (...). For instance, in the universities we have a plethora of 2nd cycle degree programmes and I am convinced that many Rectors, I myself included, if they want to cut these programmes they would have much more difficulty without the Agency” (E5, Universities’ representative).

By the same token, the representative of the the Portuguese research funding agency regrets that the agency he represents been oriented by a pragmatic approach rather than by a normative perspective focusing on “thinking about research and promoting dialogue and making the community to participate” (E3, Representative of the national research funding agency).

The cognitive approach appears to emerge on the basis of the tension between the autonomy that higher education institutions enjoy and the need to regulate the system (the issue of metagovernance).

“The existence of coordination entities such as the Council of Rectors and the Council of Polytechnics has been avoiding the proliferation of commissions and working-groups (...), for instance, the National Commission for Access to Higher Education made of public universities, polytechnics and private institutions is more than a consulting entity, it is rather an entity that collectively decides on matters that are under the sphere of the autonomy of the institutions” (E7, Top civil servant).

While the argument of institutional autonomy emerges as an idea legitimizing political action (a normative idea) sustaining that the decision-making process should occur inside higher education institutions, it also justifies the existence of a national commission, at least, with regard to the regulation of access. Consequently, the tension between the normative and cognitive approaches to institutional autonomy is reflected on the way political actors reinforce one feature at the expenses of the other. Interviewees underlined the need to use instruments for the regulation of the system and this focus on instruments, as mediating the interactions between institutions, make dominant the cognitive approach.

From a different perspective, this dominance had implications about the need to think about higher education. As stated by E6 this endeavor is seldom undertaken by the society at large: “from a certain moment on the awareness about higher education policies increased, but non-institutional key-actors are, generally speaking, university professors (...). The only organization (...) that is not linked to higher education institutions is the Gulbenkian Foundation” (E6, Representative of the government).
Conclusion

On the basis of discursive institutionalism the views of national political actors contributed to explore how policy is realised through practice, thus opening vistas to the workings of European governance. The analysis of national level actors’ perceptions of the four ‘I’s’ showed that cognitive ideas have been driven political action in higher education and that discourses on higher education governance mould and are moulded in the process of policy enactment with implications on normative assumptions associated with, for instance, massification/democratization of access. From a political goal of democratization of access, it tends to turn into a political management issue. While Parliament members and government’s actors focus on normative ideas, these were nuanced pragmatic approaches emphasizing cognitive ideas. The Portuguese case as diagnosis instrument for the enactment of European policies underlines the importance of taking into account these nuances when exploring the European governance system.

The dominance of cognitive ideas is reflected on the perceptions about interactions between national and European interests that subsume both cooperation and adaptation to compliance to internationally accepted models. In turn, perceptions on instruments and institutions revealed a close relationship between them as the need to regulate the system must cope with institutional autonomy. This linkage makes evident the implications for policy enactment as cognitive ideas shape instruments and impinge on the role of institutions and their relationships.

This is in line with the conclusions from a previous exploratory analysis of the perceptions of European level actors (Veiga & Magalhães, 2014) that underlined the prevalence of the cognitive approach to policy-making in detriment of a normative perspective. The dominance of cognitive ideas within the European governance system reflects on the assumption of European political initiatives, such as the Bologna process which is being configured not as a means to a political goal but rather as an end per se. This appears to translate into a difficulty in coordinating common policies namely towards the consolidation of the EHEA. As such, the case of Portugal is illustrating how European governance is featured by this ‘ends/means reversal’ with implication for the coordination of policies.

References


