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Chapter 5 Multi-level governance in higher education research

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5.1 Introduction

It is a common understanding that the historical steering function of the nation state has been challenged by other coordination modes. Scholarly debate has highlighted the blurring boundaries of the sovereign state along three dimensions relating to society, sub-national units and international arenas. Such shifts in the tasks of the state have been primarily explained by the retreat of the welfare state, by the increasing relevance of supranational entities such as the European Union, by globalisation forces engendering growing interdependencies out of the control of sovereign states (Piattoni, 2010; Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Scharpf, 1997). Additionally, in order to legitimise policies in democratic settings, states have increasingly involved a growing number of disparate stakeholders in policy processes. This can also be seen in higher education: reforms have granted institutional autonomy to universities, signalling changes in the division of competencies and distribution of responsibilities between governments and higher education institutions; public-private partnerships have been enhanced to increase societal relevance and socio-economic development both at national and regional levels. And the increasing role of Europe – in particular the construction of the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area – has added an additional governance level to higher education.

Against this backdrop the concept of multi-level governance (MLG) has been proposed to better understand the complexity of actors and linkages that underlie contemporary polities (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Piattoni, 2009). The MLG perspective, as initially formulated by Marks (1992, 1993), aims to capture how changes in the political structure in Europe undermine state control over sub-national units as well as over international and supranational institutions – i.e. a dispersion of authority away from central government along a vertical dimension. Equally authority has been diffused along the horizontal dimension between state and society – e.g. through public/private cooperation.

Nonetheless the MLG perspective has also several critics (Bache, 2008; Peters and Pierre, 2009). First, for its lack of explanatory power – what hypotheses can be formulated and tested?; second, for its normative stance – MLG is presented as more efficient and democratic than command and control; and third, for assuming that shared participation on decision making amounts to equal power among actors, particularly in policy implementation. To address some of these criticisms, this chapter proposes an organisational approach to MLG, arguing that the institutional and organised settings in which social and political actors are located constitute an important factor in analysing – and explaining – policy processes (March and Olsen, 1989, 1995; Egeberg, 2004, 2006, 2012). Additionally, when it comes to higher education, contiguous policy sectors like research and innovation have to be taken into consideration to examine broader dynamics of change and stability in the political and social order.

In higher education studies a multi-level perspective is not new: Clark (1983) distinguishes system (national), enterprise (organisational), professional (academic) and discipline levels and elaborates on integration and disintegration forces at systemic level. However, MLG challenges Clark's vision of higher education as significantly coordinated by national public administration and agencies (Clark, 1983, pp. 119-123). On the one hand it is clear that, especially in Europe, global and supranational

levels have affected national higher education systems significantly. On the other hand, stagnating or shrinking state funding and the assumed link between innovation and regional development have brought to the fore actors such as local public authorities, business and industry, as well as other stakeholders, e.g. students. While Clark discusses these developments, he advocates “entrepreneurial” universities (1998), focusing more on university strategy and management, and less on systemic and policy integration. Furthermore, MLG challenges traditional comparative analysis research, based primarily on national systems and higher education institutions (Kosmützky, forthcoming 2015). An MLG approach calls not only for a broader scope for scrutiny but also for a substantially more fine-grained analysis and research design.

The chapter is organised as follows: the next section discusses MLG according to its main concepts and dimensions. Section 3 reviews the main applications of MLG in higher education, research and innovation studies. The subsequent section illustrates how an organisational approach contributes to the MLG perspective in higher education studies. The final section presents some avenues for further research.

5.2 Concepts and uses of multi-level governance (MLG)

MLG has been coined by Marks (1993, 1996) and subsequently developed by Hooghe and Marks (2001) as a theoretical approach to explain the increasing complexity and interdependency in European Union governance. It was deemed to provide new insights in European integration and the innovative characteristics of the European polity beyond neo-functionalism, i.e. integration through a supranational authority, and the so-called “liberal intergovernmentalist” perspective, which sees the EU as the aggregate of bargaining among states (Wiener and Diez, 2009).

