

Lifelong learning: The *référentiel* of the Bologna Process in Portugal

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Abstract:

The article is focused on the cognitive and normative framework (*référentiel*) behind the Bologna Process and on how this European *référentiel* was edited and disseminated in Portugal by the Portuguese mediators. This is part of a broad study, which analyses the implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal, in the first decade of the twenty first century. The study adopted the public action approach in the analysis of political decision, which helped focus attention on the multilevel multiple actors of the BP, as well as on their contexts and modes of interaction, and mobilized the concepts of *référentiel* and *edition*. An interpretative descriptive study was conducted, based on content analysis of documents mostly retrieved from the Internet, by using a mixed deductive and inductive method. The aim was to identify and learn about the cognitive and normative frameworks of the key actors, who functioned as mediators, and analyze how these influenced the interpretations and edition of the European *référentiel*, which those actors disseminated in the Portuguese context. Results suggest that the Portuguese mediators edited the European Bologna Process *référentiel* of knowledge-based competitive economy, around the Lifelong Learning “paradigm”. This *référentiel* of lifelong learning circulated through opinion documents and lies behind the legislation that frames the Bologna Process in Portugal.

Keywords: Bologna Process; educational policy; higher education; *référentiel*

1 Introduction

This article reports part of the findings of a research project, which supported a doctoral thesis (Palma, 2019), aimed at analyzing the implementation of the Bologna Process as a major endeavor and strategy for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The project focused on the Portuguese situation where a global reform of the higher education system took place as an ensuing process of the Bologna Process and covered the period between June 19, 1999 (the signing of the Bologna Declaration) and March 12, 2010 (the proclamation of EHEA). Among other aims, the project analyzed the Portuguese Bologna Process *référentiel*, as a result of *edition* processes of the European *référentiel*, by the Portuguese *mediators*.

The study adopted the public action approach to study public policies (Commaille, 2004; Delvaux, 2009). The approach fits well in the nature of the Bologna Process, since this is characterized by governance processes (Le Galès, 2004) based on soft law instruments, which do not exclusively lie on decisions of national governments or of European supranational bodies. Rather than that, a number of multilevel actors are involved. These interact in different contexts and come together in the big supranational forum of the Bologna Follow-UP Group, where the Bologna Process *référentiel* has been fabricated.

The conceptual framework of the study combined cognitive approaches of political analysis (Surel, 2000b; 2004), particularly the theoretical model of *référentiel* developed by Bruno Jobert and Pierre Muller (1987), and Scandinavian institutionalism in the study of translation as a social process (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón, 2003; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). Within these approaches, the complex notion of *référentiel* (Jobert & Muller, 1987) was used alongside the concept of *edition* (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón, 2003; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

Literature about the topic suggests that the Bologna Process is part of the strategy for economic globalization (Robertson, 2009; Doh, 2008) and of the neoliberal stance that transfers the responsibility for jobs, education and training from the State to the individual (Amaral & Magalhães, 2004; Lima & Guimarães, 2011; Puhakka, Rautopuro & Tuominen, 2010; Moutsios, 2013). Furthermore, authors, such as Ravinet (2008), Muller & Ravinet (2008), Gornitzka (2010) or Moutsios (2013), highlight the new European *référentiel* of knowledge-based competitive economy and, consequently, the new utilitarian role of higher education. On the other hand,

literature highlights the importance of national contexts in the *edition* of the European referential and identifies such issues as:

- The existence of different objectives for the implementation of the Bologna Process in national contexts (Pusztai & Szabó, 2008; Sin & Saunders, 2014);
- The importance of different interpretations and objectives of the actors at different levels of implementation (Witte, 2006; Kehm, 2010);
- The various interpretations and the re-contextualization of the Bologna Process at the national level of the member States (Huisman & Wende, 2004; Ursin, Zamorski, Stiwne, Teelken & Wihlborg, 2010; Sin, 2012b, 2014b; Sin & Saunders, 2014; Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010).

