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CHANGES IN FINNISH AND PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE: COMPARING RESPONSES TO THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Field: Social Sciences

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Abstract

This research compares governmental and political changes in Portuguese and Finnish higher education (HE) systems, emerging from similar external pressures. Examples of these external pressures are the Bologna process and the recent legislative expressions of New Public Management (NPM), including the new legal framework for Portuguese (RJIES) and Finnish (New University Act) higher education institutions (HEIs) which aims at changing not only institutional governance structures but also institutions’ management and decision-making practices.

Although Portugal and Finland differ significantly in their geography, history, culture, and economic status, both countries undertook similar HE legislative reforms, making the comparison focused and relevant for the study field of HE policy. Moreover, albeit different in character, goals and enforcement level, the policies were implemented concurrently, and both intend to improve efficiency and quality of institutional performance and to enhance national visibility and competition. It is argued that the incremental internationalisation of HE, the European Union (EU) soft law, as well as the NPM ideology – also disseminated by reviews and discourses of international organisations like the Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) and the EU offer an explanation for similarities in national contexts. Nevertheless, historical and cultural specifics and structural characteristics of political-administrative systems are considered explanatory factors for differences in policy implementation processes and therefore in national outcomes.

Together with document analysis, the study is based on qualitative analysis and finds empirical evidence on 61 semi-structured interviews to key actors of system and institutional levels in both countries and in both types of HEIs conducted during the years 2011 and 2012. These actors were chosen due to their roles and degree of involvement in the study object: the latest institutional governance reforms driven by the Yliopistolaki 558/2009 and the Law 62/2007. Thus, the findings presented here rely much on the voices of the practitioners who engaged in these reforms, both at the system and institutional levels.

Briefly, it is possible to observe that frequently, the application of national legislation in HEIs is achieved through top-down processes (mainly in the Portuguese case) and a mix between top-down and bottom-up strategies (more in Finland). These strategies aim at changing institutions’ organisational structure, their governance bodies, decision-making processes and professionals working conditions. This study shows that the same group of actors tend to have similar opinions both in Portugal and in Finland, which means that regardless nationality, perceptions converge according interviewees’ roles.
How my research is having impact:

At first, this research challenges the assumption that Finland and Portugal are such different countries, hardly comparable. This already strikes several research questions: how such disparate countries have been designing and implementing similar higher education policies.

The research has been presented in several national and international seminars and conferences, several international publications in peer scientific journals and books.

In the last year, the work developed has also proved useful to my students and to present them several scenarios, enhancing their critical spirit and comparative perspectives.

The fact that I have been conducting my research both in Portugal and in Finland has been of added-valued for personal and academic reasons.