MLG distinctively focuses on actors and disentangles the state in the multitude of subunits, ministries and other agencies participating in policy making. Hence political actors – and not “the state” – are the real players in contemporary policy processes (Marks, 1996). Such actors behave according to institutional rules, which define opportunities for action. While this approach goes a step further in disentangling the state and understanding its complexities, it still holds a rationalist premise and considers political actors as interest-oriented, constantly acting according to their agendas, although admittedly constrained by bounded rationality. If political leaders shift responsibilities downwards, upwards or sideways, it is because they decide to focus on other priorities, or are unable to control dispersal of authority.

In an effort to strengthen the explanatory power of MLG, Hooghe and Marks (2003) have distinguished between Type I and Type II. Type I refers to traditional federalist structures, where multiple layers of authority are nested and membership of the different jurisdictions does not overlap. Type I is generally the outcome of a system-wide architecture and includes only a limited number of levels. In other words, decision making processes and actors’ prerogatives are designed to last. Thus such structures are only subject to (intended) incremental change. Type II, on the other hand, is organised around task-specific jurisdictions, whose number varies over time according to contingent necessities. Membership intersects several jurisdictions and the overall structure is the outcome of a flexible design. Hence, change in Type II is constant and evolutionary. While Type I is founded around the primacy of the nation state, Type II assumes that the sovereign state constitutes one actor among others.

Scholars hold diverse views on the drivers of Type II. For some the necessity for flexible governance arrangements and several jurisdictions – instead of one – is both an evolution of modern liberal democracies and a model aimed at efficiency and legitimacy (Scharpf, 1997). For others, type II is a “negotiated order” (Peters and Pierre, 2004), signalling the on-going institutionalisation of new decision-making and policy structures. In this respect, the central question relates to the sustainability of MLG and the characteristics of the emerging political system.

While it is recognised the state has lost its monopoly, it is an empirical question how authority has spread among actors across territorial and jurisdictional levels. Building on the concepts of types I and II, Bache (2008) analyses to what extent participation in the EU drives MLG in contemporary states.

He distinguishes further between a rationalist and a sociological understanding: the first perspective focuses on strategic behaviour and power of actors, the second perspective favours learning and socialisation processes. Bache also argues that characteristics, positions, and resources of the various actors frame their concrete capability to affect policies and proposes a distinction between “participation” and “governance”. Many stakeholders might participate in policy processes, but not all are able to exert control on the outputs of such processes and, even more importantly, on policy implementation.

Another contribution to the conceptualisation of MLG has been provided by Piattoni (2010), who argues that MLG takes place along three dimensions of state unbundling. First, the centre-periphery dimension: the state shifts authority to subnational state actors, either according to Type I (e.g. granting institutional autonomy to public universities) or to type II (e.g. incentivising local authorities to participate in university funding). Second, the domestic-international dimension: the sovereign state shifts authority to an international or supranational level (e.g. the role of the Bologna process in curriculum design and of the European commission in research funding). Third, the state-society dimension: the state shifts authority to societal actors such as economic sectors (e.g. public-private partnerships in research), and professions (e.g. the academic profession decides on career structures, experts participate in committees). While MLG has been studied mainly with respect to public policy, its scope is broader and covers politics and polity (Piattoni, 2010). Hence, analyses should address how actors mobilise across levels and jurisdictions (politics), as well as how institution-building takes place (polity). When it comes to higher education, politics involve the increasingly active participation of interest groups and their lobbying at regional, national and supranational level (e.g. students unions), polity relates to the creation of different agencies and organisations, which deal with specific policy dimensions (e.g. intermediary agencies such as research councils and evaluation agencies).

The MLG model has been debated with respect to efficiency and democracy. In a functionalist perspective, Scharpf (1997) sees the effectiveness of MLG related to its problem-solving capacity under conditions of global economic integration. The latter conflicts with international, national, European politics and policy making, and since global economic forces are stronger, nation states are not able anymore to oversee their boundaries. Hence a less state-centric, more flexible governance system can better grapple with existing (economic) interdependencies and provide a less fragmented framework for policy and politics. In the same vein, also Hooghe and Marks (2001) contend that MLG diffuses authority to the extent that policy coordination costs are reduced to the lowest level. This optimistic view has been criticised for ignoring that policy networks can be either inclusive or exclusive, depending on the social and political structures in which linkages and nodes are embedded (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote, 2009). Peters and Pierre (2009, p. 96; see also Peters, 2002) point to how MLG empowers and shapes regions in the European Union differently, and claim that a garbage can logic underpins MLG, where the best organised and resourceful actors dominate the policy process.