Both the literature outlined above and the mobilized theoretical framework allowed us to hypothesize that the Bologna Process *référentiel*, which circulated in Portugal between 1999 and 2010, resulted from processes carried out by the Portuguese mediators who *edited* the European *référentiel* for higher education. These mediators interpreted the *référentiel*, which was being fabricated at supra-national level, in light of their own frames of mind and of their own analysis of the Portuguese context.

The study followed an interpretative research approach and was based on content analysis of documents, published in the period 1999-2009 by a number of Portuguese actors who were defined as *mediators* (Muller, 1995). The documents were collected mostly from the Internet and from other sources, either official or public (Afonso, 2005), using a *snowball* technique (Babbie, 2001). They were of different type and size and amounted to 122. The authors were 11 Portuguese academics who simultaneously held political positions, in the period under analysis, plus seven collective actors, including government bodies and stakeholders who produced legislation, normative texts, positions or opinion texts. The analysis of these documents is the focus of the present article.

The following three sections outline the key concepts, the methodology, and the research findings. In section four, the findings are summarised and interpreted. The article ends with a concluding section, which puts the findings and interpretations in the context of the broader research, which they are part of.

2 Key concepts of the research

The concepts of *référentiel* and *édition* were mobilized in a complementary way in order to develop insight on the processes developed by the Portuguese mediators when spreading information, ideas, regulations, and proposals for the implementation of the Bologna Process in the Portuguese society, during the decade under analysis.

Référentiel

Bruno Jobert e Pierre Muller (1987) developed the concept of *référentiel* when describing and explaining collective social reality. According to the authors, policies contain the conceptualization and construction of new relations between the world and people, i.e., social actions are rooted in a social definition of reality. Therefore, “when formulating a public action, we can identify a process of fabricating images, ideas, and values, which will constitute a vision of the world” (Muller, 1995: 157).

According to Muller (1995), the *référentiel* integrates four interconnected dimensions (*levels of world perception*): *values*, *norms*, *algorithms*, and *images*. *Values* are the fundamental principles of human action, which structure the notions of good and evil and of right and wrong. *Norms* correspond to a vision of the world, ideal and prospective, which derive from a perspective that the current world is unsatisfactory. *Algorithms* are action theories that lead to *norms* and include strategies and tools. Lastly, *images* convey the ideal to be attained in an immediate direct global way.

Besides a dimension of representation, the *référentiel* contains, thus, a dimension of action as well as of power, i.e. by giving meaning and fabricating a representation of reality, a representation of the distance between perceived reality and ideal reality is also fabricated, as well as the means to bridge that distance. In this way, principles and legitimacy of a *modus operandi* are provided, which redefine the roles of actors and of hierarchies in decision-making.

In disseminating a new referential, *mediators* perform a key role. *Mediators* are those who act and circulate in forums where the *référentiel* is fabricated. *Mediators* create “cognitive images that establish the way an issue is perceived ... and define the appropriate solution” (Muller, 1990: 50).

Edition

The concept of *edition* (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón, 2003; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017) lies on the assumption that ideas circulate through their materialization in objects (texts, models or prototypes) that are recreated in light of the circumstances and representations of those who adopt them. This is a process defined as recontextualization of experiences and models. Hence, *edition* changes not only the formulation but also the meaning of experiences and models:

Ideas and practices travel across social levels, shifting from being abstract ideas to objects with real existence (ideas transformed into objects) or enacted practices (ideas transformed into action) (Waeraas & Nielsen, 2015: 21-22).

Through objects, whether documents or actions, continuous processes of edition occur, which formulate and reformulate policies, as well as their social control and legitimation. Ideas and practices are spread by *carriers* (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017) or *editors*. *Editor* is, therefore, a concept similar to *mediator* in the sense that they both relate to disseminators of ideas as a function of their own values, ideals, perceptions, and experiences.

3 Methodology

A content analysis was carried out covering 122 documents authored by the key actors, previously identified and conceptualized as *mediators*. The analysis addressed three dimensions of the study – *référentiel*, interpretations, and implementation – and aimed to describe and analyze the following: the mediators' *référentiel*; the interpretations of the Bologna Process, on the part of the mediators; how these interpretations were *edited* when outlining proposals or stating regulations to the Portuguese higher education system. The method was both deductive and inductive as explained in the next paragraph.

