

Submission 0186 THE ITALIAN WAR OF ENGLISH: GLOBALIZATION, INTERNATIONALIZATION TRENDS AND NATIONAL NUANCES.

Abstract

This paper will focus on one particular policy for internationalization in Higher Education: the compulsory use of English as a teaching language. The judicial case of the Politecnico of Milan will be analysed through organizational lenses: the Isomorphic response to the processes of change; the idiosyncratic reactions of maximum self-protection; the theory of Allomorphism. Then, it will conclude with some suggestions for internal governance mechanisms. This case suggests the importance, for the leaders of institutions based on collective mechanisms, of structuring early stages consensus-building systems: evaluating the potential dispute risks, managing conflicts and leading the implementation phase. The external forces which push the institutions to radical changes, at the same time 'casting out' the actors and the stakeholders who do not feel part of the change itself, need a mediation that, instead of coming from outside the institutions, should be built inside the institutions themselves.

Paper

Introduction

Globalization, in the Higher Education sector, has been defined as the combination of economic, political and social forces that have brought about increased internationalization of the higher education system (Altbach, 2007). However, higher education systems are still firmly anchored in national contexts.

This paper will focus on one particular internationalization policy, that being the compulsory use of English as a teaching language. The judicial case of the Politecnico of Milan will be analyzed through organizational lenses: the Isomorphic response to the processes of change; the idiosyncratic reactions of maximum self-protection; the theory of Allomorphism. Then, it will conclude with some suggestions for internal governance mechanisms.

The Italian war of English

In December 2011, the PoliMi Senate voted for a resolution, which stated that all second level degree courses and PhDs should be taught in English. A group of professors appealed to the Rector against this decision, but it was confirmed and, after other different judicial phases, the dispute went to the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional judges had to strike a balance between the goal of internationalization and the constitutional principles: substantial equality for the students, academic freedom and the prominence of the Italian language.

The Council of State, in January 2018, overturned the decision of PoliM. On the basis that the Italian language needed protection, as well as the cultural identity and cultural heritage. Globalization, the judges argued, had determined a progressive supranational integration of the different national systems, and the erosion of national borders could cause the loss of the function and primary role of the Italian language, but Internationalization did not necessarily marginalize the Italian language.

Theoretical framework and discussion

The legal case of the Italian War of English can be framed in different theoretical reference models.

In the neo-institutionalist theory, Meyer and Rowan (1977) introduce and develop the concept of isomorphism in organizations. The decision of the PoliMi to teach exclusively in English could be categorised as a case of institutional isomorphism: in the same field, the institutional actor adopts a homologation strategy responding to external forces, which are coercive and mimetic at the

same time. To teach entirely in English corresponds to a non-written standard in the international context of higher education and it identifies an example of coercive isomorphism (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991). If Coercive Isomorphism is defined as the result of the formal and informal pressures exercised on organizations by other institutions in the same field (Naidoo, 2004) through the direct imposition of implicit and indirect standard processes, the decisions of the Senate show themselves as being driven by world-class universities' portfolios. It is also possible to place the afore-mentioned process into the mimetic isomorphism category: an organization which wants or aspires to play an important role in a field tends to adopt the same decision as the organizations that are more successful in the same field, even if only by common perception (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991).

The conflicting behavior of the group of professors who appealed the decision can be described through the divergence thesis. It is possible to describe this behaviour as a strategic approach and an idiosyncratic response.

The first two phases "internal" to the organization did, in fact, lead to the adoption of a non-shared decision, and reached its formalization through the outcome of a consensus-building process, that - in all evidence - did not set out a fair representation of the conflicts. The internal leadership of the academic institution adopted a majority decision, therefore keeping the "absolutist" structure unchanged, leaving no margin for negotiation of the organizational decision.

The final judicial decision ruled that a balance should be struck between the goal of internationalization and Italian constitutional principles. It is possible to define this approach as Allomorphic behaviour (Vaira, 2004). The same balance between the external forces of globalization, and those of resistance to the opening (meaning 'exposure'?) and protection of a local identity, can be qualified as a hypothesis of "allomorphism". This theory identifies a personalized and considered deviation from the univocal and unidirectional isomorphic process.

Conclusions

The leaders of institutions based on collective mechanisms, such as the Higher Education institutions, are in need of structuring collective and shared organizational processes from early stages consensus-building systems. These processes could be developed in these phases: evaluation of the potential dispute risks, conflict management and the implementation of decisions. The external pressures that push the institutions to radical changes, at the same time 'casting out' the actors and the stakeholders who do not feel part of the change itself, need mediation and a balance. This balance should be built inside the institutions themselves, instead of coming from outside the institutions, in particular from the judges.

The Italian English war is now over. The members of the PoliMI Advisory Board, in April 2018, in the most important daily newspaper in the country, signed an announcement (initially directly in English) as follows: "Made in Italy, Graduated to stand out in the world". Then the claim continues in Italian, translated here: "teaching in English does not affect the right to study, but promotes the right to work". Throughout the brief and concise text, some elements can be highlighted: the professionalism and non-academic perspective adopted; the connection of the macro disciplines given in the PoliMI (engineering, architecture and design), with the 'made in Italy' and the international working perspective; the substantial equal value of competence in English with the other skills required for high-profile work. It seems almost a paradox, that an organ outside of faculty respects the methods of competence and consequent responsibility in a manner perhaps deeper and more effective than that of the judicial power.

It is, therefore, possible to support in conclusion the importance of maintaining consensus-building systems and compensation schemes for the idiosyncrasies of individuals within the higher education institutions. It is, in fact, clear and verified that the use of conflict mediators, further restricts the already limited autonomy remaining to the single university institutions after the significant isomorphic processes driven by globalization, even though they have been adapted and interpreted according to the translation theories.