Finally, the MLG perspective poses empirical challenges when it comes to research design and operationalisation. A key question in this respect is what is meant by “level”. Type I assumes few embedded territorial jurisdictions, like in the case of the Swiss federal system – municipality, canton, federal level. However in type II this definition seems to overlap with the concept of jurisdiction (Piattoni, 2011). In Type II MLG, levels, jurisdictions, policy networks and actors are not only changing according to tasks at hand, but are also framed across territorial levels and, as mentioned previously, have intersecting memberships. Additionally, in an MLG framework informal dimensions might be more relevant than ever in analysing the dynamics in place (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote, 2009).

5.3 Multi-level governance in higher education research

In order to illustrate and assess the use of the MLG approach in higher education research, we have conducted a literature review based on a Google Scholar search. Our main objective was to identify publications addressing explicitly MLG theory, that is beyond the simple description of the higher education policy sector as “multi-level”. We searched for “multi-level governance” and “education”. We thought that education was more representative as a policy sector in political science and public

administration journals. It also provided us with a broader sample of articles and papers, book chapters and books, from which we could select in a second stage the most relevant works. In this respect, we looked at titles and abstracts of 250 publications listed by Google Scholar according to their relevance. These publications appeared between 1995 and 2014. We then selected those articles that address the concept of MLG in higher education (policy) as a core part of the overall paper. Tables 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 list the selected 25 articles, book chapters and books, which address MLG in higher education (as well as one paper on education), and related fields such as research policy and innovation.

Our literature review shows that most papers address the domestic-international dimension of MLG, while the centre-periphery and state-society dimensions are targeted mostly in political science journals. Also, only a few papers engage with more than one dimension of MLG. Finally, our analysis of extant literature indicates that traditional federal states like for instance Belgium, Canada, Germany, Switzerland and the US (Type I MLG) represent only a small part of sample. The publications focusing on the centre-periphery dimension appear to account more for recent devolution processes, like in the UK, and address whether and how the state's central capacity for policy formulation has been affected.

5.3.1 Domestic - International

Some higher education research focuses on supranational governance at European level and accounts for the Bologna process and Lisbon Strategy as key drivers for change in traditional national steering. Equally globalisation, internationalisation, regionalisation, as well as Europeanisation, have been conceptualised and integrated in higher education research, adding a supplementary level of analysis above nation states (de Wit, 2003; Enders, 2004; Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani, 2008; Gornitzka, 2009a, 2009b; Pabian, 2009). Vukasovic and Elken (2014) discuss how the Bologna process (1999) and the Lisbon Agenda (2000) have challenged the principle of subsidiarity of higher education and examine how the Open Method of Coordination has constituted a new governance mechanism to deal with increasing complexity. The authors explain how an “additional governance layer has been added” by the Bologna Process (Vukasovic and Elken, 2014, 6-7). Similarly Amaral and Veiga (2012) illustrate the policy instruments introduced with the Lisbon Agenda and Bologna process supporting processes of integration and policy making in European higher education. Magalhães and his colleagues (2013) take a critical stance towards MLG and propose a “European governance” approach to understand how European political processes shape discourses and practices at national level. The authors analyse quality reforms and changes in funding schemes arguing that the EU main objective is policy coordination. To achieve this, the EU legitimises distinctive policies, which are then (re-)formulated and implemented at national and institutional levels. Gornitzka (2009) explains how networking administration represents an alternative to market and hierarchical coordinating models; she draws attention to the fact that networks are shaped by organised arrangements and inhabited by different types of actors. Of these actors, the state remains still preponderant, even with a diminished role. The Open Method of Coordination is characterised as a typical instrument of MLG (Kaiser and Prange, 2004, 2005 for the European Research Area).