Firstly, an analysis grid was created for each author's texts with two vertical columns for the three dimensions and the respective categories for each one. Both dimensions and categories, which follow, were previously defined and were drawn from the theory and the literature as outlined above: Dimension 1, *référentiel*: values, norms, algorithms, role of higher education; Dimension 2, interpretations of the Bologna Process: action lines, dynamics; Dimension 3, implementation in Portugal: constraints; aims, proposed changes. As the texts (coded by year, type, author, order) were read text units were semantically coded under the title "topical focus" and transcribed, in two columns, next to the corresponding dimension and category. An

example of the analysis grid used to the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP), for the dimension *référentiel*, category values is provided below. As the table shows, one text unit from a 2003 opinion text by the CRUP (transcribed in the column on the right) was coded as “higher education is a public good and a public responsibility”.

Table 1 - Example of analysis grid- CRUP

Dimensi on	Category	Topical focus	Text Unit
1. <i>Référentiel</i>	1.1. Values	Higher education is a public good and a public responsibility ...	First, we reaffirm that it is a public responsibility to provide qualification opportunities for the Portuguese to attend and attain academic degrees in higher education, which is deemed a public good . 03/B1a/CRUP/1, p. 4 ...
	1.2. Norms
	1.3. Algorithms
	1.4. Role of higher education

Source: Palma, 2019

Secondly, a table was used to gather the topical focuses of all the authors by dimension and category in order to establish comprehensive topics. The aim of this process was to identify the dominant topics, thereby finding subcategories of each category. The process led to establishing a set of subcategories, which inductively emerged from the analysis.

As an example, after aggregating the topical focuses of all authors, the following subcategories emerged from the category values: 1) freedom and institutional autonomy; 2) higher education as a public good and responsibility; 3) higher education as a universal value; 4) knowledge, education and training.

Thirdly, an analysis was carried out by subcategory, category, and dimension, which aimed at finding common ground and divergent views among the different authors, thereby establishing the dominant *référentiel*, interpretations, and proposals for the Portuguese higher education system.

4 Findings

Texts of the different actors show a great amount of convergent statements in what concerns values, society views, norms, perceptions, opinions, and proposals for action. As a rule, neither opposite positions nor major criticism to one another could be identified.

The *corpus* under analysis apparently includes complementary texts, rather than opponent or questioning opinions of one another. This situation, together with the high level of agreement with Bologna proposals, suggests that the identified divergent positions towards the EHEA and the Bologna Process can be interpreted as highlights, doubts, and fears of risks related to the process of change rather than as true divergent views as far as aims and strategies are concerned.

The convergence found in the texts allows us to identify and describe a dominant *référentiel* and a common interpretative framework, on the part of the actors, in what concerns the Bologna Process and its implementation in Portugal, in the period under analysis. An interpretative synthesis related to the three dimensions - *référentiel*, Bologna Process interpretations, and Bologna Process implementation in Portugal - is outlined below, with the help of tables per dimension.

Référentiel

In the texts, it is possible to identify values and principles related to three interconnected distinct fields: knowledge, society, and education.

Table 2 - *Référentiel*

	Dominant perceptions	Other perceptions
Values/principles	<p>Magna Carta: University independent of all political authority. Institutional Autonomy Freedom to learn and to teach</p> <p>Bologna Process Higher education as a universal public good and public responsibility</p> <p>Lifelong Learning Practical and professional knowledge Recognition and validation of prior learning Interconnected education and training Learner-centered teaching approach</p>	<p>New Public Management Criticism of corporativism Responsibility and accountability Community compliance connection Emergence of <i>stakeholders</i> concept</p> <p>Neoliberal content of LLL: transfer of the responsibility for jobs from the State to the individual, who should keep their employable by investing in learning</p>

<p>Vision of society</p>	<p>Vision of Europe</p> <p>The most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy, with more and better employment and social cohesion (Lisbon Summit)</p> <p>Statute of Portuguese HEIs Separate from the State</p> <p>Inclusion in the State autonomous administration</p> <p>HEIs Governance: principles of New Public Management</p> <p>Openness to community and <i>stakeholders</i> participation</p> <p>Accountability</p> <p>Management</p> <p>Leadership</p> <p>Competitiveness</p> <p>Transparency</p> <p>Quality</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>New basis of sovereignty and of power relations</p> <p>Will Portugal be capable to affirm the competitiveness of its knowledge?</p> <p>Vision 2015: Portugal is one of the ten most developed and attractive countries in Europe</p> <p>European competitiveness</p> <p>European area cohesive vs costs for national sovereignty</p> <p>Imbalances in the development of the countries</p> <p>Hard to maintain social cohesion in face of the market globalization</p> <p>Hard to maintain higher education as a public good</p>
<p>Algorithms</p>	<p>Global algorithm: Lisbon Strategy: turn Europe into the most competitive dynamic knowledge based economy, with more jobs and social cohesion</p> <p>Partial algorithms</p> <p>1: Lifelong education and training strategy: achieve human resources suitable to the labour market and, simultaneously, more and better jobs, and social cohesion</p> <p>2: “Knowledge triangle” strategy: achieve international high level competitiveness of the knowledge based economy</p> <p>3: EHEA strategy: turn Europe into the most competitive knowledge region of the world</p> <p>Bologna Process: transversal tool of the algorithms</p> <p>Developing knowledge useful to economy</p> <p>Training to jobs</p> <p>Reinforcing social cohesion</p> <p>Developing system cohesion, by converging policies related to degrees, academic recognition and evaluation</p>	
<p>Role of higher education</p>	<p>Algorithm to fulfilling the vision of Europe</p>	<p>Promoting comprehensive education</p> <p>Boosting society development</p>

Source: Palma, 2019

As shown in Table 2, the humanistic values of the Magna Chart Universitatum are mostly stated. The university is defined as a place of scientific knowledge creation resulting from the freedom to teach and to learn. Independence, deemed inherent to knowledge creation, leads to

claim independence and autonomy of universities, which, totally separate from the State and economic power should hold the appropriate means to fulfil its mission: teach and research. From this perspective, knowledge as a culture manifestation of society does not only respond to present needs but has also a prospective function by creating new needs. This concept of university is, however, questioned by some actors who, in line with principles alike to New Public Management, criticize corporatism and claim that responsibility and accountability, as well openness and interaction with society, must be incorporated in the management of universities.

On the other hand, in texts by the same actors who stand up for the values of classical humanism, other values emerge more engaged with society, such as: higher education as public good and responsibility, the universal right to higher education, and the principle of equal opportunities. Therefore, the actors are in line with the Bologna Process philosophy, which, since the Prague Communiqué (2001) has repeatedly uphold higher education as a public good that should be kept as a public responsibility. Furthermore, most actors are in favour of the principles that they recognize in Lifelong Learning (LLL): a new conceptualization of knowledge, which integrates not only theoretical knowledge but also practical knowledge and professional competences; a new conceptualization of education, which runs interconnected with training all along life; new learner-centred methodological approaches.

The new values and the new educational principles behind LLL are perceived as positive and beneficial both for society and economy, and for individuals. The belief is that LLL can promote social cohesion by including new audiences, those who drop out of the school system early. LLL can upgrade qualifications and employability of these people and, simultaneously, provide companies with the human resources suitable for their needs, and the knowledge base necessary for them to be competitive.

Stating and disseminating this value system is, therefore, useful in delivering the vision of Europe as a major knowledge-based world power, competitive with social cohesion, (Table 2), and this is the dominant vision of society that emerges from the texts. Although some put it into question, this apparently constitutes a quest for all actors, and rests on three pillars – knowledge, European competitiveness, social cohesion. First, today, knowledge is regarded as the basis of sovereignty, in which case a relevant question is of whether or not it is possible to maintain national independence with the present knowledge basis in Portugal. Secondly, European competitiveness demands cohesion among countries in different and unbalanced levels of development, which penalizes the weakest. Thirdly, how would it be possible to maintain social

cohesion and higher education as a public good and responsibility, in the context of economic globalization facing market deregulation and the rising of private interests?