Table 5.1: Domestic - International

Author(s), year of publication	Source	Topic/Research questions	Type of paper
de Wit, 2003	<i>Higher Education Policy</i>	Influence of European policies on national higher education and research	conceptual
Gornitzka, 2009	Book chapter in Amaral et al.	How the growing European administrative capacity affects national higher education	empirical (Europe/EU)
Maassen and Musselin, 2009	Book chapter in Amaral et al.	How intergovernmental and supranational dynamics trigger European integration, horizontal and vertical convergence	conceptual
Pabian, 2009	Book chapter in Amaral et al.	How the Bologna process has affected the governance of higher education	empirical (Czech Republic)
Gornitzka, 2010	<i>European Journal of Education</i>	How the Bologna Process affects the coordination of policy sectors	conceptual
Amaral and Veiga, 2012	<i>Educacao, Sociedade & Culturas</i>	How the implementation of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy enhance the role of the European Commission	conceptual
Magalhães et al., 2013	<i>Higher Education</i>	The influence of European governance in evaluation and funding policies	empirical (comparative 8 European countries)
Vukasovic and Elken, 2014	Book chapter in Zgaga et al.	The influence of the Bologna process in the horizontal and vertical convergence of policy processes	empirical (comparative 4 European countries)

Table 5.2: Centre – Periphery

Author(s), year of publication	Source	Topic	Type of paper
Bache, 2003	<i>Political Studies</i>	How central government controls education in a MLG system	empirical (England)
Crespy, Heraud and Perry, 2007	<i>Regional Studies</i>	How competitive science policy enhance local actors in a centralised state	empirical (France)
Kotschatzky and Henning Kroll, 2007	<i>Regional Studies</i>	Division of labour between regional and national authorities in science and innovation	empirical (Germany)
Lyll, 2007	<i>Science and Public Policy</i>	How the prominence of the nation state in regional science and innovation affects policy integration	empirical (Scotland)
Perry, 2007	<i>Regional Studies</i>	How power relations shape MLG systems in science policy	empirical (England)
Sotarauta and Kautonen, 2007	<i>Regional Studies</i>	Co-evolution dynamics of national and local policies of innovation and science in a centralised state	empirical (Finland)
Jones and Oleksiyenko, 2011	<i>Higher Education</i>	The interrelation between national, regional and institutional policy levels in internationalisation of research	empirical (Canada)

Table 5.3: State and Society

Author(s), year of publication	Source	Topic	Type of paper
Kickert, 1995	<i>Governance</i>	Networked governance discussed in terms of systems and cybernetics approach	empirical (Netherlands)
Kuhlmann, 2001	<i>Research Policy</i>	Elaboration of scenarios on how European, national, transnational and regional political systems affect the governance of innovation systems	conceptual
Harloe and Perry, 2004	<i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i>	How societal expectations enhance the local and regional role of universities	Conceptual
Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani. 2008	<i>Higher Education</i>	Discussion of networked governance	Conceptual

Table 5.4: More than one MLG dimension

Author(s), year of publication	Source	Topic	Type of paper
Larédo, 2003	<i>Science and Public Policy</i>	Discussion of public intervention in national science and technology from a regional and supranational perspective	conceptual
Kitagawa, 2004	<i>European Planning Studies</i>	How networking among institutional, regional and national levels should be strategically designed	empirical (England)
Enders, 2004	<i>Higher Education</i>	Changing relevance of nation state in globalisation, internationalisation and regionalisation	conceptual
Kaiser and Prange, 2004, 2005	<i>Journal of European Public Policy; Journal of Public Policy</i>	How heterogeneity of national research and innovation systems hampers European integration	empirical (European/EU)
Hedmo and Wedlin, 2008	Book chapter in Mazza et al.	The evolution and integration of governance models in higher education and research at European, national and societal level	Conceptual
Piattoni, 2010	Book chapter in Piattoni	How higher education has changed according to European policies, regional developments and emerging societal actors	empirical (Europe/EU)

5.3.2 Centre – Periphery

Scholars of research policy and innovation studies have addressed also the centre-periphery dimension of MLG, focusing on the role of sub-national actors. Crespy, Heraud and Perry (2007) illustrate how the empowerment of regional actors in research policy has questioned the principle of equality of territories in traditionally unitary and highly centralised France. Sotarauta and Kautonen (2007) account for how the Finnish centralised system of research and innovation has developed MLG features: city-regions have increasingly shaped regional innovation policies along with the state. In their opinion, the co-evolution of local and national dynamics of innovation policies has eventually boosted performance of the Finnish system. In a similar vein, Kitagawa (2004) contends that policy makers and institutional leaders have to take into consideration the interactions between public policy and institutional behaviour in the new MLG landscape. The author argues that networking between universities and regional authorities should be organised strategically, reflecting both policy and organisational objectives. Such learning processes are important not only for regional development and resource acquisition by universities, but more in general for innovation policy and the socioeconomic development of society.