In spite of such fears on the part of some, all the actors welcome the Bologna Process and integrate it in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy and the creation of EHEA. Moreover, they stand up for this framework, which incorporates strategies deemed to reinforce and consolidate the competitiveness of European knowledge and higher education. Therefore, the Lisbon Strategy emerges in the texts as the global algorithm of the vision of Europe, from which three partial algorithms derive, which define and stress a key role for higher education: LLL strategy, “knowledge triangle” strategy, strategy for the construction of EHEA (Table 2).

Some actors still mention the traditional role of higher education, associated to classical humanism, to promote comprehensive education and leverage society development. Nevertheless, most of them regard higher education as central to the Lisbon Strategy, with an instrumental role, where the three algorithms for delivering the vision of Europe are embedded. All the algorithms, as mentioned above, clearly respond to the existence of the Bologna Process.

Interpretations of the Bologna Process

The above outlined vision leads to interpreting the Bologna Process as a fundamental transversal instrument of the algorithm *Lisbon Strategy* as well as an integrated part of the strategies for lifelong education and training, “the knowledge triangle”, and the creation of the EHEA as an attractive area of development and knowledge in Europe.

The action lines mentioned by the authors (See Table 3) are consistent with this interpretation: the six action lines of the Bologna Declaration and the three action lines added in Prague, in 2001, which aim at the creation of the EHEA¹.

Table 3 - Interpretations of the Bologna Process

	Dominant perceptions	Other perceptions
Action lines	The six action lines of the Bologna Declaration The three action lines added in Prague 2001 Action line perceived as an implication of ECTS and LLL: change of the educational “paradigm”	
Dynamics	Voluntary process, non-legally binding By establishing interim targets, the process turned into a set of political commitments	Coordination after OMC, through soft tools “Secret” attempt to create a “unitary” State EC leading role in result of universities’ inaction

Source: Palma, 2019

A further action line is still mentioned, which especially addresses Portuguese higher education related issues. A Bologna proposal for the change of the educational “paradigm” is clearly identified in the texts. Moreover, this is viewed as the major change carried by the Bologna Process, even though some actors fear that it might not be fulfilled in the next future. This change calls for changes in curricula and in learning and teaching methodologies. Proposals are, thus, oriented to flexible curricula that should be derived from learning outcomes and based on student workload, as the ECTS suggests, rather than on traditional class teaching hours. Furthermore, learner centred methodologies, valuing students’ background, whatever their history may be, implies recognition and validation of competencies, and the adoption of active methodologies, autonomous work, and experience based work.

Most actors refer that the Bologna Process is neither a treaty nor a directive that must be transposed into national law. It is rather just an agreement of indicative flexible norms. Nevertheless, in what concerns the process’s dynamics, the texts identify the transition from this voluntary boundless process into a set of political commitments and the growing leading role of the European Commission (Table 3). Some actors mention the presence of governance soft tools and stress the use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). On the other hand, universities’ inaction is also mentioned as they let the EC take the lead along the process.

Implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal

Perceptions and attitudes in favour of the Bologna Process implementation are identified throughout the texts along the decade. On the other hand, existent problems and obstacles that can predictably constrain the process are also mentioned.

Table 4 – Implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal

	Favourable perceptions and attitudes	Perceptions of problems
Constraints	<p>Bologna Process as an opportunity for the necessary reform of the Portuguese higher education and full integration into Europe</p> <p>Bologna Process as a national imperative</p>	<p>Loss of national cultural identity</p> <p>Probable loss of quality of the system, by opening higher education to new audiences</p> <p>Low qualifications of the Portuguese</p> <p>High early drop outs</p> <p>Non response of the Portuguese binary system as for differentiation of educational offer and educational profiles</p>