Lyall (2007) highlights how a multi-level and multi-actor space for science and innovation remains fragmented due to the predominance and gate-keeping role of the public sector in the UK. In spite of devolution reforms (i.e. Type I MLG), the capacity of the central state persists and remains pervasive. Similarly, Perry (2007) focuses on the path-dependency ensuing from previous policy paradigms, which, in spite of an emerging MLG framework, constrains the development of science policy in Scotland, in particular when it comes to partnerships between science and industry. Jones and Oleksiyenko (2011) combine Clark's levels of authority (1983) with global, national and local levels (referring to [Marginson and Rhoades, 2002](#)) and show their complex interconnections in a non-European setting (for education policy in the US, see also [Hirschland and Steinmo, 2003](#)). In their view, on the one hand, de-centralisation of policy making induces strategic ambitions not followed by implementation, on the other hand a more trial and error/evolutionary approach triggers incremental change.

5.3.3 State and Society

While publications on MLG started to appear at the beginning of the 2000s, Kickert already in 1995 reflects on the changes in state steering of higher education in the Netherlands and points to the increasing number of state and non-state actors in the national context. In the same vein, besides the challenges posed by enhanced institutional autonomy of higher education institutions, other issues are highlighted such as the divide between public and private missions of universities, the role of transnational academic elites, the internationalisation of financial and human resources, and integration dynamics both across levels and across national and organisational boundaries ([Bache 2003](#)).

Piattoni (2010) illustrates how the MLG framework can explain recent changes in higher education and particularly how European governance has become stratified across policy levels, but also has blurred the divide between politics and society, centre and periphery and domestic and international. The increasing autonomy of universities, granted across European countries in the last decades, has made them prone to play a more active role in the higher education sector. On the one hand, universities connect with regional authorities, who have themselves acquired a more active role in national and international contexts, on the other hand, universities link directly to the European level by participating in research programmes (e.g. Framework programmes and Horizon 2020). Similarly, the convergence of academic curricula through the Bologna process has somewhat decoupled universities from their national higher education system and recoupled them supranationally. At the same time, universities and academics, organised around their status and disciplines, promote interest groups at local, national and European level depending on their objectives ([Fligstein, 2008](#); Piattoni 2010, p.173). Finally and importantly, the boundary between the state and society is shifting also when looking at the growing importance of students. This is related not only to the so-called notion of “student-consumers”, who have a say in curricula and teaching, but also to students' organised

activities regionally, nationally and internationally. The restructuring of European student associations is an example of the organised capacity of students to advocate their interests in several arenas ([Elken and Vukasovic, 2014](#)).

Enders (2004) discusses globalisation, internationalisation and regionalisation in higher education as three distinctive processes. The first leads to increasing economic interdependence and convergence, the second to more intensive cooperation among states and the third – which includes Europeanisation – leads to shifts upwards (supranationally), downward (subnationally) and to the side (private sector, and de-regulation). As such, Enders discusses, although in different terms than MLG scholars, the blurring boundaries of the sovereign state.

All in all, the theory of MLG is limitedly used in higher education studies: the number of publications is not large and few address all dimensions of MLG. Even more, the MLG explanatory model appears not to be extensively employed. It serves rather as a holistic device to describe sector steering, policies and actors. Implicitly though, scholars tackling Europeanisation and globalisation processes seem to relate to MLG in order to explain on-going transformations in higher education, research and innovation, when they refer to growing complexity and the need for coordination. Finally, it appears that the innovative characteristics of MLG, the ambiguous division of labour among overlapping jurisdictions and the shifting policy networks among heterogeneous actors, have not been picked up by higher education scholars.