Aims	Implement the Bologna Process and achieve integration into the European area Qualify the Portuguese
Proposed changes	<p>Systemic</p> <p>Financing: need to increase the HEI's State budget; ensure that all the training needed to the enter the labor market is fully financed</p> <p>Diversification of the system and of the educational offer; maintenance and improvement of the binary system in order to ensure the necessary diversity of training, including post-secondary technological courses</p> <p>International external evaluation</p> <p>Specific problems</p> <p>Change of the course system, in line with Bologna in order to ensure recognition and European competitiveness</p> <p>Change of the pedagogical model, in view of LLL, flexibility, and competences development</p> <p>Participation of the key actors in change solutions</p>

Source: Palma, 2019

Portuguese economic underdevelopment as well as the low level of knowledge and low qualifications of people are shared perceptions, which call for profound systemic changes. In such a context, the ambition to construct a competitive cohesive Europe is regarded beneficial for Portugal as this aims at full integration in Europe and at reaching a leading position within the most developed member states (Table 4).

Therefore, the Bologna Process is mostly regarded as a major opportunity for a two-tier reform. At the system level, urgency of the reform emerges from perceptions of the lack of efficacy in qualifying the Portuguese, the insufficient diversification of the education and training system, considering the needs of various audiences and the knowledge economy, financing shortage, and of the need for international external evaluation. More than an opportunity, at the European level, the Bologna Process is regarded as an inevitability and an imperative for recovering from the national delay, for European integration, and for enhancing competitiveness.

In such a framework, the Bologna Process is not only well received by the actors, but it is also interpreted as the carrier of a new educational “paradigm”, as mentioned above. The issue of “paradigm” change that most actors, both individual and collective, address, is focused all along the decade, appears transversal to the three analytical dimensions of the present research, and emerges as the central issue of the Bologna Process in Portugal.

For the actors, the new “paradigm” is apparently incorporated in LLL, the new societal *référentiel* that embodies new values and a new vision of society, proposes new action principles, and suggests new practices. For them, LLL, a concept supposed to respond to the demands of the knowledge society, contains transforming principles for learning and higher education likely to generate knowledge to society and qualifications for individuals. Hence, the new “paradigm” is perceived as essential to qualifying the Portuguese, the deepest flaw of the Portuguese system in face of the need to affirm the country and to full integration in Europe. In a context like this, the aims that emerge for the reform are to implement the Bologna Project, according to the authors’ views, as outlined above, and the ensuing qualification of the Portuguese.

The aims for the reform emerge, thus, framed by the vision of Portugal fully integrated in Europe, with a modern higher education system likely to respond to the training of highly qualified human resources suitable for the knowledge society. In accomplishing this vision, the Bologna Process works as an algorithm and, inevitably, must be implemented with priority, as official documents repeatedly state.

5 Interpretative synthesis

The Bologna Process is clearly viewed as an opportunity by the Portuguese mediators. For them, the Bologna Process constitutes an opportunity to solve national problems related to the global delay of Portuguese society in keeping pace with Europe. This vision may take distinct approaches to the social change that the different actors advocate, but something in common is the adoption and implementation of the Bologna Process as an indisputable reality. The notion of *référentiel* (Jobert & Muller, 1987) can help explain the perceived absence of alternative to the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process *référentiel* incorporates something that has turned into a European “slogan”, *Lifelong Learning* and the *Europe of Knowledge*. In Muller’s model (1995), this “slogan” is the *image*, one of the four dimensions of the *référentiel*, the one that immediately and globally conveys a set of *values*, *norms* and *algorithms*, in this case, related to the importance of knowledge and social cohesion for the development of Europe as a competitive economy.

Most actors do stand for the principles of *Lifelong Learning*, not only because of the values they believe it embodies, but also because of the norms and action principles that it suggests. The actors’ support to the European *référentiel* is rooted in their perception of two inter-related

realities: serious shortcomings of Portuguese society at economic, social, and educational levels, i.e. an unsatisfactory national reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ideal representation of Portugal as a country fully integrated in Europe, equivalent to the most developed countries. Hence, in the world and European context, the Bologna Process is regarded as the *algorithm* that incorporates the potential for the desired progress to turn Portugal into a developed country: raise the qualifications of all Portuguese, including those who are away of the system, and simultaneously prepare the human resources suitable for the economic development, European integration, and international competitiveness.

Thus, the actors' ownership of the Bologna Process apparently stems from the interpretations and the meaning they ascribe to the process in the Portuguese socioeconomic context. The Bologna Process potential in achieving the aims of the Portuguese society development overlaps the perceived "negative" aspects, like the economic orientation, the neoliberal stance of universities, and the utilitarian role of higher education. This leads the actors to value the Bologna Process *social dimension*, so claimed in the official texts, but never actually translated into practice along the process, at European level. As ideas are no longer abstract when travel, they rather materialize into objects (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996, Waeraas & Nielsen, 2015, Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), it appears that in this case the social dimension, neglected at European level, has become alive. When transposed into the Portuguese reality, it has acquired new meanings not only in the opinionated speech of the actors but also in the speech of the law that framed the Bologna Process.

In fact, in all national pieces of legislation of the Bologna Process, dominant issues are both the social dimension associated to employability and economic competitiveness and the central role of the student in learning and teaching. They both stem from the same principles of the universal right to higher education and of equal opportunities, and from the same conceptualization of knowledge that ascribes the same value to either theoretical and scientific knowledge or professional competencies rooted in practical knowledge. These were the bases for establishing innovative policies both at the system level and in HEIs' educational projects, aimed at including non-traditional audiences, which make raise the statistics of higher education attendance and press for new pedagogical approaches.

At the system level, law introduced a set of policies aimed to facilitate wide access and attendance, such as:

- The special regime for the access of people over 23 years of age who do not hold all the school requirements for regular candidates;
- Prior learning and competences recognition and validation;

- Delivering higher education diplomas to Technological Specialization Courses (CET), thereby counting for higher education statistics;
- Isolated curricular units available for everyone;
- Partial time student statute.

Law also introduced the obligation for HEIs publicly to account for policies for the implementation of the Bologna Process, including changes in the pedagogical model caused by ECTS adoption. At the HEIs, pressure to change the pedagogical model emerged both from the above-mentioned legal requirements and from educational needs on the part of new audiences, thereby giving rise to non-traditional concerns about higher education pedagogy.

In such a context, it is quite understandable that one of the defining features of the Bologna Process in Portugal is the “paradigm” shift. Research findings by other researchers (Veiga, 2010; Sin & Saunders, 2014) on the Portuguese situation confirm this. Respondents within these authors’ researches identified the pedagogical shift as the major change of the Bologna Process, which led to characterize the Portuguese process as “creative commitment” (Sin & Saunders, 2014).

6 Conclusion

The research findings outlined above, together with findings resulting from other parts of the broader research in which it is included, as mentioned before, help us understand why the implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal occurred in such a fast and smooth way. Although the different pieces of legislation required to put the Bologna Reform into motion only had passed in the Parliament after 2005, just four years after, the legal basis of the Bologna Process was complete and, accordingly, the entire course offer at undergraduate level had changed. Furthermore, major changes such as special access, competencies recognition and validation, and flexibility of attendance were established, in addition to establishing the new Qualifications Framework.

In achieving this, a major role was played by the *mediators*, a highly reputed small group of academics and politicians who shared a set of values and visions for Portugal within the Europe of knowledge. Since 1999, the *mediators* had been disseminating information and views of the Bologna Process as a central dimension of the European *référentiel* that foresaw Europe as the most powerful knowledge based economy and of how important for Portugal was to keep in line with this intent. The personal characteristics and the expert status combined with their

capacity to circulate among European and national contexts of different type made the *mediators'* action extremely effective and powerful (Palma, 2019). This made it possible for them to disseminate an *edited* version of the European *référentiel*, with particularly ascribed meanings, and suggest practices in line with *Lifelong Learning* perspectives, which resonated in the Portuguese society.

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Footnotes

¹ The action lines of the Bologna Declaration are: Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system; Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement; Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education. In Prague, 2001, the following action lines were added: LLL; involvement of institutions and students in HEIs; EHEA attraction.

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