5.4 Elaborating an organisational approach to multi-level governance in higher education

The organisational approach attempts to integrate the theoretical framework provided by MLG with the analysis of relevant actors embedded in institutional and organised settings. Such settings – their structure, identity and centrality – concur in explaining, on the one hand, how MLG comes about and, on the other hand, the implications of MLG for higher education. This means that organisational factors affect how MLG plays out in terms of actors' capacity, actors' linkages, distribution of resources and opportunities, and policy integration.

The organisational approach assumes that actors' behaviour is (partly) affected by their position in organisations. Organisations and organisational sub-units connect with other organisations and organisational sub-units at multiple levels according to their autonomy, their resources, their strategy and environmental conditions ([Brunsson and Olsen, 1998](#); [Egeberg, 2012](#)). In some ways organisations themselves can be understood as networks whose nodes interlink both inside and outside the organisational boundaries ([Brunsson and Olsen, 1998, March, 1999](#)). Drawing and expanding on this literature, we elaborate three main indicators to analyse actors' capacity in such configurations. These indicators are specifically developed for higher education, accordingly they relate to state actors – e.g. ministry of education and research councils; public organisations – higher education institutions and public research organisations; other organisations – e.g. private universities and firms. Besides collective “organisational” actors, individual actors and interest groups should be taken into account. Higher education research classically distinguishes between public authorities, higher education institutions, institutional and academic leadership, academics, administrators and students. In the following we present our conceptualisation of actors and the notions of organisational structure, membership and centrality are illustrated.

We assume bounded rationality of actors, who are unable to consider all possible alternatives and their consequences ([March and Simon 1958](#); [Simon 1965](#)). Second, actors partly pursue a logic of instrumentality, by defining their own interests and trying to achieve them. Third, actors partly follow a logic of appropriateness, whereby they perceive their role as appropriate on moral grounds ([March and Olsen, 1989](#); [Olsen and March, 2004](#)). Accordingly, organised settings empower and shape actors' behaviour when they provide them with a framework for simplifying decision-making, when they balance control and reward systems to align their members' interests with organisational strategic objectives ([Aldrich and Ruef, 2006](#)). Finally organisations provide a formal framework in which actors fulfil their own role according to normative frameworks as well as established routines and practices that are taken for granted ([Olsen and March, 2004](#); [Scott 2008](#)).

3.1 Organisational structure

A first analytical concept of the organisational approach is the organisational structure in which actors are embedded. The organisational structure is conceived of as a social structure of “patterns and regularised aspects of the relationships existing among participants in an organisation” (Scott, 2003, p. 18). Depending on the position in the organisational structure actors are endowed with material and symbolic resources, hold formal and informal power (to decide, take action), influence policy formulation and implementation. From their position, actors connect to other actors within and in other organisational structures enacting those configurations captured by MLG. Overall, an organisational structure reflects how hierarchy and authority are designed and dispersed, thus revealing the arrangements shaping possibilities, opportunities and constraints of actors.

Organisational structures can be observed in terms of centralisation, formalisation and standardisation, which indicate the degree of institutional integration. Recent reforms in higher education represent an attempt to strengthen central organisational leadership roles, formalise and standardise procedures and processes within universities (Seeber et al., 2014; Fumasoli, Gornitzka and Maassen, 2014). This means that professional norms and identities have come under strain: new roles and new configurations of actors have emerged, actors are able to operate at different levels and connect to policy making processes. This concerns, on one side, the rebalancing of autonomy and control between the state and higher education institutions, on the other side, the shifting level of centralisation within universities themselves.

In an MLG framework, the influence of different organisational affiliations should be considered. This is particularly relevant in higher education, where actors are located in several settings, for instance an academic is affiliated to his/her higher education institution, other institutes, professional and discipline-based associations and may be member of national and international committees.

Depending on the context, these organised settings play a major or minor role in shaping action, from an instrumental, normative and cognitive perspective.

Finally, an organisational structure may be more or less loosely coupled. Loose coupling leads to more idiosyncratic decision processes and thus unexpected results (March and Olsen, 1976). By design, an organised anarchy offers a framework enhancing discovery, in other words, it provides the necessary flexibility for innovation to take place in academia (Whitley, 2012). Key characteristics of such governance processes come close to improvisation and adhocracies (Mintzberg, 1979) where ambiguity and unclear goals lead to learning processes, shifting attention, and fluid participation (Cohen and March, 1974).

5.5 Membership and identity

The composition of staff within an organisation is characterised by entrance requirements and socialisation processes, i.e. membership criteria. These can be described by type of employment contracts and conditions, career structures and professional training. In other words, organisational boundaries have to be observed in terms of their tightness or looseness (e.g. permanent vs. non-permanent contracts, stricter or broader entrance criteria) to understand how actors are positioned and endowed with resources to pursue their own as well as organisational objectives.

Organisational identity is another indicator of behaviour of organisational, group and individual actors. While leadership quite often designs an organisational identity in line with organisational strategy, members belonging to the academic profession, with their multiple affiliations and loyalties, will comply with organisational identity only to a certain extent (Fumasoli, Pinheiro and Stensaker, forthcoming 2015). This is the case especially in higher education institutions, where senior academic staff has traditionally governed recruitment and promotion processes, thus affecting substantially the characteristics of the workforce.

5.6 Centrality

While often neglected, we contend that a measure of organisational centrality should always be part of the analysis. Where is the organisation located along the continuum between centre and periphery? Centre-periphery should be understood in geographical, political, economic and cultural terms. Whether a university is located in a major city, in the capital, in the financial, economic or industrial centre of the country or in a large and historical metropolitan area constitutes an important factor affecting its possibilities to gather material and symbolic resources. Similarly, some have observed that, depending on the level of the MLG structure where they are located, actors have different capacities to operate. This means that not only there are several types of resources, but also that diverse learning processes can be triggered. For these reasons, assuming that MLG provides equal opportunities to all actors to participate and influence policy processes in higher education, is not realistic and differences should be examined carefully ([Kaiser and Prange, 2004](#); [Schout, 2009](#), [Piattoni, 2012](#)).

6 Avenues for further research in higher education using MLG

This chapter has contended that MLG framework is not only relevant for studies of higher education governance and policy, but also offers a conceptual framework that has still to be exploited. The governance of higher education can be analysed distinguishing vertical (supranational and sub-national) and horizontal (societal) coordination. By presenting an organisational approach to MLG, the chapter advocates an emphasis on actors and their organisational embedding. The increasingly complex governance of higher education can be better understood once we analyse more systematically how and why different actors participate and affect policy processes. This seems to be a relevant question, if the number and type of actors is growing along vertical and horizontal lines of policy coordination.

MLG theory has been used to scrutinise the increasing impact of the European level in higher education and research, for instance in relation with converging policies addressing curricula, quality, and research funding. However MLG indicates other relevant aspects to investigate: Europe has become also an arena for competition and cooperation, triggering strategic behaviour of an increasing number of actors, such as universities, but also academics, and students. These actors can now link up to European institutions getting involved in policy formulation and lobbying, participating in research programmes, as well as in various committees, potentially “bypassing” their national authorities. Empirical research on the implications of such increasingly dense linkages and interdependencies could shed light on the changing dynamics of higher education governance and policy.

Another relevant avenue for future research is a reappraisal of the relationship between the form of the state, its steering mode, and higher education policy and governance ([Gornitzka and Maassen, 2000](#), [Jungblut and Vukasovic, 2013](#)). One would expect that centralised states move more slowly towards MLG, for such systems allow for less autonomy of subnational actors, and tend to coordinate higher education policy more tightly in order to foster alignment of national objectives. However, the organisational approach argues that the planning capacity of higher education systems play an important role in the ability to make changes. In the end size matters and well-integrated national systems could achieve their objectives more homogeneously than relatively fragmented (federal) systems. This research question further relates to the impact on system performance of the different governance modes.

Similarly, societal involvement in higher education policy and governance could be analysed according to the MLG framework and organisational approach. The interconnections between policy makers, higher education institutions and academics, the private sector as well as civil society can be expected to increase, as more and more actors identify opportunities to engage at different levels. This is detectable in the attempts of coordinating higher education, research, and innovation, which can be observed both at EU and national level ([Maassen and Stensaker, 2011](#)).

An organisational approach to MLG theory in higher education provides the instruments for a fine-grained analysis of complex configurations and networks where the division of labour is unclear or

shifting, actors possess different resources and leeway and pursue different objectives, and where idiosyncratic characteristics have to be singled out from relevant features.

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